

## Op-Ed: At Passover, a plea for the Child Nutrition Bill

By Elliott A. Kleinman · March 24, 2010

NEW YORK (JTA) -- When we sit down to our Passover seder tables, as a people we will proclaim that we remember the days when we were not free, when we lived under the yoke of slavery in someone's else's land. Then we will extend an invitation to all who are hungry to come and eat with us, for we remember that, too.

This is not merely an invitation to share in a meal from a bountiful table; it is also a challenge to bring freedom -- freedom from want, freedom from ignorance, freedom from fear to all who are so afflicted.

We seal the invitation with a plea that when we sit down to our seders next year we all will be free.

But it is the specifics of the seder's message of freedom from hunger that cries out to us from across this land of plenty in which so many don't have even enough food to eat. The need to eat is the most basic of human needs. It is a need so vital that we must say that no one who is hungry can be considered free in any sense of the word.

For the Americans who live in poverty and for whom hunger is the defining feature of daily subsistence, hunger is enslavement. For when all your emotional and physical resources and energy must be channeled into the quest for basic sustenance, nothing is left over for anything else -- nothing left to give to your children, nothing left over for education, nothing left over to look around at the rest of the world, nothing left to find the means to move out of slavery.

And it is the epitome of cynicism to proclaim that access to adequate nutrition is not at the core of poverty in the United States today.

As with most of society's ills and failures, children suffer the most. They are dependent on adults for whatever they receive.

For Jews, taking care of our children and the children of our communities is a moral imperative. Psalm 82: 3-4 calls upon us to "defend the poor and the orphan; deal justly with the poor and the destitute, and to rescue the weak and the needy."

So it is appropriate at Passover time and our call to the hungry among us that we also raise our voices to Congress to re-authorize the Child Nutrition Bill. This bill funds free and reduced-price lunches in our public schools, summer and afterschool food programs, free breakfast programs and the Supplemental Nutrition Program for Women, Infants and Children (WIC), which provides vital nutritious foods to new mothers, infants and children up to age 5. Food that is made available staves off serious health and social problems that occur later in life as a result of poor nutrition during the key developmental years.

Providing children with proper nutrition is therefore both the moral thing to do, and it is also a cost-effective way of investing in our nation's future.

Not to put too fine a point on it, we should all hang our heads in shame that such programs are even necessary.

In 2008, President-elect Obama set a national goal of ending child hunger in America by 2015. This resonates with Reform Jews everywhere, and our Passover call to the hungry makes it especially fitting for us at this time of the year. May the bare crumbs that we toss to the poor and the needy become a memory for everyone in our country, and may each year find us freer from want and hunger than the year before.

*(Rabbi Elliott A. Kleinman is chief programming officer of the Union for Reform Judaism and a board member of Mazon: A Jewish Response to Hunger.)*

