

Shabbat - 8th day Passover

April 30, 2016

This Week's Text

לֹא־תֹאכַל עֲלֵיוֹ תִמְצַח שִׁבְעַת יָמִים תֹּאכַל־עֲלֵיוֹ מִצּוֹת לֶחֶם עֲנִי כִּי בְּהִפְזוֹן יָצֵאתָ מֵאֶרֶץ מִצְרַיִם לִמְעַן תִּזְכֹּר
אֶת־יוֹם יְצִאתְךָ מֵאֶרֶץ מִצְרַיִם כֹּל יְמֵי חַיֶּיךָ

Eat unleavened bread with it; seven days you should eat unleavened bread, even the לֶחֶם עֲנִי for it was hurriedly that you came out of the land of Egypt. Therefore you will remember the day when you came out of the land of Egypt all the days of your life.

Linking Our Text to Modern Israel

These verses describe the unleavened bread we eat during Passover as *lechem oni* which, during the Seder, we call by its Aramaic name: *Halachma Anya*. Typically, *Hagaddot* translate this as ‘bread of affliction,’ which we eat to remember the hardships of our ancestors. Rabbi Akiva chooses to read the text as *lechem ani*, or, “bread of poverty,” harkening to the message communicated in the seder: *let all who are hungry come and eat*. Rabbi Shmuel reads the word as *lechem oni*, relating to *oni'im* “many words” because many words are proclaimed over it. This refers to the lengthy recounting of the Exodus as we gather at the Seder table, upon which ‘it’ - matzah - is served (*BT Pes. 36a*).

These multiple interpretations point to the fact that rabbinic sages sought to inculcate important values through Passover observance. In particular, Rabbi Akiva’s message of *lechem oni* - caring for the poor - resonates throughout the Seder experience. Few actually invite the hungry to their Seder tables, but many contribute to special Passover funds that exist in any Jewish community. *Ma’ot chitim*, “the wheat fund,” or *kimcha d’pischea*, “Passover flour,” address hunger and ensure that at this sacred time all are able to share in the Passover rituals.

What are we to make of the statement in the previous chapter that is also found in this week’s reading? “*The poor will never cease out of the land: therefore I command you, saying, You shall open your hand wide for your brother, to your poor, and your needy, in your land.*” [Deut 15:11] Is there truly a tradition of acceptance that there will always be poverty? Is a community obliged to care for its poor?



Additional References:
[Yad Eliezer](#) - Israel’s Largest Poverty Relief Agency

[OpEd](#) post from summer 2014

[Latet](#) addresses both immediate and long-term needs of the poor

[YNet December 2014](#): Latet’s claim that Israeli officials underestimated the poverty level

Poverty in Israel poses a legitimate contemporary challenge. Socioeconomic statistics are bleak. According to the government's Social Security branch (the NII), in 2014 there were 1.6 million people living under the poverty line, including more than 750,000 children. The charitable organization *Latet* reported an even more grievous figure: 31.6 percent of the country's population, some 2.5 million people (nearly 1 million of whom are children), live in poverty.

Following these reports, Israeli government officials began investigating poverty mitigation initiatives, prompting them to create a special committee within their Welfare and Social Services Ministry in 2013 that goes by the name: War on Poverty. The fifty members of this committee are academics, non-government workers, and representatives from government ministries and local municipalities. Five subcommittees address both immediate concerns and long-term strategies to combat the conditions that allow for such high poverty rates. These subcommittees are: 1) employment and economics, 2) individual family and community, 3) housing, 4) education, and 5) health.

Despite these efforts, the government continues to fall short in addressing immediate needs. The poor rely primarily on charitable organizations for their daily subsistence. Sixty thousand families depend on organizations like *Latet* and *Yad Eliezer* to avoid starvation. In addition to putting food on the tables of poor families, these charities mobilize and motivate the public to recognize the need and to give generously. In addition, they lobby for shifts in national priorities to include doing more to combat poverty. Despite their efforts, several of these NGO's claim that at least 25% of the children they support go to sleep hungry a few times each month, 22% of the children do not bring food to school each day, and 45% of the children from these impoverished families attend special boarding schools due to the economic insecurity of their families.

By the 8th day (or for some of us the 7th day), Passover draws to a close. The matzah crumbs lingering on tables, chairs, and floors can serve as a reminder to everyone that this "bread of affliction" or "bread of the poor" represents an ageless, contemporarily relevant problem in contemporary Israel.

Discussion Questions:

1. *Latet* reports that 93% of their organization's budget comes from public donations; more than two million Israelis have donated food and goods. Over 100,000 volunteers have participated in activities. To what extent should the government rely on the charity of Israeli citizens? Should feeding the hungry be a duty for private citizens and groups or do you think governments should take primary responsibility for meeting immediate social needs?
2. Should Jewish citizens be given priority Arab citizens in terms of job opportunities and charitable giving? As a Jewish State, is Israel obliged to open the doors to all who are hungry and in need?
3. Consider the Jews of the Old Yishuv, prior to modern Zionism, who lived off *halukah* and those early Zionists who started the *kibbutzim* and *moshavim* supported by the Rothschilds and other wealthy Jews. Reflect on the current scenario of Israel continuing to receive from the diaspora millions of dollars in contributions to worthy causes.