

Taxing Thoughts--Blog by Rabbi Marc D. Angel

Submitted by mdangel1 on Thu, 03/14/2019 - 00:00



In the United States, this is the season when we have gathered our financial data for the past year and filed our annual tax accounts. This process gives us a clear idea of our economic history for the past year. But it also tells us much about who we are, well beyond the category of economics.

Media outlets have recently reported the tax records of some Democratic candidates for President of the United States. (The Republican President has not yet released his tax records for public review, saying that his taxes are still being audited by the IRS.)

Interestingly, the candidates speak grandly about their concern for the welfare of the nation; their commitment to the poor; their dedication to immigrants; their support of the national ideals which have made America unique. But what do their tax records show?

Without mentioning names, here is a listing of incomes, charity given, and percent of income that went to charity of the candidates who have thus far made their tax returns public.

\$370, 312 income; \$1,166 charitable contributions—1/3 of one %.

\$566,00 income; \$19,000 charitable contributions—3.4%

\$1.9 million income; \$27,000 charitable contributions—1.4%

\$338,500 income; \$6600 charitable contributions—just under 2%

\$215,000 income; \$3750 charitable contributions—just under 2%

\$906,000 income; \$50,000 charitable contributions—5.5%

\$203,000 income; \$8295 charitable contributions—about 4 %

People spend money on the things that are important to them. Our financial records are a clearer reflection of our values than anything we say. It is disheartening that leading American politicians—who earn far more than the national average of incomes—share so little of their wealth with charitable causes and humanitarian assistance. While they may all be good people in so many ways, their contributions belie their stated commitments. They prefer to keep as much of their money as they can...and let others devote resources to the people and institutions that need charitable support.

But what about ourselves?

Are we generous? We all like to think that we are. But let us examine our actual financial records for the past year. How much charity did we give? The Shulhan Arukh teaches that one who gives 10% of income to charity is considered an average person. One who gives 20% is considered generous. One who gives less than 10% is considered stingy. Our tax forms will reveal our level of real—not imagined—generosity.

Do we value spiritual and religious life above materialistic concerns? Our tax records will reveal the truth about ourselves. Did we spend more money on recreation than on our spiritual/religious needs? Did we spend more on vacation than we did on Jewish education for ourselves and our children/grandchildren?

I have known people who claimed financial inability to pay synagogue dues but who spent considerable amounts on their summer homes. Others regularly spend hundreds of dollars for an evening at a restaurant and theater, but claim that they cannot afford to donate to the annual UJA-Federation campaign or other communal charities. Or they send in \$18! I know of families who have spent many thousands of dollars staying in luxurious hotels for Passover, but who contribute very small amounts to their synagogues and local day schools.

Our tax records show us what we did, not what we claimed to believe. How much did we spend in support of Jewish causes, humanitarian causes? How much did we donate to the institutions which are the backbone of our religious, charitable, humanitarian and cultural infrastructure? If promoting vital Jewish life is an uppermost concern of ours, this concern must be reflected in the way we invest our charitable dollars. The amounts we give—or do not give—are a stark and objective reflection of our priorities.

.The money we earn is the fruit of our labor. The money we spend is a reflection of our values. The way we allocate our funds—as evidenced in our tax records—tells us much about the meaning of our prayers and aspirations, and about who we really are.

The popular Hebrew word for charity is tzedaka; but this word derives from the word tzedek, justice. Giving charity is not merely a show of compassion and thoughtful concern for others; it is an expression of justice. It is a way of making an unfair world a bit fairer. It is a means of supporting causes that enhance a just, righteous society. In Jewish law, charity is an obligation, not just a privilege.

As we review our past year's tax records, let us also review what they say about who we are...and imagine what we can be during the coming year.

- [Log in](#) or [register](#) to post comments