

# Don't Sell Them Short

*From Understanding Injustice to Activism*

Irene Lehrer **Sandalow**

*Director of Strategy and Jewish Affairs*

Asaf **Bar-Tura**

*Associate Director of Programs, Jewish Council on Urban Affairs, Chicago*

*In this article we argue that the experiential learning that takes place at Jewish service-learning programs is incomplete without thorough conversation about broader social systems of oppression. Such conversations empower Jewish teens to think critically, take leadership, and gain a sense of pride in their own community. The examples and ideas are drawn from the Or Tzedek Teen Social Justice Program run by the Jewish Council on Urban Affairs. Both summer and year-round programs frame the experience within Jewish history and tradition. Central to the educational experience are workshops on systems of oppression and on skills training that move the teens to take action for long-term change. Integrating an understanding of a systemic approach to social justice into Jewish service learning is what differentiates social justice work from isolated acts of charity and service.*

In the 21st century, we can proudly and rightly claim that *tzedakah* is an important value to the American Jewish community. Volunteer service projects in the Jewish community are proliferating and synagogues have made “Mitzvah Days” a staple on their calendars. Yet, even though growing numbers of Jews take part each year in social justice projects, these programs often steer clear of addressing the root cause of injustice and reflecting on the systems of oppressions that maintain the unjust status quo. *Tzedakah* is part of everyday lingo for Jews, but we have distorted its significance by understanding it only as charity.

The term *tzedekah* refers to justice. It means rectifying the imbalance of inequality in our society. The visual of the concept of justice as a scale is telling and faithful to the original meaning of *tzedakah*. To bring about justice, you need to examine what lies on both platforms. The Jewish concept of justice is rooted in addressing systemic issues plaguing our society. When teaching about justice, we need to address the broken systems of our society that aid and abet the growing disparity between the poor and the wealthy and the racism that is still alive today. We must confront the notion of “pulling yourself by your own bootstraps,” a myth that ignores the barriers to opportunities for advancement.

We claim to inherit our social justice values from our Prophets. However, the prophetic indignation against injustice is not easily appeased by the fulfillment of a short-term “social action” project. As Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel wrote in his book, *The Prophets*, “The prophets were iconoclasts, attacking the

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*Asaf Bar-Tura is the former Director of Teen Programs at the Jewish Council on Urban Affairs. He currently directs JCUA's Jewish-Muslim Community Building Initiative and is working on his PhD in political philosophy.*

*Irene Lehrer Sandalow is the Director of Strategy and Jewish Affairs for the Jewish Council on Urban Affairs (JCUA). She engages and mobilizes the Jewish community in the social justice work of JCUA, coordinates national advocacy campaigns and develops social justice curricula.*

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established institutions and ideologies, and their main proponents. They exposed the pretension, fraud, and illusion of their society” (Heschel, 2001). Too many of us are still too reticent to name what causes injustice and to challenge the status quo. Many more do not know how to do so.

In this article we argue that the experiential learning that takes place at Jewish service-learning (JSL) programs, particularly those for teens, is incomplete without honest and thorough conversation about broader social systems of oppression. Furthermore such conversations empower Jewish teens to think critically, take leadership, and gain a sense of pride in their own community.

The examples and ideas in this article are drawn from the Or Tzedek Teen Social Justice Program run by the Jewish Council on Urban Affairs (JCUA) in Chicago. Now in its fifth year, Or Tzedek has both summer and year-round programs. In the summer, high school students spend eight days learning about social justice; meeting with community organization staff, leaders, and service recipients; and taking part in hands-on activities. During the school year, students are involved in social justice initiatives with teens of other community organizations and continue to learn about justice issues affecting Chicago’s diverse communities. Both summer and year-round programs frame the experience with texts and conversation from Jewish tradition, which are rich with ideas and models for pursuing a just society. Central to the educational experience are workshops on systems of oppression and skills training that move the teens to take action to bring about long-term change. This article demonstrates how integrating an understanding of a systemic approach to social justice into Jewish service-learning is what differentiates social justice work from isolated acts of charity and service. The arguments laid out in this article can be informative and beneficial to both experienced providers of JSL programs and professionals in the Jewish community whose work is not solely focused on social justice work. Because of JCUA’s nearly 50 years of experience working with low-income communities and communities of color, it has developed sensitivities and a deep understanding of how systemic issues affect the most vulnerable in our society. JCUA has always been very conscientious in how we as Jews—who are often privileged in various ways—partner with community organizations, while being unambiguous about our Jewish identity and the values that motivate us to be at their table. The recommendations in this article reflect a distinctive approach to social justice organizing, which includes not coming into a community unless we are invited and a willingness to confront the powers that perpetrate unjust policies.

