



JEWES AND THE HOMELESS

Summer relieves some of the guilt we feel when we walk through the streets of our cities and encounter the many people who now live in our streets. We hope that it can also provide the time we need to consider how to help them before the next frost.

In the ancient rabbis' portrait of the world, each person was respected and perceived as a bearer of a divine spark. One could never be sure if one of the beggars sitting at the gates of the city was the messiah, if the prophet Elijah was the stranger knocking at the door. The image is a potent one, of profound import for how Jews have viewed the poor. If each beggar might have been Elijah or even the messiah, then no beggar could be coldly dismissed.

But few of us today look for the messiah in the faces of street people. Our tendency is rather to live in gilded ghettos, to draw the blinds in order to protect a self-contained world untouched by larger problems. It is not that we don't care; we are willing to write checks and work for organizations that help poor people. But we prefer not to be "assaulted" by the raw sight of destitute people who live on the edge.

In the past, "bums" were curiosities, found only on the Bowery. A combination of circumstances in recent years has changed that.

- The U.S. government has revoked crucial disability and Social Security benefits for those who need help most, and has not provided enough housing.
- Many patients who were once shut away for psychiatric care can be treated with greater cost efficiency in halfway houses. Few neighborhoods, however, are willing to allow such halfway houses in their midst, and these people are left to fend for themselves. We may believe that people with psychological problems have the right to determine their own future as long as they are not a danger to others. If so, we have an obligation to provide them with safe housing in a way that does not embarrass them.
- Real estate gentrification has driven rents up beyond the means of former tenants. To prevent people from being forced out of their neighborhoods, rent subsidies should be made available.

- Funds for the elderly have been spent on the middle class rather than the poor. Regulations that ensure that subsidies for the elderly provide for our neediest senior citizens are an urgent necessity.

When Jews lived in self-governing communities before the nineteenth century, we did very well in taking care of the poor in our midst. The social welfare policies of those communities remain models of how a just and caring society acts. Circumstances today, however, differ. We are integrated into larger societies, and the panhandlers we meet are not so clearly our own.

In addition, Jews as a whole have moved far enough up the economic ladder to forget that poor people are people, too. Most of us don't recall the hardships of our immigrant forebears; we have learned about the Depression second-hand. Most of us have never been unable to pay the rent on the first of the month. And so, we are too prone to adopt the self-righteous ethos that judges impoverished individuals and families in moral terms.

What must be addressed, then, is a crisis of the Jewish soul. How are we to adapt the ancient and central principles of *tzedakah* and *gemilut hasadim* (doing the caring thing) to cities over which Jews have no direct control? How are we to avoid losing the compassion for poor people that has always characterized the Jewish outlook? How are we to remain conscious of the fact that, according to recent studies, there are a surprising number of poor Jewish people as well—several hundred thousand elderly Jews living below the poverty line in New York City alone?

Each of us must decide what to do when approached by a street person. Some of us will be more comfortable than others giving small amounts when asked. All of us, however, ought to make every effort to avoid the cynicism that comes so quickly. Begging was an honorable profession in traditional Jewish communities. The beggar was credited with serving those solicited by providing them with the opportunity to give ungrudgingly.

Yes, there are con artists out there, but there are

also countless numbers of people who don't know how they will buy their next meal. Yes, some of those who approach us could find a job, but there are many people who have been thrown into dire straits by forces beyond their control. The very act of questioning the sincerity of the beggar is sufficiently demeaning that, the rabbis taught, we are obliged to give without asking. Blaming the victims is wrong, no matter how much they intrude upon our peace of mind.

Beyond what we each may do alone, we can do more together. Every synagogue ought to have a social action committee working on this problem in its local area. At the Reconstructionist West End Synagogue in New York City, the congregation has adopted a family and pays the difference between the family's actual rent and what the family can afford.

If our children were to find hungry people at synagogue soup kitchens when they arrive for classes, they would learn about the true meaning of *kedushah* (holiness). We protect our children from unpleasant realities at the risk of not teaching them how to be true mensches.

As the end of the Reagan era approaches, it is time once again to work for government policies that will reduce homelessness. But let us not rely on the government to shield us from poor people. As long as poverty persists, let us recall that the divine spark in human beings is not smaller when their bank accounts are empty. Remembering the divine spark should fire us into action.

GUEST OPINION

The Kosher and Healthy Shall Be One

Several recent articles have related kashrut to health. The March-April 1987 issue of the RECONSTRUCTIONIST contained two such pieces.¹ The authors pondered the ethics of eating "kosher" food that can cause cancer or otherwise harm the body. Also the *Jerusalem Post* (8/1/87) carried an ar-

ticle "Kosher Food and Health Food," by Peter Singer. Singer stated,

Kosher food means fit food. For hundreds of years kosher food equaled wholesome food. . . . In recent times the addition of artificial preservatives, sweeteners, colorings, herbicides, and pesticides and greater medical knowledge should require a reevaluation of what is kosher.

Singer suggested that kosher-labeled foods containing saccharin, for instance, should be considered "treif." He quoted Maimonides' *Guide for the Perplexed*: "The general object of the Law is twofold: The well-being of the soul and the well-being of the body."

As Maimonides' words indicate, Jews have always believed that we are obliged to take good care of our bodies. Eating a healthy diet is a major part of this.

Thus, the details of kashrut need to be reevaluated. Food that is bad for one's health *should not* be considered kosher. Approval should be denied to foods containing preservatives, chemicals, artificial additives, and colorings. In addition, Jews should move away from eating foods without food value, such as white flour and white sugar.

One million people die each year of heart disease. Authorities say that diets high in meat, fat, cholesterol, salt, and sugar, and that are low in fiber, increase the risk of heart disease, colon cancer, and diabetes.

The irony is that "Jewish foods" are among the worst offenders. Jewish delicatessens and bakeries specialize in foods full of fat, cholesterol, salt, and sugar. Many meat items and smoked fish have preservatives such as sodium nitrite. Bagels and most breads and pastries are made with white flour, containing empty calories and no fiber.

All valuable parts of the wheat are stripped away in the production of white flour. The flour is also bleached with chlorine dioxide, the safety of which has never been proved.²

As for refined sugar, it is not only an "empty-calorie" food that gives you nothing. It draws on the body's own reserves of nutrients in order to be burned, because processed sugar has no vitamins or enzymes of its own.³ This energy drain can be avoided via the use of natural, unrefined sweeteners.

In the average diet, over 50 percent of calories come as fat; it should be below 30 percent. Creamy foods, such as mayonnaise, add hundreds of extra calories to the diet.