

The Moral Imperative for Jews to Fight for Economic Justice

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I was a warrior in the War on Poverty.

President Lyndon Johnson started that war fifty years ago.

Today, I am angry.

Today, I am ashamed.

Our country has failed. We have not lived up to our own standards of decency and fairness. We tolerate crushing poverty in the midst of plenty.

President Johnson declared war on poverty in his first State of the Union address, on January 8, 1964. He said,

This administration today, here and now, declares unconditional war on poverty in America. We shall not rest until that war is won. The richest nation on earth can afford to win it. We cannot afford to lose it.

The program I shall propose will emphasize a cooperative approach to help that one-fifth of all American families with incomes too small to meet even their basic needs. Our chief weapons will be better schools, and better health, and better homes, and better training, and better job opportunities to help more Americans escape from squalor and misery and unemployment.

Fifty years later, we have failed. But that failure must not defeat us. Rather, we must keep trying. We as Jews in particular have a religious obligation to do our part.

I began law school in August, 1964. That month President Johnson signed into law his Economic Opportunity Act. That first enactment in the war on poverty established the Office of Economic Opportunity. OEO administered the local application of federal funds targeted against poverty.

The following year OEO granted funds to Harvard Law School to create the Community Legal Assistance Office in Cambridge.

I volunteered in that legal clinic as a student. When I graduated in 1967 I went to work there. I stayed for four years. I ran the clinic. We represented the poor people who were our clients. Every day we saw the face of poverty and the horrendous conditions in which our clients lived. Unheated apartments. Unfair and burdensome welfare regulations. Hungry children. Disease. No decent health care. Substandard education.

When I left CLAO in 1971 I worked for the following eight years for the Commonwealth of Massachusetts. I served first in the Office of Human Services. Then I worked as General Counsel of the Department of Public Welfare.

For those twelve years I devoted myself full-time to the war on poverty. In the years since then, I volunteered in organizations like the American Jewish Congress and the Jewish Alliance for Law and Social Action. We worked on legislative and judicial solutions to some of the same problems.

So how are we doing in the effort to fight poverty? We are losing.

For too many years we have tolerated widespread misery in the midst of unprecedented plenty. Our country has never before experienced such a shocking imbalance between rich and poor.

A tiny number of top earners are doing better than ever. The average annual income of those in the top 1% is one million two hundred and sixty-four thousand dollars. Between 1978 and 2011, average compensation of American chief executive officers increased by 727 percent.

Meanwhile, pay for the average private-sector nonsupervisory worker rose by less than six percent. And at the bottom, tens of millions of Americans struggle with economic insecurity or devastating destitution.

Sasha Abramsky documents this tragedy in his book, The American Way of Poverty: How the Other Half Still Lives. Fifteen percent of Americans, about 47 million people, live at or below the government-defined poverty line. But that figure itself is ridiculous. Last year that line was \$11,490 for a single individual, or \$23,550 for a family of four. To put it mildly, if 47 million people are living on so little money, many millions more are poor by any reasonable definition.

Six years after the collapse of our economy in 2008, we are supposedly recovering from that collapse. But only a negligible number of poor Americans have been lifted from poverty by that recovery. Instead, almost all the additional wealth generated by a growing economy goes to those who already have the most.

The percentage of people in poverty today is about the same as in 1993, and in 1983. In fact, a much higher portion of Americans lives in poverty today than was true in the mid-1970s.

We as a society are choosing to ignore the needs of tens of millions of Americans. We have ignored those needs for much of the period since the War on Poverty went out of fashion. These ignored Americans include kids who are forced to choose between applying to college or dropping out of school and getting dead-end jobs to support parents who have lost not only their jobs but also their homes.

Here's just one story of many. Ellen is 72 years old. She is too sick to take the bus to work at Walmart. She has to pay her neighbors gas money to drive her to her job, but she is paid so little she routinely either eats 88-cent TV dinners or goes to bed hungry.

In New York City, nearly half the city's residents are economically insecure. In Detroit, more than a third of residents live below the official poverty line. In New Orleans, two-thirds of African-American kids under the age of 5 live in poverty. And the list goes on.

This country has more than enough resources to grapple with poverty. What we lack is not resources but political will and empathy. One of the obscene scandals of our age is our toleration of so much misery in a country with a \$17 trillion economy. We accept widespread child hunger. We allow a significant part of the labor force to work full-time or more than full-time and yet still be unable to pay basic bills.

We as Jews have a moral obligation to enlist in the fight for economic justice. Jewish law and Jewish tradition demand this of us.

We read this morning that we must be gracious and compassionate, abounding in kindness and faithfulness.

The obligation to work for a just society is ingrained in Jewish ethics. We are required to work for a society in which all citizens have an equal chance for advancement. We must not stand idly by intolerable poverty.

