

The Ten Plagues of Domestic Poverty

Contributed by [AVODAH: The Jewish Service Corps](#)

Source: Avodah

Passover is a time for us to reflect on our own freedom and an opportunity to connect our lives with the struggles of others. At AVODAH, we support emerging Jewish leaders as they work to address some of the most pressing issues in the fight against poverty. We study the complex (and often overlapping) systemic issues that impact people in our country, and explore how Jewish tradition calls on us to respond. This year, we've collected stories and insights from members of the AVODAH network to explore ten modern plagues of domestic poverty. Use this resource as a way to bring discussion to your own Seder table about the reasons so many people in America live in poverty today.

The learning we do at AVODAH asks us to question previously-held assumptions, and to challenge ourselves to explore perspectives with which we may not agree. Going into those uncomfortable spaces is often the core of meaningful learning. I encourage you to embrace those difficult moments, should they arise as you study this supplement. The seder is a time for wrestling with deep questions; let our questions be a part of your process.

With blessings for a Passover of learning, joy, and a renewed effort to build a more just world,

Cheryl Cook Executive Director, AVODAH

Hunger By Jenny Waxberg and Erin Butler

Background: One of the most common assumptions is that if someone is hungry, that person does not have a job and is living on the streets. What most people don't realize is that circumstances can change and anyone can experience hunger at some point. It could be the family with two incomes that unexpectedly must get by on one income. It could be the household with mounting medical bills that make it difficult to make ends meet at the end of the month. It could be the senior on a fixed income after a lifetime of hard work. Hunger is a silent but growing epidemic.

People live in food insecure homes if they do not always know where to find the next meal. Many citizens turning to soup kitchens and food pantries are employed but their wages cannot keep up with the cost of living.

Discuss: What does hunger look like to you?

A Kavanah/Intention: May we all answer the Passover call, 'May all who are hungry come eat' by educating ourselves about hunger in America and supporting work to alleviate hunger.

Jenny Waxberg and Erin Butler were AVODAH Fellows in 2014 and work at City Harvest in New York.

Lack of Affordable Housing

by Yonah Liberman

Background: The plague of unaffordable housing and rampant homelessness is nothing new. The problems facing the tenants I work with — leaky ceilings, no heat or hot water, patch repairs — are problems that people have faced for centuries. What's new is the way intentional neglect has reared its ugly head. As a tenant organizer working with people living in multifamily buildings that are in foreclosure, I've seen firsthand how landlords get away with it. Private equity firms come together and take out enormous mortgages from banks to buy up millions of dollars worth of property. The "business model" revolves around harassing

tenants into leaving their homes so landlords can raise the rents and cut maintenance costs. When people refuse to leave their homes, landlords can't raise the rents, and they can't pay back the bank. The bank sells the buildings to the highest bidder, unless tenants get organized and put pressure on it to sell their buildings at a lower price to a responsible investor. That's the goal I and the tenants I work with strive for everyday.

Discuss: What does the concept of "housing as a human right" mean to you?

A Kavanah/Intention: I intend to fight for the right for all people to housing by holding my elected officials to their promises to build and preserve affordable housing. And if I am living in an urban community, I intend to deepen my understanding of my neighborhood and how I can keep it affordable for my neighbors.

Yonah Lieberman was an AVODAH corps member in 2013-2014 and worked as a tenant organizer at Urban Homesteading Assistance Board in New York.

Healthcare

by Emily Unger

Background: Last week at work, one of my clients called me. He sounded exhausted and unwell. He had suddenly become very sick, he told me. He thought that he needed to go to the hospital. But he was afraid because he couldn't afford to pay a huge bill. I counseled him that the most he would have to pay for a short hospitalization was the cost of his insurance deductible, but even this amount – over \$1,000 – was more than his entire monthly income. He had been putting off medical treatment for days out of fear for the cost.

I eventually persuaded my client to see a doctor, but every day, countless others are faced with a similar choice. Thanks to the Affordable Care Act, most Americans who once had no health insurance will now be covered. However, many states still refuse to expand their Medicaid programs, leaving millions of the poorest Americans completely uninsured. Moreover, many barriers – unaffordably high co-pays and deductibles, lack of cultural competency among healthcare providers, inaccessibility of health care facilities to people with disabilities – remain, preventing even those with basic health insurance from receiving needed medical care.

Discuss: Share a time when you had to rely on your medical insurance and consider what would have happened had you not been covered.

A Kavanah/Intention: May our healthcare system provide the best possible healing to all those in need, and enable our providers to be the best possible healers.

Emily Unger was an AVODAH corps member in 2013-2014 and worked as an AmeriCorps Paralegal at the New York Legal Assistance Group

The Threat to Voting Rights by Amelia van Iwaarden

Background: Bend the Arc launched our Voting Rights Campaign to mobilize the Jewish community to support the passage of the Voting Rights Amendment Act (VRAA). This bipartisan bill includes modern protections against discrimination in voting in every part of the country. Last year's U.S. Supreme Court ruling in *Shelby County v. Holder* scrapped the enforcement mechanisms in the landmark 1965 Voting Rights Act, which provided protections against discriminatory voting laws at the state and local levels. Since the Supreme Court's ruling, we have already seen a flurry of state and local efforts that will make it difficult for communities of color, women, first-time voters, the elderly, and those living in poverty to cast their vote. In my work, I am helping to develop leaders – both organizers in diverse religious communities, and Jewish leaders in social justice organizations – who are addressing systemic issues of racial and economic injustice of which voter suppression is a symptom.

