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### Opening Our Eyes, Opening Our Hands: Confronting Madison's Homelessness Crisis

This summer, as I was running an errand with my two daughters, I approached the intersection of Odana and Whitney Way. I saw a man on the median holding a sign that said "Homeless and Hungry." The light turned red and I came to a stop. I reached over for a granola bar, rolled down my window, passed it through to him, and caught his eye for a second. The light turned green and I drove away.

I did a small, kind act. It wasn't at all significant in terms of expense, time, or emotional investment. But it was something.

We had held a few discussions last year in our community about giving *tzedakah* – money, food, or supplies to people in need – and as a result I had begun to give *tzedakah* more consistently. I started keeping granola bars in my purse, because I didn't want to hesitate when someone asked me for food or money. Part of my inspiration for change came from the Torah's teachings on justice. The Book of Deuteronomy couldn't be more direct:

If there is a needy person among you...do not harden your heart or shut your hand from your kinsman. Rather you must open your hand and lend him sufficient for his need in what he is lacking (Deut. 15:7-8).

But it wasn't just the Torah. As a parent, I didn't want to waver. Do we feed the homeless or don't we? Do we do it just when we feel like it? Do we give our money only to people who we think deserve it? I didn't want to instill a sense of waffling and judgment in my kids.

In our discussions on giving *tzedakah* I was particularly struck by a text written by the 19<sup>th</sup> century Rabbi Chayim of Sanz:

The merit of *tzedakah* is so great that I am happy to give to 100 beggars even if only one might actually be needy. Some people, however, act as if they are exempt from giving charity to 100 beggars in the event that one might be a fraud. (Darkai Chaim, 1962, p. 137)

What a startling thing to say – I mean, we are so quick to judge homeless people, people who live at the very margins of our society, who lack shelter and food and health care. People who have nowhere to go. A homeless person approaches us and we think, "He's a fraud. She's lazy. He's just going to buy whiskey with my money. Why doesn't she get a job?" We assume the worst about people, having no idea how they got to where they are and what it's like for them to sleep on the streets. We walk by, without asking them their story, much less looking up. Or we do give, but do it resentfully or self-righteously. It made me realize how powerless and

ashamed I feel when a homeless person asks something of me. Seeing a human being asking for food or money is such an ugly reminder of the stark inequalities in our city.

The Rabbis of the Talmud and medieval period talk about how much *tzedakah* we should give – a minimum of 10 percent and a maximum of 20 percent of our income. And also who is obligated to give – everyone, they say, even the poor. Everyone can give something.

They delve into the complexities of giving *tzedakah* – because in certain situations we don't have moral clarity – but they never suggest that we are exempt from giving. They don't tell us to ignore or judge the human being in front of us asking us for help. They go so far as to mandate that if someone claims that he or she has no money for food, we are to provide for them *without* checking their claims (Yoreh Deah 251:10).

Jewish tradition insists on the dignity of the poor. The Torah uses the word *achicha* – your brother – to refer to a poor person. We are not supposed to separate ourselves from the poor or see ourselves as inherently different from them. They are to be like siblings to us.

*Achicha* – he is your brother, she is your sister. By insisting on the dignity of the poor, the Torah changes the conversation, requiring us to move past our judgments and ensure that justice and kindness override skepticism and disdain. The Torah tells us to really *see* our brother and sister in front of us.

The concept of seeing, of noticing, of opening our eyes, is woven throughout our Torah portion this morning. Sarah and Abraham were very old and unable to have a child of their own, so Sarah tells Abraham to have a baby with her maidservant, Hagar. Abraham heeds her request and Hagar becomes pregnant. Hagar, gaining new confidence, shows contempt towards her mistress, Sarah, for she is the one who is pregnant. Abraham allows Sarah to abuse Hagar – so harshly that she runs away. In the wilderness Hagar has no way to survive. An angel tells her to return, and she gives birth to a son, Ishmael.

Sarah, Abraham, and Hagar both see and don't see. Entangled in complicated relationships, fighting for their dignity and survival, they look and they turn away. They see each other for who they really are even as they are blinded by their own narrow perspectives. They scrutinize each other so that they can jockey for power, but they are plagued by an inability to accurately perceive their situation. Their resentment engulfs them; their anger and shame cloud their vision.

The Torah seems to be reminding us that we too can be blind to what is before us. We allow our emotions to cloud our vision. When we see people experiencing homelessness, we don't see them as our brothers and our sisters. We don't see their humanity.

