

Our Government Needs Compassion

What will be the state of our nation in the future? What is our vision for South Africa? Judaism teaches that a society is judged by how it treats its most vulnerable members. The Hebrew Bible warns on numerous occasions of the moral duty to protect 'the stranger, the widow and the orphan', who are the symbols of the powerless and the oppressed. The prophet Isaiah (1:17) exhorts society: 'Learn to do good, seek justice, vindicate the victim, render justice to the orphan, take up the grievance of the widow.'

In South Africa today, the most vulnerable people are those who live in abject poverty. Since 1994 much has been done to provide basic services and infrastructure to those who had been denied such things by colonialism and its evil successor in the apartheid governments which ruled South Africa with a clenched iron fist. But no one would disagree that millions of South Africans live under miserable conditions, and struggle to access adequate medical care, education, housing, security, and many other basics of dignified human living.

We all know what is needed from government: a brilliantly efficient administration taking care of its people. This is the key challenge facing South Africa today and the fourth democratically elected government of our young republic. The question is how to achieve it. The answer, I believe, is compassionate government. When human beings suffer, a compassionate government will act with urgency and move heaven and earth to alleviate their suffering. A compassionate government is based on the Talmud's principle that to destroy one life is to destroy an entire world and to save one life is to save an entire world. A compassionate government will not take refuge in statistics by, for example, claiming victory with a small percentage decrease in murders when about 19 000 people are murdered each year. Every single person who suffers from disease, crime, poverty or lack of education is a national tragedy.

A compassionate government knows that vulnerable people are dependent on it for basic services. If government hospitals do not function adequately then the rich go to private clinics. What can the poor do? The rich buy their own houses but the poor are dependent on the government's housing department. If there is a shortage of electricity the rich buy generators, but what do the poor do? If the education department fails to deliver adequate schooling the rich go to private schools. What can the poor do?

The Talmud teaches 'Whosoever is compassionate to the cruel in the end will be cruel to the compassionate.' Misplaced compassion brings cruelty to the world. A compassionate government is uncompromising in its pursuit of excellence. It will establish strict service delivery contracts with its officials and employees from the top to the bottom of the system. For example, the chief executive of a major hospital must be set targets for minimum standards of delivery, such as conditions in the wards, length of time to wait to be attended to, and the standards of medical expertise. He or she must then be held accountable for the results achieved whether good or bad. Good results must be rewarded and bad dealt with. There are too many vulnerable people who need that hospital to survive. And so too, a compassionate government must hold accountable every school principal, police station commissioner, director general, and indeed every civil servant from a traffic officer, to a home affairs official, to a nurse. A compassionate government has zero tolerance for corruption. How is it conceivable, that in a country with about 50 murders a day, the government renewed the employment contract of a police commissioner who is facing criminal charges and would not be able to work? That is just cruel. How is it conceivable that after the power shortage debacle in 2008, not a single government minister or official resigned? To have compassion on failing government servants is, in fact, to be cruel to the masses of our people.

The Hebrew Bible says that when the powerless call out for help G-d says 'I will surely hear his cry.' (Exodus 22:22). G-d sees 'the tears of the oppressed with none to comfort them, and their oppressors have the power.' (Ecclesiastes 4:1), and He is the 'Father of orphans and Defender of widows.' (Psalms 68:6). Our government whom we will elect this year to fulfill these responsibilities to the vulnerable, will ultimately stand before G-d in judgment of their performance. They dare not fail.

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