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Inside...

Self and society; personal and communal. Throughout time there has been tension over which should serve which ("Ask not...") or when the one should serve the other. When does public good overrule personal desire, and when should personal pain trump public policy? And is there a better way to ask the question?

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Sh'ma

A JOURNAL OF JEWISH RESPONSIBILITY

Who's responsible? ■ Nan Fink

When I was a young psychotherapist in the 1970s, I became deeply disillusioned with the therapeutic profession because it focused so strongly on individual responsibility. If a person had a problem, it meant that something was wrong with him or her. But what about the structural context of people's lives? Didn't issues of race, gender, and class matter? Surely the genesis of all problems couldn't be traced to neurosis.

In professional meetings and conferences I listened as therapists ascribed their clients' problems to childhood trauma or self-defeating behavior patterns. "Wrong!" I wanted to yell. "Look at poverty, look at how women are treated, look at this society in which our clients live!" I was disgusted by these well-heeled, self-satisfied therapists who seemed to ignore the realities of life.

Good vs. Bad

In those days I thought that the world was divided into two camps: those who understood that the system needed to be changed (the good people), and those who believed in individual responsibility (the cop-outs). With this attitude I lasted only a dozen years as a therapist before I changed professions.

I've since become more nuanced in my understanding of cause and effect, al-

though I've never lost my concern about the way social structure affects our lives. Take my friend Hannah, for example, who struggles with depression. As an aging woman alone in a society that does not value her, and as a person without an adequate income because she can't get a job, her life is hard. The structural reasons for her depression are all too obvious. But what about her longstanding negativity? And the way her family ignores her? And her biochemistry? And how she was dumped by her medical insurance company?

Holding Complexity

My point is that the explanation for personal pain isn't as simple as I once thought. I envisage a continuum, with individual responsibility on one end and societal conditions on the other. With any problem the explanations are scattered up and down this continuum. The interrelatedness of life, evident in the physical sciences and assumed in Jewish mysticism, is certainly clear here.

A single "right" solution to easing personal pain does not exist. The familiar choice between changing "the person or the system" no longer fits. We need to work on all fronts.

It is hard to hold the complexity of (plural) explanations and (plural) answers.

Even now I wish for simplicity. But we need to stretch to include the largest understanding of personal pain, and at the same time take on a manageable part to correct.

Take Hannah's situation: Those who work to improve senior health care or eradicate agism need to value the counselor who helps her manage her daily life. And that counselor must see Hannah's problems in a social context, so that the personal work she and Hannah do together is based in a political understanding of society's attitude toward aging.

Remember the adage, the personal is political and the political is personal? The wisdom in this remains. In the United States, however, we all too often have focused on the personal part, ignoring the political part. Even those of us who consider ourselves liberal or progressive get seduced into forgetting. We too easily escape into the delusion that if we fix things within ourselves, everything will be all right.

Multiple Layers

Because of this, then, I choose to look at social structure first. A good example is the way I approach the economic, legal, and social constraints that still exist for women. My concern leads me to become involved in political action to eradicate sexism. However, this is not the extent of my activity. As a woman, I've internalized the oppression that exists, as evidenced by my tendency toward passivity and self-diminishment. If I heal these wounds within myself, I can make a greater contribution to the world. But I am not comfortable doing this healing work unless those I work with understand the larger picture of sexism.

During the past year I have had the experience of writing a book about conversion to Judaism. I took on this task because I wanted to sort out my mixed feelings about the process—I'm a convert—and I also hoped the book would expose the difficulties converts face in the Jewish world.

As I began the book, I was most aware of my anger. Converts are too often rejected or considered "not really Jewish." The pain of this has stung me and many others time and again. I wrote with great passion, but the further I got in my manuscript, the more complex my subject became. The structural conditions—the unacknowledged second-class citizenship of converts and the institutional support for this—were still my driving concerns, but others emerged.

As I wrote about my spiritual journey in relationship

NAN FINK is the author of *Stranger In the Midst: A Memoir of Spiritual Discovery* (Basic Books, 1997). The co-founder of *Tikkun* magazine, she currently teaches at Chochmat HaLev, a center of Jewish spirituality in the Bay Area.

to converting, I saw how I was holding onto my anger. I began to think about the way I and other converts handle the situation. Don't we have the responsibility to speak out and insist on better treatment? And doesn't the Jewish attitude toward converts come at least partially from experiences of historical oppression? Antisemitism, another societal reality, certainly has great bearing on the difficulties I face.

