

# Opinions and Commentaries

## The Poor Among Us

By Rabbi Robert A. Seigel

*This sermon was delivered at Temple Beth El V'Shalom on June 24.*

A rabbi ascended the bima on Rosh Hashana at his new congregation, and delivered an eloquent sermon on TIKKUN OLAM, on social justice and the need for the Jew to be involved with the problems of the world around us. The congregants were stimulated by his golden words. The following Rosh Hashana the rabbi delivered a sermon on TIKKUN OLAM, on social justice, that was every bit as magnificent as the year before. In fact, it was the SAME sermon he had preached the year before, and he delivered it precisely as he had the first time, word for word.

The members wondered but said nothing. Congregations, you see, are famous for their compassion. It happened again the third year, and once more the following year. All agreed that it was a magnificent sermon, but, after all, they had now heard it FOUR times.

Finally, the Temple president paid the rabbi a visit. "Rabbi," he began, "that surely is a magnificent sermon on Tikkun Olam." "Thank you," replied the rabbi. "Yes," said the president, warming to his task, "that truly is a magnificent sermon, and we have been deeply moved by it. But some members have mentioned to me, and I myself have been wondering — Rabbi, don't you think it's time to preach another sermon?"

"Do you really think so?" asked the rabbi. "You see, I have been waiting until we DID something about the first one!"

Our religion is not one of pronouncements or catechisms or creed; Judaism is not centered around theology or philosophy or concepts. Ours is a heritage of DOING, of acting, of observing commandments. One worships God with what we DO, not solely with what we pray. Worship of God includes the way we treat all of God's creatures. The very word "halacha" — Jewish Law — literally means the way a Jew should walk — the way a Jew should live his life. For us, the words have no meaning without action. What we do is what we really believe. Just look at anyone's actions and you will know what that person believes.

I was reminded of that Jewish value just this week. I sat over the newspaper this past Tuesday morning with

my first cup of coffee, and I felt a wave of sadness. I was reading the results of our County Commissioners' appropriations for 1988-1989, appropriations that show what they truly believe, where they really stand. It hurt to realize that in such a beautiful city as Charlotte, in a community that is truly one of the nation's finest, our County Commissioners have turned their backs on the most needy residents of our area.

- \$300,000 was cut from Charlotte Memorial Hospital's program of health care for the poor.

- Half of the money needed to establish a shelter for the homeless was turned down.

- 43% of the money needed to assist AIDS patients and their families was rejected.

- Planned Parenthood was dropped as a recipient.

But don't fear, the Commissioners showed us where they really stood.

- \$100,000 was appropriated to sponsor the first sporting event in the new coliseum.

Frankly, I'm embarrassed. As a citizen of this county and as a Jew, I'm not only embarrassed, I'm outraged. The homeless, the poor, the seriously ill, the main agency assisting teenagers to avoid becoming parents before they themselves are grown, are all rejected by our communal leaders — who stood instead for the virtues of a sporting event.

As Charlotte strives to become a "world class" city with skyscrapers competing with the best, with major league athletic teams, with a new arts center, with a newly forming image, we must at the same time struggle to see that Charlotte does not lose its soul.

Each week we read letters referring to the homeless on our streets as "worthless bums." Granted some probably are; but to paint all the homeless with that canard is unworthy of believers in God. The homeless problem is a new problem. The hard core homeless — the true bums who are out on the streets because they want to be — are few in number and have always been with us. That they were invisible for so many years only illustrates how small their number is. Of the vast majority of the homeless today many are individuals with mental prob-

lems who have been thrown into the street by the federal government's callous termination of programs and facilities for the mentally ill during these past few years. The others are individuals and families who always barely scraped along, staying one notch above abject poverty and who, in this society of plenty, have been caught in the increasing separation between the "haves" and the "have-nots." There are many out on the streets who pray each night for a chance to start over.

And as the poor in America grow — and they are growing — this is not the time to withdraw needed services from the most needy. Do you have a medical insurance card in your wallet? Think what your life would be like if you had NO medical insurance, none at all, and you didn't have the financial resources to get adequate medical help. The number of medically uninsured in our own county is staggering. Now is not the time to withdraw medical services from them.

