

# 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 Hatzair*, 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. 🌸



# Sparking a Renewed Jewish Commitment to Service

by RABBI SARA PAASCHE-ORLOW  
and MAGGI G. GAINES

**W**here do Jews stand in relation to service and what might a Jewish commitment to service look like? By reflecting on historical Jewish understandings of service, we hope to gain perspective on the present and the need to rejoin our concepts of God, service, and worship. Such explorations can spark a radical transformation of our social and communal norms.

Historically, prayer involved a physical act: a portion of one's material goods were given as an offering. Individuals could then experience how their sacrifice sustained others — specifically, the priesthood. The ritual sacrifices of the Temple fostered a connection to God and to a greater community that was confirmed and celebrated on the pilgrimage festivals.

Since the destruction of the Temple, the Rabbis of the Talmud succeeded in transforming the Temple services into a system of prayer services and Torah readings for dispersed individuals and communities. For almost two millennia, we have brought our sacrifices in the form of prayer rather than crops.

The Rabbis based the new prayer system on the pattern of activities of the priestly cast. This exploded the traditional hierarchies, as every [male] Jew took on the mantle of daily prayer. In certain ways, this central transformation has succeeded for thousands of years as a crucial historical link for Jewish practice. However, for many modern Jews the analogy is meaningless. The central holy work of our people, which derived from the Temple service to God, is now expressed through the synagogue service. But prayer does not feel like service. To be sure, we use the same language: “How were services today?” “Oh, very nice.” But it falls flat. The cultic practices seem obscure; synagogue worship does not fulfill a sense of service, be it to God, community or humanity.

Is prayer service? Many Jews feel that the recitation of prayer is itself a service to God. In traditional terms, it is a fulfillment of what God has required of us as interpreted and re-constituted by the rabbis. In an essential way, synagogue worship sustains and supports us as a community, but it cannot be the exclusive expression of how we understand our service obligation. Ultimately, if our prayers do not move us to engage the world in constructive and generous ways, the glaring fact of our inaction erodes the meaning of our prayers.

Most modern Jews do not pray out of a traditional sense of obligation, but relate to prayer as a discretionary experience. Prayer is often experienced as a luxury, an

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# THE Partnership FOR SERVICE

**P**artnership for Service is an emerging national Jewish non-profit seeking to increase the number of Jews committed to and involved in service and volunteerism. Traditionally, Jews visited the sick and the homebound and sought creative ways to help meet a wide range of needs. However, in recent decades community needs have become more polarized, work patterns have changed and social work has grown as a profession. As a result, we have become less comfortable as volunteers, and often when we do volunteer we do not connect it with the Jewish tradition.

Launched this Fall, with the support of four initial funding partners — Beginning with Children Foundation, The Charles and Lynn Schusterman Family Foundation, The Joseph and Harvey Meyerhoff Family Charitable Fund, and Jewish Life Network, Partnership for Service will capitalize on the need for meaning, bringing the Jewish community back to the tradition of service sector careers and volunteer engagement. In so doing, it will bring us back to finding greater purpose in our lives. It will encourage the understanding that volunteering and service are significant expressions of Jewish identity and commitment.

The organization's plan is to work collaboratively to channel the skills and energy of individual Jews and of the Jewish community toward volunteering and giving of the self. By encouraging and supporting Jews who volunteer and organizations that are developing and modeling volunteer programs, Partnership for Service seeks to connect acts of service with living a Jewish life. The initial emphasis for Partnership for Service will be on Jews in their teens, 20's and 30's who increasingly volunteer but frequently have limited connections to the Jewish community.

Partnership for Service will engage diverse segments of the American Jewish population in this work, in order to encourage Jewish pluralism. It will build and work with a coalition of Jewish organizations to model and expand the teaching of service as a cultural Jewish value. Partnership for Service will also participate actively in the general societal dialogue about service and volunteerism. In every facet of American life, Partnership for Service will advance the field of Jewish service.

opportunity for reflection, a social gathering, or a concert. Many Jews come to services seeking absolution. However, as this type of prayer is largely self-service, it is not true service.

In the Babylonian Talmud, *Sotah 10a-b*, when Abraham's guests want to thank him for his generosity, he responds, "don't thank me, praise and bless God." Through Abraham's *hesed*, or act of kindness, his guests are moved to prayer. In this model, we experience God in our lives through the actions of our fellow human beings and become motivated to offer thanks, to pray out of gratitude.

