

THE RUSTY can on Jaffa Road sits between a beggar and a crudely written sign asking for contributions. The sign reads: "Please help me. I am destitute. I have no father, no mother. I am an orphan and need help." Dozing peacefully alongside the can is the "orphan": a heavy-set man in his mid-fifties, dressed in tattered clothes, his chunky, hairy arms covered with tattoos.

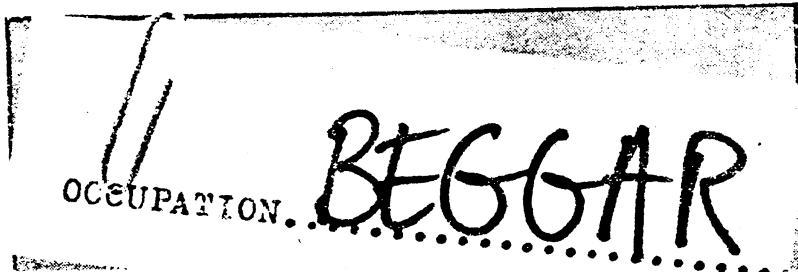
People waiting in line to purchase tickets at Jerusalem's Central Bus Station are approached by a stocky, religious woman who very matter-of-factly asks for money, explaining that her children need to eat.

In Ben Yehuda Street, a tall, slim man wearing an overcoat in the middle of summer and a baseball cap asks passersby if they speak English. Those that do get a follow-up question: "Can you spare some change for lunch?"

They are a part of the Jerusalem landscape. You can't walk through the city centre, take a bus from the Central Bus Station or pray at the Western Wall without encountering them.

Most Jerusalemites hardly notice them anymore; but those who see these beggars for the first time might find themselves being moved by the sight of dirty, hungry, blind and disabled people sitting or lying on the pavements, begging for hand-outs.

Who are the beggars of Jerusalem? Are they con-artists playing on our sympathies, or are they genuinely in need? Where do they go and how do they live when they're not "at work"? Do they have family, and if they do, what kind of family permits a father or a mother to live on the streets? Also, how is it possible that in the State of Israel, a socialist country, more importantly a Jewish country, people slip through the safety net and land so harshly on the streets?



According to Prof. Eliezer Jaffe of the Hebrew University's School of Social Work, among Jerusalem's beggars there are some drifters who beg their way through the country, in addition to those who live here permanently.

Steven B., the English-speaker who can be found most often in the downtown "Triangle," falls into the first category. He has blond hair and a brown beard and looks at least 10 years younger than his 43 years. Despite the muggy, hot weather he wears a long-sleeve corduroy shirt, a sweater, and an overcoat. He carries his belongings with him in a large canvas bag.

When I invite him to join me for lunch, he hesitates. After looking me over closely for a long moment his eyes light up with recognition. "Didn't you once help me out?" he asks. A 10-shekel coin I had given him several months before makes him feel it is safe to come with me. As an added precaution he chooses the site, a nearby café.

Steven describes himself as a life-long beggar. As a kid in Philadelphia, he says, "I asked people for change a little bit." He has begged in many parts of the world and says that conditions here compare favourably with those in other countries. Just the other day a woman handed him a IS5,000 bill. According to Steven, on a good day, "if you're prepared to work long hours," you can earn as much as IS10,000. Tax-free.

But he isn't too ambitious. Most mornings he wakes up late, after a night on a bench in Independence Park, and begs for enough to buy himself a few meals and a couple of bus tickets. Friday is the exception. The shops close early and he has to be on the streets early to earn enough money, and to get to the stores in time.

While Steven is willing to ask passersby for a handout, he doesn't ask shopkeepers for free food, coffee, and so on. Perhaps this explains the friendly welcome he gets when we enter the café.

There is a mix-up in our order and the waiter brings us an extra cup of coffee. Instead of sending it back, I tell Steven it's his if he wants it. He is excessively grateful. He eats so intently that questions have to wait until he has finished his cheese sandwich and his first coffee. The suspicion I have that he is not really in need is soon dispelled as I watch him eat.

