

Although poverty and hunger have grown rampantly, the devastation has — until very recently — been virtually ignored by the North American Jewish community. Why? And what can we do to tame the staggering wealth gaps in Israel and the United States that have resulted in colossal poverty and the cycles of shame and exasperation that it produces?

The Insidious Threats of Hunger and Poverty to Israel's Future

Peter Edelman

Security is the overriding concern in Israel today. Even if the recent reduction in suicide bombings continues, the Second Intifada is far from over. People justifiably fear for the future, especially because the Israeli economy is now in crisis too, in part due to the violence.

Nonetheless, Israel's future is clouded in other, less headline-grabbing ways. As my friend, the Israeli political scientist Yitzhak Galnoor puts it, "I'm confident there will be a government of Israel. I'm just not confident this will be the same Israel that our parents fought to create."

The Israel of *chalutzim* and *kibbutzim* that I learned about in Talmud Torah and religious school has vanished. Israel is now five "nations" coexisting uneasily, and poorly sharing power and the economic pie. Ashkenazim, Mizrahim, Russians, the ultra-Orthodox, and Israeli Arabs all come from different places — figuratively for sure and literally in most instances. It sometimes seems unrealistic to hope that these five distinct entities might successfully coalesce as a mature society. That the country remains as democratic

as it does is amazing, but there are cracks and fissures — some gaping.

Researchers argue about whether Israel has the largest gap between rich and poor of any developed nation, or is only second or third, after the United States and maybe the United Kingdom. Arab citizens of Israel — more than a million people — have a per capita income that is half the national average. But they are not the only group on the margins. Recent immigrants are disproportionately poor, and too many among those who came from North Africa and western Asia 50 years ago have never been fully inte-

grated economically, especially those living in the Negev.

Exacerbating both the group divisions and the economic gaps is the continuing domination by the Ashkenazim of the economic and cultural life of the country. Partly in response, many among the marginalized vote in ways that seem contrary to their interests. Rejecting the Ashkenazi-dominated parties of the left, they keep choosing people who, in office, ignore them — proof yet again that the psychology of

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group identity can be a more powerful political motivator than economic self-interest.

The combination of the Intifada, the conservative government it caused to be elected, the battered economy, and the budget cuts that ensued have made matters far worse. Unemployment is well over 10 percent. Benefits have been reduced rather than improved. Child poverty has skyrocketed and is now more than 25 percent. Serious hunger — never a widely noted concern despite the poverty of some groups all along — is now visible and the subject of public discussion.

Attitudes about minority groups — in particular, Arab citizens — are intertwined with the poverty issues. Arab Israeli unemployment is 40 percent, and the poverty rate is even higher. This poverty is entrenched from generation to generation because of discrimination in multiple realms, especially discrimination in spending on education, which leaves Arab children with far less than half the spending per child than is available to Jewish children.

The reasons for taking action on poverty are the same everywhere — it is a moral question as well as, more instrumentally, a question about social stability and the future of the democracy. The kinds of disparities that exist in both Israel and the United States (where, for example, African-Americans and Latinos are poor at three times the rate for whites, and Native American poverty is even higher) call into question the claim of both societies that equality is a fundamental principle and, if they persist, can

threaten the continuing capacity of the economy to generate enough income to sustain a broad middle class. Any hope of knitting together the five highly disparate groups that constitute today's Israel depends at least in part on ensuring all an equal stake in the country's economy and social/civic structure (and on progress toward a more open society, religiously, as well).

But the disparities faced by Arab Israelis raise further, even deeper questions, especially now. Fulfilling the promise of equality for all citizens should be enough of a reason to end the discrimination and the disparities. Now, however, there is an additional urgency. The grim joke among Arab Israelis is that the Jewish democratic state is "democratic" for the Jews and "Jewish" for the Arabs. Political equality — the right to vote — means very little if one is consigned to be a member of a permanent minority that not only loses nearly every vote but also is the object of a continuing pattern of governmental decisions that discriminate spectacularly again and again. Sooner or later, people are going to refuse to take it any more. That day will not be a good day for Israel.

If Israel wants to remain a democracy, it must act. The current position is untenable. Either social, political, and economic conditions will be made better, or they will deteriorate. That is the current reality.

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Penury and Hunger in Israel

Jenny Cohen-Khallas

Here is an example of the new Israeli poverty. When Israelis see people like this, they say: "There but for the grace of God, go I." Marina and Yvgeny came to Israel from Riga, Latvia, in about 1994 with two adolescent children, as did Ethiopian Abonash, with her three children. Abonash's husband died of dysentery on the long march to the Jewish Agency camp in Addis Ababa, Ethiopia. I also want to introduce to you Masha, a doctor who couldn't retrain in Israel, so she became an attendant paramedic in a tour company. Yvgeny retrained and became a computer Webmaster, joining a successful software start-up company. Abonash

worked as a room cleaner in a newly opened five-star hotel.

In 2000 they were all fired because their respective employment situations went bankrupt or were closed at a huge loss. They have mortgages or rent to pay and loans to repay for their children's upkeep and higher education fees. For six months, their severance pay and unemployment benefits supported them. But, now at age 50, they are unemployable. Some sold their cars, CD players, televisions. Then they took a bridge loan. Then the children started working full time to stay in university. Then they tried to sell the

house, but there's a slump in the market and nothing is selling. Then they stopped buying meat during the week. Their credit is stopped, interest payments swell; suddenly there's no food on the table and no money for medicine.

And yet the open use of the words "poverty" and "hunger" arouses waves of discomfort and sometimes indignation in Israel. Some Israelis are shamed by it. Some say that we must lobby the government to change its priorities. Some say that poverty and hunger don't exist — that it's just the exploitation of long-term welfare dependents and the unemployed. But some say that it not only exists but also threatens to overwhelm us. They note that the government is overburdened with defense expenses and we, the citizens of Israel, cannot stand by and blame everybody else.

