

DC Tax Revision Commission -- Public Hearing, June 24, 2013
Room 1107, One Judiciary Square 441 4th Street, NW

Rabbi Gilah Langner, on behalf of Jews United for Justice

Good evening. I am pleased to have the opportunity to testify before the Commission, and I commend you for your efforts in advising the city on its tax system. My focus tonight is on the fairness of the tax system across different income groups in society.

I've been a resident of the District for 34 years; I've seen some good years here, and some awful ones. I like to think that we are on a path toward a brighter future, and I'm glad to see the city running a surplus. I would hate to think, however, that a one-year surplus would be the occasion for rolling back tax increases on the wealthy, or even more ill-advised, granting tax cuts that will cut into the city's budget in future years.

I know it's a truism that all tax-payers want a cut in taxes. After all, who wouldn't? Well, I'll tell you who wouldn't. Just a little over two years ago, the nonprofit group Jews United for Justice convened a Sunday brunch at my house and invited Councilwoman Mary Cheh to a discussion with about 60 of her Ward 3 constituents on the merits of budget cuts and slashing social services, versus tax increases on higher-income DC residents. Sixty constituents made very clear that we were willing and able to do our part, including paying higher taxes, so as to make the burden fairer.

The current DC tax structure is NOT fair, when all the various taxes are considered together. According to data from the DC Fiscal Policy Institute, families with incomes between \$22,000 and \$62,000 pay 10-11 percent of their overall income in combined DC taxes. But the top 1 percent of DC families, making more than \$1.4 million annually, pay just 6 percent of their income in DC taxes.

For the well off to pay their fair share of taxes is NOT charity. It's an investment in DC, a way of building a just and sustainable society, one where we don't have to keep cutting back on social services every other year, where our physical and social service infrastructure can sustain the community into the future. If there is anything that attracts and keeps high income families living in DC, it is not lower taxes, it's a healthy, vibrant city. If there is tax relief, it should go to those who are earning the least. If there is a more general reconsideration of the tax structure, I hope you will recommend a fair burden across all income classes. We should not, for example, increase the sales taxes just so as to be comparable to national rates for this regressive tax.

The Jewish word for charity is *tzedakah*, and it means dispensing justice. It entails not just an admirable *willingness* to provide for those who are powerless, but an *obligation* to provide for the vulnerable, and an obligation to structure society so that everyone's needs are met in a just and fair fashion.

Thank you for the opportunity to share these thoughts.