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Spare Some Change?

Beggars pester Jerusalemites, but some people keep on giving

GRIFFIN FAY GASHMAN

To give or not to give — that is the question,” says Eliezer Jaffe, paraphrasing Hamlet’s dilemma. Jaffe, Professor of Social Work at the Paul Baerwald School at the Hebrew University and chair for the Study of Philanthropy and Non-Profit Organizations, is naturally in favor of helping the poor, but doesn’t want to encourage panhandling as a profession. “In Jewish culture it’s a mitzva to give — so there has to be someone to receive.”

And, in Jerusalem, there are plenty who want to receive.

Beggars and collectors for charitable causes are proliferating around the city to the extent that it is becoming impossible to window-shop, walk down the street, enter the supermarket, go to the bank or dine in a restaurant without being accosted by someone asking for a handout.

Ironically, the situation is magnified many times over at the Western Wall where there are signs in the plaza proclaiming that begging is illegal. That of-course does not deter beggars from butting in on the prayers of the pious to ask for donations. Some even have the audacity to beg on the Sabbath, taking it for granted that some of the visitors to the Wall are not Sabbath observant and are carrying money with them.

On weekdays they make it a practice to work the synagogues during morning and afternoon services, and some even hang out at cemeteries to cadge coins from mourners. They plague people waiting for buses, rattling their tin cups till the noise becomes so deafening that even the most reluctant donor gives a coin just to get rid of them.

Demographically, their density is most prevalent in downtown areas, particularly King George Street, Ben Yehuda and surrounding side streets. On Fridays, there’s a swell of numbers in and

around Geula and Mea Shearim.

In fact, there is a law against begging. But no one enforces it.

According to the Municipal Spokesman’s office, it is not a city bylaw, but a matter for police jurisdiction.

The police beg to differ. When contacted by *In Jerusalem*, the Spokesman’s Office of the Jerusalem District of the Israel Police agreed that it is a police matter when beggars are involved

in a criminal offence or work the cars at traffic intersections. But otherwise it’s the job of the municipality to take them off the streets.

Tel Aviv police have started clamping down on beggars who harass drivers at intersections, since many of them tend to ignore the traffic lights. Not only are the jay-walking beggars endangering their own lives, but they are hazards to drivers who can sometimes get into a lot of trouble when swerving to avoid them.

As a professor of social work, Jaffe wants to know who the beggars are.

What are their backgrounds?
Who and where are their families?

Are these beggars genuinely without resources or are they sick people who have a need to debase themselves?

Are they drug addicts or alcoholics who have turned to begging to support their habit?

Why have they chosen to make begging a profession?

Jaffe thinks that the city’s welfare department should make it its business to put together a complete profile on every beggar.

He can’t imagine, for instance, that those beggars who are asking for alms for basic health services are not getting medical services from some public source. He surmises that most are probably get-

ting multiple services from a variety of public and voluntary service agencies.

The problem of begging, in all its manifestations, is more acute in Jerusalem because of the high ratio of religiously observant Jews

in the city. For most people, especially the secular, the problem is knowing how to distinguish between the shysters and the truly destitute who however they might try, just can’t make ends meet.

But in some religious circles that distinction is irrelevant. What is paramount is the mitzva of giving. We are enjoined in *Ethics of the Fathers* not to do a good deed for the sake of the reward, but for the sake of the deed itself.

Thus in some families, it is customary before Sabbath candle lighting to put some coins in a charity box. Similarly, prior to attending a wedding or some other celebration where beggars might be lining up in the doorway, many Orthodox Jews make sure that their purses are full of small change. This enables them to accommodate every beggar with an outstretched hand.

It doesn’t take very much. After all, NIS 10 can be translated into one hundred coins of 10 agorot each, which in essence means a hundred mitzvot.

While this may seem amusing to those who don't live a mitzva-oriented lifestyle, it is something which the religiously observant take very seriously.

As for giving, the Orthodox give much more than the secular, Jaffe says, adding that "asking is what usually triggers giving."

Citing 1997 statistics, Jaffe says that religiously observant Jews accounted for 77% of the adult

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population who gave money in Israel. The average annual contribution per household was NIS 846.

Excluding lotteries, the Israeli public contributed NIS 465 million to a wide variety of projects, institutions and causes. The prime beneficiaries were non-profit organizations, with 42% of contributions directed towards social welfare, 38% towards medical needs, 10% for religion and 7% for education.

The largest chunk of all, says Jaffe, was for Orthodox organizations in all these categories.

While the vast majority of Orthodox give, Jaffe's statistics show that in haredi circles, the percentage is as high as 89%.

