PERSONAL ESSAY

The Privilege Gap

Sidney Schwarz

I do a lot of talking about social justice. It is my job. But there is often a significant distance between the Jewish community's talk around the issue of justice and its walk. I am not innocent of the indictment. I often find that the time to practice what I preach is all too limited. Pirke Avot (1:7) teaches: "it is not the teaching but the doing that is the essential thing." I have this passage posted prominently near my desk as a reminder. It is necessary because the walk is so much harder than the talk. It is easy to despair.

I reflect on this reality because of an experience I just went through trying to "adopt" and rehabilitate a homeless African American man. After a year and a half and countless hours of effort, David Bratton is no better off today than when I started. And yet, I don't regret a single hour of the time I spent trying to help him.

During Christmas week, 2001, I brought David Bratton to a Friday night Shabbat service at Adat Shalom, the Reconstructionist synagogue which I helped to found in 1988. He captivated all those in attendance with his magnificent voice and soulful presentation. He also touched our hearts with his story, which led to a kind of communal adoption of David, an effort which I tried to coordinate. I engaged significant numbers of members of the congregation in the effort. Week after week in shul, people would ask me: "How is David doing?"

I've come to think of David's story, and my community's attempt to help him, as a modern day parable on what I call "the privilege gap." It points to the challenge faced by those of us who both promote and engage in "mitzvah work" because it is evidence of the deep structural flaws that exist in our society that conspire to frustrate well-meaning attempts to rectify social inequity. But even more importantly, it is a valuable piece of Torah on how we measure "success" as we try to reach out to the most vulnerable members of society. It makes my encounter with David Bratton a story worth telling.

Chapter 1

It is Christmas Day, 2001, and my son Danny and I are spending the day volunteering for Food and Friends, a social service agency in downtown Washington, D.C. that brings food and companionship to shut-ins throughout the city. We get trained, receive our home visitation assignments, and drive off with baskets of foodstuffs and addresses to neighborhoods where middle-class Jews would normally fear to tread. The stops are, in and of themselves, an education.

Get closer to the pain

One of my activist rebbes is Harold Moss. A black scientist who worked as a researcher at the National Institute of Health, he walked away from his comfortable middle-class life to become a homelessness activist. As Danny and I made our visits, one of the lessons I learned from Harold Moss kept ringing in my head: "You can't begin to help until you start to understand; and you can't begin to understand until you get closer to the pain."

Jews have an enviable track record of compassion for the downtrodden. We express it in a variety of ways. Yet for most of us, it is done at arm's length, several steps removed from the pain. Check writing has taken the place of *chesed* work, face-to-face acts of compassion. It is certainly safer that way. But the Talmud tells us that if we are looking for the Messiah, we will find him by the gates of the city, bandaging the wounds of the lepers. The lesson the Talmud is teaching is that there is no global salvation until we engage in one to one acts of lovingkindness. Or, perhaps more accurately, saving the world is secondary to personal acts of *chesed*, of compassion. If enough people give priority to the latter, we will have done the Messiah's work ourselves.

Danny and I made our last drop off in the neighborhood where Harold Moss established a house he calls the Olive Branch. It is a place for his wild assortment of lieutenants for the war he wages against homelessness in D.C.—from guys he has pulled off the street to young people who have dropped out of college or run away from their middle-class homes to save the world. We stopped in. I found Harold, and we enjoyed catching up with each other's lives. He invited us to Zachaeus Soup Kitchen, run by the Olive Branch out of the basement of First Congregational Church. It was Christmas Day and the Olive Branch was throwing a party for the homeless in addition to providing a Christmas dinner. It was only after we spent some time talking with the homeless at the soup kitchen and were getting ready to leave that one of the homeless men stepped up to the stage where a band had been playing. He took the mike and sang a song called "Dance like David Danced," an African American spiritual with which I was unfamiliar. It was a song

