

Sydney Henning

Two paychecks...two paychecks...that is what separates most Americans from their regular, day-to-day lives and homelessness. What would you do if you had to survive for a short while without any income? Would you dip into your savings? Would you find a way to scale back, borrow money from a friend, take out a loan, have a yard sale? Most of us in this room would figure out a way to survive, like many military families may have to if the government shuts down tonight, but what if, rather than just two paychecks, you had to survive a whole year? Did I also mention that you have no health insurance? Oh, and one more thing, your child has just been diagnosed with advanced Hodgkin's lymphoma.

I would like to say that this is a wildly hypothetical situation, but it's not. This is a real person, Debbie, and I met her at UCLA hospital last week. Her adult son, Colin, is undergoing stem cell treatment for his advanced lymphoma and Debbie, well, Debbie, on top of everything else, is worried about her car being towed because she doesn't even have the money to pay for her parking outside Ronald Reagan Medical Center. She brings a little bit of cheese and some crackers to the hospital each day because she can't afford the pricey cafeteria food. Most days she is at the hospital for so long that the food spoils. She is clearly malnourished and stressed beyond belief, but Debbie has committed herself to caring for her son, even if it kills her.

Some people might sit in judgment of this woman. "what did you do, or not do, to land yourself in this situation?" Did you drop out of high school, have a gambling addiction, spend your hard earned money frivolously? There are those who believe that poor people bring poverty upon themselves, that they are being punished for one sin or another. But what was Debbie's sin? What was her big mistake? I will tell you a little bit about her story and then let you decide for yourself.

Born and raised in an orthodox family in England, Debbie was a registered nurse. Her husband, Ben was, ironically, an oncologist. When the couple discovered that they wouldn't be able to have children of their own, they adopted a little boy, Colin, from Nigeria. They made good money and lived a good life. They had two

homes, one in Florida and another in Los Angeles and Colin received a full scholarship to play football for Duke University. Life was just about perfect...until, one day, Ben, Colin's adoptive father, was diagnosed with lymphoma himself. He was given less than a year to live. Colin was working in Durham at the time, but quite his job to move back to California where he could be closer to his parents. Debbie became Ben's full-time hospice nurse, quitting her own full time job to care for him, but confident that they had saved more than enough money to get them through this financial hardship. But, like a modern-day Joab, disaster struck Debbie another painful blow. Colin fell ill, and the diagnosis? Hodgkin's lymphoma. Debbie now had two terminally ill family members on her hands, a tragedy beyond her wildest dreams, but the real calamity presented itself weeks later, in the form of an letter from COBRA, Colin's temporary health insurance provider, informing Colin that his coverage had been cancelled because he had missed his payment deadline BY ONE DAY. With a confirmed diagnosis of Hodgkin's lymphoma, Colin now had a pre-existing condition that barred him from getting any other form of health insurance. Again, Debbie was confident that the savings that she and her husband had accrued would get them through...until the bills came rolling in. In less than three months, they had accrued so much debt that they had to foreclose on both their houses in Florida and California and move to a small two bedroom apartment in Marina del Rey. Cedars Sinai would no longer treat Colin because of the unpaid bills and, as a result, he was shuttled off to the county hospital where he was one of 500 new patients waiting to see a doctor. His mother would visit him and keep vigil at his bedside, located in one of the hospital's narrow hallways where many patients sit for days waiting to be assigned a room. Colin had to go on Social Security disability and his mother, although ashamed, applied for food stamps. When she told me that she got 14 dollars in food stamps, I was stunned to think that two adults could be expected to live off only 14 dollars a day..."oh, no, no", she corrected me, 14 dollars a MONTH! Now, I don't know about you all, but I can't even imagine how someone outside the third world lives off less than fifty cents a day. Why was the sum so low? Because Colin was receiving a whopping \$900 a month for social security, an amount that didn't even cover the rent. Debbie had gone to Sova, the Jewish food pantry, for assistance, but many of the canned

goods she received there were not allowed on Colin's very restrictive diet. Adding insult to injury, one Jewish organization that will remain nameless, told Debbie that they couldn't help her because Colin, being adopted and having never undergone an Orthodox conversion, was not a Jew under their definition and was, therefore, ineligible for aid.

So I ask again, what was Debbie's big mistake, how did she bring this situation upon herself. Perhaps she should have been more on top of Colin's COBRA payments, perhaps she didn't maneuver the welfare system to her best advantage, perhaps she should have never quit her job to care for her husband or son, or perhaps she just didn't try hard enough.

I almost never talk politics from the bimah because I don't think politics and religion mix well, but when politics run headlong against morality, something needs to be said. When I was standing outside Colin's hospital room with Debbie, it pained me, but I asked her if she had ever considered moving back to the UK to get proper medical care for Colin. She said "believe me, it was the first thing I thought of. If Colin's condition hadn't been so critical, if we'd had more time, it wouldn't have even been a question." This hurts! It hurts as an American to tell someone that they should leave this country because their basic health care needs will not be met here. You might say, "Sydney, obviously Colin is getting treatment because you met him at UCLA." But here, I must add, that he is being treated as a patient in an experimental stem cell trial that is just as likely to kill him as it is to cure him. Colin is now getting the best, most advanced medical treatment that the western United States has to offer because he was willing to offer himself up as a guinea pig. Even if this weren't the case, would Colin get treatment? Yes. Would it be the level of care he deserves? No. Would he still receive medical bills? Yes. Even on medicare, treatment is not 100% free. What happens to those bills when they go unpaid? The hospital eats them, and then that debt is passed on to the taxpayers, one way or another. Opponents of national health care would argue that no hospital would refuse Colin emergency care, but is that the right message to be sending? Hey, we know your sick, but not sick enough, you have to wait until you're really sick, then we can treat you.

In this scenario, the cost of your care sky rockets and your chances of survival become really slim.

One piece in the puzzle of this threatened government shutdown tonight is health care spending. Representative Michele Bachmann, a presidential hopeful for The Tea Party Republicans, said that many Republicans are holding out on passing a budget because they are angry about the cost of the new health care package, or Obama-care, as she lovingly call it. They see it as wasteful spending, something that we cannot afford in these harsh economic times, but people with pre-existing conditions, people like Colin, and even my own sister who is an amputee, see it as a God-send. Colin doesn't have health care today, not because he would rather spend his money on an i-phone, but because he was unlucky enough to have a deadly and expensive pre-existing health condition.

I know this is a dicey issue, and I don't expect all of your to agree with me on this, but I think health care should be a basic human right. We are one of the few countries in the free world that doesn't have universal healthcare, and it is, in my opinion, a crime. As Jews, we are committed to preserving life at all costs. That is probably why Israel, even as a very young country, provides healthcare for all its citizens. It would violate Jewish ethics for them not to. I think it's time for the US to embrace these same values, so that people like Colin, like his mother, like many other Americans, will not have to chose medication over food, hospital bills over mortgage payments, **merely existing** above *really living*.

Ken Yehe ratzon!