

## **Judaism and Poverty**

### **Rabbi David Rosen**

The Jewish sages of old viewed poverty as a great affliction and said that “he who is crushed by poverty is as if he were subject to all the afflictions of the world” (Midrash Rabbah, Exodus, 31:12).

Yet poverty is also a challenge and an opportunity, both for the poor but above all for those with the means to assist the needy.

One of the most powerful Rabbinic homilies in this regard is based on the second verse of Psalm 65, “Let the Lord arise and scatter his enemies and let those that hate Him flee from before him”. Say the sages “Five times David (the author of the book Psalms according to Tradition) calls on God to arise and scatter his enemies. Yet we do not find that the Lord rises up (in response). When does He arise? (We find it stated in Psalm 12 v. 6), ‘For the oppression of the poor and the cry of the needy, then will I arise saith the Lord’!”

In this very powerful homily, the Rabbis of old teach us that even if one is King David himself, one may not assume that God is on your side. When is he on your side? When you are on His. And when is that? When one cares for the poor and the needy!

This is of course in keeping with the fundamental Jewish teaching of “imitatio Dei” (based on Leviticus 19 v. 1); as the sage Abba Shaul puts it, “Just as He is compassionate and gracious, so must you be compassionate and gracious (see also Maimonides, Yad, ‘Gifts to the Needy’ 7:6).

We are only truly godly in our behavior – the way the Lord calls us to be – when we respond to the needs of the poor and the vulnerable.

The Bible lays down the precise precept as follows:-

If, there is a needy person among you, do not harden your heart and shut your hand. Rather, you must open your hand and lend him, sufficient for whatever he needs. Beware lest you harbor the base thought...so that you are miserly towards your needy kinsman and give him nothing and he cries out to the Lord against you and you have sinned. Give to him readily and have no regrets when you do so ...the Lord your God will bless you in all your efforts and in all your undertakings. For there will never cease to be needy people in your land, which is why I command you; open your hand to the poor and needy kinsmen in your land. (Deuteronomy 15:7-11).

In fact the Hebrew word for charity is “*tzedakah*” which actually means “righteousness”. Caring for and giving to the poor is our righteous obligation, responsibility and duty. Thereby we affirm the bonds of our common humanity that bind us together: thereby we promote peace in society. The root of the Hebrew word Peace “*shalom*” means complete and united – and it is through practical response to the needs of the other that we promote that unity and harmony that is the essence of true peace and redemption for society (see Maimonides, *Ibid*).

Because our responsibility to care for the poor and eradicate poverty is meant to be the expression of human solidarity, the manner in which we act is of significance as well even when we are not able to provide materially.

Maimonides (*Yad, Gifts to the Needy, 10: 4-5*) summarizes this as follows:- 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, as it is said, “A broken and contrite heart, O God, You will not despise” (Psalm 51:19). And it is written, “To revive the spirit of the humble, and to revive the heart of the contrite” (Isaiah 57:10). Woe to him who shames a poor man. Rather one should be as a father to the poor man, in both compassion and speech, as it is said, “I am a father to the poor” (Job 29:15). Moreover whosoever gives charity to a poor man ill manneredly and with downcast looks has lost all the merit of his actions even though he should give him a thousand gold pieces, but he should give with good grace and with joy.

He should speak to him words of consolation and sympathy, as it is said, “And I gladdened the heart of the widow” (Job 29:13).

Beyond our responsibility to respond to the needs of the poor, we are obliged to work for the eradication of poverty. However the most virtuous and praiseworthy response is that which facilitates the fullest expression of the dignity of the needy by allowing the latter to become self-sufficient. The Talmud designates eight levels of response, one higher than the other, as follows:-

1. Those who give grudgingly, reluctantly, or with regret.
2. Those who give less than is fitting, but give graciously.
3. Those who give appropriately, but only after being asked.
4. Those who give before being asked.
5. Those who give without knowing to whom, although the recipients know the identity of the donors.
6. Those who give without making their identity known to the recipient.
7. Those who give without knowing to whom, neither do the recipients know from whom they receive.
8. Those who assist others by a gift or loan or by making them business partners or by finding them employment thereby helping them to dispense with the aid of others. As Scripture says, “You shall support him, be he a stranger or a resident, he shall live with you” (Leviticus 23:35). This means to support them in such a manner that falling into want is prevented. (Maimonides, Yad, Gifts to the Needy, 10).

As the saying goes, “Giving bread provides meals; teaching how to harvest provides livelihoods.” It is through providing people with the means to maintain themselves with dignity that we fulfill the highest goal of “tzedakah”- righteousness and it is through righteousness, teaches the Bible and Jewish Tradition, that we bring redemption for humankind.