

In the Family

The Intrinsic Impact of Serving Other Jews

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The recent debate regarding whether the Jewish community should invest in programs of Jewish particularism or Jewish universalism has made its way into the realm of Jewish service. By only focusing this conversation on the choice between helping Jewish or non-Jewish populations—arguably both Jewish things to do—we lose sight of something more central to service opportunities: shaping identity. Program providers would by and large agree that Jewish service done well strengthens Jewish identity regardless of whom one is serving. Yet, is there any unique difference noted by participants when they serve other Jews? By using internal information from the American Jewish Joint Distribution Committee (JDC), this article explores the potentially unique ability to shape Jewish identity that Jewish service in Jewish communities may have.

For anyone who likes to keep tabs on debates in the Jewish media, an important one is currently taking place: Should the Jewish community support and invest in programs of Jewish particularism or those that embrace Jewish universalism?

From Rabbi Daniel Gordis stating that “it is a simple matter of fact that Jews have always been taught to care, first and foremost, for other Jews” (Gordis, 2011) to a reply the following month by Mira Sucharov (2011) in her piece “The Risks of Jewish Particularism” in *Haaretz*, this debate has wide-reaching impact. So much so that it has also touched the arena of Jewish service, perhaps most notably in the discourse between Professor Jack Wertheimer of the Jewish Theological Seminary and Repair the World CEO Jon Rosenberg. Clearly, underlying this debate is a concern on both sides for the future of the Jewish community and what values and priorities will determine its defining characteristics.

Yet all of this back and forth may have missed something profound. The essential debate is not only about whether we help Jewish or non-Jewish populations, as both are arguably Jewish things to do. It is about something more crucial: how we shape Jewish identity. One of the primary objectives of the field of Jewish service is to strengthen the Jewish identity of the young Jewish adults engaged in its programs. After all, Jewish service is just that—service in the context of Jewish values and thought, whether to Jews or non-Jews.

If one wanted to better understand how service to different population groups can uniquely affect the volunteers in Jewish service programs, one would be hard-pressed to find much research on the topic. Yet internal evaluation forms from short-term Jewish service-learning programs run by the American Jewish

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Joint Distribution Committee (JDC) and an unpublished online survey of young Jewish adults that JDC supported do provide information from which some interesting trends are emerging. Although the JDC data are not the outcome of an expert research team and should not be viewed as such, they can serve as an interesting case study that offers fascinating insights for future exploration.

JDC's service programs take place within the context of the organization's global humanitarian interventions around the world—in Jewish communities abroad, in Israel (serving both Jewish and non-Jewish citizens), and in non-Jewish communities where JDC performs a wide variety of disaster relief and development work. It is one of the few Jewish service program developers/providers that offer service in all three settings. Therefore JDC's data offer an unparalleled opportunity to explore the impact of multicategory Jewish service by Jewish young adults. With this information, we can better understand what happens to Jewish young adults when they are immersed in the same program and structure, developed by a Jewish organization, serving community-identified needs, yet in different settings and serving different populations.

Two trends emerge from analysis of the evaluation forms: *Jewish service in a Jewish community and in Israel initially has a stronger impact on the Jewish identity of the individual than does service to non-Jews, and individuals serving Jews do feel, initially, a stronger sense of Jewish communal responsibility than those serving non-Jews.*

Currently more attention is given to ensuring that Jewish values underlie service given to address universal needs, in part because research seems to indicate that this is where young Jews have an overwhelming interest in serving. However, we know too little about service motivations and interests of young Jewish adults not to pay equal attention to Jewish service in Jewish communities.

JDC EVALUATIONS: AN OPEN BOOK

The data, collected from JDC program evaluations from May 2009 to August 2011, include responses from nearly 600 participants from 30 service trips; of these participants, 10% served in a non-Jewish community. The evaluations asked 35 questions about the trip's impact on participants, including on the following areas:

- Understanding of the issues/challenges facing the community visited
- Understanding of the issues/challenges facing Israel's vulnerable populations
- Connection to Israel and their sense of responsibility
- Connection to the global Jewish community and their sense of responsibility
- Thinking regarding their own Jewish identity

It is critical to note that participants overwhelmingly indicated an impact on their own Jewish identity, regardless of the service placement. However, helping Jews in need had a stronger impact on Jewish identity than helping non-Jews in need. The impact on identity of serving in a non-Jewish community was 14% weaker than that of helping fellow Jews.