Israel is no longer the single-faceted ideological society it was in the 1950s when the dire poverty of tens of thousands of Jewish refugees living in asbestos shacks on severe rationing was called, not "poverty and hunger," but "national fragility." Israel is now a postmodern (for a large proportion of its population), Western, industrialized, high-tech state. Israelis no longer share the mentality of struggling for initial economic survival. Israel is now strong enough to enable healthy public discussion of social and other issues. So the fact that one-sixth of the population is defined as impoverished is a shocking reality both to those who thought we lived in a comfortable Western, middle-class milieu and to those whose ideological priorities had never allowed them to consider how the socioeconomic strain of widespread poverty would detour public efforts, solidarity, and electoral tendencies from the national struggle. One of the clear results of daily prime-time media exposure to poverty and demonstrations in front of the Knesset is that vociferous segments of the public are demanding that governmental resources be channeled to welfare and other domestic resources, rather than to strengthening settlements beyond the green line. In the recent national elections, the Shinui Party quadrupled

its size, demonstrating the public's desire to fund civil needs such as welfare, employment, and education, instead of settlements and ultra-religious ventures.

Soup kitchens have mushroomed as the situation in Israel gets worse. While some blame the Intifada for the poverty, the underlying causes may be more complicated. Israel was a world leader in the high-tech bubble. For 10 years a large percentage of the Israeli work scene was devoted to training, offering employment in, and proliferating high-tech services and environments. The bubble burst, and thousands became unemployed. Older workers could not find alternative employment.

In addition, the wave of immigration that boosted Israel's population by over 20 percent in the early 1990s brought an abnormal, negative socioeconomic balance, the impact of which the government had not foreseen. The immigration brought a disproportionate percentage of old and unhealthy people without families, a disproportionate percentage of single mothers, and a roller coaster of drop-out immigrant adolescents who felt alienated from their Israeli peer group and uncomfortable in their parental homes.

There were whole communities of families from the Asiatic ex-Soviet Union, Ethiopia, Yemen, Syria, and Kurdistan who were unfamiliar with Western, democratic society.

This is how we arrived at 1,000,000 people under the poverty line — one-sixth of Israel's population, Jews and Arabs included, 400,000 children included. In nearly every school, teachers know who comes to school without a sandwich because he or she forgot it and who cuts back on the sandwich and doesn't eat until the evening because the family exists in penury. The overloaded social workers are helpless and refer the impoverished to nonprofit soup kitchens and associations that distribute food, clothing, household goods, and school books to the needy. When, in August 2002, Minister of Education Limor Livnat approached the Pitchon Lev Association to help address the problem of hunger in schools, the organization was accused of serving

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politicians and allowing the government to shirk its welfare responsibilities. But the dimension of poverty today is so great that the government is incapable of coping; social welfare organizations today are essential if Israel is to keep feeding the hungry.

Like other welfare organizations, the demands for services have grown. When Pitchon Lev started operating in 1998, it provided 300 food parcels a month, in addition to blankets and heaters to old people. It now provides 5,500 food parcels a month to over 140,000 needy individuals a year. There is a waiting list of 1,000 families. The needy are referred by social workers and include people from all backgrounds. Rather than providing meals in soup kitchens, Pitchon-Lev delivers weekly parcels of food for the family — enabling the family to prepare its own meals at home and maintain its dignity and independence. Food is also provided to certain welfare institutions such as Beit Hashanti and shelters for battered women and children.

Many people-to-people Israeli welfare associations wrestle with whether to directly address social need or to work toward governmental intervention. In addition to weekly news programs emphasizing the plight of the poor, the work of nonprofit associations, and dwindling governmental resources for welfare, there have been numerous discussions among charity foundations and the nonprofit sector as to who will deal with the hunger crisis.

The tremendous growth of organizations that

provide hands-on solutions to various aspects of poverty and hunger indicates the enormous increase in numbers of families whose material support systems have totally collapsed, including the governmentally funded welfare services that are colossally over-stretched. It is also increasingly clear that the crisis is going to get worse in the next few years. Until the current conflict with the Palestinians is resolved, Israel will not enjoy the confidence of tourists, investors, or developers. Resources will not be made available to develop new employment fields or attend adequately to the fallout of thousands of alienated and asocialized immigrants. International embargoes, both overt and unspoken, will not be rescinded until the regional conflict is solved.

Increased citizen involvement and a more attuned media are addressing the poverty crisis. As a result, one of the main banners of the recent elections was the claim of parties — not known for their social agenda — that they would invest immediately in new sources of employment in poor areas, in reducing governmental waste, and in solving the problem of hunger.

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Employment Not Poverty

Danny Pins

Israel's economy continues to worsen. Recession, layoffs, massive government budget cuts resulting in reduction of transfer payments — all are adding to the burden of Israel's weakest populations, particularly those with large families. More and more, Israelis are hearing reports of severe social difficulties — even cases of hunger.

Among those most vulnerable to the effects of economic downturn are the very immigrant groups who struggled to find their place in Israel, even in times of prosperity. And prominent among these is the Ethiopian-Israeli community of some 85,000, 50 percent of whom are

below the age of 18.

The greatest challenge to the integration of any immigrant group has always been employment and economic self-sufficiency. Yet with the unique cultural challenges they have faced in their integration, large numbers of Ethiopian-Israeli adults remain unemployed. Even many of those who do work are in unskilled, low-status, low-income jobs, which are often the first positions to be cut as employers strain to trim costs to the bone.

The result: many families — including many who do have a working parent — depend on trans-

fer payments to make ends meet. As budget cuts have eaten into this vital supplementary income, they have hit the Ethiopian community, especially children, harder than most.

Ironically, the subsistence lifestyle that sustained Ethiopian families for generations prepared them to withstand today's poverty. To this day, many live on basic food staples — 50-pound sacks of flour, wheat, and lentils — and eat meat only on special occasions. In this way, they can get by on minimal household budgets. But raising a child in poverty is hard, no matter how resourceful and resilient a parent may be.

As bleak as the picture may appear, closer analysis shows considerable progress in helping the Ethiopian Israelis achieve the economic self-sufficiency they seek. In the critical 25–44, year-old age group, more than 70 percent of men and 45 percent of women are employed. These rates are still far below those in the general population but are much higher than only a few years ago.

