

August 15, 2009

Shabbat Shalom,

Watching the news last week and the responses of some of our fellow citizens to the Health Care Legislation that is being put forward by the Administration and Congress, I wondered about the following: It seems beyond whatever is wrong with the plan and whatever may be missing, the innuendos, accusations and mistruths that are perpetuated reflect something much more basic. What is behind the rhetoric and the emotions of the debate? I think it runs deeper than a disagreement on the delivery of health care or even who is going to pay.

The issue, I believe, has to do with fear. The level of anger that we have seen expressed over the past week can only come out of a sense of a loss of control and fear. So, what are people afraid of? Well, they are afraid of losing their liberties, their freedom. I am hearing a fear that this health care reform will transform our society in such a way that it will destroy the democratic nature of our country. It will turn America into a socialist state. Worse yet, the idea of it being a program that is equated with Nazism and evil is bandied about. All this is so unhelpful to the conversation, totally distracting everyone from what the real issues are.

If you listen carefully to the questions that are asked we find that, unfortunately, very few know much of the 1,100 page proposal. Responses are coming from a place of deep emotion and little thought, questions coming from a failure to reflect on the text of the proposals, and incitement by right-wing radio talk show hosts, FOX television and thoughtless leaders like Sarah Palin. It's almost as if there is an unwillingness to grapple with the critical issues and produce a program, a bipartisan proposal, to fix a system that everyone knows is broken.

I was astounded by the fellow in New Hampshire, with a loaded gun tied to his thigh (legal in New Hampshire) becoming a focus of the controversy. New Hampshire, as you may know, has as its state motto "Life Free or Die." New Hampshire is a place where the culture reflects a fierce desire to protect individual rights and individual freedoms. And that man with the gun believes his freedom is being stolen.

When reflecting on all this and reading this week's parashah, I got a sense of the larger issue. Do Americans want to be guided by a law that preserves individual rights or are we a nation that is defined by personal responsibility? Rights or responsibility? It is such an interesting question because it is a core question in Jewish culture. That man in New Hampshire has the right to carry a gun, even, as we learned a loaded gun. It was properly licensed. The question is when one walks into a situation where very heated arguments are taking place, is it responsible to have a gun showing. I think for us, the answer would be very clear; it is not responsible. But, for him it was an expression of a legal right. When he was interviewed, he indicated that the room would be safer if every person had a gun. God forbid everyone should have a gun when these debates are taking place! We have heard people asking

questions who can't even get the words out of their mouths because they are so angry, so hostile and so fearful.

Joseph Telushkin was the Jewish Scholar in Residence at Chatauqua this summer and he delivered one of his lectures on Jewish humor. In a not very humorous way, he pointed out that John F. Kennedy's Inaugural Address in January 1961 said "Ask not what your country can do for you, ask what you can do for your country." According to Telushkin those words wouldn't be so acceptable or popular today because those words came during a time where there was a much greater sense of the need for common purpose. We were seeing individuals acting with a sense of communal responsibility. Today there's less of that. Today, the question is "what's in it for me?"

The United States was founded on the notion of "rugged individualism." Our earliest days carried the background of an escape from tyranny. And so, freedom for the individual permeates American Democracy. Yet, over time, through law, systems and forms developed whereby we, the people, and the government, take responsibility for the larger good. Public schools and Medicare are two obvious examples.

The Jewish people were founded on the basis of "mitzvah." And that is rooted in notions of individual responsibility and community. That's the essence of mitzvah. The goal of Tikkun Olam is not about individual self-worth or creating the best life for each one of us. Tikkun Olam is about the individual's responsibility to make sure the world works well, that things are in balance, as it literally means "to repair the world."

This week Parashat Re'eh begins "This day I set before you blessing and curse. Blessing if you obey the commandments of the Lord Your God and curses if you do not obey the commandments." The parashah opens with Moses calling to the Children of Israel to understand that they have the power to choose whether or not they want to fulfill the Divine commandments. As human beings we have the power to choose the life that we prefer. And we value that. Obviously, our choices have consequences, but the most important aspect of being a human being is found in the right and capacity to make choices and thereby determine for ourselves the quality of our lives and the quality of our communal life; the quality of the world.

