

# POLITICAL IMPERATIVES

Seven activists brief us on what to do next

## RESCUE vs. REPAIRING THE WORLD

Rabbi Jane Kanarek

**T**he Talmud (B. *Berakhot* 10a) tells us a short story about Beruriah, a powerful woman who refuses to accept the world as it is. Some bandits live in the neighborhood of Rabbi Meir. They cause him so much sorrow that Rabbi Meir, Beruriah's husband, prays for their deaths. Beruriah chastises him for his behavior. Correcting her husband's interpretation of Psalms 104:35, Beruriah teaches: Does the book of Psalms say, "May sinners disappear?" No! Instead it says, "May sins disappear (Psalms 104:35)." And, even more, the end of the verse says, "And evildoers will be no more." Instead of praying for the bandits' deaths, Beruriah tells Rabbi Meir that he should pray that they repent from their evil ways. If the bandits repent, "evildoers will be no more." Rabbi Meir follows Beruriah's instructions, and the bandits repent. Through her ability to read Scripture and her willingness to speak out, Beruriah has saved the lives of the bandits, taught her husband about compassion, and lessened the amount of evil in the world.

Jewish tradition presents us with two modes of healing suffering: *tikkun olam* and *hesed*. *Tikkun olam*, often translated as repairing the world, can also be translated as recalibrating the world. It is a view that the world is out of balance, and that its very order, even its legal order, needs to be modified. *Tikkun olam* involves looking at the systemic needs of the wider community and trying to create a better, but not necessarily perfect, future. *Hesed*, often translated as compassion or loving-kindness, means looking at the needs of individuals. It involves focusing on the immediate needs of those suffering, trying to alleviate moment-to-moment pain.

Although Beruriah's story does not use the words *tikkun olam* or *hesed*, it teaches us about acting in both of these modes. As women,

we have often been associated with the mode of *hesed*, private acts of compassion. *Hesed* is quieter, more hidden. However, Beruriah's story encourages us to speak out about systemic injustice as well as act with compassion. It would have been easy for Beruriah to agree with her husband, to imagine Meir's suffering ending through the bandits' deaths. Yet, she does not comfort her husband by sympathizing over his misfortune and agreeing that these bandits deserve to die. Instead, she takes a route of *hesed* and of *tikkun olam*. She envisions a world where these bandits have become good. She speaks sharply and unhesitatingly, teaching her husband how to act in a different voice, a voice that Rabbi Meir is unable to see without her instruction. Pray, she tells him, for a different kind of world. Have compassion for those who act wrongly. As the story teaches, his prayer is effective and the bandits change their ways.

While our prayers alone will not change the world, Beruriah tells us that in order to recalibrate the world we will need to learn to imagine our society's possibilities anew. We will need to raise our voices, sharply and strongly, in order to advocate for these visions. What can our world be? What systemic injustices do we need to correct and how? How do we need to learn to treat others with compassion as we try to change our society? How can re-thinking our Jewish tradition teach us to act with *hesed* and *tikkun olam*? Beruriah teaches us the importance of creative and outspoken action, action that treats individuals with kindness as we simultaneously change our world. ■

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# TEETERING ON THE BRINK OF POVERTY

Stefanie Greenberg

**P**eople frequently talk about the poor, people who have incomes so low that they are barely scraping by and need government assistance for food, housing, medicine and other basic life needs. But what about those who make a little more—just enough money to survive above the poverty line—and thus are ineligible for government help? These are people who, if they lose one paycheck, can't pay their rent or buy food for the week. In New York State there are over 3 million households whose economic status is “near poor,” which means they are hovering just above the poverty line, which in 2007 was \$21,027 for a family of four with two children under 18. Many of the near-poor are known as “working poor,” earning too much to qualify for government benefits, but not enough to pay for their basic necessities. Many of the working poor would have considered themselves middle-class before they lost their jobs, or their health deteriorated, or a spouse died.

