EMPOWERING THE JEWISH POOR THROUGH HUMAN RIGHTS ADVOCACY

Reflections on the Project Genesis Experience in Montreal

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Despite the Jewish imperative of doing justice to the poor and the Jewish community's unsurpassed social service network, poverty is a persistent and significant aspect of the North American Jewish experience. For 15 years, Project Genesis, through its outreach and community organization efforts, has empowered the Jewish poor of Montreal through a unique combination of mobilization, advocacy, and participation. Funded primarily by the Montreal federation, Project Genesis gives contemporary expression to the notion of Gemilut Hasidim *and the interdependence of donor and recipient.*

It is undoubtedly true that Jews are perceived to be successful and self-reliant. As a community, Jews have a tradition of philanthropy and service networks that are unsurpassed in terms of the voluntary assistance provided to its members, both locally and throughout the world. Tzedakah is a deeply rooted Jewish value, and giving priority to the needs of the poor is a long-standing practice, as well as conviction. Paradoxically, despite communal giving and caring, the Jewish poor are alienated and invisible from Jew and non-Jew alike. They are a minority among Jews because they are poor and a minority among the poor because they are Jews.

This article speaks to the one-sixth of the North American Jewish community that is poor and describes the work of Project Genesis in Montreal—a unique and continuing Jewish communal response to social injustice through human rights advocacy. Human rights advocacy, empowerment, and participation—key values and principles in the development of Jewish communities and their institutions—are applied by Project Genesis to the Jewish poor in a manner that counteracts their invisibility and validates the Jewish community as a whole as claimants for social and economic justice.

TRADITIONAL JEWISH VALUES AND SOCIAL JUSTICE

Humanism driven by a concern for the poor, social justice, and universal human rights continues to be a specific and urgent Jewish imperative. Millions of dollars each year are donated to communal agencies and combined appeals to better the lot and ameliorate the conditions of the Jewish poor. With striking similarity from city to city and coast to coast, whether in Canada or the United States, contributors are implored to give—"Your gift provides a hot lunch to a Jewish child, meals on wheels to the elderly, a camping experience, a homemaker, or a Hebrew book in Braille for the blind"—and they give to a far greater degree than any other community in the world.

Although support for Israel and Jewish education accounts for much larger shares of campaign proceeds in recent years, assisting the poor remains a visible and important priority; this has not changed substantially since federated campaigns were first established. Tzedakah continues to be a central Jewish idiom, a cornerstone of Jewish experience, and a vehicle that links Jews and

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Jewish communities. The term *"Gemilut Hasidim,"* deeds of loving kindness, our sages tell us, takes the plural form to signify the interdependence of giver and recipient in a common mosaic of mutuality—affirming a shared destiny.

This predominant motif of doing justice to the poor—the Jewish poor in the first instance and then to all poor persons—is a cornerstone of religious and secular thought and deed. It was written in the 13th century that, if a community lacks a synagogue and a shelter for the poor, it is first obligated to build a shelter for the poor (*Sefer Hasidim*). According to the Talmud, this communal imperative of giving equals the combined weight of all other *mitzvot (Baba Bathra)*. To do justice to the poor—there is no Hebrew word for charity—is not just a responsibility of the organized community, but requires the direct participation of all its members, including the poor: "Even a poor man—a subject of charity—must give charity" (Talmud, *Gittin* 7B).

Indeed, not only is assistance to the poor a fundamental Jewish value and practice but careful thought has been given over the centuries to ensure the dignity of the recipient and that assistance is a tool for empowerment. Maimonides' famous dictum of helping people before they fall and helping them to help themselves is a central Jewish idiom (*Yad Matnot Aniyim*, 1180). The statements, "We are our brothers' keepers" and "we are one people," are collective affirmations of our obligation to care for others as we would wish to be cared for ourselves. We must be advocates for those who need assistance. There is an urgency to a Jewish agenda of human rights and social justice (Cotler, 1986), and this agenda comprises advocacy, participation, and empowerment.