He says the war in Lebanon is the reason why he's in Israel. He is an Israeli citizen who made aliya in 1972 and, he tells me, he has served in the Israel Air Force. He returned to Israel in May 1983 in order to "help" in the war. He says he served in the reserves for one month and was given a discharge from the Air Force.

He had been living on disability payments from the American social security service. He is vague about the nature of his disability. When pressed, he motions to his knee and shrugs. One suspects that his disability may not be physical.

Most beggars don't want to be rehabilitated. "I have my job, my hours, my clients, my corner," they say. JOEL REBIBO investigates.

When the payments were stopped a little over a year ago, he went back to the only profession he's ever succeeded at.

It's not as if he hasn't tried to make it in more acceptable fields. He has held a series of odd jobs. Once he worked for a meat company, "but after I stabbed myself a couple of times, I decided to quit." During the '60s he drifted to Haight-Ashbury, and found work as a caller outside a strip joint in San Francisco. He can't hold on to a job because he has trouble getting along with his co-workers. He has always been a loner.

"I'd really like to work alone," he says, "fix up a house or a garden or something for a couple of months."

He doesn't speak about his father or mother. He has a brother, 10

years his junior, living somewhere in the States doing manual labour. He is alone, without support from friends or family.

He does not complain about his life here. He finds that it is safer in Israel than in New York or San Francisco, though in those cities public shelters provide a bed and roof for the destitute. Here, when it's cold or raining, Steven can find shelter in a yeshiva or a church for a few days. He keeps up his health insurance payments.

Despite his problems with the Hebrew language, he gets along well with other beggars. From time to time he'll invade another beggar's turf and will sense his annoyance. When that happens he moves along to another spot. The police have never bothered him despite an ordinance that prohibits begging in Jerusalem.

Steven denies having any drug problems. When asked about alcohol, he says, "I don't have a 'problem' with alcohol, I like to drink."

In the short term he hopes to "earn" enough money on the streets to buy a ticket back to the States.

There is no long term.

Moshe made aliya 27 years ago from Turkey. His first jobs were with the Jewish National Fund and the Jerusalem Municipality. After seven or eight years he was out of a job - another vague "disability" - and began working the streets.

He also has no family he can depend on. A son and a daughter live in Tiberias, but he refuses to be a burden to them as they are in no position to help.

He lives in a windowless bomb shelter in the Bukharan section. "It's a community of *tzaddikim*," he says.

Moshe was willing to join me on a curb near the bus station and submit to a brief interview, but he was always on his guard and skillfully avoided answering such questions as, "Do you receive payments from National Insurance?"

When asked how much he can earn in a day, he refused to give a figure; but when pressed he did not deny that he can make IS10,000. Judging from his performance with me, he is probably doing much better than that. At the start he asked for and received "ten hundred shekels." Ten minutes later he asked for another "ten hundred." I resisted, insisting that we continue with our interview, but he would not let up. His persistent pleas were mixed with promises that my children would be *bonei tzaddikim*. He was a very skillful salesman who

wouldn't take "no" for an answer, and he walked away with IS2,000 after 20 minutes of work.

He dresses in a shabby overcoat, and non-kosher *tzitzit*; he wears a pair of worn slippers.

As he talks, his ill-fitting lower dentures shake loose. This could be the cause of his earaches.

It is clear that a man like him, in his mid-seventies, should not be living like that. Even if he makes more than enough to feed himself, his mental well-being is neglected.

IF THERE were an award for the most anguished facial expression, "Moshe," who works in the area of the Central Bus Station, would win it easily.

His head is swathed in rags, his eyes are coloured with pain; he shuffles from person to person, pleading for help.

The truth is that Moshe is in pain. He explains that he can't come to work before 10 a.m. because he has terrible earaches - that's why he covers his head, to place pressure on his aching ears. He goes to the Kupat Holim Clalit clinic in the Bukharan quarter, where he receives free medical care; but so far he's found no relief for his pain.

His words belie his appearance. He speaks of Israel in glowing terms: "There is no land like the Land of Israel," he says. There is food here, "beshefa" - in abundance. The people here are righteous.