While poverty is a hot issue these days, the issue of near-poverty attracts less notice. Considering that 56% of all the Jewish near-poor are female, this is a big issue for Jewish women. Women make up a large majority of the near-poor population for a variety of reasons: many Jewish women who are married do not work, or they work in a job that supplements a partner's income but would not alone be sufficient to support a family. If that partner's income is lost through job layoff, injury, divorce or death, many women will not have the skills or monetary resources to recover. Women in these situations, who have never dealt with their finances, must not only care for themselves, their homes and their dependents, now must also handle the budget and pay bills. Furthermore, many of these women cannot receive help from the government because they don't fall below the federal poverty guidelines, even though they do not make enough money to survive and support a family.

Education and advocacy can help. For example, the current method for setting the poverty line is based on an outdated formula from 1960 that assumes households use one-third of their

income for food. Congress has the power to “raise the floor” of poverty by changing how the poverty line is determined, and

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you can press for this change with elected representatives. But because entrenched political positions may mean this alteration will be slow to arrive, consider other ways to get involved too. With skyrocketing food costs and an economy in recession, local food banks are feeling a major pinch. Organizations like Mazon ([mazon.org](http://mazon.org)) fund food banks across the country and around the world, and are always looking for donations and volunteers. More systemically, support legislation that helps protect the near-poor from sliding into poverty. Lobby your representative to support paid sick leave via the Healthy Families Act (H.R. 1843, S. 910), or talk up the need to push through the Child Support Protection Act of 2007, still in committee in Congress. In addition to New York City's Metropolitan Council on Jewish Poverty, organizations such as the Jewish Council for Public Affairs and the Economic Policy Institute supply current information about these and other pieces of legislation that can help lift people from the margins of poverty. ■

*Stefanie Greenberg was an AmeriCorps VISTA volunteer at the Metropolitan Council on Jewish Poverty, and became the organization's Volunteer Department Manager. [sgreenberg@metcouncil.org](mailto:sgreenberg@metcouncil.org).*

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## A CRISIS FOR CAREGIVERS

Dara Silverman

**F**or Jewish women, like all women across the world, one of the most crucial issues at hand is how we care for ourselves, our families and our communities. This burden falls most directly on immigrant women workers, but as women and Jews we represent our Jewish values by supporting and creating programs that improve wages, benefits and basic dignity. In the coming U.S. presidential election, confronting the problems of work/family balance and the crisis around care-giving must be a top priority.

We are facing a “care crisis” (as historian, journalist and Longview Institute senior fellow Ruth Rosen and others have pointed out) in which increasing numbers of women have joined the formal workforce, leaving the tasks of primary caregiver for their children, parents and partners more fraught than ever.

Individuals continue to bear the burden of balancing meaningful and fulfilling work in the world with meeting the needs of children and aging parents.

Most people experience this crisis in the privacy of their own homes and workplaces, a compartmentalization which falsely frames the need as individual, rather than the result of systemic problems. In reality, our neighbors both locally and globally are struggling against the same negative impacts of bad government policies. The defunding and privatization of necessary social services has shifted the burden of care-taking from the public sphere to the private. At the same time, the U.S., unlike other industrialized nations, provides no guaranteed support systems (stipends for children, paid paternity leave, etc.)

Like the midwives Shifra and Puah, who brought baby Moses into this world and conspired with his sister Miriam to protect him, caregivers can be organized and powerful. The experiences of primarily immigrant women of color, who fill the service sector across the U.S., are largely invisible. Like our Jewish ancestors who worked in domestic service when they first came to this country, caregivers today are regularly denied dignity, respect, fair pay and basic benefits.

There *are* alternative models of governmental policies that value care and thus create sustainable care-giving experiences for families and care workers. These include new legislation, such as the New York State Domestic Workers Bill of Rights, one example of what is being proposed in states across the U.S. to include domestic care workers in basic labor protections, from which they have been exempt. At the same time, we need to support the development of affordable housing, child care subsidies and universal health care. This is a movement to support all women to work up to their full potential with dignity and support.