Each year more babies are having babies. Teenagers and those hardly into their teens are becoming parents before they fully understand the cause of pregnancy. They certainly do not understand the implications. The vast majority are not from Southeast Charlotte. They are financially poor and poorly educated and they are populating our society with unwanted babies because so many people and institutions are fighting to keep them ignorant. Planned Parenthood has had the guts to speak out against that ignorance, and now they, too, have fallen from grace.

My friends, the purveyors of narrow mindedness, the perpetrators of ignorance, have taken the upper hand in Mecklenburg County. It must end. Those who speak out against the poor in the name of religion must be stopped. Those who mustered political clout to force their repressive ideas on us all in the name of religion must be stopped. Those who turn their backs on the pain of God's children in the name of religion must be stopped. We have been silent too long.

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## Gen. Zach's Presentation Did Not Help

By Rabbi Marc H. Wilson

Gen. Freddy Zach's presentation at the recent Jewish Community Forum was deeply disturbing. He delivered all the predictable rhetoric and cliches that take off from the dubious premise that Israel must be committed to the long-term occupation of Gaza and the West Bank and that it thus has every right to exercise extraordinary means to contain and pacify a belligerent populace.

Gen. Zach made three points that deserve our special scrutiny. They underscore a growing moral obliviousness that threatens to gut our Homeland of the very values and ideals that have been its raison d'etre:

(1) Gen. Zach was asked pointedly about Israel holding over 5,000 Palestinians in detention camps indefinitely, without indictment or trial. He would not address the issue forthrightly, but instead boasted about how well the detainees were being treated under Israeli authority. I could not help but muse about how one day a crackpot regime might throw a "suspected subversive" (ACLU Board member) like me into a detention camp and then tell me to shut up, stop complaining, because I was being fed the same food as my guards. Boasting about the civility of a detention camp is not an answer for why thousands of people — even suspectedly bad people — must be incarcerated outside the due process of law.

Gen. Zach displayed similar obtuseness when he was questioned about the Israeli policy of establishing new settlements on the West Bank. Rather than addressing the question of the policy's ultimate wisdom or prudence, he defended the decision as one that had garnered a broad base of Israeli political support. I was outraged to hear a fellow Jew of considerable power and influence glibly obscure the critical moral distinction between "majority rules" (which is political reality) and a majority determining that which is ultimately right (which we know, bitterly, is certainly not always the case).

While Gen. Zach repeatedly protested that he was not speaking "as a politician," it was clear that the Israeli posi-

tion was being represented by a man who could address these troubling situations only in terms of power politics.

(2) When Gen. Zach was questioned about the need for more direct negotiations with the Palestinians, he took the opportunity to chide our "American business mentality" that demands that every problem have a quick black-and-white solution. Frankly, I was surprised that some of the businesspeople in Gorelick Hall didn't make him eat his words. As I looked around the audience, I realized more than ever that one cannot possibly be a successful American businessperson without being a tough and skillful negotiator. Any one of ten or fifteen businesspeople present could have given Gen. Zach a few basic lessons in the delicate art of negotiation.

"We can't negotiate with people who demand nothing less than our total surrender," Gen. Zach said. Naturally, that's what they demand. That's what we demand, too. Any savvy businessperson will tell you that the opening shot in any negotiation is the demand of the other side's total surrender, whether it be in buying a house or in arranging the terms of a peace treaty. This is known as "mating call." Only after "mating call" can the parties really sit down and start talking "tachlis."

The idea that Israel will wait (and wait) to start negotiations until a spokesman for an angry, radicalized people comes along one day who is "kosher" enough to meet our high standards, creates a Catch-22 that borders on the most ludicrous kind of sophistry. We forget in the midst of all our passion that peace is something we must make with our mortal enemies, not our friends.

(3) The only time that Gen. Zach waxed truly romantic was when he admonished us that Jews must all "speak with one voice." That had a nice ring to it. The only prob-

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