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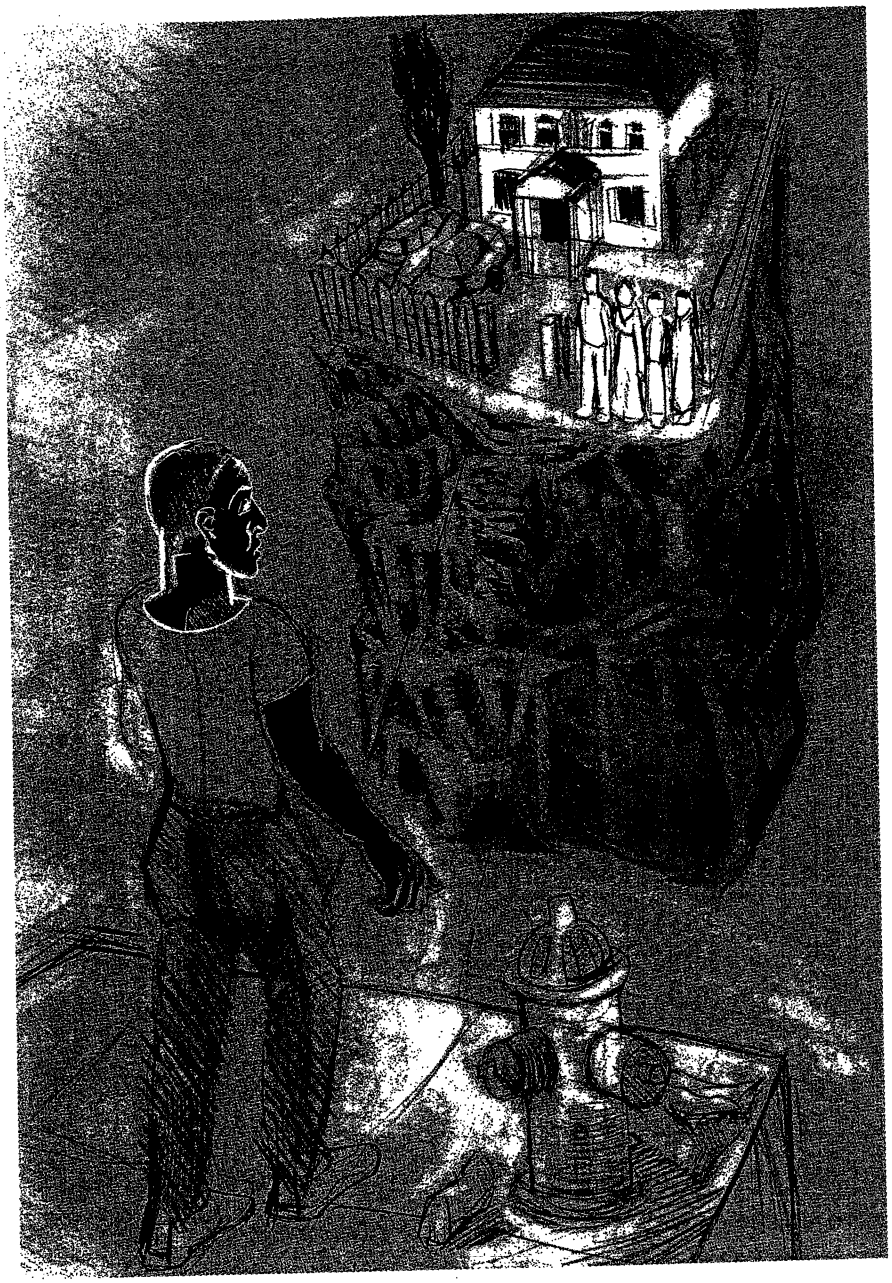

ILLUSTRATION BY STEVEN RUSHEVSKY

about King David and the joy of prayer. I was mesmerized.

The homeless man was David. I approached him and complimented him on his singing, and he beamed. He proceeded to tell me a little about his life. Raised in D.C., he got into some trouble with drugs and did jail time for robbing a bank. He found Jesus in prison and then, with the help of a prison chaplain, spent some time at a seminary in St. Thomas after serving his sentence. He came back to D.C. to care of his ailing mother but had not yet found work and was living on the street. Moved by his story and drawn by his personal charisma, I invited him to come and sing a couple of songs at an Adat Shalom Friday night service that I was to be leading two nights later. David was ecstatic and game. I gave him twenty dollars and my phone number, and told him to meet me at a metro stop near my home at 4 P.M. on Friday.

David arrived exactly on time, reinforcing the trust that I had placed in him over the skepticism of some of my closest "advisors." I brought him to the house to wash up, offered him some clothes, and then we planned how he would plug into the kabbalat shabbat service. At the service itself, David sang two songs, "Dance like David Danced" and an original composition he wrote about the challenges of growing up in an urban ghetto. I encouraged David to say a few words about himself between songs and he was characteristically candid. At the oneg, David attracted a crowd of admirers and well-wishers. The next week when I posted a summary of the story on the Adat Shalom listserve and made the suggestion that we set out to help David get back on his feet, I was flooded by offers of money and job leads.