This progress demonstrates in part the investment the Israeli government, in partnership with the American Jewish Joint Distribution Committee, has made in integrating Ethiopian-Israelis into the workforce. From a major campaign of finding jobs for men who arrived in Operation Solomon, to a program that provides young adults with both a 10th-grade education and a vocational diploma, the JDC has long fostered employment. Even the JDC's cur-

rent focus on education is grounded in the belief that the long-term effects of proper schooling will enhance the ability of the community's children to succeed as adults in Israel's job market.

There has been an increased focus on women's needs, with programs like Eshet Hayil, which has encouraged some 3,000 women to work through workshops, Hebrew language instruction, and job placement. Other employment programs include an employment incubator that trains participants for electronic assembly lines and entrepreneurship.

Even without the sharp reductions in transfer payments Israel is now contemplating, employment — and the special dignity it bestows — offers the only real avenue for the Ethiopian community's genuine absorption into mainstream Israeli society. The prospect of government cutbacks only heightens the urgency.

The limited means of support so many now depend on will soon shrink further still. Unless we intensify our efforts to help more Ethiopian-Israelis gain the employment skills they still need, their poverty, and their life on the margins of the society that greeted them so eagerly little more than a decade ago, will remain as an inescapable testament to our failure.

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Not Merely Invisible But Also Poor

Eitan Michaeli and H'ir Aldin Elbaz

A preliminary report on a study titled "Nutrition and Hunger in the Negev" headed by Prof. Vered Slonim Nevo, Dr. Roni Kaufman, and Dr. Jonathan Anson from the Department of Social Work at Ben Gurion University of the Negev offers new insights into social assistance and poverty among Jews and Bedouin in the Negev. The following is a conversation between Eitan Michaeli, Associate Director of Shatil in Beersheva, and H'ir Aldin Elbaz, Director of Social Services for the "recognized"¹ Bedouin village Segev Shalom as well as approximately 70,000 Bedouin who live in "unrecognized"² villages. The conversation was translated from the Hebrew by Susann Codish.

Michaeli: In the recent study of Jews and Bedouin Arabs in the Negev who sought assistance from social services, 36 percent of the Jews reported that they lacked resources for adequate food, compared to 71 percent of the Bedouin in this group.

When asked, "In the past 12 months, how often did it happen that you did not have food to give to your child to take to school or kindergarten?" 40 percent of the Jewish respondents answered "It happened occasionally," compared with 87 percent of the



Bedouin respondents.

Elbaz: Usually, studies get skewed downward, and there is a lack of precise data. Reality is harsher than any study. It is generally known that one out of every two Bedouin families lives below the poverty line. However, the whole concept is problematic. If we define the poverty line as living in a wooden or tin shack, with minimal amenities, and minimal clothing for children in which to attend school — well then, 70 percent of the community lives below this line.

It would be interesting to check how the community itself views the topic of poverty. I estimate that by the end of 2003, because of the cutbacks in education, health, and social services, a growing percentage of families will be defined as living below the poverty line. Poverty is expressed not only in the lack of food, which is actually the last item affected by budget cuts. The first item to go is education — people will be sending fewer and fewer children to school because sending children to school costs money.

Health, too, will be adversely affected, because families will buy less clothing and food, and this will have direct repercussions on the children's health. While mandatory health insurance exists, access to services becomes more expensive. The law applies to everyone who has any income from either work or allowances. But what happens to all those families who have no income at all? Will they still be eligible for health services?

Michaeli: It has been claimed that it is precisely within the unrecognized settlements that protection against hunger exists. Even the small scale of undeveloped farming helps critically needy people and provides a minimum income for subsistence.

Elbaz: Before responding to your comment, I need to acknowledge that the Bedouin community today is in the midst of a leadership crisis, quite similar to the crisis experienced by the Sephardic communities of the 1950s and 1960s: social conflicts, a crisis of values and norms, a leadership crisis, anomie. The chances of getting a community consensus on any project are low because of the crisis in

leadership.

As to your comment: It is well known today that families in stress take advantage of every addition to their income. We know of families whose entire income is derived from a few sheep and subsistence farming near their homes. Because of unemployment and the lack of established sources of income, people today look for new avenues, not just farming but also small businesses, such as running shops in tin shacks at the sides of major highways or providing ad hoc transportation in pickup trucks — every type of informal income. The hope of improving one's economic lot lies in establishing a small business, even if it is illegal.

Michaeli: Can you illustrate the difficulties of the Bedouin existence?

Elbaz: It is very hard to pick a few examples from among so many. Within this population, it is very common to find couples made up of a Bedouin husband and a wife from the occupied territories. Such families have no legal status and no rights to social services.

A young Bedouin man, a father of six, divorced his first wife. The children stayed

with him. He took another wife, from the territories, and they had a son. Today, he has no income at all. During the last festival, he locked himself, his wife, and his seven children into a room so that no one was able to leave the home. He justified his actions by saying that this was the only way he could prevent his wife and children from seeing their neighbors eating a festive meal and enjoying holiday gifts.

Another example is that of a Bedouin family with eight children whose only income today is child allowance. Up until a few months ago, the family also received a national insurance income subsidy. They have a wreck of a car, a Subaru that serves as their means of transportation in and out of their unrecognized village. Obviously, there is no public transportation in this area. And, of course, the car was not registered in their name so as not to hurt the unemployment insurance, but rather was registered in the name of the husband's brother. A few months ago, the father was stopped for a traffic vio-

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lation, and prior traffic citations were checked. So the authorities discovered that the car was being used regularly by the family. The income subsidy was revoked, and the family was ordered to return all the money it had been drawing. Now they have no income but they do have a debt.

Michaeli: And, in conclusion, who are you, H'ir Aldin Elbaz?

Elbaz: I was born in the area between Moshav Nevatim and Tel Sheva. In the mid-1970s, my family moved to Tel Sheva. I studied Social Work at Ben Gurion University of the Negev and paid for my education by doing all sorts of odd jobs. After completing my bachelor's degree, I received a scholarship from the Friends of Ben Gurion University to continue my studies toward a master's degree in Canada, in Social Policy Planning. There, I worked with immigrants and the native population.

Although I was offered Canadian citizenship, I chose to return to where my parents live and to raise my own two children here. I also wanted to invest my citizenship in this country with new meaning, so I formed the Department of Social Services for Segev and the unrecognized villages.

