

The Poor shall not Cease... A Jewish Response to Poverty in the UK

A Contradiction in Torah

Deut. 15

v. 4

אֵפֶס כִּי לֹא יִהְיֶה-בָּךְ אֶבְיֹן כִּי-יְבָרְכֶךָ יְהוָה בְּאֶרֶץ אֲשֶׁר יִתֶּנָּה אֱלֹהֶיךָ נַחֲמֶלְךָ נַחֲלָה לְרִשְׁתָּהּ:

There shall be no needy among you—since the Eternal One your God will bless you in the land that the Eternal One your God is giving you as a hereditary portion.

vv. 7-11

כִּי-יִהְיֶה בָּךְ אֶבְיֹן מֵאֶחָד אֶחָיֶךָ בְּאֶרֶץ שְׁעָרֶיךָ בְּאֶרֶץ אֲשֶׁר-יִתֶּנָּה אֱלֹהֶיךָ נָתַן לָךְ לֹא תִאָּמֵץ אֶת-לִבְּךָ וְלֹא תִקְפֹּץ אֶת-גִּידְךָ מֵאֶחָד הָאֶבְיֹן: כִּי-פָתַח תִּפְתָּח אֶת-יָדְךָ לּוֹ וְהַעֲבַט תַּעֲבִיטֵנוּ דִּי מִחֲסָדּוֹ אֲשֶׁר יַחֲסֵר לּוֹ: הַשְׁמֵר לָךְ פְּנֵי-יְהוָה דְּבָר עִם-לִבְּךָ בְּלִיעַל לֹא-מֵר קָרְבָּה שְׁנֵת-הַשָּׁבַע שְׁנֵת הַשְּׁמִטָּה וְרַעְיָה עֵינֶיךָ בְּאֶחָד הָאֶבְיֹן וְלֹא תִתֵּן לּוֹ וְקִרְאָה עָלֶיךָ אֶל-יְהוָה וְהָיָה בָּךְ חָטָא: נָתַן תִּתֵּן לּוֹ וְלֹא-יִגְרַע לִבְּךָ בְּתַמָּתָה לּוֹ כִּי בְּגִלְלָהּ הַדָּבָר הַזֶּה יְבָרְכֶךָ יְהוָה אֱלֹהֶיךָ בְּכָל-מַעֲשֶׂיךָ וּבְכָל מַשְׁלַח יָדְךָ: כִּי לֹא-יִחַדֵּל אֶבְיֹן מִקֶּרֶב הָאֶרֶץ עַל-כֵּן אֲנִכִּי מְצֻוֶּה לֵאמֹר פָּתַח תִּפְתָּח אֶת-יָדְךָ לְאֶחָד לַעֲנִי וּלְאֶבְיֹן בְּאֶרֶץ: {ס}

If, however, there is a needy person among you, one of your kin in any of your settlements in the land that the Eternal One your God is giving you, do not harden your heart and shut your hand against your needy kin. Rather, you must open your hand and lend whatever is sufficient to meet the need. Beware lest you harbour the base thought, “The seventh year, the year of remission, is approaching,” so that you are mean and give nothing to your needy kin—who will cry out to the Eternal One against you, and you will incur guilt. Give readily and have no regrets when you do so, for in return the Eternal One your God will bless you in all your efforts and in all your undertakings. **For there will never cease to be poor in your land**, which is why I command you: open your hand to the poor and needy kin in your land.

A Contemporary Response to the Contradiction

The Bible expresses the hope that ‘there shall be no needy among you’ (Deut. 15:4). That is the ideal, and should therefore be an aim of social policy. But the Bible recognises that the idea is not likely to be completely attained, for the chapter goes on to say that ‘the poor shall never cease out of the land’ (Deut. 15:11). Therefore, while it should be possible to eliminate extreme poverty, the problem is one which requires the constant attention of governments, philanthropic agencies, and citizens with a social conscious.

Rabbi John Rayner, Principles of Jewish Ethics, Liberal Judaism, 2005

Responsibilities of Donor and Recipient

Babylonian Talmud Bava Batra 9a

: בּוֹדְקִין לְמִזּוֹנוֹת, וְאִין בּוֹדְקִין לְכִסּוֹת – אִי בְּעֵית אִימָא קְרָא, וְאִי בְּעֵית אִימָא סְבָרָא; אִי בְּעֵית אִימָא סְבָרָא – הָאִי קָא מְבִי, וְהָאִי לֹא קָא מְבִי. אִי בְּעֵית אִימָא קְרָא – “הֵלֵא פְּרִשׁ לְרַעֲב לְחֻמָּה”; בְּשִׁין כְּתִיב – פְּרִשׁ, וְנִדְרָהּ הֵב לִיָּהּ. וְהָתָם כְּתִיב: “כִּי תִרְאֶה עָרֹם וְכִסְתּוֹ”; “כִּי תִרְאֶה” – לֹא-תִרְאֶה.

