

2019 Jewish Resource for the Children's Shabbat Uniting Hearts and Voices to End Child Poverty Now

The 2019 Children's Shabbat falls on Chol HaMo-eid Sukkot. The Torah portion is Exodus 33:12–34:26. As the Religious Action Center notes, "On the Shabbat during Sukkot, we are reminded of the age-old desire to know God. Moses implores God to let him see God. While God will not allow Moses to see God's face, God tells Moses, 'I will make My goodness pass before you...' Perhaps we experience the divine presence through the goodness we create in the world. The Torah then sets forth the thirteen attributes of God, among them that God is compassionate, gracious, slow to anger and abounding in kindness. By emulating these very attributes, we create the goodness which allows us to know God." (<https://reformjudaism.org/learning/torah-study/chol-hamo-eid-sukkot>)

Both the Torah portion and the holiday provide ready connections to the 2019 Children's Shabbat and its theme, "Uniting Hearts and Voices to End Child Poverty Now" and its focus on ending children poverty.

In CDF's recent report, *Ending Child Poverty Now*, we included the voices of children. Jasmine, age 7, recalled: "We slept in the car. We had to because we had no home. I slept in the back seat. My sister laid in the front. My mom laid in the front. Her head was back. My sister's head was on the side. I laid flat....We went to IHOP and we only got one pancake and we shared it. That was our breakfast."

Alan, age 10, said, "My dad did not have enough money to buy his car license...So the cop took his car away. He can't drive anymore. Now it is harder for him to get to work, and sometimes he is late. So he does not get as much money as he used to get. Now we have to go walking everywhere. We get tired. Our life is harder. We can't get as much food. Sometimes my mom has only beans, and I don't like beans so I just don't eat. Sometimes I get hungry. It's harder for me to go to sleep and I'm tired in the morning. When I grow up, I was thinking to be a doctor. But now I think that I won't be able to do anything, because I won't even have food or shelter."

Those of us who typically dwell secure in stable homes and enjoy ample nutritious food have the opportunity during Sukkot to remember in visceral, experiential ways what it means to have fragile, temporary shelter exposed to the elements. We have the chance to extend hospitality and offer food—recalling the millions of children and families who experience food insecurity. This Children's Shabbat during Sukkot is a meaningful time to engage our congregations in learning more about the 12.8 million children who live in poverty and commit to taking action for lasting, systemic change. We can begin by calling on our elected leaders to reduce child poverty by more than 57 percent through, as CDF reported in *Ending Child Poverty Now*, "nine policy improvements that could be enacted immediately to increase employment, make work pay, and meet children's basic survival needs for food, housing, and child support."

On this Children's Shabbat, we might consider Moses' recognition that as we journey toward justice, we don't—in fact we can't—go alone. "*Moses said to the Eternal, "See, You say to me, 'Lead this people forward,' but You have not made known to me whom You will send with me. Further, You have said, 'I have singled you out by name, and you have, indeed, gained My favor.'"*" - Exodus 33:12 We might consider not only how the Eternal accompanies us in this movement to justice

and freedom from oppression, but also how we gather others in our congregations and in the community –especially those who are “experts by experience,” who have first-hand experience of poverty and can guide us in the best ways to serve and seek change.

As you prepare for the 2019 Children’s Shabbat, you are encouraged to explore the other 2019 resources prepared for the National Observance of Children’s Sabbaths, especially the supplement “Uniting Hearts and Voices to End Child Poverty Now: An Interfaith Advocacy Resource” (<https://www.childrensdefense.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/08/2019-Sabbath-Interfaith-Toolkit.pdf>), which includes a curriculum and guide for a session on ending child poverty now that can engage adults and teens in your own congregation or be used with congregations from many traditions. It also includes suggested actions to take on the Children’s Shabbat weekend and throughout the year that follows, inserts, and other resources. As well, you are encouraged to draw from the section Jewish Resources for Children’s Shabbat which includes materials appropriate for this and every year. (<https://www.childrensdefense.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/08/Childrens-Sabbath-JEWISH.pdf>)

Activities for the Children’s Shabbat during Sukkot:

- Decorate your *sukkah* with nonedibles (gourds, Indian corn, peanut shell mosaics) to affirm the preciousness of food and focus attention on the problem of hunger which afflicts millions of children. Discuss the problem of childhood hunger, homelessness, and inadequate housing in age-appropriate ways with children and youths. Collect fruits, vegetables, and nonperishables and donate them to a program serving children and families without homes or other programs serving children.
- Make an effort to extend hospitality to single-parent families, families with foster children, and non-member families to share a meal in the *sukkah*.
- After Sukkot, explore ways that your congregation can work for permanent housing for children and families without homes, such as working with Habitat for Humanity or a local affordable housing organization. Or, collect items needed by families moving from shelters into their own homes. Learn more about transitional housing programs in your community that help families and ask how you can support them.
- Donate a *sukkah* or work together to build a *sukkah*-like structure for a program serving children from impoverished families as a permanent feature of their play space.

Passages from Modern and Traditional Jewish Sources on Poverty, the Importance of Children, and Justice

On Poverty

A small bit of bread may be life to the poor; one who deprives them of it sheds blood.

(Ben Sira 34:21)

Defend the poor and the orphan; do justice to the afflicted and needy.