My goal in life is to establish a service that matches the needs of this specific population and to serve that population as well as possible. I started from scratch. Today, as I sit in various government

offices or with colleagues, I am not ashamed of the services I developed, even when I compare them with the range of social services available to the non-Bedouin population.

¹Recognized Villages – In its attempt to concentrate the Bedouin in a small number of nonagricultural settlements and to minimize the land available to them, the government initiated the planning of seven urban villages for the Bedouin population in the 1960s. The villages are considered to be failures from a planning point of view. Infrastructure is poor, there are no employment opportunities, and the level of services in education and health is low grade. All of the seven recognized villages rate among the 15 poorest settlements in the country.

²Unrecognized Villages – Prior to the establishment of the State of Israel, the Bedouin lived in all parts of the Negev. During the 1950s, the government forcibly transferred the Bedouin to the northeastern area of the Negev. These primarily agricultural villages (including 45 settlements with approximately 70,000 residents) are unrecognized by the government and as such lack basic amenities including running water and electricity, even where infrastructure does exist. Unrecognized villages do not have legal status and, as a result, dwellings are considered illegal and at risk of being demolished at any time.

Wealth, Poverty, and the Zionist Vision

Eliezer David Jaffe

The Zionist vision of the founders of the State of Israel was never monolithic, but goals that all agreed upon were economic stability, security, and minimal socioeducational gaps. Today unemployment is nearing 300,000 people, 1.2 million Israelis (531,000 of them children) are living under the poverty line, and the income gap between the wealthy and the poor increased by 23 percent in the past two decades. The poverty line is 50 percent of the median family income, or NIS 2,768 (\$575.00 U.S.), for a couple. Inequality is a sad reality in the Promised Land. Poverty in Israel is not a new phenomenon and is always relative. In the past it was accompanied by a need to absorb mass immigration,

build housing, create educational and health institutions, provide work, and defend the country.

Poverty today is caused foremost by the economic depression worldwide and the ongoing war with the Palestinians and lack of peace. This combination has been deadly for the Israeli economy, leading to a syndrome of lack of investments, business closures, flight of capital, down-sizing, unemployment, debt, and drastically increased welfare expenditure. The government, hampered by serial weak coalition governments (institutionalized by an archaic electoral system that allows dozens of parties into the Knesset), vainly attempts to counter this decline by instinctively increasing taxes, curtailing so-



cial insurances, tightening interest rates, and irresponsibly presenting the public with false forecasts of the economic situation. The budget cuts in social spending that were approved before the recent elections were a minor prelude to what is coming next – a \$4 billion cut in government spending. Ironically, despite the increase in government social spending from 32 percent in 1980 to 57 percent in 2002, poverty has continued to rise. Those who think that transfer payments (i.e. government grants to individuals for income maintenance, unemployment compensation, and other social insurances) can take the place of economic growth are headed for disaster. Transfer payments may keep the poor afloat but have not prevented more poverty. Incredibly high taxation to keep the government running and make social payments has made things worse, all leading to more unemployment and more poverty. This is the cycle that we are in now.

It is very important to understand that contemporary poverty comes after six decades of nation building and success in relating to the challenges that existed when the State was created. These efforts led to remarkable social insurance legislation, a relatively high standard of living, universal education, and good health services. The economy has moved from a quasi-socialist to a market economy, with private enterprise and the serious introduction of privatization. A large middle class developed that funds most of the benefits of the present post-welfare state, but it thirsts for tax relief.

The poverty of 1949 and 1960 is not the poverty of 2003. Masses of people are not selling wedding rings to make Shabbat, sharing courtyard toilets, living in tent cities, or living five to a room. Today many people will not take low-paying jobs, now filled eagerly by 300,000 foreign workers, and they view government subsidized unemployment insurance as a personal savings plan. There are problems with bloated government, low productivity, coalition waste, and privileged groups and unions. The lust for political power has often led to abuse of public and private funds, leaving the cats in the Knesset to guard the milk.

Until war and terrorism come to an end, we will continue to pay a severe economic price. Economic

attrition and decline is a weapon of the enemy. There is no possibility of maintaining the standard and style of living and services that existed before the war, and taxes and the welfare system will not be able to fill the gap indefinitely. Government will have to allocate resources to maintain a basic poverty line while changing the expectations, priorities, and values of many Israelis regarding communal and self-responsibility. It will have to concentrate on providing education to more people, creating jobs (including jobs instead of welfare for those who can work), tax relief, security, a real economic partnership with the nonprofit sector for the delivery of more services to the public, and electoral reform that will provide stable government with a capability for long-term social and economic

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planning. Creative thinking and planning is needed for relating to specific sectors of the "poor by virtue of social choice," including some (not all) *haredi* men, Arab women, and single-parent families, estimated in 1997 to constitute 40 percent of the poor. For example, it is important to create and subsidize skilled technical training for *haredi* men and women in separate private institutes and convince key rabbinical figures

that not all yeshivah students really want or are suited for lifetime yeshivah careers. Provision of capital, equipment, and interest-free loans for promotion of cottage-home industries could help thousands of Arab and Jewish ultra-Orthodox women become financially independent. Subsidized day care for children of single mothers and tax benefits would go a long way to protect these economically vulnerable families.

It will require rare leadership to meet these challenges, but economic reality will bring change one way or the other. Social work services and the voluntary sector will always be needed to help some people reach their maximum potential and participation in society, but they are hopeless if government leadership cannot guarantee basic economic and political stability, equal opportunity, and security. These are some of the current crises and challenges that we now have to overcome as our State continues to evolve.

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(www.givingwisely.org.il) are used worldwide. He served on the Special Committee appointed by the Begin government to draw the Israeli poverty line and helped write legislation regulating Israeli intercountry adoptions.

The Privatization Revolution and Social Inequality Policy in Israel

Daniel Gutwein

The rising incidence of poverty and the worsening of its manifestations in Israel are the result of economic and social policies aimed at destroying the welfare state over the past three decades from both right- and left-wing governments. The economic crisis wrought by the war during the past three years has merely emphasized these trends but did not by any means bring them about. The new finance minister, Benjamin Netanyahu, also uses the economic crisis and the state of war as an excuse to continue dismantling the welfare systems, breaking the organized work and the trade unions in the public sector and changing the structure of Israeli society in a way that will only worsen the inequality and poverty both in the short and the longterm.

