

Rabbi Rick Kellner
Sukkot 5771
Fighting Poverty

Each year the Religious Action Center, which is the central Social Action arm of the Reform movement, hosts its L'takein seminars, attended by thousands of Reform Jewish teens from around the country. The entire weekend long seminar focuses on various social justice issues facing our nation. The first night often focuses on homelessness. When I attended the seminar a number of years ago as a chaperone, I could not help but be extremely moved by the family that was brought in to tell their own personal struggles with homelessness. The family of four, two parents and two kids, had spent time sleeping on the streets, prior to that they had slept in a car the kids had slept in friend's homes. They had moved from place to place without a home for so long. There they sat with us on the stage in the hotel ballroom to tell us their story.

All I could help but wonder was, each of us are going to sleep in a comfortable (or not comfortable) bed depending on the hotel tonight, wake up and eat breakfast. Where are they sleeping tonight, will they eat breakfast tomorrow?

Being in a hotel certainly made the contrasts of our lives that much more distinct. I never found out the answer to my wonderings but it is experiences like these that remind you of the poverty line.

The holiday of Sukkot for me is another reminder of this line. Think about the sukkah for a moment, it is a temporary structure. Some Jews eat in the sukkah every night; others sleep in the sukkah every night. While it may not be our intention as we celebrate this holiday, such events should remind us of hunger and homelessness which rage throughout our city and society. These are just two of the many symptoms of

poverty and it is the holiday of Sukkot that puts them on the forefront of our minds. The liturgy and the customs of these festivals not only serve as reminders of the celebration of the holiday but also remind us of our social obligation towards other human beings as well.

The other night we sang the words of hallel, praises to God. These psalms contain praises to God. We are thankful that God brought us out of Egypt, gave us Torah, and brought us to Israel. Psalm 118, one of the hallel psalms reads, Min hameitzar karati yah, anani vamerchav yah. From the distress I called to you O God, God answered me and brought me relief.

The second word of this verse is the critical word here. Let's focus on this word for a moment.

Meitzar it sounds like Mitzrayim

Mitzrayim is the Hebrew word for Egypt

Egypt is a place of distress for the Israelites, slavery, food, water, being a stranger, being marginalized

Another meaning of meitzar, it means a narrow place. Think about being stuck, in a cave, or even those who suffer from claustrophobia, that is what it means to be in a narrow place, to be gasping for air, to be so tight that you can barely move.

Is poverty a narrow place? It can seem like an endless cycle, not having a job, working multiple jobs, to barely pay the rent, never seeing your family, eating

only what food stamps will pay for, having to ask friends to have your kids sleep at your home, asking for money for food, waiting in line at a food bank.

Each of these experiences puts those who face them in a narrow place. They are calling to God for help. How will God answer them? How will we answer them? How will be God's hands doing this difficult work? Hallel reminds us of the time in our people's history when we were redeemed from Egypt. How will we help in this modern form of redemption for those who are in distress, for those in their own Egypt, for those in their own narrow place?

Perhaps the traditions of Sukkot can help us figure out the answer to those questions. The tradition of Ushpizin, bringing guests into our sukkah was designed to build community; it was designed to remind us of Torah as each night is assigned a different biblical guest to be welcomed. We could take this tradition in another direction. I would propose that on this Sukkot we bring in two other individuals as guests. These two individuals are considered poor. And they are recent poor. They are those who are among the 4 million Americans who have fallen into poverty since the start of the recession.

The first guest I want us to invite to our Sukkah is Sheila Richardson, a 41-year-old Brooklyn, NY resident. In early September she moved into a homeless shelter because she had no money to pay rent. In late 2007 she lost her job as an admissions officer in a culinary school. She has gone through her 401k and her savings and she is asking others to house her 15 year old son until she gets back on her feet. Sheila said, "I

used to cry, but now I can't cry anymore, I just wait for it to get dark at night, so the creditors can't call."

The second guest I want us to invite to our Sukkah is Evadney Palmerston of Los Angeles. She is a High School graduate; she started out earning \$10 an hour and worked her way up to \$18 an hour. Three years ago she quit her job to take care of her mother. She found another job but was recently laid off. The Belize native said she "is working tooth and nail right now to find a job."

These stories were told in an LA Times article last week, new poor who live in our country.¹ The current poverty level is at 14.3%, one in seven Americans, 4 million Americans. It is not that these numbers are staggering. It is the face of the new poor that is shocking to the system. Those falling below the poverty line today are more likely to be full-time workers who cannot earn enough to meet their needs or middle-class workers driven into the ranks of the poor by lost jobs or shrinking incomes.

Reading this article upset me. It angered me. It reminded me that it is up to me to do something. If I take responsibility, and if I join with others who are also upset by reading those words, together we can fight poverty and make a difference in a person's life.

If these guests were in our Sukkah what we would we say to them? How would we comfort them? What might they say to us? After offering them a meal, would we offer them the traditional Ushpizin prayer, that reads, "May it be your will [Eternal] my God and God of my [ancestors] to cause Your divine spirit to dwell in our midst. O God spread over us a shelter of peace, and encircle us with Your majestic glory, holy and

¹ 1 in 7 Lives below the Poverty Line by Don Lee and Alana Semuels
<http://www.latimes.com/news/nationworld/nation/la-fi-poverty-census-20100917,0,5820203,full.story>

pure. As for those who are hungry and thirsty, grant them sufficient bread and water. O grant us long life in the Holy Land, that we may serve Thee with reverence. Praised be the [Eternal] forever. Amen, Amen.”

This prayer asks God to grant bread and water to those who are hungry or thirsty. If our guests heard this prayer they might thank us for offering a prayer to God, or for us taking them in for a meal. But they might also be offended, they might wonder why people who are more well off than they are, are not giving to food banks; they are not helping them find a job. Instead of offering a prayer saying May God grant you bread and water, let's get up and act, let's get up make our donations to SOVA. Our SOVA drive continues through the end of the month. If you have not brought in a bag of food or other non-perishables, there are a few more days to do so. There are so many ways for us to fight poverty, let's not leave it to God, let's be God's hands and fight poverty on our own.

Maimonides, the great Jewish philosopher of the 12th century reminds us, “When a person eats and drinks in celebration of a festival, he is obligated to feed converts, orphans, widows, and others who are destitute and poor. In contrast, a person who locks the gates of his courtyard and eats and drinks with his children and his wife, without feeding the poor and the embittered, is not indulging in rejoicing associated with a mitzvah, but rather the rejoicing of his gut...This rejoicing is a disgrace...”

This year as we celebrate and rejoice on the festival of Sukkot, let us associate our rejoicing with a mitzvah; we do not have a choice, let's help the poor among us. Every person that joins in to help has the power to save a single life. Let's join together to make a difference in people's lives. Kein y'hi ratzon.