Chapter 2

Truth be told, I am not new to the enterprise of adopting the homeless. The organization that I lead, PANIM, brings groups of Jewish teenagers from around the country to Washington for leadership seminars on Jewish values and social responsibility. Some years ago I started to bring them onto the street to bring clothing and food to the homeless. But the handouts were only an excuse for the conversations that I encouraged the teens to have. Week after week I would see middle-class Jewish teens sit on the ground next to a homeless person asking them to share their story. They heard from people whose lives were far removed from their own experiences: men who fought in Vietnam and came back, broken in spirit with no real job skills; people whose dependency on drugs or alcohol made them unemployable; people who were raised in broken homes and dysfunctional communities and who never had the support or the opportunities that these Jewish kids took for granted; scores of individuals who actually worked at minimum wage jobs but who did not earn enough money to pay for both housing and food.

This experience was Economics 100, Sociology 100, and Psychology 100 all rolled into one. Even more importantly, the experience allowed the teens to put a face on "the

homeless," to personalize them. They came to appreciate the humanity of those who had fallen to the fringes of our society. They empathized with their stories, felt more than a tad self-conscious about their own privileged status, which they had neither earned nor appreciated, and were motivated to do something to help. Because of these critical lessons I called the program, which we still do to this day, "Street Torah."

Having orchestrated hundreds of encounters between Jewish teens and the homeless, I suppose that with David Bratton I was attempting to take the experience one step further. What would happen if someone like me, a person with significant resources, contacts, and commitments, took a person who was born into totally different circumstances and had none of the opportunities that I enjoyed, and helped him turn his life around? Don Quixote, watch out!

Our family got close to David Bratton. Some might say too close. We didn't leave the oneg shabbat until 10:30pm. I didn't have the heart to send David back downtown to spend the night on the street in the dead of winter when just an hour earlier he stood on our bimah and inspired us. With my wife's permission, we brought David home for the night. We learned a lot more about David that night. With our kids around the blow-up mattress in the family room, David told us about being raised by a single mom. With no father in his life, he joined a gang with strong male role models, and all the wrong kinds of lessons. He was party to numerous crimes well before he was caught and convicted for bank robbery. He fathered a son he hadn't seen in years. His siblings were knee deep into criminal activity as well. He began taking drugs but went clean when he found Jesus in prison. Not your typical house guest! By the time we brought David to the metro the next morning, we had gotten a crash course in urban America and an introduction to the life experience that is the lot for tens of thousands of Americans who live within a few miles of our homes.

In America, one in four children grows up in poverty. Over the past twenty years, the social safety net— long a commitment America made to those at the bottom of the earning spectrum—has been devastated.

Over the next few months, I became David's sponsor and friend. He came to call me "brother Sid." With money that our congregation contributed, I co-signed a lease for an apartment in Northeast D.C. and put down a month's rent and a security deposit. We moved him in. We got a half-dozen job leads and he got a job as a classroom assistant at a private school in Virginia specializing in troubled kids that the D.C. school system couldn't handle. Several of our members spent time with him, helping him negotiate and access D.C. social services, a procedure that is mystifying and daunting to many who are most in need. We gave David money for transportation and food, asking him to sign a note promising to pay it back, following Maimonides' dictum that a loan is preferable to an outright gift to the poor as it helps to preserve their dignity. During this time, David reconnected with his 15-year-old son and took him on some outings. While I had my share of frustration working with David, I thought we were making some progress in getting his life together.

Chapter 3

I believe that the privilege gap is the central moral question of our time. In 1960 the income of the richest 20 percent of the world's population was 30 times greater than the income of the poorest 20 percent. Today it is more than 80 times greater. Over 1.3 billion people in the world live in abject poverty, earning less than $1 a day. Every day, some 30,000 children under the age of 10 die of hunger or hunger-related diseases. That is more than 1,000 children per hour!

In America, one in four children grows up in poverty. Over the past twenty years, the social safety net—long a commitment America made to those at the bottom of the earning spectrum—has been devastated. With much of the responsibility turned over to the states, it is now harder than ever for poor people to qualify for food stamps, low income housing, health care, aid for families with dependent children, and subsidized day care. The list goes on. The rare state that is not facing looming budget deficits today dares not be more generous to the poor lest it become a magnet for more poor people. A person working 40 hours a week at the minimum wage of $5.15 per hour cannot afford to both feed and house a family in urban America, so we have the working poor in shelters or on the street. The minimum wage today is 21 percent lower relative to costs than it was in 1979. At the behest of the current Bush Administration, our Congress just passed the largest tax cut in history, primarily favoring middle- and upper-income individuals.

America, a country that prides itself on equal opportunity, has, over the past thirty years, become less and less equal. The bottom 20 percent of Americans earn 4 percent of the national income. The top 5 percent of Americans earn 21 percent. In 1973 the top 5 percent earned 11 times more than the bottom of 20 percent. Today they earn 20 times more.

