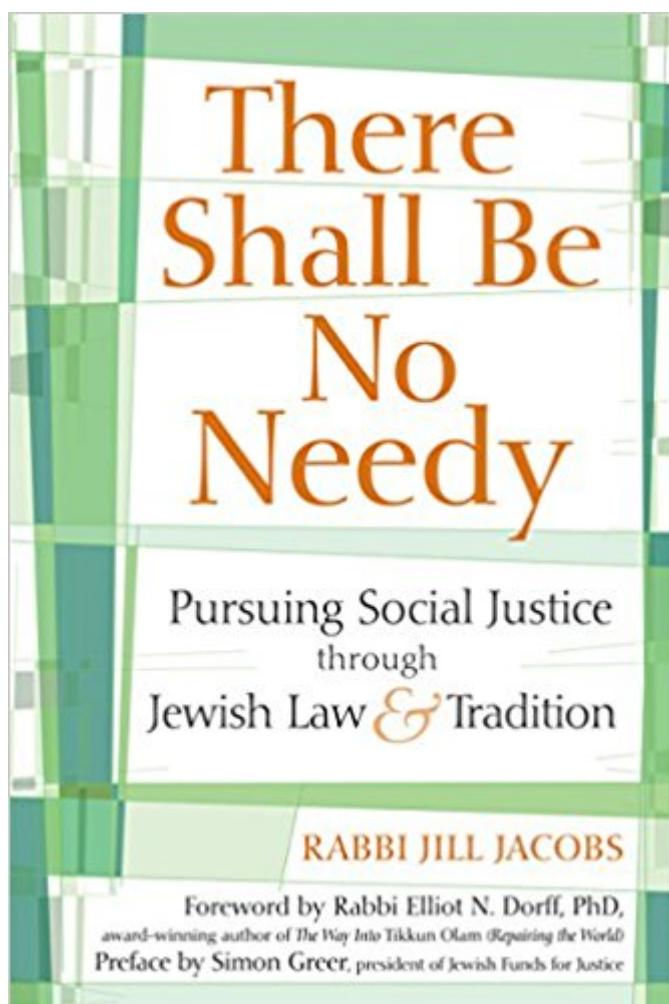


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# There Shall Be No Needy: Pursuing Social Justice Through Jewish Law And Tradition



## Synopsis

How can a Jewish approach to social justice offer positive change for America?"Ancient texts offer significant wisdom about human nature, economic cycles, the causes of inequality, and our obligations to each other. These insights can inform our own approaches to current issues, challenge our assumptions, and force us to consider alternative approaches. The conversation between our texts and our lives can enrich our experience of both."Ã¢â€¢from the IntroductionConfront the most pressing issues of twenty-first-century America in this fascinating book, which brings together classical Jewish sources, contemporary policy debate and real-life stories.Rabbi Jill Jacobs, a leading young voice in the social justice arena, makes a powerful argument for participation in the American public square from a deeply Jewish perspective, while deepening our understanding of the relationship between Judaism and such current social issues as: Poverty and the Poor Collection and Allocation of Tzedakah Workers, Employers and Unions Housing the Homeless The Provision of Health Care Environmental Sustainability Crime, Punishment and RehabilitationBy creating a dialogue between traditional texts and current realities, Jacobs presents a template for engagement in public life from a Jewish perspective and challenges us to renew our obligations to each other.

## Book Information

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## Customer Reviews

The author of this excellent examination of the Jewish response to contemporary issues of social justice earned her rabbinical ordination at New York's Jewish Theological Seminary, where she became aware of problems experienced by residents of neighboring Harlem. This and her

subsequent position working for a trade union led her to explore the relationship between Jewish texts and matters of social policy. Today, she is rabbi-in-residence of the Jewish Fund for Justice. Combining the examination of Jewish texts with contemporary social concerns has resulted in a thoughtful book. Jacobs explores problems of poverty, workers, housing, health care and the environment, highlighting the contribution of Jewish teachings to answering these social questions. (Apr. ) Copyright © Reed Business Information, a division of Reed Elsevier Inc. All rights reserved. --This text refers to the Hardcover edition.

