

TIME TO ACT – A CALL FOR HEALTHCARE REFORM

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Anyone here own an I-phone? A Blackberry? I'm a Palm Pre user myself. If there is one thing that we smartphone users love about our phones, its our apps, or applications. It's not often that I quote from a Bar Mitzvah student's D'var Torah in my High Holiday sermons. But a few weeks ago, Lyle Fenton gave a beautiful talk which he based on the I-Phone commercials. You know the ones. You see the I-Phone on the screen and the announcer says: "You want to find an apartment? There's an app for that? Do you need to read your patient's MRI? There's an app for that. Can't find where you parked your car? There's an app for that too." Lyle pointed out that his Torah portion contained a large number of commandments about many different areas of life, both ritual and ethical. He said, "You need to know about how to treat animals? There is a mitzvah for that. You want to know about giving to the poor? There's a mitzvah for that too. "

I loved that talk, because it is so true. Indeed, there is a mitzvah for just about everything in the Torah, and our tradition has wisdom to share at every moment, in every choice we make and for every issue we face. Just for fun, I Googled the phrase "What does Judaism have to say about...?" And I got 26,000 answers. There's a syllabus there for a great class for our Weingold Jewish Learning Series.

When I am preparing for the High Holidays, I always try to look for the issues that are on everyone's mind and to ask myself, what does Judaism have to say about that? Often, people will even come to me with their suggestions about what they are hoping to hear. This year many people wanted to know if I was speaking on one issue in particular: healthcare reform. Some asked me to speak about it. Some asked me not to speak about it because they did not feel it was appropriate to address from the pulpit.

Of course, it is never appropriate for the pulpit to be used for political purposes, but to avoid one of the most important – and one of the most contentious – issues of our day, one that is filling our airwaves and our broadband and which hovers over our kitchen tables like a cloud, to avoid such a central issue is to suggest that Judaism does not have anything to say on the subject, that the Torah and Jewish law should somehow be left at the sidelines. But to paraphrase our Bar Mitzvah, you want to learn about the ethics of providing healthcare? There's a mitzvah for that too. In fact there are a few; and if we are serious about seeking guidance from our tradition in our lives, if we are serious about following *halakhha* - Jewish law - if we are serious about trying to live our lives in

accordance with our best understanding of God's will, then we need to know what our tradition says.

Four thousand years of Jewish tradition teaches that it is the community's obligation to provide all its members with access to healthcare. Our sages learn the obligation to heal from the passage in the Torah commanding us to return a lost object: The Talmud teaches that among this mitzvah also obligates us to seek to return someone's lost health. The Shulchan Aruch –the masterwork that still defines Jewish law today –states that one who withholds healing his guilty of murder.

This of course refers to an individual's responsibility to heal. But Jewish law goes much farther. Jewish law stipulates that the obligation to heal falls upon the entire community. The best contemporary exposition of this law was written by Rabbi Eliezer Waldenberg, the greatest and most widely respected contemporary Jewish medical ethics expert. Summarizing four thousand years of Jewish tradition, Rabbi Waldenberg rules that a rabbinic court can compel doctors to provide medical services to those who cannot pay, and that the organized community bears ultimate responsibility for covering the cost of that care. Indeed throughout the ages, whenever foreign rulers granted Jews autonomy to govern themselves, Jewish leaders always ensured healthcare was provided to all. That is a history of which we should be proud.

It should come as no surprise that Jewish law mandates that the community provide healthcare to all of its members. That position is also a natural extension of the most fundamental core values of our faith.

We are gathered here on Rosh Hashanah, the date which was – according to a debate between our sages – either the date of creation of the world or the date of creation of humanity. Our sages teach that the human race was created from one man and woman, Adam and Eve, in order to teach us that all people are equal, and that every human life is sacred, because every person is created in God's image and contains within them a spark of the Divine. Every human life is equally sacred, and preservation of human life is the highest value in our tradition, overriding almost everything else.