וְרַב יְהוּדָה אָמַר: בּוֹדְקִין לְכִסּוֹת, וְאִין בּוֹדְקִין לְמִזּוֹנוֹת – אִי בְּעֵית אִימָא סְבָרָא, וְאִי בְּעֵית אִימָא קְרָא; אִי בְּעֵית אִימָא סְבָרָא – הָאִי קָא מְבִי, וְהָאִי לֹא קָא מְבִי. אִי בְּעֵית אִימָא קְרָא – הֵלֵא פְּרִשׁ לְרַעֲב לְחֻמָּה – פְּרוֹס לֹא-תִרְאֶה, וְכִדְקִרְנֵי; וְהָתָם כְּתִיב: “כִּי תִרְאֶה עָרֹם וְכִסְתּוֹ” – כְּשִׁירְאָה לָהּ. תְּנִיָּא פּוֹתִיָּה דְּרַב יְהוּדָה: אָמַר “פְּסוּגִי” – בּוֹדְקִין אֶתְרִי. “פְּרִנְסוּגִי” – אִין בּוֹדְקִין.

Rav Huna says: Charity collectors examine one who asks for food, but they do not examine one who asks for clothing. If you wish, say that this distinction is derived from a scriptural verse; if you wish, say it is derived from logical reasoning.

If you wish, say that this distinction is derived via logical reasoning: This one [who needs clothing] is exposed to contempt, whereas that one who is hungry is not exposed to contempt. If you wish, say instead that this distinction is derived from a verse, as it is written: "Is it not to share [*paros*] your bread with the hungry?" (Isaiah 58:7). The word *paros* is written with a *shin*, alluding to the word *parosh*, meaning examine and investigate, and only then should you give him. And there in the same verse it is written with regard to clothing: "When you see the naked, that you cover him," indicating that "when you see" him you should immediately cover him.

And Rav Yehuda says: Charity collectors examine one who asks for clothing, but they do not examine one who asks for food. If you wish, say that this distinction is derived via logical reasoning; if you wish, say instead that it is derived from a verse.

If you wish, say that this distinction is derived via logical reasoning: This one who is hungry suffers, whereas that one who is in need of clothing does not suffer in the same way. And if you wish, say instead that this distinction is derived from a verse. Here, it is written: "Is it not to share [*paros*] your bread with the hungry?" meaning, share it immediately. And there, it is written: "When you see the naked, that you cover him," meaning, when it will be clearly apparent to you, then you shall cover him. The Gemara comments: It is taught in a *baraita* in accordance with the opinion of Rav Yehuda: If a poor person said: Cover me with clothing, the charity collectors examine him; but if he said: Sustain me with food, they do not examine him.

תנו ה'תם: אין פותחין לעני העובר ממקום למקום, מפני כפונדיון – מארבע סאין בסלע. לו – נותנין לו פרנסת לינה. מאי "פרנסת לינה"? אמר רב פפא: פוריא ובי סדיא. שבת – נותנין לו מזון שלש סעודות. תנא: אם היה מחזיר על הפתחים – אין נזקקין לו.

We learned [from a Mishnah] (*Pe' a* 8:7): One does not give a poor person who is travelling from place to place less than a loaf worth a *pundeyon*, when the standard price of grain is four *se'a* for a *sela*. If the poor person sleeps in that place, one gives him provisions for lodging. What is meant by provisions for lodging? Rav Pappa said: A bed and a pillow. And if he spends Shabbat in that place, one gives him food for three meals. A Sage taught in a *baraita*: If a poor person was going door to door asking for charity, one is not required to attend to him and give him money from the charity fund.

ההוא עניא דהנה מחזיר על הפתחים, דאמא לקמיה דרב פפא – לא מזדקיק ליה. אמר ליה רב סמא בריה דרב ייבא לרב פפא: אי מר לא מזדקיק ליה, אינש אחרינא לא מזדקיק ליה! לימות ליה! וקא תניא: אם היה עני המחזיר על הפתחים – אין נזקקין לו! אמר ליה: אין נזקקין לו למתנה מרובה, אבל נזקקין לו למתנה מועטת.