Another important model in understanding the relationship of service to prayer is that revelation is often preceded by acts of *hesed*. Acts of *hesed* often bring us in contact with people who are in difficult circumstances. We are awakened to the world as it is experienced by less fortunate people. Through opening our door to the stranger or those in need, we open ourselves up to a relationship with God. The agent of *hesed* is him/herself changed through the experience.

The emotional rushes of fear, gratitude, distress, exhilaration, or pride that emanate from service are powerful moments in people's lives. As a Jewish community, we should embrace the potential of these emotions and see in them an opportunity for the empowerment of volunteers as Jews. Jewish study, reflection and prayer are important responses to service that can help connect volunteers to our rich tradition. Our ritual and spiritual relationship to God can become deeply rooted in our actions towards other people.

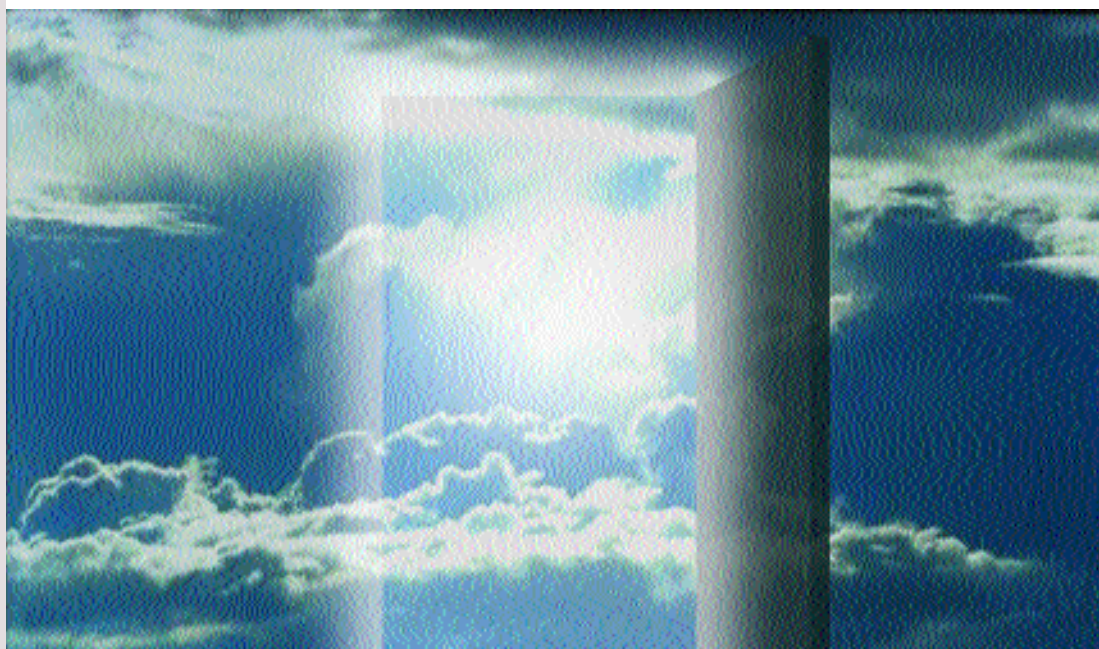
The Rabbis replaced the hierarchy of the Levite blood-line with a civilization based on meritocracy. Success in the rabbinic system could be established through mastery of Jew-

ish texts or through the accumulation of great wealth. Out of this communal structure we maintain a special role for the scholar and the philanthropist. It is time, however, to assert a third axis of meritocracy in our community, by giving our respect to those who engage in service. Jews who work in professions that serve the communal good, that support the poor and the downtrodden, and that serve humanity are fulfilling the highest precepts of Torah. This is not to say that we should not study and learn, but that learning is only defensible when it results in humane activism and a response to the issues in the world around us.

Many Jews are not compelled to pray or learn in community. Some of those who do pray interact with the activity as spectators or as theater critics. The crowds who appear on Yom Kippur for propitiation often find the experience grueling. However, many Jews may be motivated to engage with the Jewish community through service. Volunteering allows for the personal declaration of principle outside of an explicitly theological framework. Through additional service learning, volunteers can engage Jewish ideas and texts and explore the ways in which their own impulse to live an ethical life and serve those in need is supported, informed and enriched by Jewish tradition. Not only should we encourage more service by all Jews, we must engage this generation of service-oriented spiritual seekers and support them in their sacred work.