The Transformation of the Jewish Community and the Invisibility of Its Poor

Paradoxically, notwithstanding the visual impact of posters of the frail elderly or poor children displayed during fund-raising campaigns, hardly anyone seems to know any real Jews who actually are poor. The poor don't live in the same neighborhoods, join the same organizations, or attend the same functions as other Jews. They tend to stay away from social services provided by both Jewish and public agencies and lack representation in communal decision-making bodies and neighborhood organizations that deal with matters affecting their lives (Reichson-Kolb, 1978; Torczyner, 1976, 1981; Wolf, 1972). One hundred years later, Mark Twain's observation appears to be true. "A Jewish beggar is not impossible; perhaps such a thing may exist, but there are few men who can say that they have seen that spectacle" (Twain, 1899).

The intervening century, however, was not without vivid portrayals and recognition of poverty among Jews. The plight of poor Jewish immigrants and the hardships they endured on the Lower East Side of New York or the Main in Montreal became part of American folklore and were woven into the fabric of North American Jewish identity. Old Jewish neighborhoods were a focus of this awareness. In 1941, for example, 80% of Montreal's Jews lived in the neighborhoods in which they first settled, and most worked in the needle trades. Forty of Montreal's 50 synagogues were located within one mile of each other. St. Urbain Street, later popularized by the novelist Mordechai Richler, housed six synagogues. The Jewish labor movement actively participated in attempts to create a more just social order and represented the Jewish poor and working class in communal bodies. Synagogues, fraternal organizations, and *landsmanshaft* acted as extended families, provided cohesion to the community, mediated disputes, listened to the lonely, forged an identity for the young, tended to the sick, found homes for the elderly, buried the dead, and found mates for the living. As one rabbi put it, "Everyone knew who was poor, and everyone knew who was pretending to be rich" (Rabbi H. Kaufman, interview, 1976).

As economic opportunities expanded, Jews prospered, moved, and integrated themselves into more affluent, often suburban communities, which replaced the centrality of the old Jewish neighborhood. Synagogues and social, cultural, and recreational organizations moved to the new neighborhoods that now housed the middle-class majority and increasingly came to reflect their needs. In the process, they became disengaged from direct contact with and service to the Jewish poor. Some of the poor remained behind. Others moved to newer working-class neighborhoods. Increasingly isolated, their prime organizational vehicle, the labor movement, no longer expressed Jewish concerns.

POVERTY AMONG JEWS IN NORTH AMERICA

Poverty remains a persistent and significant aspect of the North American Jewish experience. In Canada, 1 in 6 Jews were poor in 1981, and in Montreal, 1 in 5 were poor in 1986 (Shahar, 1991; Torczyner, 1990). These figures are likely to rise during these recessionary times. They include not only immigrants, the elderly, and the disabled—people ordinarily considered to be "the worthy poor"—but single mothers living on welfare, homeless men who frequent soup kitchens, the young and the old who have been physically abused, the unemployed, psychiatric patients, crack addicts, AIDS patients, high school dropouts, and even university graduates.

By and large, poverty among Jews reflects the experience of the broader society. Overrepresented among the poor are families headed by women, the elderly, the unemployed, and recent immigrants. There are some notable differences, however, and these differences heighten the invisibility of the Jewish poor. Three out of ten Jewish poor persons are over the age of 65, twice the percentage of elderly in the Canadian poor population. One out of three elderly Jewish women are poor as are two of every three elderly Jewish women who live alone. One in three Jewish poor persons lives alone compared to one in five in the overall population of Canadian poor persons. Lastly, the Jewish poor, be they in two-parent or single-parent families, have fewer children and smaller families. More than 1 in 4 low-income Canadians live in families with three or more children. The corresponding figure for the Jewish poor is 1 in 8. These demographic characteristics contribute to the lack of visibility of the Jewish poor (Torczyner, 1990).