The author of this excellent examination of the Jewish response to contemporary issues of social justice earned her rabbinical ordination at New York's Jewish Theological Seminary, where she became aware of problems experienced by residents of neighboring Harlem. This and her subsequent position working for a trade union led her to explore the relationship between Jewish texts and matters of social policy. Today, she is rabbi-in-residence of the Jewish Fund for Justice. Combining the examination of Jewish texts with contemporary social concerns has resulted in a thoughtful book. Jacobs explores problems of poverty, workers, housing, health care and the environment, highlighting the contribution of Jewish teachings to answering these social questions. (Apr. ) --Publishers Weekly, March 9, 2009 "The irresistible urge to work for justice is a hallmark of Jewish engagement with the modern world. Ever since the Haskalah, a.k.a. the 'Jewish Enlightenment,' began to pry open the gates of European ghettos in the 18th century, Jewish law was pressed into service as an advocate for and witness to change in the "host" societies that had previously quarantined its Jews. Jewish law had, of course, long influenced secular civil law to uplift the poor and the needy, and to safeguard the widow and the orphan; Jews who made their way into positions of influence in the arts, journalism and even government urged societal confrontation with collective prejudices and blindnesses - not always with happy results. The Jewish engagement with Enlightenment values also helped Judaism fracture into denominations, whose principal disagreements consisted of whether and to what extent to absorb and engage with modernity. These aren't merely academic considerations. How to engage with modernity without sacrificing one's Judaism is the mixed blessing of the modern age. To simply brandish a phrase such as tikkun olam without understanding its original and varied meanings, or its adaptability, is to reduce one's Judaism to a sacred version of SparkNotes; it treats Torah like a Twitter post from God. There are no limits to the wisdom and complexity of Torah. For the Jewish social justice movement and its adherents to significantly heal the world, their work must become infused with a literacy and an impartiality, a perspective and a fluency in Jewish text that they all too frequently lack. I'm as guilty

of this lack of fluency as anyone. Although perhaps a little to the right of your average social justicenik, I am no social-justice slouch. But it wasn't until I read *There Shall Be No Needy: Pursuing Social Justice through Jewish law & Tradition*, Rabbi Jill Jacobs' new book, that I began to understand the extent to which my work - both paid and volunteer - was the quintessential work of the Jew in the modern world. Just as the review copy of Rabbi Jacobs' book arrived in the mail, I was coming face to face with a very knotty Jewish problem in my volunteer work, and wondering where to turn for help. As co-president of the board of the ARK, a Jewish social services agency in Chicago, I was part of a group trying to figure out how to cut the agency's budget without fatally undermining its ability to serve the Chicago area's neediest Jews. At a time of increasing need and shrinking funding, how were we to confront budget shortfalls in a way that was consistent with both our mission and Jewish law? Which types of tzedakah, which programs were most critical to the well-being of our clients? Which ones were given highest priority by our Sages? Which ones meant the most to donors and the wider community? And which ones would be fatally compromised by even a small cut in funding? *There Shall Be No Needy* addresses these questions and more, in a brave, lucid and learned style. Jacobs asks how American Jews might engage in the effort to work for peace and justice in a fully Jewish context, using both halakhah (Jewish law) and aggadah (Jewish narrative), and she insists that the traditional distinction between the two interferes with the ability to see how Jewish ethical and legal wisdom exists in both genres. *There Shall Be No Needy* gets deep into policy, and wades rather fearlessly into statistical arcana, without succumbing to dry wonk-speak or lofty rabbinic sermonizing. It promotes Jewish literacy by envisioning "the emergence of a Judaism that views ritual observance, study, and engagement in the world as an integrated whole." The result is a work that's both inspiring and edifying, written by someone with uncommon good sense and a fine education to boot. It arrives at a time when the American Jewish proclivity for civic engagement is confronted with its own funding crises and with intractable and increasingly complex issues, and, as Jacobs unflinchingly points out, a tendency to advocate for change under the banner of Jewish values without a fully realized understanding of what those values are. This isn't to say that *There Shall Be No Needy* is a flawless book. It indulges the Jewish propensity for cerebration, preferring to address problems through legislation, "debate," "discussion" of "policy questions," harnessing the energies of Jewish "community organizers, public policy experts, legislators and government officials." It would be refreshing, and not at all inconsistent with Jewish law, for Jews committed to social justice to create rather than simply advocate or agitate for change, to do rather than simply discuss. It would also be fitting and proper for the social justice progress to include the wisdom and the work of Jewish developers, builders, craftsmen and

