

Jewish Service-Learning

A Conceptual Framework

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Jewish service-learning—catapulted into popularity by Alternative Break Trips to post-Katrina Louisiana and Mississippi—is a natural outgrowth of the combination of community service and informal Jewish education, both of which are fundamental Jewish communal modalities. This article examines the three primary educational frameworks that have provided the conceptual platform from which Jewish service-learning has evolved—experiential education, informal Jewish education, and service learning—and then presents a definition for the field of Jewish service-learning. Following an exegesis of the core components of the Jewish service-learning framework, the article focuses on the critical role of the educator in designing, facilitating, and guiding these experiences.

Tell me and I forget.

Teach me and I remember.

Involve me and I learn.

Benjamin Franklin (1706–1790)

WHAT IS JEWISH SERVICE-LEARNING?

Community service has long been recognized as an authentically Jewish expression of the values of *tzedakah* (charity) and *g'milut hasadim* (acts of lovingkindness). It provides an excellent context for (Jewish) learning and offers a transformative experience that can have far-reaching effects on its participants. The development of Jewish service-learning (JSL) is a natural outgrowth of the combination of community service and informal Jewish education—both of which are fundamental Jewish communal modalities. From a philosophical, communal, and educational perspective, JSL meets young people “where they are at” psychologically, politically, and developmentally.

In the last decade, thousands of teens and emerging adults have spent their weekends, school breaks, summers, and academic years engaged in community service. The devastation brought by Hurricane Katrina was the impetus for an enormous mobilization of young adults, constituting a large-scale meaningful response by the Jewish community.¹ This response was not centrally or philanthropically driven (as had been typical up until that time), but rather by the numerous Alternative Break trips to Louisiana and Mississippi that engaged thousands of participants in a grassroots call to action.

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¹Although Katrina was certainly not the start of the Jewish communal involvement in service-learning programs (most notably here is the great work of AVODAH: The Jewish Service Corps, Jewish Organizing Initiative, and American Jewish World Service), it was a major catalyst for expansion of offerings provided.

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As with any reactive or responsive action, JSL needed to learn quickly from pre-existing educational frameworks: in this case, experiential education, informal Jewish education, and service-learning. Over time, what was adopted and adapted from each of these fields depended on the orientation and goals of the sponsoring Jewish organizations, the resources available to them, and the quality of educators who planned and facilitated these experiences. This article lays out a framework for understanding JSL within the framework of those educational approaches and provides basic principles from which we can analyze and further develop this growing field.

JSL has emerged from three educational frameworks:

1. Experiential education focuses on the transactive process between teacher and student that takes place within the learning environment and on content that allows learners to directly experience and reflect on these experiences to increase their knowledge, develop skills, and clarify personal values (Gilbertson et al., 2006).

2. Informal Jewish education is aimed at the personal growth of Jews of all ages. It happens as the individual actively experiences a diversity of Jewish moments and values that are regarded as worthwhile. It works by creating venues, by developing a total educational culture, and by co-opting the social context. It is based on a curriculum of Jewish values and experiences that is presented in a dynamic and flexible manner. As an activity, it is not specific to any one venue, but may happen in a variety of settings. It evokes pleasurable feelings and memories. It requires Jewishly literate educators with a “teaching” style that is highly interactive and participatory and who are willing to make maximal use of self and personal lifestyle in their educational work (Chazan, 2003).

3. Service-learning is a teaching and learning strategy that integrates meaningful community service with instruction and reflection to enrich the learning experience, teach civic responsibility, and strengthen communities (National Service-Learning Clearinghouse, 2011).²

These three educational frameworks combined provide an important basis for defining and developing the concept of JSL. A working definition of JSL can be adapted from these fields, creating its own unique pathway to understanding how these experiences should be conceptualized, structured, and evaluated (see box below).

We can best understand this definition by using the method of exegesis, which allows us to understand the value of a sentence based on the contextual definition of each of its individual words to derive an overall meaning.

Individuals

In the *TaNakh* (Hebrew Bible), the term *chinuch* (education) is mentioned only once and focuses on the individual learner (and not on a class or group of students):

Teach the child according to his way so that he will not stray from it.

