

# There Shall Be No Needy

Pursuing Social Justice  
through  
Jewish Law & Tradition  
**Discussion Guide**

RABBI JILL JACOBS

*There Shall Be No Needy Discussion Guide*

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# Introduction



## *The Search for an Integrated Judaism*

1. Rabbi Jill Jacobs speaks about the disconnect she once experienced between her Jewish life and her social justice commitments. Have you ever experienced this kind of disconnect? In what context? How can/did you reconcile these two parts of your life?
2. The Jewish community has a long history of involvement in social justice work, and most synagogues are active in local volunteer projects or—in some cases—advocacy. There are also an increasing number of local and national organizations that involve Jews in social justice work. What Jewish community social justice activities have you been a part of? How did it feel different to you to do this work as part of a Jewish community, as opposed to as part of a secular organization?
3. Jews who are involved in social justice work explain this commitment in various ways. For some, this commitment stems from the historical experiences of the Jewish community in suffering oppression and in fighting for change in their own societies; for some, this commitment begins with the Jewish narrative about the redemption from slavery in Egypt, or with the prophetic call to justice; for others, this commitment is rooted in traditional sources that demand ethical behavior toward those in a weaker position. Which of these motives for social justice work do you find most compelling? Why? Are there other motives you find more compelling?

# Chapter 1



## *A Vision of Economic Justice*

1. This chapter describes some of the ways in which Jewish texts suggest that we should approach the poor. How would you characterize our own society's attitude toward the poor? How does it compare to Jewish ideals? Do you agree with these Jewish ideals? Why or why not?
2. What have your own experiences of poverty been? What personal poverty or economic insecurity have you experienced? Have you observed or worked with people in poverty? How do these experiences correspond to the Jewish texts' description of poverty, as laid out in this chapter?

3. What would need to change in our own society in order to achieve the principles laid out in this chapter? Would you choose any of the prescriptions suggested by Jewish texts? Do you think that these principles or prescriptions are realistic? Why or why not?

## Chapter 2

### *Essential Terms: Tikkun Olam, Tzedek, and Prophetic Judaism*

1. This chapter introduces three terms—*tikkun olam*, *tzedek*, and prophetic Judaism—which are often used to describe social justice work. How have you used these terms to describe your own work? In what context? Which of these terms do you find most compelling and why?
2. If you were already familiar with any or all of these terms before reading this chapter, how did your understanding of these terms change? Are you now more or less likely to use one or all of these terms to describe social justice work?
3. Rabbi Jacobs asserts that “In some circles, *tikkun olam*, *tzedek*, and ‘prophetic Judaism’ have become overused to the point of losing any real meaning.” Do you agree? Why or why not? What is the value of finding more precise definitions of these terms?

## Chapter 3

### *Defining Poverty and the Poor*

1. How would you define poverty? Does your definition correspond to the definitions laid out in this chapter? How are the definitions similar and different?
2. Rabbi Jacobs notes that traditional sources often speak about poverty through the medium of stories. What stories have you read or heard that effectively conveyed the experience of poverty? What role do you think storytelling has, or should have, in combating poverty?
3. Some of the sources cited in this chapter suggest that “what goes around comes around”—that is, the wealthy have a personal self-interest in supporting the poor. Do you agree? Why or why not?

## Chapter 4

### *Sufficient for One's Needs: The Collection and Allocation of Tzedakah*

1. How often do you give *tzedakah*? How do you make decisions about how much money to give away? Which individuals or organizations should receive your *tzedakah* money?
2. Rabbi Jacobs distinguishes between *tzedakah*, which connotes gifts to the poor, and philanthropy, which does not necessarily benefit the poor. Do you agree with this distinction? Within your own giving, which gifts would you characterize as *tzedakah* and which would you characterize as philanthropy?
3. What are the personal spiritual benefits you have experienced from giving *tzedakah*? What did this feel like? How would you imagine making *tzedakah* a central part of your own spiritual practice?
4. Rabbi Jacobs distinguishes between the *tzedakah* obligations of the individual and those of the government. Do you agree with this distinction? Why or why not? How have you experienced the relative roles of the state and the individual in your own life?

