



Who Will Live and Who Will Die? The Power to Decide is in Our Hands

Erev Rosh Hashanah 2008/5769

Last week, I went to visit Larry at the hospital. We chatted for a while – he actually was feeling quite well. The entire visit I noticed a light blinking above his bed. As I was about to leave, I asked him about the light. “Oh, that’s the nurse call button. I pushed it over 35 minutes ago and see, no one has come yet. I guess I’m lucky I’m not dying!” There was no frustration or anger in his voice. Sadly, he was resigned to the situation. As a patient in the hospital, unfortunately he had to learn to be patient. As I left, I said to myself what I knew my grandmother would have said: “It’s a shanda.”

Sharon, a congregant here at Temple Judea, tells me that she suffers from a GI tract syndrome which her doctor will not officially diagnose because when he does, it will then appear in her medical records, and any new coverage she gets will exclude her entire GI tract due to a pre-existing condition. It’s a shanda.

Another congregant, Lori, tells me that after her divorce she was left without healthcare. She had to defer medical and dental treatment for her kids, which resulted in far more severe problems for them as adults. Plus Lori had to live with her own motherly guilt for what she couldn’t provide her children. It’s a shanda.

Gina, the daughter of a prominent doctor in our community was pregnant. Her husband was a student, and she lost her job. What else did she lose? Her healthcare. Pregnant – no coverage. It’s a shanda.

Yes, the state of our health care system is a shanda. The crisis has grown. It’s hit home. It’s not just “they” who have to worry. It’s us! Raise your hands if:

1. At any time within the past 12 months, you, a member of your family, or someone you know, did not have health insurance.
3. If you’ve ever been denied health insurance.
4. If you have health insurance but have been denied care for any reason.
5. If your health insurance has ever denied you the prescription you need.
6. If you have ever gone without prescription drugs because your health care insurance has been insufficient.
7. If you’ve faced substantial financial loss and/or debt due to expenses related to your or someone in your families health care.

It’s a shanda and we should be ashamed. How many American lack adequate healthcare? 47 million in 2006. As my grandmother would say, ‘It’s a shanda!’ There is a myth that American healthcare is the best in the world, however did you know we are #28 when it comes to infant mortality, worse than Portugal, Greece, the Czech Republic, Northern Ireland, and 23 other nations. What would my grandmother say? ‘It’s a shanda!’ Something is profoundly wrong when somebody else’s medical crisis is no longer our problem, and when we are so unwilling to come to each other’s aid.



On Rosh Hashanah and again on Yom Kippur we chant “Who will live and who will die.” This is a truly awesome prayer. Such fearful imagery of God’s power – deciding who will be written in the Book of Life for the coming year. It never occurs to us that when it comes to healthcare the decision is in our hands. “Who will live and who will die.”

The lack of universal access to healthcare in our nation often determines who will live and who will die. And we allow it. We allow people to die in emergency rooms. We allow people to die who lack essential coverage. We allow people to die simply for lack of care. Who will live and who will die? We as a community must do Teshuvah for the lack of adequate healthcare for the poor – and let’s not ignore reality –we as a community must do Teshuvah for the lack of adequate healthcare for many of us sitting in this sanctuary today.

As we enter this New Year let us admit that this is a communal issue. As we enter this New Year let us admit that this is a Jewish issue. Yes, this is a Jewish issue, an issue of faith that must be addressed from the Bimah. Judaism from our earliest writings envisions a society in which each person is afforded health, wholeness, and dignity. According to the Talmud what Mitzvah takes precedence above all others? Pikuah Nefesh- saving a soul. You can break the laws of Shabbat...you can break the laws of Rosh Hashanah to save a life.

