

Choosing a Future Without Hunger

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How far would you go for a bowl of lentil soup? Would you beg? Would you give up your dignity? In this week's parasha, *Toldot*, we find that Esau chose to do just that – he gave up his birthright, his father's entire estate, to his brother Jacob, in exchange for a mere bowl of lentil soup.

Many Torah commentators explain that Esau's choice was based on a selfish drive to satisfy his physical urges. True, his motives present a weakness of character. However, Esau's choice also echoes a loud and painfully familiar reality.

To 33 million hungry people in America – including 12 million children – Esau's choice is one that they must consider on a daily basis. They make similar choices, but for very different reasons: their choices are driven by hunger pains. Millions of people must compromise their self-respect in order to meet their basic human needs.

Hunger is a nationwide problem that affects people of every age, gender, race and religion. The statistics provide a sobering reality: One in six elderly people in the United States has an inadequate diet, and must choose between paying their medical bills and buying food; America's child poverty rate is twice the child poverty rate for any other developed country, and nearly 500,000 children go blind each year from lack of vitamin A, which is obtained from green, yellow and orange vegetables.

The consequences of hunger are not only physical, as they take a significant psychological and emotional toll as well. Every time we say *Birkat Hamazon*, the blessing after a meal, we plead with God: "please do not make us dependent on the gifts of Man...that we may never feel *shame* nor *humiliation*." Dependency on others is not only precarious, but also deeply demeaning.

How, then, do we create an environment where the poor and the hungry are not dependent on others for food? How do we help them move from poverty to a future of dignity and promise?

Our job as activists for social justice is not only to feed the hungry today, but also make sure that each and every person among us can live a dignified life in the future. Many of you may have heard the story about the person standing by the river watching babies float by. She rushes out mid-stream to start saving babies. They keep coming, and she keeps saving, but eventually she realizes that she must go up stream and find out who keeps throwing the babies into the river.

Through what we call a "double mitzvah," MAZON enables concerned Jews to help hungry people today, as well as to "go upstream" by working to alleviate the root causes of hunger, through public education and public policy responses that facilitate long-term, systemic change.

2002 continues to be an crucial year for determining the nature of important governmental food assistance programs: TANF (Temporary Assistance to Needy Families), the Food Stamp

Program, WIC (The Special Supplemental Nutrition Program for Women, Infants, and Children), and Child Nutrition Programs (subsidized school meals), are all up for reauthorization by Congress this year. For more information about the issues at hand, I encourage all of you to visit MAZON's Web site (www.mazon.org.)

The Talmud teaches us: "*Gadol k'vod habriyot*" – great is the value of respect due to all living creatures. By working to reach social justice through activism, we can mend what is broken in the world today, and make sure that in the future, no one will ever be forced to make the undignified choice that Esau made.