

Temple Beth Am
WORKING TO END HOMELESSNESS IN OUR COMMUNITY

Background

Homelessness is not a new phenomenon in America. Before the Industrial Revolution, social and economic disparities were taken for granted and the acceptance of traditional class divisions caused a lack of sensitivity to the plight of poor people. That began to change as the late 19th century and the early 20th century saw hard-won increases in union membership, giving many Americans hope to rise out of poverty. That hope was briefly dashed during the Depression. Americans saw the specter of homelessness become common in cities and rural areas alike. Hoovervilles arose in urban areas. World War II brought the Depression to an end, and increased postwar industrialization and economic growth brought more jobs. By the 1960s, the opportunity to rise up out of poverty seemed a reality. The Johnson Administration's "War on Poverty" brought important social programs which, added to those originated in the New Deal, helped protect Americans from extremes of personal financial difficulties. The visibly homeless were mostly older alcoholic men, homeless for decades, who slept in religiously-based missions or lived in SROs (Single Room Occupancy hotels). Downtown Seattle's "Skid Road" offered many SROs, whose residents managed to support themselves by restaurant dishwashing or doing occasional light labor jobs. The federal government built public housing to shelter poor families.

But as Seattle and other urban areas in America began to expand in the 70s, the SROs and older apartment houses were knocked down to erect new corporate office buildings and hotels for increased tourist activity, the SROs disappeared. The federal Administration taking office in the 80s stopped funding public housing and the number of housing vouchers were reduced. In addition, the phenomenon of "deinstitutionalization" – the well-intentioned emptying-out of mental hospitals in favor of community services – emptied out the wards onto the streets. Former hospital residents became homeless without dependable housing or mental health care. The safety net of federal social services which had grown during the 60s and 70s was reduced; states and counties were expected to provide what had been federally funded. In 1980, cities could count on federal funds for 22% of their budgets, but by 1989, that figure was only 6%. Cities and counties were on their own. It was a perfect storm, the ideal setting for the rise of homelessness.

In 2001, the National Alliance to End Homelessness along with the federal Interagency Council on Homelessness (USICH) encouraged communities to create and implement plans to end homelessness. Counties around the country were mandated by the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD) to do "one night counts" of unsheltered individuals. King County launched its 10-Year Plan in 2005, emphasizing "housing first", an effort to quickly rehouse those who became homeless. However, before the 10-Year Plans could institute any real improvements, the country went into recession in 2008, and many more Americans dropped into poverty and homelessness.

In 2010, USICH released "Opening Doors: The Federal Strategic Plan to Prevent and End Homelessness", setting a 10-year path to end homelessness, with four goals: 1) end chronic homelessness by 2015; 2) end veteran homelessness by 2015; 3) end homelessness for families and children by 2020; 4) set a path to end all homelessness. Goals 1) and 2) have not yet been accomplished due to lack of funding. It is hoped that goal 3) will be accomplished on time, if funding is increased. Achieving Goal 4) will be extremely difficult because of the complexity of the "landscape" of homelessness, and the fact that it will demand major societal changes regarding housing and job creation. King County is now in the second year of the 4-year follow-on Plan to end homelessness called Allhome.

The unfortunate figures for the 2016 One Night Count in January are: 2,942 found without shelter in Seattle; 4,505 found homeless in King County. The King County total is a 20% increase from 2015. There is clearly more work to do to end homelessness in our community.

Jewish Values

As Jews, we cannot look away from the disaster that is called homelessness. *Hineini* is a word that appears a number of times in the Tanakh, in a number of different settings. It doesn't simply mean "I am here" in a locational sense. It means "I'm listening to what you tell me", and "I acknowledge your right to command me", and "I will do what you say," and most especially, "I trust you to tell me the right thing to do." It means "I am here" in every sense. *Hineini* expresses what we need to do to work to end homelessness.

Judaism teaches that helping fellow human beings in need, *tzedakah*, is not simply a matter of charity, but of responsibility, righteousness, and justice. In "The Stories That Shape Our Work to Eradicate Homelessness," the Religious Action Center of Reform Judaism tells us that our Jewish tradition calls on our communities to take care of those who are experiencing homelessness. Recognizing that people become housing insecure for a number of reasons, many of which are out of control of a single person, we have a communal responsibility to care for those who do not have a home. Implicit in our tradition is a suggestion that we help others willingly, knowing that they would help us if we fell into similar hard times. "

The Torah teaches, "And when you reap the harvest of your land, you shall not make clean riddance of the corners of your field when you reap, neither shall you gather any gleaning of your harvest: you shall leave them to the poor and to the stranger. Leviticus 23:22. When Isaiah questions us, "Wherefore have we fasted" (58:3), he hears the Eternal's teaching: "Is it not to deal thy bread to the hungry and that you bring the poor that are cast out to your house? When you see the naked, that you cover him, and that you not hide yourself from your own kin. Then shall the light blaze forth like the dawn." Isaiah 58:7-8.

