

What Tu B'Av can teach us about addressing Jewish poverty

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Opinion

FEELING THE LOVE

One of my earliest dates with my husband was on Tu B'Av, the 15th day of the month of Av. While neither of us was very religious, the holiday — traditionally a celebration of the grape harvest and a day for finding love — gave us an invitation to plan a romantic date: dinner and a deck of conversation prompts as we walked along the beach in Santa Monica. We married a year later, so it's safe to say we are a Tu B'Av success story.

Tu B'Av is described as one of the two happiest days in the Hebrew calendar. In the Mishnah, Rabban Shimon ben Gamliel describes how, before the women went out to dance in the fields, they would borrow white dresses from one another “so as not to embarrass one who did not have her own.” It was a day every daughter of Jerusalem should be able to participate in.

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This form of mutual aid and sharing of wardrobes feels both deeply Jewish and a part of womanhood. I love lending dresses, and I love even more wearing the dress of a friend, knowing I carry a piece of their love and style.

Many of us in the Jewish community, especially in low-income households, felt that instinct toward collective care fade after pandemic-era mutual aid programs wound down, and fade further as the country grew more polarized. The data bears this out: [Jewish Federations of North America data](#) shows 66% of financially secure Jews believe their community “cares for people who are in need,” but among financially vulnerable Jews, only 39% agree. Nearly 30% of U.S. Jewish households struggle to pay their bills every month. That number has climbed since the pandemic and hits hardest among those with a disability, those out of work or those navigating a major life transition like divorce or caregiving.

If this sounds like you, you are not alone.



One of the statistics that stood out to me in [TEN: Together Ending Need's first-ever landscape scan on Jewish economic vulnerability](#) was that 27% of economically vulnerable Jewish households have no connection to Jewish life. This goes hand in hand with figures published in JFNA's "Surge" data showing that even though struggling households want deeper connection to the Jewish community, they are dropping out of the Surge at rates higher than almost any other group because they don't feel welcome. The top dropout group was LGBTQ Jews, reminding us of the compounding effects of intersecting identities.

Addressing the stigma

The 2024 study ["On the Edge: Voices of Economic Vulnerability in U.S. Jewish Communities"](#) found that struggling Jews often believe they are the rare outlier and that no one else in Jewish spaces is struggling too. The myth is self-fulfilling: shame causes families to let their connection to Jewish community "wither," shrinking their path back in. Fewer people at the grape harvest, fewer dresses to share.

In a recent Identity/Crisis episode, Yehuda Kurtzer put it plainly: money "shapes so many features of North American Jewish life," yet we almost never talk about it openly. His guest, Tulane sociologist Ilana Horwitz, whose research was behind the "On the Edge"

study, argues that the fix isn't just financial aid — it's normalizing the conversation before someone has to ask for help.

My aunt called me last week, knowing the work I do, and asked for resources for a mother in our community who was struggling. I shared a list of resources and the Jewish Family Service of LA number to call. I then commended her for being someone her friend felt safe asking for help.

“Oh no,” my aunt said. “I went up to her and said, ‘These are tough times for everyone; can I help you find a food pantry?’” The mother broke down and was relieved for support, she said.

In that moment, my aunt, even without knowing exactly who to call, let her know she is not alone. She opened up her closet to another Jew.

Communal care is happening across corners of our community every time a Jewish Family Service social worker goes beyond the job and accompanies a client to Shabbat services; every time a funder gives to a rent subsidy for seniors or a camp scholarship; and every time a friend posts on behalf of another friend in a Facebook group, raising a few dollars.

Tu B'Av worked because no one had to ask twice for a dress. That's the whole point — a community where offering and asking for help does not feel daunting. We tell a good story about our commitment to *tzedakah*. It's time we told an equally honest one about who still needs it. The first thing it requires admitting that some of us are standing at the edge of the field with nothing to wear.

Rachel Sumekh is the CEO of TEN: Together Ending Need and a long-time anti-poverty advocate.