One of the main policies that generated economic inequality and poverty in Israel was the privatization revolution that Israel has undergone since the 1970s. In the mid-1970s, Israel had one of the smallest economic social gaps of Western societies. But by the mid-1990s, the country's social gap had grown so large as to rank it second within the Western world. Israel's ethos of social solidarity has been replaced by an ethos of privatization. The privatization revolution was conducted in two tracks: sectorization by the right and commercialization by the left. Both of them, however, advanced economic and social inequality. After the 1977 defeat of the Labor Party, Menachem Begin's government understood that dismantling the universal welfare state was a means of hurting the power bases from which the left drew its strength. A central target was the Histadrut — the primary axis of the Labor Party and one of the anchors of the Israeli universal welfare system. The universal welfare state was replaced by an alterna-

tive mechanism that allocated social services: sectors that were defined along religious, ethnic, national, cultural, or geographical lines. The fullest expression of the sectoring policy came in the form of the activities of Shas, an ultra-religious political party that entrenched the sectoring based not only on religious observance but also on ethnic origin. This policy turned Israel into a federation of rival sectors, leading eventually to privatization.

In the mid-1980s, the traditionally left Labor and Meretz parties representing the middle classes — among which the Ashkenazi and secular elements were prominent — understood that the left's loss of power was not an accident; it was the outcome of a fundamental social and demographic change that transferred power to the *Mizrahim*, the *haredim*, and through them to the right. To ensure prolonging its hegemony, the middle class also started to adopt a privatization policy. By privatizing and commercializing the social services, they meant to reduce the state's influence on the economy, on society, and on the ruling bodies, and to transfer this power to the marketplace, to professional establishments, and to the civil society in which the middle classes retained their power. Thus, for example, it was Yitzhak Rabin's support of the dismantling of the Histadrut that hastened the privatization of health services and the labor market; similarly, Meretz ministers acted to hasten the privatization of the educational system.

The most far-reaching political influence of the privatization revolution is found in the middle class, which — though the champion of privatization — is increasingly becoming its victims and downwardly mobile. Based on the experiences of other Western countries that have un-



dergone similar changes, this new situation places the downwardly mobile class at a crossroads where it has two alternatives. It can look back longingly at the privileges of the past, adopting a “politics of hatred” that emphasizes the cultural differences between it and other identity groups within the population and fight for its slice of the shrinking pie. Alternately, the interests common to both the downwardly mobile middle class and the lower classes may serve to bridge the cultural differences that divide them and to be the basis

for a common cause against the privatization revolution and for the rehabilitation and modernization of the welfare state.

The fulfillment of this goal is now the challenge of the Israeli left, which can rehabilitate itself if it chooses to distance itself from its neo-liberal past and to adopt an agenda focused on economic growth and social equality.

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Leaving Poverty Behind

Nachum Ido

It is much too simplistic to suggest that the rise in poverty and inequality is caused primarily by privatization. The Israeli economy has undergone significant upheavals that have all but destroyed Israel’s traditional industry, like the tens of thousands of unskilled workers who used to make a living in the textile industry and are now unemployed. Another reason is the phenomenon of foreign workers — about 300,000 living legally and illegally in the country today. At the same time, there are 300,000 unemployed Israelis. If the foreign workers were not here, a large number of Israelis might find work in construction, agriculture, and health care. Earning salaries higher than the foreign workers, they would reduce the number of people living in poverty. Only 70 percent of 25–54-year-olds are a part of the labor force, compared to an average of 80 percent in developed countries. Large segments of the population, such as Arab women and *haredi* men, do not work, thus hurting the gross national product and causing the poverty among these families to rise, a rise exacerbated by the high birthrates in these two population groups.

Researchers at the National Insurance Institute estimate that, as a result of the latest round of economic decrees, the rate of poverty will reach 19.5 percent of families in the country and that 33.8 percent of children — 661,000 children — will live below the poverty level. While several factors contribute to the crisis in the economy, primary are the current state of war, the downswing

of the high-tech market, and the high rate of unemployment that is forcing high government expenditures in the form of national insurance allowances. These allowances — intended to help the poor rise above the poverty level — have reduced the number of people living below the poverty line significantly. However, plans to reduce these allowances as well as layoffs in the public sector — especially recent plans from Benjamin Netanyahu’s Finance Ministry — will only worsen the problem of poverty and inequality.

The solutions to reducing the poverty rate lie primarily in stimulating economic growth. If the economic plan stimulates growth and causes foreign workers to leave the country, more Israelis will be able to enter the labor market, earn decent salaries, and leave the cycle of poverty. This is both the plan and the forecast of the Finance Ministry. The labor and welfare minister has suggested reducing benefits given to the upper percentiles and giving the difference to the poor. That suggestion was part of a package that included postponing the tax reforms that would have reduced the tax rate paid by the highest income brackets, stopping employers’ exemption from paying into national insurance, and instituting a high Value Added Tax on luxury goods while lowering the V.A.T. on basic commodities. These suggestions were not adopted.

Nachum Ido is Spokesman of the Ministry of Labor and Social Affairs in Israel. Translation by Susann Codish.

Bringing Justice and Righteousness to Life

Sari Revkin

Are Jewish values defined primarily by Jewish textual sources? Or, are they what we have learned and passed down from generation to generation? The classic Jewish textual source for understanding the values of empowerment and helping the poor meet their own needs is Maimonides' eight levels of *tzedakah*, which connects with the essence of the social justice work I do in Israel today.

The experiences that developed my Jewish sense of justice and righteousness have grown primarily from *living* Jewish sources. During my childhood, I learned about justice and righteousness when my father "hosted" the somewhat intoxicated homeless stranger for lunch at our table. And even more so when he took me each Friday afternoon to Ebert's Field to demonstrate support for the rights of African-American ballplayers to play professional baseball.

Now, living in Israel, I direct Yedid: The Association for Community Empowerment, which advocates for the social rights of low income people in the areas of housing, health care, employment, and food, and works to achieve social justice goals through three different, interrelated approaches: individual assistance, community programming, and policy change.