## **A SYSTEMIC APPROACH TO SOCIAL JUSTICE THROUGH JEWISH EYES**

JSL programs provide an opportunity for participants to reflect on social justice themes and ideas from a Jewish perspective. Jewish traditions and history are essential in providing a shared moral and ethical framework for our youth. Experiential learning activities are critical in rooting activism in a Jewish historical narrative. In turn social justice education can strengthen participants’ Jewish identity, make Jewish education relevant for them, and help them develop a sense of pride in belonging to the Jewish community.

***Integrating an understanding of a systemic approach to social justice into JSL is what differentiates social justice work from isolated acts of charity and service.***

### **Biblical Commandments as Social Revolution**

The Torah is a revolutionary text that envisions social and economic structures for a just society and the fulfillment of human rights for all of its members. It commands the Jewish people time and time again to create an economic system that prevents the control of land and resources by a minority and to implement laws that protect the most vulnerable and preserve their dignity. The *mitzvot* (commandments) of *peah*, *leket*, and *shicheha* (the corner, the gleanings, and the forgotten sheaves of wheat that have fallen to the ground during the gathering of the harvest and that are left for the poor) ensure that those in need can find food without having to beg for sustenance. The laws of tithing, loans, *Shemita* (sabbatical year), and the Jubilee year are some of the measures to prevent social inequality.

The laws of the Torah were first implemented during the time of the Judges. In a recent excavation in Israel, archaeologists found pottery and other materials demonstrating that during that time the Israelites organized their society with more social equality than their Philistine and Canaanite neighbors. Some historians go so far as to claim that the formation of a Jewish nation was more a social than a religious revolution (Mazar, 1994).

### **Understanding Community**

It is often said that “it takes a village to raise a child.” Yet we hardly ever ask what it takes to *create the village*. Thus, Or Tzedek participants spend a significant amount of time learning about the concept of “community.” The notion of community is commonly used in the context of social justice organizing and therefore needs further exploration. How do you build community? What does it mean to be part of a community? Why do we need a community to effect social change? How do we reach out and partner with other communities on issues of justice? One of the tools used for this conversation is a discussion about Maimonides’ *Mishneh Torah*, Law of the Poor 9:12:

*One who settles in a community for thirty days becomes obligated to contribute to the charity fund; one who settles there for three months becomes obligated to contribute to the soup kitchen; one who settles there for six months becomes obligated to contribute clothing for the poor; one who settles there for nine months becomes obligated to contribute to the burial fund to pay for the funeral and burial needs of the indigent.*

This text sheds light on the individual’s obligation to contribute to and participate in communal responsibilities, and it illustrates the community’s responsibilities to include the newcomer or immigrant. It also points to the process of community building, which must happen over time and in gradually increasing degrees of intimacy and responsibility.

Another text for discussion is the reflection by Abba Kovner (1981) on the importance of a *minyán* (the quorum needed for prayer):

*There is no meaning in life if it is for their [the individual’s] sake only. Only with their linkage to one’s being to the words that come to witness and—are coming from afar toward you, is there meaning to standing (the amidah) one—but one in a community.*

In a culture of individualism where one’s desires trump the needs of others, Jewish tradition and history have an important message to this generation: building

community is an essential component in the struggle for justice. On the flipside, we need to be willing to challenge our own community when it condones injustice. The Prophets describe with much emotion and detail the challenges of confronting one's own community when it is oppressing the poor, the widows, and the orphans.

