

A Vision for the Future

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On September 15, I marked the five year anniversary of my arrival in Australia. Except for a five week holiday back in the States in December and January, I've spent the last five years in Australia--mostly in Adelaide. I now feel qualified to share some observations I've developed over time about the strengths of this country, but also about its weaknesses.

Compared to the current United States, Australia is a beacon of economic prosperity and enlightened government in today's world. I was fifteen years old when Ronald Reagan was elected president, and for most of the last thirty years, I've listened to a succession of Republican politicians brainwash the American people into believing that government is never a force for good. Today's Americans pay far lower taxes than they did when I was young and, not surprisingly, they get far fewer services for their money. The deficit has also ballooned to nearly fifteen trillion dollars, or \$47,000 per American. As the current government seeks ways to trim its spending, it's now actually considering cutting back its already inadequate health expenditures.

I know that Australia's Medicare system is facing challenges. I know that waits at emergency rooms are unacceptably long. I know that people wait months to see specialists. But it means a lot to me that politicians across the political spectrum agree that this is a problem that needs to be fixed. In America, even that level of political consensus is absent and greatly missed. I appreciate that all politicians appear to feel a sense of responsibility for the welfare of Australia's people, and I believe that many of them stay up late at night trying to figure out how to make things better.

I feel spoiled by the Medicare system, which makes it possible for me to visit my doctor when something is concerning me and not only when I think I can afford it. I appreciate the beautiful playgrounds and the well-looked after park system. I love the HECS system, which theoretically makes it possible for

all qualified Australians to go to university despite financial challenges. I love that the minimum wage is \$15.51 per hour and that it gets raised every year. I even like e-tax, which is such a step up from the Internal Revenue Service's absolutely impenetrable tax system.

At the same time, there are things about Australia which drive me absolutely nuts. I have come from a country whose more conservative politicians are constantly trying to strip the government of its regulatory power. It's been quite a shock to be here, where the nanny state is in full force. A few examples: my husband enrolled several years ago in a fine arts program at TAFE. As part of his first year studies, he was required to complete a short course on occupational safety and health issues. You can imagine for yourselves the many dangers lurking in an average art studio: toxic paints that shouldn't be consumed, sharp artists' tools, pools of water to slip on--the mind boggles. My kids' dentist renovated his offices several years ago and finished up with a gleaming new reception area. In the middle was a small table with a collection of children's books on display. I made the suggestion that perhaps it would be nice to introduce some toys as well. The receptionist responded that they would then be required to wash and sterilize the toys each day, and no one in the office was prepared to do this. It's quite certain that a well-meaning bureaucrat thought it would be a good idea to guarantee that kids had access to relatively clean toys in their doctors' offices. The unintended consequence has been that many kids who visit the doctor have no access to toys at all. I'm sure you have your own pet examples. Sometimes I wonder whether all of those warning labels and restrictions have the unintended effect of making us parents completely paranoid about what a dangerous world it is.

Something else that makes me crazy is Australians' tremendous resistance to new ideas. Any new ideas. Renewable energy for example, which is still being treated as edgy and the domain solely of the left. Several years ago, I mentioned how I couldn't figure out why it was that this country doesn't run on

renewable energy. After all, we have sun, wind and geothermal resources to spare. Now, we have a carbon tax plan which is supposed to lower our carbon output but will still preserve the coal industry. As if we can have a flourishing coal industry and still be doing our bit to lower our carbon footprint? If the coal is burned somewhere else in the world, does it not count as Australian?! There is no question that the world's petroleum supply is rapidly decreasing, and those countries that are prepared for this eventuality will be in a strong position. Why isn't Australia doing more to get ready, especially with its tremendous resources of renewable energy? I just can't figure it out.

Another new idea is a national disability insurance scheme, which I spoke about at Yom Kippur three years ago. Now, the Gillard administration has finally introduced plans for such a scheme, thankfully with cross bench support. But the first partial roll-out of the scheme will not begin until 2015. Why not?! Will it take the next four years for Australians to adjust to this new idea? And what will happen to the thousands of severely disabled Australians and their incredibly stressed families in the interim?

