

## Bringing Justice and Righteousness to Life

Sari Reekin

Are Jewish values defined primarily by Jewish textual sources? Or, are they what we have learned and passed down from generation to generation? The classic Jewish textual source for understanding the values of empowerment and helping the poor meet their own needs is Maimonides' eight levels of *tzedakah*, which connects with the essence of the social justice work I do in Israel today.

The experiences that developed my Jewish sense of justice and righteousness have grown primarily from *living* Jewish sources. During my childhood, I learned about justice and righteousness when my father "hosted" the somewhat intoxicated homeless stranger for lunch at our table. And even more so when he took me each Friday afternoon to Ebert's Field to demonstrate support for the rights of African-American ballplayers to play professional baseball.

Now, living in Israel, I direct Yedid: The Association for Community Empowerment, which advocates for the social rights of low income people in the areas of housing, health care, employment, and food, and works to achieve social justice goals through three different, interrelated approaches: individual assistance, community programming, and policy change.

At a time when Israel's socioeconomic gap between the rich and poor is second only to the United States, I am dedicating my work to bringing justice and righteousness to life. I want to give my children the same living examples of justice and righteousness that my father gave me. Given the current tax reforms that continue to favor the rich and perpetuate poverty among Israeli citizens of all ethnic and national backgrounds — a reality often overlooked amid the overwhelming political tensions of the region — my focus is building foundations of community empowerment throughout the country.

Maimonides' description of these eight levels of *tzedakah* inform my work for justice. These eight levels are often referred to as a ladder, since there is a clear progression from the lowest "rung" to the highest. The first level regards one who gives charity unwillingly; the highest level is one who assists the poor by providing a gift or a loan, by accepting the person into a business partner-

ship, or by helping the individual find employment. There is an obvious progression in terms of the intention of the giver from stinginess, to dedication, to truly just action. Similarly, there is also an evolution from giving a handout as a short-term solution to creatively working to find long-term solutions to people's short-term problems and needs.

According to Rabbi David Hartman, Maimonides' vision of *tzedakah* is empowering but should partner with *mishpat* — a legal form of justice that builds on the righteousness and good intentions in people's hearts.

*Tzedakah* and *mishpat* are often linked in biblical writings and Jewish liturgy. For example, putting on tefillin in the morning, an individual says: "*v'erastich li btzedek u'mishpat.*" And I will betroth You to me with righteousness and justice. The precepts are also linked in the description of Abraham and his descendants as those who perform *tzedakah u'mishpat* (Genesis 18:19).

Yedid's first level of individual assistance resembles Maimonides' *tzedakah*. Throughout Israel, in 12 different towns across the country — from the Bedouin town of Rahat to the multicultural port of Haifa — Yedid works with the poor and needy to help them understand and access fundamental rights such as food, shelter, education, and national health insurance. From supporting immigrants who are defrauded of their life savings to helping terror victims receive the support they need, we consider this first level of support to be foundational.

The second level of community programming blends *tzedakah* and *mishpat*. This approach recognizes that while some needs may appear to be individual, they are, in fact, communal in nature and should be addressed as such. For example, some common issues and concerns — such as coping with crisis situations, women's empowerment, literacy, and citizenship and democracy education — are best addressed when the community pools resources.

The third level — policy change — concerns *mishpat*. Sometimes the poor and the needy don't know their rights. Sometimes they lack appropriate

*continued on page 16*

served? Why not constitute a new agricultural/urban tithing, where a very small portion of crops are volunteer harvested and donated to the hungry across the United States?

What about pairing inter-generational members of the Jewish community, younger high school and college students with the elderly who are in need — not only to provide a steady source of food but companionship and perhaps occasional employment as well? We might just provide an opportunity to explore and appreciate the food chain and both sides of the hunger issue. Group strategizing, community by community, should provide innovative, community-based ideas to provide food, drink, and comfort while we look for longer-term policy solutions.

So what are we waiting for?

If anyone doubts this evil cannot be conquered, then they have not breathed deeply of the huge energy that exists among our young, of the determination of our elderly who have witnessed similar crises before and successfully conquered them, and of the concerned bystanders in between. What we all need is a call to action after digesting the facts and facing the human faces of poverty — a monster with solutions within our grasp.

A decade ago, speaking before his Parliament, the Japanese prime minister commented that the true measurement of any so-called powerful nation was if any of its citizens went to bed at night without food or shelter or any of its babies

went to sleep without milk. By this simple test, how do we judge ourselves and our community? And our country, how does it measure against this simple standard?

*Mark E. Talisman was the founder of the Council of Jewish Federation's Washington Action Office and served as its director for 18 years. Among many issues, he focused upon hunger issues during that time. In 1979, he created the National Emergency Food and Shelter Program that was legislated into law under the sponsorship of the late Speaker of the House Tip O'Neill. It still exists in FEMA and has delivered over a billion and a half federal dollars through its national board, of which Talisman was a member for 14 years, to thousands of local boards across the country.*

*Sari Revkin continued from page 11*

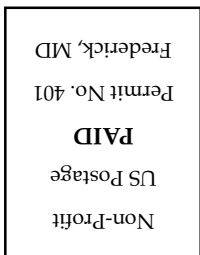
education or tools to improve their own situations. And sometimes problems stem from inequality or injustice at the legal and policy levels. For example, in Israel it is illegal for anyone who has ever been a homeowner to receive public housing assistance. This is based on the assumption that, if a person were once economically self-sufficient, it would be inconceivable that he or she would need substantive economic assistance in the future. Given the present challenging economic times, many middle-class individuals and families are struggling as a result of this law to provide the most basic amenities. We must work to change these types of laws and policies to strengthen both

*tzadakah and mishpat* in the Israel of 2003.

Ever since a few *tzadikim* provided funds to prevent 10 families from losing their homes when the banks issued foreclosure notices, I continue to ask myself how to best use my limited resources. While I continue to strive for an Israel where those who have can care and give to those who don't, working case-by-case is too arduous a path. In addition, we must now struggle to reverse decisions made earlier that essentially destroyed the social safety net that once existed. I dream of Israel as a light unto the nations — that we not only feed the poor but also help them out of poverty; that we care for the stranger among us and realize

that an eye for an eye will leave all of us blind. I know that the road from this dream to reality is long.

*Sari Revkin, originally from New York, received her MSW from the University of Maryland School of Social Work. She made aliyah in 1983 and subsequently founded SHATIL, an institution assisting the development of hundreds of social change organizations. In 1997 she established Yedid: The Association for Community Empowerment to assist families on the geographic and cultural periphery of Israeli society, foster relationships between members of different sectors of the population, and bring disenfranchised communities closer to the principles and practice of democracy.*



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