Ours is the tradition that taught the world the obligation to care for the widow, the orphan and the stranger in our midst. Our Torah mandates that we clothe the naked, feed the hungry and provide for the wayfarer. Our sages were clear and explicit that we bear these obligations to all – Jew and non-Jew alike.

In the Alenu prayer we commit ourselves *l'taken olam b'malchut shaddai* – to repair the world – to make it worthy of being God's kingdom. *Tikkun Olam* – repairing the world – is one of the sacred missions of the Jewish people.

That is why all four major movements of Judaism have voiced support and encouragement for healthcare reform. That support includes the lay and rabbinic leadership of the Reform, Reconstructionist, Conservative and Orthodox movements, and within orthodoxy that includes the more modern orthodox O-U and its Rabbinic body the

RCA, as well as the rabbinic leadership of the more right wing Agudath Israel. All these leaders decry the current state of health care and call for reform that includes universal coverage for all citizens. It is not often that all four movements in Judaism agree about anything. When they do, we should pay attention.

How did we get to this point?

How can it be that the wealthiest nation on earth is the last industrialized democracy to not provide healthcare coverage to all its citizens?

How is it that we allow 47 million of our brothers and sisters to not have health coverage, and six million more lost their coverage in the last 12 months?

Why are people like you and I – successful employed folk with insurance – unable to get approval for medications and treatments that we need, and why are our doctors forced to spend more time fighting for their approval than they spend treating patients?

And why do we - the successfully employed and insured - live in fear that tomorrow our employer may drop our coverage, or our insurer may cancel us - deciding to treat a new diagnosis as a pre-existing condition - or that if we become ill and cannot work or lose our job we will find ourselves uncovered and unable to pay our medical expenses?

Why is it that we spend significantly more on healthcare than any other nation and yet our life expectancy is less than that of Slovenia?

Why are prescription medications which are made in America more expensive here than in any country around the world, and why are we left to buy imported generic drugs from India and China that have been found to be tainted and to have incorrect dosing?

The answer is that, though medical *research* and medical *providers* have always placed the welfare of their patients first, the health care *system* as a whole evolved as a business model revolving around the need for profit; but matters of life and death cannot be measured solely in dollars and cents; they no less need to be considered through the prism of religion and morality.

Everyone agrees that we need healthcare reform; but this country has been talking about healthcare reform and universal coverage since President Truman first proposed it in the 1940s. Nearly every American President, whether Democrat or Republican, has tried in some way to reform healthcare, almost always failing. Meanwhile, every year 18,000 people die who would have lived if they had health coverage. Talk is not enough to save those lives. The time has come to do something about it – to act.

I do not know which plan is best for this country. Let me be very clear about this. I am not here to recommend one solution over another. What I do know is that regarding the commandment that applies to providing healing to those who are ill the Torah states *al titalam* - do not hide yourself. God tells the prophet Ezekiel that one of the reasons the

Temple was destroyed and we were exiled and suffered was because we did not strengthen the weak and heal those who were sick. (Ezekiel 34:4). How then can we stand before God next week to seek his mercy when we know that we have collectively turned a blind eye to the suffering of so many whose plights we simply accept as a necessary fact of life? How can we ask God's compassion if we as a nation fail to show compassion to the vulnerable in our own midst?

Robert Fulghum once wrote: "The line between good and evil, hope and despair does not divide the world between us and them. It runs down the middle of every one of us. I do not want to talk to you about what you understand about this world, I want to know what you will do about it. I do not want to know what you hope, I want to know what you will work for. I do not want your sympathy for the needs of humanity, I want your muscle. As the wagon driver said when they came to a long hard hill: "Them that's going on with us, get out and push. Them that ain't, get out of the way."

Healthcare affects all of us in many ways. We know we must do this because we are all in this wagon together. It is my prayer that we all get out together and push, so that we may all go on together healthy and whole. I can think of no better way for us to earn the love and compassion we seek from God as we begin the New Year.