For a detailed take on what to do when you are hiring household help, look at “Who Cleans Your House,” Lilith Summer 2006. ■

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## A ROOF OF ONE'S OWN

Catherine Schneider

**W**e all know there is a crisis of homelessness in America — indeed, the National Law Center on Homelessness and Poverty estimates that 3.5 million people will experience homelessness in a given year—but most of us view this problem as an unsolvable social ill, relegated in our minds to social action days

and sporadic food drives. But the dramatic rise in homelessness is *not* the result of an unavoidable turn of events. It is caused by the lack of affordable housing coupled with economic, social or physical vulnerability, and these factors affect women especially. Over the past three decades, a deliberate set of policies have gutted housing development and assistance in the United States. These cuts mean that

there are two million homeless individuals at any given point during a year. Who are these people? Women and their children are the fastest growing category of homeless people today.

In the United States, over 30 million households face significant problems with housing: cost, physical inadequacy and overcrowding, according to Habitat for Humanity. Women and their children

suffer most. These families lack food, health coverage and transportation. They are one crisis away from homelessness; a medical emergency, change in family structure, domestic violence or job loss can drive these vulnerable households directly into the street.

Many countries, including Scotland, South Africa and France (as well as the Universal Declaration of Human Rights), recognize housing as a right, the legal basis for which was first established by the United Nations in 1948. Nations that recognize this right are then obligated to work to gradually guarantee housing through a mix of government and market forces. But the United States has in fact reduced or curtailed federal housing assistance in

allowing people to live on the street. On Yom Kippur we read the words of Isaiah as he channels the fury of God: “Is this the kind of fast I have chosen, only a day for a man to humble himself?... Is it not to share your food with the hungry and to provide the poor wanderer with shelter...!”

Here are five steps you can take to affirm that every woman and family has shelter and safety.

**1. Fight NIMBYism.** (NIMBY stands for Not In My Back Yard.) Support the creation of low-income housing and treatment facilities in your neighborhood.

**2. Ask your elected official** for increased wage and income supports to keep pace with rising housing costs and

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every administration since 1980. These cuts, along with the destruction of affordable housing and a rise in rental costs that outpaces inflation, have created a housing crisis that leads growing numbers of women and children over the precipice into homelessness.

Current U.S. “strategy”—temporary shelter, emergency-room stays, jails and foster care—actually costs more than providing safe, long-term affordable housing and preventative services to vulnerable populations like women with families.

Beyond dollars, there’s the unbearable moral cost of

more funding for rent supplement programs.

**3. Call upon Congress** to develop and fully fund a national housing policy that addresses the deficiencies of the housing market to produce sufficient, affordable housing.

**4. Acknowledge that temporary shelters** are only the first step in ending homelessness. Support the creation of permanent supportive housing.

**5. Push your local representatives,** your city and your state to pass resolutions recognizing housing as a human right. ■

*Catherine Schneider is a member of the Wexner Heritage Program.*

## TREATING STRANGERS JUSTLY

Rachel Tiven

**W**hile cleaning my kitchen for Pesach this year, I took a break to email a friend. Because I run Immigration Equality, a non-profit organization that provides advice and representation to lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender and HIV-positive immigrants, friends often ask me for immigration help. This one wanted advice for two young women—both graduates of local high schools who had come from Mexico as children. What could they do to get out of legal limbo and improve their lives? My reply: “Nothing.”

United States’ immigration policy has created a class of people who, although they work hard, pay their taxes, and raise American children, will live and die as legal non-persons. Many do messy, dangerous jobs—in construction, food processing, and childcare, for starters—with insufficient safeguards from their employers or the law. Combine hard, dangerous work with the permanent denial of legal rights and it doesn’t have to be Passover for us to see the parallels to slavery.

The comprehensive immigration reform packages proposed in the U.S. Congress in 2006 and 2007 failed to pass after more than a year of debate. Many conservatives attacked the bills as too lenient for offering a restrictive, glacially paced route to citizenship for women like the ones my friend described, while liberals refused to accept the numerous concessions Congress sought in exchange. The legislation ultimately died. In the process, the vicious public debate reminded the world of America’s xenophobic streak.