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AVRAHAM works on a side street in Jerusalem's Me'a She'arim district, a few minutes away from his home. His clothing does not identify him as a beggar; he shows passersby

a letter written (in Hebrew and English) by the Eda Haredit Community Council, and quietly asks for contributions.

There is none of the pushy, abrasive quality found in some beggars, and it seems odd that he doesn't take his letter to the busier streets nearby.

Avraham was born in Jerusalem about 50 years ago. He has seven children, the eldest of whom is 14. As his letter and thick glasses indicate, he has very poor eyesight.

He worked for many years as a printer, but his eyesight deteriorated before he could qualify for a pension; the disability payments he receives do not cover the cost of raising a family of nine.

He sees begging as his only alternative. But he is different from the other beggars with whom I spoke. Most are either unwilling or unable to provide accurate information about themselves. Those who are mentally alert tend to be suspicious; those who are not, simply do not understand what they are being asked.

But Avraham is uncomfortable answering questions about life as a beggar because he hasn't come to terms with the fact that he is a beggar. Perhaps that is why he avoids the main streets. As he answers questions about beggars, he clearly dissociates himself from them.

Those who don't have homes, he says, can find a place to sleep near the Mahane Yehuda market. Tourists are not the big givers; Orthodox Jews and yeshiva students are. The

best place to beg is the Western Wall, but he doesn't go there because the guards keep beggars away.

The unasked question remains unanswered: What is he supposed to do to provide for his family, given his disability and the small sums he receives from welfare agencies.

OFFICIAL reaction to the city's beggars can be summed up by outgoing National Insurance Institute director Danny Azrieli: "There is absolutely no reason for anyone to be begging on the streets in Israel."

To support his contention he points to programmes such as *Havtachat Hachnassa*, guaranteed income (in October a single received IS55,160), free medical care, free appliances, discounts in many stores, in addition to free or highly-subsidized housing.

Also, volunteer-run public kitchens in the Me'a She'arim area provide free meals to the needy.

With housing and medical needs provided, plus an allowance for food and clothing why are people on the streets?

Answers Asher Harris, director of the Labour and Social Affairs Ministry's Rehabilitation Division: "Begging has nothing to do with need."

Prof. Jaffe goes a step further: "Begging is a profession," he says.

In 1972, when Jaffe was director of the Jerusalem Municipal Welfare Bureau, he issued a memorandum to his staff stating his department's primary objective: Get the beggars off the streets. He ordered his staff to meet with and counsel beggars individually in order to rehabilitate them. One after the other they came back to him with the same message: the beggars don't want to be rehabilitated. "I have my job," they were told repeatedly by beggars they worked with. "I have my hours, my clients, my corner."

According to Jaffe, beggars - contrary to popular belief - are providing

them. One after the other they came back to him with the same message: the beggars don't want to be rehabilitated. "I have my job," they were told repeatedly by beggars they worked with. "I have my hours, my clients, my corner."

According to Jaffe, beggars - contrary to popular belief - are providing a service for the funds they receive. "It is ingrained in Jewish culture to give *tzedaka* and obviously you need someone to take it. There are takers and givers, each providing for the needs of the other. The donor is getting something for his contribution."

Jaffe sees two problems with this "business." First, "if it's a business, it should be licensed and regulated." But he is more concerned about the "institutionalization of begging."

"Begging continues because there are people who continue to give. But people shouldn't think they're getting away with their responsibility to give *tzedaka* by giving a few shekels to the poor on the streets.

But the problem goes beyond the problems of the giver. It is clear that a high percentage of the beggars are not in complete control of their mental faculties.

"If a child is found begging on the streets, child protection laws give social workers the authority to get him placed in protective custody and a court order can be obtained to keep him off the streets," says Jaffe. "But for adults it is not clear who is responsible."

And there are people in the streets who are in genuine need of assistance. Azrieli of the NII admits that there are many beggars who are completely unaware of the benefits to which they are entitled. "We promote our programmes, but there are clearly many who don't know what they are eligible to receive."

Like the Western Wall, Jerusalem's beggars are timeless, and defy explanation. Perhaps in some mystical way the two are linked. According to Jewish legend, it will be in honour of the beggars of Jerusalem that the Temple will be rebuilt. □