

GEMILUT CHASADIM— Israel and the Social Action Agenda

2. KEREN B'KAVOD PROJECT

INTRODUCTION

Over the past 60 years, Israel has advanced in many areas of life, including in the area of economic development. Case in point: Israel has one of the most robust economies in the West, with its economic growth outstripping almost every other country in 2007. However, there is also a growing gap between those who benefit from the growing economy and the hundreds of thousands of individuals and families that are seeing their personal economic picture grow bleaker by the day. Our Movement in Israel is responding to this challenge through the exceptional work of **Keren B'Kavod**, a project of the Israel Religious Action Center (IRAC). The Israel Religious Action Center, founded in 1987, is the public and legal advocacy arm of the Reform Movement in Israel.

Keren B'Kavod works on a year-round basis providing hundreds of food packages and both social and cultural opportunities to needy Israelis in all sectors of Israeli society in order to:

- provide humanitarian aid to needy populations in Israel in a way that will also empower them to create social change,
- raise public awareness of social problems in Israel,
- offer opportunities to members and friends of the Reform Movement in Israel to improve the situation, and
- educate about our Jewish values to the tens of thousands of Israelis who are guests at life-cycle events each year at Israeli Reform synagogues.

The **Keren B'Kavod** initiative has already raised over \$50,000 from Reform Jews in Israel who are now making *tzedakah* an important component of their personal Jewish practice. The idea of expressing commitment to social justice through religious frameworks is a new and important phenomenon for Israelis, including many members of our congregations in Israel. The following program is designed to raise awareness in your community about the crisis, the work of **Keren B'Kavod**, and steps that can be taken to participate in this sacred work.

This program can be used as a study session

- before a congregational Social Action Committee, Religious School Board or Board of Trustees meeting (especially as part of considerations for projects for the upcoming year),
- at a NFTY conclave, or prior to a Mitzvah Day, to link our youth social action projects here with those in Israel,
- during a pre-trip planning session for a congregational mission to Israel, as preparation for a hands-on **Keren B'Kavod** project while there, or
- as part of a 7th grade mitzvah project curriculum, or general adult education text study curriculum.

TIMELINE

Introduction	0:00-0:05
Text Study and Discussion Questions	0:05-0:25
Learning About Hunger and Poverty in Israel & Keren B’Kavod	0:25-0:40
Take Action	0:40-0:55
Wrap Up	0:40-0:55

MATERIALS

Copies of the Israel at 60 **Keren B’Kavod** Text Study and Fact Sheet

Access to Internet

IMPLEMENTATION

- *Introduction*

The program leader should introduce the topic utilizing the following key points:

 - Israel has accomplished many things in the past 60 years and is recognized throughout the world for many of its accomplishments in the areas such as medicine and biotech, communications, desert reclamation, and a host of other technological advances.
 - This has led to a strong economy; in fact, in 2007, Israel had the most robust economy of any country in the west with a growth rate of over 5%.
 - Unfortunately, Israel has also seen a significant growth in the gap between those who have and those who have not, a challenging and less desirable outcome of the process referred to by many in Israel as *americanizatia*.
 - In this program, these issues will be explored through classic Jewish texts on poverty and hunger and we will learn how the Reform Movement in Israel is engaging congregations and individual Israelis in the process of combating poverty and hunger through the **Keren b’Kavod** program of the Israel Religious Action Center.
 - We will also look at steps we can take here in North America to be partners with **Keren b’Kavod** and to be a part of the solution to this challenge facing the Jewish State.
- *Text Study*
 - The program leader can distribute the Israel at 60 **Keren B’Kavod** Text Study and Fact Sheet, and, if it is the custom of the congregation, begin with the blessing for studying Torah.
 - Prior to studying the text, the following background information to the text can be shared with the group: The *Mishnah* was the first written collection of oral legal traditions, edited in the Land of Israel about the year 200 C.E. It then formed the basis for the studies in the academies of Babylonia and the Land of Israel which were compiled in the *Gemara*. The *Talmud* is comprised of the *Mishnah* plus the *Gemara*. The following text is from the second tractate of the *Mishnah*, with commentary and explanation by the modern Israeli scholar Rabbi Pinhas Kehati.
 - After reading the text aloud and clarifying any terms or words, the program leader can raise the following questions:

1. What are differences between the *kupab* and the *tamchuy*? What can we learn from the distinctions (a) between giving food and giving money, (b) between daily and weekly distributions, and (c) between fixed contributions (to the *kupab*) and non-fixed contributions (to the *tamchuy*)?
2. What do you think of the two different explanations given by Kehati for the number of people who collect and distribute the *tamchuy*, i.e., the opinion of Rashi that it was a practical matter of needing to distribute immediately and the opinion of Rambam that it was a matter of law?
3. When the *Mishnah* says, “enough food for two meals,” it uses the Hebrew word “*se’udab*” for “meal.” A *se’udab* is a substantial meal, a “square” meal, perhaps even a feast. Who determines when an individual is eligible to receive food from the *tamchuy*? Why do you suppose the *Mishnah* uses the word *se’udab* even though it has a connotation that is far beyond subsistence-level eating?
4. What practical implications can you glean from this ancient Jewish tradition about the *kupab* and the *tamchuy*? How (if at all) does the tradition affect your sense of personal *tzedakah* obligations and practices? How might it affect our communal *tzedakah* obligations and practices, say in our synagogues?

- *Poverty in Israel and the **Keren B’Kavod***

- The group can now review the second half of the handout entitled **Fact Sheet on Poverty in Israel—A Deep Moral Challenge**
- The program leader might want to ask some of the following leading questions:

1. Which of these facts did you find the most surprising?
2. How might the text we just studied guide our response to these issues?
3. What are the responsibilities of a Jewish State and the Jews who live in that State in regard to implementing these values into daily life?
4. Are there examples from individual’s lives or projects at the congregation that respond to similar challenges in our local communities?
5. How might Reform Jews in Israel bring the values of our Movement to bear in responding to such issues?

- The program leader can now share some of the following information about **Keren b’Kavod** and the Israel Religious Action Center:
 - The Israel Religious Action Center (IRAC) was established in 1987 with the goals of advancing pluralism in Israeli society and of protecting and defending the human rights of all Israeli citizens, especially those rights having to do with freedoms of conscience, faith, and religion. (for more on IRAC, visit <http://rac.org/advocacy/irac/>)
 - In recent years, the IRAC has expanded its religious justice work to include training congregations in Israel through its *Kehillat Tzedek* program to fight poverty in Israel through its **Keren B’Kavod** project.
 - **Keren B’Kavod**, which translates as “*a fund in dignity*,” is the Israeli Reform Movement’s response to the growing difficulty for many people in Israel to provide themselves with basic necessities. **Keren B’Kavod** addresses the problem of poverty through food projects, cultural education and other similar efforts. The project helps foreign workers, native Israelis, and people from all sectors and all religious backgrounds.
 - One of the elements of the **Keren B’Kavod** project that makes it different from many other projects in Israel is the fact that it uses the liberal religious values of the Reform Movement to inspire Israelis to participate through financial donations and social action work at the grassroots

level. For many Israelis who have not been exposed to these values or who understand Judaism solely as the inheritance of the Orthodox and traditional community, these core ideas are both new to them and compelling.