tradesmen. They do exist, and they do build, invent, make, repair and fashion the physical as well as the intellectual environment. Their propensity for action can be harnessed to the advocacy, legislative and policy discussions, moving Jewish action from the purely conceptual to the active and constructive realms. The book suffers, too, from an idealism occasionally so lofty that it strays too far from the factual, or the possible. For example, she views the debate on immigration as beginning with maintaining "the dignity of individuals." Borders, however, are necessary first and foremost for the maintenance of a nation's security, and Rabbi Jacobs neglects to address immigration in light of this significant and growing concern. What's more, my Inner Agnostic cannot help but be irked by Jacobs' statement that in being a major cause of today's affordable housing crisis, "the federal government . . . has a responsibility to do teshuvah [repentance]." I must give the rabbi credit: she herself notes that we "do not usually talk about institutions or governments doing teshuvah." And Rabbi Jacobs' focus on the housing issue is both pertinent and prescient: this book was written before our sub-prime mortgage meltdown, and if ever there was a government that needed to do teshuvah, it's ours. But I'm from Illinois, and I'm just glad if my government abandons the felonious and retreats to the merely Machiavellian. I can see changes in the course of policy, but to call it teshuvah casts the government as one great, big sinner, careening into debt and debauchery: a monolithic apikuris headed for a reckoning; not a Jewish individual or institution, and yet held to Jewish standards. And although a disciplined and sensitive researcher and writer, Rabbi Jacobs makes the occasional unsupported assertion that casts doubt on entire arguments. To say, for example, that the federal government has ignored the need for affordable housing and made it impossible for private builders to profit from the construction of it, is simply not true. The Low Income Housing Tax Credit, a policy innovation included in the Tax Reform Act of 1986, has facilitated the construction of approximately 1.5 million units of affordable housing since its inception, putting plenty of developers' kids through college debt-free. She promotes policies some of whose practical consequences could unleash capitalism's appetite for self-destruction. She says, for example, that "in accordance with the assumptions of Ramban and Rambam, we can say that the wages set by a community should be sufficient for a person to support himself or herself, and on a single job with a forty-hour work week." With all due respect to two of the greatest Jewish sages, their ideas, when applied to free-market capitalism, could heal the world, or they could produce runaway inflation, massive unemployment and outsourcing on an unprecedented scale, depending on how universally and how quickly they were applied. Rabbi Jacobs notes that a number of municipalities have passed living wage ordinances; a quick online search revealed that most studies show that living wage ordinances have had, or would have, a beneficial or, at worst, negligible effect

on communities adopting such ordinances. Citing these studies, and proposing practical frameworks and timetables for change, might turn the book into more of a policy brief than a manifesto, but it would also lend more support to the author's arguments. *There Shall Be No* Needy's greatest contribution is in the author's reimagining of *tikkun olam*. In this quintessentially rabbinic feat, the author weaves together four strands of Jewish text -- the *Aleinu* prayer's call to destroy impurities; the midrashic interpretation of *tikkun olam* as referring to creation of a sustainable social order; the rabbinic application of *tikkun olam* to amending laws that could foment chaos; and the kabbalistic belief that individual actions affect the whole world - to arrive at a vision for a just and sustainable social order. In such an order, Jacobs says, an individual's actions and a government's constant self-adjustments maintain a course that steer the whole world in a healing direction. Rabbi Jacobs' undertaking is a noble and noteworthy one. As someone with semicha from the Jewish Theological Seminary, along with an MA in Talmud and Rabbinics from the same institution and an MS in Urban Affairs from Hunter College, she is uniquely qualified to reinforce the Jewish social justice movement with a Jewish literacy both heartfelt and intellectually grounded.