A few weeks ago I read that Mayor Soglin is working to make it illegal for someone who is standing on a median to approach an operating vehicle. The ACLU reminded the city that it couldn't directly target homeless people, because panhandling is protected as free speech under the U.S. Constitution, so Mayor Soglin broadened the proposal, making it about public

safety. It didn't target the homeless, because it would apply to anyone standing on a median, for any reason.

The Homeless Services Consortium of Dane County didn't quite see it that way. In a statement they issued this past July they wrote, "This amendment is a thinly veiled attempt to criminalize individuals seeking support from their community through panhandling on local roadways."

We don't want to see these people, because to really see them would mean that we are responsible, that we have to try to solve Madison's homelessness crisis. As Torrie Kopp Mueller, housing director of the YWCA and Board President of the Consortium remarked: "If we're concerned about people's safety, let's get them housing. Let's look at some actual solutions to the problem..."

*"Vateireh Sarah et ben Hagar hamitzrit yaldah l'Avraham – Sarah saw the son whom Hagar the Egyptian had borne to Abraham..."* Sarah, miraculously, had become pregnant at the age of 90 and given birth to a baby boy, Isaac. The Torah tells us that he grows older and Sarah weans him – meaning he will survive on his own. After that she saw the son whom Hagar had borne; she perceived him in a new way. Seeing him in this new way, she feels threatened by his presence. He has no purpose, he no longer belongs, he's taking up too much space and too many resources. Sometimes, when we open our eyes and see, our vision is clouded. We lack compassion. Sarah tells Abraham to banish both Hagar and Ishmael.

I'm afraid that Mayor Soglin may be seeing Madison's homeless as not really belonging to our city, not being full members of our community. He says that he is promoting safety through "compassion with rules," but like Sarah, he seems to demonstrate disdain for the most vulnerable among us. Commenting on his latest proposal to create public safety, Mayor Soglin says, "We have to protect individuals who don't know any better and insist on playing in the road."

Does he really think these people are just playing in the road? That they have nothing better to do than to mess up his beautiful city with their dirty faces? Is this why he pushed to create ordinances that fine homeless people \$439 for sitting on the planters at the top of State Street? Or why he tried to limit how long someone is allowed to sit on a public bench? Or why he plans to reintroduce an ordinance to ban sleeping on sidewalks overnight?

Just as Sarah sees the young Ishmael as a stranger, as someone who does not belong, it seems that Mayor Soglin sees the homeless as strangers. It doesn't seem like he sees their humanity.

I understand it can feel like a nuisance when you go out to dinner on State Street and people ask you for money. But if we reframe the situation, if we consider that each of these people is *achicha* – your brother, or your sister – then we start to ask different questions. Instead of "Why can't they just go somewhere else?" the question becomes, "How can we help them get the services that they need?" Or "What are real solutions to this problem?"

Karen Andro, an important advocate for the homeless in Madison, led some discussions in our Hebrew school last year. When she met with our younger students she took out a fresh dollar

bill and asked them how much it was worth. “One dollar,” they answered. She then asked one of them to crumple it up, throw it on the floor, and stomp on it. Afterwards she picked it up and asked, “How much is it worth?” “One dollar,” they answered again. “So it’s worth the same, even if it looks different?” she asked. Karen talked about what it’s like to live on the streets and why homeless people often look dirty, smell bad, and have wrinkled and sunburned skin. The students learned the term, *b’tzelem Elohim*, we are all created in the image of God – even people who are homeless. They are just as special as you and me.

Karen is intimately involved with people experiencing homelessness through her work at the First United Methodist Church on the Square. To Karen, these people aren’t numbers, they are human beings. She helped me understand what tremendous capacity we have – for feeling compassion, for being able to do the excruciatingly difficult work of serving these people, and for finding real solutions to homelessness.

But to do the work we need to know what’s going on. We have to understand the scope of this crisis.

First a look at the state of Wisconsin: The Wisconsin Coalition Against Homelessness estimates that on any given night about 20,000 people are homeless in the state of Wisconsin. Wisconsin ranks fifth in the country among states for an increase in homelessness, seeing a 24.5 percent rise between 2007 and 2015. According to the Wisconsin Department of Public Instruction, the number of homeless children rose 241 percent, from 5,354 in 2003 to 18,390 in 2015.

Lest we think that Dane County is a bright spot in our state, we should think again. According to the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development, the number of people who are experiencing homelessness in the state dropped slightly since 2010. But the number of homeless people in Dane County has increased by 37 percent since 2010.

On any given night in Madison 2,400 people are homeless. And half of them are children.