The data presented in Canadian studies are derived from the Canadian national census, which collects information on both religion and ethnicity—thus enabling in-depth analysis of population groups at relatively little cost. Corresponding data do not exist in the U.S. Census, and there has been a paucity of research and interest in the Jewish poor. However, studies conducted in the United States in the 1970s as an outgrowth of the War on Poverty confirm the Canadian findings. Poverty rates of between 15% and 20% were reported in Chicago in 1971 (Silberman, 1971), in New York in 1973 (Federation of Jewish Philanthropies, 1973), and in national estimates (Comar, 1974). These studies were synthesized in the 1974 book, *Poor Jews: An American Awakening* by Levine and Hochbaum. Because these studies corroborate the demographic similarity of Canadian and American Jews, one can assume that the figure of one in six Jews living in poverty applies to North American Jewry as a whole (Norland & Freedman, 1977; Rosenwaike, 1987).

Jewish social agencies invest significantly in the care and support of the poor. They have, for example, developed innovative care for the elderly through outreach and by strengthening support systems to sustain independent lifestyles. The array of agencies and services funded by the Jewish community are second to none. The problem, however, is that these services do not sufficiently empower the Jewish poor or counteract their invisibility.

THE TRANSFORMATION OF JEWISH SOCIAL SERVICES

In the latter part of the twentieth century, caring has become a corporate, communal concern. Traditional forms of assistance now undergo program coordination, are scrutinized by budget review committees, and are subject to executive decision making, which seeks to apply objective measures and rational criteria to an array of needs that stagger the communal imagination and strain its resources. Families struggling to cope with the pressures of maintaining two incomes, the increasing number of single-parent families, and mobility patterns that leave the elderly more isolated contribute to the demands on Jewish social agencies. The scope of Jewish endeavor, the demands of the global Jewish neighborhood, the defense and survival of Israel, the immigration of Russian Jews, the specter of renewed forms of anti-Semitism both here and abroad, the requirements of future generations, and rising intermarriage rates are only some of the complex and far-reaching issues on the Jewish agenda that require prioritization, coordination, fund raising, and professional management.

The institutional nature of Jewish life has changed considerably during the past half-century. Emerging in the aftermath of the ashes of Europe and infused by Holocaust survivors, Jewish communities are concerned with the global Jewish neighborhood—Israel and her defense and the survival of endangered Diaspora communities. At the same time, life in North America has allowed for greater social and economic integration and a broad diversity of Jewish expression. In the process, the scope and functions of Jewish communal agencies have expanded, professional social workers have specialized in a complexity of tasks, and the Jewish social service network has become intertwined with various levels of funding programs and governmental policy.

In today's milieu, the nature of service, the quality of voluntarism, and the concern for traditional constituencies and ways of doing things have changed. There is less direct contact today between rich and poor, elderly and young, healthy and frail. Caring has been professionalized and to a degree commercialized through such market considerations as fees for services. Some argue that traditional values of charity, justice, and community, which were formerly transmitted through synagogues and families, have been transformed by the secular church of Jewish humanism—the Jewish Community Center and federation.

Thus, the combination of altered demographic and residential patterns, as well as changes in service delivery and communal organization, have contributed to the persistence of invisible poverty among Jews in North America.

THE CONSEQUENCES OF INVISIBILITY

The invisibility of the Jewish poor has profound effects. The Jewish poor are less likely to seek help or benefits to which they are entitled because they do not know other persons who are like them and there are no organizational vehicles to represent them (Lerner, 1985; Reichson-Kolb, 1978). Given the stereotypes of Jews as successful, they are more likely to feel a sense of failure, shame, and unworthiness for being different. When asked about seeking help from Jewish social service agencies, one blind and wheelchair-bound elderly Jewish woman put it this way, "I am too ashamed, I don't want them to know that I am poor." Nor would she approach public agencies: "I am too ashamed. I don't want them to know that I am Jewish" (Torczyner, 1981).