### A Prophetic Vision of Justice

In the introduction to a guidebook published by the Ziegler School of Rabbinic Studies entitled *Walking with Justice*, Rabbi Benjamin Scolnic writes that King Solomon's failures came when he tried to make the Land of Israel more powerful without creating the system to prevent growing social and economic inequality (Shavit Artson & Silver, 2008). The Prophets called on the Jewish people to remember the value that is the basis of the creation of the Jewish people as retold in the Exodus story: freedom from oppression. Isaiah's words, which are read during Yom Kippur services, exemplify this idea:

*This is the kind of fast day I'm after:  
to break the chains of injustice,  
get rid of exploitation in the workplace,  
free the oppressed,  
cancel debts.*

*What I'm interested in seeing you do is:  
sharing your food with the hungry,  
inviting the homeless poor into your homes,  
putting clothes on the shivering ill-clad,*

Isaiah 58: 6

The narrative of the Prophets includes powerful themes such as passion and righteous indignation when facing social injustice; isolation when fellow collaborators are not providing support; and standing for what one believes in, even when these values are unpopular. Make no mistake, young people often face such dilemmas in their everyday lives—in their school when they see bullying, in their youth group when they think differently from their peers, or at camp when they see a friend picking on a younger camper. They ask themselves this question, as we all do: Do I stand up for what is right, or do I conform to what is comfortable? Empowering our teens to speak up for what they believe in is perhaps the most important step in fostering their self-confidence and sense of leadership.

Through this model of leadership we can demonstrate how anger toward injustice is warranted when it is channeled toward strategic actions. Prophets are often isolated for their unpopular opinions, but this isolation can be overcome by reaching out to potential partners and strategizing how to build a strong base of support for one's cause. The concept of the "outsider" challenging the status quo is in line with the way many Jewish activists see themselves, including Rabbi Robert J. Marx, who marched with Martin Luther King Jr. during the civil rights movement. Rabbi Marx founded the Jewish Council on Urban Affairs in Chicago in 1964. As a congregational rabbi, he faced criticism from the Jewish community for his involvement in the civil rights movement. Consequently, in 1966 he wrote a letter to his congregants explaining why he was marching with Dr. King in the Gage Park neighborhood on Chicago's southwest side:

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*Why do I dissipate so much of my energy on a cause that is not ours? I am aware of these criticisms, and I am pained by them: for you see, I feel that freedom is Judaism, that Passover is not 3,000 years old—that it is today, and that we are part of it. I feel even more deeply that unless Jews—Jews who are devoted to their faith and their synagogues, as I am devoted to my faith and my synagogue—unless all of us are involved in the crucial issues of the world; Judaism will not exist in future generations for our children and our children’s children.*

In this letter he called on his fellow Jews to deal courageously with the judgmental forces against them; to be relevant and prophetic. To be prophetic means to expose corruption, even if it means losing respectable standing in the community; it means standing up for the underdog for the long haul, and it means to feel the pain of oppression and not rest until the oppressed have seen relief.

This discussion of ancient and modern-day prophets highlights the courage it takes to support unpopular ideas. When people have strongly rooted values and commitment, such as did Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel and Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. during the civil rights movement, they can overcome the most difficult of hurdles. Thus, Or Tzedek participants are asked to share how their own experiences of anger, isolation, and unpopularity can be channeled for positive change. Such discussions bring the intimidating ideas of prophetic action down to earth. Through sharing their own experiences, participants recognize that they too can be, and may already be, powerful leaders for social change. They are the leaders they have been waiting for.

Furthermore, discussions of “otherness,” of experiences of exclusion, and of possibilities for empowerment give participants confidence to explore unresolved issues in their own lives. They may feel “other” due to their sexual orientation, ethnicity, or religious views, or simply because they are (being told that they are) too fat, too skinny, too quiet, too verbose, too ugly, too awkward, and the list goes on. Or Tzedek provides teens with the space in which to explore their “otherness” and to take pride in what makes them unique. Engaging teens with issues of social injustice brings to the surface the quest for authenticity, dignity, and respect. Abbie Hoffman, a Jewish political and social activist in the 1960s and 1970s, said it best: “I see Judaism as a way of life. Sticking up for the underdog. Being an outsider. A critic of society. The kid on the corner who says the emperor has no clothes on. The Prophet” (Avni, 1989).

#### **UNDERSTANDING SYSTEMS OF OPPRESSION AND HUMAN RIGHTS: EMPOWERING PROGRAM PARTICIPANTS TO MAKE A DIFFERENCE**

Or Tzedek participants spend time with seasoned trainers and facilitators learning about systemic issues in society that engender injustice and impede the fulfillment of human rights. They participate in workshops such as “Understanding Oppression & Racism,” led by a human rights activist, and “Why Is Our Education System so Unequal?” facilitated by the executive director of a nonprofit organization specializing in tax and budget accountability. The workshop on oppression analyzes different systems of oppression, including institutional, social, and internalized oppression. Teens learn through examples how different types of oppressions are interrelated.

