

Untroubled Tranquility

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The history of Jews in America is the story of immigrants, who left lives of poverty and oppression in the Old World to begin anew in the land of freedom and opportunity. It is a familiar story to me, because all four of my grandparents were born in the Czarist Russian Empire and made their way to America's shores between 1906 and 1914. Some immigrants succeeded beyond their wildest dreams, and some even attained fame and fortune. But many (Jews and non-Jews) came here, not with the idea of advancing themselves personally – they would have to learn a new language and adapt to a new culture and would face many hurdles – but for the sake of their children. Their sons and daughters would have opportunities that would have been denied them in their countries of origin and would have far better lives than their parents.

I recount this history because it has been the American dream for immigrants and for natives alike. Each generation hoped that their children would do better materially than they and would enjoy a more comfortable and fulfilling life. Immigrants undertook an arduous voyage across the ocean for the sake of that aspiration. Parents sacrificed for their children's benefit, and did without luxuries or even things they needed to set aside money for the children's education. For Jews, who moved from the tenements to the suburbs, from sweatshops to ownership of retail businesses to success in the professions and in many new and innovative fields of endeavor, the dream came true as it did for large numbers of Americans. Now, however, I fear that we've arrived at a point, where the arc of progress from one generation to the next has been stopped, perhaps even reversed. Many young people growing up and attending school today can not realistically expect to do better than their parents or even as well.

These diminished expectations are part of a larger picture. These are difficult times indeed for many of our fellow Americans. The statistics we read in our daily newspapers or hear reported on the nightly news tell the story – 9% unemployment, foreclosures on homes, poverty affecting nearly one in six of us. We hear about college graduates who find it difficult to get a job, numerous applicants for each advertised job opening, employees in mid-career laid off with scant prospects for being re-hired, and those nearing retirement age who can't quit working yet because the accounts they were relying on to fund their retirement years have lost much of their value. Public employees- teachers, police, firefighters – on whom we rely to keep us safe and to educate our children – are prominent among those whose continued employment is imperiled. Manufacturing jobs long ago moved overseas, and now white-collar

workers as well are finding their jobs outsourced to foreign countries. The budgets of state and local governments are strapped, and services are being cut. I serve as representative of the Jewish Federation on a committee that distributes supplementary Federal funding for emergency food, shelter and utilities assistance to local agencies and was recently informed that this year we have just one-fifth of the money to give out that we had last year.

People are hurting and they're angry. They look to government and to the private sector to provide a solution, but none seems to be forthcoming. Companies are cutting back on hiring because demand for their products has dropped. Government is immobilized by partisan bickering, jockeying for political advantage, finger-pointing, and gridlock. Compromise measures to bolster our economy are painfully difficult, if not impossible to achieve. Political leaders know how to say no to the opposition's ideas or how to apply band-aids to our ailments, but there is a frightful lack of vision at all points along the political spectrum. Government itself ends up with a bad name, and confidence in its ability to accomplish anything that will benefit the general public is undermined. To whatever extent we experienced a recovery from the crash of 2008, that seems now to have evaporated and we appear to be teetering again on the edge of a recession.

So why is the rabbi, who took one semester of Political Economy 101 in college and who claims no specialized knowledge of how to extricate our country and our state from their current economic woes, discussing these issues on Yom Kippur of all days? Perhaps because of the Haftorah we just read, in which Isaiah makes reference to the poor, the homeless and the naked and proclaims in God's name that concern for their needs is the necessary accompaniment to fasting and self-affliction, a prerequisite for our prayers being heard on high. Or perhaps because of the Chasidic rebbe who taught that the reason we have two eyes is so that we might look inward with one to our own spiritual state and outward with the other, to concern ourselves with the material well-being of our fellow persons. Isaiah may not have known about lobbying or about the influence that campaign donors wield in our political process. But he did know that the poor in his society (unlike the prosperous) had no power and no one to advocate their cause, that their only hope of rescue from their dire situation lay in the internalization by their more fortunate countrymen of the prophet's message: God cares about the hungry, the poor, and the needy.

The implication is clear; if God cares about the poor, so should we. Indifference to the suffering of our fellow and to his or her needs is a sin. Sodom and Gomorrah are a byword for wickedness and evil in the Jewish tradition. If asked to identify the transgressions of these notorious cities, most readers of Scripture would without hesitation mention sexual perversion. The narrative of Genesis 19 certainly favors and supports that interpretation. But there is an alternate tradition referred to by the prophet

Ezekiel (chapter 16, verse 49): “Only this was the sin of your sister Sodom: arrogance! She and her daughters had plenty of bread and untroubled tranquility; yet she did not support the poor and the needy.”

