

Poverty and Policies for Its Limitation as Reflected in Rabbinic Literature

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This article deals with problems of poverty and methods proposed by rabbis to deal with it as found in rabbinic literature. At the basis of this article stands the Biblical commandment: “If there be among you a needy man... you shall not harden your heart, nor shut your hand from your needy brother; but you shall surely open your hand unto him...” (Deut. 15, 7-8).

Identifying the poor and defining their rights according to agreed-upon criteria were required because of the great number of poor and a dearth of sources open to the persons in charge of the communal charity funds, financed by collections from those with means.

The rabbis determined the poverty line ; anyone below this line was considered to be poor and entitled to support. With time, the poverty line was refined, as seen from the rabbinic literature discussing the subject throughout history. The rabbis also determined a list of commodities and services that the officers in charge of the public charity fund should provide to the needy, taking into consideration the depth of their poverty and the means at the disposal of the charity fund. From the definition of poverty arose, among other resolutions, the determination that someone who could work and earn a living was not entitled to charity from the public fund, even if he actually was in a state of need.

The article also discusses treating temporary poverty in contrast to incessant poverty, in addition to the preference of hiring the poor and the employer’s paying them subsidized wages rather than giving them charity.

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