The broken educational system is a good case study to understand this issue. More affluent neighborhoods have better resourced schools because of the property-tax-based education financing system. In Chicago, neighborhoods are highly racially segregated; Illinois is the second most segregated state for African Americans, with 61% of Black students attending extremely segregated schools—schools with a 90–100% minority student body (Orfield & Lee, 2007). The current system of taxation and funding of education continuously feeds the vicious cycle of poverty and lack of opportunities for African Americans. This type of institutional racism can only be removed through structural change. Well-intentioned school supply drives will not suffice.

In these workshops the teens are engaged in passionate conversations about tax structures and institutional policies. They are able to relate these policies to their personal lives and their own community. They discuss responses and concrete solutions to these issues. They are not given the opportunity to hide behind misguided feelings of guilt or a sense of paralysis stemming from the immensity of the problems.

The educational moments, however, often occur spontaneously. The key is to ask questions and open the participants' eyes to things they take for granted. For instance, during the summer program, as one of their "fun" outings, the participants went to Chicago's famous Second City Comedy Club. While waiting for the acts to start, the program leaders asked the participants to look around: What do they notice about the racial make-up of the room? Why are there so few African Americans present? What does it say about access? What does it say about who actually benefits from culture and entertainment in the city? How do we change this reality?

### **TAKING ON INJUSTICE: FROM UNDERSTANDING TO ACTION**

Once the participants are grounded in the root causes of injustice, we begin to expose them to the different spheres of social change: advocacy, organizing, education (raising awareness), fundraising, and direct service. There is no hierarchy to the different spheres, and many spheres overlap. The teens learn how to create their own campaign strategies, which integrate some or all of the five spheres of change. Once they create the plan, they can apply it to any issue they may want to take up in the future—from public housing in Chicago to alleviating hunger in Somalia.

### **Meeting and Working With Community Organizations on the Ground**

Jewish service-learning can be very impactful for the program participants when they can engage in a dialogue with community leaders who are part of the solution. Meeting with organizations that specialize in these different types of social change approaches—advocacy, organizing, education, fundraising, and direct service—exposes participants to current issues and concrete tools for social change. In the summer of 2011, the program participants met with leaders from Northside P.O.W.E.R. (People Organized to Work, Educate and Restore), an institution-based people's power organization located in a low-income community in Chicago. Northside P.O.W.E.R., a partner of JCUA, works on issues that address the causes of hunger and poverty. After learning about the issues of housing

and food justice affecting the community, participants distributed fliers, knocked on doors, and talked to the neighborhood residents to raise awareness for an organizing campaign that aims to preserve affordable housing. In this activity, they internalized the fact that caring about justice means “taking it out into the streets” to mobilize others to get involved.

### **Art as Social Justice Activism**

The sense of anger and frustration with injustice that participants develop through these meetings and service learning projects can be translated into powerful creative testimonies. One of the teens, Benjamin Jacobi, learned about the foreclosure crisis firsthand by meeting with a community organization working on the issue and with residents who had been evicted. Moved by this experience, he wrote a poem to raise awareness about the housing crisis and recited it at a Jewish communal seder. This is his poem:

#### **Home**

*Is where the heart is.  
And the thing I find the hardest  
Is to stop the cycle once it's started,  
So let's start this  
Now.  
Home  
Should not be merely a privilege, but a right.  
But beyond where you lay your head at night,  
It's community, it's relationships, and for this is what we fight. Displacement  
can cause destruction—the level of which is awesome.  
To be uprooted is to suffer, a tree with no roots will never blossom.  
It carries with it not merely change of location,  
For a look at what it does let's focus on incarceration:  
Every sentence is life despite judge's intended.  
A prison term isn't like you're life's suspended  
Put on pause, press play once the term has been served.  
No, the world spins while one sits—tell me is that what's deserved?  
A year, is not a unit of time, it's a  
Unit of missed birthdays, weddings, lessons, moments, memories  
Or opportunities, promotions, new friends it's these  
Things  
That are impossible to take into consideration.  
This is my dissertation  
I can offer no consolation,  
Until one provides an alteration.  
The system's position on this is abdication.  
One example not enough? You require further explanation*

This powerful poem expresses with passion Benjamin's outrage that people are deprived of their basic human right to a home. The foreclosure crisis in Chicago disproportionately affects African American and Latinos (Takahashi, 2009). Benjamin's poem reflects on the fact that ending the crisis, which is a systemic issue, requires the intervention of institutions in power.