“Plenty of bread but no support for the needy” might aptly describe economic developments within our country over the past thirty years and, in particular, the growing concentration of wealth and income in the hands of the top 1 per cent of the population. The benefits reaped from increased productivity in recent decades have gone preponderantly to those already at the top of the socio-economic scale. The disparities in income between the richest and poorest have grown ever larger. However you identify yourself politically and whatever solutions you propose to our current problems, the statistics are incontestable. The immediate post- World War II era and the 1950’s, for all of the sexual hypocrisy, the limitations on women’s ambitions, and the discrimination against minorities, were by contrast a time of a much broader-based prosperity than the present. Disparities in income and the concentration of wealth are not unique to the United States – witness the tent cities and mass demonstrations in Israel this past summer – and they are not new phenomena. Isaiah 5:8 speaks of “those who add house to house and join field to field till there is room for none but you.”

Neither Isaiah nor Ezekiel nor the Kotzker rebbe discussed public policy. Although you will find in the prophets denunciations of bribery and corruption, there’s no talk of tax rates or loopholes, entitlements, budget deficits, stimulus, or investment in infrastructure. They were talking for the most part about charity, personal acts of beneficence toward those in need. And to be fair, I am not accusing anyone of being uncharitable, of failing to support the poor and needy through personal philanthropy. I am well aware of the generosity of many individuals and families of means, without which we would not have so many of the worthwhile programs that extend a helping hand to the needy in our community and across the country. But our problems go beyond what can be addressed by charity, and here, of course, is where we enter into the contentious and the controversial.

A society, it has been said, must balance various needs and interests. In our case, we have to balance the need for tax revenues and for regulations that protect the environment and the safety of workers and consumers with the need to preserve incentives for growth, innovation and entrepreneurship. We need to balance, as well, our own needs with those of our children and grandchildren, whom we don’t want to be saddled with an enormous burden of debt. Complicating the process is the fact that what might be appropriate for addressing long-term concerns may not be the answer to our short-term needs. Sometimes, moreover, proposed solutions end up creating new and unforeseen problems. Whatever policies are adopted, it is inevitable that the interests of some particular group will be adversely affected, and people will be angry. I would hope that the policies that ultimately prevail will be those that benefit

the larger society and that represent the common good (as hard as that might be to identify). Having a strong middle class, which has traditionally been the pillar of a democratic society, would certainly fall into that category. Also, in addressing deficits, the poor and needy, who have no powerful lobbies to speak in their behalf and who are least able to afford sacrifices, should not be unduly burdened.

Some of our financial and economic woes and much of the disparity in wealth I've mentioned have been blamed on globalization. And it is true that we are linked to economies around the world; when they falter, we are affected. It is true also that rising economic powerhouses such as China and India are formidable competitors. Their demands for energy and raw materials are burgeoning, and they are able to produce goods at lower cost than can be done here. Globalization is partially responsible for where we are, and it does make finding solutions tougher. But government policies relating to taxation, labor relations and regulation (or lack thereof) of the financial sector have also played a role in creating the current economic situation, and they can play a future role in getting us out of it and moving us forward. The GI Bill of Rights in the post World War II era provides a positive example of a governmental policy that fostered greater equality and assisted many Americans (Jews among them) in moving up to the middle class.

To move forward, we need vision, we need thoughtfully articulated presentations of policy from a diversity of viewpoints, and we need honest and in-depth coverage by the media. Regrettably, what we too often get are sound bites, superficiality, a culture of gossip, and campaigns that are covered as celebrity popularity contests. What we also have is an excess of ideology that too often trumps plain old common sense. Ideology traffics in absolutes: it tells us we must never work out a compromise with the folks on the other side of the aisle, that we must never raise taxes, that we must never cut or reform entitlements. The opposite of ideology is pragmatism, the willingness to inquire what has worked in the past and what might work for us in the future, whether or not it fits within our ideological constraints.

In setting the mood for the High Holiday season, Dr. Abraham Heschel decried our sense of comfort and complacency and would ask, "Where is the *yirah*?" "Where is the fear of God?" In the Scriptures, "fear of God" connotes having a conscience, knowing that something is wrong, whether or not anyone else is looking, whether or not we can get away with it. I am fearful that we have not done our best to assist those who are now in need. We haven't demanded of our political leaders the vision and the action to build a better and stronger society. And I am fearful for the world my grandchildren will grow up in and the opportunities that will be available for them. Will they be able to do as well or better than I have? Parenthetically, I speak here of economics, but my fears for the future generations are not limited to that sphere. I fear as well for the natural environment they will inherit (the air, water, and soil), and I

fear for future 9/11's and Oklahoma City's, the havoc that ideological zealots and terrorists armed with weapons of destruction can wreak.

I have ranged far afield into areas beyond my expertise and in which we might have honest disagreements. I return now to Ezekiel and his condemnation of Sodom for its "untroubled tranquility." Today, Yom Kippur, is indeed the day for our tranquility to be disturbed – by our own lapses in serving God, by our failures in our interpersonal relationships, and by the troubled state of our economy and our society. May our un-ease and the disturbance of our tranquility move us to act. May we be sealed for the coming year in the Book of Life and *b'sefer haparnassah*, in the Book of Sustenance.