



Op-Ed: Embracing public Judaism

By Jill Jacobs · June 30, 2009

NEW YORK (JTA) -- The Fourth of July is a time for the American Jewish community to celebrate the unprecedented freedom that the United States has afforded its Jewish citizens. While anti-Semitism has not disappeared, Jews living in America enjoy religious liberties that few Jewish communities in history have experienced, have attained economic and educational success, and have risen to the highest echelons of political power.

In the 21st century, the question is no longer whether Jews will make it in this country but what Jews will contribute to the American discourse.

The topic of religion in the public square tends to elicit images of the Christian right fighting for restrictions on abortion, same-sex marriage and sex education. But religious traditions -- Judaism, Christianity, Islam and others -- have much to say not only about social and cultural norms, but also about economic policy, equality and inequality, and interpersonal behavior.

In this time of economic crisis, the United States needs to learn from the wisdom of these traditions, as well as from contemporary social science and the experiences of real people on the ground.

When we think about halachah (Jewish law), we tend to think first of ritual practices -- what observant Jews do and do not eat, what activities are permitted or allowed on Shabbat, and what blessings to say on specific occasions. But halachah also includes extensive discussion of civil law, including standards for the relationships between employers and employees, the responsibilities that tenants and landlords have toward one another, and best practices for allocating tzedakah (material support for the poor).

Since the beginning of this economic crisis, I often have been reminded of classical Jewish texts that speak directly to the issues now facing the United States. For example, during the first century CE, Hillel -- one of the greatest rabbis of the Talmud -- noticed a threat to the system of lending and borrowing. According to biblical law, debts are forgiven during the shmittah, or sabbatical, year. The Torah foresees the likelihood that individuals will avoid making loans soon before the shmittah year, and warns against giving into this impulse.

By Hillel's time, though, many people were refusing to make loans that would not be paid back. Hillel realized that the economic system was likely to collapse if borrowing and lending stopped, even for a short period. In response, he instituted "prozbul," a legal fiction that allows debts to be transferred to the court and collected after the shmittah year.

While technically a subversion of biblical law, this innovation protects the poorest members of society from being denied the loans that will help them to survive difficult periods and maintains the stability of the economic system as a whole.

In the past few years, we have learned in a dramatic way that a drastic reduction in lending and borrowing can undermine the global financial system. While prozbul may not be the solution to today's challenges, Hillel's willingness to transform engrained law serves as a model for re-imagining the laws that govern our own economic system.

In addition to pushing us to change laws in order to create a sustainable and just economic system, Judaism teaches specific laws aimed at guaranteeing that employers will not take unfair advantage of low-income workers, that landlords will not evict tenants without fair warning, and that the criminal justice system will preserve the dignity of both victims and perpetrators.

But some of us remain uncomfortable speaking publicly as Jews about current issues. Many Jews who lead community or public policy organizations, or who hold elected office, speak privately about the ways in which Jewish history and tradition have influenced their approaches to social and economic policy but do not necessarily speak about these Jewish perspectives in public. Perhaps our own negative experiences as the victims of religious coercion, or our attempts to protect ourselves from the intrusion of Christian practice into public institutions, have persuaded us that Judaism has no place in the public sphere.

A powerful rejoinder to this view was offered up by the theologian Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel.

"We affirm the principle of separation of church and state," the rabbi wrote. *"We reject the separation of religion and the human situation."*

While the teachings of an individual religious tradition should not be allowed to limit individual or group freedoms or religious practices, our fear of coercion should not dissuade us from bringing the best of Jewish wisdom into the American public debate. We have much to learn from the nuanced approaches to social and economic policy that our rabbis and scholars have developed over the past 3,000 years. If we are to build a sustainable American economy for the future, we should learn from this wisdom, as well as from the wisdom of other religious traditions, academic disciplines and practitioners.

The United States needs us to be Jews not only at home, but also in the street.

http://jta.org/news/article-print/2009/06/30/1006223/op-ed-embracing-public-judaism?TB_iframe=true&width=750&height=500