

“Economic Decency”
Rosh haShanah Evening Sermon 5774-2013
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Long ago, my wife, Toby, stopped attending seminars, scholar-in-residence programs and the like at my rabbinical conferences. Not because the basic information being delivered isn't interesting. Rather, it is because of what comes later – the Question and Answer period. Imagine a room filled rabbi's. After the speaker concludes, the moderator asks, “Does **anyone** have a question or a comment?” **Every** hand in the room goes up! Some of my colleagues put up **both** hands; some stand up as they put up their hand, squirming their bodies a bit, as if to say, “Ooh, ooh! Pick me. That's not the worst of it though. Often, someone makes a “rabbi's inside joke”, fooling around with some Hebrew text or a clever Talmudic double entendre. The rabbis giggle. Of course, non-rabbis in attendance **can't** get the joke, which is 99% of our spouses, including mine - leaving them out because they don't have the back story. Not fair and not really funny.

Still, in order to understand some wisdom and humor that comes out of our tradition, one does need that back story. So here's the back story for this sermon:

Simeon the Righteous used to say: “The world is based upon three things: upon torah, upon self-emptying prayer and meditation, and upon acts of kindness.” (Avot 1:2) There is a Yiddish folk saying that responds with another interpretation. It says, “The world stands on three things: money, money and money.” This little witticism reflects a serious value found in the same text: “Rabbi Eliezar ben Azariah said, “...Where there is no sustenance there is no torah; where there is no torah there is no sustenance.” (Avot 4:17)

A beautiful commentary notes that the word “torah” in Rabbi Eliezar's comment is not the scroll in the ark. Torah is the breadth and depth of human **moral** capability, which needs food and other means of sustenance in order to maintain its complex and very fragile fabric. When basic human support is lacking or absent, the moral degradation of individual lives follows and ultimately the degradation of entire societies. Is This what Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel discovered through his study of our ancient Jewish prophets. He says, “It became quite clear to me that while our eyes are witness to

the callousness and cruelty of man, our heart tries to obliterate the memories, to calm the nerves, and to **silence our conscience.**" [my emphasis]

"There is immense silent agony in the world," Heschel says, "and the task of man is to be a voice for the plundered poor, to prevent the desecration of the soul and the violation of our dream of honesty...It became clear to me what the lives of the prophets sought to convey: that **morally** [my emphasis] speaking there is no limit to the concern one must feel for the suffering of human beings." (The Reasons for My Involvement in the Peace Movement, 1972, in Journal of Social Philosophy, Vol. 4 (January, 1973), pp. 7-8).

Many human beings are suffering all around us – and we often don't recognize them even though they provide our basic needs and contribute to our relatively luxurious lifestyle in Santa Monica/West Los Angeles. From sanitation workers to gardeners, from medical personnel to workers in carwashes, from security guards to custodians, from airline flight attendants to housekeepers, all of these and many, many more, serve us every day. None of them are completely altruistic about it. They all get paid for the services they provide. Yet, there are great differences in their various kinds of work, and our perceived **value** of that work, which results in a huge disparity in their wages, a disparity that is so extreme the result is that the poorest segments of American society subsidize the lifestyles of those in the strata above them.

Most of us see ourselves as being sensitive to this unfairness. We throw up our hands in despair and blame it on the "economy" or the "market" as if these were independent entities that somehow operate without us. **We are** the economy. **We are** the market! And not only will that "market" supply us with what we demand, it will also supply those commodities with fair wages and a **humane** production chain **if** we demand that, too.

The California State Assembly, trying to address compensation imbalances, already passed a recommendation for our state's minimum wage to **gradually** increase to \$9.25 an hour from the current \$8.00 an hour and President Obama has done similarly on the national level, proposing an increase from the current \$7.25 an hour to \$9.00 an hour. And yet, one person working full-time at \$9.00 per hour would make a grand total of \$18,700 per year, far below the \$23,000 set as the federal poverty line - for a family...of **three!** And

that figure misses the mark for how much it costs to survive in many parts of this country, including Los Angeles County.

