

An Historical Sketch of the HUC-JIR Soup Kitchen:
Students' Ongoing Response to the Hunger Crisis in NYC

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Chapter 1

**An Ancient Basis for a Modern Soup Kitchen:
A “*Shalsholet Hakabbalah*” of Feeding the Hungry**

The HUC-JIR Soup Kitchen is unlike any other. Since its establishment in New York in 1988, its founders and subsequent generations of rabbinical, cantorial and education student volunteers have been motivated by the same sacred texts they study and parse day in and day out in the classroom. Guided by Talmud scholars at the College-Institute, including their beloved Rabbinics professor Rabbi Michael Chernick, the student-founders relied on teachings gleaned during planned study sessions to inform decisions big and small on how the Soup Kitchen would operate. As one of its founding members, Rabbi Amy Schwartzman, explains: “Through those text studies, we imagined the physical layout and exactly what this thing would be.”¹ Among the decisions Rabbi Schwartzman attributes to conclusions drawn from study of the rich Jewish textual tradition are whether to offer a second helping to guests knowing that there might not be enough for everyone, as well as the unique, dignified way that guests are seated and waited on during the meal rather than having to stand on a line for their food.² To this day, HUC-JIR Soup Kitchen volunteers regard themselves as part of a *Shalsholet Hakabbalah*—a link in a “Chain of Tradition”—of feeding the hungry that emerges out of Rabbinic interpretations of key Biblical passages that obligate Jews to treat all people—rich and poor—with respect and love.

¹ Rabbi Amy Schwartzman. Telephone interview. 14 Aug. 2014.

² Ibid.

Biblical Guidance for Feeding the Hungry

The Bible is replete with instruction detailing the care that must be given to society's least fortunate. The chief rationale for such behavior stems from the Israelites' bondage in Egypt, as we read: "You shall not wrong nor oppress the stranger, for you were strangers in the land of Egypt" (Exodus 22:20). The commandments that flow from that are found primarily in Exodus and Deuteronomy.

Exodus 22:21-26³

You [communal leaders] shall not ill-treat any widow or orphan. If you do mistreat them, I will heed their outcry as soon as they cry out to Me, and My anger shall blaze forth and I will put you to the sword, and your own wives shall become widows and your children orphans.

If you lend money to My people, to the poor among you, do not act toward them as a creditor; exact no interest from them. If you take your neighbor's garment in pledge, you must return it before the sun sets; it is the only available clothing—it is what covers the skin. In what else shall [your neighbor] sleep? Therefore, if that person cries out to Me, I will pay heed, for I am compassionate.

Deuteronomy 24:10-22

When you make a loan of any sort to your compatriot, you must not enter the house to seize the pledge. You must remain outside, while the party to whom you made the loan brings the pledge out to you. If the party is needy, you shall not go

³ All Bible translations from NJPS, as found in *The Torah: A Women's Commentary* (New York: URJ Press 2008).

to sleep in that pledge; you must return the pledge at sundown, that its owner may sleep in the cloth and bless you; and it will be to your merit before your God.

You shall not abuse a needy and destitute laborer, whether a fellow Israelite or a stranger in one of the communities of your land. You must pay out the wages due on the same day, before the sun sets, for the worker is needy and urgently depends on it; else a cry to *Adonai* will be issued against you and you will incur guilt.

Parents shall not be put to death for children, nor children be put to death for parents: they shall each be put to death only for their own crime.

You shall not subvert the rights of the stranger or the fatherless; you shall not take a widow's garment in pawn. Remember that you were a slave in Egypt and that your God redeemed you from there; therefore do I enjoin you to observe this commandment.

When you reap the harvest in your field and overlook a sheaf in the field, do not turn back to get it; it shall go to the stranger, the fatherless, and the widow—in order that your God may bless you in all your undertakings.

When you beat down the fruit of your olive trees, do not go over them again; that shall go to the stranger, the fatherless, and the widow. When you gather the grapes of your vineyard, do not pick it over again; that shall go to the stranger, the fatherless, and the widow. Always remember that you were a slave in the land of Egypt; therefore do I enjoin you to observe this commandment.

Commentary

Both passages come to show us how to treat the vulnerable, given our own story of persecution in Egypt. “The attitudes contained in these passages,” explains Rabbi David Ellenson, Chancellor of HUC-JIR, “indicate that the experience of oppression demands sensitivity and response on the part of Jews to the needs of others.”⁴ Biblical scholar, Dr. Adele Berlin, echoes these words when she states, “This unit provides laws to protect various categories of economically disadvantaged persons, safeguarding, in particular, the welfare of the stranger, the orphan, and the widow.”⁵ This selection of disadvantaged people is meant to represent all those in our midst who are in need of support. About Deuteronomy 24:17-18, the editor of *ArtScroll* adds, “Repeating a familiar theme, this passage stresses the admonition against taking advantage of the vulnerable. It closes by giving the explanation that lies at the root of many such commandments: Jews who were once persecuted strangers must be especially sensitive to the plight of the downtrodden.”⁶ This reminder that the Jews were once slaves to Pharaoh in Egypt appears no fewer than 36 times throughout the Hebrew Bible.

To sharpen the point, the Torah teaches that all people are created *Betzelem Elohim*, “in the image of God” (Gen. 1:27), which thus necessitates that we regard each individual as holy and worthy of our care. It is the divinity in each of us that unites us as one human community.