Proverbs 22:6

²Some of the Jewish community’s initial response to Katrina was in the form not of JSL but of service-living. What I mean is that central to the understanding of JSL (within the frameworks of experiential and informal Jewish education) is that learning and reflection are essential not only to “doing the right thing” now but also to training community members and program participants in why we should do and how we should do it in an ethical, responsible, and *menshlichkeit* way. At the time of this *Journal* being published, many of our efforts are therefore evolving from service-living to service-learning—an advancement and enhancement that we will enable us to learn much from the fields of experiential education and informal Jewish education.

Jewish service-learning can be defined as *individuals living in authentic, values-driven communities of service and learning.*

Although service-learning experiences are primarily organized as group experiences (with significant subsequent benefits), it is imperative that they address the individual's interests, needs, concerns, and learning styles. Educators have several tools at their disposal—beyond “paying attention” to provide each individual with the ability to make the most of the experience—from journal-writing and flip-camera filmmaking; reflection exercises using texts, poetry, music, and art; to group processing that ensures that all individuals are heard.

Living

As with so many modalities of experiential education, the most powerful JSL experiences are immersive in nature: 24/7, they embody living a “Jewish Way.” Some JSL participants may for the first time truly experience living, breathing Judaism. The program permeates all aspects of the day, including meals (are blessings recited before and/or after meals?), prayer services (are options provided to allow for all participants to feel comfortable and/or connected to what is offered?), free time (to allow for individuals to “do their own thing”), and reflection (is there time to relax and informally regroup about the experience?). How the group members interact with each other outside the planned learning-action experience is a critical way in which participants will experience the group and Jewish community they are part of building. For less intensive experiences, it is still possible to create means by which participants can experience authentic Jewish living on a smaller scale—including, for example, through prayer before and after meals reflecting on the bounty for which participants are grateful.

Authentic

Today's youth and young adults are looking for authenticity—authenticity in their leaders, role models, and educators; authenticity in that what they are being asked to do will make a difference, and authenticity in finding their own unique paths. Today's youth have multiple identities, and being Jewish is only one of them. To pretend that being Jewish is their sole or primary identity would be a mistake. How their Judaism interacts or integrates authentically with other elements of their identities is a struggle with which learners must grapple. Our participants want to find their own pathway—it is the educator's role to inspire them to take that journey and to be mindful to guide but not drag them along it or fence them in en route.

Values-Driven

A key challenge facing designers and facilitators of JSL experiences is determining how explicit the teaching of Jewish values and their sources should be. Some might think it is more effective to only subtly bring those values to life experientially through the program, yet I believe that we need to be explicit. Although we may not want to overwhelm participants with formal teachings, the richness and uniqueness of Jewish wisdom that has shaped our community cannot be underestimated. So many participants have not been exposed to quality Jewish education or to positive role modeling in their lives prior to their JSL experiences. Therefore, weaving Jewish text and values-based learning into the experience creates new powerful and meaningful conversations on which the entire experience rests. It is essential for participants to come away with an understanding that the

Some JSL participants may for the first time truly experience living, breathing Judaism.

Jewish lens is a profoundly relevant and meaningful one through which to experience life (including—but not limited to—a life of community service and social action). Core Jewish values and concepts of *tzedakah* (charity or righteousness), *tzedek* (justice), *g'milut hasadim* (acts of loving-kindness) and *tikkun olam* (repairing the world) are each directly relevant and meaningful (with a unique set of values and actions associated to each) to those who are seeking to help solve the problems of the world. These values (referred to in Chazan's definition of informal Jewish education, stated earlier) inform the pedagogy not only of Jewish service-learning but also of Jewish approaches to service and social change itself.

Communities

Judaism is a religion of community, which often transcends the role of the individual. So many of our Jewish experiences and memories take place in community—from the *brit milah* (circumcision) where a child is welcomed into the community, to *k'vurah* (burial) where the deceased is mourned by family members, friends, and community members together. So too, the power of the immersive experience that is Jewish service-learning is most profound when experienced in community. The peer-learning opportunities that exist on such programs are endless, and a key function of the educator is to bring out those sharings and conversations so that broader learning can take place. The group—with all of its challenges and strengths when working together as a unit—is an important paradigm for understanding and experiencing community. Not only is it important to create a one-of-a-kind community specific to that place and time but it is also critical for participants to learn the value and skills of community-building so they can share that knowledge with other communities that they will build and/or encounter throughout their lives.

