

At my synagogue in Maidenhead we do meals for the homeless every week.

Not long ago, a chap called Iscar came on a particularly cold day - at first we thought he was drunk.

It was only 20 minutes later, when we had been hand-feeding him with soup, and he was back to his normal state, we realised he was not drunk, just freezing.

By the way, I asked one of the other helpers how old Iscar was – and he replied “hard to tell – he’s so weatherbeaten he could be anywhere between 40 and 65”..and it’s really not good when a 40 year old can look 65

Another regular at our lunches is John, who used to manage a small factory before experiencing a frightenly quick downward spiral you may have seen too:

...in which someone loses their job, falls behind on the mortgage and within weeks find themselves sleeping on park benches

And it will be no surprise to you that the number of people attending our lunches has risen over the last 4 years....in fact we have linked up with local churches doing the same thing on different days and since then, we have given out over 380,000 meals.

What a terrible indictment that figure is just for one town – covering both those who are poor, and others who are starving in 21st century Britain - something has gone terribly wrong.

To be honest, I don't know who I pity more amongst our regular guests: those like Shirley who turn up without family or home aged 55...and feel they are on the scrapheap with no way back

...or those like Darren who turn up without family or home aged 19....far too young to be overwhelmed by life.

Either way, it 's not just physical hunger but they are also starved of any hope for the future.

And I can hear another regular who he told me how a few weeks ago he'd gone to Tesco's just before closing time - when they reduce their stock to clear it - and he'd picked up a piece of steak for just 50p – took it to his bedsit, but became so despondent about what might happen the next week, that he threw it away

There are certain hungers that are deeper than hunger.

But today isn't just about the problems, but also the solutions...and Tzelem and the call for social justice means not just helping individuals but changing structures in society – either to prevent situations developing in the first place or to ameliorate existing conditions.

So let me make a proposal: a Good Samaritans Law that does two things

1st – over-rides current legislation that is intended to be helpful but actually impedes: such as Supermarkets who believe they will be sued if they give food to charities, past the "use by" date (even though it's still perfectly safe) ... or new food regulations regarding allergies, which are so onerous it may mean we have to stop the sandwich run for the homeless.....or laws that prevent those who want to cook at home for us and freeze itall of which are designed to protect the vulnerable but in reality do even greater harm to those who don't have food in the 1st place.

2nd – the Good Samaritans Law would bypass over-cautious concerns about data protection – as when a local hospital wanted to discharge one of the homeless people. who had no clothes and nowhere to go. We wanted to pick him up, make sure he was clothed and fed, and give him a sleeping bag.

They refused to tell him we wanted to speak to him, because we were not family. They also did not ask his permission for them to speak to us because they were worried whether he had the mental capacity to give them a correct answer. So, what happened? - they ended up sending him out on the streets with no protection at all. Politically correct stupidity

Now whether a Good Samaritans Law is the best route or whether other formats are preferable – that's detail to be worked out – but the point of Tzelem is about making things happen and bringing change for the better.

And we need your help to do so.

Rabbi Dr Jonathan Romain
Maidenhead Synagogue