**Fighting Poverty in Judaism**

**Fighting poverty globally and locally**

**By Rabbi Jill Jacobs**

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The task of fighting poverty can seem overwhelming. Each day, the news brings more stories of children without health insurance, families struggling to escape homelessness, and workers trying to support themselves on minimum wage jobs. At the same time, organizations that fight poverty bombard us with letters and e-mails soliciting donations and asking us to contact our legislators about various issues.

It's no wonder that so many of us feel helpless in the face of so much need.

While none of us may be able to single-handedly end poverty in the world, our country, or even our own town, each of us can play a role in alleviating the crisis. Below are a few suggestions for finding your own place within the global effort to eliminate poverty.

**Recognize the Nature of the Problem**

To fight poverty, you must understand the myriad of issues that contribute to it. These include unemployment, low wages, unequal access to education, discriminatory policies and practices, inadequate health care, a broken criminal justice system, and dozens more. The effects of poverty range from homelessness to malnutrition to drug use to depression to violence.

Given the complicated nature of poverty, it is tempting to address the problem by focusing on a single symptom. For instance, we might combat malnutrition by contributing food to a local soup kitchen or compensate for low educational achievement by starting a tutoring program. While efforts to alleviate the symptoms of poverty are important and necessary, we also need to ask the bigger questions:  why are working people unable to afford food? Why are there no supermarkets in poor urban neighborhoods? Why are some schools better funded and less crowded than others? Why are there so few good jobs available for people with only a high school education?

In one of the most oft-quoted Jewish texts on poverty, Moses Maimonides lays out eight levels of *tzedakah* (charity), the highest of which involves making a person self-sufficient by giving him/her a job or a loan or entering into a business partnership with him/her. While we should certainly learn from Maimonides the importance of helping people to help themselves, we also need to ask the question that Maimonides does not ask:  What happens when even a person with a job does not earn enough to buy basic necessities? How can we create a society in which people who work full-time are guaranteed of earning enough money to support a family?

To learn more about the causes of poverty, pay attention to both local and national newspapers and to smaller media, such as magazines that focus on urban issues in your neighborhood, newspapers published by neighborhood or community groups, and websites focused on politics and social justice. Most importantly, continuously ask yourself "why?"  Judaism is a tradition of questions—we teach even the youngest child to recite four questions at the Passover Seder, and our oral tradition is filled with the questions of the most learned rabbis. Without questioning accepted realities and searching for better explanations, we will never fully understand either the causes of poverty or the potential solutions.

**Decide on an Issue**

Even with a more in-depth analysis of the problem, you will not be able to solve poverty globally, nationally or even in your neighborhood. You will, however, have a better sense of the ways in which you might begin to address the issue.

In choosing an issue that you want to work on, you might begin by asking what is most important to you. Are you a doctor who cares deeply about health care? Did you benefit from a teacher who helped you to love learning? Did you or your parents grow up in a neighborhood that is now struggling? Find a way to articulate your interest in an issue in a way that is compelling both to you and to others.

Social justice activists often talk about "self interest" as a key element in organizing. The concept of self-interest recognizes both that people are most likely to work long-term on issues important to them, and that we all stand to benefit from a more just society. While the poor might suffer disproportionately from inequities, we all suffer when our town, our country or the world as a whole fails to achieve what we otherwise might.

Recognizing our own self-interest in the issues on which we choose to work challenges us to work side by side with people who are less fortunate, rather than seeing ourselves as benevolent outsiders working to help others. This attitude toward fighting poverty and injustice is perhaps best expressed in the famous words of Lily Watson, an aboriginal activist who said, "**If you have come to help me, you are wasting your time. But if you have come because your liberation is tied up with mine, then let us work together."**

**Connect with Others**

You will most likely not have to start a new organization or project to tackle the issue that you have prioritized. Instead, look for local community organizations or advocacy groups that are already working on the issue, learn more about their work, and find out whether they need your help. You can find these groups by reading local news, asking people who work in the social justice or social service sectors, looking at lists of grantees of local foundations, and searching the internet for groups in your area.

**Think Big (and Small)**

In one of the richest biblical texts on poverty, God promises that "There shall be no needy among you" and then, a few lines later commands the people to open their hands to the poor "for the poor shall never cease from your land." (Deuteronomy 15)

One way of resolving the apparent paradox of this text is to understand these verses as simultaneously presenting a long-term vision for ending poverty and a short-term strategy for alleviating the immediate needs of the poor. We may not ignore an individual’s need for food, clothing or housing; at the same time, we cannot focus only on band-aid solutions to the point that we forget about the grand vision of creating a world without poverty.

There are numerous ways to approach any issue. For instance, you might address the housing crisis by volunteering in a homeless shelter, starting a homeless shelter, advocating for local investment in affordable housing, investing in banks that provide loans to community development groups, advocating for federal support of affordable housing, or offering pro bono legal assistance to tenants’ rights organizations. Remember that eradicating poverty requires a focus on both the individual symptoms of poverty and the systems that cause it.

**Ask the Right Questions**

When adopting any issue, you might ask yourself:

--How can I volunteer my time in such a way as to make a difference on this issue? Do I have any special skills (legal, technological, educational, medical, etc.) that might be helpful to an organization working on this issue?

--How can I financially support an organization working on this issue?

--Is there a way to work on an ongoing campaign to change policies that affect this issue? Are any local Jewish organizations or community organizations tackling this issue in a long-term way?

--How can I do legislative advocacy around this issue? To whom might I direct a letter, an e-mail or a phone call? When do my elected officials hold office hours? Whom might I visit to talk about this issue?

--How can I have an effect on this issue locally, nationally and globally? What groups are working on this issue in different areas of the country or of the world?

**Choose to Organize**

The Talmud teaches: One who causes others [to give] is greater than one who simplygives" (Bava Batra 9a). While each of us, as individuals, can do much to combat poverty, we can be even more effective when we mobilize others to join us in these efforts. We can be most effective at organizing those within our own communities—members of our synagogues, friends, neighbors, family members, classmates, and co-workers. Instead of simply writing a letter to a legislator, we might ask five friends to do the same. Instead of just volunteering for a particular issue campaign, we might try to make this issue a priority for our synagogue. Instead of going alone to a protest or meeting, we might bring a family member or neighbor. None of us may be able, single-handedly, to eradicate poverty, but together each of us can do our part to transform the systems that create inequity.

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