At a time when Israel's socioeconomic gap between the rich and poor is second only to the United States, I am dedicating my work to bringing justice and righteousness to life. I want to give my children the same living examples of justice and righteousness that my father gave me. Given the current tax reforms that continue to favor the rich and perpetuate poverty among Israeli citizens of all ethnic and national backgrounds — a reality often overlooked amid the overwhelming political tensions of the region — my focus is building foundations of community empowerment throughout the country.

Maimonides' description of these eight levels of *tzedakah* inform my work for justice. These eight levels are often referred to as a ladder, since there is a clear progression from the lowest "rung" to the highest. The first level regards one who gives charity unwillingly; the highest level is one who assists the poor by providing a gift or a loan, by accepting the person into a business partner-

ship, or by helping the individual find employment. There is an obvious progression in terms of the intention of the giver from stinginess, to dedication, to truly just action. Similarly, there is also an evolution from giving a handout as a short-term solution to creatively working to find long-term solutions to people's short-term problems and needs.

According to Rabbi David Hartman, Maimonides' vision of *tzedakah* is empowering but should partner with *mishpat* — a legal form of justice that builds on the righteousness and good intentions in people's hearts.

Tzedakah and *mishpat* are often linked in biblical writings and Jewish liturgy. For example, putting on tefillin in the morning, an individual says: "*v'erastich li btzedek u'mishpat.*" And I will betroth You to me with righteousness and justice. The precepts are also linked in the description of Abraham and his descendants as those who perform *tzedakah u'mishpat* (Genesis 18:19).

Yedid's first level of individual assistance resembles Maimonides' *tzedakah*. Throughout Israel, in 12 different towns across the country — from the Bedouin town of Rahat to the multicultural port of Haifa — Yedid works with the poor and needy to help them understand and access fundamental rights such as food, shelter, education, and national health insurance. From supporting immigrants who are defrauded of their life savings to helping terror victims receive the support they need, we consider this first level of support to be foundational.

The second level of community programming blends *tzedakah* and *mishpat*. This approach recognizes that while some needs may appear to be individual, they are, in fact, communal in nature and should be addressed as such. For example, some common issues and concerns — such as coping with crisis situations, women's empowerment, literacy, and citizenship and democracy education — are best addressed when the community pools resources.

The third level — policy change — concerns *mishpat*. Sometimes the poor and the needy don't know their rights. Sometimes they lack appropriate

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At times a trace of discomfort shaded with embarrassment has stirred within me while sitting with friends around a table, chanting the words of the *Birkat Hamazon*, the "Grace After a Meal." *Baruch Atah Hashem Hazan et Hakol*. Blessed are You God the Sustainer of All. How strangely dissonant it is to sing those words while being aware of the reality that so many in this world are not sustained but starved or malnourished.

What is the message and challenge of this blessing? It reminds us that The Creator of All is indeed providing a world that *has the capacity* to feed all of its inhabitants. The blessing calls us to our duty to cultivate and protect God's creation and to distribute the abundance so that sustenance reaches all. The message is this: God provides for all. But only in partnership with God can we ensure that the Divine Will to sustain all of the world's inhabitants becomes realized by creating a sustainable global system of sustenance.

Yitzhak Husbands-Hankin is Rabbi of Temple Beth Israel in Eugene, Oregon, and is active in the development of an Ethical-Kashrut.

In light of the dire economic situation today in Israel, religious and spiritual leaders should be spearheading a fight to improve social conditions drawing inspiration from texts, like the Pirke Avot verse that Robert Karp explicates: "If some people tithe and others do not, some go hungry and others are satisfied; if all decide not to tithe, a general famine caused by both armed bands and drought ensues." But voices of Israeli spiritual leaders have been, for the most part, silent within the social arena.

In the past few years, the connection in Israel between Jewish thought and text and social justice has been undermined. The spiritual aid, the spiritual succor that Jewish leaders should be providing, as well as the leadership on social issues such as hunger have been lacking. Instead, aid has become a tool for political maneuvering. This situation urgently needs to be changed. Israel's spiritual leadership should lead the campaign to close the economic and social gaps within Israeli society. Robert Karp acknowledged that providing affordable food for everyone is a social task, but it is also a divine mitzvah, vehai behem.

Uri Ayalon was born in Buenos Aires and immigrated to Israel with his parents and sisters in 1977. He is currently a rabbinical student at Machon Schechter in Jerusalem and is a member of RIKMA: Spiritual Community Leadership Training, an organization that helps involve Israeli rabbinic students in social action issues.

The Talmud astutely reveals the relationship between "drought" and "famine" as a mirror of class difference. Drought raises demand on available goods and sets a premium on their purchase; famine decimates entire populations, leveling economic inequity since economic power has no meaning.

While defining hunger as an instrument of class, the Talmud ingeniously turns class warfare on its head. For as Jews, we engage the world broken in an effort to make it whole; have or have-not, we each play our role in crafting a workable society. Even—especially—from a palace of plenty, our tradition implores us to sound the alarm on behalf of those who stand outside our doors.

Hunger in America does not represent a drought of public will, or a famine of social conscience. Nor is hunger a result of entitlement, sloth, or missed opportunity. Rather, hunger takes root in a field of wasted resources. Globally, we produce 20 percent more food than the entire world population can consume. This is not a matter of haves and have-nots but is instead a question of what we do with what we have.

The struggle against hunger joins rich and poor, young and old, Jew and gentile in a willing embrace of a most noble goal: living well together.

H. Eric Schockman, Ph.D., is Executive Director of MAZON: A Jewish Response to Hunger (www.mazon.org). MAZON is a national nonprofit that allocates donations from the Jewish community to prevent and alleviate hunger among people of all faiths and backgrounds.

If some people tithe and others do not, some go hungry and others are satisfied; if all decide not to tithe, a general famine caused by both armed bands and drought ensues. Pirkei Avot 5:10

The Talmud distinguished between the natural calamities of "drought" and "famine." During drought, rains and crops fail locally. Imported food is available at high cost, so that only the poor go hungry. During famine, rains, crops, and transport fail *everywhere*. Everyone goes hungry. The rabbis ask: "Should the alarm be sounded for public fast with drought or with famine?" To sound the alarm when there is famine is obvious. But, also in the case of drought: "...the alarm must be sounded immediately, for this is a situation where those with money will be able to purchase food, but those without will be unable to do so" (Ta'Anit II, 19B).

