

Below you will find Jewish texts dealing with poverty to assist you in framing this important work within Jewish tradition. The texts are arranged based on historical context: Biblical, rabbinic, medieval and contemporary. We hope that these texts and questions will create interesting and stimulating discussion and debate.

Biblical

When you reap the harvest of your land, you shall not reap all the way to the edges of your field or gather the gleanings of your harvest. You shall not pick your vineyard bare or gather the fallen fruit of your vineyard; you shall leave them for the poor and the stranger; I am Adonai your God. *Leviticus 19:9-10*

But do not neglect the Levite in your community, for he has no hereditary portion as you have. Every third year you shall bring out the full tithe of that year, but leave it within your settlements. Then the Levite, who has no hereditary portion as you have, and the stranger, the fatherless, and the widow in your settlements shall come and eat their fill, so that the Eternal your God may bless you in all the enterprises you undertake. *Deuteronomy 14:27-29*

When you have set aside in full the tenth of your yield – in the third year, the year of the tithe – and have given it to the Levite, the stranger, the fatherless, and the widow, that they may eat their fill in your settlements, you shall declare before the Eternal your God: “I have cleared out the consecrated portion from the house; and I have given it to the Levite, the stranger, the fatherless, and the widow, just as You commanded me; I have neither transgressed nor neglected any of Your commandments.” *Deuteronomy 26:12-13*

Share your bread with the hungry, and take the wretched poor into your home. When you see the naked, clothe him, and do not ignore your own kin. *Isaiah 58:7*

Discussion Questions

1. When discussing issues of hunger, we often use these biblical sources to site our tradition’s concern for fighting hunger. However, we no longer live in an agricultural society, and the laws of reaping and tithing no longer apply. How do we make these texts relevant today? What can we do in our modern lives to realize the principles that underlie these laws?
2. The Torah recognizes certain categories of people: the Levite, the stranger, the fatherless, the widow, etc. who are particularly vulnerable. What categories of people today require special assistance and our focused attention?

There shall be no needy among you—for the Eternal will surely bless you in the land that the Eternal your God is giving you as an inheritance.

For there will never cease to be needy ones in your land; therefore I command you: open your hand to the poor and needy kin in your land. *Deuteronomy 15: 4, 11*

If there is among you a poor person, one of your kin, in any of your towns within your land which God gives you, you shall not harden your heart or shut your hand against them, but you shall open your hand to them, and lend them sufficient for their needs, whatever they may be.

Deuteronomy 15: 7-8

Give to the needy readily and have no regrets when you do so, for in return the Eternal your God will bless you in all your efforts and in all your undertakings. *Deuteronomy 15:10*

Anyone who withholds what is due to the poor blasphemes against the Maker of all, but one who is gracious unto the needy honors God. *Proverbs 14:31*

One who mocks the poor blasphemes one's Maker. *Proverbs 17:5*

Discussion Questions

1. Explain the tension between Deuteronomy chapter 15 verses 4 and 11, found in the same chapter in Deuteronomy.
2. If we accept an obligation to care for the needy in our society, does that mean that we have to do it without regret for our own financial loss? Do you personally feel that you are able to give without regret or reticence?
3. Again we see that our relationship with God parallels our relationship with the vulnerable members of society. Why are these two related?

And if your neighbor becomes poor and his means fail him with you, then you shall strengthen him, be he a stranger or a settler, he shall live with you. *Leviticus 25:35*

Do not allow him to decline [socially and financially] and fall [altogether so that] it will be difficult to restore him [to his original position], but strengthen him from the time of his weakness. To what may this be compared? To a burden on a donkey: While it is still on the donkey, one [person] may grab hold of it and hold up [the load, but if the donkey] falls to the ground, five cannot raise it [the load] up. *Rashi on Leviticus 25:35*

Judge the wretched and the orphan; vindicate the lowly and the poor; rescue the wretched and the needy; save them from the hand of the wicked. *Psalms 82:3-4*

Discussion Questions

1. How can safety net programs (welfare, food stamps, Medicaid, etc.) fulfill Rashi's directive that we must catch people before they fall too far?
2. When you work to assist the poor and vulnerable members of your community, do you have a sense of the biblical imperative for your work? Why or why not?

