

# Welfare and Its Discontents

Rabbi Basil Herring -

Winston Churchill once said "Any man who is under 30 and is not a liberal has no heart; and any man who is over 30 and is not a conservative, has no brains." Those words came to mind this week, in thinking about an appropriate Jewish response to the revolutionary welfare legislation that is about to become the law of the land. In Churchillian terms, one might say that the welfare policy of the United States, born three decades ago in the sixties, turned 30 years of age this very week: that is to say, on the face of it to become less liberal and more conservative; less heart and more brains; less charitable and more businesslike, by forcing welfare recipients to find work within strict time limits, at the peril of losing their benefits after a couple of years. But what are we to make of this latest attempt to rid our country of the scourge of welfare-dependency? Should we exult with those on the Right, cry gevalt with those on the Left, or—like the President—seek to split the difference? From a Torah perspective, should we favor the idea and practice of a welfare state, as we have known it in this land, one that protects the poor, and guarantees their basic amenities? Or does our Torah teach us rather the imperatives of self-reliance and personal responsibility, for even the least able or motivated in our midst. This morning I would like to venture the beginnings of an opinion, on this most divisive of issues, one that is truly a litmus test of the character of our society and culture.

Few can deny that welfare as we have come to know it, has largely failed as social policy. It has led to a growing underclass of dependency, slowly eating away at the innards of our society. Among blacks, a staggering 69% of children live in single-parent homes; there are 4 million single mothers on the dole, half of them never married; and one out of every three young black men is either in prison, on probation, or on parole. Worse yet, these numbers are not stagnant—they grow appreciably with every passing year. And it is not just a problem for the ghetto dwellers of the inner cities of the nation. Increasingly we are all affected by rising crime rates, angry race relations, increasing homelessness, enormous strains on city and state budgets, and a growing gap of mutual resentment between the haves and the have nots. And as to less tangible moral costs of the welfare crisis, the fact that there should be so many in this country living below the official poverty line, surely does not bode well for the social fabric of this great land of plenty. It simply will not do, and indeed it is a stain on the nation's conscience, that so many young men and women, of whatever race, are allowed to grow up in despair of ever bettering their lot, generation after generation, as is currently all too often the case.

And so, yes, we can all agree that the system is broke. The more important question, however, is how best to fix it, given the limited resources that we have at every level of government. What, from a Torah perspective, should be the guiding principles of welfare reform?

Let me begin by sharing with you the following significant words, that portray and reflect the awful predicament of one welfare mother:

How did I give birth to these children, when I was abandoned by my lover and my relatives, left downtrodden and alone? Who will raise my children, now that I feel so destitute? And, given my circumstances, how will my children turn out to be?

Although they may sound like it, these are not words written this week or last by a teenage single

mother in Harlem or Brownsville, or South Central Los Angeles. They are in fact the words of this morning's haftorah, taken from Isaiah 49, as spoken to the people of Jerusalem just about 2600 years ago, and fully reflecting the impending fate of his people Israel. Well do they describe his contemporaries' awful sense of abandonment and loneliness, in terms of a mother's deep fear for her self and her babies, as to who will take care of, feed and clothe, and give them shelter. Of course Isaiah invoked this paradigm to portray the Jewish people's crushing sense of abandonment by God, left to their own devices in a harsh and uncaring world, finding themselves very much like an abandoned mother, thrown into the street with her small children, there to wander as pariahs and outcasts among the nations of the world. Nonetheless we do well to be reminded by Isaiah's graphic language, of the crushing burdens born by the so-called welfare or underclass, and the very real, and sometimes tragic, challenges they face.

And indeed, with Isaiah's words in mind, we dare never speak with insensitivity and disdain about the lot of those who are caught in a trap of welfare dependency. For in spite of all the recent progress in interracial relations, I do believe that there remain strong vestiges of racism in this society. This is particularly the case when it comes to inner city young black women, many themselves raised in single parent homes, for whom the doors of opportunity seldom open. I often think that these women, through no fault of their own, are the real victims of generations of ignorance and prejudice: ignorance in the black community, and prejudice in the white.