Nearly a year after the left held out for better and the right held out for worse, the result is... worse. Anti-immigrant members of Congress have continued to push their agenda—more walls and patrols at the Mexican border, more jails for immigration detainees, more raids at factories—without offering any solution to people who have built their lives here or to their employers. This “enforcement-only” strategy raises few complaints: immigrants proved to be such an easy target for bigotry that legislators fear looking “soft” if they oppose it. Yes, millions of people blanketed the streets of major cities from Dallas to Chicago, and from Washington DC to Des Moines to San Diego in the March and April of 2006 to demand justice and equality—but only some of them can vote.

Meanwhile, disturbing trends in immigration law persist, including:

**The escalating deportation for minor crimes.** These penalties are retroactive, so a bar fight broken up by the police 20 years ago, which had no immigration consequences at the time, can cost someone his or her green card today (a situation faced by a former client of mine).

**Increasingly aggressive raids by immigration officials;** tactics include rounding up employees at their workplaces and separating them from young children with no notice; or entering private homes under false pretenses, without a warrant.

**Lack of access to counsel.** My client was lucky to have a lawyer, as immigrants have no right to counsel in immigration court even if they are incarcerated and facing permanent expulsion.

**National I.D. cards for workers.** Proposals for an “employer verification system” are hot in Congress, where they look like an easy “get tough” measure. They’re far from cheap, however, with an estimated four percent error rate, ensuring that American citizens, legal permanent residents and work-authorized immigrants will be wrongly accused and likely fired.

Judaism binds our treatment of “outsiders” to a hyper-consciousness of the fact that outsider-ness is entirely situational. “When a

*ger* [variously translated as stranger, sojourner, immigrant] dwells with you in your land, do not oppress him. The *ger* who dwells with you should be like one of your citizens; love him like yourself, for you were *gerim* in the land of Egypt.” (Lev. 19:33-34) If we have become insiders in the United States, we are obligated to act for the benefit of others, both passively (“Do not oppress [them]”) and actively (“Love [them] like yourself”). ■

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## IT'S STILL THE SUPREME COURT

Nancy Ratzan

It's the Supreme Court, Stupid!” That's the button a lot of women wore in 2000, and it hasn't gone out of style. In the heat of the recent primaries, the Supreme Court just recently ruled that an Indiana law requiring voters to produce a photo ID at the polling place was not an undue burden, although we know acquiring such an ID if you are, for example, a mother working two jobs, caring for a family, and just barely getting by is a hardship akin to a poll tax. The Supreme Court's apparent inability to comprehend this truth is a reflection of how far from the American reality this Court has strayed. And last summer, in a 5-4 decision, the Court disregarded decades of precedent by interpreting the 1964 Equal Employment Opportunity

Act to deprive Lily Ledbetter of back pay for ongoing sex discrimination.

We have already had a preview of what the next years could bring in the clearest comparison likely to occur outside the pages of a textbook. In 2000, a majority of the court, led by Justice Sandra Day O'Connor, ruled in *Stenberg v. Carhart* that a Nebraska law attempting to ban a particular abortion procedure was unconstitutional because it lacked an exception allowing the banned procedure when necessary to preserve a woman's health.

In 2007, with the resignation of Justice O'Connor and the addition of Chief Justice Roberts and Justice Alito, the Supreme Court ruled 5-4 in *Gonzales v. Carhart* that a nearly identical federal law was constitutional. It's now clear that a majority of this new Court no longer upholds the premise that the regulation of abortion by the state or federal government must protect the mother's health.

Abortion is not the only issue at stake. Of particular interest to Jewish women and others who value the separation of religion and state is the interpretation of the first amendment clauses banning the “establishment of religion” or “prohibiting the free exercise thereof.” A conference convened in April by President Bush at the White House highlights the ongoing struggle in this arena. Its express purpose was to seek ways to fund faith-based schools with taxpayer dollars. The promotion of religious statuary, plaques and celebrations by government at all levels is worrisome enough, but federal funding for faith-based programs that need not observe federal anti-discrimination laws, and whose message is inherently religious, is in many ways even more troubling.

These are critical issues that will likely come before the Supreme Court in the next few years. Can we rely on the Court to hold firm on protecting the rights of minorities and the right to be free from government control of over matters of personal choice? This is the question for us, the voters, as we make our choices in November.