⁴ David Ellenson, “Laws and Judgments as a ‘Bridge to a Better World,’” Gregg Drinkwater, Joshua Lesser, and David Shneer eds. *Torah Queeries: Weekly Commentaries on the Hebrew Bible*, (New York: New York University Press, 2009), p. 99.

⁵ Adele Berlin, “Central Commentary,” Pg. 1180, in *The Torah: A Women's Commentary* (New York: URJ Press 2008), Tamara Cohn Eskanazi and Andrea L. Weiss eds.

⁶ Nosson Sherman, et al., eds, *The Chumash: The Torah, Haftaros and Five Megillos*, Stone Ed, (Brooklyn, NY: Mesorah Publications, 1993), p. 1061.

In fact, the Bible tells us, compassion actually inheres in God. In Exodus, God says, “For I am compassionate” (22:26); and the Psalmist similarly reminds us, “*Adonai* is compassionate and gracious” (Ps. 103:8). Thus, we are to be a compassionate people who follow in the ways of our compassionate God.

Leviticus 19:18

“You shall not take vengeance or bear a grudge against members of your people. Love your fellow as yourself: I am *Adonai*”

Commentary

While many attribute this teaching—commonly known as “The Golden Rule” – to Jesus, the concept is rooted in Jewish tradition. We are commanded to treat others the way that we want to be treated—with kindness, respect, and dignity. HUC-JIR’s Soup Kitchen provides a vehicle for carrying out these commandments. Each Monday night, volunteers affirm their commitment to *tzedakah*, “justice,” for all. The student and community volunteers are motivated to elevate the unglamorous act of serving Manhattan’s homeless population to the sacred practice of welcoming guests and caring for them. Inspired by Torah, the volunteers begin to see beyond the guests’ soiled clothing and body odor to listen for the person that lives beneath the exterior. A Divine spark shines in *every* individual. Therefore, it is not out of guilt that the Soup Kitchen’s students and community volunteers offer assistance to the needy, rather in acknowledgement of the Divine in every person.

Rabbinic Guidance on Feeding the Hungry

The Rabbis of the Talmud created an elaborate and compassionate system for taking care of those in need, largely based on the principles articulated in the Bible. They spelled out who was deserving of charity and mechanisms for feeding the hungry. Later, Medieval and Modern thinkers expanded on the Talmudic decisions and further codified laws regarding caring for the needy.

Babylonian Talmud Bava Batra 8a⁷

Rabbi Yehudah HaNasi, codifier of the Mishnah, opened storehouses to hold provisions during the years of famine. He said, “Only masters of Scripture, masters of Mishnah, masters of the Oral Tradition, masters of Halakhah, and masters of Aggadah, may enter and take food from the storehouses. But the general unlearned folk may not enter.”

But Rabbi Yonatan ben Amram disguised himself as an unlearned man and forced his way into the storehouse. Once inside, he said to Rabbi Yehudah HaNasi, “Master, sustain me.” Rabbi Yehudah HaNasi said to him, “My son, do you study Scripture?” Rabbi Yonatan responded, “No.” “Have you studied any sacred text?” asked Rabbi Yehudah HaNasi. Again Rabbi Yonatan responded, “No.” “If it is so,” replied Rabbi Yehudah HaNasi, “then on what merit should I sustain you?” Rabbi Yonatan pleaded with Rabbi Yehudah HaNasi: “Sustain me as you would a dog or a raven.” So Rabbi Yehudah HaNasi relented and sustained him.

⁷ Translation mine.

After Rabbi Yonatan left, Rabbi Yehudah HaNasi was sitting and became distressed over what transpired. “Woe is me, for I have given my bread to an unlearned person!” he bemoaned. His son, Rabbi Shimon bar Rebi said to Rabbi Yehudah HaNasi, “Perhaps that was actually Yonatan ben Amram, your student, who does not wish to benefit ever from the honor due the Torah.” So they investigated and found that indeed the beggar was Rabbi Yonatan ben Amram. Therefore, realizing that others might follow Rabbi Yonatan’s example, Rabbi Yehudah HaNasi declared: “Let everyone enter the storehouses to receive food!”

Commentary

“For the Rabbis, *tzedakah* and the care of the poor, are very important, but we have to make distinctions in the Rabbinic Period,”⁸ warns Dr. Alyssa Gray of the Hebrew Union College – Jewish Institute of Religion. Professor Gray teaches that during the Tannaitic Period, roughly the years after the destruction of the Temple in 70 CE until around 200 CE when the Mishnah was redacted, the Rabbis were concerned with caring for the poor, but they did not necessarily feel compelled to play an active role—besides legislating—in ridding the world of poverty. The Ammoraim on the other hand, who lived and ruled from roughly 220 CE until the end of the 4th century in Palestine and around 500 or 550 CE in Babylonia, took a more active interest in caring for the poor. “Particularly, what we see in Babylonia, is that individual Ammoraim will exert a great deal of individual control over the administration, the collection and the distribution, of

⁸ Dr. Alyssa M. Gray. Personal interview. 9 Dec. 2014.

tzedakah in their communities,” but do not always refer to their work using the names of the specific institutions established by the rabbis who lived before them.⁹

The Rabbis on Tamchui and Kuppah

It is from early Tannaitic literature that we learn about the two unique mechanisms of emergency food assistance established by our early sages to meet the short-term needs of the resident poor as well as needy visitors passing through town. The first, they called *tamchui*, or “food tray,” which operated like a community soup kitchen. As Dr. Gray explains, “Per [Babylonian Talmud, Bava Batra] 8b, the *tamhui* was both collected and distributed by three people every day, and was intended for all poor, not simply the poor of the city in which it was collected.”¹⁰ Our tradition is clear: we are responsible for all people, including those who reside permanently in the city as well as passersby. The second mechanism created by our Sages was called *kuppah*, or “communal fund.” The *kuppah* was collected by a team of community volunteers and distributed weekly to those in need (BT Bava Batra 8b).

