

Statement by Rabbi Jack Moline, Director of Public Policy, Rabbinical Assembly, Dec 14, 2009

The Torah famously prohibits lending money at usurious interest, and those who try to live by Biblical precepts just as famously have tried to come to an understanding of what constitutes usury that is consistent with a variety of economic systems in which Jews, Christians and others have lived.

Over the centuries, Jews have come to many accommodations with lending practices and some of us have even become expert in the financial world. But the guiding principles of our souls remain not the specific details of lending and collecting that are mentioned in the Biblical text, but the mandate that is at the center of Deuteronomy chapter 6 - to do the right and the good.

It is not enough just to do the right thing, and it is not enough just to do the good thing. The two values are inextricably bound together. The right thing, of course, is to adhere to the laws and regulations by which we are governed. But laws and regulations exist for the benefit of those who observe them. If they do not achieve their goal, then they do not accomplish the goal of goodness.

Jewish tradition encourages far more restrictive regulations than a free market economy would tolerate. But its goal – also from that same chapter in the Book of Deuteronomy – is to remind us of ancient lessons when we were slaves in the land of Egypt. Whatever is oppressive is contrary to what is right and good. Whatever causes oppression – whatever presses down on the working members of society – stands at the wrong end of the continuum between righteousness and injustice. We live in a time when far too many people defend the status quo with the argument that what is legal is what is right.

For those of us who find our grounding in Biblical tradition, the argument addresses only half the mandate. We would not be standing here today if things were good. Far too many people who believed they had invested in the good life – a roof over their heads, food in the pantry and enough to help others in need – now find that legal lending practices did not start them on the road to security at all, but quite the opposite. And how ironic is it that many of the lenders, whether they were entrepreneurial in their motives or simply greedy, now find that the good is eluding them as well. So much is not good that it is apparent that things are not right either.

As an American it strikes me as an affront, and as a Jew it strikes me as a violation of our mandate to uphold the commandments, the statutes and the judgments of Torah, for the already wealthy to demand the corners of the fields and the gleanings of the workers as a bonus for maintaining the financial institutions that did the right, but not the good, for executives who took rightful advantage of what was on the books, but not in the Book, for board members who focused on the narrow and momentary good of the company's bottom line, but not on the greater good of those who contributed to it.

This week, Jews light candles against the darkness. The light is not utilitarian – it exists to remember the efforts of those who came before us and the miracles that sustained them. To do Chanukkah right means to focus on the good. To do economic justice right means to focus on the good.

Contact: publicpolicy@rabbinicalassembly.org; 703-304-0232