

Jewish Attitudes to Wealth and Poverty

Judaism as a religion accepts that there will always be differences in wealth and that there is nothing intrinsically wrong with wealth creation. Poverty is seen as a dire evil and is certainly not divinely ordained. However the Torah set out a series of measures that in its day approximated to the modern welfare state. Every seven years those who had been forced (through poverty) to sell themselves into slavery had to be freed by their master and given the means to start afresh. Every fifty years there would be the Jubilee when land was returned to its original possessors. During the harvest the poor were to be allowed to glean from the fallen sheaves (which were dropped accidentally and not allowed to be retrieved) and from the corner of the field that was deliberately left by the harvesters. The poor also received a tithe in the third and sixth year of the seven year cycle.

With the end of national independence and the development of a mercantile economy, as a supplement to an agrarian one, the Rabbis took the principles laid down in the Torah regarding care for the poor and developed the concept of Tzedakah which had been mentioned in the Torah in passing but was now elaborated upon. The nearest equivalent words in English are "social justice". This is based upon the idea that we are possessors, but not owners, of what we have. We are guardians of our property, but not its owners. Therefore we must use our possessions for a Godly purpose. The Rabbis understood this to mean both absolute and relative poverty so that the dignity of the fallen is protected and they are spared humiliation of having fallen on hard times from a position of great wealth. The psychological factor in poverty is dealt with by the command that even one in receipt of charity must give charity.

Therefore every newly constituted Jewish community set up a charitable fund as soon as it was able to do so. The care of the itinerant poor was written into the service on Friday night and food was provided in the synagogue for wayfarers. Nowadays demographic changes have led to an ageing community. Therefore a plethora of organizations have arisen to care for the elderly, the sick and the disabled. While these organisations receive some funding from the state they rely greatly on funds raised from the Jewish community particularly with appeals at New Year and Passover. At those times there can be over 20 separate appeals from local, national and international Jewish charities. There is a daily collection in most synagogues and some have a collection on Thursdays to help those that can't afford the cost of Shabbat. Tzedakah is built into the very fabric of Jewish life.