

# Poverty Need Not Lead to Terrorism

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The November 4, 2004 issue of the *Harvard University Gazette* reported the results of a Harvard study conducted by Associate Professor of Public Policy Alberto Abadie dealing with the causes of terrorism. The article, entitled "Freedom squelches terrorist violence," stated

Before analyzing the data, Abadie believed it was a reasonable assumption that terrorism has its roots in poverty, especially since studies have linked civil war to economic factors. However, once the data was corrected for the influence of other factors studied, Abadie said he found no significant relationship between a nation's wealth and the level of terrorism it experiences.

I would like to point out that not only is poverty not a root cause of terrorism, but that one can be living in the most dire straits and still accomplish the most positive of things.

Rav Elazar Menachem Man Schach, zt"l, joined the *kibbutz* (study group) in Ponevezh at the age of eleven. Despite his youth and lack of financial resources, Rav Schach was determined to study Torah, no matter what hardships he had to endure. On pages 23 to 25 of the recently released book, **Harav Schach, Conversations** (compiled by Rabbi Asher Berman) one reads:

Rav Schach spoke of the tremendous personal difficulties he experienced at that time. For many months at a time he ate nothing but a few pieces of stale bread in the morning, indulging in a special "treat" of a glass of milk once a week. For Shabbos meals, he was ashamed to seek out a regular host among the townsfolk, whom he did not know, so he always arranged to avoid eating the two Shabbos meals with the same family. The people in the town were so poor that Rav Schach did not want to burden them by seeking hospitality for Shalosh Seudos at all, and he instead "satiated himself" with words of Torah.

"Those were the years of my childhood, years of rapid physical growth," Ray Schach related, "and I found that I had quickly outgrown my shoes that I had brought to the yeshiva. Not having any money whatsoever, however, I had no choice but to keep wearing my old shoes, which were

already several sizes too small, until my toes became swollen and painful from the pressure of the shoe (an ailment from which Rav Schach suffered subsequently for some time). In honor of my bar-mitzvah I decided to treat myself to 'new shoes' — I had a shoemaker cut off the ends of the old pair and add a patch to them so that my toes would no longer be squeezed!"

Rav Schach's ordeals did not end there, however, as he continued to relate. During the First World War he hid out in the *ezras nashim* of one of the synagogues in Slutzk, afraid that he might be pressed into military service if he were seen by the authorities. He lived there for a half a year, during which time his entire daily diet consisted of a morsel of bread and some soup brought to him by a righteous woman, who had noticed this young yeshiva *bachur* hiding out in the shul. In that *ezras nashim* he studied day and night, without interruption, unaware of the fate of his family members.

He had neither a winter coat, nor even woolen socks to help warm him during the harsh Russian winter. Embarrassed to turn for help to the residents of the town, and not wanting to make himself dependent upon the grace of others, he laundered his only shirt in the sink that was just outside the *beis midrash*, and stood shivering in the cold until it dried and could be worn again. He would use that same sink for washing up. When Ray Isser Zalman Meltzer (Rosh Yeshiva in Slutzk at the time) one day noticed the boy and took him in to his yeshiva, the first thing he did was take him to the barber, for he had not had a haircut for so long. The barber had to soften the boy's hair with kerosene in order to cut it!

Even after this, when he lived in the yeshiva, he suffered from poverty and deprivation. The collar of his only shirt became so blackened that, embarrassed to wear it the way it was, he would fold the collar inwards, one fold after another. "In honor of the Shabbos" he would turn the shirt inside out. After a time his pants became torn, and, not having the money to pay a tailor to fix them, he tried to stitch them up himself. His efforts at sewing did not meet with much success, however, so he asked a friend who was taller than he to lend him his jacket, which would be just long enough on him to cover the poorly patched hole in the pants. Rav Schach later joked about this incident and remarked, "The Rosh Yeshiva, Rav Isser Zalman, wore a regular, short jacket, while I, his student, went about with a long jacket (usually worn by men of distinction)!"

Despite the fact that he lived in abject poverty, I am certain that the thought of turning to terrorist activities never once entered Rav Schach's mind. Rather than responding to his financial situation with negativism, Rav Schach focused all of his efforts toward Torah study, and he eventually became a *gadol*. With this as an example, can anyone really claim that poverty causes people to perform terrorist acts that kill and maim innocents? It is the warped mindset that

extremists have that leads to these heinous acts, not poverty. We should not let ourselves be fooled by those who claim otherwise. After all, Rav Schach has shown us that one can achieve true greatness no matter how difficult one's situation.