The Business of Life: Thoughts for Succoth

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Thoughts for Succoth

by Rabbi Marc D. Angel

Healthy societies and communities depend on their members' loyalty and sense of responsibility. They thrive when people work for the general good and not just for their own self-interest. People realize that if they are to enjoy the benefits of a society/community, they should rightfully share in the responsibilities of its maintenance.

Happily, many people understand this and govern their lives accordingly. They are good citizens, good community members. They pay their way and do their share.

Unhappily, there is a growing trend in our society that undermines these values. Professor Barry Schwartz of Swarthmore College has written extensively and cogently on how the market economy—where people look out primarily for themselves rather than the public good—is eroding the quality of our lives. In almost every profession and every business, there is a "free agent" attitude that says: let me take as much as I can for myself; I'm not going to worry about how this affects others. Business is business. My first concern is for the bottom line; let others fend for themselves.

We read in our newspapers how major corporations, with billions of dollars of annual profits, pay little or no taxes. They hire lawyers to find loopholes, and they pay lobbyists to make the tax loopholes in the first place. Their explanation is: business is business. We need to maximize profits. We owe this to our stockholders.

But what about responsibility for the country, the society that enables them to do business and make profits? What about a sense of loyalty for the rest of the citizenry, who must pay all the taxes that these corporations avoid? The answer: business is business. We take what we can; if the burden falls on others, that's their problem, not ours.

While this philosophy of the market economy increases, the quality of our lives decreases. Some few get very rich, and the masses are left to pay the bills. This causes a breakdown in trust, a festering of social antagonisms and resentments. As the level of public responsibility decreases, personal relationships suffer as well. The conclusion is: people are disposable. Loyalty to others is not the top concern: money is.

Judaism is a powerful voice that stands for social responsibility. The Torah reminds us that we were slaves in Egypt. We are to have mercy on the stranger, for we were strangers in the land of Egypt. The Torah and rabbinic tradition insist that we see the humanity in others, that we put the concerns of human beings first. We are instructed to be constructive, caring, responsible people.

Each of us is an ambassador of this great idea, this great vision. The hallmark of who we are as a Jewish people is our commitment to humanity—our own humanity and the humanity of others. We rebel against oppression; we reject the philosophy of business is business, that profits come first; we embrace social responsibility and mutual trust. Each of us who strives to live by these Jewish ideals is a moral hero who defies the dehumanizing tendencies evident in our society.

In describing Succoth as the time of our rejoicing, our tradition reminds us that we are to rejoice by sharing our blessings with others. It is not a time to hoard our harvest for our own benefit, but a time to remember the poor and the stranger—to share and reach out to others.

The Succah is a temporary dwelling reminding us that our own lives are temporary—we are transient visitors in this world. Our personal fulfillment comes through sharing with others, through playing our part for the betterment of all.

Professor Gershon Galil of the Department of Biblical Studies at the University of Haifa recently deciphered an inscription dating from the 10th century BCE—the earliest known fragment of Hebrew writing. How wonderful that this oldest Hebrew inscription captures the spirit of the Jewish people:

“You shall not do it, but worship the Lord. Judge the slave and the widow, judge the orphan and the stranger. Plead for the infant, plead for the poor and the widow. Rehabilitate the poor at the hands of the king. Protect the poor and the slave, support the stranger.”

Some people think it’s fine to say business is business, that people are disposable, that people don’t matter but profits matter. Look out for yourself, and let others look out for themselves.

We say with full voice: this is not the way. Hessed is the way. Social responsibility is the way. Building a righteous society is the way.
