

# Mazon: A Jewish Response to Hunger

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by Leonard Fein

I have just finished reading through 131 proposals from food banks, soup kitchens, and food pantries all across the United States. I am supposed to be used to this; I am chairman of the allocations committee of Mazon: A Jewish Response to Hunger, one of a far too modest number of national organizations that seek both to alleviate the pain of hunger in America and to promote policies that will help, finally, force hunger into retreat.

Mazon is four and a half years old, and I've been reading proposals since our first round of grants. So I am supposed to be used to the matter-of-fact descriptions of desperate need in Mississippi, in Massachusetts, in Montana, of hunger in big cities and in rural areas, of malnourished new-borns and homeless families, of people whose food stamps run out a week before they're eligible for more and of people who don't know to apply for food stamps and of people who are too proud to apply for food stamps, of the frail elderly who live alone and depend on delivered meals not only for their food but also for the few minutes of companionship the driver provides. By and large, the proposals are spare in their accounts. They are written by people who care to be read by people who care, and there's little need to load the narrative with haunting details.

So why am I still broken up as I sit and try to decide whom to deny and whom to affirm? Because this is not the America we have imagined and intended. Corporate contributions to hunger programs are down, the states are in tough financial shape and are cutting sharply back, the federal dollars are scandalously inadequate - and the numbers of people who depend on the rest of us, whether

through charity or through government program, are up - way up.

I am an American citizen, and I am a Jew, twice-born therefore into traditions of generosity and justice. I read the proposals and I am reminded that there are many thousands of Americans who give of their time and their energy to volunteer in a food bank, a soup kitchen, a meals-on-wheels program. (The overwhelming majority of these are recruited out of America's religious communities. Lutherans in Washington, D.C. and San Diego, Catholic nuns in Salt Lake City, Jews in Indianapolis, ecumenical groups in dozens of places; Christian kindness, Jewish justice - these seem to be what prompt the self-recruited, the feeders.)

I am a child of history's most ancient obsession with justice, of a people that once left the corners of its fields to be gleaned by the poor, and I am a citizen of history's greatest experiment in freedom, of a country that others take as their example and their inspiration. Yet I read the proposals and am reminded that millions of my neighbors suffer the pain, the humiliation, the prison of hunger. How do I live with that? How do I live with it, knowing that of all our great societal problems - drugs, crime, schools, Trumpism - hunger is the only one we know how to cure, to fix? During the later years of the Nixon administration and the early years of the Carter administration, hunger in American was episodic rather than systemic. Government programs more or less matched people's needs.

That is no longer the case. Somewhere along the line, we lost the political will, and hunger was transformed from a scandal to be made right into another item on the demoralizing list of American failures. The scandal of hunger encompasses the tragedy of the hungry and the shame of the rest of us. The fact of hunger in America is a sin against man and against God. To whom, then, should I appeal for its repair? My first choice is government. American voluntarism is a wonderful, an inspiring thing, to behold, and there will always be room for the kind and the gentle among us to offer their time, their money. But a public whose manifest generosity is legitimately spread among dozens of different worthy

claims, from art museums to AIDS research, cannot be charged with the final responsibility for helping the hungry. Nor does it make any sense, pragmatic or moral, that the malnourished child must await your remembering, or mine, our charitable obligations. Nor, finally, can volunteers undertake repair of the tragedies and inequities that produce hunger. The task is so pressing, so vast, that government alone - which means all of us together, as a political society, a polity - must respond to it. But to appeal to government these days means to appeal to a president whose own evident concern trips over the federal deficit and collapses somewhere in the empty space between his private conscience and his conception of public policy. Or it means to appeal to a Congress whose members- those who care- know that to vote more funds to aid the hungry means to risk being denounced as wastrels when they run for re-election.

What then? Sooner or later, the general and generous will of the American people must shape the political will of its leaders. Sooner or later, we must come to translate into law our belief that in a society of abundance, freedom from hunger is an entitlement. But in the meanwhile, are today's victims to be held hostage to tomorrow's reforms?

Not if Mazon-fever spreads: Mazon suggests to all that we add a three percent surcharge to the cost of our life-cycle celebrations (weddings, bar- and bat-mitzvahs, confirmations, etc.), our parties, our dinings out. Not a high price to help make right a scandal, and to help make neighbors out of strangers, and to help us feel good about ourselves. Not a high price to remind ourselves that we are Americans - generous and responsible - even if this is not yet, not quite, the America we have intended.