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Most of them are out of sight. Dean Mosiman and Doug Erickson, in their powerful series for the *Wisconsin State Journal* this summer entitled “Homeless in Madison: A City Challenged” write:

Indignities and trauma hound and scar them, from something as simple as needing to find a bathroom to the unthinkable: trading sex for a place to stay. They exit our jails and hospitals with no prospects but the streets. They arrive at our schools bleary-eyed and hungry, too distressed to learn. Taxpayers bear an immense financial cost for social services, medical care, police work.

We like to think they come here from elsewhere, and some do. But Madison creates its own homeless every day as a brutal rental market and low-wage jobs conspire against them. Second chances are few for anyone with little means, a criminal past or a low credit score.

The Madison School District identified 1,414 students as homeless over the course of the 2014-15 school year. That's 5.2 percent of the student body and an 89 percent increase since 2008-09. It includes children whose families are doubled up with other family members, sharing motel rooms or couches or living in cars, at campgrounds, or in shelters. Children who do not have stable housing have tremendous health and educational challenges. They are twice as likely to go hungry, nine times more likely to repeat a grade, and are four times more likely to drop out of school. (The Road Home, <http://trhome.org/press-releases.php>)

We tend to think of the homeless as a static category, as if all of them are chronically homeless, but many people move in and out of homelessness, lack secure housing, and live on the verge of eviction. Madison is not an affordable city for staggering numbers of people. According to a new report by the United Way of Wisconsin, 41 percent of the people who live in our county do not have enough money to cover basic living expenses like housing, child care, food, transportation, and health care. When life is this perilous, any set-back, even minor, can plunge someone into homelessness. (*Wisconsin State Journal*, [Report: 41 percent of Dane County households can't make ends meet](#), Sept. 14, 2016)

How can this be?

Our city's – and country's – lack of affordable housing is a major cause of homelessness. While the city has made some efforts in a positive direction, such as the Mayor's Affordable Housing Plan, homeless advocates say the city and county have no unified vision, no comprehensive plan, and no common goals with measurable outcomes. The crisis is so deep that much, much more is needed.

Harvard Professor Matthew Desmond painfully and painstakingly shows in *Evicted: Poverty and Profit in the American City* that there is a tremendous need for safe, decent, and affordable housing all over the country. A combination of stagnating or falling incomes and soaring housing costs has led to a huge crisis of evictions, which disproportionately affect African-American communities. Frequent, forced moves create instability, destroy the social fabric of a community, and leave people trapped in an endless cycle of poverty.

He writes, "Today, the majority of poor renting families in America spend over half of their income on housing, and at least one in four dedicates over 70 percent to paying the rent and keeping the lights on" (Matthew Desmond, *Evicted: Poverty and Profit in the American City*, 2016).

70 percent? And sometimes, he writes, even 80 or 90 percent? How can this be?

When Sarah tells Abraham to banish Hagar and Ishmael, he remains silent. He sees – "*Va-yayra hadavar me'od b'aynay Avraham* – The matter was very bad in Abraham's eyes" – but he remains silent. And so often we remain silent. We see injustice in our society, but we do not raise our voices.

So many people in Madison and throughout our country, like Hagar, have no place to go, no secure housing, no stable shelter. Hagar wanders in the wilderness, cast out, invisible. Her son becomes sick, and they are stranded in the intense desert heat without water.

It feels as if there is no solution as they sit on the very edge between life and death. Ishmael is not going to survive. Hagar turns away from her son: “*Al ereh b’mot hayeled* – Let me not look on as the child dies.”

But God hears the cry of the boy, and an angel of God calls to Hagar and tells her to lift up the boy and hold him by the hand. “*Vayiftach Elohim et ayneh-ha vatayray b’ayr mayim* – Then God opened her eyes and she saw a well of water.” Once she had the courage to open her eyes, to refuse to turn away, she found a way to save her son.

We too can find solutions – the problem of homelessness and affordable housing are daunting to address, but they are not impossible to fix. On this Rosh Hashanah, let us have that same courage – to open our eyes, to see the homeless before us with compassion, to treat them as *achicha*, as our brother or our sister, and not to remain silent.

Like Hagar, when we open our eyes we may see new possibilities. Let us raise our voices, demand that our city can do better, work towards real solutions, and create a vision where each person is treated with the dignity that the Torah demands.

L’shanah tovah, may it be a better year for our brothers and our sisters.

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Unless otherwise noted all information based on “[Homeless in Madison: A City Challenged](#),” by Dean Mosiman and Doug Erickson, *Wisconsin State Journal*, June-September, 2016.