### Teen Leaders Taking Action

Some participants have been able to take what they learned and effect change in their own community, challenging decisions made by community leaders. Sam Hamer, an Or Tzedek participant, internalized what he learned in the summer program to change what he considered a problematic policy. When Sam, a senior at Chicago's elite Northside College Prep High School, learned that his senior prom was going to be held at the Congress Plaza Hotel, he moved into action. At the time, workers at the Congress had been out on strike for almost six years fighting for wages comparable to other hotel workers. Hamer knew firsthand of the workers' struggle through his participation in the strike during Or Tzedek's summer program. Hamer went to the school's principal who set up an emergency meeting of the prom committee, at which Sam convinced it to move the prom to an alternate location, even though it meant giving up a \$3,000 deposit. The students made up the lost money through fundraisers. In describing his experience, he wrote, "[In the meeting] I proceeded to relay some facts: that Congress workers earned \$8.80 an hour with minimal benefits while the standard is now \$13.20 with significant benefits. Also, I made it clear to the committee members that having the prom at the Congress would misrepresent Northside, a place where liberal thinking and cultured morals in fact abound." Why would a teenager, whose thoughts at this time of the year usually turn toward graduation and senior parties, think about a group of mostly immigrant hotel workers? Here is Hamer's answer: "Everything in my religious spirit, my religious being, tells me that to stand by while injustice occurs would be the wrong thing to do. Thankfully, the discussion [at the school] ended with the decision that our own financial burdens should never take precedence over the daily struggles of working class families that are less fortunate than us. When I got home I said the *Shema* (an affirmation of Judaism and a declaration of faith in God)."

The fight for social justice and human rights is not something Or Tzedek participants read about in a newspaper. Rather, they become part of it. In all of these activities, we facilitate their understanding that we are not coming to help those in need; we are trying to learn from those affected by the injustices. They learn to not perpetuate unjust policies by passive participation in them. The first step in the approach to social change is to listen to those affected by injustice and to develop partnerships; then relationships can be built with affected communities across social, economic and racial boundaries.

### Incorporating a Systemic Approach to Social Justice in Religious School and Other Jewish Educational Programs

Synagogues, religious schools, camps, and other Jewish educational programs can incorporate Or Tzedek's approach in their own programs. First, the program should provide an analysis of various ways to approach social justice work (service, organizing, advocacy, and so on); second, it should address root and systemic causes of injustice when examining issues such as poverty and racism; third, it should strive to engage participants directly with people affected by the issues being discussed; and, most importantly, it should allow the voices of those directly affected to be heard in a meaningful, respectful, and dignified way. In part, this means that field trips should not be "safari rides" where participants have a false sense of accomplishment by merely visiting and "helping" those "in



need” who are “down on their luck.” It is not a matter of luck. Rather, the program should highlight the ways in which power and privilege are systemically distributed in unequal ways and thus should engage participants in meaningful dialogues where they can understand that they are receiving and learning, and not only giving.

What does this mean concretely? It means steering the conversations toward addressing certain prevalent attitudes. Thoughtful preparation before a service project and debriefing are important in moving the participants away from “blaming the victim.” A common, though seldom voiced, perception of homeless individuals is that they are lazy and are to blame for being poor. Understanding the systemic problems that lead to poverty and other forms of oppression provides a context for understanding why people are stuck in intolerable situations and have to make impossible choices. Furthermore, some participants may question the relevance of these issues to them. After all, they may not feel as if they or the Jewish community is affected by those problems. It is precisely here that the educator would do well to highlight systemic issues, so that participants can better appreciate the famous words of Martin Luther King Jr. that an injustice anywhere is a threat to justice everywhere. The following parable from the *Midrash* is especially instructive here:

*A man in a boat began to bore a hole under his seat. His fellow passengers protested. “What concern is it of yours?” he responded. “I am making a hole under my seat, not yours.” They replied, “That is so, but when the water enters and the boat sinks, we too will drown” (Rabbi Shimon Bar Yohai, Leviticus Rabbah 4:6).*

When participants see the relevance of the issues to their own lives and communities, they will be all the more inspired to address them.

