

## The Jewish Poor

By CONGRESSWOMAN BELLA ABZUG

As the only Jewish woman member of Congress, I feel a very special sense of responsibility and that is why I have spoken out strongly on the issue of aid to Israel in her struggle for survival.

I have also been concerned with calling attention to a problem that has been largely ignored until the past year. I refer to the so-called invisible Jewish poor, who are believed to number about a million and are concentrated in our nation's inner-cities. The great majority are elderly men and women.

In New York City alone, a quarter of a million Jews subsist on less than \$3,500 a year, and another 150,000 live in near-poverty on incomes below \$4,500.

Existing in furnished rooms, slum dwellings and shabby hotels throughout my district in New York City--particularly on the Lower East Side and the West Side--are thousands of old men and women, usually alone, many in failing health, paying exorbitant rents and trying to survive on meager social security benefits and pensions.

Recently the head of a program for senior citizens at a center in my district asked some of them how they managed on so little money. "What do you do?" she asked. And one answered, "We don't do. We don't go out. We don't buy clothes. And we don't eat much."

Thousands of other non-aged poor Jewish families in New York are on welfare or receive Aid to Dependent Children, a fact that is usually greeted with disbelief by those who have been brainwashed into thinking that only blacks and Puerto Ricans receive assistance.

The third largest poverty group in New York can be found among the 80,000 Chassidic Jews, many living in ghettos within ghettos.

All these are what have been called the invisible Jewish poor, but fortunately more and more Jewish organizations are addressing themselves to the problem, though the government has yet to show any significant interest.

Recently, I went to a leadership conference of national Jewish women's organizations to discuss this question. Present were leaders of B'nai B'rith Women, Mizrahi Women's Organizations, the National Council of Jewish Women, the Temple Sisterhoods, Pioneer Women, Women's American ORT, the American Jewish Congress and the Women's Branch of Orthodox congregations.

As I expected, they were all greatly concerned and recognized that this was an area of Jewish life right here in America that had been too long neglected. They agreed to work out an action program that would involve voluntary service as well as governmental programs, and my office is cooperating with them in this effort.

As a result of studies by the American Jewish Committee, American Jewish Congress and other organizations calling attention to the problem of the Jewish poor, I believe there will be a major concentration on the community level by the voluntary groups to provide the kinds of personal services so desperately needed by these people.

Many elderly Jews are hidden away in areas that have ceased to be Jewish. They are isolated, frightened people, deprived of the security and support they need, cut off from access to neighborhood synagogues, kosher food stores, friends and social centers. Most have no place else to go, but their lives would be more bearable if they had free transportation



RABBI MARC TANNENBAUM, NAT'L. DIR. INTERRELIGIOUS AFFAIRS OF AMERICAN JEWISH COMMITTEE EXPLAINS PASSOVER TO HUGH DOWNS, HOST OF NBC-TV'S "TODAY" SHOW.

to and from Jewish communities or if the services could be brought to them.

A major problem is that many poor Jews live outside the officially designated poverty areas and are disqualified from poverty program benefits. This requires revision of the Economic Opportunity Act to provide for benefits on the basis of need rather than residence. Even Jews who do live in designated poverty areas are seriously under-represented in the poverty councils that run the program. As a result of the growing awareness of this discriminatory practice, the Lindsay Administration in New York is opposing plans to conduct elections for poverty councils on a Saturday when orthodox Jews would be able to vote only in the late evening hours.

In Congress I have been working on the legislative aspects of this problem, particularly for the elderly. Any program which helps older Americans, the great majority of whom are poor, will also go a long way toward easing the plight of the Jewish poor.

I have introduced bills authorizing federal grants and loans to private non-profit organizations for special transportation service to the elderly and the handicapped. After three elderly Jews were murdered in their apartments on the Lower East Side, I introduced the Public Housing Tenants Security Act, which would assure that people living in federally assisted housing are provided with police protection and

other security measures. This is of special importance to the elderly, who are the chief victims of the muggings, robberies and other crimes that are plaguing our big cities.

I am also introducing a comprehensive Senior Citizens Bill of Rights legislative package that would allow the elderly to live out their remaining years in dignity and with at least a modest standard of living.

It includes a 25 percent across-the-board increase in social security payments; completely free Medicare, including eye care, dental care, hearing aids, prescription drugs, and other items not now covered; training programs and jobs, full and part-time for the elderly (they make great community workers.); property tax credits and private pension protection; and a cabinet-level agency for the elderly.

Because housing is probably the most crucial problem for the aged, a key feature of my proposals is a bill to provide a shelter allowance of up to \$1200 a year for individuals with a disposable income of \$4,500 or less.

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