Similar findings were reported about the impact of identity of serving in Israel. Those serving non-Jews in Israel indicated a 16.4% weaker impact on their Jewish identity than those serving in a Jewish community in Israel. However, when asked about the impact the trip had on their connection to Israel and sense of responsibility the differential was much less, around 5%, with both

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types of experiences scoring high in terms of their connection to the country. Clearly, the service experience in Israel left participants feeling highly connected to Israel, yet had somewhat less impact on the Jewish identities of those serving in non-Jewish communities.

This point is perhaps best illustrated by the voices of Jewish service alumni. Take Leah Smith, a junior at Brandeis University, who has served in many settings, including in the developing world and in Israel, and like a growing number of young people finds that “serving is the main way in which I practice Judaism” (Smith, personal communication, October, 2011).

Leah explained that “doing service in a Jewish community does not automatically mean that I will feel a connection. It does, however, mean that there is a higher chance of finding some common ground with the people I am serving.” She went on to describe the unique import of this sense of connection in Israel where her service was “especially meaningful to me because I was able to make that connection—with Judaism as the catalyst—with a group of Ethiopian Israeli girls who were otherwise completely different from me. It was an experience that I think would be much harder to find in a non-Jewish community.”

Joy Sisisky, a JDC Ralph I. Goldman Fellow in International Jewish Service, further elucidated this point: “working in the Jewish community of Ukraine I felt very Jewish. I was there, working in that particular community specifically because I am Jewish.” When relating an experience of visiting an elderly bedridden Jewish woman, Joy noted that it made her “feel even more Jewish in the sense that I felt connected to her because of who we were. We were instantly connected.” This sense of a unique connection through an unspoken similarity or commonality seems to drive the feeling of “enhanced Jewishness” for many young Jews serving in Jewish communities.

However, Joy’s experience working in Ethiopia among non-Jewish populations was quite different: “the need was so great, I don’t think anyone cared whether or not I was Jewish and neither did I. I felt like a better human being for being there and that didn’t have a lot to do with my Jewishness” (Sisisky, personal communication, October 2011).

In addition to qualifying impact on Jewish identity, JDC’s evaluation forms assessed feelings of increased communal responsibility after the service trip. Here too a trend emerges: those serving in a global Jewish community returned home feeling a stronger sense of responsibility to the Jewish community by some 15% when compared with those serving globally in a non-Jewish community.

Serving other Jews seems to generate something of unique import when it comes to Jewish identity. Perhaps it is the feeling of family or belonging to a common “people” when serving other Jews that creates these variances observed in the data. Or as Perry Teicher, another alumnus of Jewish service programs who was also a Peace Corps volunteer, explained, “When working with a Jewish community, I learned more about how I relate to Judaism; how I can better express and understand my Jewish identity” (Perry Teicher, personal communication, October 2011).

Of course, because these data are anecdotal, one could easily dismiss these trends, especially when other formal research studies seem to indicate that young Jews are not interested in helping fellow Jews. Yet is something missing from those other studies?

DIGGING DEEPER

The recent powerful study, *Volunteering + Values: A Repair the World Report on Jewish Young Adults* (Chertok et al., 2011), has done much to further our understanding of young Jewish attitudes toward service. It indicates that young Jews, with the exception of young Orthodox Jews, do not find serving the Jewish community a top priority. They care more about universal issues and also do not see much that is Jewish about the time they spend volunteering to help meet these universal needs.

Yet, although this study has provided the most important information on Jewish adults' volunteer habits to date, the way some questions were posed may have skewed the results. For example, in *Issues that Animate Young Adults*, the category of "service to the Jewish community" was listed as a separate option from "material assistance to the needy," "education," "health care," "poverty/economic development," or "youth" (Chertok et al., 2011). These options are confusing in that serving the Jewish community can mean all of these things too. The results to this question, as posed, were that serving the Jewish community was not in the top five areas of interest.

For the sake of argument, if we accept the responses to this question as accurate, would anyone be so surprised that young Jews care about important universal needs when they know so much more about these issues in the broader society? After all, if they knew that these issues existed in the Jewish community as well, would they not be motivated to care about these issues and act on them just as with their non-Jewish neighbors?

THE SURVEY, OPENING EYES

To supplement the findings from the Repair the World study, we can look at the work done in 2008 by JDC and a graduate student consulting group from NYU's Robert F. Wagner Graduate School of Public Service (Beery et al., 2008).¹ As part of their research, the team developed an online survey of young Jewish opinions. There were 889 respondents, mostly between the ages of 18–34 years of age, making it one of the largest recent surveys of young Jewish attitudes.

