

A DEBATE WITHIN THE JEWISH COMMUNITY
(Appropriate for students in grades 6-8)

Introduction:

Share with the class some facts about U.S. and world hunger (from www.mazon.org).

Time for debate:

Divide the class into four groups, and assign each group one of the position statements listed below. Within their groups, ask students to:

1. Develop a list of points that support their position
2. Select a group leader to present the group's position to the rest of the class

Once all the groups have shared their positions, ask each student to write down on a small piece of paper what position they personally agree with. Collect all the votes, and count them to see which position holds majority support.

Conclusion:

Lead students in discussion of whether, after hearing all four position statements, their own personal positions changed. If so, why?

Position 1

The Jewish community should take care of its own problems first, such as poverty and illness that affect Jews. By ministering to our own sick and poor populations, we will be able to set an example to the rest of the world; we will be the true "light to other nations" ("*or lagoyim*") that the Prophet Isaiah envisioned. Nations around the world will realize that, if each took care of its own communities as Jews do, then the hunger problem would be alleviated. Jews help Jews: There is no compelling reason for the Jewish community as a whole to respond to world hunger.

A person's poor relative has priority over any person; the poor in his own household have priority over the poor in his town; the poor in his town have priority over the poor in another town, as it is written: 'Open your hand to your brother, to your needy, to your poor in the land.' (Maimonides, Mishneh Torah, citing Deuteronomy 15:110)

Position 2

Judaism places value on saving a life above almost everything else. Therefore, because world hunger puts human lives at stake, a Jewish hunger organization should be formed. This organization should educate and raise the consciousness of the Jewish community about hunger and about Jewish observances and traditions that deal with hunger. Furthermore, the organization should raise money to work towards alleviating hunger in both the short-term (buying food today) and long-term (education, research, advocacy, etc.).

It is an axiom of the halacha that human life is precious. Except for the three grave sins of murder, sexual crime...and idolatry, every commandment in the Torah may be violated to save a life. (I.J. Rosenbaum, Holocaust and Halacha)

Position 3

The Jewish community should get involved in the issue of world hunger because it will help Jews gain favor – and get along – with the international community. Hunger is an issue of general concern that affects all people. By working on behalf of others, the Jewish community is more likely to secure support from the general public for its own concerns. At the same time, the general public will be more inclined to view the Jews in a favorable light.

In other words, Jews should engage in work outside the Jewish community both as a matter of self-interest and a desire for harmony. If Jews fight hunger that affects non-Jews, the public will be more inclined to listen to them on issues relating to Israel and religious tolerance. And the general public will be less hostile towards Jews if it doesn't view them as an insular group only concerned with its own affairs.

The non-Jewish poor should be maintained and clothed along with the Jewish poor for the sake of peaceful relations. (Maimonides, Mishneh Torah)

Position 4

The Jewish community must help the world's hungry, not out of charity, but out of obligation. Whether or not the Jewish community takes a stand as a whole, each one of us must come to terms with our own role in perpetuating hunger and get involved in the struggle to end it. How have we contributed to the world hunger problem? Like all Americans, Jews work for or own shares in corporations that use farmland for personal profit (by choosing to grow luxury crops for export instead of life-saving fruits and grains); we work in and vote for governments that support oppressive foreign regimes (which keep land and income distributed inequitably); we continue to pay minimum wage workers an unlivable wage.

As believers in personal responsibility, and as promoters of *tikkun olam* (building a better world), Jews must work – on a grassroots, political level – to ensure that poor and hungry people are not ensnared in an unbreakable, unending cycle; that they can escape poverty and hunger in their lifetimes, and not resign their families to generations of suffering.

Hunger mistakenly has been labeled an issue of charity, rather than of social justice. Charity keeps the power with the powerful. Justice says the poor...have rights.
(Steve Bauck, Seattle Times)

Justice, justice shall you pursue... (Parshat Shoftim, Deuteronomy 16:18-20)