What is the solution? The rabbis tell of the virtue of Rav Huna who went to market each Thursday afternoon to purchase all unsold food. This practice ensured that merchants kept their stalls well stocked with affordable food and a joyous Shabbat was possible.

The need for affordable food is just as great today. Families living in poverty use their entire income to pay for the necessities of life. "Natural calamities" — modern versions of drought — cause an even greater decrease in income. This limits food selection to items that provide the most energy at the lowest cost — fats, starches, and sugar. Micro-nutrients disappear from the diet. Hunger, malnutrition, and their consequences follow.

Two millennia ago, Jews were told: Sound the alarm when the poor are faced with hunger, because they "are entitled to share the food supply." Can we do less?

Robert Karp, M.D., is Professor of Pediatrics at SUNY-Downstate Medical Center and Lecturer in Nutrition at the Institute of Human Nutrition of Columbia University School of Public Health.

Global Hunger: Causes and Actions

Tony Castleman

“Flatbread and salt,” the 35-year-old woman said, “twice a day, every day. For the past month that’s all we’ve eaten.” She gestured toward a toddler and older child playing nearby, “Them too. We haven’t had anything else to feed them.”

When I asked about lentils, the most common source of protein in the area, the woman responded with a resigned laugh. “We haven’t seen lentils in six weeks. Now that the squashes are ripe, we will eat them.” She pointed to the green squashes growing plump on vines stretched across the roof of her tiny mud house.

This woman and her family, living in a small village in northern India, are among the approximately 840 million people in the world who are undernourished. While victims of large-scale famine and starvation at times receive world attention and emergency aid, millions of other families face chronic hunger every day of their lives, largely unnoticed and unsupported by programs or policies. One-third of the entire population of sub-Saharan Africa is undernourished, as are nearly half of South Asian children under age five. Understanding the global hunger situation and its causes can help provide a context for understanding, and perhaps addressing, the hunger crisis in Israel.

Hunger is arguably the single greatest cause of human misery that exists in the world today. Malnutrition causes illness and early death, reduces productivity and income, and stunts children’s physical and mental development. By leaving children underweight with weakened immune systems, malnutrition directly or indirectly kills six million children under age five each year and causes over half of child deaths globally. In addition to the physical impacts, being unable to adequately feed oneself and one’s family can also create psychological impacts such as frustration and despair.

In a world that produces vast quantities of food, why does hunger continue to exist on such a large

scale? The primary cause is poverty. Even in a country such as India, which currently possesses large surpluses of wheat and rice, many households do not produce enough food or earn enough income to access enough food to meet their nutritional needs. Poverty is compounded by other related factors, such as droughts and floods. The recent droughts in southern and eastern Africa have devastated agricultural production and left over 20 million people at risk of starvation. The woman quoted above lives in an area

hit by frequent floods, exacerbating poor agricultural production and limiting people’s capacity to earn income by other means.

Conflict is another major source of hunger. Developing countries lose an average of \$4.3 billion of agricultural output each year due to armed conflict. Conflict displaces people from their homes, preventing them from producing food or performing other income-generating activities.

During wars, nations increase expenditures on armies and weapons, which often drastically diminishes the resources available for local agriculture or food imports. Civil conflict can also result in food being diverted to soldiers or in some cases being deliberately withheld from groups of people as punishment.

Poor policies are another source of hunger. Zimbabwe’s recent economic and land policies have combined with drought to dramatically reduce the country’s food production, turning it from a food exporter to the recipient of external food aid. This situation has left nearly seven million Zimbabweans at risk of starvation. A relatively recent factor that has gravely exacerbated hunger in many parts of Africa is HIV / AIDS. Striking large proportions of the population during their most productive years, the disease reduces food production and income, depletes savings, and often forces families to sell productive assets in order to access health care and meet basic food needs.

Governments, international agencies, and private organizations engage in a range of activities to prevent

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world hunger.*



and alleviate hunger, such as strengthening agricultural production, public distribution systems and other safety net programs, nutrition education, income generation activities, famine early warning systems, and direct food aid. While these activities rely largely on governments and specialized organizations, there are also actions that we as American citizens and American Jews can take to contribute to the battle against global hunger.

One simple action is to improve our own knowledge and awareness (and that of our families and communities) about world hunger. Greater consciousness of the status and impacts of global hunger helps the issue to become a higher priority for *tzedakah*, for political action, and for community initiatives — three further actions. Many organizations implementing programs to prevent and alleviate hunger rely heavily on private contributions, and extending *tzedakah* to them — in the form of money, time volunteered, or in-kind donations — can enable these initiatives to reach more people more effectively.

The U.S. Congress wields considerable power to allocate funds to directly and indirectly address world hunger. Most members of Congress do not think these decisions are high priorities for their constituents. Individual and organized efforts to inform our representatives of our views on these issues, especially when linked to a specific bill, helps leverage important shifts in the government's resource allocations and policy direction.

Synagogues, youth groups, schools, and campus Hillel groups can include global hunger as a component of their service initiatives. Possible activities include organizing campaigns to focus public attention on the issue, developing linkages with implementing institutions or other groups working in the field, and mobilizing resources to support anti-hunger efforts.

Ninety-five percent of the world's malnourished people live in developing countries. As economic and communication systems globalize, the reach of our compassion and our social justice efforts must also broaden to embrace human beings suffering from hunger across the globe.

Tony Castleman works with the Food and Nutrition Technical Assistance Project at the Academy for Educational Development in Washington, D.C., providing technical assistance to USAID and NGOs on nutrition and food security programming. From 1994 to 2000 he served as Director of a nonprofit organization in India that implements health, education, and poverty alleviation projects.

Inadvertently, in the last issue of Sh'ma, we failed to acknowledge the long-time and profound support of one of our Advisory Committee members: Jeremy Burton.

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Hunger Is a Challenge Not a Problem — Solutions Abound

Mark E. Talisman

On the issue of hunger, there is a knowledge and compassion gap among Jews in the United States. After having spent nearly 40 years working on problems of endemic hunger (and homelessness, too), I cannot understand why that special social-justice nerve Jews have deeply embedded inside them is absent regarding this issue of hunger.

