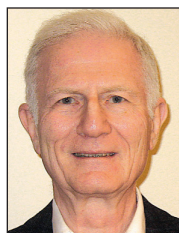


DEBATABLE Is Government Morally Obligated to Provide Healthcare?

→ **YES**

Rabbi Jerry Steinberg

I write as a proud Canadian born and raised in the Province of Saskatchewan, where, sixty years ago, the first government-sponsored healthcare program was instituted on the premise that every citizen has the God-given right to a healthy body and the government has a responsibility to ensure that this right is honored as best it can through excellent medical care. Today, every Canadian citizen—regardless of ability to pay or any other factor—receives the finest medical and hospital treatment available from birth to death. There are no exceptions.



**Am I my brother's keeper?
The answer—Yes.**

At the heart of the argument for government involvement in healthcare is the earliest question in the Torah: “Am I my brother’s keeper?” If the answer is “No,” then those we elect to represent us in government can deny responsibility for our physical well-being; it’s everyone for him/herself. If, however, the answer is “Yes,” then government must see to it that every citizen who experiences illness, disease, birth defects, or injuries from accidents is cared for. The same principle applies when governments legislate such rules as requiring drivers and passengers to wear seatbelts, thereby protecting lives and limbs.

Many American friends have commented to me that they find Canada to be a calmer and more relaxed place. One of the reasons for this serenity, I explain, is that, while we may worry about our health, we do not worry about receiving high quality healthcare. Nor do we fear that a serious accident or disease will cause us financial ruin.

Maimonides’ medical oath begins with these words: “Eternal providence has appointed me to watch over the life of Thy creatures.” If only his words were part of the oath administered to all persons assuming an elected position in government.

Rabbi Jerry Steinberg is spiritual leader of Temple B’nai Shalom V’Tikvah in Ajax, Ontario.

NO ←

Rabbi Stephen Wise



I feel privileged to live in Canada, where my tax dollars go towards total health coverage for my family. But does the government have a moral obligation to provide healthcare? No. Its obligation is to create the context for moral actions, to ensure that every citizen has the ability to get healthcare.

Those countries that take the extra step of providing their citizenry with coverage are not making purely moral decisions, but also economic ones. A healthy population creates a stronger country: Citizens can concentrate on educating themselves, sustaining a strong economy, and working towards the common good.

**A morally obligated government?
The answer—No.**

A government which is morally obligated to provide care would be responsible for making healthcare decisions that should be up to each individual: *Does this person need care—even if he/she says “I don’t want it”?* *What is the appropriate care?*

Moreover, in light of high medical costs and increasing national debt, how can one expect a government to choose healthcare above all other national requirements? Something else may have to give, including the very basic needs of life: food, clothing, security, and housing.

As Jews, however, we do have a moral obligation to care for one another. We are instructed to see each individual as created in the image of God (Genesis 5:1) and to “love your neighbor as yourself” (Leviticus 19:18). Preservation of human life takes precedence over all other commandments, and for generations Jewish communities provided healthcare for all—a societal obligation. Maimonides considered it the most important thing a community should attend to (Mishneh Torah, Hilchot De’ot IV: 23), and today Israel views its national health coverage program as a moral obligation in upholding Torah values. Still, however admirable it is to bestow such coverage, it is not a government’s moral obligation.

Rabbi Stephen Wise is a proud Canadian and spiritual leader of Shaarei-Beth El Congregation in Oakville, Ontario.

VOTE YOUR VIEW Is Government Morally Obligated...? www.reformjudaismmag.org