



**KEYNOTE ADDRESS**

**NEW YORK STATE DIVISION OF HUMAN RIGHTS**

**DISABILITY HOUSING CONFERENCE**

**APRIL 28, 2010**

**THE BRONX ZOO**

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THANK YOU JOHN AND COMMISSIONER KIRKLAND  
AND THE STAFF OF THE HUMAN RIGHTS DIVISION.

THE TITLE OF MY TALK IS “THERE ARE NO ATHEISTS  
IN THE NYS DIVISION OF HUMAN RIGHTS” .....AND  
SOON YOU WILL SEE WHY.

GOOD AFTERNOON EVERYONE. IT IS A GREAT  
HONOR TO HAVE THIS OPPORTUNITY TO SPEAK  
WITH YOU. I MUST CONFESS, WHEN JOHN ASKED  
ME TO PARTICIPATE IN THIS CONFERENCE, I KNEW  
VERY LITTLE OF THE GOOD WORK OF THE DIVISION



ON HUMAN RIGHTS.....SO I PROCEEDED TO  
EDUCATE MYSELF.

I AM SURE SOME OF THESE FACTS HAVE ALREADY  
BEEN MENTIONED AT THIS CONFERENCE, BUT I  
WAS FASCINATED TO LEARN THAT THE AGENCY IS  
65 YEARS OLD --- ITS FIRST FOCUS WAS  
EMPLOYMENT AND OVER THE YEARS IT INCLUDED  
ADDITIONAL JURISDICTIONS AND PROTECTIONS –  
INCLUDING HOUSING --- WHICH IS OBVIOUSLY THE  
FOCUS OF THESE PROCEEDINGS. THEN I REVIEWED  
ARTICLE 15 OF NYS EXECUTIVE LAW.....OTHERWISE



KNOWN AS THE HUMAN RIGHTS LAW. RIGHT

FROM THE START, ARTICLE 15 MAKES ITS PURPOSE

PRETTY CLEAR:

To assure that every individual within this state is afforded an equal opportunity to enjoy a full and productive life and that the failure to provide such equal opportunity, whether because of discrimination, prejudice, intolerance or inadequate education, training, housing or health care not only threatens the rights and proper privileges of its inhabitants but menaces the institutions and foundation of a free democratic state and threatens the peace, order, health, safety and general welfare of the state and its inhabitants.



AND SO, THE HUMAN RIGHTS DIVISION WAS

CREATED, FOR, AMONG OTHER THINGS,:

To encourage programs designed to insure that every individual shall have an equal opportunity to participate fully in the economic, cultural and intellectual life of the state.

DUE TO 13 YEARS OF SOLOMON SCHECTER

SCHOOLING, WHICH INCLUDED LEARNING THE

TALMUD IN THE ORIGINAL ARAMAIC, AS WELL AS

THREE YEARS OF LAW SCHOOL EDUCATION, I AM

ALWAYS INTERESTED IN THE CONSTRUCT OF THE

LAWS AND RULES. ARTICLE 15 FOR INSTANCE IS

MADE UP OF 14 SECTIONS AND IS ABOUT 41 PAGES



SINGLED SPACE WHEN PRINTED OUT IN MICROSOFT WORD...(OH, YES, I DID READ IT FRONT TO BACK!) AND AS FASCINATED AS I FIND ARTICLE 15, I MUST CONFESS TO BEING OBSESSED WITH ANOTHER SET OF CIVIL RIGHTS LAWS: THE 37 VERSES FOUND IN LEVITICUS CHAPTER 19 OF THE OLD TESTAMENT.

FIRST LET ME EXPLAIN MY OBSESSION. IF YOU DO NOT KNOW, WHEN A JEWISH BOY REACHES THE AGE OF 13, HE IS CALLED TO THE TORAH FOR HIS BAR MITZVAH. IN MY CASE, SINCE MY PARENTS WANTED TO GET THE MOST OUT OF THE TUTION



THEY WERE PAYING FOR SCHOOL....I ACTUALLY  
READ THE ENTIRE PORTION OF THE WEEK....IN  
HEBREW....WITH NO VOWELS...AND YES IT  
INCLUDED THIS CHAPTER: LEVITICUS 19.

BACK IN 1976, I DID NOT PAY MUCH ATTENTION TO  
THE ENGLISH TRANSLATION OR INTERPRETATION  
OF THE PORTION. HOWEVER, THE PORTION  
WOULD ACTUALLY REENTR MY LIFE IN A VERY  
INTERESTING WAY.

