

Rabbi Rick Kellner  
Erev Sukkot Shabbat 5770

### Our Fragile Health Care System

For the last two weeks we have been discussing the importance of “Bayit”, the importance of our homes. On Rosh Hashanah each of the clergy spoke about an object or place in their home that exemplifies values. Whether the dining room table, a ketubah, or the views from our home or our kitchen we celebrate those objects and spaces knowing that there is a sense of stability and permanence to our homes. We know that when we are in our homes we feel safe and comfortable. It is interesting that almost immediately following our conversations about our stable homes we celebrate the holiday of Sukkot which reminds us of the fragility of our homes and our lives. With a big gust of wind or a heavy rain storm our sukkot can topple over. Just imagine what it was like for our ancestors to wander in the desert for 40 years sleeping every night in the sukkah. Wild animals, winds, rains, other people were all out there threatening their safety.

Today we wander in a new wilderness. We wander through a desert of despair and pain and this is the wilderness of our fragile health care system. At any moment, when disease befalls us, or an insurance company decides to take away our coverage, the health care system can topple over before our eyes. For so many it already has. We hear stories of health care that just bother us and make us angry.

Here are some examples of people for whom the health care system has shattered and it has also shattered their lives as well. These stories are told right here in good old 90064<sup>1</sup>. Here is the story of Fatemah whose sister has an ulcerative colitis. She is unable to get health care because her colitis is a pre-existing condition. Fatemah’s sister is unable to get health coverage even though she is willing to pay for it. Or there is Lynette, whose husband died of cancer, amidst all the grief she was grateful she only had to pay \$12,000 of two years towards a medical bill that totaled \$285,000. And now her medical expenses are increasing each month for her and her 16 year old son. But she can’t leave her insurance company because she has tested positive for Hepatitis C and no other company will give her insurance because of this pre-existing condition. Then there is Denson a neurologist whose father-in-law developed progressive difficulty with balance and walking over the course of a year. His physician and neurologist were treating him for Alzheimer’s and Parkinson’s.

---

<sup>1</sup> Stories adapted from <http://stories.barackobama.com/healthcare/>

Denson had requested to see a CD with his CT scan on it and as a result recommended another treatment that will ultimately help his father-in-law improve dramatically. If he had not intervened his father-in-law would have been left to die of a terrible misdiagnosis. And finally one of our temple members who recently shared with me her struggles with cancer. Her doctors want her to go on to the next stage of treatment but the insurance companies want valid proof that this is necessary. Here are four stories of health care related issues that take place right in our own backyard. There are millions upon millions of people who tell these horror stories throughout America. It's not just that 46 million people do not have insurance, millions don't have adequate care and others shuffle from doctor to doctor and receive treatment after treatment that helps to increase their own medical costs. It's time for a change.

Just two months ago at the Forum in Inglewood, dozens of doctors gathered together to perform a great mitzvah. For a week they treated thousands of patients for at a free health care clinic. Doctors, nurses and other medical workers who donated their time said most visitors' ailments were basic but Dr. Nancy Greep from Santa Monica was quoted in the Los Angeles Times saying, "many have chronic diseases -- high blood pressure, diabetes, asthma -- conditions we can't deal with in just one day. Some had problems, such as a recurring cancer, that demand long-term treatment." Local health officials reported that this week of free health care is just the latest evidence of that this country's health care system is unable to adequately serve low income patients and the increasingly unemployed. Carol Meyer, chief network officer of the Los Angeles County Department of Health Services, said, "'It absolutely reinforced what we know based on how overwhelmed our facilities are: The current system of healthcare in the United States is broken.'" Yes our system is broken, it's time for a change.<sup>2</sup>

It has been a rough summer to hear the political debates and to witness news stories about town hall meetings and protests. There have been claims of death panels and socialized medicine. We all heard Rep. Joe Wilson's liar remark during the President's address to congress. The debate in the political sphere has been nothing less than heated and partisan. There has been animosity and anger and a seemingly unwillingness for our elected officials to work together.

---

<sup>2</sup> Los Angeles Times, August 12, 2009, "Super-clinic Finds Super-need in LA Region," by Bob Pool and Kim Yoshino. <http://www.latimes.com/news/local/la-me-health-forum12-2009aug12,1,3401107,full.story>

Health Care reform is more than just a political debate. It is a moral debate and it is a Jewish debate. We know that a solution cannot come to fruition without the policy decisions made by our representatives and senators. They are key players in policy outcomes. As Reform Jews and Americans we can be key players in this conversation. Note the change of words here, I stole it from Rabbi Frimmer's vocabulary. We can enter the conversation with our elected officials and use our moral grounding as Jews to guide our words.

Judaism has at its disposal an ocean of Jewish texts for us to use to justify the moral grounding in the Health Care conversation. We see these lessons in the various layers of Jewish texts, from the Torah to the Talmud to medieval commentators all the way through modern theologians. Joseph Caro in his great Jewish legal work called the Shulchan Aruch wrote the following, "Doctors are required to reduce their fees for the poor. Where that is still not sufficient the community should subsidize the patient." (Shulchan Aruch Yoreh Deah, 249). Joseph Caro wrote these words in the 16<sup>th</sup> century, recognizing the importance of the community's role in providing healing to those who are unable to afford it. Perhaps the doctors who worked the clinic at the forum understood this, more likely they just recognized the critical nature of helping those who cannot afford medical care. What Joseph Caro knew long ago is what we are witnessing today. There is an inextricable link between poverty and the flaws of our health care system.<sup>3</sup>

