

WEALTH DISPARITY

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Almost every day, I read stories about bank executives, hedge fund managers, executives at Fannie Mae and Freddie Mac making multi-million dollar salaries and bonuses while the number of unemployed in this country has reached a whopping 14 million. And given the fact that there are 5 people applying for every available job, 4 out of those 5 face grim prospects indeed. While companies like Goldman Sachs make record profits, many of those who ARE working are underemployed and many of the jobs that ARE being created don't pay people enough to cover groceries, health care, and rent. This is taking a toll not just financially, but psychologically as well.

Listen to a 46-year-old teacher in Charlotte, Vt., unable to find a full-time job and weighed down with debt. In a letter to his U.S. senator, Bernie Sanders, he says:

“I am financially ruined. I find myself depressed and demoralized and my confidence is shattered. Worst of all, as I hear more and more talk about deficit reduction and further layoffs, I have the agonizing feeling that the worst may not be behind us.”

And listen to a couple facing foreclosure in Barre, Mass.,
who wrote to Senator Sanders:

“We are now at our wits end and in dire straits.

Our parents have since left this world and with no place to go,
what are we to do and where are we to go?”

They pray to God, they said, that they will not end up living in their car
in the cold.¹

Unfortunately, these heart-wrenching stories are far from isolated.

I consider Bob Herbert, until recently an Op Ed columnist for The New York Times,
to be an important modern day prophet.

He has been ceaseless in reminding us about the poor, the unemployed,
those we have left behind and forgotten. Recently he wrote:

“So here we are pouring shiploads of cash into yet another war, this time in Libya,
while simultaneously demolishing school budgets, closing libraries,
laying off teachers and police officers, and generally letting the bottom fall out
of the quality of life here at home.

Welcome to America in the second decade of the 21st century...

Limitless greed, unrestrained corporate power and a ferocious addiction
to foreign oil have led us to an era of perpetual war and economic decline.

Young people today are staring at a future in which they will be less well off
than their elders, a reversal of fortune that should send a shudder
through everyone.

The U.S. has not just misplaced its priorities.

When the most powerful country ever to inhabit the earth finds it so easy to plunge into the horror of warfare but almost impossible to find adequate work for its people or to properly educate its young, it has lost its way entirely.”

Now it may seem surprising that I would connect this state of affairs to this week’s Torah portion. Indeed, last week’s portion, Tazria, as well as this week’s, Metzora, speaks of a disease called tzaraat, which, when it attacks a person, is something like leprosy, and when it attacks a house, is something like mold.

Interestingly, it is not a doctor or a housing inspector who must determine whether or not the person or the home is afflicted with tzaarat.

Rather, it is a priest. The priest must also determine whether the person or the home has been cured. Why would this be the case?

The rabbis of our tradition think that tzaarat is a physical manifestation of a spiritual illness. For example, if a person is struck with tzaarat, the rabbis believe this is a result of *lashon hara* – evil tongue or gossip. If a house is struck with mold, they speculate that this is due to a dysfunction within the family.

Well, I would like to suggest that our society has been struck with tzaraat because there is a clear dysfunction going on.

Bob Herbert tells us that “income and wealth inequality in the US have reached stages that would make the Third World blush.”²

Up until fairly recently, the top 10% of families accounted for only 1/3

of average income growth. The rest of us accounted for 2/3 of income growth. However, between 2000 and 2007, the richest 10% of American families received 100% -- that's 100% -- of average income growth.

I know you have all felt this in your pocketbooks.

Your income has been stagnant over the past decade.

In addition, to add insult to injury, in 2009, the richest 5 % claimed 63.5% of the nation's wealth. The bottom 80% collectively held just 12.8 %.

I agree with Bob Herbert who calls this maldistribution of wealth "scandalous."

He continues: "This inequality, in which an enormous segment of the population struggles while the fortunate few ride the gravy train, is a world-class recipe for social unrest.

Downward mobility is an ever-shortening fuse leading to profound consequences."

Another example of how incredibly unfair the system has become is that despite profits of \$14.2 billion — \$5.1 billion from its operations in the United States — General Electric did not have to pay any U.S. taxes last year.

As The Times's David Kocieniewski reported, 'Its extraordinary success is based on an aggressive strategy that mixes fierce lobbying for tax breaks and innovative accounting that enables it to concentrate its profits offshore.'

Ched Myers, a Christian theologian, interprets the Torah as mandating restraint in the area of economics. As an example, he points to the passage in the book of Exodus that deals with

the distribution of manna in the desert.

