

I recently had the opportunity to visit an amazing place called Community First Village, just outside of Austin. I went as part of a group of Corpus clergy and city leaders to see how this program was working to help the homeless in Austin. The main aspects of this program are that it provides tiny homes for homeless people at a very low cost, provides opportunities for them to earn their keep (such as a car shop and a community garden), and perhaps even more important, the founders of the community realized that to truly help the homeless of Austin they needed not just to help them physically but to provide for their emotional needs too. They realized that they needed to listen to them rather than judge them and they needed to prioritize providing community and connection for the residents, referred to as Neighbors.

This approach reflects both Jewish values and the realities of homelessness in America. It reflects Jewish values in focusing, as does the Jewish law of tzedakah (charity), on the significance of not just giving money to those in need but giving dignity. This is a theme that appears throughout rabbinic discussion on charity that tells us that helping the poor is not just about helping them materially but helping them to experience the dignity that is due all human beings, made as we are in the image of G-d. And it is in keeping with what most experts now know about the plight of the homeless, that most people are not homeless because of laziness or because they have chosen to be but because they are dealing with serious underlying issues of mental illness or addiction. For people in that situation providing a place where they can have shelter and community is the most effective way of providing them a life of dignity and meaning.

And it is also increasingly clear that it is the most effective way of dealing with the problem of homelessness both for the homeless and for everyone else. Far too often we try to deal with the problem of homelessness by moving homeless people somewhere out of sight and out of mind, but not only does that not help them, it generally doesn't help solve the problem. People who have been moved will just move somewhere else in the city and will often move back to where they started eventually. It is becoming increasingly evident that an alternative kind of approach is better for everyone involved.

I was inspired by the Community First Village, as were the other clergy and city leaders who were with us. It is a powerful reminder that human beings, no matter how rich or poor, have the same needs for security, community and connection. That is universal. And it is a reminder that when we stop judging others and start listening and treating others with dignity we can open our minds to so much more and make the world so much better.

There are plans to build something like this village in Corpus and I hope we take the opportunity as a congregation and as individuals to work to make this a reality. And once it is a reality in years to come there will be much to do and many opportunities to engage in the work of Tikkun Olam as part of such a project. I hope others will be as inspired as I was to be part of such a project of helping not only give shelter but dignity and meaning to so many in need.

Rabbi Ilan Emanuel