But having said that, it is also true that the American underclass has for too long been permitted to avoid the benefits and virtues of self-reliance and self-discipline, and the virtues of hard work. For too many such people, without regard to age or and racial group, unlimited and self-perpetuating government handouts have resulted in a mentality that considers welfare and food stamp programs a way of life. It has reached the point where, we are told, some of them deliberately choose to drop out of school, become pregnant, and give birth, so that they can throw themselves onto assistance, and thereby avoid the tough choices requiring personal sacrifice and taking responsibility for their lives. In that respect, the new rules with strict limits and cutoffs, are surely correct.

And yet, I fear, in agreement with Senator Moynihan, that the current reform effort does not do enough to ensure that those most at risk will be able to find work, and stay there over the long term, to become truly productive members of society. Where is the provision for job training, and job availability? I see little if any of that. And with so many companies downsizing, so much of blue and white collar labor being taken over by computers, rising minimum wage requirements causing potential employees to think twice before hiring, and the public schools producing so many graduates who are so ill-equipped to function as literate and disciplined workers, most States will simply fail at finding reliable employment for current and future welfare recipients. Put all of that together with the recent demise of affirmative action that guaranteed so many minority groups preferential educational and employment opportunities, and one can hardly avoid the conclusion that the problem of ending welfare will prove to be much more complicated and frustrating than most politicians are willing to admit. And because of the failure of this legislation to adequately ensure work and employment for such people, I believe that we will almost surely see more and more down and out destitute on the streets of the land, people who will fall further and further behind, with incalculable consequences for all of us.

It is in this connection, that I would like to share with you a most instructive experience, as it happened to me about three years ago, deep below the streets of Manhattan. I was sitting on the E-train minding my own business like everyone else, when I heard a man's voice as it said "Good morning Ladies and Gentlemen." "Another pan-handler" I thought to myself. He then started his pitch. First he apologized for disturbing his audience. Then, in carefully chosen and well-articulated words, this black man in torn clothing explained that he was selling Street News, the newspaper produced and distributed by the homeless (and hopeless) as a means of support. I started to tune him out - after all I already had more than enough to read. But then he said "please help us support ourselves, after all if you give a man a fish he will eat for a day, but if you teach him how to catch a fish, he will eat for a lifetime." I knew that quote of course, for those are the words of our sages of blessed memory, spoken in praise of putting the poor on their own feet, so that they can effectively support themselves and no longer depend on handouts. As Maimonides puts it in the laws of Gifts to the Poor 10:7, "There are 8 degrees of charity, one higher than the other. The highest, exceeded by none, is that of a person who assists a poor Jew by accepting him into a business partnership or by helping him find employment, in a word, putting him where he can dispense with other people's aid" In other words, set someone up in business, show him (or her) how to succeed, and you have really done God's will.

And so I reached for my wallet, gave the man the dollar that would support his business enterprise, and took my newspaper. He started to move away; then stopped; and came back toward me. As I looked up at him, he smiled and, having seen my kippah, said "I realize that I used that quote from the rabbis, and didn't give them credit, but I was only summarizing their words." I was amazed. For such sensitivity on the part of this hungry human being was, to say the least, unexpected. To be concerned that he may have improperly used someone else's words without giving credit to their author, was the mark of a cultured man. And for him to go out of his way to make sure that I understood his moral qualms, and his rationale, taught me, as no professor or rebbe ever did, never to judge a man by his appearance.

I reassured him that I understood completely, and we smiled at each other. A moment later the subway door opened and I stepped out of the car, a humbled, more aware person, a dollar lighter, but much the richer, thanks to a man who did not know where his next meal was coming from, and who may have slept on the street the night before.

But there is a postscript to the story, one that, for my purposes this morning, is most instructive. For a few weeks later, the MTA that controls the subways, needlessly decreed that this man, and his fellow entrepreneurs, would no longer be permitted to sell Street News in the subway. And that, in all likelihood, put an end to his earnest effort to make an honest living.

In conclusion, it is clear that welfare, and its discontents, will not easily go away. Much as we dislike it, and for all that we would prefer that the poor just go and get a job, there is much more that we as a society need to do, much more than this latest legislation is willing to admit, before we, with all our claims to being a truly compassionate culture, will have discharged our responsibility to those less fortunate than ourselves. The new laws are only a beginning - much, much more waits to be done - not just with brain but with heart, not just for the young, but for the mature, and not just for them, but for all of us, we who live in this blessed land together.

