

Judaism's Commitment to Caring for the Poor and Hungry

In addition to excerpts from selected weekly Torah portions, MAZON has also compiled this list of Jewish texts that speak to our tradition's commitment to caring for the poor and hungry.

Isaiah 32:17

And the work of tzedakah shall bring peace.

Isaiah 58:7-8, 10-11

Is it not to share your bread with the hungry, and bring the homeless poor into your house; when you see the naked to cover him, and not to hide yourself from your own flesh? Then shall your light break forth like the dawn, and your healing shall spring up speedily, your righteousness shall go before you, the glory of the Eternal shall be your rear guard. If you shall pour yourself out for the hungry and satisfy the desire of the afflicted, then shall your light rise in the darkness and your gloom be as the noonday. And the eternal will guide you continually, and satisfy your desire with good things, and make your bones strong, and you shall be like a watered garden, like a spring of water, whose waters fail not.

Proverbs 14:31

He that oppresses the poor blasphemes his maker, but he that is gracious to the poor honors God.

Proverbs 14:34

Tzedakah exalts a nation.

Psalms 72:2, 4

May the ruler of the land judge your people with righteousness, and your poor with justice... May the ruler champion the cause of the poor among the people, give deliverance to the needy, and crush those who wrong them.

Psalms 82:3-4

Defend the poor and the orphan; deal justly with the poor and the destitute. Rescue the weak and the needy; deliver them from the hand of the wicked.

Mishnah Sanhedrin 4:5

Therefore only one person was created to teach you that whosoever kills a single soul the Bible considers to have killed a complete world. And whosoever sustains and saves a single soul, it is as if that person sustained a whole world.

Ben Sira

A small bit of bread may be life to the poor; one who deprives them of it sheds blood.

Pirke Avot 2:5

Hillel said, do not separate yourself from the community.

Avot 3:21

Rabbi Elazar ben Azaria: Without Torah there is no social order; without social order there is no Torah. Without wisdom, there is no conscience; without conscience, there is no wisdom. Without knowledge, there is no understanding; without understanding there is no knowledge. Without sustenance, there is no Torah; without Torah there is no sustenance.



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Nedarim 81a

Do not neglect the children of the poor, for from them will go forth the Law.

Baba Metziah 21b

Figs found on the road, even if found beside a field [covered with figs], and also figs found under a fig-tree that overhangs the road, may be appropriated by the finder without him being guilty of robbery, and they are free from tithing . . . [why?] Rav Papa answered: Figs become filthy/ disgusting when they [drop to the ground].

Baba Batra 9a

Rabbi Assi said, "Tzedakah is equally important as all the other mitzvot put together."

Baba Batra 11a

A story is told of Binyamin HaTzaddik, who was the supervisor of the community's tzedakah funds. Once, when food was scarce, a woman came to him and said, "Rabbi, feed me!" He replied, "I swear there is nothing in the tzedakah fund." She said, "If you do not feed me, a woman and her seven children will die." So he fed her from his own money.

Gittin 7b

Even a poor person who receives tzedakah must give from what he receives.

Gittin 61a

Our Rabbis taught, "Give sustenance to the poor of the non-Jews along with the poor of Israel. Visit the sick of the non-Jews along with the sick of Israel. Bury the dead of the non-Jews along with the dead of Israel. [Do all these things] because of the ways of peace."

Ta'anit 20b

When Rav Huna would eat a meal, he would open his door and say, "Whoever is in need, let that person come and eat."

Jerusalem Talmud Demai 4:1/ Gittin 61a

In a city where non-Jews and Jews live, the tzedakah collectors collect from Jews and non-Jews and support Jewish and non-Jewish poor; we visit Jewish and non-Jewish sick and bury Jewish and non-Jewish dead, and comfort Jewish and non-Jewish mourners, and return lost goods of non-Jews and Jews, to promote the ways of peace.

Midrash Vayikra Rabba

How shall a man be of use in the world if he is not inclined by temperament to be a student? He should devote time to the public welfare and the collection of charities.

Midrash Vayikra Rabba 34:14

Some say that careful inquiry should be made in regard to beggars who ask for clothing, but no inquiries should be made in regard to food. Others say that in regard to clothing also no inquiries should be made.

Midrash Vayikra Rabba 34:2

Rabbi Pinchas, in the name of Rabbi Reuven, said: "Whoever gives a perutah to a poor man, the Holy Blessed One will give him life. For indeed, is he really giving only a perutah? No, he gives him his life! How can we explain this? If a loaf of bread costs 10 perutot and a poor man standing in the marketplace has only nine, then if someone comes and gives him a perutah so that he is able to buy a loaf of bread and, having eaten it, feels refreshed, the Holy Blessed One says to the donor, 'In your case too, when your soul presses to break loose from your body, I shall return it to you.'"