Healthcare is a specifically Jewish issue. Jews are disproportionately healthcare workers - nurses, doctors, dentists, academics. Health care is a specifically Jewish issue because we use health care disproportionately, from mental health to in-vitro fertilization. The median age of the Jewish community is older than the rest of America. SSI and Medicare are vitally important to us. Did you know that:

- Judaism believes in medicine. Patients have an obligation to obtain health care;
- Judaism teaches an obligation of physicians to heal every patient – the poor along with the rich;
- Judaism even goes so far as to require preventative medicine;
- And according to Judaism, healthcare is not simply the obligation of doctors and patients – but of the community;
- Rambam, the great Maimonides of the 12th century, lists medicine as an obligation of the community. The responsibility for healthcare is to be shared among individuals and families, physicians and other health care providers, and the community;
- We know that in the Golden Age in Spain, Jewish communities set up public health care systems with doctors who were required to see the poor, they even visited patients who weren’t sick in order to ensure their health. This was funded by the community and regulated by the community.

I am not here tonight, on one of the holiest days of the year, to engage in politics. I won’t address whether Obama or McCain, Governor Shwartznegger or Sheila Kuhl, offers the best plan. I don’t speak of Healthcare on Rosh HaShanah in order to advocate for any specific prescription. The great power that Judaism holds is not to enact legislation. Our



greatest power is to advocate for our vision of society. I am aware that I speak to you today from the Bimah of our synagogue. I plan to remain in **our** realm tonight, the realm of values, of morality, the realm of Judaism.

The synagogue is most powerful when we avoid linking ourselves to a particular political agenda and instead voice the concerns of those who have no voice. As Jews we have great concern for every individual in society, for those with no voice, no power. The Torah reminds us constantly. Who are we are commanded to care for? The widow, the orphan, the immigrant. Why these three? Because they have no voice, no power. Temple Judea can be powerful in advocating for those without a voice. I believe strongly that for Temple Judea to remain a powerful moral voice in our community we must advocate for those with no voice, and we must also advocate for Larry, for Sharon, for Lori, for Gina. We must advocate for ourselves.

“Who will live and who will die? The decision is in our hands. What is our vision?”

There is a Jewish belief system that guides us as we advocate for healthcare. As Jews, we believe that it is a moral imperative to transform health care so that it is: 1) Inclusive; 2) Accessible; 3) Affordable; 4) Accountable.

Our vision is for healthcare which is **Inclusive**. Judaism teaches that all human beings are created in God’s image – B’tzelem Elohim. Each human being, created in God’s image, must be treated justly, with equity and dignity. Judaism commands us to provide inclusive, comprehensive health care for every person, without exception.

Our vision is for healthcare which is **Accessible**. Judaism teaches that the resources of our world were created for all to share. We are called to act justly, with love and compassion, ensuring that each person has access to the health care needed to live out the fullness of his or her God given potential.

Our vision is for healthcare which is **Affordable**. We believe that God has endowed us with the talents, wisdom and abundant resources that can meet the needs of all who live in this country. As Jews, we are commanded to act as responsible stewards of God’s gifts. We must use our health resources efficiently, to allocate them with equity, and offer them with compassion.

Finally, our vision is for healthcare which is **Accountable**. Judaism calls upon us to build a system that partners all aspects of our society – individuals, families, the government, the working community, the business community and the religious community – to ensure that timely, quality, and safe care treats body, mind and spirit.

We have a vision. We have a mandate. It’s time that we act. Rabbi Eric Yoffe, the President of the Union for Reform Judaism, in his address at the most recent Biennial convention, challenged us. He addressed each one of us when he said: “My friends, the health insurance situation in this country is a disaster. If we continue to tolerate it, we will lose our humanity, and no matter our other accomplishments, we will have failed as a



people and a nation. So let us work to change it, piece by piece and child by child—until no cry for help goes unheard. Only in this way can we honor the image of God in every human being.”

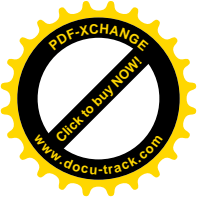
The Mishnah speaks directly to us in this moment. “Lo alecha hamlacha ligmor..The task is huge – we can’t accomplish it all - neither can we defer from starting.” Doctors and nurses will need to organize to demand better. Doctors without borders treats patients around the world. Why can’t we organize our doctors right her in the U.S.? Clinics and hospitals all need to organize and demand better. I visited clinics in Ethiopia that provided care more efficiently than right here in San Fernando Valley. We need to organize and demand better. This is a priority which each of us needs to set in order to make a real difference.