*Maimonides, Mishneh Torah, Matanot Aniyyim 9:1*¹¹

In every city where Jews live, they are obligated to appoint faithful men of renown as trustees of a charitable fund. They should circulate among the people from Friday to Friday and take from each person what is appropriate for him to

⁹ Dr. Alyssa M. Gray. Personal interview. 9 Dec. 2014.

¹⁰ Alyssa M. Gray, “Poverty and Community in R. Joseph Karo’s *Shulhan Arukh*: ‘Law and Literature’ and Halakhic History,” *Diné Israel* 29 (2013) p. 65.

¹¹ Translated by Eliyahu Touger.

give. They then allocate the money from Friday to Friday, giving each poor person sufficient food for seven days. This is called the *Kuppah*.

Commentary

Rabbi Moses ben Maimon (1138-1204), more commonly referred to as the *Rambam*, delineates the Jews' obligation to live justly and to give *tzedakah* in his twelfth-century legal magnum opus, *Mishneh Torah*. In his grand summation, covering the gamut of Jewish law, Maimonides offers both legal interpretations and some rationale for his decisions. Included in the seventh volume, called *Zeraim* or "Seeds," of this famous anthology, Maimonides illustrates the Jews' responsibility to caring for the hungry and downtrodden. He titled the second section "Laws of Gifts for the Poor," and includes his understanding of the importance of *tamchui* and *kuppah*.

Most impressive in his analysis is Maimonides' statement: "We have never seen nor heard of an Israelite community that does not have a charity fund" (MT *Laws of Gifts to the Poor* 9:3). Though it may be hyperbolic, Maimonides' statement highlights the importance of communal giving in his time. It is clear from Maimonides' observation, and true of most Jewish communities today, that caring for the needy has become a defining characteristic of the Jewish people. We need only to peruse synagogue bulletins and newsletters within the Reform movement and elsewhere to find advertisements for annual Mitzvah Days and monthly service projects. Such programs often include preparing food for the local homeless and hungry or visiting local food pantries and soup kitchens. These service projects are credited with keeping many Jews involved in the Jewish community, on the one hand, and for burnishing synagogues' reputation in their

local communities, on the other. They also provide opportunities for Jews to join in fellowship with other religious and secular organizations to provide for local folks in need.

Mishnah Peah 8:7

Whoever has enough food for two meals may not take from the *Tamchui*. If one has enough food for fourteen meals, he may not take from the *Kuppah*.

Commentary

We glean from the above *mishnah* that our sages understood that every person is entitled to a minimum of two meals per day. Shabbat is different; the Rabbis declare in Talmud that every person is entitled to an extra meal on Shabbat. The practice is attributed to Rabbi Chidka's teaching that each person is obligated to consume four meals on Shabbat, one at night and three during the day (BT Shabbat 117b). This practice, which is now referred to as *seudah shlishit* or "third meal," developed from the Rabbis' interpretation of a Bible verse regarding manna: "Then Moses said, 'Eat it today, for today is a Sabbath of *Adonai*; you will not find it today on the plain'" (Ex. 16:25). In the verse, Moses is referring to the bounty of manna that God gifted the Israelites in the wilderness. The three-fold repetition of "today" in verse 25 was interpreted by our Sages to refer to the number of meals that each person is obligated to eat on Shabbat. In BT Shabbat 117b, Rabbi Chidka interprets the three meals to be exclusive of the evening meal.

Therefore, the *Tamchui* and *Kuppah* were in part created to ensure that all people were able to eat two meals on weekdays and three on Shabbat. In his book, *To Do the Right and the Good*, Rabbi Elliot N. Dorff emphasizes each Jewish community's responsibility to ensure that this occurs:

Civilized societies have confronted poverty for millennia. Some have seen it as a moral fault, and some have even imprisoned debtors who could not pay their bills. Jewish ideology, ethics, and law instead affirm that it is an obligation of both the individual and the community to care for the poor and ultimately to bring them out of poverty.¹²

The Babylonian Talmud makes clear that permanent residents in a city are obligated to contribute to both the *Tamchui* and *Kuppah*. Our Rabbis taught, one who resides in a city for thirty days is required to contribute to the *Tamchui*. One who resides in a city for three months is required to contribute to the *Kuppah*, the community's general charity fund (BT Bava Batra 8a). Rabbi Dorff adds, "The degree to which a person was obligated to contribute to the poor became the mark of membership in a community."¹³

*Maimonides, Mishneh Torah, Issurei Mizbe'ah 7:11*¹⁴

One who desires to gain merit for himself, subjugate his evil inclination, and amplify his generosity should bring his sacrifice from the most desirable and superior type of the item he is bringing.

¹² Rabbi Elliot N. Dorff, *To Do the Right and the Good: A Jewish Approach to Modern Social Ethics*. (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 2002) p. 127.

¹³ Ibid. p. 132.

¹⁴ Translated by Eliyahu Touger.