Discuss: There are some who say that there is no need for Jews to be involved in this work, because most

American Jews do not belong to the groups experiencing discrimination. Why is it important for Jews to be in this fight as Jews? What role do you think we can play as Jews in protecting voting rights for all Americans?

A Kavanah/Intention: Exodus 22:20 tells us “ You shall not wrong a stranger or oppress him, for you were strangers in the land of Egypt.” This Passover, as we celebrate our freedom, let us recommit to ending oppression wherever we see it.

Amelia van Iwaarden was an AVODAH Fellow in 2014, working at Bend the Arc: A Jewish Partnership for Justice

Debt by ErikaVan Gundy

Background: Debt is a primary force that traps individuals in a cycle of deepening poverty. A number of factors contribute to the strong effect that debt has on poverty, including required payments on interest accrued, late fees, predatory products targeted to the short-on-cash, and the inherent insecurity of one’s financial future. In the finance world, there is a distinction between “good debt” and “bad debt,” one which grows in value and the other which becomes costlier over time, respectively. However, debt (student loan, credit card, medical, or other) is almost universally a stressor for those in its grips and an extra factor in decisions such as where to live, what to eat that day, and how many jobs are needed to pay for the above and more. As a financial counselor for low-income New Yorkers, I see debt in terms of people and control. For my clients, debt is a dozen calls per day from creditors seeking repayment, piles of mail that sit unopened out of fear, and a constant tax on mental, financial, and emotional bandwidth.

Discuss: In taking on debt, there is an expectation and hope that your “future self” will be better off than your current self. Reflect on this for a moment. What does this hope mean, and how does it change the way we think about debt and debtors? How can this hope be channeled otherwise as it relates to financial or other aspects of someone’s life?

A Kavanah/Intention: I intend to speak with people from different parts of my life to better understand their experiences with debt, the situations that led them into debt, and how their subsequent decisions were impacted.

Erika Van Gundy was an AVODAH Fellow in 2014 and works for the New York City Department of Consumer Affairs Office of Financial Empowerment

Education by Laura Taishoff

Background: A significant proportion of positive life outcomes depend on the foundation of a quality education. But what does it really mean? We need students to pursue challenging coursework and succeed academically, but education is also about empowerment and building character. It is no secret that the students with the greatest needs are often in the schools with the fewest resources available to meet them. In New Orleans, a city where an overwhelming majority of schools are either private or charter, access to quality education for the city’s most at-risk population is a cocktail of school closings, staff changes, and school-based arrests. I am a high school special education teacher working with students who are past the typical age range for their schooling. They are overage for a variety of factors, but one of the most prevalent is that other schools pushed them out. Despite the fact that they have consistently been denied access to a quality education, these are the students who are pursuing a diploma when it would undoubtedly be easier not to. We should simultaneously be inspired by them and ashamed that so many of them exist.

Discuss: In your best memories of school, how did you feel? Creative? Boundless? Praised? How would it have felt to be told you were not smart or made to feel as if your school did not want you there?

A Kavanah/Intention: I commit to doing my part to create a world in which every student, no matter what neighborhood the student is from, attends a school where students are challenged academically and

empowered to be the future leaders of our world.

Laura Taishoff is a special education teacher at ReNew Accelerated High School in New Orleans. Laura is an alumna of the AVODAH 2009-2010 New Orleans cohort.

The Decline of Labor Rights by Lee M. Leviter

Background: For the past several decades, median earnings have been stagnant while hours worked have steadily increased. Why have we been working harder for less and less? Because decreasing union density has led to the disempowerment of workers in all sectors of the economy. Although workers are best able to improve their working conditions when they can make collective demands of their employer, many seek to vilify and weaken collective employee action. Companies like Walmart continue to fight unionization while paying so little that many of their full-time employees qualify for food stamps. Standing together in a union, these workers could negotiate for higher wages. In New York, we have heard calls for a higher minimum wage from workers in the fast-food industry, where pay can be as little as \$8 an hour. It's nearly impossible to survive in New York City at such a wage. As an attorney, I help represent public sector teachers, nurses, and other civil servants in New York City, where the same political and economic pressures threaten public sector employment as a pathway to the middle class

Discuss: If you are an employee, what aspects of your job would you change if you could join with your co-workers and ask? If you are an employer, how would you respond if an employee – or a group of employees – asked to change a particular aspect of the job?

A Kavanah/Intention: As we celebrate freedom this Passover, let us remember that we empower ourselves to fight oppression by acting together.

Lee Leviter was an AVODAH Fellow in 2014 and works as an attorney representing several major public-sector unions.