YOU SEE, IN ADDITION TO BEING THE NEPHEW  
OF DR. BURTON BLATT, ONE OF THIS COUNTRY'S



MOST INFLUENTIAL CHANGE AGENTS IN THE  
DISABILITY WORLD, 20 YEARS AGO, MY TWINS,  
JONATHAN AND STEPHANIE WERE BORN  
PREMATURELY WHICH RESULTED IN STEPHANIE'S  
CEREBRAL PALSY. AND AS A FATHER FOR THE LAST  
20 YEARS OF A "CHILD WITH A DISABILITY", MY  
FOCUS WAS NOT TURNED ONLY TO STEPHANIE'S  
NEEDS BUT ALSO I WAS EXPOSED TO THE  
INEQUALITY OF SERVICES, INEFFICIENCIES OF  
GOVERNMENT AND THE MISPERCEPTION OF THE



VALUE AND LACK THEREOF OF PEOPLE WITH  
DISABILITIES IN THIS AND THE GLOBAL SOCIETY.

ON THE FLIP SIDE, I HAVE ENJOYED BEING  
INTRODUCED TO A WHOLE NEW “CONGREGATION”  
SO TO SPEAK. BECAUSE STEPHANIE WAS A  
STUDENT AT THE HENRY VISCARDI SCHOOL, I  
ENJOYED A WONDERFUL RELATIONSHIP WITH  
HANK VISCARDI. HANK’S VISION FOR HIS  
EMPLOYEES OF THE ABILITIES FACTORY, THE  
STUDENTS OF THE SCHOOL AND US, THE PARENTS  
WHO COULDN’T WAIT FOR ANOTHER ONE OF HIS



TALKS.....WAS EQUALLY MATCHED BY HIS  
INCREDIBLE SENSE OF HUMOR AND KINDNESS TO  
OTHERS. “PEOPLE WITH DISABILITIES JUST WANT  
TO BE TREATED AS PEOPLE” WAS ONE OF HIS  
STAPLES.

SO, AS BURT’S NEPHEW, AND AS A HANK DISCIPLE  
AND STEPHANIE’S FATHER, I HAVE ENJOYED MANY  
TRAVELS IN THE DISABILITY ARENA. AND ALONG  
THE WAY, A MOST REMARKABLE WOMAN, GINNY  
THORNBURGH, ENTERED MY LIFE AND BROUGHT  
ME BACK TO LEVITICUS CHAPTER 19. YOU SEE,



GINNY CREATED THE RELIGION AND DISABILITY  
PROGRAM AT NATIONAL ORGANIZATION ON  
DISABILITY (WHICH IS NOW AT AAPD) AND SHE  
INTRODUCED ME TO THE LEVITICUS 19:14:

**YOU SHALL NOT INSULT THE DEAF, OR PLACE A STUMBLING BLOCK  
BEFORE THE BLIND. YOU SHALL FEAR YOUR G-D. I AM THE LORD**

SO THINK ABOUT IT: I READ THESE WORDS IN 1976  
AT MY BAR-MITZVAH AND I HAVE NOW TURNED  
THESE WORDS INTO MY VOCATION.

JUST LIKE ARTICLE 15 OF THE HUMAN RIGHTS LAW,  
THE SIGNIFICANCE OF THIS VERSE BECOMES



CLEARER WHEN TAKEN IN THE CONTEXT OF THE REST OF THE CHAPTER.

THE CHAPTER ITSELF IS CALLED KEDOSHIM IN THE HEBREW....WHCIH TRANSLATES TO “HOILNESS” IN ENGLISH. AT THIS POINT IN THE OLD TESTAMENT, G-D IS SPEAKING TO MOSES AND GIVES A DISCOURSE ON HOLINESS: MOSES IS TO INSTRUCT THE PEOPLE O ISRAEL ON HOW TO ACHIEVE HOLINESS BY USING THIS CHAPTER AS A GUIDEPPOST. BUT WHAT IS HOLINESS? WELL ONE COMMENTATOR EXPLAINS IT THIS WAY:



What is holiness? The term can be applied to G-d, to good people, to a book, to a period of time or even to an animal sacrifice. To be Holy is to be different, to be set apart from the ordinary. “Ordinary” is often used as the opposite of holy in rabbinic discourse. To be holy is to rise to partake in some measure of the special qualities of G-d, the source of holiness. Holiness is the highest level of human behavior.

