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Judaism and Sprawl

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This speech is about the relationship between Judaism and suburban sprawl. First of all, I would like to define sprawl. Then I will show how, from a Jewish point of view, sprawl has some negative side effects.

By sprawl, I mean a combination of two issues: first, the movement of population from city to suburb; for example, the city of St. Louis has lost about 2/3 of its 1950 population. Second, the low-density, automobile-dependent nature of those suburbs.

In this speech, I would suggest that sprawl is problematic as to both Jewish values and Jewish observance. First let's talk about Jewish values- in particular, charity and environmental protection.

In Judaism, support of the poor is not optional. The book of Leviticus states: "You shall not glean your vineyard, neither shalt thou gather the fallen fruit of the vineyard; thou shalt leave them for the poor and the stranger." Later Jewish law makes it clear that such obligations are not voluntary. In the 12th c., Moses ben Maimon (aka Maimonides), a leading codifier of Jewish law, wrote that the duty to give charity is actually enforceable in rabbinic courts. He also specified the proper methods of charity, writing that the highest level of charity is giving someone a job so that he can support himself.

But sprawl exacerbates inequalities. In the 1940s, most urban jobs were accessible on foot or by public transit. But government policy changed this: in the 20th c., government funneled tens of billions of dollars every year into highway construction, and now exceeds \$100b at all levels of govt. Such highway spending initially generated suburban residential development, by making it easier for commuters to drive from suburbs to downtown.

Eventually, jobs followed commuters, because bosses wanted their companies to be near their homes and near their customers. As a result, most jobs are in suburbs. And because govt. spending on highways was not matched by an equally extensive investment in public transit, many of those jobs have minimal or nonexistent access by public transit. For example, a recent Brookings Institution study showed that the typical metropolitan resident can reach about 30 percent of jobs in their metropolitan area via transit in 90 minutes.

What does this have to do with Maimonides? Everything. Because of sprawl and inadequate public transit, people too poor or disabled to drive can no longer reach jobs. In turn, this means that they must rely on public or private social welfare programs rather than being self-sufficient – thus creating a situation that is exactly the opposite of what Maimonides recommends. Sprawl makes poor people less self-sufficient by keeping them away from jobs. (Or alternatively, impoverishes them by forcing them to spend money on cars).

Now I'd like to talk about Jewish environmental values. Judaism disfavors both pollution and the expansion of urban land into the countryside, both of which are results of sprawl. The Torah mandates an uncultivated green belt around land dominated by the Levite tribe. According to 19th c. rabbi Samson Raphael Hirsch, this law is designed to

prevent cities from being cut off from agriculture. Although the Torah does not directly address pollution, later Jewish tradition does. For example, the Talmud, a code of Jewish law written around the 5th c., prohibits tanneries and furnaces (then considered smelly, polluting activities) from being close to a city. Jewish law also creates limits on more urban activities: for example, an oven located on the 2nd floor of a building must be placed upon plaster so that any fire caused by the oven will not spread downstairs.

By contrast, sprawl means cities expand into the countryside, and increases pollution as well. When people move to suburbs where everyone has to have a car to get around, they of course drive more. Each mile driven creates more pollution. The correlation between auto traffic and pollution was demonstrated during the 1996 Olympics; when the city encouraged Atlanta motorists to drive less. As traffic on Atl roads fell by 23 percent, emergency room visits related to asthma dropped by 42 percent!

What about sprawl and Jewish observance? The Torah prohibits work and kindling a fire on the Sabbath (from Friday at sundown to a little after sundown Saturday) For a variety of reasons, traditional Jews interpret this rule to prohibit driving on the Sabbath. First, auto engines burn gasoline, which is arguably setting a fire. Second, the need to fuel and maintain a car creates a risk of other independent violations. For example, drivers may need to carry money for gas, and Jewish law prohibits carrying money on the Sabbath. And if a car breaks down, the owner must repair it, creating an independent Sabbath violation.

But in American suburbia, walking to synagogue (or anyplace else) is often quite difficult, for three reasons. Many suburbs are so thinly populated that only a few dozen houses are really within walking distance. Many suburban neighborhoods have just one or two houses per acre. In such a neighborhood, very few people will live within real walking distance of a synagogue, and unless the area is heavily Jewish most of them won't be Jewish anyhow.

Second, even in higher density areas walking is often difficult or dangerous due to anti-pedestrian street design. For example, I lived in Jacksonville Florida until this fall. In Jacksonville, most of the community's synagogues were on or near San Jose Blvd., a major road. San Jose is 8 lanes wide in some spots- not exactly a walkable place, because such wide streets encourage fast traffic that is dangerous for pedestrians

Third, in residential areas streets are often dead-end (or cul-de-sac) streets instead of being on a grid. Because such streets do not connect with each other, residents of such streets often cannot walk to one residential street to another without walking on the aforementioned 8 lane roads.

As a result of all these things, it is difficult for Jewish suburbanites to walk to a synagogue- or for that matter anything else. Thus, the relationship between Jewish law and sprawl is a dicey one.

So what can we do about it? As Jews, we can locate our congregations in walkable areas, but otherwise, we cannot do much more than any other citizens. But in our role as

political actors, I would like to point out that sprawl is not just a result of immutable consumer preferences, but in fact is caused by government policy in a variety of ways:

- *Govt highway spending helps people move to suburbs

- *Low density subdivisions exist because zoning laws artificially limit density.

- *Streets are wide because municipal planners like them that way, and comprehensive plans often provide for very wide streets.

- *Cul-de-sac streets were encouraged by the federal govt back in the 1930s, when the FHA started guaranteeing home mortgages. The FHA tended to require low densities, wide streets and cul de sacs.

Remove the govt policy, and you remove the sprawl- or at least, you limit the amount of new sprawl, and make it more pedestrian-friendly.