

# CONTACT

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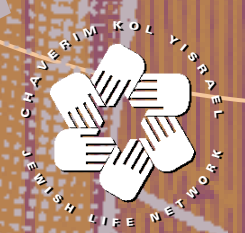
THE JOURNAL OF JEWISH LIFE NETWORK / חברים כל ישראל



# יד ויד

## Jewish Service

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Jewish Life Network is dedicated to strengthening and transforming American Jewry to ensure a flourishing, sustainable community in a fully integrated free society. We seek to revitalize Jewish identity through educational, religious and cultural initiatives that are designed to reach out to all Jews, with an emphasis on those who are on the margins of Jewish life.

*Photographs in this issue appear courtesy of Art Today, C. Garret, Steve Saton, and R.L. Sullivan.*

## Rededicating Ourselves to Service

Jewish life once revolved around service. A hierarchy was established in which the greatest esteem was attached to good deeds that could not be repaid. Since caring for the dead was an example of absolute altruism, membership in burial societies became the highest honor.

But in recent years, as the American Jewish community has become more prosperous, service and volunteerism have receded from prominence as community-defining values. Today the highest honor in the community is awarded less for personal service than for giving money to a Jewish institution. Needless to say, *tzedaka* is a fundamental Jewish ethic, but it was never meant to be a replacement for acts of human service.

In an affluent age, it is easy to blind ourselves to the need for service. But suffering and neediness persist through every age. On a deeper level, it is often when people have satisfied their material needs that they begin thinking of larger issues such as finding meaning and working for the greater good of society. For this reason, now more than ever Judaism can inspire people with its message of service. Indeed, if Judaism is to remain a comprehensive system of ethical conduct, service must return to the forefront of community life. With this in mind, the current issue of *Contact* is devoted to creating a practical and theological framework to mobilize Jewish service in contemporary America.

As part of the surging tide of service work in recent years, American Jews certainly volunteer. Yet service is often expressed not as a reflection of Jewish values, but as a secular commitment to assisting those in need, or as a search for meaning in an avidly materialistic era. Indeed, many Jews devote themselves to non-sectarian service, reasoning that the Jewish community is self-sufficient and that our time should thus be devoted to helping the less fortunate. It is time to articulate a vision that embraces and honors all kinds of service, including acts of *hesed* outside the Jewish community. It happens that in many cases, even the most marginally-affiliated Jews volunteer out of an unspoken connection to their upbringing. We need to bring these connections back to the surface. By fusing essential Jewish values with a contemporary emphasis on community building, we can inspire Jews throughout North America towards a rededication to service, Jewish life and *tikkun olam*.

Eli Valley

## A SPECIAL NOTE TO OUR READERS:

We were putting the finishing touches on this issue of *Contact* when tragedy struck the United States. Although it is impossible to predict where these events will lead our country and the world, the crisis has already summoned a newfound devotion to volunteering. In New York, Washington and throughout the country, the stories are endless: thousands of people have given of themselves in ways that stir the soul. From the long lines of blood donors and rescue volunteers to the social workers who came from out of town to console the bereaved, the United States has been strengthened and sustained by people helping others.

In a time of national upheaval, we have found that service is the lifeblood of civil society. It is the expression of a primal human instinct to unite, to rebuild, and to heal. In this light, the theme of this *Contact* is more pertinent today than ever.

Our thoughts and prayers go out to the victims, their families and friends. As we continue to grieve at a tragedy we are still struggling to absorb, we long for a time of healing, justice and a peaceful future for ourselves and the world.

# COMMUNITY SERVICE LEARNING: Pursuing Jewish Ideals of Compassion and Justice

by JOEL WESTHEIMER

Service learning involves community service activities tied to the academic curriculum. It has strong roots in the progressive philosophy of turn-of-the-century educators like John Dewey, Harold Rugg, and William Kilpatrick, but its widespread popularity is a contemporary phenomenon. A recent study by the National Center for Education Statistics reveals that 83 percent of high schools currently offer community service opportunities (compared with 27 percent in 1984). School-based service learning is among the fastest growing and popular education reforms of the past three decades.

Jewish educators have seen similar renewed passion for tying community experiences to the academic curriculum. There are dozens of Jewish organizations that promote both community service in general and service learning in particular. As an educator who has been involved in both developing and studying service learning programs, I relished this invitation to reflect on the possible links between my own Jewish experience and my fondness for (and reservations about) educational programs that bridge academic work with community action. My exposure to Jewish traditions and, in particular, my thirteen-year involvement with the youth movement, *Hashomer Hatza'ir*, led me to ask: What might a Jewish perspective on service learning offer?