Rabbinic

God says to Israel, "My Children, whenever you give sustenance to the poor, I impute it to you as though you gave sustenance to Me." Does God then eat and drink? No, but whenever you give food to the poor, God accounts it to you as if you gave food to God. *Midrash Tannaim* on Deuteronomy 15:10, citing Numbers 28:2

When you are asked in the world to come, "What was your work?" and you answer: "I fed the hungry," you will be told: "This is the gate of the Lord, enter into it, you who have fed the hungry." *Midrash Psalms* 118:17

HaLachma Anya, di achalu avahatana b'ar'a d'mitzrayim. "This is the bread of affliction our ancestors ate in the land of Egypt. Let all who are hungry come and eat; let all who are in need come share our Passover meal." *Haggadah shel Pesach* (Beginning of our Passover Liturgy)

Discussion Questions

1. How is our relationship with God impacted when we collect food for the poor? Do you feel that you are building that relationship and, "doing God's work" as you provide sustenance for the hungry?
2. Today when we open the door at our Pesach *seder* to invite in all those who are hungry it is often a symbolic gesture. We don't expect that anyone will actually walk in off of the street. How can we use the holidays as a time to really reach out to those in need?

"Follow the Lord your God" (Deuteronomy 13:5). What does this mean? Is it possible for a mortal to follow God's Presence? The verse means to teach us that we should follow the attributes of the Holy One, blessed be God. As God clothes the naked body, you should clothe the naked. Talmud, *Sotah* 14a

We have been taught: If a man who is in debt for a thousand *maneh* wears a robe worth a hundred *maneh*, he may be stripped of it. But he must still be provided with a robe that fits his standing, for, as we have been taught in the name of R. Ishmael and of R. Akiva: Everyone in Israel deserves such a robe. Talmud, *Shabbat* 128a

Discussion Questions

1. How does your clothing relate to your sense of dignity? When you see people on the street wearing dirty, torn clothes, how does that impact on your impression of them?
2. Do you agree with the statement in *Shabbat* 128a? Why or why not?

R. Abba said in the name of R. Simeon ben Lakish: the person who lends money [to a poor person] is greater than the person who gives charity; and the one who throws money into a common purse [to form a partnership with the poor person] is greater than either. *Talmud, Shabbat 63b*

Discussion Question

1. Why is it more desirable to lend money than to provide charity?

There is nothing in the world more grievous than poverty—the most terrible of sufferings. Our teachers said: All the troubles of the world are assembled on one side and poverty is on the other. *Midrash Rabbah Exodus 31:12*

Discussion Question

1. Our early rabbis believed that poverty was the worst form of suffering. Do you agree? Why or why not?

Medieval

When you give food to a hungry person, give your best and sweetest food. *Hilchot Issurei Mizbayach* 7:11

Discussion Question

1. Do you agree with the ruling found in *Hilchot Issurei Mizbayach* that you should “give your best and sweetest food” to the hungry? Shouldn’t it be enough to give even the leftovers from your meals? What message does this law send?

If a community lacked a synagogue and a shelter for the poor, it was first obligated to build a shelter for the poor. *Sefer Chasidim*

Discussion Questions

1. Here we see that there were many who believed that action was more important than prayer. Is the same true today?
2. Do our Jewish communities still place an emphasis on providing shelter for the homeless? What are some ways we can do better?

If a poor man requests money from you and you have nothing to give him, speak to him consolingly. It is forbidden to upbraid a poor person or to shout at him because his heart is broken and contrite...for it is written, "To revive the spirit of the humble and to revive the heart of the contrite." *Isaiah 57:15; Maimonides, Mishneh Torah, "Gifts to the Poor," 10:5*

Every city with even a few Jewish people must appoint *tzedakah* collectors, people who are well-known and trustworthy, who will go door to door each week before Shabbat and take from everyone what they are expected to give. And they distribute the money before each Shabbat and give to each poor person enough food for 7 days – this is called the *kupah*.

Collectors are also appointed to travel through public places to gather the bread and foodstuffs and fruits and money from whomever volunteers it, and they distribute it in the evening among the poor, giving each poor person enough to get through the day. *Maimonides, Mishnah Torah, Laws of Contributions to the Poor, Chapter 9:1-2*

The highest form of charity is to step in with help to prevent a person from becoming poor. This includes offering a loan or employment, investing in a business, or any other form of assistance that will avoid poverty. The basis for this principle is the commandment in our passage: *you shall strengthen the poor. Maimonides' commentary to Leviticus 25:35-38*

Discussion Questions

1. Maimonides focuses on the feelings of the poor person. Do our current modes of giving consider the emotions and dignity of the poor?
2. We all know the parable: Give a man a fish, and he will eat for a day. Teach a man to fish, and he will eat for a lifetime. How does Maimonides' emphasis on this idea relate to our soup kitchen donations? Creation of synagogue shelters?