### **JEWISH SERVICE-LEARNING PROVIDER ORGANIZATIONS SHOULD NOT FEAR POLITICS**

Jewish institutions are sometimes concerned about creating programs that are considered too “political.” At Or Tzedek, without being partisan, we explain that politics is one of the ways that we can fight for a more just society. For the most part, Jews in America no longer have to expend all of our energy on mere survival; we are now able to participate in the public sphere to influence the discourse on contemporary issues. We cannot claim to address social justice without being political. Indeed, the civil rights movement used political means for change. Instead of shielding our youth from being involved in politics, we should connect the dots between social change and politics. For example, in today’s recession the issue of inequality is at the core of the debate, whether it is about high rates of unemployment, the foreclosure crisis, or failing school systems. A discussion about taxes is really a discussion about how we allocate our resources and provide equality of opportunities.

Statistics show that the rich are getting richer; the middle class is at risk to disappear, and low-income people struggle to survive (Reich, 2011). This should be a real crisis of conscience for all of us. At Or Tzedek, we vigilantly examine whose basic human rights to a living wage, a decent home, and a solid education are being violated and why. This conversation can become personal for youth when they understand that behind the economic lingo there is real pain and

***We cannot claim to address social justice without being political.***

anguish among people in the United States, including within our Jewish communities. We want our teens to engage in public debate and own up to their civic duty. We want them to understand the issues and be articulate about them. We want them to find their prophetic voice, not mute it.

## CONCLUSION

One of our goals of our Jewish service-learning program is to provide program participants with the tools and skills necessary to address injustice in society. The program facilitates a process in which participants' relationships to themselves, their community, their institutions, and the world around them shift. Indeed, the connection between self-empowerment and empowerment of others is fundamental. For example, when teaching the basic principles of community organizing, we explain the importance of understanding the basic interests of those we interact with, as well as our own. We ask Or Tzedek participants to reflect on who they are and what influences shaped who they are. One participant, visibly emotional during the exercise, said, "I have never really thought about these questions." Later in the week participants and staff were playing the "compliment game," where participants must give compliments to each other. Then, when the rules changed and they had to compliment themselves, the aforementioned participant said, "I am beautiful," and began to cry. When asked if she was OK, she replied, "Yes, I'm fine. It's just that I've never been able to say that about myself until this week."

Such powerful experiences serve as a foundation for taking action. This process takes teens from being a spectator or bystander to becoming an ally for others. It is easier to check off our responsibility to make the world a better place by only doing direct service or charity work, but it has limited effects on the creation of justice. As Jewish social justice organizations are grappling with how to build the Jewish social justice movement, we already have one effective tool to do so: Jewish service-learning programs. We have the potential to multiply the effects of our JSL programs by exposing participants to the roots of social problems.

When trying to relieve poverty, we need to change both the attitudes and institutional structures that cause poverty. Ultimately, this approach to justice enables our youth to understand how societal problems affect and ultimately limit us all. As King wrote in his *Letter from a Birmingham Jail*, "We are caught in an inescapable network of mutuality, tied in a single garment of destiny. Whatever affects one directly, affects all indirectly." Although one person is unable to alleviate all the suffering in the world, we are reminded and comforted by the words of our Jewish sages: "It's not up to you to complete the work, nor are you free to desist from it" (*Pirke Avot* 2:21).

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## Strengthening Mentorship in Jewish Service Learning Settings

*Erica Hymen*

*San Francisco State University*

The positive impact of mentoring relationships on young people is widely known, yet many programs do not use this proven strategy to increase academic achievement, success, and identity development. Jewish service-learning (JSL) programs provide an ideal environment for successful mentoring by employing adults who embody a clear cultural understanding of the student, a style of authentic caring, and attention to transformative learning. In a JSL setting, mentors can provide youth with safe, authentic relationships in contexts that teach Jewish cultural norms and practices and information that are vital to success in school, life, and Jewish communal involvement. Jewish mentors can create an environment conducive for transformative learning where the student can experience dramatic shifts in the way they see themselves and world. The best mentors will be skilled facilitators able to debrief, lead a discussion and reflection, and draw out key learnings for all students.

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