Midrash Vayikra Rabba 34:4



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If the rich man says to the poor man, "Why do you not go and work and get food? Look at those hips! Look at those legs! Look at that fat body! Look at those lumps of flesh!" The Holy Blessed One says to the rich person, "It is not enough that you have not given him anything of yours and helped him out, but you must set an evil eye upon (make fun of/mock) what I have given him, must you?"

Sifra 109b on Leviticus 25:35

If your brother waxes poor, you shall not suffer him to fall. He is like a load resting on a wall; one can then hold it and prevent it from falling, but if it has once fallen to the ground, five cannot raise it up again.

Midrash Tannaim on Numbers 28:2

God says to Israel, "My children, whenever you give sustenance to the poor, I impute it to you as though you gave sustenance to Me." Does God then eat and drink? No, but whenever you give food to the poor, God accounts it to you as if you gave food to God.

Sifre on Parshat Re'eh

To one for whom bread is suitable, give bread; to the one who needs dough, give dough; to one for whom money is required, give money; to one for whom it is fitting to put the food in that one's mouth, put it in.

Midrash Tehillim 82:3

Defend the poor and the orphan; do justice to the afflicted and needy.

Midrash Psalms 118:17

When you are asked in the world to come, "What was your work?" and you answer, "I fed the hungry," you will be told, "This is the gate of Adonai, enter into it, you who have fed the hungry."

Mishnah Torah, Laws of Contributions to the Poor, ch. 9:1-3

1. Every city with even a few Jewish people must appoint tzedakah collectors, people who are well-known and trustworthy, who will go door to door each week before Shabbat and take from everyone what they are expected to give. And they distribute the money before each Shabbat and give to each poor person enough food for 7 days – this is called the kupah.
2. Collectors are also appointed to travel through public places to gather the bread and foodstuffs and fruits and money from whomever volunteers it, and they distribute it in the evening among the poor, giving each poor person enough to get through the day.
3. We have never seen or heard of a community of Israel without a kupah for tzedakah; however, not all communities have had a tamchui. Today the custom is for the kupah collectors to collect each day and distribute before Shabbat.

Mishnah Torah 6:6

If a stranger comes and says, "I am hungry. Please give me food," we are not allowed to check to see if he is honest or not; we must immediately give him food.

Mishnah Torah 10:7-14

The highest level of tzedakah, exceeded by none, is that of the person who assists a poor person by providing him with a gift or loan or by accepting him into a business partnership or by helping him to find employment – in a word, by putting him where he can dispense with other people's aid.

Mishnah Pe'ah, Maimonides on Leviticus 19:9-10

Pe'ah (corners) should be left at the very end of the field so that the poor may gather (the crops left in the corner) in anonymity; so that the poor should know exactly where and when to obtain the pe'ah due to them, without wasting their time waiting for the farmer to designate part of the field; so that passersby can see that the farmer has fulfilled



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this obligation; and so that the farmer cannot claim falsely that another part of the field was already designated, in order to evade fulfilling the obligation.

Hilchot Deot, Maimonides 3:3

A person should see to it that the body is kept healthy and strong in order that they may be upright to know God. For it is impossible to understand and comprehend wisdom when one is hungry and ailing or if one's limbs ache.

Hilchot Isurai Mizbayach 7:11

When you give food to a hungry person, give him your best and sweetest food.

Rabenu Bahya (late 13th century)

Job lauds himself that his home was wide open to all wayfarers, strangers, and sojourners and that he endured that no one regardless of his nationality ever lodged in the street. Job was a righteous person and he was kind to all people as well as to his own countrymen. This should be an inspiration for man to broaden the extent of his compassion, as the sages said, "one who shows mercy to God's creatures will be shown mercy in heaven" (Shabbat 151b). We may conclude a fortiori that if Job, who did not know Torah, practiced this quality of kindness, the Israelites, who have accepted the Torah, are certainly obliged to practice it in all aspects. Seder Hasidim If a community lacked a synagogue and a shelter for the poor, it was first obligated to build a shelter for the poor.

Shulchan Aruch, Yoreh De'ah 249:7

One should give up to a fifth of one's possessions – that is the mitzvah to an extraordinary degree. One tenth is an average percentage and less is considered miserly.

Rabbi Shelom of Karlin (18th Century)

If you want to raise a person from mud and filth, do not think it is enough to keep standing on top and reaching a helping hand down to the person. You must go all the way down yourself, down into mud and filth. Then take hold of the person with strong hands and pull the person and yourself out into the light.

Passover Haggadah

This is the bread of affliction our ancestors ate in the land of Egypt. Let all who are hungry come and eat; let all who are in need come share our Passover.



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