Immigration by Merri Nicholson

Background: During my AVODAH year at CASA de Maryland, young people (commonly referred to as DREAMers) led the way in utilizing grassroots organizing to successfully pass the Maryland DREAM Act, which expanded access to higher education to students without documentation. These DREAMers also pushed for comprehensive immigration reform that would provide a path to citizenship for the 11 million undocumented people currently living in the United States. Many of these people are the cornerstone of economies from which we all benefit, such as construction and agriculture. They proudly pay taxes and immigrated for the same reasons our families did, to seek a better life or escape violence. Unlike when our families came to the United States, current restrictions make it impossible for most to obtain legal status. Fixing our immigration system will strengthen our communities by keeping families together and lift many out of poverty with expanded access to opportunities such as higher education and quality jobs.

Discuss: What caused your family to come to America? If it wasn't recent, would they still have been able to immigrate in today's political climate?

A Kavanah/Intention: May we see a Jewish community that fully embraces our immigrant roots by working for justice in solidarity with those coming to America seeking a better tomorrow.

Merri Nicholson is a research assistant at Academy Health in Washington, DC. Merri is an alum of the AVODAH 2012-2013 Washington, DC cohort.

Systemic Oppression by Emily Saltzman

Background: Oppression is largely defined as the use of authority or power in a cruel or unjust manner.

Institutional oppression refers to the power of large systems or institutions that determine the cultural or professional standards for our society. Often these systems were developed from a framework, intentionally or not, that propels certain communities towards success, while keeping others from it. There is also an inextricable link between systematic oppression and poverty. For example, transgender communities of color are more likely to experience poverty due to transphobia in a labor force layered with racism in the educational system. This does not mean that individual members of this community cannot break the cycle of poverty, but it does mean that due to systematic oppression, they will have to struggle harder to reach success.

As Jews, we often think about oppression as it relates to our community's historical struggle for religious freedom. This experience with historical oppression gives us a jumping-off point to address issues of systematic oppression with which we may not all have first-hand experience, including racism, classism, homophobia, sexism, ableism, and transphobia. Our ability to tap into our personal experiences with antisemitism in addition to our community's struggle allows us to build solidarity with these communities and adds to our call for tikkun olam —to repair the world—because it is a world we share.

Discuss: As Jews, how can we use our experience of oppression to build solidarity with and support communities who are currently experiencing oppression? How might we inadvertently contribute to certain oppressive systems?

A Kavanah/Intention: I intend to challenge myself and my family to think more concretely about the ways systematic oppression affects our lives and what we can do individually to question the systems that we work and live in.

Emily Saltzman is a social worker focusing on comprehensive sexuality education in addition to being a Steering Committee Member of the Undoing Racism Internship Project. Emily is an alumna of the AVODAH 2008-2009 New York City cohort.

Intersecting Oppressions by Rabbi Stephanie Ruskay

Background: Hunger, healthcare, education, threats to voting rights, systemic oppression, lack of affordable housing, immigration, debt, labor restrictions. For many, these plagues intersect and overlap for people in poverty, increasing the obstacles that they must face. High health care bills can trigger hunger, inability to pay for adequate housing and long-term debt. An insufficient immigration policy can limit educational opportunities. Threats to voting rights limit the ability of individuals and communities to advocate for policies that could alleviate the challenges they face. Each individual plague has the capacity to devastate, and the combination can paralyze.

There are a variety of perspectives on how to address these plagues. We divide ourselves by political affiliation, sure that our policy and perspective is the best way forward. And yet, year after year, there are poor people to invite into our seders. Year after year, we create a set of contemporary plagues to read at our seders, because the society we've constructed is imperfect. We continue to dream of a redeemed and just world, and wonder how to get there.

This Passover, as always, we retell the story of our exodus from slavery to freedom. We remember the Egyptians by spilling a drop of wine for each plague that afflicted them, sacrificing some of the sweetness of the wine to honor the humanity of our enemy. This action reminds us that we were all made in God's image. It compels us to connect even with those whom we consider our foes.

We live in a polarized society and often find ourselves believing the worst about one another. We have different ideas about how a just society looks and how it requires us each to behave. Our sages teach us that we cannot live without a chevruta, someone who challenges our "facts" and demands that we reconsider our opinions. Though we may disagree about how to get there, we must remember that our ultimate goal is to

alleviate the intersecting oppressions that foster a system in which many don't have the resources to meet their needs or a path through which they can attain them.

Discuss: Can you share a time in which someone (maybe even someone at your seder) inspired you to reconsider and expand your ideas about how to alleviate poverty? What contributed to your ability to think differently (and hopefully even act)?

Having considered this contemporary list of intersecting plagues and oppressions, how might the Jewish community contribute to creating a more just world for all people?

A Kavanah/Intention: May we always assume goodwill as we work to pursue justice and may our assumption of goodwill inspire it in others, so that together we bring about more civil discourse among pursuers of justice.

Rabbi Stephanie Ruskay is AVODAH's Director of Alumni and Community Engagement

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