The Jewish poor are often alienated from the neighborhoods in which they remain as other groups move in, bringing new cultures and lifestyles that are unfamiliar if not inhospitable to the Jewish poor (Taylor, 1977). Public agencies cater to the majority needs of the neighborhood, have little understanding of the Jewish poor, and do not seek them out (Cohen, 1989). Unrepresented and unorganized,

the Jewish poor have become disconnected from the mainstream of Jewish organizational life, as well as from the communities in which they live.

The lack of recognition that poverty is a significant aspect of the Jewish communal experience strains the credibility of the Jewish community as a claimant for social and economic justice. If poverty is something that only others experience, then it is not for the Jews to be advocates on their behalf. If Jews who take leadership roles in campaigns for social and economic opportunity are neither poor nor representative of the poor, their involvement in broad coalitions for social justice may be suspect or considered to be paternalistic.

Public recognition of a problem is an indispensable prerequisite to its solution. Yet, at the November 1990 Council of Jewish Federations General Assembly in San Francisco, not one of the hundreds of sessions or resolutions concerned the Jewish poor.

A progressive Jewish agenda recognizes that the causes of poverty are structural and that voluntary effort, although important, cannot eradicate it. On the other hand, voluntary effort can give public recognition to the problem, assist the Jewish poor to mobilize and represent themselves, and encourage them to work with other groups to ameliorate poverty. Outreach and advocacy, participation and mobilization are contemporary expressions of traditional Jewish values and, in combination, can provide moral and political legitimacy to the Jewish poor and the community as a whole as claimants for economic and social justice. These approaches must be included among the range of Jewish communal responses.

PROJECT GENESIS: EMPOWERMENT AND HUMAN RIGHTS ADVOCACY

For the past 15 years, Project Genesis has pioneered human rights advocacy, community organizing, and alternative service delivery in Montreal. It has done so by empowering the poor through a unique combination of outreach, mobilization, and participation. Most of its funding comes from the Montreal federation, Allied Jewish Community Services, because Project Genesis was launched as a specific response to Jewish poverty. An outgrowth of a McGill University School of Social Work study that identified 20,000 Jewish poor persons in Montreal in 1975, Project Genesis was created with the following objectives:

- to conduct outreach to the Jewish poor and to advocate on their behalf
- to organize the Jewish poor along with other disadvantaged groups to change social and economic conditions
- to assist these persons to determine their own affairs and to participate in decision-making bodies that affect their lives

Project Genesis was established as a McGill University School of Social Work field teaching center. Its creation was initially resisted by the federation and organized Jewish community because the notions that the Jewish poor could and should represent themselves, organize to change their own conditions along with non-Jews, and even challenge the delivery methods of Jewish social services were perceived as foreign and threatening. Today, however, there is a strong partnership between Project Genesis and Allied Jewish Community Services, as well as with the network of other Jewish communal agencies, as reinforcing and interdependent relationships have emerged. As a consequence of this 15-year process, a forum has been established wherein rich and poor Jews and competing ideas about justice and social service interact and influence each other. Evaluations conducted by Allied Jewish Community Services in 1976, 1979, 1983, and 1986, as well as yearly budget and programmatic reviews, have confirmed the utility of the Project Genesis approach as an important component of Jewish social service delivery.

Project Genesis operates out of a storefront in the heart of the most ethnically

diverse community in Canada. The storefront is at street level, and about 14,000 persons a year seek assistance from some 100 volunteers, mainly elderly Jews. These volunteers provide service in many languages, including English, French, Russian, Yiddish, Polish, Hebrew, Hungarian, Spanish, Vietnamese, and Tamal. People come to Project Genesis for help in dealing with landlords who will not make repairs to their apartments and to fight drug trafficking in their buildings. They come seeking access to welfare, unemployment, and old age security benefits, as well as reparations and other entitlements requiring numerous forms with conflicting instructions. People turn to Project Genesis and its volunteers because it is easy; advice is dispensed by people like themselves, and in the absence of bureaucratic red tape, people are made to feel comfortable seeking help. They then tell their friends about it. Those who give advice also receive advice—both from those whom they help and from the Project Genesis staff. Volunteers, some of whom are now well into their eighties, and who have been advising others for 15 years, are themselves of modest means, and derive meaning and purpose from their involvement. The notion of *Gemilut Hasidim*—in which both the giver and recipient give to each other—finds contemporary expression in the Genesis storefront. This storefront service component of the Project Genesis budget costs less than $40,000 a year to operate, and it directly returns some $3,000,000 annually in cash benefits to persons who did not know they were entitled to them or how to gain access to them.

