



## Homelessness Awareness Shabbat December 19, 2009

Today we read Parshat Miketz, where the Torah tells of the famine in Egypt and the elaborate preparations Joseph made to feed the people of Egypt. The Torah tells how those preparations during the seven years of plenty ultimately saved Joseph's own family, our ancestors, the progenitors of the Jewish people.

Today is also the eighth day of Hanukah, when we are especially attuned to how we can participate in miraculous events. Ending hunger, ending homelessness, providing a sustainable life for all our citizens are such miracles as we can participate in today by turning our attention to what our tradition teaches about how we relate to our poorest neighbors.

Today is also the Shabbat before Homeless Memorial Day, December 21<sup>st</sup>, the shortest day and longest night of the year. The longest night is symbolic of the struggle of the chronic homeless, many of whom live out their lives on the cold streets or in dangerous abandoned buildings. Tragically, some of our most vulnerable neighbors die on the streets each year for lack of a home.

For the last decade, there has been a movement in public policy toward the idea that homelessness can be ended. The solution, both humane and cost effective, provides subsidies for rental apartments and for case management services. Called Housing First, this approach to ending homelessness is gaining wide acceptance around the county. But we still need to advocate for committing public resources to Housing First, while preserving the safety net of emergency shelters.

On this Shabbat before Homeless Memorial Day, we devote our Torah study to Jewish texts that bear on how we relate to our poorest and most vulnerable neighbors.

### GENERAL PRINCIPLES

1. Eliot N. Dorff, *To Do the Right and the Good: A Jewish Approach to Modern Social Ethics*

“Jews in the United States are the product of both the American and the Jewish culture, each with a radically different understanding of community. Am I, as the Declaration of Independence proclaims, a creature born with inalienable rights within a community that exists only at the pleasure of those who give up some of their rights? Or am I, as Deuteronomy would have it, a person born into a host of obligations that are as ‘unalienable’ as the Declaration’s rights? The two are not mutually contradictory, but they certainly present two very different ways of thinking of oneself and one’s community.”

2. Deuteronomy, Ch. 15



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"There shall be no needy among you" (v. 4).

"For there will never cease to be needy ones in your land" (v. 11)

3. *Sifre* on Deuteronomy 15: 4 (early rabbinic commentary – 2<sup>nd</sup> century C.E.)

"As long as you do the will of God, poor people may live among others [i.e. other nations who have not been commanded to do God's will], but they will not be among you."

### A CASE STUDY

4. Mishna, *Bava Batra* 1:5

"[If one is living in a cooperative courtyard], they [the authorities] may coerce him to [participate in the] building of a gate for the [joint] courtyard. Rabbi Shimon ben Gamliel says, 'Not all courtyards need a gatehouse.'"

*Question:* From a public policy point of view, why might Rabban Shimon ben Gamliel disagree?

5. Commentary on the Mishna, Babylonian Talmud, *Bava Kamma* 7b

"This implies that the building of a gatehouse is a laudable thing. However, there is [the story of] that righteous person whom Elijah spoke with [regularly]. He built a gatehouse for his house and Elijah no longer spoke with him."

*Question:* Why might Elijah have stopped speaking with the righteous person when he built a gatehouse.

6. Rashi's commentary on the Babylonian Talmud's commentary on the Mishna

"'And Elijah no longer spoke with him': For it gates off the poor people who are crying out [for money or assistance] and their voices are not heard."

*Question:* How does Rashi know this to be true?

### RELATED BIBLICAL TEXTS ON "CRYING OUT"

7. Exodus 2: 23 – 24

"The Israelites were groaning under their bondage and cried out; and their cry for help from the bondage rose up to God. God heard their moaning and God remembered the covenant with Abraham and Isaac and Jacob. God looked upon the Israelites and God took notice of them.



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### 8. Exodus 22: 20-23

“ You shall not wrong a stranger or oppress him or her, for you were strangers in the land of Egypt. You shall not ill-treat any widow or orphan. If you do mistreat them, I will heed their outcry as soon as they cry out to Me, and My anger shall blaze forth and I will put you to the sword, and your own wives shall become widows and your children orphans.”

*Question:* How do these texts provide a background for Rashi’s comment?

