

Government Shutdown: A Torah Perspective

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Another government shutdown could have begun tonight at midnight. Whatever one's opinion about the tactics employed to avert that shutdown, we may all be grateful that hundreds of thousands of government workers and contractors will not again miss paychecks. We may all give thanks that the Supplemental Nutrition Aid Program, SNAP, or Food Stamps, will continue to provide needy Americans – most of them working people, and some of them military families – with the assistance they desperately need to provide food to themselves and their family. We may all be pleased that poor and disabled Americans who live in government-subsidized housing won't risk eviction or face market-rate rent they can ill afford – and, for that matter, that their landlords will be paid. And we may all breathe more easily when we travel by air, knowing that the people who protect our safety – be they air traffic controllers, airplane inspectors, or TSA agents – are not distracted by financial distress.

Last month, Congregation B'nai Israel conducted a very short-term *tzedakah* charitable collection, raising over \$6,000, surpassing even my most optimistic goal, to provide Walmart, Target, and Kroger gift cards to TSA agents who were working without pay. We initiated this project on the basis of one line from the Torah, Leviticus 19:13, which clearly indicates that one is required to pay workers on time. That verse is part of the Holiness Code in Leviticus, so central to our faith that we read it on the holiest day of the year, on Yom Kippur afternoon.

At the congregation I formerly served in San Antonio, a past president of the Temple enjoyed the honor of reading this selection for many years. A banker, he would always pause after reading the verse about paying a laborer on time to claim that this injunction suggests that the Torah acknowledges the time value of money: "A dollar today is worth more than a dollar tomorrow."ⁱ

Appallingly, the United States Secretary of Commerce, dismissed the hardships faced by federal workers who endured more than a month without paychecks but would receive back pay after the shutdown. Not only was the San Antonio banker correct – receiving the money later means it was worth a bit less in real terms – but Secretary Ross ignored the reality of middle-income working Americans. We chose to assist TSA agents specifically because they are relatively

low income workers, who cannot be expected to amass significant savings that permit them to go without two or more paychecks. We can only imagine the credit card interest racked up by federal workers during the shutdown. The damage to some workers' credit ratings may be costly and long-lasting.

Leviticus 19 is not the only place that Jewish tradition speaks to the damage of a government shutdown. For example, in tonight's Torah portion, we read of priests, who must always be compensated for carrying out their functions in the Temple.ⁱⁱ Oppressing laborers is high on the list of sins for which the prophets of Ancient Israel excoriated the elite of their society, and we read from Isaiah about exactly that injustice on Yom Kippur morning.ⁱⁱⁱ

One might also think of federal workers as analogous to noncombatants in a war. Our federal workers were not engaged in the debate about the federal budget or the specific matter about whether the government should be shut if Congress declined to fund a border wall or President Trump refused to sign an appropriations bill without it. The Constitution required that the President and Members of Congress continue to be paid during the shutdown – though some, including our Representative, French Hill, commendably donated their salary to charity during that time. Federal workers, though, were noncombatant casualties during a fight not of their making. "Judaism and the Ethics of War" requires: "If at all possible, non-combatants should be spared."^{iv}

During a previous shutdown in 2013 – and lest we forget, shutdowns have occurred under presidents of both parties with congressional majorities of both parties – Rabbi Jeffrey Goldwasser encouraged us to consider a famous story from the Talmud^v. The majority of the rabbis were in disagreement with Rabbi Eliezer, who demonstrably had God on his side. Ultimately, God relents, citing a verse from Deuteronomy, which we also read on Yom Kippur morning, "Torah is not up in heaven,"^{vi} but is here on Earth, where the Talmud grants the rabbis the unfettered right of interpretation. The majority rabbis were so angry that they threw Rabbi Eliezer out of the Talmudic academy. Rabbi Goldwasser writes: "Rabbi Eliezer was so obsessed in his determination to be proven right that he lost sight of the greater good. He refused to honor majority rule and, worse, he put his ego above everything else. Eliezer's arrogance, in the end, was the cause of his own downfall and the cause of suffering for many others. The other rabbis of the Sanhedrin were not much better. They fell victim to their desire for revenge. They forgot to be humble in victory, and they forgot how much their incivility could come back to haunt them." Rabbi Goldwasser continues, and I emphasize again,

he is writing during a 2013 shutdown, not last month: “Today in Washington, the government of the most powerful country in the world has been brought to its knees by people who, like Rabbi Eliezer, refuse to see beyond their own egos and agendas.”^{vii}

We suffer a sad state of affairs in Washington today, where compromise has become a dirty word and humility is at an all-time low. One bright spot is a bill proposed last month by Senator Mark Warner, the Stop STUPIDITY Act, “STUPIDITY” being an acronym for “Shutdowns Transferring Unnecessary Pain and Inflicting Damage in The Coming Years.” Let’s hope that Congress and the President come to their senses, not only this week, but for the future. Let no federal worker’s wages be unfairly delayed. Let ego and stubbornness not injure governmental non-combatants. Let the voice of the prophets be heard.

Amen.

ⁱ Words uttered by Michael J.C. Roth on innumerable Yom Kippur afternoons.

ⁱⁱ Exodus 29:28.

ⁱⁱⁱ Isaiah 58:3.

^{iv} Norman Solomon, “Judaism and the ethics of war,” *International Review of the Red Cross*, Volume 8, Number 858, June, 2005, p. 308.

^v Babylonian Talmud, Bava Metzia 59a-59b.

^{vi} Deuteronomy 30:12.

^{vii} Rabbi Jeffrey Goldwasser, “What Does the Talmud Say About the Government Shutdown?” *ReformJudaism.org*, October 8, 2013, accessed February 15, 2019 at <https://reformjudaism.org/blog/2013/10/08/what-does-talmud-say-about-government-shutdown>.