Service

The work that participants are doing during the trip needs to be both meaningful and directly related to solving the societal problem at hand. Service should be as hands-on as possible—not only because it is important that participants feel that they are directly contributing but also because manual and physical labor are part of the “experience” that can significantly benefit the educational process and certainly help create powerful, lasting memories. It is also important for learners to encounter members of the community whom they are working to support. Such encounters—especially those in which participants work together with community members on a set of issues—can have a profound effect on participants' understanding the “other” as well as appreciating their own life situations, privileges, and advantages (see the section, *Experiential Modalities*).

Learning

Above all, for service to be truly integrated into the fields of informal education and Jewish experiential learning, our thinking about the experience being both a learning experience and a service experience must continue to evolve. Therefore the role of the educator, facilitator, and/or mentor is absolutely critical to the success of a JSL experience. Significantly more thought, attention, and resources should be given to the selection, training, and coaching of these role models. Following the section, *Experiential Modalities*, this article focuses on some of the key elements that need to be considered in this regard.

EXPERIENTIAL MODALITIES

It is important to note that “experiences” take on many forms. As John Dewey points out in “Experience and Education” (1938):

“It is not enough to insist upon the necessity of experience, nor even of activity in experience. Everything depends upon the quality of the experience which is had. The quality of any experience has two aspects. There is an immediate aspect of agreeableness or disagreeableness, and there is its influence upon later experiences.”

Within the context of Jewish Service-Learning, therefore, it is important to recognize that beyond the experience being “agreeable” it must move us beyond the mountain-top experience. Here are three modalities of experiential learning that should be considered when designing impactful Jewish service-learning experiences.

Experiential Modality 1

Bringing our prior experiences into the group. Some of the more powerful moments of a group is the sharing of memories that they bring in with them to an experience. “The first time I . . .” is an activity that not only serves as an icebreaker but can also be a way in which learners can more fully bring themselves into a group and for the group to understand more holistically where that individual is coming from.

Experiential Modality 2

Creating a unique, powerful, and meaningful experience by hands-on action, reflection, and learning. [For this section, I shall use the term “trip” to describe the period of time that a group of participants will be in the immersive service experience (e.g., in the case of Alternative Spring Break, from arrival in New Orleans until arrival back at the home airport)].

Pre-Trip

Here, the educator must plan for the “structuring of the environment” to ensure that

- In program design, enough time is given (during each day) for reflection, process, discussion.
- Every participant has the opportunity to engage in meaningful, rewarding service work during the trip.
- Participants have been socialized into the goals and norms of the group experience.
- There has been ‘orientation’ programming in which individual participants have become acquainted with each other, the community they will visit, their educators, the goals and norms of the group during the trip, as well as any expectations the sponsoring organization has for them upon their return home.
- Participants have the opportunity to express their own expectations, concerns, and hopes—creating both a baseline for understanding where the group “is at” as well as the establishment of a sharing community.

During Trip

Here, the educator must be available to facilitate reflection, probing questions, and conversations in both formal and informal settings

Informal settings can include on the mini-bus driving away from a work site or the 2:00 am one-on-one conversation on the porch steps of the youth hostel, (teachable moments).

More formal settings include those places in the day that were set in advance by planners for reflection, discussion, and learning. For these, it is essential that the educator be flexible – constantly assessing the needs and interests of the group to ensure that these opportunities are relevant and meaningful.

Post-Trip

Depending on the sponsoring organization (its goals, resources, etc.), here, the educator may remain in ongoing relationship with the trip participants in the months after their return home.

At minimum, one role of the educator throughout the experience is to provide ways in which each participant can internalize what he or she experienced and figure out ways in which to take that experience home with them in a way that is authentic and realistic to them.

It is vital, therefore, that the educator is thinking post-trip in the pre-trip planning phase. What tools will the educator provide to participants before and during the trip to enable them to reflect, remember, learn, and grow from their experience “away,” enabling everyone to take their mountain top experience back into the valleys in which we all live everyday?

Experiential Modality 3: Taking the Shared Experiences Back Home

These modalities are not mutually exclusive. There is a pre-post continuum focusing on relevance to daily lives and integrating learning into the participant’s life experience significantly beyond the trip.

THE ROLE OF THE EDUCATOR

We should be open to this adventure in heightened awareness of living. We should stake our whole existence on our willingness to explore and experience.

Martin Buber (Hodes, 1972)

Given the centrality of the educator in designing and facilitating these experiences, what are some of the key aspects of the educator’s role?

