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## Putting Jewish values on poor Americans' dinner tables

Thursday, October 6, 2011 | by Abby J. Leibman

At Yom Kippur, through tefillah, teshuvah and tzedakah, we recommit ourselves to improving our relationship with God and with our community. It is a time of reflection, repentance and responsibility.

So as Jews, what is our responsibility to the rising number of American families suffering from hunger and poor nutrition?

This is a question that Mazon: A Jewish Response to Hunger asks not only during the High Holy Days, but every day, as we seek to embody the Jewish ideals of tzedakah and tikkun olam.



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The answer — or at least part of it — lies in the Farm Bill, which funds nutrition programs, farm subsidies and emergency food programs. But in order for the Farm Bill to effectively address our nation's hunger issues and provide better access to healthier food, it needs both safeguards and changes. Only then will the Farm Bill reflect the values we as Jews have chosen to uphold.

First, we want the Farm Bill to protect and increase funding for the federal Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (or SNAP, formerly called food stamps) to provide for the minimum nutrition needs for everyone who qualifies. SNAP is the cornerstone of our nation's efforts to reduce hunger and promote better nutrition for families in need.

Forty-six million Americans, including one in four children, rely on SNAP benefits to eat. But current levels of SNAP assistance are inadequate to support a consistently healthy diet. After the benefits run out — which often happens after three weeks — families must either buy low-cost, highly processed and unhealthy food with what little money they might have, or worse, they must skip meals altogether. What kind of choice is that?

That's not all. Although the block grants recommended by the House appropriations bill were defeated in the Senate, there still exists a threat of block granting in the Farm Bill. Without question, block granting SNAP will threaten its very existence.

In a block grant system, states would receive a fixed amount of federal funding for nutrition programs. But once the money reaches a state's coffers, it can spend that money in any way it sees fit, even for programs unrelated to nutrition. Without a guarantee that SNAP provide adequate resources for families to meet their most basic needs and put healthy food on the table, the Farm Bill would abandon those who depend on food assistance for survival — flouting our Jewish ideals in the process.

Second, we believe there is a pressing need to create incentives for small farmers to make their products more accessible to all Americans. The Farm Bill's provisions include subsidies for agricultural commodities such as corn and soybeans, virtually excluding farms that grow less-industrialized fruits and vegetables for consumers. Subsidies for smaller farms could help reduce the cost of produce at neighborhood grocery stores — an improvement that would help all families stretch their food dollar to purchase more nutritious food.

Third, we believe that food distributed through the Emergency Food Assistance Program — often known

as the Farm Bill's "surplus" food program — should be more nutritious, as well. Much of the TEFAP menu consists of canned fruits and vegetables, white rice, high-sodium soups and meats that tend to be high in saturated fat. What does it say about our priorities as a nation when we're not giving the poor and the elderly better food options, and in the process, exacerbating long-term health conditions such as diabetes, hypertension and obesity that are often caused by a poor diet?

We want to see a much greater emphasis on foods that contain less processed sugar, less sodium, less saturated fat, and which contain more whole grains and fiber. We need not sacrifice health and well-being in order to provide sustenance to those in need, and we cannot heal the world until we heal ourselves.

A Jewish response to the Farm Bill requires not just education on each of these important issues, but engagement as well. So today I challenge you to help Mazon educate members of Congress, especially members of the House and Senate Agriculture Committees, about the importance of these protections and changes to the Farm Bill.

Urge them to be proactive about ensuring that families in need can put healthy, nutritious food on their tables every day. Then, and only then, can we declare that the Farm Bill manifests Jewish values and our commitment to true tzedakah.

**Abby J. Leibman** is president and CEO of Mazon: A Jewish Response to Hunger, a national nonprofit dedicated to preventing and alleviating hunger among people of all faiths and backgrounds. For more information, please visit <http://www.mazon.org>.