When the Jews arrived at Sinai, God spoke to them and said, "Indeed, all the Earth is Mine, but you shall be to Me a kingdom of priests, and a holy nation." (*Exodus, 19:6*). By exploring and engaging in the many meanings of service, we aspire to fulfill this vision. 🌸

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# Volunteering IS NOT Enough

by JOSEPH I.  
LIEBERMAN

*I raise this point not to say that we need more voting and less volunteering, but really an outpouring of both. We have to find a way to maintain that civic spirit while translating it into the political arena.*

According to a study by Independent Sector, 46 percent of the nation's 18- to 24-year-olds volunteered in the past year, up from 38 percent in 1996. I applaud this noble trend toward voluntary public service in American life. I encourage people to become a Big Brother or Big Sister, work a regular shift at a local soup kitchen, counsel rape victims, join the local PTA, serve on an education board or library board, or find one of the countless other ways to volunteer their time to strengthen the sinews of the community where they live and improve the quality of life there. Volunteerism shows that despite all the political cynicism and disenchantment today, America's civic spirit is alive and well, and being expended effectively to better our communities and the lives of those who live in them.

But there is a subtle cause for concern in the flip side of volunteerism, particularly as it relates to young people. Surveys consistently show that more and more of those volunteers are people withdrawing from the democratic process and looking for alternative ways to channel their sense of communal responsibility. For instance, a poll taken last year by the Panetta Institute found that 73 percent of college students had done volunteer work in helping the homeless, tutoring children and cleaning up the environment, among other things, with 41 percent doing so more than ten times in the past year. Nearly two thirds said they would consider spending some of their lives working in education or for a non-profit. But only 25 percent said they would consider spending some time in politics. A Harvard study found that 85 percent of college students prefer volunteering to political engagement as a better way to solve important challenges facing their communities.

This withdrawal from political life is evident in legislative races throughout the country that are being run solo, with incumbents facing no challenger. And it is most evident in those who are and are not doing the voting. A smaller percentage of voters goes to the polls in recent years than at any time since 1942, when millions of Americans had the excuse that they were overseas fighting to keep the world safe for democracy.

In the past several decades, I fear much has happened to discourage young people from choosing the path of public service: a politics too often embittered by partisanship and personal attacks; a press increasingly consumed by conflict and scandal; a public that, as a result, is more and more distrustful of government even while understanding their need for it. A recent poll from the Council for Excellence in Government found that two out of three Americans feel "disconnected" from their government.

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More than half do not believe that government is any longer "of, by and for the people." And the segment of our society that feels most estranged from government is the young generation of Americans aged 18 to 34.

And yet, our great nation cannot survive without public service. We cannot have a democracy without Democrats and Republicans and Greens and Reformers and other political practitioners. Democracy requires participation to work. That is what Ben Franklin was getting at when he responded to a question about whether America was a republic or a monarchy by declaring "a republic — if you can keep it."

Of course, our government is not on the verge of collapse and our freedoms are not about to evaporate. We have people to write the laws and run the programs and render the services. But, in fact, we are facing what the folks in the Senate in Washington are calling a coming crisis in human capital. Translated into English, that means in the next several years a very large number of the our nation's workforce is going to retire. We need new people to replace them in the service of our great society. We need politicians to formulate and implement the next Marshall Plan for the poorest people on earth, the next G.I. Bill to better educate every one of America's children, the next Civil Rights Act to extend freedom's franchise. We need to empower the government to find a cure for AIDS, breast cancer and Alzheimer's. We need vision and courage in the government to confront the threat of global warming. And we need brilliance to shape an energy future that is based on new, clean, and efficient technologies, not on old fuels that pollute our world's atmosphere and diminish our nation's independence.

I raise this point not to say that we need more voting and less volunteering, but really an outpouring of both. We have to find a way to maintain that civic spirit while translating it into the political arena. We have to because no matter how many Kiwanis and Lions Clubs there are, and no matter how many good deeds they do, these private associations simply cannot replace our public institutions or fulfill their enormous responsibilities. It would be unfair and unrealistic to expect them to do so. We need a vital and accountable government to educate our children, build our streets, defend our borders, and provide a safety net to our most vulnerable citizens. And we need good people to serve and all kinds of people to participate to foster that kind of government.

Volunteerism and government service should not be considered either/or options. They should complement each other as we work to strengthen and improve American society for all its citizens. Politics can be not only a noble profession but a way to give something back to the country that has given us and our families the priceless promises of freedom and opportunity. 🌸