Commentary

Our Rabbis developed a large library of texts on this topic, expanding on Torah's teachings and adding commentary and clear rules to observe. The rabbis were motivated by the Jewish value of compassion. This was important for Rabbi Joseph Karo (1488-1575), for example, when writing his four-part code of Jewish law called *Shulchan Aruch*. Karo taught that *tzedakah* should be offered graciously, and we must not refuse assistance to a person in need (YD 249:3-4, 11-13). Treating the poor with dignity was essential for the Rabbis, as our tradition would remind us that that is how one who is in a position to give to others would wish to be treated himself. Furthermore, our tradition also holds that we are obligated to give the best of whatever one has to offer. "One who wishes to give merit to himself will restrain his evil inclination and open wide his hand," Karo teaches, "and everything which is for the sake of Heaven must be of that which is good and beautiful...[if] one feeds the hungry, he must feed [him] from the best and sweetest of his table. If he clothes the naked, he must clothe from the finest of his clothes."¹⁵

*Maimonides, Mishneh Torah, Matanot Aniyyim 9:4*¹⁶

On fast days, we distribute food to the poor. Whenever there is a fast day on which the people eat and went to bed without distributing charity to the poor, they are considered as murderers.

¹⁵ YD 248, drawn from Maimonides' Issurei Mizbe'ah 7:11, found in Gray, p. 70.

¹⁶ Translated by Eliyahu Touger.

Commentary

A Jew is obligated to distribute food to the hungry even on fast days. Maimonides further elaborates on this, explaining what that meal ought to consist of: at least bread and fruit such as dates and grapes.¹⁷ The student-founders of the HUC-JIR Soup Kitchen, and its leaders ever since, maintained the HUC-JIR Soup Kitchen every Monday regardless of whether Jewish holidays fell on that day. Practices within the Jewish community are abrogated for Soup Kitchen guests. So, for example, HUC-JIR students continue to serve bread during Passover, as it would be a disservice to our hungry guests to withhold that from them. The Soup Kitchen has also operated during major festivals and observances such as Yom Kippur (even as the student servers were fasting) and the first night of Passover. After all, the Passover *Haggadah* famously states: *Kol dichfin yeitei v'yeichol*, “Let all who are hungry, come and eat”¹⁸ Such is the case each Monday evening at One West 4th Street in Greenwich Village as students serve up food and dignity at the HUC-JIR Soup Kitchen, guided by a wealth of texts from the tradition that feeds their souls.

¹⁷ YD 248, drawn from Maimonides’ *Issurei Mizbe’ah* 7:11, found in Gray, p. 70.

¹⁸ Traditional Passover *Haggadah*.

Chapter 2

**The Origins of the Soup Kitchen at the New York Campus of HUC-JIR:
A Response to Civic Duty**

The prosperity that America's wealthiest enjoyed during the Reagan administration was not felt by New York City's most needy. This was not surprising to community advocates, who were well aware of President Reagan's merciless attitude towards the country's homeless population. "One problem that we've had, even in the best of times," explained Reagan, "...is the people who are sleeping on the grates, the homeless who are homeless, you might say, by choice."¹⁹ Advised by The Heritage Foundation and other conservative organizations, Reagan instituted a policy of government contraction. Consequently and in short order, according to food security expert and veteran community organizer, Kathy Goldman, "we had the beginning of what's now an outrageous number of people who are homeless...[they] just lost jobs and couldn't pay their rent, and were out in the street."²⁰

The homelessness epidemic in New York City continued to grow in the following decades. Scholar Janet Poppendieck writes, "The poverty rate, which had hovered between 11 and 12 percent throughout the 1970s, rose steadily in the early 1980s, reaching a peak of 15.2 percent in 1983."²¹ According to the definition of homelessness detailed in the McKinney-Vento Homeless Assistance Act, passed by Congress and signed into law in July 1987, the homeless population of New York City grew to 4,600

¹⁹ Richard Reeves, *President Reagan* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 2005), p. 212.

²⁰ Interview with Kathy Goldman, Co-Founder, Community Food Advocates. Personal Interview. 14 Nov. 2014.

²¹ Janet Poppendieck. *Sweet Charity?: Emergency Food and the End of Entitlement* (New York, NY: Viking Penguin, 1998), p. 82.

families that year.²² As defined by the U.S. Code, an individual or family is homeless if they “lack a fixed, regular, and adequate nighttime residence and have a primary nighttime residence in a supervised shelter or other transitional housing situation or a public place not designed as sleeping accommodations.”²³ Official numbers do not account for the entirety of soup kitchen patrons, however, which include the hundreds of thousands of New Yorkers who live in overcrowded accommodations and the City’s unsheltered homeless who are not easily counted.

Historians and politicians continue to debate the specific conditions that led to the increase of homelessness in New York City in the 1980s. According to the Institute for Children, Poverty, and Homelessness: “The transformation of New York’s economy that had begun in the 1960s—from one based in manufacturing to one based in services—continued through the 1970s and 1980s. In 1977 there were 538,600 manufacturing jobs in the city; in 1989 there were only 360,600,”²⁴ and the decrease in manufacturing jobs led to increased unemployment, and in the most extreme cases, homelessness.

Poppendieck, who currently serves as a Professor of Sociology at Hunter College, City University of New York, adds:

In the early 1980s, all of the factors that send people to soup kitchens and food pantries—unemployment and underemployment, excessive shelter costs,

²² Grinker W. Testimony in U.S. House of Representatives hearings, op. cit., 306–10.

