

*URJ President, Rabbi Eric Yoffie, calls for Reform Movement to support state initiatives to expand health insurance.*

In our Torah portion this morning, we read of the first known example of centralized economic planning. Joseph used the seven years of plenty to prepare for seven years of famine, and then with the famine as a pretext, seized the land of the peasants for his Egyptian master.

However, while the Torah describes this economic model, it does not endorse it. When the Children of Israel arrived in the Promised Land, the biblical text mandates that property rights and economic freedom were to be respected there, along with the rule of law. Still, this is not the end of the story; the Jewish view of economics is a nuanced one. The Torah also mandates that free markets were not to be given full sway—they were to be tempered by social welfare and practical compassion. No one—no one—was to be reduced to humiliating dependence or excluded from the support of the body politic.

These considerations come to mind as the debate continues in America over the economic arrangements appropriate for American society. When talking today of those denied the blessings of our political system, we think most frequently of the 47 million people without health insurance, and thus without assured access to decent medical care. We think of the pain, chaos and indignity imposed on these Americans, who know that a single profound illness or injury can devastate their lives.

Of course, this is hardly a new story. Because the fact is that we live in a country with a pitifully inadequate health insurance system that causes horrors every day so tragic that they could rip the heart out of a stone.

We know that the uninsured tend to let minor illnesses grow into major illnesses before seeking treatment. The press is filled with stories of a mother with a lump on her breast who worries about the cost of checking it out, and a father with chest pains who decides that seeing a cardiologist is too expensive. We are aware that lack of insurance sends thousands of people to an early grave every year and plunges millions of Americans into severe financial distress.

It is not my intention to discuss with you the mechanics of providing health insurance. Some, including our Movement, prefer a single-payer system in which the government provides health insurance, and some want insurance delivered by private entities under government regulation.

But what we do need to discuss is the fundamental question of values that is as yet unresolved by our society: What do we owe each other as Americans?

The Jewish answer is: Communities are obligated to provide healing to all of their citizens. The Shulchan Aruch makes the point very simply: "If the physician withholds his services, it is considered as shedding blood" (S.A., Yoreh Dei-ah 336:1).

The Jewish answer is: Something is profoundly wrong when somebody else's medical crisis is no longer our problem, and when we are so unwilling to come to each other's aid.

The Jewish answer is: Providing health insurance for all is about helping a family member, a neighbor, or a fellow citizen because, next time, any one of us could be facing catastrophe. It is not just about them, it is about us.

We all know the practical problems that have, thus far, prevented us from providing medical insurance to all Americans. What ever plan is adopted, drug and insurance companies may face reduced profits; health-care providers may have to accept reductions in income; and middle-class families may have to pay more for the coverage they receive.

In a country such as ours, it is natural that honest, well-intentioned people are going to differ about how to fix health care. But that is what we pay politicians for-to lead our country in finding some reasonable compromise.

And now is the time. Every uninsured family is a catastrophe waiting to happen. The time has long since passed when our leaders should have done what every other advanced country has somehow managed to do: provide all its citizens with essential health care.

No more excuses, please.

And no more claims that we have nothing to learn from other countries. Our Canadian members, as well as British and Israeli Reform Jews, will be happy to tell us about the health care problems in their countries. But how many of them would prefer the American system to their own?

And no more talk by congressional leaders and White House aides, all with superb health insurance provided by the taxpayers, about how we need to focus on "the long run." What do we say to the uninsured divorced mother, valiantly raising three children, hounded by medical bills she cannot pay? She doesn't need access to medical care in the long run; she needs access right now. And what do we say to the 9 million children in this country who do not have health insurance? We ask those children every day to recite the Pledge of Allegiance, and the time has come for us to pledge them the unfettered access to decent health care that they deserve.

We don't know if this country will elect a president committed to providing health insurance to all Americans. And if we do, we don't know if he or she will follow through. We have watched many times before as our leaders, bullied by the drug and insurance industries, rationalize their surrender in clouds of earnest words and good intentions.

But we need not look only to Washington for answers. In light of federal failures to address this issue, most states are considering plans to cover uninsured residents. In California, Maryland and Vermont, the crucial debate is well underway. Our Massachusetts congregations have already demonstrated how effective we ourselves can be. Progress on the state level is important in and of itself; and if we succeed there, our

next president will be far more likely to actively promote a national solution.

I propose, therefore, that this Movement begin immediately to support state initiatives to expand health insurance. In almost every state of the Union, we have identified one Reform synagogue that has agreed to coordinate these efforts. We will bring Reform Jews, and our allies, to state capitals and we will make our voice heard and our presence felt.

I also urge the major communal organizations of the American Jewish community to join with us. There was a time when the Jews of America would have spoken with a single voice on this issue. There was a time when to be a Jew in America meant not only to care for our own, to fight for Israel, to educate our children as Jews; it also meant that whenever we saw injustice afflicting our neighbors, our Jewish souls would rush in to bring balm to their wounds. But I fear that is far less true today than it once was.

In recent years, there has been a feverish conversation among communal leaders about how to connect young adults to Jewish life. We all agree that they need Torah study, Jewish ritual and connection to Israel. But all of this has not been enough.

Well, here is my suggestion to these leaders about what they need to do next: They need to speak up for justice. They need to speak up loud, proud and unafraid.

Because our young people are very wise. They know that a Judaism that ghettoizes itself has no real mission and therefore no real purpose. They don't understand how Jews can pray for the sick every day and then do nothing to get health care to those who need it. In the end, if the Judaism we offer our young does not speak to the great moral issues of the world and of their lives, it will fail to capture their imagination or their hearts.

And one more point: Our synagogues have a responsibility to promote good health that goes beyond public activism. Are we providing healthy food choices at our meetings, onegs and in our classrooms? Are we educating children and adults about Jewish teachings on health? Are we offering fitness programs to our members in all age categories? Our Department of Jewish Family Concerns has prepared a congregational audit that suggests how each of our synagogues can do more to keep its members healthy, and I urge you to review it with your leadership.

My friends, the health insurance situation in this country is a disaster. If we continue to tolerate it, we will lose our humanity, and no matter our other accomplishments, we will have failed as a people and a nation. So let us work to change it, piece by piece and child by child-until no cry for help goes unheard. Only in this way can we honor the image of God in every human being.

*Sermon by Rabbi Eric H. Yoffie at the San Diego Biennial , December 15, 2007*