Outreach

Project Genesis was launched through outreach. As the initial step in its development, thousands of persons were visited in their homes. Through discussions of their needs, ideas, and wishes, people came together, designed and built Project Genesis, and became volunteers in all of its operations. Outreach remains an important aspect of the Genesis experience. Staff and volunteers regularly go door to door to find those persons too isolated to make contact with Genesis and to measure the pulse of the community. In 1990, a new outreach program, Home Advocacy for Seniors, was created to extend the full range of storefront services to elderly shut-ins. Over 1600 families were reached through outreach efforts last year.

Although 15 years have passed since I first started Project Genesis through outreach, it is still painful to recall the plight of an elderly man whom I discovered living in a dark and unlit apartment. I met this man once in his apartment, having come to see him several times before he finally let me in because he thought I was a relative from his home town in Poland. This man was a survivor of the Treblinka concentration camp. He had survived because his friends hid him behind a partition where he stood all day—unable to move, to talk, or to go to the bathroom. At night, his friends let him out. Somehow this man came to Montreal and found himself an apartment from which he did occasional tailoring for his neighbors. This man lived within walking distance of synagogues, Jewish social agencies, and Jewish hospitals. Yet, no one knew this man or knew what it meant to him to be let out at night.

Several weeks after I visited this man in his apartment, I received a call from the police. They explained that they did not know what to do with this man as they found him naked in the streets every couple of months, screaming in the dead of night. They would pick him up, bring him to the police station or the hospital, keep him for awhile, and then release him—until the cycle repeated itself. Through the outreach efforts of Project Genesis, this man was finally able to be helped.

In another example of outreach, Project Genesis discovered a man who claimed that he had become disfigured when he

worked at a federal nuclear reactor plant at which an accident had occurred. He was unable to obtain workers' compensation because the government denied that there had ever been an accident. With Genesis' help, this man was linked with others who had worked at the nuclear plant at the same time and had developed unusual forms of cancer. Through the involvement of Project Genesis, the Chalk River nuclear accident came to light, and the government of Canada, unfortunately too late for this man, compensated the victims.

Outreach is the most direct and traditional form of social work to emerge from this profession, and it is steeped in Jewish principles. It generates a partnership, a reciprocity between institutions and people. Outreach allows one to understand events and their meaning from the perspective of those who experience them.

Direct Action

Project Genesis' organizing efforts, which have gained national recognition, are predicated on the assumptions that (1) it is possible for people affected by problems to devise solutions to them and (2) problems associated with poverty are not the domain of any particular ethnic or religious group. Rather, solutions can be found by organizing together all affected persons, be they Jews or blacks, English or French speaking, or young or old. By identifying commonalities, organizing efforts forge alliances among people of different backgrounds. Empowerment occurs through personal experience and direct community participation.

Consider these examples of Project Genesis' community organization efforts.

