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## **Poverty and tzedakah in Jewish law**

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**Pittsburgh, Pa., 2006**

INTRODUCTION

**urn:nbn:de:kobv:517-vlib-10224**

## INTRODUCTION

The struggle to overcome poverty has always been with us. In the Bible it began with the expulsion from the Garden of Eden. The barest essentials of life were often beyond reach in the Stone Age and tragically remain so for many in our century. Judaism has engaged in this struggle since its beginnings through divine imperatives, prophetic exhortations, laws, and communal pressure. The literature of moral exhortations expressed through midrashim, touching tales, and sermons is vast. It has been matched by the demands of the *halakhah* along with its community enforcement. All Jews were and are to provide at least a tenth of their income to relieving poverty; this has not been expressed as a pious expectation, but as a demand which has generally been carried out.

It is the task of the *halakhah* to define the details clearly and to be sufficiently specific to make it enforceable. As conditions changed, the *halakhah* has adapted itself to new circumstances as for example the shift from a rural agricultural setting to a more urban environment. In times of persecution, massive expulsions, enslavement, and kidnaping, priorities had to shift; new tools along with different methods of collection and distribution had to be developed. The underlying assumptions were challenged from time to time. Three essays in this volume deal with those issues.

Standards of living changed as they have most visibly in our time, so the level of poverty had to be adjusted. The level just above absolute poverty always concerned us, but till modern times resources were insufficient to deal with it. The working poor are addressed in our book. Aside from general poverty there were always special small groups which had to be looked after, like the poor traveler who is the subject of one essay.

*Halakhah* is primarily about specifics treated through responsa. They can never provide a complete picture as many matters

are never questioned and true crises cannot await a scholarly answer. Responsa, however, give us an insight into changing conditions and the willingness of the community to deal with new situations as our selection of Reform responsa demonstrate.

This is an area as yet little studied with older material hard to come by. Core issues and peripheral matters raise interesting questions and we hope to turn to them in the future. We will deal with issues connected to poverty and *tzedakah* in future volumes of this series.