“Lo alecha hamlacha ligmor. The task is huge – we can’t accomplish it all - neither can we defer from starting.” What can Temple Judea do with such an overwhelming challenge? We invite you to join us in two very specific areas of work.

First - Rabbi Yoffe, and the Reform movement, chose us, Temple Judea, to be the Healthcare Coordinating Congregation in Southern California. We have a mandate. As a coordinating congregation, our role will be to lead other congregations in our area to focus on healthcare. Temple Judea will be a model of concern and action to other congregations. As a coordinating congregation, our role will be to add a Jewish voice to the healthcare debate in Sacramento. Your role will be to join us. The first step is to attend a house meeting, organized by our Judean’s for Justice. At our house meetings your voice will be joined to other voices. Together we will plot a strategy for our congregation, for all Reform congregations, so that we can speak with a united voice in Southern California and in Sacramento. We need your voice. Only with thousands of voices like yours, will we be able to achieve health care that is Inclusive, Accessible, Affordable; and Accountable. Rabbi Yoffee’s call is to each one of us sitting here tonight. Begin our journey at a house meeting. Join your voice to ours – here in the Valley, and eventually in Sacramento.

Our second step toward action is quite local. Why were we were chosen by the URJ to be a coordinating congregation? Because our Judeans for Justice, our community organizing group, had already heard your voices in a previous house meeting campaign. We heard from you that healthcare is already a major concern for so many of us. Our Judeans for Justice has been researching healthcare issues right here in the San Fernando Valley. We’ve learned what Larry, and so many of us already know after laying with unanswered blinking lights above our hospital beds - that a major problem is a lack of nurses. Thanks to a grant from Tarzana-Encino Hospital, Pierce College was able to set up an LVN to RN program that in a relatively short period of time produced more registered nurses to help with the nursing shortage. Unfortunately, the funding for this program has disappeared because Tarzana-Encino Hospital has recently been sold and is now under new ownership and reorganization.

We at Temple Judea have the opportunity to work with Pierce College and administrators



from local health care facilities to create a fund that would allow Pierce College to restart this important program. A special program that could benefit all of us when there are more registered nurses available. This is something we have the power to fix. Join our Judeans for Justice as we, in the coming months, work with local hospitals and with Pierce College. Temple Judea can be a part of the solution in Southern California, in Sacramento, and right here in the Valley. Be a part of the solution – join us.

“Lo alecha hamlacha ligmor. The task is huge – we can’t accomplish it all - neither can we defer from starting.” For some of us, the starting place might not be political action or advocacy. For some of us the best place to start is to learn more, to understand the problem better. Join us on the next three Tuesday evenings as our community organizing rabbinical intern, Josh Whinston, leads us in an exploration course called: R’fuah Shlemah - Healing our Health Care System. Sign up on our website.

As we enter this New Year may Judaism guide us as we advocate for a better system of healthcare. As we enter this New Year may our voice, as Jews, be clearly heard in our national debate, reminding our nation of the moral imperative to transform health care so that it is: inclusive, accessible, affordable; and accountable. For Larry, for Sharon, for Lori and for Gina, for the widow, the orphan, the stranger in our midst, for each of us who raised our hands, we must demand better

This Rosh Hashanah and next week on Yom Kippur when we chant “Who will live and who will die,” let us remember that the answer is in our hands. Will we live in a society where too many of us suffer from a lack of sufficient care and worry, sometimes daily, if our insurance will truly cover us? Or will we live in a society with a model system where everyone has access to the health care that each person needs to live a healthy life?

Each week we pray a Mi Shebayrach for those in need of healing. Our healthcare system is broken – it is desperately in need of healing. Join us in our campaign. Add your voice to ours. Together, we at Temple Judea have the power to make a difference.

R’faeinu Adonai v’neirafei. Hoshieinu v’nivasheah. Heal us Adonai, and we shall be healed. Save us and we shall be saved. We pray for healing of the land. We pray for health for every race and nation. Every child, every woman, every man. Eil Na r’fana la. Oh please, heal us – heal our health care system - now.