Structure the Environment Physically, Mentally, Pedagogically—The term “safe space” is used to describe an environment in which participants are willing to take risks, which is an essential part of the learning process. In JSL experiences, those risks may be physical (what kind of manual labor will be required, what safety standards are met, what equipment is provided, what rest breaks are offered, what water and food are available, etc.); or emotional (will the group listen to me, hear my concerns without being judgmental, etc.); or intellectual (is my

Why has Jewish service-learning caught on so quickly and strongly?

- > Service is a central Jewish value that is extremely accessible and universal for many to embrace.
- > Jews have always “done service” and doing service is a rich tradition, not only based on values (*tzedakah, chesed, gemilut hasadim, tzedek, tikkun olam*) but on millennia of actions—individual and collective.
- > Teens and emerging adults want to change the world—if given clear opportunities they will jump at the challenge. Service-learning is meeting them “where they are at.”
- > Service and service-learning have become more important in mainstream American civic engagement, education systems, and society at large, and therefore part of the wider culture in which the American Jewish community is working.
- > Technology, travel, and resources have enabled modern-day masses to be directly involved in helping solve societal problems beyond our immediate neighborhoods.
- > There is a seemingly never-ending supply of needs of struggling communities and individuals in need for whom help is necessary, and to whom the Jewish community can direct care and attention.

learning style respected and supported, are all participants being treated as equal members of the group, etc.).

Create Multisensory Opportunities—The immersive, “mountain-top” nature of many JSL experiences provides for the holistic approach required to create transformative, all-encompassing environments. Yet, what some may perceive to be multisensory in style and design may not be seen that way by others. It is important to think about all of our participants and their different learning styles as well as prior exposure to different teachings and educational methodologies. For example, how are we engaging the group in “text study”—how narrowly or broadly are we defining “text” and “study”? Are we reading the text out aloud or using biblio-drama, working in pairs or large group settings, or using poetry and arts or words on paper?

Be Intentional—The educator should not only recognize but also create and use teachable moments. One of the biggest challenges facing an educator during these experiences is when to interject, when to teach, and when to hold back. In whatever role, the educators’ art involves intentionality, being conscious of their actions, and determining consciously what to do (and what not to do) at any given moment. If modeled correctly, this intentionality can also potentially inspire group participants to act according to the Jewish value of *kavanah*—intention or mindfulness.

Be Learner-Centered—One of the educator’s greatest resources in creating educational opportunities is the group of participants themselves. JSL experiences are often organized around peer groups (bar/bat mitzvah projects, teen trips, college student Alternative Breaks). This naturally brings a certain homogeneity and focus to the group and also provides the opportunity for the group to develop as a supportive, learning cooperative with common goals, sharing experiences, passions, and ambitions—thereby developing community and individual identities at the same time.

Facilitate a Group/Community Experience—Group-building requires a specific skill set in and of itself in which the educator not only facilitates the individuals, their learnings and experiences, but also simultaneously develops a cohesive group or team. Coping with difficult personalities, bringing a group through a challenging time, and offering a platform for all to engage and contribute to are all important tasks.

Provide Meaningful Reflection (time, process, space)—As seen in the definitions of the three educational frameworks from which Jewish service-learning is evolving, reflection on service is critical for participants to understand what is going on inside them and within the community that they are serving. Similarly a Jewish value that is taught but does not have time to be absorbed and integrated by the learners may be remembered intellectually but unlikely to be embraced later in their behaviors or actions. What learners should be encouraged to reflect on will depend in part on the sponsoring organization’s goals and educational mission, the particular service setting, and societal issue being addressed. It can, however, always include universal themes such as humility, celebration of what you have, and understanding or appreciating power—all of which have related Jewish sources and perspectives.

Empower—Educators should help participants empower themselves and understand what they are capable of doing to change their environment and themselves; provide them with take-home tools that they can unpack and use in

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their home communities to continue living according to the values embodied in the program; and direct them to resources that they can have access to after their return so that their passion for Jewish service can be sustained and developed further.

Embrace Being a Role-Model and Mentor—Educators should be accessible to all participants, presenting themselves as a genuine Jewish role model, “with warts and all,” expressing their own hopes and dreams, concerns, and fears to bring them out in others, without eclipsing the learners.

