"A Wealth of Data Reveals Jewish Poverty" (PAGE 3)

LESSON PLAN BY ERICA BROWN

This lesson is an opportunity for students to learn some important statistics about poverty that may come as a surprise to many; to discuss which segments of the Jewish community suffer most from poverty; and to develop a plan to help change this situation.

CONCEPTS AND OBJECTIVES

- Students will recognize that poverty exists in the Jewish community.
- Students will understand the responsibility that every Jew has to help alleviate the suffering of other Jews (*arevut*).

GENERAL DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

Many people believe that all American Jews are wealthy or upper-middle class.

What would contribute to this impression about the American Jewish community?

Ask students to share stories of contact with the poor of their city or the poor in Israel. Through tangible examples of what they have versus what others lack, get them to see the distance between the way they live and how the poor Jews studied in the National Jewish Population Survey live.

Many people believe that education is the best solution to ending poverty in the Jewish community. Education is seen as the surest path to high-paying jobs.

Why is education a significant factor in a move out of poverty?

What kinds of jobs are generally available to people with a college degree? What kinds of jobs are generally available to those without a college degree?

Maimonides maintained that the best kind of tzedakah involves helping a needy person to support himself or herself in some occupation.

Maimonides wrote about eight levels of charity. Providing someone with a job was highest on his list. Why is this better than just giving someone money? When someone has a job, how else does it change him or her—in addition to providing an income?

MOTIVATION AND DEVELOPMENT

1. Read and discuss the article about poverty in the Jewish community. Ask students to underline one fact about Jewish poverty that most surprised them.

Share this information with one partner and explain why this statement surprised you and what you had expected before reading the article.

2. Study the Jewish texts below.

3. Invite a speaker to your class from a local organization that serves the Jewish poor in your community. This might be someone from the Jewish Social Service Agency, an organization that assists the elderly, a kosher food pantry, or a representative from the local Jewish Federation. Prepare questions for the speaker in advance. Organize a plan of action to help support the poor Jews in your local community. Possible activities include:

- Conduct a Passover food drive. (Now is a good time to plan for this so that there is time to collect and distribute the food before the holiday.)
- Collect old costumes for needy children to use for Purim.
- Raise funds for a specific purpose (such as to buy a computer for a poor family).

- Collect gently used (or new) children's clothing for Shabbat.
- Gather tzedakah funds to be distributed in Israel by members of your school community going there for a visit.

JEWISH TEXTS

The Book of Ruth, Excerpts from Chapters 1 and 2

(The texts are available in Hebrew and English on www.babaganewz.com/teachers.) The first two chapters of the Book of Ruth tell the story of poverty and responsibility.

The first five verses outline a drastic drop in lifestyle for Naomi. Ask the students to identify ways in which her life soured.

Read excerpts from chapter two and discuss Ruth's gleaning in the fields, as a form of tzedakah. How does this agree with or deviate from Maimonides' attitudes on the highest level of giving tzedakah?

Examine Boaz's role in the chapter as a good starting point for understanding *arevut*. Emphasize two aspects of his behavior—sensitivity and productivity—that are important for anyone giving tzedakah. Boaz was compassionate to Ruth's situation and also rewarded her hard work.

Finally, ask your students to consider the modern parallels to the elements of the story in these two chapters: becoming impoverished (what situational changes might lead to poverty?) and finding a "way out" of poverty (where could someone like Ruth turn in our community and what kinds of help would she get?).

Shemot 22:20–24

You shall not wrong a stranger or oppress him or her, for you were strangers in the land of Egypt. You shall not mistreat any widow or orphan. If you do mistreat them, I will hear their outcry as soon as they cry out to Me, and My anger shall blaze forth.... If you lend money to My people, to the poor among you, do not act toward them as a creditor; charge no interest from them.

Identify each of the types of people who are suffering and write this list on the board: the stranger, the widow, the orphan, the poor.

Divide the class into four groups and have each group consider the different reasons that these four groups are singled out in these verses.

Why is this group in need of special attention?

In what ways are members of this group impoverished? Consider other forms of poverty beyond financial need. [Encourage students to consider how the orphan might feel on Mother's Day or how the widow might feel at a party, etc.]

Examine God's role, as mentioned in these verses. Why does God come to their aid?

What other categories of needy people are you aware of, and how do these verses also include them? [the elderly, the ill, the mentally ill, the physically challenged, etc.]

FOLLOW-UP AND ENRICHMENT

One of the issues not discussed in the article is the expense of living "Jewishly." Have students identify sources of expense that may be unique to Jewish people: day school/Hebrew school tuition, housing in "Jewish" neighborhoods, kosher food, items for observing holidays, etc.

How can our class or synagogue help in these areas?

VOCABULARY FOR YOUR STUDENTS

עֹנִי poverty

עָנִי poor person