

BEYOND GOOD INTENTIONS:
Poverty and Hunger Today
Yom Kippur 5772
Rabbi Suzanne Singer

Rabbi Joshua Ben Levi was walking through the streets of Rome. There he saw the pillars of great buildings covered in tapestries so that they would not crack in the cold. Meantime, along the same path, he saw a poor man who was dressed in sackcloth. Rabbi Joshua was dismayed by the care taken to protect the buildings contrasted with the neglect of the poor.

This story from our collection of Jewish lore, serves to remind us that our most important value is to care for people, not for things. Indeed, as Rabbi David Wolpe points out, there has never been a Jewish community that failed to create a *tamhui*, a communal soup kitchen. One of our law codes states simply, “We give charity to anyone who stretches out his hand in need. This includes gentiles as well as Jews.”

But, warns Rabbi Wolpe, “Charitable work is complicated.” “There are always dangers — that the help will be misused, that it will create dependency, that it is misconceived or even stolen from those who need it most. Jewish law envisioned all of these possibilities, but still insisted that *tzedakah* was not a choice, but an obligation.”¹

The question is, How can we engage in Judaism’s mandate to engage in *tzedakah* – in the work of justice -- while avoiding the pitfalls involved in this effort? How can we make sure our good intentions don’t result in unintended consequences? Because, in our effort to help people less fortunate than we, the results are sometimes wasteful if not actually harmful.

Ruth Messinger, the head of the American Jewish World Service, which sponsored my recent trip to Ghana, related this story: “Following the devastating tsunami in Sri Lanka a few years ago, then Secretary of State Colin Powell told me that the highest point on the island was created by the mountain of blankets donated by Americans wanting to help the victims. The only problem was: the temperature in Sri Lanka never goes below 75 degrees.” Ruth Messinger’s simple story illustrates just how difficult it is to “help” people across the world. In our effort to do the right thing, we don’t always know what is best for them, and we can sometimes actually cause inadvertent harm, though we certainly do not mean to do so.

I told you at Rosh Hashana about questions that arose for my fellow rabbis and me while spending 10 days in a Ghanaian fishing community, helping to build a computer center for an elementary school. We sometimes felt that we were actually in the way, that the Ghanaian workers could have gotten the structure finished much faster without us. And what of the money that was spent to bring us to Ghana, as well as to house and feed 19 of us? We sometimes wondered whether that money not have been put to better use by giving it directly to the school

¹ “What We Owe the Poor,” by Rabi David Wolpe.

to hire local workers and to fund other worthy endeavors? Of course, I am not denying the great value in having rabbis witness and participate in life and work in Ghana, bringing those observations and insights back to our congregations. Still, the questions nagged at us.

On a much larger scale, we might ask major questions about the consequences of our efforts to solve the problem of hunger in the world. Our country is actually the largest supplier of food aid to the rest of the world, yet some of our efforts are actually exacerbating the problem. Now, you might well wonder why, at a time when all of us are pretty worried about our own economic futures, why we should spend time today worrying about people who are hungry halfway across the world. I would like to suggest that the issue of hunger is one we cannot avoid on Yom Kippur.

After all, we have been fasting since last night and, this morning's Haftarah is Isaiah's anguished cry about our responsibility to feed the hungry. Isaiah asks: "Is this the fast that I desire, a day for men to starve their bodies?...Do you call that a fast?...No, this is the fast I desire: to unlock the fetters of wickedness, to untie the cords of the yoke, to let the oppressed go free...It is to share your bread with the hungry, and to take the wretched poor into your home. When you see the naked, to clothe him, and not to ignore your own kin. Then shall your light break forth as the morning, and your healing shall spring forth speedily..." Taking our cue from Isaiah, can we ignore the close to one billion people on this planet who are hungry, including people right here at home? Do we not hear the cry of 30 million Americans who go to bed hungry every day?² Are we not anguished by the fact that, around the world, a child dies every six seconds from starvation and hunger-related causes?³ And how can we stand by in silence when the reality is that there is enough food to feed everyone in the world.

The reason for hunger is not food shortages but poverty. Most people in the world are poor, and indeed, much, much poorer than the wealthy few. Here is a startling statistic: If there were 100 people in the world, the richest person would have an annual income of 231 million dollars -- that's 231 million dollars. The tenth richest would have an income of only a little more than \$25,000 thousand dollars. The twentieth richest would have an income of about 1,800 dollars. The 90th richest would have an income of 400 dollars a year, and the person at the bottom would have an income of --- 0.⁴ So there is an enormous disparity between the rich and the poor, a fact we can certainly see in our own country where the richest one percent owns 40 percent of the wealth.

Following this morning's service, I invite you to participate in an eye-opening activity. We are offering a Poverty Simulation which will give you some idea of how poverty affects Americans' ability to stay afloat and to provide for basic needs such as housing, food and transportation. I participated in this exercise a few months ago, and it was a really thought-provoking experience. I urge you to stay for it. You won't regret it. This morning, though, I would like to focus on hunger and poverty in the Global South – that is, the developing nations of Africa, Latin America

² Source: Ruth Messinger, Graduation Speech, Hebrew Union College, May 19, 2005.

³ The Oregonian (Portland, OR), "Fighting Hunger from the Ground Up," Doug Bates, September 2009.

⁴ From AJWS.org

and most of Asia.

How can we help these folks without inadvertently making their situation worse because, unfortunate consequences have resulted from good intentions, as well as from market forces. As I mentioned, the US is the largest supplier of food aid to the Global South. This is a wonderful fact testifying to our generosity. However, there are unfortunate consequences to our help. By law, 75 percent of our food donations must be purchased, processed and transported by American companies. As a result, when we send food aid overseas to help combat hunger, we undercut the local growers who cannot compete with our free food. This increases the problem of local poverty as farmers can no longer make a living. This also turns out to be expensive and wasteful.⁵ A better approach would be to buy the food locally and to invest in local agriculture. We actually have an opportunity to weigh in on this matter because food aid programs are up for review in the 2012 Farm Bill. I encourage all of us to learn more about this issue, and to make our voices heard.