One of the fellows that I heard interviewed in a town meeting on CNN said, "I have the right to buy myself a Hummer. I won't pay for someone else's Hummer. I have the right to buy myself the best health care possible. I don't have to pay for somebody else's. That's what it means to be an American." (I wondered why the guy's not out there protesting cash for clunkers!) So with millions of people uninsured, he can say, that they are like Hummers! This is a function of a pure capitalist ideology that reflects the notion that we take only our responsible for ourselves.

So, what do we do as we see people fall through the cracks? We have thousands daily losing their health insurance. Millions of people who just aren't able to do what is necessary to pay for the extraordinary expenses of health care. Insurance executives, hospital administrators, physicians, health care workers and the general public all agree. The system isn't working!

We need government intervention. And that need does not mean we become socialists! Medicare is a social program that has been brought to us by the government. And thank God and the government for Medicare. Without it there would be millions more uninsured who could not afford health care. In truth the government pays for much that holds our society together. We need it and we accept it. So the question is... should government be more involved in the health care of our citizens? And the question is not being asked theoretically. It's being asked during a time of crisis. Millions of people are uninsured.

Israel has a medical system that could be labeled as socialist. Israel is a democracy, as many other European countries, but for them there is an operative value. And that is a value that is beyond the rights of the individual. It's about the collective. It's about the community and it is saying that each one of us has to do the best we can for ourselves, in addition, there is a responsibility for the other. For those who hold this position, individual rights is not the ultimate value.

Health care in this thinking is a right for all citizens, rich or poor, young or old!

Our social order will depend, as we move into the next decade, on our ability to create a medical system that is responsible and available. I'm aware of how complicated this is. We need to look at the issues of a legal system that allows for predatory lawyers and abusive patients. We need to have proper regulatory controls over a pharmaceutical industry that is out of control. We need to properly support health care workers on every level. To be a physician should be a most desirable occupation to pursue! And we need to seriously be in the conversation about end of life issues. That is an ongoing conversation as technology continues to improve. The larger conversations in society, as well as the personal conversations with families, physicians, clergy and all who have a stake is not the moral equivalence of promoting euthanasia. Rather it indicates sensitivity to the life of the individual and the well being of society. We value life, but we also understand its limits. "There is a time to be born and a time to die." Let's talk about that. Let's study those issues.

As Jews, we cannot say that we want to live in a society where medical care is only available to the "haves," to the wealthy. To us, the interplay between individual rights and collective responsibility is reflected in our essential values and found throughout our tradition. It exists in prayer. It takes a minyan. In the minyan we are not praying for ourselves alone. We are praying for each other. We pray for our people. We pray for the world.

The great teacher Hillel was aware of this when he said, "If I am not myself, who will be for me? But if I am only for myself, what am I?" We must take responsibility for ourselves, but we dare not reject our responsibility for others.

How important is the individual? Hillel states in another place: "In a place where there are no men (mentches—decent human beings) strive to be a man." Hillel insisted that the failure of others to do what's right does not free us from undertaking this responsibility. Tikkun Olam, balancing or repairing the world, is a mandate to the individual to work for a better society.

We are aware, when all is said and done, that the will of the majority is going to make the decision. The tension that each one of us faces as individuals is how do we respond when and if the collective will subvert moral imperatives? Do we stand by idly or do we have the courage to challenge the status quo? That is the big question. The times are changing. What we saw by the end of 2008 was that an economic system unchecked was creating a chasm between the rich and the poor, between the haves and the have nots, that was not only eroding markets, but eroding our nation. It would lead to the implosion not only of an economy, but of a culture. We have the ability to begin to correct it, not by becoming socialists, but by assuming the responsibility that John F. Kennedy spoke about some fifty years ago.

The Bible teaches, "See I placed before you blessings and curses." It is our choice. That is the beautiful thing. Is it all about me or is it about us, is it about you or all of us? That's the essential question. Is it about your right or your responsibility? That is the question. Not an easy question, because it takes constant attention and moral decision making.