

How Can My Community Respond to the Economic Decline?

Rabbi Elazar ben Azariah says: Without Torah, there is no decency; without decency, there can be no Torah... Without sustenance, there is no Torah; without Torah, there can be no sustenance.

Mishnah, *Avot* 3.17

There can be no real prosperity among any people where either capital or labor is persistently trying to give as little as possible, and get as much as possible. **One of the most sweeping causes of unemployment is the prevalent individualism that causes a lack of social responsibility.**

To the extent that we have made no vigorous effort to apply the principles of divine justice and righteousness to the practical problems of economic and social life, we have greatly neglected our duty. When we realize that the moral conditions under which people live are vitally affected by economic conditions, it becomes clear why the synagogue should interest itself in all questions of economic justice: **social responsibility forms the basis of Jewish ethics and underlies most of the teachings that fill our sacred books.**

Adapted from Rabbi Alter Landesman, "Lessons We Can Learn from the Economic Crisis," *Proceedings of the Rabbinical Assembly*, 1931

Arise and shake off the dust,
Wear the clothes that suit your glory, My people.

"Lecha Dodi," from the Kabbalat Shabbat Prayers

Turn the page for practical ways your community can respond to the economic downturn

ARISE: *Five Ways Your Community Can Respond to the Economic Downturn*

Assure your congregants of their continued value in your community. The financial effects of the economic downturn are difficult enough, but the worst part could be the fear and uncertainty. Will our family lose our community by not being able to afford synagogue membership, school tuition, or other dues? What will people think of us if we ask for help? **Find ways to calm these anxieties.** Some communities have sent an open letter to the community, addressing these questions; others have held parlor meetings in homes or informal meetings with the rabbi and communal leaders in order to create a safe space for members of the community to share their experiences.

Reach out to families in need. All too often, people in need don't ask for help – they might feel embarrassed or overwhelmed, or they might not even realize how their synagogue can help. **If you know that a family is having trouble, don't wait for them to come to you; reach out.** Encourage the people in your community to tell you, discreetly, if they know of friends in need. Wherever appropriate, enable friends to reach out and help one another as well. An economic downturn presents a priceless opportunity to put fellowship and community to work.

Identify local resources. In most cities, the local Federation, Jewish Family Service, Jewish Vocational Service, and other organizations already offer a wide range of support for people who have fallen on hard times. Larger communities may even have a Jewish Free Loan Association. **Get the word out to your community about the resources that already exist** – some people may need their help, while others may be in a position to support these organizations' critical work.

Support job-seekers. The Rabbis of the Talmud believed that match-making was so difficult, God needed to arrange the matches personally. Become God's partner in this holy work: set up a Job and Resume Bank within your community. **Inevitably, some members of your community will be looking for work; others will probably know of available jobs. Your Job Bank can bring them together.** If people in your community haven't needed to look for jobs in a while, they might want to brush up on resume-writing, interviewing, and other professional skills. Host workshops that offer job-seekers a leg up in their search. Leverage your organization's connective power even farther by working together with other local synagogues and organizations to create a community-wide Job Bank.

Exchange services and used items. Ultimately, all families need some help, but all families are able to offer help as well. **Set up a "swap meet" in your community** that enables people to trade used items, childcare, professional expertise, and anything else that might be of value to others.