

Healthcare Reform & U'netaneh Tokef

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The great shofar is sounded; a still small voice is heard.

The Day of Judgment has arrived!

Who will live and who will die; who is the fullness of years and who before; who will perish by fire and who by water, who by sword and who by wild beast; who by famine and who by thirst, who by earthquake and who by plague....who will be secure and who worried; who will be at ease and who will be afflicted; who will be impoverished and who enriched; who will be humbled and who exalted....

The message of U'netaneh Tokef is a difficult one. At this very moment, on Rosh HaShanah it is being decided who will live and who will die in the new year. On Yom Kippur the book will be closed. Our fate is beyond our control and yet we have the capacity to redeem our lives, to alter the decree, by acts of repentance, acts of prayer and acts of generosity and righteousness.

We focus a lot on teshuvah and prayer, and I want to take a moment to focus on tzedekah. The true definition of tzedekah is not "charity" but righteousness, doing the right thing, determining the just way, repairing the imbalances in the world.

On this Rosh HaShanah, we cannot help but think of the situation of healthcare in America and the same questions as are raised in the U'netaneh Tokef....who will live and who will die, who will be secure and who will be afflicted, who will be impoverished and who will grow rich....The problem today is that these questions are in human hands and we have not been doing a good job. There are too many people without healthcare in the wealthiest nation in the world. There are too many people whose life's savings have been wiped out by illness. There are too many people who lack the capacity to care for their children and care for themselves without going to the emergency room for common medical treatment.

I'm not a doctor, or a politician, or an expert on the latest version of the healthcare bill.

I am a rabbi, so all I know is that we can not allow the current state of our healthcare system to continue as it is. Because our sense of justice, our mandate to pursue justice, tells us that something is seriously wrong and something must be done. Our tradition teaches us that each and every human life is of infinite value... as the Mishnah Sandhedrin (4:5) teaches: only one human was created to teach us that whosoever kills a single soul the Bible considers to have killed a complete world. And whosoever sustains and saves a single soul, it is as if that person sustained a whole world.

We are obligated to preserve life, we are to place the calls of the distressed above even God's demands and save a human life whenever possible. How many lives are in jeopardy because of our inadequate healthcare system? And what are we going to do about it?

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 and physician, listed health care first on his list of the ten most important communal services that a city had to offer to its residents (Mishneh Torah, Hilchot De'ot IV: 23). Almost all self-governing Jewish communities throughout history set up systems to ensure that all their citizens had access to health care. Doctors were even required by Jewish law to reduce their rates for poor patients, and when that was not sufficient, communal subsidies were established (Shulchan Aruch, Yoreh Deah 249:16; Responsa of Rabbi Eliezer Waldenberg)

So what can we do? We can pray. We pray for the sick every day. But that is not enough. We need to act, we need to support change, we need to believe in the possibility that our government can do some good and save many lives.

We have the power to save lives...and if we don't use this power, we will see more people suffer under a broken system.

But repentance, prayer and righteous acts in pursuit of justice...all of these can annul the decree for many and help those who struggle to survive. It's up to us...to get to work on healthcare reform...before it's too late...

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