Within the Jewish community, synagogues, youth groups, day schools, and other gatherings of Jews collect canned goods from their own cupboards and put them in large bags for delivery to hungry people; sometimes we substitute for non-Jews at soup kitchens and shelters on Christmas or Easter. But we only touch the very outer limits of hunger in America — a problem that also afflicts our own elderly, shut-ins, dysfunctional families, suddenly unemployed families, and singles. In times like this, Jews living below the poverty level hovers at 20 percent or more! Miami, with so many elderly, may be a higher figure. The irony is that most Jewish federations don't know how many Jews in their own geographical areas fall below the poverty level, making it difficult to provide targeted assistance. Yes, we have meals on wheels for the lucky who live in the right places. But many of our own folks and others aren't even close to such luxuries.

No matter how innovative we are, when it comes to hunger and creative solutions to an issue that grows larger by the day in abundant America, we fail on all counts.

I've had the privilege to serve for many years on the National Emergency Food and Shelter Program. I also helped create, several years ago at the Council of Jewish Federation's Washington Action Office, a "Memorandum of Understanding" between Israel's Ministry of Labor and Social Affairs and the U.S. Health and Human Services Department. While I found that local nonprofits, churches, and groups of people in neighborhoods creatively found ways to fill the huge and ever widening gap among those with and those without basic nutritional food, unfortunately, very few

Jewish communities had community pantries for the hungry to go and shop. The Dallas Federation was, at that time, the only federation that had a kosher pantry available for the Jewish and general community to use, and use they did. What we say on Shabbat and the holy days of our lives is meant to apply on this earth as we reach out to ensure no person ever goes to bed without food or decent shelter. We must acknowledge and address the fact that malnutrition has a deep connection to learning and productivity in school.

We waste so much food in the process of production. And we lack knowledge about our food production systems — from the field to the conveyor belt — to creatively reduce waste. Years ago, a contractor for McDonald's discovered that when the vast fields of iceberg lettuce were machine cut for American supermarkets, there were perfectly good leaves of lettuce left on the remaining stems. A machine was invented, with the help of McDonald's, to pick the remaining lettuce leaves,

which are then washed and shredded into the very format needed for Big Macs! Second Harvest, a food recovery group, now follows that McDonald's harvester and recovers the third layer of last lettuce leaves, leaving nothing wasted at all.

What is to be done with the remains of fertile fields in America after the main crops are picked? How can we maximize redistribution — especially in urban America? We might start by creatively redistributing untouched remains from our family simchas. I resolved long ago that dented cans of food from my pantry were insulting as a donation. So I bake bread — a nutritional nearly one-stop way to feed the hungry. What else can we do?

Why not challenge synagogues, Hillel campus memberships, Jewish schools, and our youth organizations to strategize about long-term manageable ways to provide streams of nutritional foods on a sustained basis? How about organizing trips for the younger, able bodied to assist with food production — picking during harvesting foods that can then be collectively canned and preserved, frozen and otherwise con-

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served? Why not constitute a new agricultural/urban tithing, where a very small portion of crops are volunteer harvested and donated to the hungry across the United States?

What about pairing inter-generational members of the Jewish community, younger high school and college students with the elderly who are in need — not only to provide a steady source of food but companionship and perhaps occasional employment as well? We might just provide an opportunity to explore and appreciate the food chain and both sides of the hunger issue. Group strategizing, community by community, should provide innovative, community-based ideas to provide food, drink, and comfort while we look for longer-term policy solutions.

So what are we waiting for?

If anyone doubts this evil cannot be conquered, then they have not breathed deeply of the huge energy that exists among our young, of the determination of our elderly who have witnessed similar crises before and successfully conquered them, and of the concerned bystanders in between. What we all need is a call to action after digesting the facts and facing the human faces of poverty — a monster with solutions within our grasp.

A decade ago, speaking before his Parliament, the Japanese prime minister commented that the true measurement of any so-called powerful nation was if any of its citizens went to bed at night without food or shelter or any of its babies

went to sleep without milk. By this simple test, how do we judge ourselves and our community? And our country, how does it measure against this simple standard?

Mark E. Talisman was the founder of the Council of Jewish Federation's Washington Action Office and served as its director for 18 years. Among many issues, he focused upon hunger issues during that time. In 1979, he created the National Emergency Food and Shelter Program that was legislated into law under the sponsorship of the late Speaker of the House Tip O'Neill. It still exists in FEMA and has delivered over a billion and a half federal dollars through its national board, of which Talisman was a member for 14 years, to thousands of local boards across the country.

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education or tools to improve their own situations. And sometimes problems stem from inequality or injustice at the legal and policy levels. For example, in Israel it is illegal for anyone who has ever been a homeowner to receive public housing assistance. This is based on the assumption that, if a person were once economically self-sufficient, it would be inconceivable that he or she would need substantive economic assistance in the future. Given the present challenging economic times, many middle-class individuals and families are struggling as a result of this law to provide the most basic amenities. We must work to change these types of laws and policies to strengthen both

tzadakah and *mishpat* in the Israel of 2003.

Ever since a few *tzadikim* provided funds to prevent 10 families from losing their homes when the banks issued foreclosure notices, I continue to ask myself how to best use my limited resources. While I continue to strive for an Israel where those who have can care and give to those who don't, working case-by-case is too arduous a path. In addition, we must now struggle to reverse decisions made earlier that essentially destroyed the social safety net that once existed. I dream of Israel as a light unto the nations — that we not only feed the poor but also help them out of poverty; that we care for the stranger among us and realize

that an eye for an eye will leave all of us blind. I know that the road from this dream to reality is long.

Sari Revkin, originally from New York, received her MSW from the University of Maryland School of Social Work. She made aliyah in 1983 and subsequently founded SHATIL, an institution assisting the development of hundreds of social change organizations. In 1997 she established Yedid: The Association for Community Empowerment to assist families on the geographic and cultural periphery of Israeli society, foster relationships between members of different sectors of the population, and bring disenfranchised communities closer to the principles and practice of democracy.

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