

Who shall live and who shall die?
Yom Kippur Morning 2009
Rabbi Mona Alfi

On Rosh Hashanah it is written,
On Yom Kippur it is sealed:
How many shall pass on, how many shall come to be;
Who shall live and who shall die;
Who shall see ripe age and who shall not;
Who shall perish by fire and who by water;
Who by sword and who by beast;
Who by inadequate medical coverage and who by denial of services?
Who by pre-existing condition and who by lack of access to care?

This may sound extreme, but I believe that finding livable, affordable and moral solutions to healthcare coverage is now of the utmost urgency. It is literally a matter of life and death.

A Harvard study released on September 17, said that 45,000 people die - every year - from lack of health insurance. That means that approximately 1 person dies every 12 minutes, or 5 people every hour, or 15 people will have died in this country during the course of this service alone. To give more perspective on what this means, more people die in this country every year because they do not have access to medical care than the total number of people who are killed because of drunk driving and murder combined.

The Talmud teaches us that "If one person is able to save another and does not save him, he transgresses the commandment, "Neither shall you stand idly by the blood of your neighbor" (Lev. 19:16)."

The longer we wait to fix this system, the more people will die because of it. Are we prepared to say that we stood on the sidelines? Will we stand idly by when we know that our neighbors are suffering, when we know that they are dying, and when we know that the system that is shutting them out, and allowing them to die, can be fixed?

I stand here before you this morning eager to begin a congregational discussion about healthcare reform that I hope will lead not only to more congregational wide discussions, but more importantly, I hope this will lead us towards congregational action in becoming vocal advocates to ensure that all Americans have access to good and affordable healthcare coverage.

I stand here not just as an American, but as an American who is guided by our Jewish teachings that command us to care for the widow, the poor, the orphan, the stranger in our midst.

And I stand HERE in this building, with this congregation, on whose outer walls are written the words: Love thy neighbor as yourself.

Those words were placed there more than half a century ago. And I ask, what do those words mean to us today? Who are our neighbors? Are our neighbors only those individuals who we see and know? Are our neighbors the residents of Sacramento? Of California? Or our entire country?

We must be engaged in healthcare reform, not because it is a political issue, but because from the perspective of Jewish law, Jewish teachings, and Jewish moral imperatives, Healthcare Reform is a Jewish issue.

It is a Jewish issue not only because this is a matter of self-interest. But it is alright to acknowledge that it is an issue of Jewish communal self-interest. We as a community are disproportionately represented as healthcare providers and professionals. And as a community, we use healthcare at higher rates for both our physical and mental health needs, in part because our median age is older than the general population and in part because we are raised to believe in the value of seeking medical help for both our physical and mental needs.

And let us be clear - it is not a sin in Judaism to consider one's own well-being when making a decision. But we are also taught that our personal comfort cannot be our only interest. Self interest might be where we *begin* to be engaged in the conversation, but that cannot be where we end it.

And let me be up front in saying this: I am not so arrogant to think that I have all the answers, or any silver bullets that will fix all the problems we have in providing good and affordable healthcare. And I am not going to offer a specific proposal this morning. But I do encourage people to go on the internet and look at the proposals put forth by the Union of Reform Judaism and the Religious Action Center.

No, all I have to offer is the reason why we should care, and why we as individuals and as a congregation have the Jewish moral imperative to work to change the status quo.

It is because our religion demands it of us.

The Talmud is clear. In it we are taught that "the non-Jewish poor are to be sustained along with the Jewish poor, the non-Jewish sick are to be visited with the Jewish sick, and the non-Jewish dead are to be buried with the Jewish dead (Gitten 61a)."

This teaches us that we have a responsibility - as Jews - to be engaged in the *national* dialogue of caring for all of the nation's poor, sick and indigent.

There is an American myth that people should simply be able to "pull themselves up by their own bootstraps" if only they take personal responsibility and put in enough hard work. This myth implies that success does not depend on anyone else's help. It implies that the community has no responsibility for an individual.

But there is another American tradition, that of the community barn-raiser. Where a person's neighbors put in their own sweat to help an individual make a go of it. In these situations, there is a recognition by the community that some tasks are too big for one person, or even one family.

And in these situations there is also the recognition that when the community pulls together to help one another, the entire community benefits as a result.

The Shulchan Aruch, the definitive Jewish law code written in the 16th century, says that "Doctors are required to reduce their fees for the poor. And where that is still not sufficient, the community should subsidize the patient. (Shulchan Aruch, Yoreh Deah, 249)"

If that doesn't describe Medicare or community clinics, I don't know what does. But it also tells me Judaism sees an individual's access to medical care as being the responsibility of the community.

The Shulchan Aruch further teaches that “he who has medicine, and his sick neighbor requires it, is forbidden to raise their price above the proper level. (Shulchan Aruch, Yoreh Deah 336.3)”

These two teachings combined speak to the heart of the traditional Jewish perspective on what is needed in healthcare reform –accessibility and affordability.

As a rabbi, I often hear heartbreaking stories from members of our congregation. There is the story of the young man in his 20’s who because of childhood cancer will have trouble getting health insurance because he has a pre-existing condition.

There is the family who *thought* they had great insurance coverage until they discovered that neither the visits to the audiologist or the hearing aids that their young child needs is covered by their insurance.

Then there are the families who are suffering from the current economic crises who are fearful of losing their jobs because they know they won’t be able to cover the costs of insurance on their own.

We have small business owners who struggle each year under the rising cost of providing health insurance for their employees.

