

BALANCE
A sermon by Rabbi Gary M. Bretton-Granatoor
Congregation Da'at Elohim – the Temple of Universal Judaism
Erev Rosh Hashana 5770

When I was a young rabbinical student studying the traditional liturgy, one prayer always made me laugh out loud. It would come at the very beginning of the daily morning service, known as the Shacharit service. We learn from tradition that this was supposed to be recited shortly after sunrise – certainly soon after one rises from bed and completes one's daily ablutions.

ברוך אתה יי אלוהינו מלך העולם, אשר יצר את האדם בחכמה,
וברא בו נקבים ונקבים, חלולים חלולים. גלוי וידוע לפני כסא
כבודך, שאם יפתח אחד מהם, או יסתם אחד מהם, אי אפשר
ליתקים ולעמוד לפניך. ברוך אתה יי, רופה כל בשר ומפליא לעשות.

Blessed is our Eternal God, Creator of the Universe, who has made our bodies with wisdom, combining veins, arteries, and vital organs (Traditional siddur: openings and cavities) into a finely balanced network. It is obvious and known before your Throne of Glory that if but one of them were to be ruptured (giggles) or but one of them were to be blocked it would be impossible to survive and to stand before You. Blessed are You, O God, who heals all flesh and does wondrous things.

I now stand before all of you thirty years after I let out my first giggle after reciting that prayer and say to you: This is one of the most profound prayers in our liturgy for it teaches us one of the essential and necessary characteristics of life – implicit in the very work of Creation and the very design of our human bodies: BALANCE.

As a 23 year old, I didn't give a thought to the first thing I did when I got out of bed in the morning. As a 53 years old male, I am grateful every time things seem to work. I am grateful that my doctor pronounces my prostate "healthy" and I have spent much time counseling those who must make decisions about what course of treatment one should take when the prostate is not healthy. I know that it is important for my cells to reproduce, but I have seen the devastation of too many cells growing out of control and threatening the balance of life. I know that my mid-section waxes and wanes depending on what I put in my mouth and how often and how much. I know that I look healthy when I have had some sun on my face and I know what it is like to suffer self-inflicted second degree burns on my body when falling

asleep unprotected on the beach. The words of the Morning Prayer seem oddly reflective of life itself. Our bodies are finely balanced networks and when that balance is disturbed, little good results.

This summer, for the first time in my fifty-three years I developed hay-fever. Unable to breathe (two of those openings seemed permanently shut) I turned to a nasal spray, which worked for twelve hours at a time. All seemed fine until I exceeded the recommended three days usage. I was dosing myself daily for three weeks at smaller and smaller intervals. Not only was I addicted to the stuff, but the stuff didn't unstuff the stuff that it was supposed to unstuff. Trying to wean myself off of the Afrin, I turned to oral cold remedies and even tried a medication that I knew from past experience was not good for me. At 3 am – unable to sleep, the words to the prayer came to me again. I needed to seek balance. And it took time to work all of the medications out of my system, and over time, I was able to breathe. God created a finely balanced network, and it was thrown out of sync and I over-compensated and the gyrations became wilder and wilder until I was breathless.

For each of us to find health, we must strive to find balance and find appropriate measures to achieve that balance. Pliers cannot remove a fine splinter and amputation is not an appropriate solution. We must measure our response to the challenges before us.

In like manner, the question before our country on how to deal with the health care system seems to have gone out of control. As medicine and medical technology advances, the resources necessary to support research and refinement grows. Companies invest great sums of money in order to discover and manufacture new cures and healings and look to recoup their investment and profit from their effort. The costs of medicine and medical care rise exponentially. Insurance companies look to control costs so that they too can profit from their investment and labor. Yet, corporate interest in profit can lead to greed and greed can cause patients to suffer and be deprived of appropriate care and the system can quickly fall out of balance.

It has been said that a society must be judged on how it cares for the least among that society. We must find a way to provide adequate health care for the least among us while at the same time providing an incentive to continued innovation and discovery. We Americans have always prided ourselves on the choices we allow ourselves. We would not shop at a supermarket that only had one kind of bread, one kind of peanut butter and one kind of vegetable available – we insist on variety. In like manner, we must remember that there cannot be a single solution for all people. We must find a way to provide health care at a number of entry points and with

various options. But, at all times there must be balance between the competing goals of profit and accessibility.

