

Va-y'chi 5779

The Blessing of Social Justice

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What a blessing!

Truth and honesty, huh (Jacob's blessings on his sons in Genesis 49)! Who needs curses?

Perhaps a little close to the bone, I mean who wants to actually hear the truth? In an era of "post-truth" does honesty hurt anymore? When Jacob's sons heard their father's character assassin - sorry I mean assessment, no blessing - did they laugh or cry? Did they emit giggles with embarrassment or pride, glee or discomfort, knowing in themselves the veracity of Jacob's words? Did the brutal honesty of Israel's words serve as a pantomime act - a skilful act of amusement or a reality check?

I have often thought that Shaya, my younger daughter, was my measure of social conscience. We are unable to walk the streets without witnessing her profound disconcertion at the sight of a homeless person or beggar. She is unable to walk on by and often I have fulfilled the mitzvah - commandment - of lo nuchal l'hitaleim, 'do not ignore...' reversing my steps to provide tzedakah or gemillut chasadim - the definition of the first dependent on one's political stance - is it charity or something closer to justice; the latter - gemillut chasadim - acts of loving kindness.

While our country has become obsessed with Brexit we have allowed social injustice to become as ubiquitous as that word this year. One such case is that of homelessness. Go for a walk through Whippendell Woods or gaze at the grassy banks at the top of the Watford ring road and you will see the tents of the homeless and around town the evidence of the dramatic rise in people sleeping on the streets.

Last week, I volunteered for my first shift of the winter months at New Hope's Winter Night Shelter (operated in partnership with St Mary's Church and Watford Borough Council). I will be there again on Christmas Day and in January. I am joined by Judith Gair and other members are volunteering at various London projects. Andrew Montlake has produced a single in aid of End Youth Homelessness (link below), our Cheder have provided donations of porridge pots, cup-a-soups and hot drinks and our support of New Hope is a relationship that I am deeply proud of.

The individual stories are varied and it is humbling to think that we are all but a few crises from needing such support. I am desperate that those who I engaged with do not become a 2019 statistic reported by the Office for National Statistics who this week announced that 597 rough sleepers had died this year. Crisis suggest that there are more than 24,000 people in Britain who will be sleeping rough or in cars, trains, buses or tents this winter.

Whilst gratified by our deep involvement in social action to aid the homeless, we should not ignore social justice work on this issue. Tzelem.UK the Rabbinic Call for Social and Economic Justice in the UK will be an important voice in our Community and Rabbi Dr Margaret Jacobi justifiably gave

Colleagues at our Liberal Judaism Clergy Kallah (retreat) a verbal rocket to be a leading voice as our ancient prophets were in calling out social injustice.

In Birkhat HaMazon (Grace after Meals), we read:

We have eaten and been satisfied. Help us to be responsive to the needs of others and to listen to their cry for food. Open our eyes and our hearts, so that we may share Your gifts and help to remove hunger and want from the world.

Over this winter may we continue our valuable and meaningful social action work; and raise our voices to affect long-term change in our society, turning curse into blessing.

Amen