

The Importance of Voluntarism in the Welfare State

A conference was held in Israel recently on voluntarism. The subject has become especially important because the modern state, even a democratic one, has assumed most functions once performed by volunteer individuals and groups. The volunteers were not paid professionals, and what they did was in response to an inner drive to alleviate human suffering.

With the emergence of the welfare state, much of today's social work is no longer in their hands. Nonetheless, there is great need of the volunteers. Not only are they needed for the well-being of the indigent, but what they do ultimately contributes to their own well-being.

At that conference I reported on a number of insights from Jewish sources. There was a time in Jewish history when it was through donations to charitable causes that the poor were aided. It was subsequently discovered that reliance on voluntary gifts was not adequate. Jewish communities, therefore, resorted to taxing their constituents to help the needy. This was coercion of the more affluent to assist the less affluent. Yet voluntary *tzedakah*, charity, was still urged as a great mitzvah.

There was coercion with regard to specific amounts, and there was voluntarism for additional sums. By the same token, the welfare state may now do much, but it can never do enough. The professional civil servant may perform his or her duty admirably, but there is room for that extra something which the law does not provide. Thus voluntarism has its place and it is an area worthy of study. As one might have expected, Judaism has much to say about it.

Begin with the Bible. Undoubtedly, kings built castles and equipped their armies and paid soldiers from taxes. But God's tabernacle was to be built from gifts given voluntarily - "as much as a man's heart chose to give." (*Exodus 25:2*) Performance of any

religious obligation must be voluntary. Otherwise, it is absurd. If it is not a willing response to God, what spiritual meaning can it have?

Indeed, even those who served God full-time - the priests and the Levites - were also compensated by gifts which were not coerced. Most people are not aware of this. They know that the institution of tithes impoverished many Christians during the Middle Ages and may have been one of the causes for the French Revolution. However, the Bible is not to be blamed.

The rabbis, millenia ago, so understood the Bible that there were no sanctions for the collection of these gifts. The state did not collect the tithes, nor were the priests and Levites permitted to solicit them. They were not even permitted to assist in the harvesting of crops lest their presence constitute an indirect hint that they should receive their share.

Jews were exhorted to pay the tithes, but that was all. As a matter of fact, a man might simply set the tithe aside and do no more. The rest of his crop might be eaten with violating any religious prohibition.

Two objectives were achieved by permitting the system of tithes to operate on a voluntary basis. First, philanthropy would remain within the province of free will. Second, the clergy would receive their due in the measure in which they were beloved by the people. Both objectives would have been defeated had the state enforced collection. And that is why, despite the great laxity that prevailed in payment of tithes by peasants, the rabbis never gave these tithes the status of a tax.

The same was generally true of gifts to the priests who took care of the sacrifices in the Temple. In most cases, priests were to receive only a share of voluntary offerings for services rendered.

All the rabbinic precautions, however, did not help prevent these servants of the Lord from aggrandizing their power and influence, and rabbis ultimately replaced them. And the rabbis' services too were to be wholly voluntary. Voluntarism was to be the hallmark of the custodians of the Law.

If the rabbi did perform a ritualistic service, he could lawfully be compensated only for the time he had given and for the loss he had sustained by being taken away from his non-rabbinic vocation, whatever it might be. The same rule applied to cantors or

readers of the Law, who, because their service was rendered on the Sabbath, could only be paid for the time they spent in preparation for the Sabbath.

Centuries before the Protestant development of a non-professional clergy, Judaism was putting it into practice. This idea later found its most vivid expression among the Jews of Eastern Europe. Every Jewish community in East Europe supported at least one rabbi, but in each there were scores of others, also ordained and equally learned in the Law, who chose not to make the Torah their "trade." The yeshiva student, preparing for the rabbinate, looked forward to nothing better than to devote his life to study for its own sake (*Torah li' shmah*) rather than for the sake of a livelihood.

The Talmud mentions no fewer than 100 rabbis who were artisans by profession. In fact, the Talmudic rabbi was the true successor of the Judean prophet and the Pharisaic scribe, retaining absolute financial independence.

This limitation was based on the simple fact that God is available to people gratis. Therefore, those who act as His surrogates must do the same. They too must be available without compensation. They can be reimbursed for their pecuniary losses but no more.

The most impressive of all services that had been voluntary in Jewish life from time immemorial was service to the dead. There may be good reasons for its becoming professionalized in our day, but the traditional *chevra kadisha* - the men or women who took over when one died and rendered every necessary service until the bereaved returned to normal routines - was the most respected group in the vast array of Jewish societies attending the needy. No one would dream of taking money for this service. And it is the only communal group accorded the adjective "holy."

Indeed, the rabbis distinguished between tzedakah and *gemilat chesed*, the rendering of a kindly act. (*Sukkah* 59b) The latter ranked higher in the hierarchy of Jewish values than the former. Why? For three reasons. Charity one gives only with one's financial resources. A kindly act one renders with one's body as well. One gives charity only to the living; kindly acts are performed also for the dead. And charity one gives only to the poor. But the rich too are in need of kindly acts.

There is one more difference. The state can take the place of individuals insofar as charity is concerned. It can use its power of taxation and provide all that the needy require. But there is no way to coerce kindly acts. These can come only from volunteers, and every human being, at one time or another, want them - rich or poor, living or dead.

Voluntarism must be encouraged, especially in a society in which there is an abundance of leisure. It is the best way to make that time meaningful - and avoid ennui and depression.