But Jewish sources remind us that health care is a right and a responsibility. Talmud Sanhedrin 17b teaches that a scholar should not reside in a city where the following ten things are not found: 1) A court of justice; 2) A charity fund (collected by 2 people and distributed by 3 – meaning an honest and fair distribution); 3) a synagogue; 4) public baths (for hygiene); 5) toilet facilities (also hygiene – and when we NYC get public facilities????); 6) a mohel; 7) a doctor; 8) a notary (for writing up public documents); 9) a shochet (a good butcher) and 10) a school-master. Rabbi Akiba is said to have included healthy fruits (which are beneficial to eyesight). Three out of the ten are directly linked to health (baths, toilets, doctor) and Akiba demands healthy food. The demand that a charity fund requires that the poor have access to health and dignity.

However, Judaism doesn't demand that everyone be given equal access – there is recognition that those who can afford better things are entitled to them but what is not acceptable in Jewish law is that the poor be denied access to that which a human needs to live and survive and thrive. Rabbi Elliot N. Dorff has said, “The Jewish demand that everyone have access to health care does not necessarily mandate a particular form of delivery, such as socialize medicine. Any delivery system that provides basic needs will meet [these] Jewish standards. So, for example, the current combination in the United States of employer-related insurance plans, individual payments and government programs like Medicaid would suffice *if* that blend were effective in providing health care for everyone within our borders. The fact, however, that more than forty million American has no health insurance is, from a Jewish point of view, an intolerable dereliction of society's moral duty. The fact that some of those people will ultimately get health care in the most expensive way possible – namely, in the emergency room, usually when they are sickest -- , means that the United states is currently neglecting its fiduciary responsibility to spend its communal resources wisely.” (“Jewish Approaches in the Distribution and Cost of Health Care” Elliot N. Dorff, article published by NYBR)

The system is out of balance.

So, too, is the debate about the medical insurance system. Let us be totally honest – the current debate about health care that is taking place among elected officials is embarrassing. Invectives are flying left and right. People are accusing other people of misstating the facts. When a Louisiana congressman can call a sitting President a liar, in the halls of the legislature, then all civility has been lost. The airwaves are full of some of the nastiest

rhetoric that has been heard outside of a high-school gym locker-room. It is an affront to civil society and it takes the debate about how to care for the health of our citizens – a debate about ideals -- and turns it into a highly personal mud-slinging match.

It is remarkable that in our political system, which has divided our political philosophies into liberal vs. conservative / democratic vs. republican -- and has allowed the electorate to weigh the balance of power in favor of one side or another – that there be a demand for bi-partisanship as a medical reform bill is taking shape. Rep. Barney Frank was correct when he pointed out that the electorate gave a mandate to the Democratic Party in both houses of congress – they won this particular power battle. Let them construct a bill and place it before their colleagues. There is nothing in our system that demands that both sides have equal footing – or equal say – when trying to write laws and reforms. The shouts of “unfair” from one side or the other is not correct – it is fair – it may be unbalanced but it is part of our democratic system for there to be a majority and a minority. Live with it – it is the political system that has served our country for over two hundred years and was part of the original design of this bi-cameral governmental structure. For the debate to become balanced it is not necessary that both sides are equally represented in the easy that the propose to fix the system, but that there be a civility to the debate – the balance comes from reasonable people searching for reasonable solutions, not through a distortion of the very system of democracy, and not through resorting to bullying, name-calling and other nursery school – or locker-room -- behaviors.

For our bodies to be balanced it is not necessary to have 2 eyes, 2 mouths, 2 noses, and 2 ears – in fact balance comes when we have two ears and one mouth – when we listen twice as much as we talk. If we close off our ears, we cease to remain open to new ideas and new points of view. When we close our eyes, we cease to see others as part of our world. If our hands are balled into fists, we cannot touch and reach out to our neighbors. And our morning prayer gives insight, not just on the finely balanced nature of our internal circuitry, but to the world in which we live. We must seek balance in all manner of our lives.

It begins with the discipline necessary to care for the fine design of the wondrous bodies the Creator formed for us. It continues by seeing the remarkable world in which we live, that too is system that must remain in balance. Our communities demand the kind of balance so each has what he or she needs to live a life of dignity and respect. And even our discourse must be balanced so that remain open to those around us and not shut out new ideas and new ways of thinking.

So when we arise, let us each take stock of the blessings of our bodies – with all the creaks and pains and reminders that we are human – and let us feel grateful that we can strive to find balance – and when things are out of whack (as they are wont to be) we turn first to the Source of Life and remind ourselves that God’s design requires that we seek balance.

By the way, the common question “How are you?” in Hebrew, is “Ma Shlomcha?” How is your peace, how is your wholeness, how is your balance? When we find balance we find peace – exactly what I wish for each and every one of us on this New Year’s Eve.

Shana Tova!