And sadly, we have congregants who are senior citizens who have wondered what to buy first, medicine or food.

I could tell you more stories, but I don’t have to tell you, because you know them as well as I do.

Every one of us has our own story, or a story about a loved one, about problems we have had with access to affordable healthcare.

As Jews, we have not always lived in countries where we could turn to our government for help. So instead we created our own social service programs that the entire community supported. Organizations such as the Hebrew Free Loan societies, Jewish Welfare Boards, Jewish Family Services, community funded schools, and doctors and nurses who would donate their services at community clinics or for individual clients.

We created for our own community social networks that provided a net underneath us to protect each of us should one of us stumble or fall. We did this in part because our religious code demanded us to, and we did it in part because simply because we knew that this was the right and moral thing to do.

And we did it because we knew that while today it might be our neighbor who needed our help, tomorrow it might be us who needed theirs.

We are blessed to live in a country where, for the most part, we are not seen as “other.” We live in a country where we can fully and freely participate in the life of our community and our government. We live in a country where our ability to speak freely is protected. And because of this, I believe that we have a moral obligation to bring our values into the national discussion, and to bring our energy to the work that needs to be done. Just as we did in the Civil Rights Movement, the Women’s Movement and so many other times when the call to preserve and protect the dignity and sanctity of human life was heard.

Throughout B'nai Israel's history, throughout Jewish history, we have had members of our community, who have worked for the greater good of the larger community, in politics, in social programs, education, the arts, and of course in medicine as well.

Now is the time for us to be engaged in an organized, thoughtful and directed way in healthcare reform.

The problem is too big to be solved by local communities being left to fix it on their own, like band-aids slapped on here or there.

We as Americans have an obligation to bring our moral sensibilities to the law of our land. And it is the law of our land that needs to address the injustices concerning health insurance.

I want to share with you a contemporary Jewish legal ruling issued by Rabbi Eliezer Waldenberg. Rabbi Waldenberg passed away in 2006. He was a leading Orthodox rabbi and a dayan - or judge - on the Supreme Rabbinical Court in Jerusalem and was considered to be one of the foremost authorities on medical Halacha, or Jewish law. He was also the rabbi of the Sha'are Zedek Medical Center in Jerusalem.

Rabbi Waldenberg ruled that "Our tradition teaches us that human life is of infinite value and that the preservation of life supersedes almost all other considerations. We, as Jews, believe that God endowed humanity with the understanding and ability to become partners with God in making a better world. The use of our wisdom to cure illnesses has been a central theme in Jewish thought and history. Providing health care is not just an obligation for the patient and the doctor, but for society as well. It is for this reason that Maimonides, a revered Jewish scholar, listed health care first on his list of the ten most important communal services that a city has to offer its residents (Mishneh Torah, Hilchot De'ot IV:23). Almost all self-governing Jewish communities throughout Jewish history set up systems to ensure that all their citizens had access to health care. (Shulchan Aruch, Yoreh Deah 249:16; Responsa Ramat Rahel of Rabbi Eliezer Waldenberg, sections 24-25)."

Healthcare Reform is an issue that bridges the differences between the many Jewish religious movements. Across the spectrum we are all united in our belief that this is an issue that demands communal responsibility, and communal action.

Last year our temple board voted that we as a congregation need to be engaged in being advocates for healthcare reform. In the upcoming weeks and months you will be hearing from me and from our past president, Jennifer Kaufman, who is also on the North American board of the Union of Reform Judaism, we will be talking with you about healthcare reform. We will be holding educational discussions and advocacy workshops.

Because of our congregation's location in the State Capital, and because so many of our congregants are engaged in healthcare, politics, and advocacy work, as well as our past work in interfaith coalitions, our congregation is uniquely situated to be effective agents for change.

We will be working with the Religious Action Center and other California congregations in educating our members and working together to lobby for reforms.

We all want to do what is right, and it is natural that we would be concerned or afraid that with healthcare reform our own coverage might be compromised, our individual premiums raised.

But what is the cost if we do nothing? The financial costs will not only rise, but the human toll will as well.

And there is no reason to believe that previous generations of Americans were smart enough, and compassionate enough, to figure out how to create Social Security and Medicare, but we are not smart enough, or caring enough, to figure out how to get out of this healthcare.

Concern about access to decent health care is not new. Concerns about the affordability of health care are not new. And a Jewish discussion about the role of the community verses the individual, the doctor verses the patient in being able to have access to and obtain quality, affordable health care is not new either. These issues are as old as the Bible itself.

Our sacred texts, our legal codes, our rabbis, throughout the ages teach us again and again and again, that access to good and affordable healthcare is not only the responsibility of the individual, it is also a mandate on the community and on the medical profession to ensure that all people, rich or poor, Jew or non-Jew, have equal access to affordable healthcare.

As Jews we are taught that we study so that we shall do. The purpose of learning is to know how to act in the world. We have an obligation to do more than pray for people's healing, we must work to make healing possible, accessible and affordable. We must do more than just educate ourselves on what Judaism teaches us, we must also be advocates in the public square for what is right and just.

On Rosh Hashanah we reflect,
On Yom Kippur we consider:
Who shall live or who shall die?

The answer is in part, in our hands. When the Book of Life is written this year, what will be written of our actions? When the Book of Life is sealed, what will be our fate? What will be God's judgment on us?

May this year be a year of blessing and opportunity, of health and of hope, of reform and renewal.
Ken yehi ratzon - may this be God's will.