

What We Owe the Poor

BY RABBI DAVID WOLPE

The Midrash tells of Rabbi Joshua Ben Levi who went walking through the streets of Rome. There he saw the pillars of great buildings covered in tapestries so that they would not contract and split with variations of temperature. Along the same path he saw a poor man who was dressed in sackcloth. Rabbi Joshua noted the splendor with which buildings were covered and the poverty of people.

There has never been an established Jewish community that failed to create a *tamhui*, a communal charitable plate. Rabbi Jacob Ben Asher's great code of law, the *Tur*, states simply, "We give charity to anyone who stretches out his hand in need. This includes gentiles as well as Jews."

Charitable work is complicated. There are always dangers — that the help will be misused, that it will create dependency, that it is misconceived or even stolen from those who need it most. Jewish law envisioned all of these possibilities, but still insisted that *tzedakah* was not a choice, but an obligation.

The wife of Rabbi Naftali of Roshpitz once asked her husband if his prayer for the rich to give more funds to the poor had been successful. "Half of my prayer I have accomplished," he answered, "the poor are willing to accept them."