### **A TEXT FROM LIFE**

### 9. Tenant in Housing First Program, Mercer County, NJ

“The homeless thing was really rough. It was, really. A lot of people there now, I guess some of them didn’t quite make it. I guess I was one of the [lucky] ones. You get sick and tired of being without a house and you want to make things better, but I couldn’t really get a job because I have seizures and nobody wants to really hire me.

“I got to where I was on drugs and I just got sick and tired of being sick and tired. I had this suicide thing in mind and had to go and get some help. I was at my sister’s house on the 11<sup>th</sup> floor thinking about jumping out the window killing myself. I’ve been at the shelter and tried to apply to a few places, they say you didn’t have enough money. I didn’t have a job. I’m on disability. I’m disabled so I wasn’t able to afford to pay no rent. Rent’s a little too high to maintain for an apartment anyway. I was out there trying to find a place... Welfare said they would pay \$650, but the apartments were \$700, \$800, so it was hard to find a place. They didn’t want me to have a room, but that is all you can afford for \$650 a month.... Welfare, they give you money. They don’t want you to have no savings account anyway. If I did try to put 10 dollars away every month they might well take it.

“To me, now I feel good because I get a chance to get a roof over my head. You know, not worry about nothing being taken from me at the shelter. Being at the shelter, you know. I was there off and on for about 10 years, trying to survive. A couple times I remember at the shelter I had a seizure. When I would get back from the hospital my stuff would be gone, my bag with medication and stuff, oh man, all my important papers, and it really wasn’t nothing valuable to them. That’s the thing about the shelter, when you go there you have to sleep with one eye closed and one eye open. You can’t go take a shower because you got to bring everything with you. You know they gonna take your stuff, man. I found my stuff all scattered outside, come on man. All it was, was a couple of hats, two razors, a comb, just cosmetic stuff. The papers and stuff were more important to me than anything, I had a few pictures in there I will never get back of my kids. The only ones I could keep with me, you know. I am glad I got



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away from that. I can say that. Every time I turn around I was always about to get into a fight, most of the time I had to fight, you know, protecting your area, it's crazy man."

"I think in the last 10 years I don't think I ever slept. I guess I did, but it was much worse. I am gaining the weight now. I keep myself involved in NA, you know, I go to an AA meeting sometime on Tuesday. So Monday, Wednesdays, and Fridays I have mines (NA meetings) and sometimes Tuesday, Thursday and Saturdays.... I can sleep better, I can stay on my medication, I can get my act together more, get myself settled more. Being homeless man, you always in danger, you never know what you are going to do on the streets ...It is a lot better now, like I said, being that I have a place I can concentrate on my health and my medication. I have a regular doctor now. I keep in touch with her about health and things.

"I've been more or less having my grandkids back and my daughter, she's gonna get back August first. Cause when I was all messed up on drugs before, my daughter probably really wouldn't want to be there. Me having this, having a place, aw man... I am looking forward to (fathers day) this weekend. My grandson is nine, the youngest just turned three. Having a place, being near them, I can have them over. It's been hard. I try to see them as much as possibly I can. Before, I didn't have a place, I couldn't do certain things, couldn't have them over, didn't have no safe environment for them. I got a better environment for them now... I am happier today. I have a chance to see my grandkids now."

### **MAKING A COMMITMENT**

*Question: Are you willing to say yes to the following statements?*

\_\_\_ I would like to learn more about Housing First as an approach to ending chronic homelessness.

\_\_\_ I will encourage my congregation to become involved with the NJ Advocacy Network to End Homelessness.

\_\_\_ I am interested in advocating for more public resources to end homelessness.

*If so, please bring this study sheet home and look us up at [www.njaneh.org](http://www.njaneh.org)*

This study sheet was prepared by Herb Levine, Executive Director, Mercer Alliance to End Homelessness; Secretary, NJ Advocacy Network to End Homelessness. He wishes to acknowledge Aryeh Cohen, "Hearing the Cry of the Poor," in *Righteous Indignation: A Jewish Call for Justice* (Jewish Lights, 2009). Herb can be reached at [hlevine@merceralliance.org](mailto:hlevine@merceralliance.org)