LET’S REVIEW THE CHAPTER VERY QUICKLY. IN EACH LINE, G-D FINISHES EACH PRONOUNCEMENT WITH “I AM THE LORD YOUR G-D”. AND THERE ARE VERSES THAT YOU WILL BE VARY FAMILIAR WITH: REVERING YOUR PARENTS, DO NOT DECEIVE OTHER



PEOPLE AND EVEN THE GOLDEN RULE: LOVE YOUR  
FELLOW AS YOURSELF....(HEBREW).....BUT THERE  
ARE TWO INSTANCES WHEN G-D ADDS A LITTLE  
REMINDER: YOU SHALL FEAR G-D, I AM THE LORD  
YOUR G-D.....VERSE 14

**YOU SHALL NOT INSULT THE DEAF, OR PLACE A STUMBLING BLOCK  
BEFORE THE BLIND. YOU SHALL FEAR YOUR G-D. I AM THE LORD**

AND VERSE 32

You shall rise before the aged and show deference  
to the old; you shall fear your G-d; I am the Lord.  
...ONLY THESE TWO TIMES.....FOR THE DISABLED  
AND THE AGED....HOW INTERESTING.



NOW WE WERE ALWAYS TAUGHT THAT THERE IS NOTHING SUPERFLUOUS IN THE TORAH.....SO TO ME, HAVING G-D BASICALLY WARN MANKIND, YOU MESS WITH THEM, YOU MESS WITH ME.....IS A VERY, VERY POWERFUL STATEMENT...

AND THIS IS WHAT MOTIVATES OUR WORK AT THE DISABILITY OPPORTUNITY FUND [THE DOF].

WHAT IS THE DOF? SIMPLY PUT, WE ARE A COMMUNITY LOAN FUND WHICH STARTED WITH THE IDEA THAT WE COULD CREATE A MARKET FOR MONEY AND IDEAS TO CREATE BETTER HOUSING



SOLUTIONS FOR PEOPLE WITH DISABILITIES AND THEIR FAMILIES. WHAT STARTED AS A CONCEPT IN 2005, RESULTED IN THE NATION’S FIRST COMMUNITY LOAN FUND WHICH EXCLUSIVELY FOCUSES ON PROJECTS FOR PWD. WE STARTED LENDING LAST YEAR AND HAVE ALREADY ACHIEVED “CERTIFICATION” BY THE CDFI FUND, A DIVISION OF THE US TREASURY DEPARTMENT.

IN ADDITION TO LENDING, OUR OTHER MAIN INITIATIVE IS TO BE CHANGE AGENTS....THAT IS, THROUGH OUR TECHNICAL ASSISTANCE WORK, WE



HOPE TO CHANGE THE ATTITUDES, RULES,  
REGULATIONS, LAWS AND ANYTHING ELSE  
DISRUPTING THE PROGRESS WHICH NEEDS TO BE  
ACHIEVED. AS SOME OF YOU KNOW, BEING A  
CHANGE AGENT IS NOT A GREAT WAY TO MAKE A  
LIVING (WHICH IS WHY WE CREATED THE LOAN  
FUND!!) SO WHY DO WE DO IT?

WELL LET'S ASK UNCLE BURT. IN A JULY 1979  
ESSAY PUBLISHED IN THE JOURNAL OF LEARNING  
DISABILITIES, HE WROTE:

We need advocates because of the way our political-economic system works. It supposes that if everyone grabs as much as he can, everyone



will have what he deserves. However, the poor the weak and the handicapped are at a great disadvantage in such a system. These persons have not been able to grab fair shares. Consequently, one solution to their plight is to assign advocates to take for the weak what they cannot take for themselves. The goal to institutionalize advocacy can only be a permanent state of siege between the weak and the strong, the poor and the rich. Those who grab the most for themselves or others come out the winners, but to wish a fair share for the weak is to repudiate the adversary model. AS AGENTS OF SOCIAL CHANGE, we should seek to establish advocacy as a short-term expedient only as long as it is needed to counteract the destructiveness of a society gone wrong. As a long-range social goal we should seek to ELIMINATE the need for advocacy or at least minimize it. The systemic focus of social change should not be the establishment of advocacy networks as routine as fire departments or schools. Rather the focus should be to reduce the raw frontier ethics of the survival of the strong. [Pause]. A TRULY CIVILIZED SOCIETY is beyond the need for advocates. We should not have a system that serves the weak, like card players are served by the good or bad luck of who is drawn to advocate. Triage in not sharing.