A certain poor person who was going door to door requesting charity came before Rav Pappa, but Rav Pappa did not attend to him. Rav Sama, son of Rav Yeiva, said to Rav Pappa: If the Master does not attend to him, nobody else will attend to him either; should he be left to die of hunger? Rav Pappa said to him: But isn't it taught in a *baraita*: If a poor person was going door to door asking for charity, one is not required to attend to him? Rav Sama said to him: That *baraita* means to say that one is not required to attend to him and give him a large gift, but one does attend to him and give him a small gift.

Maimonides (1135-1204) Mishneh Torah, Gifts to the Poor

Chapter 7

1.

מצות עשה לתן צדקה לעניים כפי מה שראוי לעני. אם היתה גד הבנות משגת. שנאמר (דברים טו ח) "פתתם תפתח את ידך לו" ונאמר (ויקרא כה לה) "והחזקת בו גר ותושב וחי עמך" ונאמר (ויקרא כה לו) "והי אחיך עמך":

It is a positive commandment to give charity to the poor, according to what is appropriate for the poor person if the donor has sufficient means, as [Deuteronomy 15:8] states: "You shall certainly open your hand to him." [Leviticus 25:35] states: "You shall support the stranger and the resident and they shall live with you," and [*ibid.*:36] states: "And your brother shall live with you."

2.

וכל הרוֹאֶה עֲנִי מִבְּקֹשׁ וְהֶעֱלִים עֵינָיו מִמֶּנּוּ וְלֹא נָתַן לוֹ צָדָקָה עֲבַר בְּלֹא תַעֲשֶׂה שְׁנַאמֶר (דברים טו ז) "לֹא תִאמָץ אֶת לִבְךָ וְלֹא תִקְפֹּץ אֶת יָדְךָ מֵאֲחִידֵי הָאֲבִיוֹן":

Anyone who sees a poor person asking and turns his eyes away from him and does not give him charity transgresses a negative commandment, as [Deuteronomy 15:7] states: "Do not harden your heart or close your hand against your brother, the poor person."

3.

לְפִי מַה שְׁחָסַר הָעֲנִי אַתָּה מַצְנֶה לָתֵן לוֹ. אִם אֵין לוֹ כִּסּוּת מְכַסִּים אוֹתוֹ. אִם אֵין לוֹ כְּלֵי בֵּית קוֹנֵין לוֹ. אִם אֵין לוֹ אִשָּׁה מְשִׁיאִין אוֹתוֹ. וְאִם הָיְתָה אִשָּׁה מְשִׁיאִין אוֹתָהּ לֹאִישׁ. אֲפֹלוּ הִיָּה דָרְכּוֹ שֶׁל זֶה הָעֲנִי לִרְכֹּב עַל הַסּוּס וְעָבָד רֵץ לִפְנֵיו וְהָעֲנִי וְיָרַד מִנְּכֻסֵּיוּ קוֹנֵין לוֹ סוּס לִרְכֹּב עָלָיו וְעָבָד לְרוּץ לִפְנֵיו שְׁנַאמֶר (דברים טו ח) "דֵּי מִחְסְרוֹ אֲשֶׁר יִחְסַר לוֹ". וּמַצְנֶה אַתָּה לְהַשְׁלִים חֲסָרוֹ וְאֵין אַתָּה מַצְנֶה לַעֲשֹׂרוֹ:

We are commanded to give a poor person according to what he lacks. If he lacks clothes, we should clothe him. If he lacks household utensils, we should purchase them for him. If he is unmarried, we should help him marry. And we should help a woman to marry. Even if the person's custom was to ride on a horse and to have a servant run before him and then he became impoverished and lost his wealth, we should buy a horse for him to ride and a servant to run before him. [This is implied by Deuteronomy 15:8 which] speaks [of providing him with] "enough to [fill the] lack that he feels." You are commanded to fill his lack, but you are not obligated to enrich him.

4.