Education that is inextricably bound to improving community life is a deeply embedded Jewish value. Judaism undoubtedly teaches us the critical importance of texts. However, Jewish customs, traditions, and the texts themselves make clear that learning from books alone is insufficient. As Abraham Joshua Heschel pointed out in his book *The Prophets*, Judaism demands participation in the details of everyday life. It is not enough to pray for atonement on Yom Kippur, for example. Ritual acts must be accompanied by one's work and actions in the community.

The Jewish requirement to help repair the

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world is often interpreted as a call for *tzedaka* or charity. But, a second critical aspect of Jewish tradition and experience is an emphasis on the need not only for compassion and charity but also for justice—for addressing root causes of problems and inequity. Judaism teaches that acts of *tzedaka* (charity) and *hesed* (kindness) are not enough if these acts ignore or perpetuate underlying root causes of problems. The notions of *tzedaka*, on the one hand, and *tzedek* (justice) on the other offer a powerful lens through which educators can assess the worth of a variety of service learning activities.

Some of the greatest historical seekers of social justice and change were expressing a profoundly Jewish sensibility: the belief that change is possible and that justice is not some other-worldly concept but an imperative for the here and now. The Jewish tradition is committed to ideals of democracy and basic human rights, to fighting oppression and injustice, and to meaningful community participation in improving society. The fact that a disproportionate percentage of activists in the civil rights movement were Jewish is not a matter of happenstance. Professor Judith Hauptman of the Jewish Theological Seminary notes that the Torah and Talmud both present a clear vision of a just society: “The pages of the Torah resonate with a profound concern for the socially and economically vulnerable segments of society—the poor, the day laborers, the orphans and widows, [and] the resident aliens.” The struggle of the Jewish people to move beyond slavery

is retold *each week* in the Torah readings; it is our common story and our common reference point for our actions on behalf of all peoples. *Tikkun Olam* means to repair the world not simply by being nice to your neighbor but also through a progressive message of change: we were slaves and we overcame our oppression; we know that it is possible to change the world, and we must act in the world to change it on behalf of those who are less powerful.

These profoundly Jewish commitments resonate powerfully with those who hope that service learning can reinvigorate a democratic community. Currently, both within the Jewish community and in the broader education community, volunteerism and charity remain the most common form of service. An emphasis on charity and on acts of kindness (collecting cans for a food drive, cleaning up a local park, etc.) allows the formation of coalitions of community workers, politicians and activists, but prevents deep investigation into solving complex social problems. As the name of the Federal legislation to “Serve America” implies, most service learning programs emphasize altruism and charity, hoping that teaching a personal responsibility to “help others” is the solution to the nation’s problems. This kind of service risks being understood as a kind of noblesse oblige, a private act of kindness performed by the privileged that does little to address underlying causes of inequity and injustice. As Paul Hanna notes in his 1937 book, *Youth Serves the Community*, making Thanksgiving baskets for poor families is important work, but it does little to address “the basic inhibiting influences which perpetuate a scarcity economy in the midst of abundance.” In other words, while engaging students in acts of service might produce George Bush Sr.’s now-famous “thousand points of light,” it might also promote a thousand points of the status quo.

Acts of kindness and of charity are important, but citizenship in a democratic society requires more than civic decency. To repair the world, students have to learn how to create, evaluate, criticize, and change public norms, institutions, and programs. Students need to learn to contribute cans to a food drive, but they also need to learn to question why people are hungry and explore ways to solve structural causes of hunger and homelessness. “It’s like a rowboat,” explained one service learning instructor I observed, “one oar is compassion and the other is justice. If you don’t keep both going, you move in a circle.” Judaism and Jewish ideals of social action can help to reinvigorate the quest among service learning educators for both compassion and justice and ensure that neither is ignored on the road to a better society. 🌸



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*By creating a Jewish framework for all service and incorporating Jewish teachings into the service experience both inside and outside the community, we can inspire a generation of American Jews who would otherwise have no contact with the Jewish spiritual tradition. In this way, service won't replace the traditional forums of Jewish involvement, but complement them and serve as a gateway to more enriched Jewish living.*

—MICHAEL H. STEINHARDT