- *Take Action*

There are a number of ways that individuals here in North America can take action and serve as partners in the work of ***Keren B’Kavod***:

- As a group or as individuals, dollars can be raised and donated to ***Keren B’Kavod***. These donations can be gathered at the conclusion of the program, and at other fundraising events, and sent to the **World Union for Progressive Judaism, 633 Third Avenue, New York, NY 10017** with a note indicating that they are for ***Keren B’Kavod***.
- Individuals can visit the ***Keren B’Kavod*** website **www.happybirthdayisrael.com** to learn more about the project and to make an online donation by sending an electronic birthday card, a special picture or a blessing.
- Key elements from this session can be printed in congregational bulletins or shared within the various cohorts of the community to raise awareness and to raise support for ***Keren B’Kavod***.
- Staff of the IRAC, staff and volunteers of the ***Keren B’Kavod*** project, or members of the ARZA staff can be invited to speak at the congregation to provide more information on the issues of poverty and hunger in Israel.
- Congregations can make certain that visits to Israel include an opportunity for some hands-on work with the ***Keren B’Kavod*** project

The group may want to talk about these different opportunities for action and prioritize what would make sense for the congregation in the coming year so that Israel enters its 61st birthday with less poverty and hunger.

- *Wrap up*

The wrap up is an opportunity for the program leader to reiterate the key point that while Israel has had many tremendous successes, there are still key issues facing the Jewish State, such as the growing economic disparity. It is also important of us as Reform Jews in North America to understand that our sister Movement in Israel is combating this challenge in a constructive manner inspired by our shared religious values. In addition, the program leader may want to point out a personal reaction to the issue of poverty in Israel and the importance of ***Keren B’Kavod*** and the impact on his or her own thinking about Israel, or ask for a few individuals to share their own reactions. Someone in the group might be asked to take responsibility for writing about the session for the upcoming bulletin so that more of the congregation can be brought into the partnership.

ISRAEL AT 60

KEREN B'KAVOD TEXT STUDY AND FACT SHEET

TEXT: MISHNAH PE'AH 8:7

מי שיש לו מזון שתי סעדות, לא יטל מן התמחוי. מזון ארבע עשרה סעדות,
לא יטל מן הקפה. והקפה נגבית בשנים, ומתחלקת בשלשה:

One who has enough food for two meals does not take from the *tamchuy*. [One who has] enough food for fourteen meals does not take from the *kupab*. And the *kupab* is collected by two and distributed by three.

COMMENTARY BY RABBI PINHAS KEHATI

During the Tannaitic period [i.e., the period of the *Mishnah*] there were two charitable institutions in every Jewish community: (1) the *kupab*, the communal charitable fund, whose officials would collect weekly from each member of the community an individually fixed contribution... From the fund, charity was distributed to the poor of the city every Shabbat eve. Each poor person was given sufficient money for seven days' food. (2) The *tamchuy* was the charity dish, from which the wandering poor were fed daily. The *tamchuy* officials collected daily from the houses all kinds of food or money, in order to supply the food for the *tamchuy*... The *tamchuy*... is collected and distributed by three because the distribution is made immediately after the collection and if the collection were to be done by two, there would be the trouble of searching for a third person in order to distribute the *tamchuy* (Talmud, Bava Batra 8b; Rashi [Rashi was an 11th century French commentator]). Rambam [i.e., Moses Maimonides, 12th century Spain, Morocco, and Egypt] explains that since the quantities of the contributions to the *tamchuy* are not fixed, but left to the donor's discretion, the collection for the *tamchuy* also involves matters of monetary jurisdiction [and therefore must be adjudicated, according to the rules of the *Mishnah*, by a court of three].

FACT SHEET ON POVERTY IN ISRAEL—A DEEP MORAL CHALLENGE

In the recent past, **Keren B'Kavod** donations from Israeli Reform Jews have been used to address the growing issue of poverty and hunger in the Jewish State.

- *Almost 40% of children in Israel live at or below the poverty level.*
- *750,000 retirees find themselves living below the poverty level.*
- *New immigrants, legal foreign workers, non-Jewish citizens and those on the periphery are most susceptible to poverty and hunger.*
- *Some 1,200,000 Israelis currently find themselves within the framework of the governmental welfare bureaus.*
- *The current coalition government has been unable to raise the minimum wage to \$1,000 a month.*
- *Last year's Second War in Lebanon significantly delayed the government's declared War on Poverty.*

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