מִפְּרֻנְסִין וּמִכֻּסִּין עֲנִיִּי עֲכּוּ"ם עִם עֲנִיֵּי יִשְׂרָאֵל מִפְּנֵי דִרְכֵי שְׁלוֹם. וְעֲנִי הַמְּחֻזָּר עַל הַפְּתָחִים אֵין נִזְקָקִין לוֹ לְמַתָּנָה מְרֻבָּה אֲבָל עַד כֹּא) "אֵל יֵשֶׁב נֹתֵנִין לוֹ מַתָּנָה מְעֻטָּה. וְאִסּוּר לְהַחֲזִיר אֶת הָעֲנִי שֶׁשָּׂאֵל רִיקָם וְאֲפֹלוּ אַתָּה נֹתֵן לוֹ גְּרוּגָרַת אַחַת שְׁנַאמֶר (תהילים): "דָּךְ נָכְלָם

We provide sustenance and clothing for the poor of the non-Jews together with the poor of the Jewish people for the sake of peace. When a poor person begs from door to door, we do not give him a large gift. Instead, we give him a small gift. It is forbidden to turn away a poor person who asks [for charity] empty-handed. Even giving him one fig [is sufficient], as [Psalms 74:21] states: "Let not the dejected turn away in shame."

6.

עֲנִי שֹׂאֵין מִכִּירִין אוֹתוֹ וְאָמַר רַעֲב אֲנִי הָאֲכִילוּנִי אֵין בּוֹדֵקִין אַחֲרָיו שֶׁמָּא רַמַּאי הוּא אֲלֵא מִפְּרֻנְסִין אוֹתוֹ מִיָּד. הִנֵּה עָרוֹם וְאָמַר כִּסּוּנִי בּוֹדֵקִין אַחֲרָיו שֶׁמָּא רַמַּאי הוּא. וְאִם הֵיוּ מִכִּירִין אוֹתוֹ מְכַסִּין אוֹתוֹ לְפִי כְבוֹדוֹ מִיָּד וְאֵין בּוֹדֵקִין אַחֲרָיו:

When a poor person whose identity is unknown says: "I am hungry, provide me with food," we do not investigate whether his claim is fraudulent. Instead, we provide him with sustenance immediately. If he was unclothed and he said: "Cloth me," we investigate whether his claim is fraudulent. If he is known, we clothe him according to his honour immediately and we do not investigate the matter.

Chapter 9

14.

עֲנִי שֶׁצָּרִיךְ וְיֵשׁ לוֹ חֲצֵר וּכְלֵי בֵּית אֲפֹלוּ הֵיוּ לוֹ כְּלֵי כֶּסֶף וּכְלֵי זָהָב אֵין מְחַיְבִין אוֹתוֹ לְמַכּוֹר אֶת בֵּיתוֹ וְאֶת כְּלֵי תַשְׁמִישׁוֹ אֲלֵא מִתֵּר לָקַח. וּמַצְנֶה לָתֵן לוֹ. בְּמָה דְּבָרִים אֲמֹרִים בְּכֵלֵי אֲכִילָה וְשִׁתְיָה וּמִלְבוּשׁ וּמִצְעוֹת וְכִיּוּצָא בְּהֵן. אֲבָל אִם הֵיוּ כְּלֵי כֶּסֶף וּכְלֵי זָהָב כְּגוֹן מְגָרְדָּת אוֹ עֲלֵי וְכִיּוּצָא בְּהֵן מוֹכְרָן וְלוֹקֵם פְּחוֹת מִהֵן. בְּמָה דְּבָרִים אֲמֹרִים קִדְּם שִׁיגִיעַ לְגִבּוֹת מִן הָעָם. אֲבָל אַחֵר שְׁגָבָה הַצָּדָקָה מְחַיְבִים אוֹתוֹ לְמַכּוֹר כְּלָיו וּלְקַח אַחֲרֵיהֶם פְּחוֹתֵין מִהֵם וְאַחֵר כֹּף יִטַּל:

When a poor person is in need but owns a courtyard and household utensils - even silver and golden utensils - we do not obligate him to sell his house and his personal possessions. Instead, he is permitted to accept [charity] and it is a mitzvah to give him.

What does this apply to? To eating utensils, drinking utensils, clothing, bedding, and the like. If, however, he owns a golden comb or pestle or the like, he should sell them and buy less valuable ones. When does the above apply? Before he has become so poor he has to claim aid from the community. Once he collects charity [from the community], we obligate him to sell his utensils and purchase lesser ones and then accept charity.