Those who have little to spare give only a few coins but as income increases, so does the size of the donation, he says.

Education is also a factor in giving. It would appear that the more educated the person, the more likely he or she is to give. Of the people who do give, 81% have more than 13 years of formal education.

A BEGGAR'S religion apparently has no influence on those donors who give purely for the sake of giving. There are at least two non-Jewish beggars who pretend to be Jewish, but are not.

The woman wears a long-sleeved dress and head scarf tied in the fashion of the ladies of Geula. She is an aggressive beggar who usually sits on the pavement near the corner of King George and Keren Kayemet and has been known to pull people by the arm if they walk past her without giving.

He sits on one of those brick fences originally built around a tree, near the corner of Keren Hayesod and Lincoln Streets. Wrapped in a brown plaid blanket and speaking in a squeaky voice, he wishes passers-by "Shabbat Shalom." If there is no response, he repeats the greeting in Arabic-accented English. He seems to be a harmless old man. But when his day's "work" is over and he gets up from his crouched position, he is a tall, middle-aged man who walks with a firm stride.

Many religious people give

unquestioningly to both these non-Jewish beggars. Non-religious people usually walk past them without stopping.

Then there's the man with the pedigree dog and the large collection of well-laundered jeans and t-shirts who gets very upset with anyone who queries his creden-

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tials as a beggar.

There's the instant spastic who develops remarkable mobility when he's finished for the day. And there's the woman who, for years, sat on the ground on the corner of King George and Ben Yehuda Streets, her legs encased in calipers. More recently, she's found it more profitable to walk.

Two cherub-faced men in Hassidic garb have for some years been asking for donations to save the life of a young boy who has cancer. They stand either on the corner of King George and Agrippas or at the intersection of Jaffa Road and

Zion Square. A woman who claims to have a young daughter with cancer usually positions herself outside The Bell shopping mall on King George Street.

There's a man who appears to be legless, who often sits on Ben Yehuda Street, his loose shirt covering his stumps. In actual fact, he's a yoga expert who has mastered the technique of sitting for hours with his legs folded around his torso – a feat covered by his oversized shirt. He literally unwinds at the end of the day.

Historian, author and columnist Rabbi Micha Halpern admits that he's been conned on several occasions. That hasn't stopped him from giving, but it does make him a little wary. "The more complicated the

story," he says, "the more likely it is to be untrue."

What rankles Halpern is that local beggars fail to take note of who gives them more than the obligatory coin. A sucker for a sob story, Halpern often hands over amounts that will pay for at least a cup of coffee and a sandwich. Many of his meetings are in coffee houses, where he sometimes sits for two or three hours, meeting one person after another. The

beggars who harass patrons come back to his table again and again, ignoring the fact that he's already given.

For those preferring to give charity to organizations rather

than to individuals, Jaffe has put out a book on giving wisely in which he has published profiles of numerous non-profit organizations. He says there are 3,500 registered organizations of this kind in Jerusalem alone.

Not all of them exist to help the poor, he acknowledges. Those that don't include synagogues, ritual paths and memorial funds. But there are hundreds of organizations which provide goods, services and money for people living below the poverty line. Some also provide temporary housing for the homeless.

Gemachim, a pluralized acronym for the Hebrew terminology for provident funds, are according to Jaffe, "enormous" and often supplement public services which are inadequate.

Thousands of people – mostly

volunteers – are running them, he says, observing that the bulk of these volunteers work quietly, without fanfare or glory.

They give out meals, clothes, furniture, text books, computers, interest free loans and even grants. They also supplement health services, often making it possible for those in need of prohibitively costly medical treatment not covered by health insurance to receive treatment.

Not every beggar is out to con. Journalist Mia Spiro noticed one of the Russian immigrant beggars who operates a wooden puppet in the Ben Yehuda Mall give her day's takings to a barefooted girl. "You need this more than I do," said the immigrant.

Some beggars are active. Some are passive. Of the latter variety, there's a very sartorial character who studies Talmud on King

George Street. Usually dressed in a light colored suit – of which he has several – he brings his own chair and sits down to study, oblivious to passers-by. Those who believe in supporting scholars drop their coins into his begging bowl.

His technique seems to have inspired a young woman who has taken up a position nearby. Attired in a long skirt and a long-sleeved top, she sits immersed in her book while a gullible public supports her habit.

Legend has it that the prophet Elijah, in a guise other than his own, will herald the coming of the Messiah. Perhaps that's another reason that many religious Jews give so generously and so frequently. No one wants to be responsible for delaying the Messiah's arrival. ■



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