Once I realized these and other layers of the problem, it became clearer what could be done. Rather than one or two answers, several new understandings emerged.

Tikkun Olam

Tikkun olam, healing the world, is a fundamental part of Judaism and Jewish values. This concept is viewed in different ways within the Jewish world. Reform Jews see

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tikkun olam as the imperative to work toward social change, while the *hasidim* believe that all of us are sparks of the divine, and that *tikkun olam* is raising, or evolving, our souls.

In our tradition we have a range of understanding about *tikkun olam* that goes all the way from political action to personal soul-work. I find this to be a useful model as I look at the world around me, considering what needs to be done. In response to pain, I can come in at any point and make a contribution. But if I believe that this is all that is required, I am deluding myself.

Tikkun olam is a communal act, requiring thought and action by many people on many levels. This means that we must coordinate our activities so that we work together. We can't be content with approaching a problem on just one level; we must mobilize activists who contribute their various skills and concerns. The complexity of this is daunting, but there is no other way if we are committed to the fullest healing. ✦

No right, no left

■ Joan Bronk

As a Jewish woman who has spent a large part of her adult life engaged in dialogue in the public square, I am troubled. Why have so many of us become virtually silent on the critical domestic problems of the day? Where are today's equivalent of the creative ideas and solutions that we so proudly espoused in the 60s and 70s? Are we Jewish activists—yes, we liberals—giving up and turning inward, unable to engage in the national dialogue because our ideas seem like “old think”?

Where Is America Going?

We feel terrible pain as our old strategies, which seemed to hold out such promise, are being discarded, either because they have not lived up to their designers' dreams or because the time has come for new ideas to be formulated. Every day we witness the dismantling of those earlier approaches—whether it is the rollback of affirmative action, with its outrageous consequences in the Texas & California higher education systems and are stunned when we hear that

JOAN BRONK is Vice President of The Abraham Fund. She is a former National President of the National Council of Jewish Women and served as the Executive Director of The Communitarian Network.

even the NAACP is reviewing its support of public school integration. We have a President—a “New Democrat”—whom most of us voted for—who signed a welfare bill which drastically cut food stamps not only for welfare recipients but for the working poor.

Where is America going? Why do we Jews, who have always been in the forefront of shaping a domestic public policy agenda, not have an adequate vision for the future which would allow us to hold on to our ideals of government as an ally and personal freedom as an ultimate value?

In his latest book, *The New Golden Rule*, as well as in his other work, Amitai Etzioni, the founder of the Communitarian Network, has put forward many ideas that should resonate with Jews who are concerned about this nation's future. I have long been puzzled by the fact that by and large the leaders of the American Jewish community have not engaged in dialogue with Communitarian concepts. After all, recently they have been embraced by leaders including President Bill Clinton, First Lady Hillary Clinton, Vice President Al Gore and Senator Bill Bradley. Among the original endorsers of the Communitarian Platform, which first outlined Responsive Communitarian ideas, were William Galston, Alice Rossi, John Gardner, Kurt Schmoke, Henry Cisneros, Stuart Eisenstat, Hillel Levine and Betty Freidan.

Consider A New Road Map

“What is Communitarianism?” It is a social movement which combines a three-pronged approach: change of heart, renewal of social bonds and reform of public life. Communitarians concern themselves with the “seedbeds of virtue”—the social practices and institutions that cultivate values—the family, schools, community and the entire community of communities. They are committed to the proposition that legislative changes should follow and not precede changes in public attitudes. Etzioni points to legislation regarding smoking as an example of a legislative initiative that properly followed a changing national consensus. Though not all values in a society can or will be shared, communitarians contend that there is a set of core values on which a strong and healthy society must rest. People must come together to determine that core.

What interests me most is Etzioni's suggestion that we “rearrange the intellectual-political map.” He suggests a new social philosophy—one that breaks the opposition of left and right. He proposes a framework where the badges of liberalism and conservatism no longer mean that much. Instead, his approach looks to the core values of the community for answers. This may be painful for many of us because so much of our identity is caught up in our commit-