The demand that we protect the needy, the poor, the widow and the orphan runs throughout our tradition. Here is a small sample:

There shall be no needy among you - for Adonai will surely bless you . . . if you diligently listen to the voice of Adonai. . . . If there is among you a needy person, . . . you shall not harden your

heart, nor shut your hand from your needy brother; but you shall surely open your hand unto him.¹

You shall not mistreat any widow or fatherless child. If you do mistreat them, and they cry out to me, I will surely hear their cry, and my wrath will burn, and I will kill you with the sword, and your wives shall become widows and your children fatherless.²

You shall not pervert the justice due to the stranger or to the fatherless, or take a widow's garment in pledge, but you shall remember that you were a slave in Egypt and the Lord your God redeemed you from there; therefore I command you to do this. "When you reap your harvest in your field and forget a sheaf in the field, you shall not go back to get it. It shall be for the stranger, the fatherless, and the widow, that the Lord your God may bless you in all the work of your hands. When you beat your olive trees, you shall not go over them again. It shall be for the stranger, the fatherless, and the widow. When you gather the grapes of your vineyard, you shall not strip it afterward. It shall be for the stranger, the fatherless, and the widow."³

Is this the fast that I have chosen? Is it not instead to share your bread with the hungry and bring the homeless poor into your house?⁴

Give justice to the weak and the fatherless; maintain the right of the afflicted and the destitute.⁵

In our day it is not our obligation personally to feed and clothe and house the needy. But it is our obligation to study the issue of poverty and to take collective action through our political leaders to alleviate poverty in the ways that are possible.

Two issues in particular offer us the opportunity to take action against poverty.

The first is to raise the shockingly low minimum wage, a mere \$7.25 nationally and \$8.00 here in Massachusetts. In both the Congress and our state house there are bills pending to raise that wage to a level of

¹ Deuteronomy 15

² Exodus 22

³ Deuteronomy 24

⁴ Isaiah 58

⁵ Psalm 82

ten or eleven dollars over the next couple of years. Both of those bills should be enacted. We should support them. After Shabbat I will send an email with details on how to do that.

If you are a careful reader of the Braintree Forum you will have read a contrary opinion by Bob Ruplenas in his weekly column called “The Jaundiced Eye.” Last week that column carried this headline: “Democrats keep playing their ‘inequality’ side show.” Ruplenas made the following claim in the course of opposing any change to the minimum wage. He said, “Study after study shows that increasing the minimum wage results in increased unemployment among the underclass.”

That is false. It’s just plain false.

The overwhelming weight of opinion in reputable studies is just the opposite: increasing the minimum wage does NOT increase unemployment among the underclass.

Last Sunday The New York Times devoted a full-page editorial to this topic. The headline read “The Case for a Higher Minimum Wage.” In this comprehensive editorial the Times asked the rhetorical question, “Does an increase in the minimum wage kill jobs?” The answer was, “No, it does not.” The editorial said,

The minimum wage is one of the most thoroughly researched issues in economics. Studies in the last 20 years have been especially informative. Economists have compared states that raised the wage above the federal level with those that did not. They found that increases in the minimum wage have lifted pay without hurting employment.

And it’s not just the Times that says so. So say also in a recent public letter more than 600 economists, among them Nobel laureates and past presidents of the American Economic Association.

We need to raise the minimum wage. I ask you to join me in that effort by urging our representatives in Washington and in Boston to bring the issue to a vote and to vote “yes.”

We have one other pending matter where we can and should make a difference. That’s extending unemployment benefits to the long-term unemployed.

In this case also, bills are pending to help those who are looking for work and have not found it after lengthy searches. Until six weeks ago they could count on unemployment benefits to help in a small way to feed and clothe and house their families while they searched for work. Those benefits expired in December. Efforts to restore them failed by a

single vote in the Senate last week. The Senate voted 59 in favor of continuing those benefits, but they needed 60 votes because of a filibuster.

Republicans and Democrats, many from the nation's most economically depressed states, had been trying to reach a solution. They wanted to allow people who had exhausted their unemployment insurance to continue receiving benefits. The condition for supporting the bill was reducing costs elsewhere to offset the costs of the bill. They found those reductions, but still the bill failed by one vote. Some lawmakers claimed they did not like the particulars of the offset measures and so voted "no."

I want us to remain aware of this debate. It is not over. The measure will come up again. We need to be on the side that supports the needs of the long-term unemployed. After Shabbat I will send an email with information on how to support this law.

President Franklin D. Roosevelt said, "The test of our progress is not whether we add more to the abundance of those who have much, it is whether we provide enough for those who have little."

President John F. Kennedy said, "If a free society cannot help the many who are poor, it cannot save the few who are rich."

President Lyndon Johnson declared war on poverty and succeeded in getting Congress to join him.

Now it's our turn. Let's work together to fight poverty, in keeping with the requirements of our tradition.