

# THE NEEDY AMONG US

## CONSIDERING OUR OBLIGATIONS TO OUR LOCAL AND GLOBAL COMMUNITIES

Traditional Jewish texts concerning our obligation to help others in need are based on a very "local" sense of community. At the time they were written, one might need to balance his obligations to those in his town against those in the next town over, but would have no way of knowing if there were needier people half-way around the world. And even if he did, he would be in no position to assist them. Now, however, with the advent of 24 hour global news coverage, increased opportunities for travel, and other advances, we are aware of the needs of those outside our local communities, and so must balance our responsibilities to those in our cities against our duty to aid those in other parts of the world. This session will explore how place matters -- or doesn't -- in our decision-making about how and where to give.

*Consider the following text:*

<sup>4</sup>There shall be no needy among you – since Adonai your God will bless you in the land that Adonai your God is giving you as a hereditary portion – <sup>5</sup>if only you heed Adonai your God and take care to keep all this Instruction that I enjoin upon you this day. <sup>6</sup>For Adonai your God will bless you as Adonai has promised you; you will extend loans to many nations, but require none yourself; you will dominate many nations, but they will not dominate you.

<sup>7</sup>If however, there is a needy person among you, one of your kinsmen in any of your settlements in the land that Adonai your God is giving you, do not harden your heart and shut your hand against your needy kinsman. <sup>8</sup>Rather, you must open your hand and lend him sufficient for whatever he needs. . . . <sup>10</sup>Give to him readily and have no regrets when you do so, for in return Adonai your God will bless you in all your efforts and in all your undertakings. For there will never cease to be needy ones in your land, which is why I command you: open your hand to the poor and needy kinsman in your land. [Deuteronomy 4-11]

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### DISCUSSION QUESTIONS:

- (a) To whom are we obligated, according to this text? Anyone in our cities? Or only our "kinsmen"? Do these priorities comport with your own?
- (b) There is a stark contrast, within the biblical text, between verse 4 of this text, "there shall be no needy among you," and verse 11, "For there will never cease to be needy ones in your land." What do you make of this apparent contradiction?

*Now consider these texts:*

[Commenting on the Deuteronomy text, above]: “If there is a poor person within your gates,” *Sifre* (a collection of legal *midrash* on the book of Deuteronomy) expounds on this verse saying, “When one is starving, the one who is starving takes precedence” and then expounds, “The poor of your city take precedence over the poor of another city.” That is to say – this applies if both poor people are in need food or clothing. However, if the poor of your city have what they need to live, but just don’t have any extra money [and the poor of the other city don’t have food or clothing], then the poor of the other city take precedence over the poor of your city, for the neediest takes precedence.

— Rabbi Moshe Sofer, *She’elot and Teshuvot of the Chatam Sofer* 2:231

David Hume noted that our sense of empathy diminishes as we move outward from the members of our family to our neighbors, our society and the world. Traditionally, our sense of involvement with the fate of others has been in inverse proportion to the distance separating us and them. What has changed is that television and the Internet have effectively abolished distance. They have brought images of suffering in far-off lands into our immediate experience. Our sense of compassion for the victims of poverty, war and famine runs ahead of our capacity to act. Our moral sense is simultaneously activated and frustrated. We feel that something should be done, but what, how, and by whom?

— Rabbi Jonathan Sacks, *The Dignity of Difference* (2002), p. 30.

Today, social justice is hot in Jewish circles. Thousands of people participate in Jewish service learning trips to the Gulf Coast, Latin America, Africa, Arizona, and other places usually far away from their homes. These participants return inspired to take action. In the best cases, program alumni devote themselves to raising money for the community they visited, to taking political action on an issue they learned about during their program, or to involving themselves in a local issue for the first time. But more often than not, the initial excitement dissipates with the return home. Too often, we jump from place to place in search of the next exciting cause or meaningful experience. Heartbreaking pictures of a natural disaster in New Orleans, Haiti, or Chile prompt us to empty our wallets, but we have typically forgotten about that place by the time the difficult work of long-term rebuilding gets under way. . . .

What if, instead, individuals and communities chose a small number of places and invested heavily in a personal, financial and political relationship with these places? One of these places should be the place we live. But another might be a place we have visited on vacation, where we have studied, or one that fascinates us from afar. For some Jews, one of these places will always be Israel. . . . “Our places” may change over the course of our lifetime . . . . But in the

course of a multiyear commitment to a place, we have the chance to develop an intimate connection to that place, and perhaps have an impact there.

- Rabbi Jill Jacobs, *Where Justice Dwells: A Hands-On Guide to Doing Social Justice in Your Jewish Community* (2011), p. 19.

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#### DISCUSSION QUESTIONS:

- (a) How do you personally decide whom to help? Do you prioritize those in greater need, or those in your local community?
- (b) Do you have particular places to which you feel a sense of ownership or obligation? What are they?
- (c) Do you think the globalization that Rabbi Sacks refers to affects our obligations as set out in Deuteronomy? Or, as Rabbi Jacobs suggests, is there still a principled reason for favoring “our places.” Are we still primarily obligated to those “within our gates” or to “our kinsmen,” or does greater knowledge of events far away change our sense of obligation?

# WOULD YOU RATHER?

## EXPLORING OUR OWN PRIORITIES

1. *Would you rather give to:*
  - a. An organization that cleans up the Hudson River; OR
  - b. An organization that provides clean drinking water for villages in Africa?
  
2. *Would you rather give to:*
  - a. An organization that helps homeless people in your city; OR
  - b. An organization that helps homeless people in Israel?
  
3. *Would you rather give to:*
  - a. An organization that sends doctors to clinics in villages in India to perform surgery and train health workers; OR
  - b. A local clinic that provides medical care to low-income residents of your city?
  
4. *Would you rather give to:*
  - a. Your local public library, which runs an after-school program that helps low-income elementary school students improve their reading and writing skills; OR
  - b. An organization that builds schools for girls in Pakistan?
  
5. *Would you rather give to:*
  - a. A local organization that fights hunger by providing people with hot meals at a soup kitchen; OR
  - b. An organization that provides food for victims of a natural disaster in Asia?
  
6. *Would you rather give to:*
  - a. An organization designed to provide for composting and recycling in local schools; OR
  - b. An organization that fights deforestation in the Amazon?
  
7. *Would you rather give to:*
  - a. An organization teaching job skills to inmates in the city jails; OR
  - b. An organization that advocates for humane conditions for political prisoners in China?
  
8. *Would you rather give to:*
  - a. An organization that provides new sports equipment to children who live in the slums in Kenya; OR
  - b. The child of a friend who is raising money for new uniforms for his/her basketball team?<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> This exercise comes from American Jewish World Service's *Where Do You Give: A Tzedakah Curriculum* (Lisa Exler, ed. 2012).