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(Unedited Transcript)

The organizers of this event misunderstood when I suggested that we wanted to have Brian Hehir speak in front, because whatever he did would shape a lot of the rest of the conversation. They understood that to be that I was requesting to speak after him --

(Laughter.)

I'm really honored and pleased to be part of this extraordinary gathering, and as something bearing Geno Baroni's name, it touches me greatly. He was a legend. When I first came here 30 years ago, I watched with enormous admiration his work, that crossed the spectrum, from somebody who knew how to work in the streets to somebody who understood how to work at the highest levels of government. Somebody who was able to creatively and effectively and compassionately deal with the symptoms of injustice, and someone who understood how to get at the causes of injustice.

I'm honored to be with my fellow panelists, every one of whom I have enormous respect for and I always learn from. I will just tell you honestly, I think he gets tired of hearing me say this, I'm just dazzled whenever I listen to Brian Hehir. What you couldn't see is, he has a bunch of notes on a piece of paper. And every sentence is a diagrammable sentence, every paragraph an organized paragraph.

(Laughter.)

He truly dazzles me, and I'm really always honored. It's twice today I've had the pleasure of speaking with Brian on programs, in two different conferences.

Let me try to give you a Jewish take on some of the issues that deal with this. We only have a limited time to do this. Any of my Christian colleagues here, you will notice that they face that dilemma by being disciplined in structuring what they're going to do; being a nice Jewish boy from Brooklyn, I'm just going to talk twice as fast.

(Laughter.)

So let me try to run through a Jewish take on some of these issues, the Jewish understanding of morality, and the Jewish understanding of how one constructs a moral vision.

First, when you read the Bible, the Bible is not a system of philosophical discourse. Very little philosophy per se in the Bible, where there is kind of moral aphorisms: what does the eternal God ask of you to love justice, to walk humbly with your God, to love mercy, pursue justice; these moral aphorisms are at the core of it.

It is a system which seems to me to embody Geno Baroni's life, of inferring from specific rules and actions, what the morality is. That seemed to me to be the way he went about that. But what are the ideas underlying this vision, first?

The infinite value of every human being rooted in the notion that we are all created in the image of God, that all of us have the spark of the divine within. This applies to all people.

"All who are linked to my name, whom I have created, formed and made for my glory," Isaiah 43:7. "Have we not all one parent? Hath not one God created us?"

Or as we read in the Midrash, the wonderful collection of aphorisms, poetry, biblical legends, interpretations, from the Talmudic era, "I call on heaven and earth to witness that whether one be gentile or Jew, man or woman, slave or free, the divine spirit rests on each in accordance with his or her deeds."

Or as a Talmudic sage wrote 2000 years ago, "we are all descended from a single person in order to teach you that if one destroys a single person, it is as though he destroyed the population of the world. And one who saves a single person, it is as though she had saved the entire world."

Two, the fundamental equality of all people. Rooted in the Midrashic stories, it asks why are we all descended from one couple, Adam and Eve? Why was Adam made from the dust of the four corners and the four colors of the earth?

So that none of us could claim that the Yekhas (phonetic), the merit of our ancestors was greater than anyone else's. We are all equal before God, we are all truly brothers and sisters.

Three, the belief in the perfectibility of individuals and societies. I would suggest that that is one of the distinctive characteristics of normative Jewish messianic thought. In normative Jewish thought, the Messiah would not come from a cataclysmic event signaling the end of history, or through the creation of a supernatural order; but through the work of our own hands. And that the messianic age would be an outgrowth of history. In the end of times, the nations, the law would come forth out of Jerusalem, the nations would go -- they would still be nation-states. But now, there would be an international law. There would still be hunger, but now we'd beat our swords into plowshares and our spears into pruning hooks, and we would feed people.

The messianic age was an age of the work of our own hands. It would come not suddenly and mystically, but slowly, step-by-step, through caring people just like you and me, inexorably making the world a better place.

Fourth, the structure of Jewish law and thought that focused on responsibilities, and not on rights. There is no word for "rights" in classical Hebrew. Judaism was never a tradition that saw justice as played out to in the passive articulation of the rights of which others were entitled. Instead, there was an affirmative obligation for each to pursue justice. "Zedek, zedek, tirdof"; justice you shall pursue. We are called to be "rodfei shalom," pursuers of peace. Partners with God in the work of "Tikuna Lung" (phonetic), the healing of this broken and hurting world.

Whoever is able to protest, the Talmud warns us, against the transgressions of the world and does not, is liable for the transgressions of the world. The linkage between peace and justice is embodied in the warning of the comment that the sword enters the world because of justice delayed, and justice denied.

Jewish theology teaches us that when God created the universe, that left one part of the creation undone. That small part left undone was the creation of social justice. And then God gave to us that given to nothing else in creation, to each and every one of you, the ability to understand and choose between wrong and right, the blessing and the curse, life

and death. God can tell us what we should do and why, but ultimately if God's Word is to live on Earth, it will be because of the choices you make. (Phrase in Hebrew.) -- Therefore choose life, that you and your children after you might live.