- In 1990, Project Genesis won the right for homeless persons to receive welfare at either welfare offices or community organizations. Prior to this precedent-setting agreement, homeless persons in Quebec were denied the means to get off the streets. They could not obtain welfare without an address, but they had no address because they had no money. Similar agreements have now been implemented across Canada.
- In 1989, Project Genesis interceded on behalf of 600 safe deposit box holders whose savings had been stolen in a daring Thanksgiving weekend robbery a few blocks from Project Genesis. The victims included people from many nationalities—Vietnamese, Quebecois, blacks, and Hispanics—and, most of all, elderly Jews who had kept their Florida money, as well as their few heirlooms in that bank's safe deposit boxes. A committee was formed consisting of two Holocaust survivors, a mohel, a Moroccan Kosher butcher, a school psychologist, and a Jewish schoolteacher. They named themselves "The Victims of the Bank" and sought Project Genesis' assistance. At first, the bank denied culpability and was unwilling to make compensation, claiming that it was not responsible for its safe deposit boxes. Through Project Genesis' intervention on behalf of the committee and each of the claimants, a $6 million settlement was achieved. The lawyer for the insurance company representing the bank became a volunteer at the Project Genesis legal clinic, and both he and the chairperson of the victims committee were elected to the board of directors at Project Genesis—thus giving new meaning to the concept of trust.
- In 1988, Project Genesis was instrumental in halting illegal welfare investigations of the poor, investigations that violated their basic human rights. The organizing effort was centered on the case of a Vietnamese woman who spoke neither English nor French and was forced to sign documents she could not read in the process of a welfare investigation in which her charter rights were violated 100 times. The case attracted national attention and led to revision of the Quebec Charter of Human Rights to specifically protect welfare recipients against discrimination.

- In 1987, Project Genesis established "Multi Caf," a community cafeteria to feed the hungry and the homeless and to be run by them. This organization feeds 100 persons a day and provides 400 food baskets a month.
- Project Genesis organizers have also been instrumental in the election of a slate of four candidates—an Orthodox rabbi, a black community worker, a Vietnamese immigrant, and a single parent—to the governing board of the public agency providing primary health and social service care to the community, the formation of a community council that brings together 38 ethnic groups, and the establishment of the annual Cotes des Neige Multicultural Festival, which attracts over 15,000 persons.
- Currently, Project Genesis is involved in a range of issues, including welfare rights, homelessness, low-cost housing, crime prevention, discrimination in housing, anti-racism work, integration of new immigrants and refugees, and single mothers groups.

These activities are carried out with a permanent staff of seven. Most are social work graduates of the McGill School of Social Work, and one is a lawyer. More than 75 students from a variety of universities have received formal fieldwork training at Project Genesis. In the 1991–1992 school year, four social work and five law students are doing fieldwork at Project Genesis.

Project Genesis encourages a sense of community ownership. Its board is directly elected by members of the community, and participation is encouraged in all aspects of its operations. The sole criterion for membership in Project Genesis is voluntarism. Those who volunteer run the organization, and the board is accountable to this membership. Project Genesis is accountable as well to its varied funding sources. Half of its funds come from Allied Jewish Community Services, which annually reviews Project Genesis through its regular community planning and budget review processes. The remaining funds come from various levels of government, foundations, and Project Genesis' own fund-raising activities. Project Genesis is represented in various professional and lay bodies within the Jewish community and its federation and in the city and province at large.

CONCLUSION

The name "Genesis" signifies a new beginning—the creation of reciprocal relationships within the community and between its citizens and the institutions that serve them. During the past 15 years, Project Genesis has put these traditional Jewish values into practice as one part of a Jewish communal response to poverty and the imperatives of human rights advocacy and social justice. These generic principles of empowerment—advocacy, outreach, mobilization, and participation—are applicable in every Jewish community. In fact, Allied Jewish Community services has funded the development of a Project Genesis project in Beersheba in cooperation with McGill University, Ben Gurion University, and the municipality of Beersheba. A similar program is also being explored in Jerusalem in conjunction with the municipality, the Hebrew University and McGill University.

This approach will become increasingly necessary in the 1990s in North America. This decade has already been marked by recession and increased poverty on the one hand and unprecedented demands on community budgets by Soviet and Ethiopian immigration on the other. Human rights advocacy rooted in traditional Jewish values, as evidenced in the Project Genesis experience, fits hand in hand with fees for service and the management of the global Jewish neighborhood. The urgent challenge is to articulate a vision that incorporates both.

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