Because the survey was conducted by an involved group of young Jews who used their networks and Jewish media to circulate it, the respondents may have greater Jewish involvements than average young Jews. Yet with some 50% of the respondents indicating they were either not involved at all with a Jewish organization or with only one Jewish organization, the data provide useful information.

The following findings are relevant to understanding young Jewish attitudes and interests:

- 48.6% of respondents are "turned on" to organizational involvement when the organization or event is for a cause they believe in.
- Topping all other activities of interest offered in the survey, 75.8% reported an interest in volunteering.

¹The NYU team included Ariel Beery, Alyssa Frank, Nessa Heilpern Liben, Rachel Perten, Hindy Poupko, Natalie Solomon, and Julie Tilson Stanley. Ariel Beery was the point person for the online survey.

- 44.2% of respondents reported that they “very much” believe that Jews have a special responsibility to aid other Jews, and 41.8% answered “yes” to the same question.²
- 23.4% of respondents reported that they “very much” believe that Jews have a special responsibility to aid non-Jews, and 51% reported “yes” to the same question.
- In estimating the percentage of Jews near or under the poverty line around the world, 43.5% responded that there was not much poverty among Jews or that the percentage was low.

These responses paint an interesting picture. They indicate a population that is cause-oriented and interested in volunteering. They also indicate a population that believes that Jews have a special responsibility to help Jews that is equal to or even stronger than a special Jewish responsibility to help non-Jews. Yet, they also show a population that is not very knowledgeable about Jews in need.

So what do these responses mean? If young Jews do not know enough about Jewish needs, then there is good reason why this issue does not rise to the top when asked about what issues motivate them. These observations are supported by some of the same JDC service alumni quoted earlier. As Leah Smith put it, “Many young Jews are painfully unaware of Jewish needs ...and many grow up not realizing that there is such a thing as a Jew in poverty.” Joy Sisisky also supported this perspective, stating that “young Jews are less interested in volunteering to help other Jews as helping non-Jews simply because they are not aware of the needs.”

Because the core causes of interests to young Jews that would propel them to serve remain vast and varied, and likely still unclear, we have to ensure that our attention is not pulled too strongly in one direction. This is not to suggest that we neglect service to non-Jews. Quite the opposite—it is to suggest we give service to Jews in need equal attention and give higher priority to explore its unique ability to affect Jewish identity.

MOVING FORWARD

Today, despite the debate about particularism versus universalism, we as a community have to a large extent accepted that service to non-Jewish populations is a Jewish value that can produce not only better citizens but also better Jews. What is less discussed is the unique and intrinsic value of Jewish service in Jewish communities and its contribution to building Jewish identity.

Chloe Markowitz, an alumna of Jewish service programs both in a Jewish community in Turkey and then in Thailand, perhaps put it best: “There is a difference for me between my volunteer work with Jewish communities and with non-Jewish communities. When I volunteer to help Jews it feels like volunteering for my family. When it’s with non-Jews it’s more like with my extended family. I have love for both but I feel a familial sense of closeness with the former” (Chloe Markowitz, personal communication, October 2011). When young Jews serve other Jews, with the intimate closeness it can afford, this experience seems

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²The responses were on a scale of 0-4, with 0=No, 1=Not Really, 2=Maybe, 3=Yes, I think, and 4=Very Much.

to offer unique results in strengthening their Jewish identity and sense of Jewish communal responsibility.

The time is ripe to explore the trends revealed here. After all, when young volunteers in Moldova make that walk up the dark flights of stairs to dilapidated apartments without running water, enough light, or proper food, to help care for aging Holocaust survivors, they do not do it in a vacuum. The connectedness they feel and its impact on their idea of what it means to be Jewish are worth building on.

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Jerusalem: A Classroom for Jewish Service Learning

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During the past three years, Jerusalem has experienced a new energy brought about by a renaissance of culture and social and political activism. The participation of young adults has created a new vibrancy within the ancient city, as exhibited by the growth of various young adult organizations throughout the city, and most recently this summer by the protests for greater social justice. Jerusalem can serve as an interactive classroom for developing Jewish identity. With its deep Jewish roots and intrinsic Jewish nature, it has the ability to attract and bring together Jews from very diverse Jewish backgrounds, ethnicities, political orientations, religious practices, and expressions, making it the ideal classroom for Jewish service-learning experiences.

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