לעולם ידחיק אדם עצמו ויתגלגל בצער ואל יצטרך לבריות ואל ישליך עצמו על הצבור. וכן צווי חכמים ואמרו עשה שבתך חל ואל תצטרך לבריות. ואפלו היה חכם ומכבד והעני יעסק באמנות ואפלו באמנות מנולת ולא יצטרך לבריות. מוטב לפשט עור בהמות נבלות ולא יאמר לעם חכם גדול אני כהן אני פרנסוני. ובכך צווי חכמים. גדולי החכמים היו מהם חוטבי עצים ונושאי הקורות ושואבי מים לגנות ועושי הפרזל והפחמים ולא שאלו מן הצבור ולא קבלו מהם כשנתנו להם

A person should always constrain himself and bear hardship rather than appeal to people and claim from the community. Our Sages commanded, saying: "Make your Sabbaths as weekdays, and do not appeal to people." Even a distinguished sage who becomes poor should involve himself in a profession - even a degrading one - rather than appeal to people. It is preferable for a person to skin the hide of animal carcasses, rather than tell people: "I am a great sage..." or "I am a priest, grant me sustenance." Our Sages commanded conducting oneself in such a manner. There were great sages who were woodchoppers, porters of beams, water-carriers for gardens, and iron-smelters and makers of charcoal, but they did not ask anything from the community, nor did they accept gifts that were given to them.

Priorities in Society

When we turn to politics, I claim that revolutionary methods are as necessary as they are in international affairs. Here, one of our main objectives would seem to be the deliverance of human personality from the crushing conditions of poverty, ignorance and disease. Insofar as modern legislation has tended to be religious in character, advance has been made. It may be that on the material side we lose profit when we maintain the weakest section of the population... We are concerned, moreover, that he should have the means and opportunity to acquire a decent home, and to enjoy some degree of leisure and recreation. Indeed, bad housing, too vast a subject to be dealt with here, affecting as it does the whole physical and spiritual well-being of our people, is an intolerable evil. Bad housing may be approved by the worshippers of Mammon, for it may be an advantage to men regarded merely as ratepayers; I must be swept away by those who love God and respect human personality.

Lily Montagu, May 1943. In Memory of Lily H. Montagu. Some extracts from her Letters and Addresses, ed. Eric Conrad, 1967

(translations based on Sefaria)

Poverty in the UK – Questions and Answers

(figures from August 2024)

How many people in the UK are poor?

- According to a Government report, 11.4, million people were living in relative poverty in 2022/3, rising to 14.3 million after housing costs.
- This includes 3.2 million children, 4.3 million after housing costs.
- In October 2023 3.4 million households (58%) reported not having enough money for food.
- 61% of destitute households can't afford food; 59% heating, 51% toiletries
- 2.2 million pensioners live in poverty.

What does 'poverty' mean?

- 'Relative poverty' refers to a household with income below 60% of median income.
- At this level of income, rising costs mean households struggle to afford the basics.
- Destitution is defined as : when individuals or families don't have two or more of six essentials (Food, heating, clothes, toiletries, light, shelter)
- 'Persistent poverty' means living in poverty for three out of four years.

Who does poverty affect?

Poverty affects everyone!

- 7 out of 10 children living in poverty have at least one parent in paid work.
- Working families comprise majority the (66%) of children in relative low income, although poverty is more likely if households are workless (because more families are working).
- However, some groups are disproportionately affected:
 - Poverty rates are highest in West Midlands, North East and London
 - 47% of children from black and minority ethnic groups are in poverty, compared to 24% of white children.
 - 31% of disabled people were in poverty (2021/2)

Why don't Benefits help?

- Universal Credit is £91 a week for a single adult – insufficient to cover essentials.
- For a family not in work, benefits covered less than half of what a family with two children required in 2023 (Child Poverty Action Group)
- The two-child benefit cap contributes to children in large families being more likely to be in poverty: 14.8% of single child families are in poverty compared to 36.7% in families with three or more children.

How are children affected?

Children are most likely to experience persistent poverty.

As well as suffering deprivation, including hunger, children in poverty suffer social exclusion:

- 38% of parents can't afford one week's holiday away with children not with relatives.
- 8% of children are in homes which can't afford to have friends round for tea or snack once a fortnight.
- 8% of children can't afford a hobby or leisure activity.
- 6% of children can't afford to go on a school trip once a term

Sources and further reading:

Poverty in the UK: House of Commons Library.

<https://researchbriefings.files.parliament.uk/documents/SN07096/SN07096.pdf>

UK Poverty 2024. Joseph Rowntree Foundation: <https://www.jrf.org.uk/uk-poverty-2024-the-essential-guide-to-understanding-poverty-in-the-uk>

Child Poverty Action Group: <https://cpag.org.uk>