Moses explains to the Israelites as follows:

”This is the bread that God is giving you to eat.

Here is what God commands: Each person should collect according to what he needs.’

Thus the Israelites did ... Those who had collected much, had not gathered too much, those who had gathered little, had enough: each one had collected what he could eat.”

This, Ched Myers, explains, forms the basis of equitable distribution, whereby everyone should have enough and no one should be entitled to excessive amounts.

Moses says further in Exodus: *“No one can keep any in reserve until the next day.’ Some did not listen to Moses and kept some in reserve.*

Worms penetrated it and it became rotten.”

In other words, says Myers, wealth should circulate, not accumulate.

Our tradition calls us to task if we ignore the needs of our community.

There is a famous Jewish story about a Roman soldier who approaches the great sage, Rabbi Hillel, asking him to summarize Judaism standing on one foot.

Hillel cites his own version of the Golden Rule:

“What is hateful to you, do not do to any other.

That is the heart of the Torah. All the rest is commentary.”

The "Golden Rule" – Love your neighbor as yourself – is part of the Torah's "Holiness Code."

This is the basic principle underlying the biblical commitment to fairness, human responsibility, and social justice.

Deuteronomy famously enjoins us:

“Justice, justice shall you pursue.”

In other words, we are mandated to actively engage in the work of justice.

And what is justice but ensuring that everyone has a decent paying job, adequate health care, and a decent place to live.

The Bible does not merely command us to give to the poor, but to advocate on their behalf.

We are told in Proverbs 31:9, to "speak up, judge righteously, champion the poor and the needy."

Yet we are creating a society with an ever increasing number of poor people.

Our prophets, the fiery mouthpieces of God, are ceaseless in their calling us to account.

They too focused on matters of economic justice at a time when economic disparity increased.

Isaiah rails against the landed elite who has been made wealthy by the labor of the ordinary Israelite: *“It is you who have devoured the vineyard, crushing and grinding the face of the poor.”*

Jeremiah, also decries the disparity between rich and poor, predicting punishment for the king who builds himself a spacious palace, paneled with cedar, while workers are forced

to forego their wage.

And listen to Amos calling the notables of the society to account:

“They lie on ivory beds,

Lolling on their couches,

Feasting on lambs from the flock

And on calves from the stalls ...

They drink straight from the wine bowls

And anoint themselves from the choicest oils --

But they are not concerned about the ruin of Joseph.

Assuredly, right soon

They shall head the column of exiles;

They shall loll no more at festive meals.”

...let justice well up like water,

Righteousness as a mighty stream.”

And it is not just the already poor we need to worry about --
our middle class middle class is shrinking rapidly.

One of TBE’s former congregants, Robert Pollin,
a professor of economics at the University of Massachusetts,
warns:

“The Great Recession and its aftermath are entering a new phase
in the United States, which could bring even more severe assaults
on the living standards and basic rights of ordinary people
than we have experienced thus far.

This is because a wide swath of the country's policy- and opinion-making elite have singled out public sector workers—including schoolteachers, healthcare workers, police officers and firefighters—as well as their unions and even their pensions as deadweight burdens sapping the economy's vitality.

The Great Recession did blow a massive hole in state and municipal government finances, with tax receipts...dropping sharply along with household incomes, spending and real estate values... But let's remember that the recession was caused by Wall Street hyper-speculation, not the pay scales of elementary school teachers or public hospital nurses.

Nonetheless, a rising chorus of commentators charge that public sector workers are overpaid relative to employees in comparable positions in the private sector.

The fact that this claim is demonstrably false appears not to matter. Instead, the attacks are escalating.

The most recent proposal gaining traction is to write new laws that would allow states to declare bankruptcy.

This would let them rip up contracts with current public sector employees and walk away from their pension fund obligations.”

In our Torah portion, the person afflicted by tzaraat is brought before the priest by the community.

In other words, spiritual affliction is a matter of concern

to everyone, not just the person who is suffering.

By the same token, when our society has become ill, or misguided, we all must take responsibility to set it back on track.

What can we do? Write to our representatives in Congress.

Tell them we won't accept this redistribution of wealth to the richest Americans.

Vote for people who will remember what the values of our democracy are – indeed the values of our own tradition.

Attend a Poverty Simulation session run by Catholic Charities on May 19th – there are flyers in the back about this event.

Let's not stand idly by while we watch our neighbors bleed.

¹ From Bob Herbert's Op Ed column in *The NY Times*, Feb. 22, 2011.

² From Herbert's March 26, 2011, Op Ed column in *The NY Times*. Stats following are from this column as well.