In allowing us to be partners with God, in completing creation, God ennobled humanity, raised us above mere biological existence, as Professor Isadore Twersky of Harvard had once pointed out, and gave to our lives destiny, meaning, and purpose. In other words, the work of social justice is God's work, the work that Geno Baroni engaged throughout his life was holy work.

Fifth, the rule of law, to which even the highest human rulers are held accountable. When Nathan the prophet confronts David over the incident with Bathsheba and says, "Thou art the one," we're told that we are all subject to God's law.

Six, Judaism long addressed the issues of distributive justice, rooted in the belief that the earth is the eternal and the fullness thereof. Judaism mandated that what we own, we own in a trust relationship with God. And the terms of that trust require that we share God's wealth with those of God's children who are less fortunate than we.

There is no term in classical Hebrew for "caritas," for charity. "Zadak," the term usually used to connote charity, means justice, righteousness, doing what is required, because it is just, it is right, and it is commanded by God. This determines not only obligations, but the structure of societies, as well; the biblical rule on the cancellation of debts in the seventh year, the sabbatical year; the Jubilee year's requirement that there be a redistribution of wealth amongst the people.

The Talmud's construction 2000 years ago, at the time that Jesus walked the earth, are the world's first publicly-run tax-financed social welfare system. Every Jewish community had to have five basic institutions of social justice taxed by, run by, administered by the community: a burial fund, a money fund, a food fund, in a clothing fund. And a school to which every Jewish child was entitled to go, rich or poor alike -- let me correct that. Every Jewish boy, rich or poor was entitled to go to --

(Laughter.)

But every Jewish girl was taught to read and write at home during the dark ages, when almost no one but the monks knew how to read and write. Every Jewish child knew how to read and write. We were the people of the book in more ways than one.

The Hebrew term for peace, "shalom," does not mean "Patre," or "pax," the absence of strife. It comes from the root "Neve Shalem," to make whole. There cannot be peace or justice without that kind of healing and wholeness, that every human being in every society is not only entitled to, but is capable of achieving.

So these are some of the crucial paradigms that are used to judge what is moral and what is not. But we are fallible human beings. Good moral people can differ how to apply those values to public policies. In other words, God has not ordained monarchies or democracies. God has not ordained capitalism or socialism. God has not ordained food stamp programs or, despite what some people in recent White Houses might have thought, supply-side economics. These are human inventions.

And the role of the religious person, the role of the person who takes God seriously is to insist that they be tested by those fundamental values of whether they further or impede dignity, equality, the perfectibility of human society, responsibility for justice and peace, the rule of law, or just distribution of God's wealth entrusted to us.

Well, how are we doing today? What would Geno Baroni say, in a country the wealthiest in the history of the world? Where more people live without coverage of health care insurance than in any other developed nation? What would he say about a system that is structured in such a way that if you work eight hours a day, five days a week, 52 weeks a year, at minimum wage in this country, you will take home \$10,800 a year. Can you make it on that kind of money? How many people truly can? And most of those jobs don't have benefits.

A country in which as we move people from welfare to work, 59 percent of those people who still have jobs -- many of them who had jobs have lost them in the sense that recession -- but of those who haven't, 59 percent live below the poverty line. Take home \$10,800 a year, but the poverty rate on average for four is \$18,000 a year. And the rate -- according to studies that tell you what you really need to live a minimally decent style of living, \$27,000 a year, and that's the average. We all know, in most urban cities, it is far, far worse than that. And the millions of people you know that we promised a safety net for the truly needy.

But in the aching abyss between the promise and the deed lie the shattered lives of millions of our brothers and sisters: the elderly trapped on fixed incomes, as the government withdraws from its promise to take care of them, talking about privatizing Social Security, Medicare, Medicaid; cutting back on social programs across the board.

Too many minority youth in our inner cities who are out of jobs, out of school, out of hope. Too many ill people who simply can't get health care in this country, and at best have to resort to an emergency room for primary care in the lives of their family and their children.

Every one of them, as Geno Baroni would remind us, a human being, stamped in the image of God, whose faces and stories need to be lifted up and told by us. It is time to grab hold again in America. The sense of what the human cost is of these policies, to lift up those stories, to lift up a moral vision of this country, in which morality will not be talked about only in terms of a handful of social issues that the press loves to focus on, but will reflect, to use a Christian theologians term, God's pervasive preference for the poor, for the least among us, for the vulnerable, for the sick, for the ill.

Paul Wellstone once had a wonderful idea. You know, there should be, just like there is an environmental impact statement, there should be a child impact statement, for every budget decision that the Congress makes. It won't bind what they do, but they ought to think about what it will mean for the children of this country, in a nation that abandons its children, as so many of our policies are doing today, as a nation that will rue the day it abandoned the vision that our common religious traditions have given as the great inheritance of this world, and to which Father Baroni dedicated his life.