²³ Roy Grant, MA, Alan Shapiro, MD, Sharon Joseph, MD, Sandra Goldsmith, MS, RD, Lourdes Rigual-Lynch, PhD, and Irwin Redlener, MD. “The Health of Homeless Children Revisited.” *Advances in Pediatrics* 54 (2007): 173-87. *Children's Health Fund*. Web. 30 Dec. 2014. For a complete definition of “homeless,” see US Title Code 42, Chapter 119, Subchapter I, Section 11302 [42USC11302].

²⁴ Institute for Children, Poverty, and Homelessness. “New Poverty Overview.” *Timeline: History of Poverty & Homelessness in NYC*. Web. 30 Dec. 2014. <<http://povertyhistory.org/timeline#new-poverty-overview>>.

inadequate public assistance, and reduced food assistance—were suddenly intensified and made visible by a dramatic combination of escalating need and reduced social provision.²⁵

Other factors, such as the prevalence of drug and alcohol dependence among New Yorkers and insufficient treatment for people with mental illnesses, contributed to the problem as well. According to Professor Joel Blau, “In thirteen studies of the previously institutionalized among the homeless conducted in cities throughout the United States, the proportion of the homeless population ranged from 11.2 to 33.2 percent.” The author goes on to explain that both extremes were evident in New York City.²⁶

Another factor that greatly contributed to an increase in homelessness in New York City in the 1980s was an insurmountable housing shortage, a problem that persists to this day. For decades, mayors have unsuccessfully attempted to resolve the problem in a myriad of ways.²⁷ One major obstacle for Mayor Ed Koch in the 1980s was the city’s J-51 program, in which developers were granted tax exemptions “against increases in their future property taxes for up to ten years for the amount of money they spent upgrading a building.”²⁸ The program incentivized regentrification of prime neighborhoods around the city, and led to the conversion of many single-room-occupancy (SRO) hotels into middle-class apartments.

²⁵ Poppendieck, pp. 81-82.

²⁶ Joel Blau, *The Visible Poor: Homelessness in the United States* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993), p. 86.

²⁷ “New York’s Affordable Housing Shortage.” *The New York Times*. The New York Times, 07 Feb. 2014. Web. 03 Jan. 2015.
<http://www.nytimes.com/2014/02/08/opinion/new-yorks-affordable-housing-shortage.html?_r=0>.

²⁸ Jonathan M. Soffer, *Ed Koch and the Rebuilding of New York City* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2010), p. 278.

As witnesses to the unconscionable number of downtrodden New Yorkers sleeping on subway platforms and the sidewalks surrounding the College-Institute, the student-founders of the HUC-JIR Soup Kitchen felt they had no choice but to respond. “In those years,” recalls now Rabbi Gary Bretton-Granatoor, who was ordained in 1984, “one had to step over homeless people on the walk from [the Broadway] Lafayette subway [station] to school.”²⁹ Rabbi Amy Schwartzman, one of the Soup Kitchen’s student founders, who was ordained in 1990, remembers: “I actually lived in the Village myself; not very many students lived in the Village then...and so this was my neighborhood, and I saw these people all the time.”³⁰ While Rabbi Schwartzman and her classmates were certainly inspired by the Jewish texts that they studied in class, the student-founders of the Soup Kitchen were also responding to a sense of civic duty. Essentially, they applied the Jewish mandate to repair our broken world to a hands-on solution to their neighborhood’s hunger problem.

Those pragmatic rabbinical students were part—unknowingly at first—of a much larger movement of dedicated providers from across the country, contributing to the institutionalization of an emergency food network in the 1980s. However, veteran organizer Kathy Goldman distinguishes between terms, explaining: “What’s now called the Emergency Food Network, which is by now a complete misnomer, I will say, because it is an every-day operation.”³¹ The label *emergency food* was chosen simply because the programs are intended to serve families who are experiencing food emergencies. “For the

²⁹ Gary Bretton-Granatoor. "My Thesis: History of HUC-JIR Soup Kitchen." Message to the author. 3 Jan. 2014. E-mail.

³⁰ Interview with Rabbi Amy Schwartzman. Personal Interview. 18 Nov. 2014.

³¹ Interview with Kathy Goldman, Co-Founder, Community Food Advocates. Personal Interview. 14 Nov. 2014.

people who turned to soup kitchens and food pantries for help,” explains Poppendieck, “the term ‘emergency food’ was perversely comforting...An emergency is inherently temporary; things will get better; the emergency will be over.”³² But for anyone who volunteers regularly in our day at the HUC-JIR Soup Kitchen, or any of the thousands of other soup kitchens in this city or around the country, it is clear that the problem of hunger and homelessness is anything but temporary.

Today, nearly thirty years after it’s founding, the HUC-JIR Soup Kitchen is a well-established institution. “When we began,” remembers former HUC-JIR Dean of Administration, Rabbi Lawrence Raphael, “it was not very formal.”³³ From a grass roots student initiative, the Soup Kitchen has developed into an organization with a yearly budget of nearly \$60,000, and its fundraising efforts are robust, collecting nearly as much as it spends each year.³⁴ The Soup Kitchen welcomes nearly 45 synagogue and youth groups each year to volunteer alongside its roughly 22 regular community volunteers and current HUC-JIR students and staff. What has remained constant is that the Soup Kitchen volunteers continue to prepare nutritious meals for their guests every Monday evening. Most important, today’s volunteers remain committed to treating the guests with respect and the same high standard of care envisioned by the Soup Kitchen’s founders.

³² Poppendieck, p. 96.

³³ Interview with Rabbi Lawrence W. Raphael. Telephone interview. 12 Aug. 2014.