Yet despite the growing affluence of the privileged few, any candidate who suggests that we use taxes as a way to redistribute income and narrow the gap between rich and

poor cannot win an election. What we have learned over the past thirty years in America is that when middle- and upper-income Americans are given the choice between being able to shelter more of their long-term capital gains so that they can buy a second home or an upscale car, or take a more exotic vacation, versus allowing poor people to live with a modicum more dignity, most of them will choose the more self-serving alternative. The ongoing statistic that poor people give a higher percentage of their income to charity than the wealthy is the most conclusive evidence that there is no more stubborn addiction in America today than our addiction to money.

Let me now bring this a bit closer to home. Jews, as a group, are in the top tier of wealth and income in the wealthiest country in the world. We have traveled a long distance from the pain that Harold Moss taught me about and which is so critical to raising consciousness and effecting moral behavior. Not surprisingly, most Jews are happy that this distance is there. And I worry for our Jewish collective soul.

This year I gave a group of Jewish teens a hypothetical problem in a talk that I was giving. Assume that you are a first-year attorney in a Wall Street law firm earning $90,000 a year. After your first three months on the job, the janitors in your office building go on strike and form a picket line. They are asking to be paid a living wage because they can't support their families on the minimum wage they are bringing home. What do you do? So I wait for some socially conscious and Judaically based answers to spew forth: take up a collection to support the workers and their families during the strike; offer pro-bono legal advice to the union; approach the firm's partners with a plan for everyone to reduce their compensation by 1 percent so that the janitors can be paid a living and livable wage. The first hand goes in the air. The student's plan: fire all the strikers and find others to take their place for the same wages, if not less!

Exercising more than a little self-restraint, I stayed calm, and other students in the room took on my first respondent. But increasingly, I find Jews callous not only to the growing privilege gap between themselves and the rest of humanity but also unwilling to even acknowledge that it is a moral problem. If most of the world suffers from not enough—not enough food, not enough water, not enough health care, not enough literacy, not enough adequate shelter or housing—Jews suffer from too much of everything. We have become the poster children for American consumerism.

I think that the rabbis were onto something when they designated chapter 58 of the book of Isaiah to be read as the haftarah on the morning of Yom Kippur: "It is not the fast that I, God, desire. Rather it is freeing those who are oppressed, breaking the yoke of servitude, sharing your bread with those who are starving, bringing the cast off poor into your house, clothing those who are naked, not hiding yourselves from those who are in need." Not enough of us have been paying attention to those words.

The first covenant we, as Jews, entered into was via Abraham. God predicts, in Genesis 18, that Abraham will "extend the boundaries of righteousness and justice in the world." We now welcome young teens into that covenant—the Bar/Bat Mitzvah—with lavish parties, booty dancing, and an extravaganza of consumerism. Ironically, the party has become the greater indicator of the teens' future lot than is any lesson that the hapless rabbi and teachers try to impart to the child. Is it any wonder that we have lost our way?

David Bratton: When Failure Breeds Success

All of which brings me back to David Bratton. If Hollywood had gotten their hands on this story, David would have gone back to college, earned a Ph.D., and discovered a cure for cancer, or gone on to win the Nobel Peace Prize for his work turning inner city kids around. But Hollywood is not real life. David has been dismissed from three jobs in the time that I have known him. He was thrown out of the apartment we moved him into when the other residents complained that he was stealing their food. He never paid back any of the money we loaned him, and still calls me for money periodically, a request that I now deny because of his lack of accountability. He alternates between sleeping in shelters and in the streets. A few months ago he was stabbed and spent some time in the hospital. He still calls me, and while I don't offer him any money, the call ends with him telling me that God still loves me anyway. I tell him that God loves him too.

Was I a fool? Naïve? A do-gooder? A hopeless idealist? Probably a bit of each of these. But I refuse to conclude that I failed. David is probably more or less where he would have been without me or Adat Shalom, except that for a time, maybe even until today, he experienced someone who cared about him and wasn't trying to hustle him or rip him off. He has had too little of that in his life and it may one day form a bridge that he will use to get himself to a better place.

Maybe all of this was part of some larger plan, the hand of God which needed me to have this experience, if only to tell the story. Every day I ask myself: "by what grace of God was I born into a middle-class family with a strong set of values instead of being born as David Bratton, a person of color in an urban ghetto from which there are few, if any exits."

Judaism teaches us that life is about sharing and giving and reaching out to those who don't enjoy the privileges that we enjoy. It is about working to change the policies of a society that has turned its back on the poor because they don't make campaign contributions or vote. It's about recognizing that every human being is made in the image of God and deserves to experience a warm bed, a good meal, and human love and caring.

David Bratton is certainly no angel. But he was an angel for me, a messenger, reminding me yet again about who I am and what I must do. ❑