Former Senate Majority leader Bill Frist wrote in an article published in June<sup>4</sup>, "Americans are increasingly aware that there is an almost linear relationship between poverty and poor health around the world. The chance of a child dying before the 5th birthday in Sierra Leone, one of the world's poorest countries, is almost 100 times greater than a child dying in Sweden, one of the world's wealthiest countries. For every small increase in income, we see a remarkable increase in health outcomes as diverse as life expectancy and infant mortality. A 50 percent increase in income can result in two to three years increase in life expectancy. Think about that for a minute. A relatively small increase in income translates into years of added life." We know this information, it is apparent today, it is why we do not

---

<sup>3</sup> <http://urj.org/socialaction/issues/healthcare/>

<sup>4</sup> Johnson City Press, June 21, 2009 "Poverty and Health Care: Fatally Linked" by Bill Frist. [http://www.hopethroughhealinghands.org/\\_uploads/Poverty%20and%20Healthcare\\_Fatefully%20Linked\\_Johnson%20City%20Press\\_6.21.09.pdf](http://www.hopethroughhealinghands.org/_uploads/Poverty%20and%20Healthcare_Fatefully%20Linked_Johnson%20City%20Press_6.21.09.pdf)

see many health clinics on the Westside of Los Angeles, but we see them block after block in the poorer sections of this city.

Not only do Caro's comments recognize the issue of poverty but they also reflect the role of the community. The second piece of this text emphasizes that the community must play a role in the subsidization of that Health Care. We see examples of this through Medicare and Medicaid. Rabbi Elliot Dorff, a professor of Philosophy at the American Jewish University and the chair of the conservative movement's committee on Jewish law and standards wrote in a recent article for the Jewish Journal<sup>5</sup> that the costs of Health Care should be split between the physician, the individual, the family members and the community. Rabbi Dorff cites Maimonides, a physician, a rabbi and an author of Jewish legal literature, who said "If a person wants to give no charity at all, or less than is fitting for him, the court compels him and flogs him for disobedience until he gives as much as the court estimates is proper. Thus, with donations from, or taxes on, its members, the community as a whole has the duty to pay for the health care of those who cannot afford it themselves. In medieval Spain, for example, Jews played a prominent role in the state's medical program, while in other places, Jewish communities, on their own, hired surgeons, physicians, nurses and midwives among their staff of salaried servants. Whatever the arrangement, the community as well as individual doctors were under the obligation to heal, and that was taken very seriously." These notions from Jewish history remind us that it is time for change. It is also comforting to know that there are examples from history where Health Care Reform was possible.

Joseph Caro also teaches that "The Torah grants physicians permission to heal. Healing is, in fact, a religious duty that falls under the rules for saving a life. If a physician withholds treatment when he is able to give it, he is regarded as a murderer." Jewish law takes the notion of healing so seriously to regard a physician who does not give healing as a murder. I wonder what Caro would have said about insurance companies who withhold treatments when they withhold coverage for those who need a certain kind of treatment. In some cases they could be considered murderers because we have all heard stories of cancer patients who have had their insurance revoked and have spent their time fighting to get back

---

<sup>5</sup> The Jewish Journal (Los Angeles) August 26, 2009, "Why Jews must support Universal Health Care" by Rabbi Elliott Dorff, [http://www.jewishjournal.com/articles/print/why\\_we\\_must\\_support\\_universal\\_health\\_care\\_20090826/](http://www.jewishjournal.com/articles/print/why_we_must_support_universal_health_care_20090826/)

rather than receiving the treatment they direly need. It's time for a change, and that time is now. We need to be a part of the conversation and Jewish tradition can help us find the words to share.

As a rabbinic student I read the memoir of Dr. Lewis Thomas, a physician whose life spanned almost the entire twentieth century. In his book called the Youngest Science he talks about how healing went from an art to science. Dr. Thomas tells the story of how his father used to make house calls and visit all of his patients. He would see them at whatever hour of the day. Healing was an art, in which he as a physician would also speak to the hearts of the patients he treated. During Dr. Thomas' life span, healing went from an art to a science, and if he were still alive today he might say that it has gone from a science to a business that is one-sixth of the US Economy. Perhaps there is comfort in knowing that there is still part of the art of healing left in today's world. It's a healing service that you don't necessarily pay for directly but actually comes with your membership to the Temple. Our temple's clergy can be part of the healing process and we don't have to be in contact with any insurance company to provide healing. Healing of mind is such an important part of this conversation, I find it comforting to know that while we cannot write prescriptions, we can hopefully bring a smile to your face, some words that may comfort your mind and prayers that can help heal your soul.

We hope that this conversation around health care reform is drawing to a close. And that it closes with an outcome that fits within the federal budget and provides coverage for all Americans. If this outcome is going to come to fruition we cannot sit here silently while the conversation happens all around us. I want each household to take home an index card tonight, it contains the phone numbers and addresses of our congressional officials. It also contains websites for you to learn more about Health Care Reform. It also contains talking points published by the Union for Reform Judaism to guide you in your conversation. On this holiday of Sukkot when we recognize the fragility of the world around us, we pray that our elected officials will bring us out of the danger of the wilderness into a home of stability. May we all have the strength to pick the phone and make a call, may we have the strength to pick up a pen and write a letter. We can tell our stories regarding health care and we can bring a little Judaism into the mix. It's time for a change and it's time for us to be a part of the conversation. *Kein y'hi Ratzon.*