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A Country In Need of Social Justice

By Leonard Fein

Why does it matter that the Jewish people persists, beyond the sometime comforts of ethnic identity? What grand purpose is served by the continuing existence of the Jews?

Obviously, there are a variety of plausible responses to those questions. Having a compelling way to fill in the blank in the sentence that begins, “It is important that the Jews persist because _____” is a way of placing oneself within Jewish history — past, future and present. It elevates a personal predilection, transforming it into public significance. My own preferred words to fill in that blank are “because this world is not working the way it was meant to work” (or, perhaps, “the way it is supposed to work”). And then there’s another sentence: The Jews are implicated in the world’s repair.

Judaism without an emphatic commitment to social justice is a betrayal, a disfiguring distortion. That may seem a rather heavy burden, given the state of the world. Compound fractures abound in almost every realm, endless insults and injuries. But then it is well to bear in mind that many people, surely Jews no less than others, yearn to live a life that matters, to live a purposeful life, to feel that their brief time on earth has made something of a difference. When put in that context, engagement in one of the myriad ways in which the world cries out for repair seems less a heavy burden than an exhilarating opportunity.

I have been thinking about such things lately for two very different reasons. The first has to do with the escalating assault on common understandings of social justices. From Wisconsin to Michigan and New Jersey and Arizona, our erstwhile rough consensus on what it means to be an American, on who we are and what we believe as a people is now fraying — no, “fraying” is too temperate a word — shredding. And then, of course, there’s Congress, composed as Charles

Blow reminds us in his Times OpEd piece on June 25 of “pitiless Republicans accommodated by pitiful Democrats” — Congress, nearly half of whose members are millionaires. The prospective cuts in the federal government’s discretionary spending, even if the President hangs tough and persuades the Congressional Republicans that the reductions they propose must be at least partially offset by revisiting and revising the Bush tax cuts, will leave many, many people not merely bruised but battered.

In this still-unfolding drama, we do not yet know how the president will behave, what values he will not merely propose but energetically and even stubbornly defend. The stakes just now are very high. Most Americans do not understand that the reason the nation’s debt limit must be raised is that otherwise we cannot pay down the loans we have already borrowed; we will be in default. A world-wide economic tsunami. (Try borrowing money after you’ve defaulted; try funding government without borrowing money.) But the Republicans insist that raising the limit be packaged together with taking an axe to discretionary spending. In their view, the free enterprise system is self-correcting and our economy can therefore best be repaired by deregulation and a radical reduction in corporate taxes.

An under-regulated free enterprise system? But isn’t that where we were in September of 2008, before the dirty bomb exploded and brought on the current recession?

While the federal government may yet raise the debt limit, it is likely to remain in default on what it owes to its citizens, and that is the other reason I have been particularly focused on social justice issues and the ways in which Jews connect to them. The happy fact is that we are witness to a remarkable flowering of organized Jewish efforts in the work of social justice.

Rather than catalogue those efforts here, I call attention to a very special gathering in mid-June at Congregation B’nai Jeshurun in New York. The gathering was a celebration of the life work (so far) of Rachel Cowan, who for much of her professional career has been the signal social justice entrepreneur in the American Jewish community. Much of this she accomplished during her years with the Nathan Cummings Foundation, where she served for 14 years as Director of the Jewish Life and Values Program. There, as was dazzlingly recalled at the BJ celebration, she provided start-up funding for nearly every consequential social justice initiative that now characterizes our community. And even that understates her impact, whether as co-creator and executive director of the Institute for Jewish Spirituality or as someone whose natural

warmth has provided critical encouragement to a generation that might otherwise have been far more tentative in its efforts. I thought, as I looked about the crowd that gathered for the celebration, of Silicon Valley. It was as if one entrepreneur (there have been others, but none nearly so central as Cowan) had funded Apple and Google and e-Bay and a dozen others, known and on the cusp of being known, together fomenting a revolution in American life and culture.

Or: As Washington defaults, the work of repairing the world increasingly depends on foundations, philanthropies and philanthropists. And here we are. Let all those who believe that the American Jewish community has defaulted on its historic commitment to social justice enter and drink deep of this overflowing cup,