

Labor Day and the Cause of Health Care

D'var Torah

Moses Maimonides, the great 12th century medieval legal scholar, philosopher and doctor, codifies ten requirements for a town so that a *talmid hacham*, a wise person, can live there (*Hilchot Deot* 4:23). First on the list is a doctor – fundamentally, a society must provide health care for its citizens before any other work can begin. In educational terms, teachers frame it similarly: If there is not a safe space, no learning can occur. Without the physical health of a society, there is no productivity.

I do not like preaching politics from this pulpit. But the issue of health care is much more than political – it is fundamentally human. It is fundamentally Jewish. Health is the great equalizer in our world; it affects every one in this room. As we approach Labor Day, a National American Holiday established to honor American workers, honor all of us, it is essential that we address the issue of Health Care, which intimately affects every worker in personal ways.

More than a Jewish social issue, the quest for health care is a Godly issue. The rabbis of the Talmud struggled to explicate the verse, “Aharai Adonai Eloheichem Telechu,” (Deuteronomy 13:4) “You shall walk after Adonai your God.” After all, how does one walk after God? What does that mean?

The rabbis of the Talmud explain (Sotah 14a): R. Hama son of R. Hanina further said: What does the text “You shall walk after God” (Deuteronomy 13) mean? Is it possible for a human being to walk after God? Has it not been said: “For God is a devouring fire” (Deuteronomy 4)? But [the meaning of the text is] to walk after the attributes of the Holy One. Just as God clothes the naked... so do you also clothe the naked. The Holy

One, blessed be God, visited the sick... so do you also visit the sick. The Holy One, blessed be God, comforted mourners... so do you also comfort mourners. The Holy one, blessed be God, buried the dead... so do you also bury the dead.

So too, as God reveals God’s self to Moses at Marah as “Adonai Rofecha,” God your healer (Exodus 15:26), you must also heal the afflicted.

By turning God into a verb,¹ we encounter the Divine. Protecting those most vulnerable in society is a tangible way to understand God’s role in the world. There is a place for meditation in our ritual, for finding our spiritual selves in the barrenness of the desert. But our theological lives revolve around staring people in the face, seeing in them reflections of ourselves and of God.

The issue of the health care has been on the front page of the paper pretty much every day of the past month. We have seen and heard the word “disaster” and “crisis” so much over the past year that perhaps they no longer have any meaning.

But there is no doubt that the American system of health care does not provide the protection that so many people *need*. And it is a *need*. People are suffering, people are dying.

Can anyone in this room say that he or she does not know somebody who has been adversely affected in some way by an issue with insurance? Does anyone not know someone who has been crippled by the cost of health insurance?

The statistics are overwhelming. 47 million, including 9 million children, are uninsured. But statistics wash over us and numbers cannot chronicle human suffering.

¹ I heard this description from Rabbi Eric Yoffie in a dvar torah he gave in New Orleans.

The issue of American Health Care is Jewish precisely because it is human – it affects every person sitting here, every person sitting in America writ-large.

“Our Rabbis taught: We sustain the non-Jewish poor with the Jewish poor, visit the non-Jewish sick with the Jewish sick, and bury the non-Jewish dead with the Jewish dead, *mipnei darchei shalom* – for the sake of peace” (Gittin 61b).

Jewish lives are innately tied up with those of the general society – living as part of a community is a privilege and responsibility.

Sure there is politics involved. How will the Senate respond to President Obama’s plan? Talking heads speak on repeat for twenty-four hours, pinning one polarity against another. But we must elevate the discussion, as well. This is not about the polls, but raising the common bar of discourse about this issue. Let us engage.

Modern public policy is inherently a political animal. But the issue cannot wait. Humans push policy forward. Citizens create fundamental change. As we approach another Labor Day, let us thrust our collective voices toward an issue that is so central to our very humanity. The issue is at the forefront of a national consciousness and we must seize on this opportunity to push it forward. We must educate ourselves about our own desired goals, discuss them in our own communities and propel them to our legislators.

More than politics, the cause of health care in America currently is an ethical siren to us all. By living in a system which does not allow doctors access to patients, we are not allowing humans to interact with the Divine.

In the words of Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel, “Medicine is prayer in the form of a deed...The body is a sanctuary, the doctor is a priest...The act of healing is the highest form of imitation of God.”

Our tradition notes quite astutely that sickness affects not only the body, but indeed one’s mental state and financial viability, as well.

When people are not able to work, it affects all aspects of the individual, her heart, her mind, her resources.

Labor Day gives us pause to recognize the realities of our own status as workers in this great nation. The issue is political because we are human; and they are Divine for the same reason.

Why do I speak today on issues of public policy?

Mipnei Darchei Shalom – for the sake of a real, existential, peace. May this Labor Day be a day which pushes us to take stock of our own views of the health care crisis in the country, so that together, we may enact systemic change, crafting a vision of the world that we wish to create.

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