NOTICE BURT'S FOCUS ON GETTING SOCIETY TO BE MORE CIVILIZED --- VERY MUCH THE FOCUS OF YOUR WORK AT THE DIVISION OF HUMAN RIGHTS. BURT PASSED AWAY IN 1985, 5 YEARS BEFORE THE PASSAGE OF THE ADA. ON THE TEN YEAR ANNIVERSARY OF HIS DEATH AT A MEMORIAL SERVICE IN SYRACUSE, MY COUSIN WAS ASKED WHAT BURT WOULD HAVE THOUGHT ABOUT THE ADA. THE AUDIENCE, CLEARLY EXPECTING SOME GLOWING REMARKS, HEARD THIS RESPONSE: HE



WOULD HAVE BEEN SAD TO THINK THAT COMMON  
HUMAN DECENCY NEEDS TO BE LEGISLATED.

AS FOR HOUSING, ONE ASPECT OF BURT'S LIFE'S

WORK WAS TO CHANGE THE DISGUSTING

CONDITIONS AT STATE SPONSORED INSTITUTIONS:

ENJOY THIS INSIGHT FROM A 1973 ARTICLE

PUBLISHED IN THERAPEUTIC RECREATION

JOURNAL:

As I once stated to the Massachusetts Legislature, there is a dark side of every mirror, a side beyond inspection because it is without thoughtfulness. And while the optimism and pride of our lives is for the gains made in civil rights, for our few achievements in mental retardation, for the concept of the Declaration of Independence and the Constitution, surely a dark side in the evolution of our civilization in this mid-twentieth century must be reserved for the deep, unremitting,



unrewarding lives of drudgery and pain we inflict upon our institutionalized brothers and all others who are needlessly segregated.

ARE THESE JUST WORDS FROM THE PAST? DO

THEY HAVE ANY RELEVANCE TODAY??

OBVIOUSLY THEY DO. IN ADDITION TO THE

INCREASING CASELOAD OF “DISCRIMINATION

CLAIMS” THAT THIS AGENCY IS CARRYING, THOSE

OF US ON THE FRONT LINES SEE THE INCREASED

POPULATIONS WHICH NEED SOLUTIONS. AND THE

LACK OF UNDERSTANDING, NOT ONLY FROM THE

MAINSTREAM REAL ESTATE WORLD, BUT EVEN



GOVERNMENT AGENCIES WHICH ARE NOT  
EQUIPPED TO HANDLE THE INCREASED DEMAND.

THE TSUMANI OF CHILDREN WITH AUTISM  
SPECTRUM DISORDER WHO ARE “GRADUATING” TO  
YOUNG ADULthood WITH NO REAL SOLUTIONS, IS  
THE NEXT CRISIS NOONE WANTS TO DEAL WITH.  
YOU SHOULD BE APPLAUDED FOR YOUR MISSION  
AND YOUR DILIGENCE. KEEP IT UP.

**TAKE ENCOURAGEMENT** FROM HANK VISCARDI  
WHO WROTE IN ONE OF HIS BOOKS DESCRIBING  
WHY THE SCHOOL NEEDED TO BE BUILT:



Meaning would be there. The children would be there. The classes. The graduates. Alumni. The Dream and fulfillment. Freedom to Dream, Freedom to Struggle, Freedom to Achieve Our Goals.

## **TAKE ENCOURAGEMENT FROM BURTON BLATT**

WHO WAS ONCE QUOTED AS FOLLOWS:

TO HAVE A DECENT SOCIETY, WE MUST BEHAVE AS DECENT INDIVIDUALS. ULTIMATELY OUR SOCIETY WILL DISCOVER THAT IT IS ACTUALLY EASIER TO MEET THAN AVOID THE RESPONSIBILITIES WE HAVE AS HUMAN BEINGS.

AND FINALLY, **TAKE ENCOURAGEMENT** FROM G-D.

AS I STATED BEFORE, THIS TALK IS TITLED, “THERE

ARE NO ATHEISTS IN THE DIVISION OF HUMAN

RIGHTS.” ..... THERE CAN'T BE....YOU ARE DOING G-

D'S WORK....AND WHEN YOU FEEL LIKE ALL OF THE



LEGAL ARGUMENTS ARE FAILING YOU, REMEMBER  
LEVITICUS 19:14.....IT'S NICE TO KNOW THAT IN  
YOUR CORNER, YOU HAVE PRETTY POWERFUL CO-  
COUNSEL.

THANK YOU FOR YOUR ATTENTION AND  
CONGRATULATIONS ON A GREAT CONFERENCE.