³⁴ The total budget for Soup Kitchen during the fiscal year July 1, 2014-June 30, 2015 is \$57,474, and the Soup Kitchen collected \$55,025 in gifts during the prior fiscal year.

Timeline of Key Events in the Development of the HUC-JIR Soup Kitchen

April 14, 1983 – Fourth-year rabbinical student, Gary Bretton-Granatoor, delivers a memorable senior sermon in the Minnie Petrie Synagogue at HUC-JIR/NY, urging the community to engage in *tikkun olam* (“repairing the world”). Bretton-Granatoor directly calls on members of the College-Institute to open their own soup kitchen to serve the area’s needy population. His sermon helps to build a culture of compassion and *tzedakah* (“justice”) at the campus.

Hebrew Union College, and we, the members of the community here, must be willing to open up *these* doors to aid the poor and the homeless—the people who we pass [every] day on our way to school and then we close the doors behind us. There is no reason why we cannot have our own soup-kitchen or breakfast-kitchen. We have the facilities to prepare the food and serve the people—it never seems to be a problem at other times, when people are fed at College functions. With a little bit of effort, we could also house people here at night. This would give each and every one of us the opportunity to put into practice what Jewish tradition has been telling us to do all along. This very building is situated on the edge of one of the city’s poorest areas—the area with the densest population of homeless. Our presence here in this area obligates us to do these things for the community of which we are part—we must make our presence felt by the people in the neighborhood.³⁵

³⁵ Gary Bretton-Granatoor. Sermon for Parashat Tazria-Metzora. HUC-JIR, New York. 14 Apr. 1983. Speech.

Spring 1988 – The HUC-JIR Soup Kitchen is established in the basement of HUC-JIR/NY. The early leadership team includes rabbinical students Arik Ascherman (RAB '89), Amy Schwartzman (RAB '90), Ellen Lippmann (RAB '91), and Serge Lippe (RAB '91). The Dean of Administration, Rabbi Lawrence W. Raphael, supervises the student leadership team and actively volunteers at the Soup Kitchen. The student coordinator(s) of the Soup Kitchen are volunteers, except for a short period during the early 1990s when Paula Feldstein (RAB '93) will be paid a small honorarium for her work as Coordinator.³⁶

Summer 1988 – Food service in the summer time is modified to brown-bag 'to-go' meals, consisting of cold sandwiches, a drink, and snacks, because classes are not in session and many students are out of town.

1988 – Within the first year of operation, the student volunteers begin to rely on youth groups from local synagogues to supplement the HUC-JIR student volunteers at the Soup Kitchen.

Summer 1989 – Soup Kitchen receives first MAZON grant for \$5,000.³⁷

Fall 1991 – The HUC-JIR Soup Kitchen informally partners with legal aid organizations, at the initiative of the leadership team. Student rabbi Jordan Millstein (RAB '93) invites

³⁶ Interview with Paula Feldstein. Personal interview. 11 Jan. 2015.

³⁷ Interview with Mia Hubbard, MAZON Vice President of Programs. Telephone interview. 15 Aug. 2014. Founded in 1985, MAZON: A Jewish Response to Hunger is a national nonprofit organization created to combat hunger in the United States and Israel.

the Legal Action Center for the Homeless, which later became the Urban Justice Center to assist. The group—which included many NYU law students—rotates among soup kitchens in the area offering free legal assistance.³⁸

March 3, 1992 – Dr. Alfred Gottschalk, President of HUC-JIR, sends memo to Board of Governors’ Administrative Executive, Sylvia Posner, requesting a “very sensitive preamble to the [Roger E. Joseph] Prize,” which is awarded annually at ordination to an individual or organization that has made a significant contribution to humanity.³⁹

April 20, 1992 – New York Dean Norman J. Cohen sends memo to Dr. Alfred Gottschalk with enclosed draft of Ordination/Investiture service, explaining that the awarding of the Joseph Prize and Ordination/Investiture ritual will follow the service rather than being embedded within it, as usual.⁴⁰

May 17, 1992 – The Roger E. Joseph Prize is awarded to the students of HUC-JIR at the Service of Ordination and Investiture (Congregation Emanu-El of the City of New York) for their “courage and moral passion through their relentless work as volunteers on behalf of the poor, the abused and disadvantaged.”⁴¹

³⁸ Interview with Jordan Millstein. Personal interview. 11 Jan. 2015.

³⁹ American Jewish Archives. Memo sent from Dr. Alfred Gottschalk to Sylvia Posner. Re: The Joseph Prize. March 3, 1992.

⁴⁰ American Jewish Archives. Memo sent from Dr. Norman J. Cohen to Dr. Alfred Gottschalk. Untitled. April 20, 1992.

⁴¹ Hebrew Union College – Jewish Institute of Religion. Service of Ordination and Investiture. New York, 1992.