Rabbi Jill Jacobs, Executive Director of T'ruah: The Rabbinic Call for Human Rights, says that Judaism does not specify the mechanism by which we carry out that communal responsibility. However, we must assume that our neighbors need secure housing. Charitable giving to housing organizations is one method to provide that housing, as is participating in group efforts to provide affordable housing, or direct contributions to poor or homeless families. However, homelessness is a large and complex problem and requires a more systemic approach. That means work on governmental policies and programs to lift people out of homelessness. Enlarging on that need for systemic work, Rabbi Jacobs explicates the seeming contradiction between Deuteronomy 15's two separate lines of text, "There shall be no needy among you", and "...for the poor shall never cease from your land." The resolution of that contradiction, she says, is to both give immediate help in loving kindness (*gemilut chasidim*) to those who are homeless, and to work long-term on the injustice of societal lack of housing (*tzedek tirdot*).

Moses Maimonides provides context to the duty of property owners toward those renting housing which is strikingly relevant to our 21st-century conditions. He says, for instance, that a landlord must allow tenants sufficient notice before ending their rental period so that they "will not be abandoned in the street" (*Mishneh Torah, Hilkhoh S'khirut 6:7*), and the landlord will be held responsible if that occurs. In addition, the *Tur* (Jacob ben Asher, a 14th century sage), the landlord must fix broken windows "if the tenant needs light...even if there is a lot of light" (*Hoshen Mishpat 314:1*). It is clear

that Judaism emphasizes that those who depend upon others for a place to live must be treated with respect and kindness.

Lastly, when Jews speak of their knowledge of homelessness, it is common to refer to the period that the Hebrews spent in the wilderness before going up to Canaan. Another much longer period of time, however, was spent by our ancestors – hundreds of years, in fact -- being forced to leave one area they'd hoped to make their home, and then starting over in another area where eventually the same situation occurred. Very seldom, and in very few places in the world, were they able to feel truly at home, at ease. Although America can now be experienced as a permanent home, the historical "memory" of those hundreds of years is still fresh. Our neighbors who are homeless live in that reality every day. They are never at ease, never at home, never knowing when they will be asked to leave. Our understanding of that experience and that feeling should spur us on to do what we can to bring them home.

Prior Temple Beth Am Action on Homelessness

Beth Am has presented a number of forums over the past 15 years for the congregation and the larger community on poverty, homelessness and hunger. Temple Beth Am was the first Seattle congregation to sign in support of the Ten Year Plan to End Homelessness in King County in 2005. In response to Maimonides' instruction to provide poor people with the means to raise up themselves, and after listening to residents of the Tent City homelessness encampment after their visit in 2003, Beth Am has for eleven years partnered with Jewish Family Service in the Homeless to Renter Program (H2R) which helps fund the move of homeless families with children into their own apartments. Beth Am hosted Tent City for the second time in 2005, and held a community forum on homelessness attended by members of the wider community. H2R was an important impetus for Beth Am being awarded the URJ's Fain Award in 2005. Temple members as a group and as individuals have lobbied in Olympia during legislative sessions for increased resources for poor and homeless Washington residents.

Current Efforts on Homelessness

A local shelter provider for women with children, Mary's Place, rotates through congregations throughout the year. As one of those congregations, Beth Am provides the women and their children with a safe, warm place to stay, meals, and companionship and care -- *gemulit chasidim*. For one of its two annual weeks of service, Beth Am covers the week over Christmas, which period is difficult for Christian congregations to cover. Mary's Place volunteers comprise a large number of Beth Am families, including teens, who gain a vision of how homelessness affects children. The teens have come to specialize in playing with the children between their arrival and their bedtime, allowing Mary's Place mothers a few hours of respite. In its 11 years of progress, H2R has helped more than 270 families regain homes, and provides education at our yearly fundraising event with speakers. Beth Am also participates in 6 separate meals programs, which include providing and serving meals off-campus at various organizations and packing lunches for a women's day shelter. Beth Am has continued to hold regular temple forums which provide members with the opportunity to gain education about homelessness. Congregation members, through their professional and personal lives, provide direct service and advocate in the community for services and housing for our homeless neighbors. In the near future, the H2R Committee hopes to invite Beth Am members who are property owners to participate in the Landlord Liaison Project, a local effort to increase the number of private housing units offered to homeless families.

