



think about reflection

Jewish learning

service opportunities

Jewish Text Sources on Homelessness

- The parallel themes of homelessness and wandering pervade the Bible and Jewish history. In the first chapters of the book of [Genesis](#), Adam and Eve are expelled from the [Garden of Eden](#). Abraham begins his relationship with God by leaving his native land, and Jacob and his sons leave their own home to go down to Egypt. After the Exodus, the Israelites journey through the wilderness, homeless, for 40 years. The destruction of the first Temple in Jerusalem is followed by 70 years of exile, and the destruction of the second Temple in 70 C.E. is followed by two millennia of national homelessness, which ended only with the establishment of the [State of Israel](#) in 1948.

- A few Jewish sources explicitly speak of the provision of housing as a means of [tzedakah](#) (charity). Most famous among these texts is the exhortation in Isaiah to "take the poor into your homes," read as the [Haftarah](#) on [Yom Kippur](#). This prophetic cry defines the relief of homelessness as a religious duty, preferable to fasts, sacrifices, and other ritual observances.

- While Jews fast for twenty four hours on Yom Kippur, God reminds them that fasting is not enough "Fasting like yours this day will not make your voice to be heard on high ...Is not this the fast that I have chosen to share your bread with the hungry, and that you bring the homeless poor who are cast out to your house?"

- While the Torah and the later Jewish tradition provide a number of rationales for helping the poor, the ultimate one is that G-d commands us to do so. For example the Torah tells us clearly that we should not expect to accomplish the utilitarian purpose of ridding the world of poverty, which might be one of the aims we have in mind in giving charity, "for the poor will never disappear from the earth." Nevertheless, we must help the poor in response to God's command:

If there is a needy person among you, one of your kinsmen in any of your settlements in the land that the Lord your G-d is giving you, do not harden your heart and shut your hand against your needy kinsman. Rather you must open your hand and lend him sufficient resources for whatever he needs. For the poor will never disappear from the earth, which is why I command you: open your hand to the poor and needy kinsman in your land" (Deuteronomy 15:7-8, 11).

- Undoubtedly the first reason we think of helping the poor is sheer compassion for someone in need. The Torah, however, finds a special reason that Jews must have compassion for those in need—namely, that we Jews were in Egypt and should know how it feels to be completely without resources. We should therefore treat others as we would want to be treated if we were in such a destitute position. Remember that you were a slave in Egypt and that the Lord your G-d redeemed you from there; therefore do I enjoin you to observe this commandment... When you gather the grapes of your vineyard, do not pick it over again; that shall go to the stranger, the fatherless, and the widow.

Sulam: The Center for Jewish Service Learning

Bureau of Jewish Education of Greater Los Angeles, 6505 Wilshire Blvd., Suite 300, Los Angeles, CA 90035
Office: (323)761-8607 Fax: (323)761-8640 Email: dgold@bjela.org

- Another motive that influences many to give charity is their feeling that they have a duty to support their community and give back to it. Jewish law does not leave that to communal feelings alone; it specifies exactly who has the duty to contribute to social causes based on the length of time that the person has lived in a given place. One who settles in a community for thirty days becomes obligated to contribute to the charity fund together with the other members of the community.

- Jewish tradition provides a rationale for helping the poor that speaks to our own character: we should want to be the kind of people who aid those in need. The Torah puts these considerations in theological terms: we should aspire to be not only decent and even noble human beings, but also Godlike. We should strive to be holy like G-d, and part of the way to do that is provide for the poor, as the following selection makes clear.
“The Lord spoke to Moses, saying: Speak to the whole Israelite community and say to them: “You shall be holy, for I, the Lord your God, am holy... When you reap the harvest of your land, you shall not reap all the way to the edges of your field, or gather the gleanings of your harvest. You shall not pick your vineyard bare...you shall leave them for the poor and the stranger: I the Lord am your God” (Leviticus 19:1-2, 9-10)

- Jewish tradition teaches that it is more valuable to help a person become self-supporting than it is to give the person a handout of food or money. “R. Abba said in the name of R. Simeon ben Lakish: the person who lends money [to a poor person] is greater than the person who gives charity; and the one who throws money into a common purse [to form a partnership with the poor person] is greater than either” (Talmud, *Shabbat* 63b). We are commanded to help those less fortunate on the path to self-sufficiency so that one day they will not need assistance. Housing is a foundation upon which self-sufficiency can be built. Without a place to live, a person cannot begin to take charge of his or her life.

- According to one *midrash*, Abraham is judged to be greater than Job because while the latter "opened his doors to the road" (Job 31:32), Abraham left his tent to seek guests among the passers-by (Genesis 18:1–8). Furthermore, Abraham "got busy and built spacious mansions along the highways, and stocked them with food and drink, so that whoever entered ate, drank, and blessed Heaven" (Avot 1:5; Avot d'Rabbi Natan 7). Clearly both Abraham and Job valued hospitality and did not wish to leave anyone hungry or roofless. However, Abraham surpassed Job because he sought after opportunities to improve lives by taking people into his home, rather than waiting until the needy approached him.

- When Rabbi Joshua ben Levi went to Rome, he saw marble pillars covered with sheets, so they wouldn't crack with heat, nor freeze from the cold. He also saw a poor person with only a reed mat under him and a reed mat over him (Pesikta de-Rav Kahana 9:1).

This observation points out a prioritization of marble over humanity in ancient Roman society. In contrast, Jewish tradition highlights the supremacy of caring for fellow human beings. Isaiah the prophet proclaims that *even the service of God* is devoid of meaning if the worshippers have not demonstrated compassion for people here on earth. Israel is commanded: “Share your bread with the hungry, and take the wretched poor into your home; when you see the naked, clothe him and do not ignore your own kin” (Isaiah 58:7)

Sulam: The Center for Jewish Service Learning