Representatives from each of the four campuses accept the prize on behalf of all HUC-JIR students; they include Ruth Alpers (Cincinnati), Paula Feldstein (New York), Moji Javid (Los Angeles), and Sharon Young (Jerusalem). The President remarks include the following: “Our gifted and dedicated students will be honored for their commitment to human and community outreach, and for their volunteer projects in support of the disadvantaged and the helpless in our society.”⁴²

April 14, 2000 –The New York *Jewish Week* journalist, Martha Mendelsohn, reports on Shifra Mincer, a 13 year-old teenager, who is “the sewing lady of the [HUC-JIR] soup kitchen” and recipient of a statewide prize:

An eighth grader at the Ramaz School, Shifra is one of two New York State students who was named a top volunteer in the New York Prudential Spirit of Community Awards, a nation-wide program, sponsored in partnership with the National Association of Secondary School Principals, to honor middle and high school students for outstanding volunteer work.⁴³

2002 – NYU law school students are recruited to provide legal services to guests at the HUC-JIR Soup Kitchen.⁴⁴ They assist guests in issues relating to welfare, food stamps and other benefits. In addition to distributing meals, HUC-JIR student volunteers engage

⁴² “Remarks Prepared for Dr. Alfred Gottschalk upon Presentation of the Roger E. Joseph Prize.” Service of Ordination and Investiture. Congregation Emanu-El of the City of New York, New York. 17 May 1992. Speech.

⁴³ Martha Mendelsohn. “Not Your Usual Sewing Circle.” *The Jewish Week* (14 Apr. 2000).

⁴⁴ *MAZON Grant Review*, 2002.

in letter-writing campaigns and develop curriculum for study sessions for community group volunteers.

January 9, 2003 – Marilyn Dickey’s article, “Shy Student Finds Her Niche as Seamstress for the Homeless,” appears in *The Chronicle of Philanthropy*, reprising the story of Shifra Mincer, who is 16 years old at the time.⁴⁵

Summer 2004 – Incoming Coordinator of the Soup Kitchen, Stephanie Kolin (RAB ’06), and Head Chef, David Young (RAB ’06), purchase new pots, pans, utensils and knives to replace the original kitchen items, which were donations solicited by Rabbi Lawrence Raphael in 1988. The new supplies enable the Soup Kitchen leadership team to expand the menu beyond simple soups and stews. In the words of David Young:

We looked at prices for some new menu items: vegetarian chili (sometimes with ground turkey), fajitas, [and] stir fry. Sometimes I would look in the pantry, assess the donations that we had on hand, and use them to make a meal for that evening. Other times we would special order for things like Thanksgiving week (we served a Thanksgiving meal complete with pies), Christmas/Chanukah week (when we served roast turkey and latkes), Valentine’s Week (I think that was cookies with pink icing).⁴⁶

⁴⁵ Marilyn Dickey. “Shy Student Finds Her Niche as Seamstress for the Homeless.” *The Chronicle of Philanthropy* (9 Jan. 2003).

⁴⁶ Rabbi David Young. “Soup Kitchen History.” 16 Jan. 2015. E-mail.

2005 – Soup Kitchen leadership continues to request grant money from MAZON, highlighting the Soup Kitchen’s unique approach to caring for the homeless and hungry.⁴⁷

2006 – Soup Kitchen continues to partner with anti-hunger citywide groups, such as the Interfaith Voices Against Hunger, the Emergency Food Action Center, and the New York City Coalition Against Hunger. By dint of these activities and others, the Soup Kitchen broadens its visibility beyond the HUC-JIR community.⁴⁸

February 28, 2011 – Rabbi Mary L. Zamore edits *The Sacred Table: Creating a Jewish Food Ethic* (CCAR Press), which acknowledges volunteering at a soup kitchen as an aspect of Reform Jewish *kashrut*.⁴⁹

⁴⁷ *MAZON Grant Review, 2005*: “First, it uses the concept and practice of tikkun olam as a tool to infuse the direct service part of their work with anti-hunger curriculum and advocacy efforts. Second, its one-on-one approach in getting to know their guests provides a more intimate and welcoming environment than other soup kitchens. This setting also allows students to listen to client stories of how hunger and homelessness affected their lives, which, in turn, allows for further discussions on how to solve these issues. Third, it collaborates with a wide-range of local agencies, educational institutions and congregations to share, learn and have in-depth discussions about the different types of legislative and advocacy work that help mobilize the poor.”

⁴⁸ *MAZON Grant Review, 2006*: “Part of the program’s success is its work in partnership with anti-hunger citywide groups, such as the Interfaith Voices Against Hunger, the Emergency Food Action Center and the New York City Coalition Against Hunger. Collaborative work includes advocating for food stamp and social services improvement. With its great work, and with the help of the media, HUC has deepened its visibility, and the group’s work has been highly publicized—one article about HUC was published in the *New York Jewish Week*.”

⁴⁹ Carole B Balin. "Making Every Forkful Count: Reform Jews, Kashrut, and Mindful Eating, 1840-2010." *The Sacred Table: Creating a Jewish Food Ethic*. Mary L. Zamore, ed. (New York: CCAR, 2011), pp. 5-16.

2011 – Due to rising food costs, the student leaders are forced to increase their fundraising efforts, and rely on social media networking websites to expand the Soup Kitchen’s fundraising base.⁵⁰

September 16, 2011 – “Huc-jir Soup Kitchen” Facebook profile is created to promote the Soup Kitchen’s accomplishments and connect with community and synagogue groups, as well as HUC-JIR alumni and former volunteers.

