

Bend the Arc Text Study

SUNSETTING THE TAX CUTS FOR THE COUNTRY'S WEALTHIEST TWO PERCENT

There is considerable debate in our country today over the role of the government in protecting the most vulnerable among us, upholding the dignity of all people, and building an economy that benefits all Americans.

The coming weeks are a critical time in this debate, as congressional leaders and the President work to bring the federal government's revenue and spending more in balance. Jewish tradition and history ground our response to this debate. For those dedicated to holding America to its promise to build a more just and equitable society, our scriptural teachings and history provide a model of what government can and should do.

Pirkei Avot* 5:13

There are four types of people:

1. One who says, "What is mine is mine and what is yours is yours" — this is the common type, though some say that this is the type of Sodom.
2. One who says, "What is mine is yours and what is yours is mine" — this is an ignorant person.
3. One who says, "What is mine is yours and what is yours is your own" — this is a saintly person.
4. And one who says, "What is yours is mine, and what is mine is mine" — this is a wicked person.

* Pirkei Avot, often translated as Chapters of the Fathers or Ethics of the Fathers, is a compilation of the ethical teachings and maxims of the early rabbis (200 C.E.).

GUIDING QUESTIONS

- 1** *What are the different types of giving? What does this text say about how we ought to relate to each other?*
- 2** *What do you make of the fact that the first statement is described by some as the "type of Sodom" – a city that deserved destruction?*
- 3** *How might we apply this to our discussion of developing an ethical budget?*

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Jewish Dimensions of Social Justice

The practices and theories of Jewish philanthropy that evolved in the second century C.E. anticipated many of the most advanced concepts of modern social work. Every Jewish community had four basic funds. The first was called the *kuppah* (“box”) and served only the local poor. The indigent were given funds to supply their needs for an entire week. The second fund was called *tamchui* (“bowl”) and consisted of a daily distribution of food to both itinerants and residents. The fund’s administrators, selected from among the leaders of the community, were expected to be persons of the highest integrity. The *kuppah* was administered by three trustees who acted as a *beit din* (“court”). They determined the merit of applications and the amounts to be given. The fund was always operated under the strictest regulations. To avoid suspicion, collections were always made by two or three persons. They were authorized to tax all members of the community, including *tzedakah* recipients, according to their capacity to pay — testimony to the principle that no individual was free from responsibility for the welfare of all. If necessary, they seized property until the assessed amount was paid. In most countries, clothing funds, burial funds, and schools to which everybody in the community could go — rich and poor alike — were also found.

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GUIDING QUESTIONS

- 1 *What do you see as the similarities and differences between some of the practices of these classic Jewish communities and modern democratic states?*
- 2 *How do you understand the proper balance of tax obligations among people with vastly different levels of income and wealth?*

Conclusion

At its best, the government of the United States is one of, by, and for the people. As such, it is responsible for accomplishing the many vital social welfare functions that individuals or voluntary associations cannot achieve on their own. In this nation, Jews have historically been at the forefront of progressive movements that have sought to ensure that all people enjoy the right to participate in a democratic government that seeks the common good, and that all people have access to a decent job, healthy food, a safe home, excellent medical care, a quality education, and insurance from the fears of old age, sickness, accident, and unemployment. As inheritors of this activist tradition, we remain staunchly committed to these principles.