RESOLUTION ON TEMPLE ACTIVITIES TO REDUCE HOMELESSNESS

WHEREAS the history of the Jewish people is marked by periods of homelessness and wandering, from the Exodus from Egypt and wandering in the desert for 40 years, to the centuries and millennia of wanderings that followed the destruction of the first and second temples in Jerusalem,

WHEREAS the Torah and Prophets teach that we are commanded to help clothe the naked, feed the hungry and shelter the wanderers in our midst,

WHEREAS the Reform Jewish Movement has strongly supported policy to end homelessness in the Union for Reform Judaism's 1989 resolution outlining a plan for commitment to increase the availability of affordable housing and to help provide the means for homeless people to make the transition from shelters and the street to permanent homes¹. WHEREAS Temple Beth Am has a long tradition of supporting housing rights that goes back to its support for equal housing rights in 1964,²

WHEREAS Temple Beth Am has engaged in numerous efforts on behalf of homeless populations over the past twenty five years, including support for refugees from the former Soviet Union, Bosnia, and El Salvador,

WHEREAS Temple Beth Am supported and endorsed the King County 2005 "Ten Year Plan to End Homelessness,"³

WHEREAS homelessness has been persistent for many reasons, as reflected in the accompanying white paper on homelessness,

WHEREAS Temple Beth Am joined other religious organizations and congregations in a friend of the court brief that recognized that hosting Tent City was an expression of religious belief,⁴

WHEREAS TEMPLE BETH AM has participated in numerous activities to support homeless individuals and families in the past fifteen years, including hosting Tent City in 2003⁵ and 2005 (April 21, 2005 Motion), developing the Homeless-2-Renter program in 2004,⁶ providing meals for numerous programs that serve the homeless, such as Angeline's Center and the YouthCare Orion Center, and hosting Mary's Place families semi-annually since August 2011, and

WHEREAS our religious school program includes lessons on repairing the world in general, and supporting temple programs to support homeless individuals and families in particular, through support of many of the programs mentioned above,

NOW THEREFORE the Board of Directors of Temple Beth Am RESOLVES:

¹ Resolution passed at 1989 Biennial; visit <http://www.rac.org/position-reform-movement-housing#sthash.ms5hrPjl.dpuf>

² Motion Approved January 1964, at special congregational meeting

³ 2005 Temple Beth Am Executive Committee action as reported in Temple Bulletin, January 2006.

⁴ *City of Woodinville v. Northshore United Church of Christ*, 166 Wn.2d 633 (2009).

⁵ January 2003 Motion and May 15, 2003 Report to the Board. See Temple Beth Am board meeting minutes.

⁶ Feb. 19, 2004 Motion. See also, Feb. 17, 2005 Report to the Board re: URJ's Fain Award to Temple Beth Am for Social Action projects including Tent City and H2R. See Temple Beth Am board meeting minutes.

- As part of the Temple's mission for social justice, Temple Beth Am reaffirms its support for programs and efforts through direct service, education and advocacy to help provide stable housing and other supports for homeless individuals and families. Temple Beth Am's Senior, Assistant and Associate Rabbis and the Board President can act and sign documentation as Temple Beth Am's agent, advocating in support of rights for homeless people and will inform the Congregation of the action(s) they have taken.
- Temple Beth Am's Senior, Assistant and Associate Rabbis and the Board President can act and sign documentation as agents of Temple Beth Am advocating support for the measures listed below:
 - Lobbying for more investment in the Washington State Housing Trust Fund
 - Supporting county and municipal legislation that restricts discrimination in rental housing and provides relief for renters experiencing large increases in rent.
 - Advocating and promoting public and private initiatives to increase the affordable housing stock in Puget Sound.
- Temple Committees that work on homelessness, are encouraged to address the religious basis for social justice activity to reduce homelessness and to coordinate with other committees to educate the membership. Committees that work on homelessness, in consultation with an appropriate Rabbi, can communicate advocacy and educational opportunities for congregants on relevant issues related to reducing homelessness through a range of means, such as sermons, Religious School curricula, adult education programs, and through TBA communication outlets such as the *Bulletin*, website, facebook, etc.
- TBA's Senior, Associate, and Assistant Rabbis, and Welcoming Synagogue Initiative in collaboration with an appropriate TBA Rabbi, may build coalitions with other organizations, especially interfaith partners, other like-minded Jewish congregations, and other Jewish organizations to work on these issues.