

Making Moral Healthcare

PHEW! The high holidays have come and gone, and from the looks of it, we have all survived. Go ahead, take a deep Jewish professional's "Yom Kippur's over" breath! We've all earned it! Many of us have worked hard on behalf of others, and hopefully, while we were at it, we even had the chance to work on ourselves – saying our "*al cheyts*," reflecting on how to improve ourselves, and fixing that which just wasn't working for us.

Now that we're on the other side of those *Yamim Noraim*, it is a bit easier to look back at the past week and a half as Days of Awe. But remember those days before Rosh Hashanah? Didn't these *Yamim Noraim* seem a bit more like the Days of Fear? Am I going to finish all my sermons, my programs? If I fast, will I make it all day without passing-out on the bima? Will I be written in the book of life? Despite these concerns, with our hard work, our resolve, and our reflection hopefully we were able to turn our fears into a truly awe-filled experience. **This is the gift of Yom Kippur – the chance to transform our fear into awe;** These *Yamim*

Noraim provide us with a fresh start, an opportunity to re-create ourselves and transcend what we have been.

We know how important Yom Kippur can be for the individual, but what can it help us do about the parts of our society that need fixing? If only we could Yom Kippur our healthcare system. Because American healthcare is in urgent and dire need of a fresh start and a re-creation. It needs the opportunity to transcend what it has been – to transform from a system that compounds our fears during some of life’s scariest moments into that which it has the potential to be – a system that works **with** us to offer quality, healing care to those whose lives depend on it. Our health care system has missed the mark for too many Americans in crisis, leaving us unable to transcend our medical needs in order to achieve the fresh starts that could be possible. Our American health care system has been a litany of *Al Cheyts*.

<bang chest> *Al cheyt shecatanu lifnei* Nancy in West Hollywood, whose husband changed career paths. Along with his new job came a lapse in medical insurance. Therefore, Nancy has

been branded with the scarlet “P” for her pre-existing conditions, which wards off insurance coverage for necessary treatments, despite the increased amount she and her husband are paying on the premiums for their new policy.

Al cheyt shechatanu lifnei William from Beverly Hills who has health insurance but is afraid to go to the doctor because he can’t afford his co-payments.

Al cheyt shechatanu lifnei the members of the HIV/AIDS 12-step group who meet at Congregation Kol Ami, whose treatments cost more and more every year yet some of whom may be left without life-sustaining medications due to cuts to the state-funded assistance programs that had been their lifelines.

Al cheyt shechatanu lifnei Eric in Central Florida, who became one of the approximately 18,000 people who died this past year because of a lack of insurance. He lost his coverage after getting laid-off, preventing him from receiving the preventative care that could have saved his life. His pancreatic cancer went

untreated until it was too late because he was denied the more thorough testing that should have caught it earlier.

For all these wrongs, forgive us, pardon us – but we do not deserve to be forgiven unless we figure out a way to wipe the slate clean, and find a way to create a better system.

Unfortunately, for many people in our community and in our country, like those I've just named, going to a doctor has become a more fearful experience than it ought to be. Between the pain of shots and the worry of receiving a life-altering diagnosis, healthcare visits evoke enough anxiety. How to pay for the procedures and treatments we need – **the costs of “choosing life”** – **should not be one of our fears.** The Goliath we fight should be the disease and infections we need to slay, not the insurance companies we often battle in order to receive the benefits we are due, nor the health providers with whom we often struggle to be more than another body they have to push back out their doors.

Health care in this country is failing far too many people. More than 40 million Americans have no health care coverage,

leaving them one accident or a few cancer cells away from costing them and their families all that they have worked for. And a June CNN report revealed that even amongst the insured, medical costs are still one of the leading causes of bankruptcy; and in 78% of those cases, individuals had insurance.