*There Shall Be No* Needy gently confronts both the lack of Jewish literacy along the battlements of the Jewish social justice movement and the lack of civic engagement, from a Jewish perspective, on the part of many other American Jewish movements and communities. It shows a command of Jewish sources, history and public policy that puts Rabbi Jacobs at the forefront of American Jewish leadership. And it carries the deepest and most textually grounded meanings of *tikkun olam* to the forefront of American Jewish life. Realizing that "the rich Jewish tradition of law and narrative must be lived in the world," Jacobs has made it her mission to understand how the elasticity and interpretability of Jewish text must be applied to pressing and constantly changing issues in contemporary society. It's a mission that, for Jews, became approachable only relatively recently in our history: Jewish law has historically avoided grappling with civil law because Jews were for millennia separated from often hostile host cultures. Any encounter with civil law was almost sure to be an unhappy one. The most Jewish communities could do, as Rabbi Jacobs points out, was adapt Jewish law to the law of the land, following "the Talmudic principle *dina d'malkhuta dina* - the law of the land is the law." The question that looms behind her book is how one builds and sustains a meaningful and authentic Jewish identity without retreating from modernity. Jacobs' solution combines increasing Jewish literacy with a tireless effort to heal the dysfunctions and deteriorations in American society and governance. *There Shall Be No* Needy recognizes a unique, and perhaps fleeting, opportunity: the chance for American Jews to embrace social action as a way to repair the nation's tattered social fabric while reinvigorating Jewish identity and deepening Jewish knowledge.

There's never been a moment quite like it. Rabbi Jacobs has seized it." --Zeek.net, April 23, 2009

--This text refers to the Hardcover edition.

In *There Shall be No Needy* Rabbi Jill Jacobs poses some of the most relevant and provocative questions of our day: Who are the poor? What is adequate housing? Why is more than one out of every hundred adults in the US in prison? What is our obligation to pursue justice for all? What is the government's role in ensuring basic human rights? What I found most enlightening is her historical perspective, illuminated through Scripture, parables, and Jewish texts, which she pairs with current facts, statistics and analysis leading to a very cogent argument for policy changes. Rabbi Jacobs leaves the reader with three principles that resonate all religious traditions and lay a foundation for our efforts toward social justice: "the fundamental dignity of human life; the commitment to lessening disparities of money or power; and the mutual responsibility between the community and the individual." (p. 214) Sue Cipolle, author of *Service-Learning and Social Justice: Engaging Students in Social Change*

A well written discussion of Jewish law and tradition and what it says about important current social policy issues. The discussion makes clear that Jewish law and tradition are relevant today in these areas. Highly recommended!

This book is a smart, serious look at traditions of social justice in Judaism and what they can teach us about living an ethical life today. I liked it because it's not just for religious scholars and not just for activists - it's for anyone interested in understanding Jewish ways of thinking about our responsibility to our communities. If you have ever been unsure about whether/how Judaism is relevant to the challenges we face in today's global society, this book might have some answers for you.

This is a terrific book! For Jews, the connection with social justice seems almost automatic... this book helps us to understand where those connections originate. Rabbi Jacobs links social justice ideas to Jewish texts and other core ideas in Judaism. This book is enriching and inspirational!

This timely, beautifully-written book is an essential addition to any bookshelf. Combining Jewish law and tradition with contemporary social justice efforts, Rabbi Jacobs' voice is a new and welcome addition to the conversation.

The books all arrived in great condition, but they took longer than expected to arrive due to the large order. Notification should have been sent advising that the large order would take longer to ship.

There is nothing more nauseating than left wing do-gooders-run for the hills when you hear the words social justice and human rights. The good rabbi needs to apply her Occupy Wall Street mentality to the black murderous streets of Chicago. Or perhaps anywhere in Africa. Or maybe the Middle East. And tell her to spend all of her own money in her pursuit of "policy change". I am pretty sure Rabbi Jill has not affected my life in the least.

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