

Executive Summary
"You Shall Strengthen Them:" (Lev. 25:35) A Rabbinic Letter on the Poor
Prepared by Lee Paskind

The Jewish tradition is rich in concepts that express the value of every human life. These include "Saving or Guarding Human life", the importance of "community," "compassion," "the dignity of being God's creature," and human "aspirations for holiness." Even the Hebrew word *tz'dakah*, charity, means justice. "We care for the poor because it is the just and righteous thing to do."

The Bible ordains that we leave the corners of the field and sheaves or fruit forgotten in the fields for the poor. They likewise have the first rights to the fruit of the Sabbatical year when the land was to lie fallow. Workers were to be paid promptly. Those who needed loans were to be extended them without usury. If clothing was taken as a pledge for a loan, it was to be returned for use by the poor person at night.

Rabbinic Poverty Law extended Biblical rulings to establish soup-kitchens, food for the poor and needy travelers. Medical care was given freely to those who could not pay. A carefully graduated scale was worked out for the resident poor to determine who was eligible to receive assistance (*tz'dakah*).

Based on Deut. 15:8, "You shall open your hand [to the poor person] and provide him sufficient for his need, whatever it may be," Rabbinic law taught that a person's former status had to be taken into account in assessing his/her need. Families had the responsibility to teach their children a craft so they would be gainfully employed. The Rabbis governed the marketplace, especially regarding the prices of basic necessities. Maimonides taught that the highest and best form of assistance is "attained by the person who comes to the aid of another before he reaches the stage of actual poverty in the form of a loan, or the forming of a partnership with him for the transaction of some business, or assistance is obtained some employment for him."

The challenge before us in translating these traditional structures into our own day comes from the changing face of the poor. In the United States, poverty is spreading. In the past two decades, the largest growth in poverty for children under age six has been not in urban and rural areas, but in suburbia. Since the '60's housing subsidies, food stamps, Aid to Families with Dependent Children and direct cash payments have sustained those living at the poverty level. The new welfare legislation of 1996 has put many of these programs - and those supported by them - in jeopardy.

The new phenomenon of the working poor demonstrates yet another vexing concern. With rising costs and lower paying jobs, families with at least one member working are today living at or below the poverty line, and their numbers are increasing. There is today a 'culture of poverty' in which several generations within a family grow up poor. Rabbinic communal mechanisms presumed that poverty would be temporary. That is not an assumption that we may safely make today. Our taxes today arguably fulfill a part of

the required responsibility for meeting the needs of the poor. Since large-scale social and governmental institutions are today the necessary mechanism for delivering the services needed by the poor, we have an obligation to influence public policy in the direction of compassion and concern for the dignity of every citizen, as dictated by Jewish tradition.

Specific Application of Jewish Principles Today

Changes in business practices - less expensive production techniques and outsourcing, for example - make jobs less available and pay lower. The result: the average weekly earnings of 80% of Americans below the managerial level has dropped 18% in consistent dollars in the last two decades. Especially in regions with high unemployment, an awareness of available jobs is all the more important. Often today the working poor are being forced out of jobs and support benefits in favor of those newly forced off welfare. Thus those who are working are in danger of losing even their homes.

When we consider the needs of the poor, we must take into account the affordability of housing where they live, good and safe child care, adequate health care and transportation. There are also real obstacles such as functional illiteracy and various addictions. Only comprehensive programs which provide for a family's real needs will have a chance of success.

One important key to a solution to poverty is the business community. Trial programs have demonstrated that companies, with Federal, state and local support, can teach people to get and keep jobs that they need to fill. These various governments can provide the necessary support to help people transition from often total reliance to self-sufficiency. The businesses can provide job training, and even completion of high school equivalency programs. They can also help 'socialize' new workers into the culture of the business world. This is consistent with the high value Judaism has always placed on labor and self-sufficiency.

At the same time, Judaism's insistence on a responsibility for each citizen to address the temporary needs of the impoverished argues for a restoration of the safety net for the poorest, sickest and least able to work in society. There will be those individuals who cannot work. It may also take several generations to teach those who can - how to do so. We cannot turn our backs on them and their children in the interim. We must remove the stigma of blame attached indiscriminately to all poor people. We are all, Judaism insists, God's children, created in the divine image. The poor must be afforded the real opportunity of gainful employment, under circumstances that support that employment. Even those who, for the moment, cannot do so, or fail to do so, must be afforded protections that recognize and maintain their dignity, as children of God.