## Chapter 5

### *Servants to Servants or Servants to God: Workers, Employers, and Unions*

1. What was the best workplace situation you have ever experienced? What was the worst? Did these experiences correspond to the descriptions of good and bad workplaces in the Jewish texts cited in this chapter? How or how not?
2. As Rabbi Jacobs notes, Jewish tradition is ambivalent about whether work is inherently valuable or a necessary evil. What do you think? When have you experienced work as inherently valuable? When have you experienced it as a necessary evil?
3. Rabbi Jacobs suggests that Jewish texts do not leave wages to the fluctuations of the market, but recommend regulating the market in order to guarantee wages that will allow workers to support their families. Do you agree with this conclusion? Why or why not?
4. In your own work experiences, when have you seen employers and employees follow the standards laid out in this chapter? When have you seen these standards not followed? What has been the result on the employers and employees in each situation?

## Chapter 6

### *They Shall Tremble No More: Housing and Homelessness*

1. Rabbi Jacobs suggests that a person's housing situation can have a major effect on one's health, happiness, and sense of security. How have you experienced or observed this phenomenon in your own life? In what situations?
2. How would you define adequate housing? What are your own minimum housing needs? How do these correspond to the definition of adequate housing presented in this chapter?
3. Who do you think is responsible for providing affordable housing? Individuals? Organizations? Local governments? The federal government?

## Chapter 7

### *I Will Remove Illness from Within Your Midst: The Provision of Health Care*

1. Have you ever experienced a disruption in your own health care, or had a conflict with your insurance company over the provision of care? What was the impact of this experience on you?
2. A number of the texts included in this chapter describe God as personally feeling human pain. What might it mean to believe that human death or sickness negatively affects the divine image? How might that belief affect our attitudes toward health care?
3. This chapter notes that a number of players—including the doctor, patient, insurance company, community, and government—all bear some responsibility for the provision of health care. How would you describe the relative responsibilities of each of these parties?
4. If you were to create the ideal health care system, what would it look like? In what ways would this system resemble or differ from the vision laid out in this chapter?

## Chapter 8

### *The City and the Garden: Environmental Sustainability for the Twenty-first Century*

1. To what extent do you think about the environmental impact of your everyday activities? How has your consciousness about environmental impact changed at all in the recent past? How has your behavior changed?
2. Rabbi Jacobs comments, "Judaism makes clear that the health of humanity and of the natural world depend deeply on one another." In what ways have you experienced that interdependence succeed or fail?
3. Rabbi Jacobs argues that human beings have a responsibility to act as stewards of the world's resources in order to create a more sustainable society. How might the concept of stewardship help us think about the appropriate distribution of resources and responsibility?
4. Rabbi Jacobs asks whether Judaism favors urban life, rural life, or views the two as equally valid. How would you answer this question? Have you ever taken environmental concerns into account when deciding where to live? If so, what decision did you make as a result?

## Chapter 9

### *When Your Brother Is Flogged: Crime, Punishment, and Rehabilitation*

1. Have you had personal experience with the criminal justice system? If so, what was this experience like? How, if at all, did the experience change your views of the criminal justice system?
2. According to Rabbi Jacobs, Jewish law distinguishes between violent crimes and other types of misbehavior, such as property crimes. What value does this categorization suggest? Do you agree with this value? Why or why not?
3. Many of the texts included in this chapter indicate a simultaneous concern for the safety and welfare of the victim and for the humanity of the perpetrator. What relative weight would you give to each of these concerns? How might you suggest that contemporary criminal justice law take into account both of these concerns?
4. How would you describe the ideal criminal justice system? In what ways would this system correspond to or differ from the ideals outlined in this chapter?

# Conclusion

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## *Judaism in the Public Sphere*

1. What role do you think religion should play in the public sphere? How could Jews bring Jewish law into public policy discussions?
2. What role do you think religious people should play in public life? Should they speak from their religious values? If so, how?
3. Rabbi Jacobs lays out three essential principles: the dignity of human life; an attempt to rectify major disparities in power; and the mutual responsibilities between the individual and the community. How might these three principles inform the discussion of other public policy issues?