As an American, I find this resistance to new ideas quite frustrating. If there's one thing Americans are good at, it's innovation. It never occurred to me that a nation that speaks the same language and shares much of the same cultural language could be resistant to change. I can only imagine just how great Australia could be if new ideas were not generally greeted with suspicion. I'm betting it's not an accident that many of Australia's most creative thinkers are now living and working in the U.S.

Another major difference between the U.S. and Australia is that this country lacks a bill of rights. After a fair amount of debate and a bit of half-hearted discussion in Parliament, the Australian bill of rights appears to have fallen off the radar once again. This is a shame. I know that MPs worry about handing over vast powers to the judiciary. I also know all too well that America's bill of rights has not always been that effective at protecting those

rights it claims to enshrine. The anti-terrorism laws of the last ten years have gutted what I thought were protected rights in the name of security. But what the bill of rights does for America is to enshrine what it considers to be its most sacred values. In short, it offers a vision. And that, I think, is what Australia needs most.

After five years of living here, I still have a very fuzzy image of what it means to be Australian. Footie and lamb on the barbie? Lots of Olympic gold medals and world championships? Surely there must be much more than that. But it's sure hard to figure it out from listening to what our politicians have to say. What are their dearest wishes for their country? What is it they imagine, hope for, dream of? I believe I'm not alone in wanting to hear our leaders speak more about the goals they are working for. Instead, what I get is Question Time, with its endless succession of insults and accusations. I understand that question time predates Federation and is a hoary custom imported from the U.K., but that doesn't mean I have to like it. It seems to be all about scoring political points rather than about building a better nation.

I believe that nations should stand for things. It is, perhaps, a counter-cultural ideal in these self-centered times. Countries, and the politicians who lead them, should be judged on more than whether they deliver a high rate of growth in their major industries. If that is the major criterion, then China is the most successful nation in our modern world. But the happiness of a people depends far more on whether major stockholders see a good return on their investments. Of course, there is also more to life than just happiness: there is goodness, altruism, working for the betterment of others.

The style these days is for major organisations to create a vision statement which articulate their values. The vision statements are not always that useful, but the process by which the vision statement is arrived at is. Organisations are required to figure out what are the values they hold dear. They should then feel called upon to find ways to make those values real in their

ongoing work. Does Australia have a core value that can serve as the basis for its vision statement? I believe it does. It's a simple idea but immensely appealing: it's the idea of a fair go for all.

In 2006, a survey by the Australian Council for Social Service found that 91% of Australians believe a fair go is important. I personally appreciate the concept of a fair go, because it suggests that Australia ideally seeks to dismantle those barriers that stand in the way of all its citizens realising happy livelihoods for themselves. But if Australia is serious about providing a fair go to everyone, it still has quite a bit of work to do. There are too many marginalised populations which are not getting their chance at a fair go. I've already mentioned the disabled and those who care for them, but at least there is a remedy in the pipeline for them. Newly-arrived migrants are another group. I'm not even speaking of asylum seekers but of legal migrants. I have spoken with a number of newly-arrived Israeli families who have encountered tremendous difficulties in starting new lives. The Australian ethos of doing it for oneself can go too far when new migrants are left hanging with no idea of how to navigate through the system. Refugees have an even more difficult time; the Australian government provides little meaningful assistance to this population. Instead, it relies on NGOs and especially on good-hearted volunteers to welcome these new arrivals. Overseas students struggle at all. I know from my conversations with the chaplains at Flinders University that there is little in the way of actual personal support for students who may be experiencing cultural shock, homesickness, and the depression that accompany them. In this and other areas, this often generous country can seem surprisingly mean.

Why is this an appropriate topic for Yom Kippur? Because although this is a day to turn inward, it is also a day to look beyond ourselves. What are our personal visions for this nation? What can each of us do to help Australia live out a vision for itself? On this day, we look for possibilities for tikkun olam--repair of the world. Where better to start the work than right here?

My very best wishes to you for a year of health, joy and peace, but also for a year of transformation and change. Shana tova!