There are so many **critical**  
issues for **Jewish** women.

Replacing Sandra Day O'Connor, the fifth vote in many cases involving women's lives, has put critical focus on the remaining swing justice,

Anthony Kennedy. Justices like Kennedy used to occupy the right wing of the court—now he is barely in the middle. Those four justices who embrace the jurisprudence of the Supreme Court that brought us *Brown v. Board of Education* and *Roe v. Wade* average 75 years of age, with none younger than 69. The others average 63 years, with none older than 72. There is little doubt that the next president will have the chance to make key appointments critical to saving the

hard-won gains made since the landmark civil rights case *Brown v. Board of Education* of 1954. Like President Bush's nominees, judges in their 50's, the next president's picks for life time seats on the highest court in the U.S. will exert influence over our people's rights for another 25 years or more after January 20, 2009. Women's stake in this inarguable fact is incalculable. Perhaps we need a new run of the "It's the Supreme Court, Stupid!" buttons? Because it is! ■

*Nancy Ratzan, president of the National Council of Jewish Women, is an attorney and was chair of BenchMark: NCJW's Campaign to Save Roe, educating and activating the grassroots on judicial nominations.*

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## GLORIA'S TOP 5 WAYS TO FIGHT FOR REPRODUCTIVE HEALTH, RIGHTS AND JUSTICE

Gloria Feldt

**B**ut haven't we already fought those battles?"

I hear this question often when I'm speaking to women's groups. Since I started my own activism for reproductive rights and health in 1974, one year after *Roe v. Wade* legalized abortion, I sympathize.

Yet the recent U. S. Supreme Court decision in *Gonzales v. Carhart* put reproductive rights, health and justice squarely on the table once again. The Court stripped away the primacy of women's health as a constitutional right. Congress and states were given permission to practice medicine (on women) without a license. The notion that women are intelligent human beings with moral capacity to make their own decisions about childbearing was thrown out the window by the majority opinion.

Justice Ginsburg's dissent nailed it: "This way of thinking reflects ancient notions about women's place in the family and under the Constitution, ideas that have long since been discredited."

Still, in this critical election year, *Gonzales v. Carhart* could be the jolt America needs to start setting a new table on which to secure the human right to reproductive rights, health, and justice for all women for all time. Really—it can be done if we take these five steps:

**1. Frame the big picture in a fresh way.** You know as I do that abortion isn't about abortion. It's about whether women will have an equal place in society. Jewish women have often led the way in changing those ancient notions about women's place in society that Justice Ginsburg speaks of.

**2. Remember that just because legislators can pass abortion bans doesn't mean they must pass abortion bans.** This is a grassroots organizing battle now. The courts are not likely to protect us any more. The Prevention First Act is the centerpiece of our table. This bill should also be filed in all 50 states, even where it has no chance of passage, so we can drive the debate anew.

**3. Build the human rights basis** for the legal rights, moral framework and practical access to birth control, comprehensive sex education, abortion and economic justice so women can make decisions freely about whether to beget, bear, or not bear a child. For starters, demand that Congress pass the Freedom of Choice Act. Simultaneously, work for similar legislation state-by-state.

**4. Watch your mouthpiece.** When the media report fairly and accurately on these issues, give them a pat. When they don't, criticize them. Write a letter to the editor once a month. Call talk shows. Post on blogs.

**5. Tell politicians what policies we want.** Tell them at town meetings, party caucuses and one-on-one. Ask specific policy questions, then ask the follow up questions so they can't get off the hook by giving general answers. Remind them you know elections matter and you'll reward or punish them at the ballot box. Bleak as things might look, it's our table to set with the agenda of our choice. ■

*Abortion isn't about abortion. It's about whether women will have an equal place in society.*

*Gloria Feldt is the author of The War on Choice: the Right-Wing Attack on Women's Rights and how to Fight Back and former president of Planned Parenthood Federation of America. She grew up Jewish in small Texas towns and says that experience shaped her commitment to tikkun olam. [www.gloriafeldt.com](http://www.gloriafeldt.com).*