According to a study done at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, MIT, if an individual were to make a **living** wage, a wage that could **truly** address that person's costs for basic needs in an urban setting, that person would need to make \$10.58 an hour (which, ironically, is only pennies below what the **minimum** wage **would** be if it had just kept pace with inflation since 1968!). However, \$10.58 is the living wage to support **one individual**. What if that **single** person were a single **parent** supporting one child, like Tiffany, the young woman Beth Shir Shalom adopted through the Imagine L.A. program? She needs a living wage of \$23.50 an hour for her and her little girl in order to have their basic expenses covered! She is fortunate to have Roselee Packham, Joe Safier, Laura Kanofsky and Yolanda Shapiro as her committee of staunch advisors and champions. Others are not so lucky – and there are fifteen million of them.

Robert Reich, the former Secretary of the Treasury, reminds us that “when all those people are in poverty we foot the bill: healthcare, housing assistance and food stamps.”

Former Secretary Reich also points out that there are great and prejudicial misconceptions about minimum wage employment, like the assumption that minimum wage jobs, if they become too expensive for employers to afford, will be outsourced overseas or replaced by machines. However, the vast majority of minimum wage jobs are not exportable. These jobs are mostly in the personal service sector: retail, restaurant, hotel, etc. Employers pass governmentally mandated minimum wage increases on to their customers, usually for only a few cents on their bills. There are other misconceptions about Minimum Wage jobs. Many claim that these are “entry level jobs” for teenagers working for extra money and to learn a skill. Not so says Mr. Reich. Ninety-percent of them are aged twenty and above. Half of them only work part-time, sometimes because employers don't even offer these jobs full-time – because then they would be required to pay the benefits that are **due** to full-time workers. One-quarter of the adults on minimum wage are parents, which means that some work part-time because they need to be home to take care of their children or to take a class or two to try to better their status – if they can somehow afford it. When I was working with other clergy on behalf of hotel workers for respectful conditions and wages, a leader among

the workers emerged and was noticed by Santa Monica College. The College offered him a free education. He said he couldn't take the offer because he was working **three** part-time jobs to keep his family afloat and couldn't afford to give up one of them.

Robert Reich says that even paying a **minimum** wage, not even a living wage, is a matter of decency. He acknowledges that it's a society's role to determine what decency is. When it comes to wages, America defines decency as \$7.25 an hour. We are Jewish-Americans and, like those who make Hebrew National hotdogs, our measure of decency must answer to a "higher authority". Fortunately, our tradition gives us several decency calibrators. For example, as we learned earlier from Simeon the Righteous, we achieve moral decency through three efforts: engaging with the **process** of torah, the kind of serious contemplative work we do on these High Holy Days, and the frequency of our doing deeds of loving kindness. Rabbi Eliezar ben Azariah taught us that a civilization's capacity to fulfill its responsibility to be decent and its ability to provide basic human needs are inherently **interdependent**. Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel told us that our capability to be sympathetic and sensitive to those who are suffering must be limitless. Can we do this? Can we fulfill these Jewish teachings? Of course we can! We are filled with as much potential for love, understanding, compassion and moral decency as we are for passivity and a lack of awareness. We are filled with as much potential for a positive impact on the lives of others as we are to consciously or unknowingly constrain and complicate their minimal survival or their ability to improve their lot. And we all have phones with which to call our California state senators and our Congresspeople to tell them we want them to raise the minimum wage. We are filled with all the possibility for decency that we allow ourselves.

Our Jewish understanding of Life is expressed in the prayer we call the Shema. In our Beth Shir Shalom community we translate the last word of the Shema, the word *echad*, as "Everything is One". In the context of this discussion, however, I prefer John Lennon's translation of the word *echad*: "I am he as you are he as you are me and we are all together." When people earn salaries that are sufficient to sustain them and their loved ones, we are all better off. When we insure that every individual in our society is treated decently, when a basic level of human integrity is maintained among us, then we all share in it and reap its benefits.