Then there are market forces over which we have some control, that end up increasing global poverty and hunger. Take Mexico for example. When you think of Mexican food, the first thing that probably comes to mind is: tortillas. Tortillas are a staple of food in Mexico. Corn, from which tortillas are made, was originally domesticated in Mexico but Mexicans are now dependent on corn imported from the United States. American corn is often too expensive for Mexicans to afford. Indeed, a few years ago, Mexicans rioted against a 60 percent rise in the price of corn. How did this happen?

One reason is that “highly subsidized US corn” has been sold to Mexico at very low prices, throwing over a million local Mexican corn farmers out of business.⁶ US government subsidies have also allowed American farmers to devote more and more acreage to grow corn for ethanol rather than for food. Because of this, corn prices have spiked in recent years.⁷ Most people in the world live on \$2 a day so when the price of imported corn rises because the staple has been diverted to biofuel, or because of speculation in the commodities market, corn becomes out of reach for the average person.

There are more effective ways to feed the world and to address poverty. Farmers in the Global South are starting to find solutions to becoming independent again, remaining solvent and growing food their compatriots can afford. Meet Doña Magdalena who lives in a rural Mexican village.⁸ In her community, men tend to migrate to Cancun to work in the tourist industry, sending money home to support their families. But Doña Magdalena made a different choice. Though it has become very difficult for small farmers to survive in what has become a global food market, her farm is flourishing. Here’s how a visitor describes her farm: “Unlike her neighbors’ yards, filled with trash, stray dogs and playing children, Doña Magdalena’s is

⁵ From AJWS flyer on Food Aid.

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ “Manufacturing a Food Crisis,” Walden Bellow, *The Nation*, 15 May 2008.
<http://www.thenation.com/doc/20080602/bello>.

⁸ The story of Doña Magdalena is from Adina Mermelstein Konikoff’s d’var Torah on Parshat Vayikra, March 20, 2010.

luscious and green, abounding in chilies, tomatoes, and other vegetables. Where she once spent 80 percent of her small income on food, not only can she now feed her family, she has enough money left over to buy shoes for her children. Without shoes, her children are exposed to diseases that often occur when they play outside, barefoot.” Doña Magdalena has been so successful, she manages to teach other women as well.

How did Doña do it? She joined a local organization funded by the American Jewish World Service, that helps establish local, organic sustainable farms. They trained Doña Magdalena to make her own fertilizer and to trade local seeds. Around the world, local farmers like her have been empowered to achieve some degree of food security, raising their living standards. And this is the key to addressing poverty that makes food unaffordable. We need to empower and support local farmers, which means we need to stop shipping food overseas, whether through exports or through sending food aid. On your Handouts are references to articles you can read for more background on this issue. There are also web sites for a number of organizations that work in the Global South, funding grassroots efforts to decrease poverty. It is best to contribute directly to these organizations – either with your time, your advocacy, or your money – rather than trying to guess what folks might need and tackling the problem yourself. Because here are some other examples of what happens when we think we know what people from another culture need from us.

Following the floods in Pakistan last year, the American Jewish World Service asked women on the ground what they needed most. Obvious requests were a bag of rice, some water and the like. But the women also wanted scarves. Now, why in the world would scarves be an essential item in an emergency? The answer: Pakistan is Muslim, and women cannot go out and take care of their families, unless they can cover their heads. It would never have occurred to most of us that scarves would be essential to these women.

Another example: After the tsunami in Indonesia, rotary clubs from all over the world sent fishing boats to replenish those that had been destroyed. The problem was that now, these communities had more fishing boats than ever before. So many boats went out fishing that the mangroves, on which the fish fed, were destroyed leading to the fish’s departure. Good intentions ended up overwhelming a community. These are some examples of unintended consequences with harmful results.

Most of us know about Maimonides’ eight levels of tzedakah – of charity. “The highest level, above which there is no greater, is to support a fellow someone by endowing him with a gift or loan, or entering into a partnership with him, or finding employment for him, in order to strengthen his hand until he need no longer be dependent upon others. . .” Sasha Dichter runs a non-profit venture that invests in enterprises that fight poverty in the developing world.⁹ Commenting on Maimonides, he suggests that “the greatest gifts are those that create a relationship of equals between the donor and the recipient. Otherwise, the gift can create subservience or obligation, can undermine the dignity of the recipient, and can keep the recipient

⁹ Sasha Dichter, the Director of Business Development at [Acumen Fund](#), a global non-profit venture fund that invests in enterprises that fight poverty in the developing world. Blogs and speaks about philanthropy, generosity, and social change.

subjugated to the giver and in a constant position of need.”¹⁰

The key here is dignity – we often fail in our response to those in need because we assume that they don’t know what they need. We assume that WE know better. But as James Kofi Annan proved to 16 rabbis in Ghana, and as Doña Magdalena proved in Mexico, those whom fortune has not graced are perfectly capable of solving their own problems with our support and trust.

Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel observed that “living is not a private affair of the individual, it is what we do with God’s time, what we do with God’s world.” And the Talmud tells us, “It is not up to us to complete the work, but neither are we free to desist from it.”

Let us be remembered for having done the right thing with God’s time. Let us endeavor to do the work, but let us endeavor to do so wisely, taking our cue from those we are serving who know better than we what will best empower them.

¹⁰ <http://sashadichter.wordpress.com/2008/07/31/reflections-on-maimonedes-8-levels-of-charity-tzedakah/>