September 27, 2011 – As the *Chesed* Chair of *Shalhevet: Orthodox Judaism at NYU*, Shira Falk creates the “HUC Soup Kitchen Volunteers” Facebook group to help mobilize a weekly delegation of NYU students to volunteer at the Soup Kitchen. Using Facebook and a shared Google spreadsheet, Shira recruits two groups of NYU students to volunteer each week: roughly five people to set up from 3:15 pm - 4:45 pm and another five to serve from 4:45 pm - 6:15 pm.⁵¹

October 15, 2012 – To involve more HUC-JIR students and to deepen relationships between the Soup Kitchen and community volunteer groups, student coordinator Daniel Kirzane (RAB ’14) creates the Soup Kitchen Visiting Educators Program; Temple Sinai of Bergen County is the first congregation to participate in the new program. The initiative, made possible by a generous grant provided by Rabbi Jerry Davidson’s social

⁵⁰ *MAZON Grant Review, 2011*: “The HUC-JIR soup kitchen student board has had to grapple with the rising cost of providing healthy food and nutritional meals to approximately 100 guests every week. As a result, the students involved have increased their fundraising efforts and have used new effective methods of raising money, such as social networking sites like Facebook.

⁵¹ Interview with Shira Falk. Telephone interview. 30 Dec. 2014.

leadership initiative, pays current HUC-JIR students to meet with volunteer groups before they arrive at the Soup Kitchen.⁵² (The program does not continue past its pilot year.)

November 15, 2012 – Due to new Facebook regulations, HUC-JIR Soup Kitchen creates a Facebook page. Non-profit organizations are now required to create pages instead of individual profiles.

2014 – Lifetime grand total of 25 MAZON grants received from 1993-2014 totals \$125,600.⁵³

September 18, 2014 – Thanks to a generous grant from the Gendler Grapevine Project, HUC-JIR/NY launches a new greening initiative “by reimagining the campus’ food system through a compost project and environmental education series.”⁵⁴ In accordance with this campus-wide initiative, the HUC-JIR Soup Kitchen begins using compostable plates, cups and plastic ware.

January 2015 – The Soup Kitchen continues to expand the services provided to its guests and recently recruited a Community Educator from Cornell University

⁵² Daniel Kirzane, “Reviewing Soup Kitchen Leadership: A Summary of a Semester’s Progress” submitted on April 27, 2012 for his class, *Adaptive Leadership: Soup Kitchen* taught by Dr. Evie Rotstein.

⁵³ “MAZON’s History with Hebrew Union College-Jewish Institute of Religion New York Soup Kitchen,” sent as email attachment from Mia Hubbard, Vice President of Programs, on September 10, 2014.

⁵⁴ *HUC-JIR/New York Kicks Off Campus-Wide Greening Initiative*. 23 Sept. 2014. <<http://huc.edu/news/2014/09/23/huc-jirnew-york-kicks-campus-wide-greening-initiative>> .

Cooperative Extension in the Nutrition and Health Program Area to teach about meal planning, food budgeting, and nutrition.⁵⁵ In addition, the Soup Kitchen partners with the New York City Coalition Against Hunger to encourage some guests to attend Food Action Board (FAB) meetings, at which guests learn skills to lobby elected officials on behalf of the homeless and needy.⁵⁶

⁵⁵ Jannie Wolff. "HUC-JIR Soup Kitchen - History." 15 Jan. 2015. E-mail.

⁵⁶ Lauren Levy. "Soup Kitchen: State of the Union." 12 Jan. 2015. E-mail.

Documentary Introduction

The responsibility of maintaining the HUC-JIR Soup Kitchen is bequeathed from one generation of students to the next, creating a *shalshet hakabbalah* (“chain of tradition”) of feeding the hungry at the College-Institute. Responsibility is passed on from generation to generation along with a promise to continue serving the homeless and hungry people of New York City until there is no longer a need. That of course has been the hope from the beginning and our prayer always, that one day there will be no need to continue the program. Until then, we will continue to partner with local synagogue groups and community volunteers to ensure we provide our guests with the highest possible standard of hospitality and treat everyone with dignity and respect.

Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel famously described the experience of marching alongside Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. to be like praying with his feet; for me, volunteering at the Soup Kitchen is like praying with my whole body. Every tip of the coffee pot and each spoonful of food served is prayer. It is so fulfilling to find a well-fitting business suit for a guest who needs help dressing for an upcoming job interview, and to help guests in the Clothing Closet find Christmas gifts for young family members. But perhaps most fulfilling of all is the simple act of being present for our guests; many do not have friends or family with whom to share sorrows or successes, and listening to their stories is a powerful gift.

The primary goal of this video is to capture the foundational story of the HUC-JIR Soup Kitchen, as told by its founders. They are Rabbi Ellen Lippmann (Kolot Chayeinu, Brooklyn, NY), Rabbi Serge Lippe (Brooklyn Heights Synagogue, Brooklyn, NY), and Rabbi Amy Schwartzman (Temple Rodeph Shalom, Falls Church, VA). In the absence of

any other substantial recorded history of the Soup Kitchen, I am grateful to capture their memories, and to honor their vision and efforts in this way. I owe a huge thank you to Stephen Schaller, my friend and the editor of this documentary, for spending countless hours producing such a fabulous finished product. Finally, this project would not have happened without the encouragement of my advisor, Dr. Carole Balin. I am thankful to Carole for her excitement about this work and assistance throughout.

I intend for this documentary to be a tribute to the hundreds of HUC-JIR students, faculty, staff, and volunteers who have helped found and maintain the Soup Kitchen. In order to respect the privacy of our guests, they are not featured in this documentary. Neither are the community volunteers, despite the fact that they are certainly an integral part of the volunteer team. Beside two experts, Kathy Goldman, a food security expert and veteran community organizer, and Professor Alyssa Gray of the Hebrew Union College – Jewish Institute of Religion, the only people featured are the student leaders of the Soup Kitchen, both the student-founders as well as its current Co-Coordinator. This is their story.