

**"Government Regulation or Personal Conscience:
It Is Not a Fair Choice:
How do we get ourselves out of this mess we are in?"
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AIG stands for American International Group. That's about as much as I understand with regards to the current financial crisis and the role this enormous corporation played in our economic environment. What I do know is that AIG started out as its name would imply – an insurance company. They began by making people feel safer because that is what insurance companies do. Insurance companies let you know that if something were to happen, they would be there for you. As I understand it, there were, and are, a lot of people and companies that sought out their services and, as a result, they grew in size. AIG also started other businesses. That is not where the problem began, nor could I really tell you where it did. However, I do know that AIG became quite big and some made a lot of money. Of course, we also understand that when the markets came crashing down, there were many who lost a lot of money. That's when the government stepped in to bail AIG out. There was so much resting on their success or failure that if they went under, many more people would be hurt so the government stepped in to preserve the common good. Then we had another big problem. Many people were upset about bonuses paid from this bailout money, especially when these bonuses went to executives who got them into this financial debacle in the first place. Unfortunately, that was the incentive necessary to get these executives to stay around and clean up the mess.

This week I spent some time with a professor of Finance and Economics at Drexel University. We talked about AIG and their problems and here's where it gets complicated. If I understand it correctly, and I am not sure I do, the government assumed some oversight and regulation of AIG because if money is given by the government, it comes with the strings of regulation. I understand that AIG also did business with other companies such as Goldman Sachs. If AIG couldn't pay their bills, Goldman Sachs would not get paid, and then even more people would get hurt. So, the government paid AIG and, in turn, AIG paid Goldman Sachs.

This is where the real problem resides. Goldman Sachs was paid an incredible amount of money with no government regulation or oversight, mainly because there really is no way to do this without complete and total control of the company. No matter – trust lies at the heart and believing in people is critical. It is the glue that holds our great society together. I was so pleased to hear that many of those who received the million and multi-million dollar bonuses from the government bailout, have decided to give that money back. This has restored my faith in humanity but, truthfully, I would like a little more control even though there really is none. Part of me would like to see more regulations to ensure this sort of predicament is not repeated. You see, it is hard to trust in people, but know this, ***without trust, life is even more complicated.*** AIG stands for American Insurance Group, but there is no assurance that corporate America will do the right thing. All we can really do is trust that individual Americans will do the right thing. You see, there really is no way to follow all the money. There really is no substantive way our government can trace every dollar. However, ***I believe individuals will rise to the occasion. I believe in the conscience of the majority of people. I believe people are, by and large, good. I believe when people are given an excuse, they behave admirably.*** Just as the President has said many times before, we are all going to have to make sacrifices for this economy to turn around. Just like the hourly worker who cuts back his own hours so that his co-worker doesn't lose their job. Sacrifice is difficult, but infinitely more meaningful, when it is voluntary.

This week we begin a series of weekly readings which focus on sacrifice, not the personal kind but the animal kind. We will read, learn, and study these varied sacrifices and offerings delivered by various events in the lives of our ancient ancestors. These include sacrifices for thanksgiving, sacrifices offered just because it is a new day and/or sacrifices offered for sins committed. It is this *karban hatat*, this sin offering, that I would like to focus on for a minute. You see, there is plenty of blame to go around because so many have lived beyond their means for so long. So many have mortgaged their future for instant gratification and now sacrifices must be made to correct the course. Our sages have much to say on the subject. The rabbis immediately understand that there are those who are not willing to make the difficult choices. There will be some who believe they can beat the system and they can get by without making the difficult forfeitures.

So, let me step back for a minute and teach you about the biblical mindset. For the regular Hebrew wandering through the desert, animal sacrifice was real. It was curative and it re-established a balance. Sacrifice was necessary, not just for the health and wellbeing of the individual, but the common good. What the individual did affected the entire community because when one person sinned, it infected the entire community. Therefore, the community had a stake in the sacrifices offered by its individual citizenry. We can identify with this today. The intense ramifications of one person and how they affect the whole is most acutely felt by just mentioning the name, Bernie Madoff. Bernie Madoff robbed so many of so much money, but even worse than that, he robbed us of the trust we have grown to rely upon. Although, today we might view the ancient practice of sacrifice as a psychological placebo, for our ancient ancestors it was real, it was effective, and it was for the sake of the community.

