

IN THE IMAGE OF GOD

HOW DO WE RESPECT THE DIGNITY OF THOSE WE SERVE?

Judaism goes to great lengths to protect the dignity (and at times the anonymity) of those in need of community support. In part, this is based on a recognition that each person is made “b’tzelem Elohim” – in the image of God – and that by honoring each individual, we honor the Divine in all of us. In this session we will explore the sources of this obligation, and think about how we can foster a sense of dignity among those we serve.

THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN POVERTY AND SHAME:

Consider the following texts:

It had been better that you had not given him, than now that you have given him publicly and put him to shame.

— BabylonianTalmud, Chagigah 5a

The Rambam [aka Maimonides] taught that a farmer must designate three separate times a day for the poor to glean [i.e. to take the produce left in the fields after harvest] – early in the morning for the elderly who sleep less, later in the morning for nursing mothers, and a later time for children. (Mishneh Torah Matanot L’Aniyim, 7.1-2) From this we learn that we should give tzedaka in a way that is best suited to the recipient rather than easiest for the giver.

— Rabbi Mordechai Liebling

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS:

- (a) Is it really better not to give if doing so would cause the recipient to be ashamed?
- (b) Think about the places where you do community service/social justice work. Are they designed in such a way that they preserve the dignity of the recipients? Are there any ways in which they might be changed to suit the needs of the recipients?

WHAT ABOUT THE 'UNDESERVING POOR':

Here are a few more sources from our tradition:

If the rich man says to [a] poor man, “Why do you not go and work and get food? Look at those hips! Look at those legs! Look at that fat body! Look at those lumps of flesh!” I, the Blessed Holy One say to him, “Is it not enough that you have not given him anything of yours, but you must set the evil eye upon what I have given him?”

— Vayikra Rabbah 34:4

Even if he caused himself [to lose all his property] not for the sake of studying Torah, though he is a sinner, we are obligated to give him *tzedakah* . . . one who refrains from working his fields, even out of laziness, and sells them and consumes the profits and becomes poor may collect [certain types of agricultural *tzedakah*], we are obligated to give to this person from the communal *tzedakah* fund.

— Rabbi Moshe Feinstein, Igg'rot Moshe, Yoreh De'ah 4:37

While it is critical to be vigilant in preserving and strengthening the social programs that provide a safety net for those in need, it is also important to resist the very human temptation to screen ourselves from the reality of the misery that surrounds us. It is too easy to distance ourselves from panhandlers, especially when we feel harassed or threatened by their requests – to wonder why they aren't getting what they need from appropriate social service agencies. It is a great challenge to treat them with compassion and respect, but it is a challenge to which we are encouraged to rise.

— Rabbi Jacob J. Staub

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS:

- (a) These texts can be deeply inspiring and/or very challenging. What is your gut reaction to them? What emotions arise? Do they cause you to think of any particular interactions in your own life?
- (b) Living in New York City, we are all confronted with panhandlers each day. Do you give to any of them? To all of them? If you only give occasionally, how do you decide to whom you will give?