

Conquering Poverty: a Jewish Approach

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Abstract: Jewish ethics teaches that poverty is a violation of human dignity. Therefore, our Jewish tradition unequivocally asserts: Any society that calls itself just must take care of its most vulnerable. We must help the poor to recapture their dignity, and we must conquer poverty once and for all.

In his column last Tuesday, journalist Bob Herbert of the New York Times ruefully observed that some 37 million Americans currently live below the poverty line in the United States, and yet the issue of poverty has not gotten much attention from the national media.

Since the Torah portion for this Shabbat describes two biblical laws intended to address the chronic difficulties that befell the poor in antiquity, -- namely the sabbatical year and the jubilee year --let's take up Herbert's challenge and learn more about Judaism's approach toward the issue of poverty.

From the outset I want to make clear that Judaism's approach is neither republican nor democratic, neither liberal nor conservative. As you will soon see, Judaism stakes out its own ground, adopting a moderate position that embraces elements both conservative and liberal.

Must we care for the poor? Yes, we must care because God cares. In the Torah and prophetic books, God repeatedly comforts the poor, seeks social justice for the poor, warns against oppressing the poor, and vows never to forget the poor. Biblical tradition makes it crystal clear that one way to be godlike is to care for and help the poor.

Biblical provisions to assist the poor were largely agricultural. Farmers were commanded to leave for the poor *peah*, the corners of the field; *shekhihah*, the forgotten sheaves and fruit; *leket*, the stalks that fell by the wayside.

In addition, the Bible demanded that workers were to be paid promptly, clothing taken as a pledge for a loan had to be returned each evening, loans had to be extended to the poor without interest, and in the sabbatical year, financial debts were cancelled altogether. The Bible also declares that the judicial system had an obligation to protect the rights of the poor.

It was our Rabbis who coined the term "*tzedakah*," commonly translated as "charity." But *tzedakah* does not mean charity. *Tzedakah* comes from '*tzedek*' the Hebrew word for justice. *Tzedakah* connotes something like "economic justice." Our Rabbis believed that poverty is an unjust condition.

In subsequent centuries, the Rabbis invented new forms of relief as Jewish society became more urban, and Jews engaged in commerce and trade. The Mishnah requires every community to meet the daily dietary needs of the resident poor by sponsoring a Tamhui, a soup kitchen. In addition, the transient poor had to be provided with food and lodging. The community also supplied physicians to provide the poor with rippui, free medical care. The community also maintained for the poor, a kuppah, or charity fund, to provide food and clothing.

In addition to establishing manifold institutions to conquer poverty, the Rabbis also established measures to prevent poverty from taking hold in the first place. The Rabbis obligated fathers to teach their sons not only Torah, but also a trade. They required the community to provide a dowry for indigent young women. The Rabbis obligated the community to provide employment, facilitated the making of loans to the poor, and even tried to regulate profit-margins so that basic necessities would be within the poor's reach.

Jewish ethics and Jewish tradition have many insights that can be extrapolated to our times: Jewish tradition teaches that much more must be done to prevent poverty in the first place, primarily through education and job training. Jewish tradition teaches that assistance to those in need should respect their dignity and empower them to be self-supporting. Employment and loan assistance is far preferable to a welfare system.

However, Jewish ethics categorically rejects any form of social darwinism that would make the poor fend for themselves. Our heritage strongly forbids insulting the poor by accusing them of being undeserving; or blaming the poor for their poverty, thereby adding insult to injury.

Recognizing that there will always be a percentage of people who -- through no fault of their own -- are unable to take care of themselves, Jewish ethics strongly affirms that society -- both the individual and the community -- has a bottom-line moral obligation to institutionalize an economic safety net for the poor. Poverty is a crushing blow. Not only must the poor be provided with food, clothing, and shelter, but we must always speak kindly to a poor person, and strive to treat a poverty-stricken individual with the respect he or she deserves as a child of God, no less than you or I.

Our Rabbis teach: if one were to put poverty on one side of a scale, and all of the other sufferings of the world on the other side, poverty would outweigh them all" (Midrash Rabbah on Exodus 31). Jewish ethics teach that poverty is a violation of human dignity. Therefore, our Jewish tradition unequivocally asserts: any society that calls itself just must take care of its most vulnerable. We must help the poor to recapture their dignity and we must conquer poverty once and for all.