

RELIGION IN THE WORKPLACE

—With a Twist—

by Congressman Henry A. Waxman

The religious “baggage” we bring to work with us—our beliefs, ideals, perspectives on human issues—often affects the way in which we view the matters before us, whether we realize it or not. Below, Congressman Henry A. Waxman of Los Angeles sets out to identify areas in which “the Jewish perspective” colors his outlook, making him more sensitive in his approach to the business of government.



In a Congress with 535 members, 38 of whom are Jews, I find it inevitable and desirable to take into account, consciously, the relevance of our heritage to the issues at hand. I find this to be especially true in my work as chairman of the House Subcommittee on Health and the Environment. Judaism has always assigned tremendous importance to healing the sick—Jew and non-Jew alike. The Talmud tells us that he who saves a single life is regarded as if he saved the entire world. To preserve life—even when the danger is minimal—we are allowed to eat on Yom Kippur and violate the Sabbath or other holidays. The Talmud goes so far as to prohibit us from living in a city where there is no doctor.

This Jewish perspective makes it extremely hard for me to concur with those who start and end their analysis of health problems with cost accounting. I

know procedures like kidney dialysis and organ transplants are phenomenally expensive. However, I also know that withholding such care often dooms a patient to death.

In the sphere of world affairs, I am compelled as a Jew to identify with those denied human rights—whether they be in the Soviet Union, South Africa, or Saudi Arabia. I do not see American concepts of democracy and individual liberty as having their origins in the founding years of our Republic. The roots of these concepts are to be found deep in the Torah.

Despite my preoccupation with health and the environment, I never lose sight of America's role in the Middle East. Without the full and enthusiastic military and diplomatic support of the United States, Israel could not survive. Despite the courage and sacrifices of her people, the balance of forces in Israel's

region weigh overwhelmingly to the Arab side. It is the countervailing force of the United States which has allowed Israel to flourish and to fulfill its mission for Jews from all over the world. The United States must continue to play this role if Israel is to succeed in absorbing the hundreds of thousands of Soviet Jews who, hopefully, will make *aliyah* in the next few years.

Let me conclude on a personal note. I am thankful to God that our family has been able to play an active role in Jewish communal affairs, both in Washington and in Los Angeles. Our religious life is centered in Valley Beth Shalom in Los Angeles and Adas Israel in Washington, D.C. My wife, Janet, is a founding member of Congressional Wives for Soviet Jewry. Our daughter, Carol, who studied at Hebrew University, recently married Rocky Abramson, a psychologist with the Israel Defense Forces, and the newlyweds reside in Jerusalem. Our son, Michael David, is active in our United Synagogue Youth organization and has spent the past few summers at Camp Ramah in California.

I find in our liturgy an ancient foreshadowing of President George Bush's famous call for a “kindler, gentler society.” In all of our prayers, we ask Him: “Who makes peace above to grant peace also unto us and to all our people.” The commentators point out that peace means not merely the absence of open conflict but also the presence of justice, compassion, harmony, and wholeness. ■