Yet our Torah writes, *Yakriv oto lirtzono* – “He shall bring [the offering] according to his will” (Leviticus 1:3)

The Torah reminds us that a sin-offering brought into the Temple must be a voluntary contribution, but what if a sinner does not want to bring an offering? The Talmud (Rosh Hashanah 6a) explains, “*Sh’cofin oto*,” a sinner must be forced to bring his offering. To which the Talmud objects more strenuously. How can you force someone to do something that is supposed to be voluntary? The internal dialogue continues resolving to “*sh’cofin oto ad sh’yomar ritzeh ani*.” We push him until he says “I want to.” Even today the struggle continues in our own hearts. It continues in the governance of our country and in the global financial markets. When we find ourselves among people who behave poorly, what do we do? The Talmud says, and I actually believe the Talmud hopes that we can make them behave properly. The Talmud wants us to seize control even though we really know that is impossible and our sages refuse to accept that.

Maimonides (Laws of Divorce 2:20) says, *Eyn zeh anoos mimeinu, elah hu anas et atzmo b’daato haraah* “It is only considered coercion when we force a person to do something which he is not obligated to do, but when his evil thoughts force him to...commit a sin and we coerce him to fulfill the commandment...this is not considered ‘coercion’ at all. Quite the opposite – he has overcome the evil thoughts forcing him to perform the evil deed.” Maimonides says we need to help each other and his insight is that people are innately good. He says that people basically want to do the right thing, they want to act fairly and justly, but they need help overcoming evil impulses. Our basic nature is good, but that good can be confused and confounded. Maimonides gently teaches that we can help each other but that is all we can really do.

I add to Rambam that there is one more thing we can do. We can trust again. The sacrifice we must make is found in our willingness to not be in control. Trust requires us to give over control.

Thomas Friedman, in an op-ed piece published recently, quoted from Dave (Dov) Seidman's book *How: Why How We Do Anything Means Everything in Business (and in Life)*, "There is nothing more powerful than inspirational leadership which unleashes principled behavior for a great cause." He continued writing, "What makes a company or a government sustainable is not when it adds more coercive rules or regulations to control behaviors, it's when the employees or citizens are propelled by values and principles to do the right thing, no matter how difficult the situation. Laws tell you what you can do. Values inspire you (to do) what you should do." (NY Times, March 22, 2009)

One final thought. This week in the Wall Street Journal, a funny yet instructive article appeared. Jonathan Welsch writes, "Jamie De Lisle's Buick had been warning her for days, first with a flashing yellow light, then a flashing red light, but the 31-year-old mother of two from Collinsville, Illinois, was too busy to heed the distress signals. It was only when Mrs. De Lisle began hearing an incessant beeping that she took notice: If she didn't make her car payment that day, the vehicle wouldn't start the next day." You see, "The repo man has found a new hiding place -- inside your car. Some used-car dealers are installing remote disabling devices that keep the cars from starting if the buyer gets too far behind on payments. These so-called disablers are palm-sized devices placed under dashboards and wired into ignition. Once they were limited to what industry insiders call the "buy here -- pay here" segment: used-car lots lining state highways, strung with lights and multicolored pennants. However, as the economic downturn deepens, larger, more mainstream dealerships are using the devices as a condition of financing. (WSJ March 25, 2009)

Just like car dealers, we all want assurances. We all want guarantees that the people around us will do what is right, what is fair, and what is expected. We want more than trust. We want insurance. AIG was supposed to provide it. The problem is, there really wasn't any. All we can do is learn to trust others. When that is found within, there is a peace of mind that comes. There is serenity. The turmoil this economy has generated will not soon find resolution. We will continue to feel this internal chaos because the world around us affects us and because our livelihoods are at stake. So, I offer this piece of advice. Rather than looking outward for peace, look inward instead. Find an image and hold on to it.

William Wordsworth wrote,

"I gazed -- and gazed -- but little thought
What wealth the show to me had brought:
For oft, when on my couch I lie
In vacant or in pensive mood,
They flash upon that inward eye
Which is the bliss of solitude;
And then my heart with pleasure fills,
And dances with the daffodils.

– "Daffodils" (1804)