(Midrash Tehillim 82:3)

You shall not subvert the rights of the stranger or the fatherless; you shall not take a widow's garment in pawn. Remember that you were a slave in Egypt and that the Lord your God redeemed you from there; therefore I enjoin you to observe this commandment...when you gather the grapes of your vineyard, do not pick it over again; that shall go to the stranger, the fatherless, and the widow.

(Deuteronomy 24:17-18, 21)

Rabbi Hama, son of Rabbi Hanina, said: What is the meaning of the verse, "You shall walk behind the Lord your God" (Deuteronomy 13:5)? ... [It means that] a person should imitate the righteous ways of the Holy One, blessed be God. Just as the Lord clothed the naked, ... so too you must supply clothes for the naked [poor]. Just as the Holy One, blessed be God, visited the sick, ... so too you should visit the sick. Just as the Holy One, blessed be God, buried the dead, ... so too you must bury the dead. Just as the Holy One, blessed be God, comforted mourners, ... so too you should comfort mourners.

(Babylonian Talmud, Sotah 14.)

Rabbi Abba said in the name of Rabbi Simeon ben Lakish: "He who lends money [to a poor person] is greater than he who gives charity; and he who throws money into a common purpose [to form a partnership with the poor person] is greater than either." *(Babylonian Talmud, Shabbat 63b)*

God says to Israel, "My children, whenever you give sustenance to the poor, I impute it to you as though you gave sustenance to Me." Does God then eat and drink? No, but whenever you give food to the poor, God accounts it to you as if you gave food to God.

(Midrash Tannaim on Deuteronomy 15:10, citing Numbers 28:2)

Anyone who withholds what is due to the poor blasphemes against the Maker of all, but one who is gracious unto the needy honors God.

(Proverbs 14:31)

Take care of the children of the poor, for they will be the ones who advance knowledge.

(Babylonian Talmud, Nedarim, 81a)

In Rab's day, there was a teacher whose prayer for the rain was answered promptly. When asked to tell of his special merit, he said, "I teach children of the poor as well as of the rich, I accept no fee from any who cannot afford it, and I have a fishpond to delight the children and to encourage them to do their lessons."

(Babylonian Talmud, Taanit 24a)

The prophets never thought that God's anger is something that cannot be accounted for, unpredictable, irrational. It is never a spontaneous outburst, but a reaction occasioned by the conduct of man...Man's sense of injustice is a poor analogy to God's sense of injustice. The exploitation of the poor is to us a misdemeanor; to God, it is a disaster. Our reaction is disapproval;

God's reaction is something no language can convey. Is it a sign of cruelty that God's anger is aroused when the rights of the poor are violated, when widows and orphans are oppressed? ...There is an evil which most of us condone and are even guilty of: indifference to evil. We remain neutral, impartial, and not easily moved by the wrongs done unto other people. Indifference to evil is more insidious than evil itself.

(Abraham Joshua Heschel, as quoted in Siddur Sim Shalom, p. 42)

On the Importance of Children and Justice

Thus said the Eternal: A cry is heard in Ramah, wailing, bitter weeping, Rachel weeping for her children; she refuses to be comforted for her children, who are gone. Thus said the Eternal: Restrain your voice from weeping, your eyes from shedding tears; for there is reward in your labor — declares the Eternal. They shall return from the enemy's land, and there is hope for your future — declares the Eternal, and your children shall return to their country.

(Jeremiah 31:15-17)

And Israel beheld Joseph's sons and said, "Whose are these?" And Joseph said to his father, "These are my children, whom the Lord has given me in this place." And he said, "Bring them to me, and I will bless them."

(Genesis 48:8-9)

Speak up for [those unable to speak], for the rights of all the unfortunate. Speak up, judge righteously, champion the poor and needy.

(Proverbs 31: 8-9)

One violates Shabbat for the sake of a one-day-old baby, but not for the corpse of David, King of Israel.

(Babylonian Talmud, Shabbat 151b)

As long as one dissident is in prison, our freedom will not be true. As long as one child is hungry, our life will be filled with anguish and shame. What all these victims need above all is to know that they are not alone; that we are not forgetting them, that when their voices are stifled we shall lend them ours, that while their freedom depends on ours, the quality of our freedom depends on theirs. We know that every moment is a moment of grace, every hour an offering; not to share them would mean to betray them. Our lives no longer belong to us alone; they belong to all those who need us desperately.

(Elie Wiesel, Night)

When the children are blessed, the parents by this very token are blessed.

(Zohar I: 227b)

Rabbi Meir said: When the Israelites came to receive the Torah, God said to them, "Bring me good sureties that you will observe it." They answered, "Our ancestors shall be our sureties." God replied, "Your sureties need sureties themselves. I have found fault with them." They answered, "Our prophets shall be our sureties." God replied, "I have found fault with them also." Then the Israelites said, "Our children will be our sureties." They proved acceptable, and God gave Israel the Torah.
(*Shir HaShirim Rabbah*, 1:4)

"Righteousness and only righteousness you shall pursue" (Deut. 16:20). The term "pursue" carries strong connotations of effort, eagerness, persistence, inflexibility of purpose. This implies more than merely respecting or following justice, walking in the way of righteousness; righteousness may be hard to attain; it may escape us if we do not pursue it.
(Abraham J. Heschel, *in The Prophets*, p. 264)

There may be times when we are powerless to prevent injustice, but there must never be a time when we fail to protest.
(Elie Wiesel)

Help me perfect my ways of loving and care. Inspire me to make myself whole so that I may honor your name and create a world of justice and peace.
(*Martin Buber, as quoted in Mishkan T'filah*, p 121)