This is not a just a political issue. It is a moral one and a Jewish one. Our moral and Jewish values compel us to not stand idly by this system that is not taking care of the most vulnerable in our community. Just a few days ago on Yom Kippur, we read Isaiah's plea that we use our fasts to **offer compassion to the hungry And to satisfy the famished creature — [upon doing this] shall our light shine in darkness, And our gloom shall be like noonday.** Well, there are too many people who hunger for medical attention and are starved for lack of proper medical care, whose noontimes are currently as dark as midnight.

It is our Jewish responsibility to transform our current system so that it is **inclusive**, providing for the humanity of all people. One that, as Rabbi Don Goor describes will treat all of us having

been created *b'tzelem elohim*, in the image of God, deserving of equity and dignity. Our tradition compels us to provide comprehensive health care for every person, without exception.

It is our Jewish responsibility to transform our current system so that it is **accessible** and **affordable** for us all. Don't just read that we leave the pe'ah, the corners, of our fields unharvested in order to feed those who cannot provide their own life-sustaining sustenance. We must ensure that the most vulnerable in our community can access the health resources they need in order to live. And as it says in the *Shulchan Aruch*: The one who has medicine, and his sick neighbor requires it, is forbidden to raise their price.

It is our Jewish responsibility to hold all stakeholders in healthcare **accountable** for ensuring that the system does not stand idly by the blood of their neighbors – that individuals, doctors, insurance companies, and government work together instead of deflecting responsibility for failure to one another. The *Shulchan Aruch* also teaches us that doctors should reduce their rates for the

poor to a point, but that the community should subsidize the rest – we all play a role in helping heal our community.

And while the political process will ultimately dictate the specific path we take towards healthcare reform, all of us in this room have the potential to advocate for the Jewish moral perspectives on what healthcare should be. **Ensuring that healthcare reform re-creates a system that is inclusive, accessible, affordable, and accountable** will bring our Isaiah text to life, as it **will help brighten up the dark nights of many of us who are starving for the care we so desperately need.** These four criteria should be the standard by which we evaluate any proposed plan. But we will have to work for it. So, here are four concrete suggestions for how to play a role in helping our healthcare system transcend what it has been so that we can re-create a system that will work for us all.

1) Let's make ourselves aware and up to date on the debate. After all, whatever changes occur in the healthcare system will affect all of us. And if we develop strong opinions based on hard

facts, we can get involved in one of the many organizations striving to affect change.

2) Ask your congregants/people in your internship/people in your social circles about their thoughts or stories about health care. You can help them know that they are not alone in their struggles, and inspire them to take action.

3) Raise this issue in our internships or student pulpits.

Write a sermon. Develop a lesson plan. Bring in experts who can explain the current state of affairs, and give your congregants a chance to discuss their own perspectives on health care. Help those in our community see that this is **a moral issue of justice and of saving lives** more than it is a political one. Don't let the fear of not knowing enough about what is going on, or of being overly political deter us – there are a ton of resources to help us, and I have compiled a number of them on a resource sheet that you can take with you as you leave. Might we rouse some people and get them riled up? Hopefully. If people aren't asking us about

healthcare reform, that is a problem – because it means they are seeing this more as a political issue than a moral one.

4) Become a part of providing health care support –develop pastoral skills – do CPE. See these issues first-hand, and gain experience offering spiritual support to those for whom the system does not always work.

Let us not stand before God and **ourselves** one year from now, saying *Al cheyt shechatanu* for our silence in the face of a system that has fallen short for Nancy and for William, for Eric and for those in our community with HIV/AIDS and for so many of our brothers and sisters. Instead, let us be a part of calling the healthcare system to task – of exposing where it has missed the mark.

May we inspire those around us to advocate for the re-creation of a system that transcends what we have – one that is **inclusive, accessible, affordable, and accountable** – one that provides light in our darkest moments. And hopefully, with collective reflection, hard work, and resolve, some day soon, all of

us will be able to see our doctors and obtain treatments without financial fears. And upon being healed, breathe a deep breath of relief, trusting that the system is looking out for us, working **with** us to fix that which needs fixing in our bodies, so we can get back to experiencing and creating more real *Yamim Noraim* – truly awesome days for many years to come.