Provide a Continuum of Encounters, Opportunities, and Experiences—These experiences should be provided before, during, and after the JSL experience (see sidebar) so that the impact of the peak experience can be reinforced, maintained and integrated into the learner’s daily life.

Use Text as Context and Context as Text—Framing service within Jewish text and values can both enhance the service-learning experience and provide participants with what they will experience as directly relevant, authentic, and therefore meaningful sources. It is important to be selective in choosing *meaningful and accessible Jewish texts that are relevant and authentically used*. Educators must develop content and pedagogy that meet the learners “where they are at” and stretch them to a place of growth without confusing or oversimplifying. One should not assume a comfort with Jewish literacy, but should treat the learner with the respect he or she deserves—as sophisticated seasoned consumers and producers of knowledge and ideas.

Participants will then see the connections between the service they are performing and the values inherent within the cultural, historical, religious, and ethical community that is the Jewish people. Teaching those values in a vacuum, devoid of direct experience and action, is often lost on the learner, no matter how knowledgeable and inspiring the educator may be. Within the context of the direct service experience, learning those values and appreciating their meaning promote the learning to a far higher level that can be absorbed more easily and appreciated by the learner.

At the same time the world in which we serve becomes the text around which we debrief, reflect on, and grow. Not only does JSL provide the opportunity to bring Jewish texts to bear on the experience but the experience itself (volunteerism, service, acts of lovingkindness and justice) also becomes part of the curriculum from which participants learn. The world becomes the curriculum as do the values espoused. The integration of both of these “texts” and “contexts” can have profound impact on learning communities.

CONCLUSION

By placing JSL within the framework of informal Jewish education, therefore, we need not only move beyond service-living to service-learning—incorporating more explicit educational content and reflection into our program structures—but also must carefully view and where necessary expand the Jewish nature of our programs: from the values they are embodying and teaching to the role models that are being provided in the form of adults, mentors, and educators. As the field of JSL continues to grow, it is important for us to constantly reflect on the frameworks and principles that guide this work—learning from how we are designing, running, and evaluating our programs and continuing to improve on the

experiences we are providing while opening those opportunities up to more participants. In addition to the continual reflection and development of that modus operandi, it is essential that more attention, thought, and resources be provided for the recruitment, training, and support of the educators who form the linchpin for the success of these experiences.

Do more than belong: participate.

Do more than care: help.

Do more than believe: practice.

Do more than be fair: be kind.

Do more than forgive: forget.

Do more than dream: work.

William Arthur Ward (1921–1994)

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Havu Livenim (Carry the Bricks): A New Paradigm for Manual Labor and Jewish Experience

Jordan Namerow and Ruth Messinger

What is the value of manual labor in the Jewish service-learning movement? How might we redefine its worth? For privileged American Jews who have never picked up a shovel or muddied their boots, shingling roofs or weeding cucumbers can be critical catalysts for pursuing long-term social change. These activities also invoke a core piece of Jewish experience—the experience of the *Chalutzim* (early Zionist pioneers) of the 19th and 20th centuries. Drawing on writings of early 20th-century *Chalutzim* and testimonies from participants in Jewish service-learning programs, this article offers a new paradigm for understanding manual labor as an expression of Jewish peoplehood and Israeli history, an opportunity to explore class and privilege, and a vital instrument to build a more just world.

To read the full article, please visit RepairLabs.org/JJCS.

Personal Connections as a Foundation of Service Work: Social Networking That Makes a Difference

Shimshon Stüart Siegel, with Rabbi Bradley Solmsen

Impact Boston / Brandeis University Office of High School Programs

In the community service field, slogans such as “help those less fortunate than you,” “make a difference in someone’s life,” or “change the world!” are often seen and heard. However, this emphasis on change as the direct result of volunteering can be problematic for all parties involved—the volunteer, the recipient of the service, and those organizing the service project. Ideally, service does not reaffirm classic societal inequalities, but rather brings together people with different ethnic backgrounds, levels of socioeconomic status, and ability levels to create positive change. Emphasizing personal relationships as the core goal of service can achieve this objective. Teen participants in Impact Boston at Brandeis University, a summer service-learning program, are encouraged to seek points of human connection with service recipients at their nonprofit service sites and not to focus as much on “fixing” society’s challenges in such a short period of time. Several beliefs fuel this philosophy, including the notion that it is harder to ignore the struggles of people with whom we feel a personal connection.

To read the full article, please visit RepairLabs.org/JJCS.