Contemporary

In every Jewish city in the time of the Tannaim there were two institutions for *tzedakah*: public fund (*kuppah*) and soup kitchen (*tamchui*). *Introduction to Mishna Pe'ah 8:7 by Pinchas Kehati*

We can see Joseph's desire to see his impact beyond his own success, "to see God's hand in his ascent, and to understand his success as being invested with the commandment to repair the world." As Egypt faced a massive famine, Joseph understood his role as one who could improve the lives of others. Like today's Mazon and Hunger No More, Joseph is the "quintessential diaspora Jew engaged with the well-being of the Jewish world and non-Jewish world." *Rabbi Andrew Bachman, Commentary on Parashat Vayigash, www.myjewishlearning.com*

Hunger is isolating; it may not and cannot be experienced vicariously. He who never felt hunger can never know its real effects, both tangible and intangible. Hunger defies imagination; it even defies memory. Hunger is felt only in the present. *Elie Wiesel*

Discussion Questions

1. What are some of the institutions that the North American Jewish community has established to combat hunger? How are our communities different from those in the rabbinic period and how have our safety net programs changed?
2. When we look at the world around us and all of its problems, how can we avoid being overwhelmed? How can we truly believe that even one person, like Joseph, can make a difference and repair the world?
3. What is Wiesel trying to impart to his reader? Do you think that an inability to truly understand the pain of hunger should impact your response to it?

There is no word in the Hebrew vocabulary for "charity" in the modern sense. The word used is *tzedakah*, which literally means "righteousness." *Tzedakah* is not an act of condescension by the affluent toward the needy; it is the fulfillment of a moral obligation. Injustice to humanity is desecration of God. Refusal to give charity is considered by Jewish tradition to be idolatry.

Albert Vorspan and David Saperstein, Jewish Dimensions of Social Justice, UAH Press, New York, NY, p. 93.

Discussion Questions

1. How is the word 'idolatry' being used here? Is it an appropriate usage of the word?
2. Why isn't there a Hebrew word for "charity"? What does it say about our religion that we are commanded to give *tzedakah* and not just when asked?
3. What are some ways that we can ensure we always act "righteously," both as individuals and as a community?

BE IT RESOLVED THAT the Union of American Hebrew Congregations:

1. Calls upon our Reform congregations to increase aid to the homeless in four areas:
 - A. To provide greater financial assistance to established shelters;
 - B. To organize volunteers to assist in staffing these shelters on an ongoing basis;
 - C. To offer the use of their buildings and resources to provide shelter, food, and clothing, as required; and
 - D. To come together with other religious and communal institutions in coalitions to coordinate efforts and to provide maximum pressure on local, state and federal governments to take their fair share of responsibility for the homeless; and
2. Commends those congregations that have taken action to assist the hungry and the homeless.

*From the 57th General Assembly of the Union of American Hebrew Congregations, Houston, TX,
November 1983*

In Jewish law and in its implementation during the 1,500 years of the self-governing Jewish community, the government and the public sector played a central role in achieving social justice. By talmudic times, at least four communal funds (food, clothing, burial, and money funds), plus communal schools for all children, were required in every sizeable community. These programs were aimed at ensuring that the society as a whole fulfilled its moral responsibility to help *every* needy person. By the Middle Ages, these had grown into a broad network of social welfare institutions, serving children, the sick, the elderly, the hungry, the refugee—a social welfare system rivaling our own today, with extensive communal regulation of the environment, consumer rights, and worker’s rights.

Statement by Rabbi David Saperstein, Director, Religious Action of Reform Judaism, on Welfare Reform Reauthorization Proposals to the Human Resources Subcommittee of the U.S. House of Representatives Committee on Ways and Means, April 11, 2001

Discussion Question

1. Do you feel that the Reform Movement in general and our congregation in particular have done enough to fight poverty and assist the needy? How can we go beyond the efforts that are already in place?