

Jewish Studies and Service-Learning in Higher Education

What Each Can Gain From the Other

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Although service-learning has become an incredibly popular and powerful movement in higher education, the Jewish Studies field has to date had minimal interaction with, much less integration of, the practices and philosophies of service-learning and its pedagogical parallels such as civic engagement and community-based research. This article explores the opportunities and challenges that emerge at the intersection of Jewish communal interests in service-learning and higher education's views toward the field. We map out the rise and spread of service-learning in higher education and offer a typology of practice to better understand the differing models of service-learning currently enacted. We conclude by suggesting that the field of Jewish Studies may serve as fertile ground for reconciling the potentially divergent goals of the university and Jewish service-learning as well as expanding Jewish service learning to reach a far larger audience and to provide a theoretical and pedagogic foundation to communal activities.

Service-learning has become an incredibly popular and powerful movement in higher education, precisely because it is an engaged and engaging synergy of theory and practice, linking colleges with communities, and classrooms and textbooks with the lived world. It would thus make sense that such an activist practice and philosophy would be deeply and enthusiastically embraced within the academic field of Jewish Studies, particularly as scholars and practitioners continue to search for the field's relevancy to the academy and the larger Jewish public (Morris, 2010). Service-learning seemingly offers a viable model to embrace concrete and impactful action in the world by linking it to already existing academic Jewish Studies courses and programs. *Tikkun Olam*—from the academic quad to our urban centers: a perfect match.

Or so it would seem. Yet, surprisingly, the Jewish Studies field has to date had minimal interaction with, much less integration of, the practices and philosophies of service-learning and its pedagogical parallels such as civic engagement and community-based research. This lack of engagement is that much more glaringly absent as the Jewish communal service field and Jewish service-learning in nonacademic contexts have become ever more popular with Jewish youth and the Jewish philanthropic community (Irie & Blair, 2008; Chertok

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et al., 2011). Repair the World's recent support for the development of a Jewish Studies service-learning initiative (see the article by Eisen, Sacks, and Rosenberg on p. 3) could thus be viewed as a singular moment and opportunity to coalesce around a more embodied, collaborative, and applied Jewish Studies.

We have high hopes for such an opportunity. At the same time, we—two scholars immersed in our respective fields of community engagement and Jewish Studies—are very aware that there are distinct challenges in this supposed synergy. To take but two examples: in the service-learning field, even as service-learning has become so popular and commonplace, there are troubling ambiguities and contradictions in how differing constituencies—students, faculty, administrators, and community partners—view and enact what service-learning is for and who truly benefits from it. In the Jewish Studies field, academic coursework is viewed as fundamentally about challenging students to raise (and overturn) key questions and issues about their social, political, and cultural worldviews; is this agenda compatible with Jewish communal priorities and Jewish identity-building?

This article explores the opportunities and challenges that emerge at the intersection of Jewish communal interests in service-learning and higher education's views toward the field. We map out the rise and spread of service-learning in higher education and offer a typology of practice to better understand the differing models of service-learning currently enacted. We then provide some insights into how these differing models of service-learning both align with and may be in tension with the ideals of the Jewish Studies field and the larger Jewish service-learning (JSL) movement. We conclude by suggesting that the field of Jewish Studies may serve as fertile ground for reconciling the potentially divergent goals of the university and Jewish service-learning, as well as expanding Jewish service-learning to reach a far larger audience and to provide a theoretical and pedagogic foundation to communal activities. In so doing, we suggest that Jewish traditions and scholarships may be able to offer some important insights for the larger service-learning field.

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SERVICE-LEARNING IN HIGHER EDUCATION

Service-learning in higher education is traditionally defined as the integration of community service within the context of an academic course (Bringle & Hatcher, 1995). Students thus work in a homeless shelter while studying poverty in an introductory Sociology course or serve as math tutors for migrant youth in their Education Methods course. This demand for experiential and “useful” knowledge arose in the late 1960s and early 1970s as a conscious and activist response to university practices deemed woefully disengaged from and useless to the local and global communities in which institutions resided but were not truly a part (Stanton et al., 1999).

Today, service-learning is practiced at more than 1,100 postsecondary institutions by tens of thousands of faculty who engage well over a million college students a year in service activities (Campus Compact, 2010). It has been shown to increase students' cognitive skills, self-esteem, and cultural competency, as well as to more broadly foster institutions' retention and graduation rates (Seifer, 2005). In fact, service-learning has been shown to be just one of four “high impact” practices in higher education (along with first-year learning communities,

study abroad, and undergraduate research experiences) that support college students' academic success (Kuh, 2008).

It is important, however, to realize that there is no single "thing" called service-learning, because there are many modes and models for engaging with the community. This diversity can be captured by the multiplicities of service-learning practices and monikers: community engagement, civic engagement, public scholarship, translational research, action research, participatory action research, community-based research, academic service-learning, or community-based participatory research. Some view service-learning as a pedagogical method, others as a means of civic and multicultural enhancement, and still others as a mode of social justice. Although we discuss later some of the problems and implications of this variability, for now we summarize service-learning as something that is a central component of an academic course that has four key attributes (what we gloss as the "four Rs"): *respect* for the community being served, *reciprocity* in practices and outcomes, *relevance* to the academic course in which it is taught, and the opportunity for *reflection* (Butin, 2010a).

Yet even as service-learning has become a commonplace in higher education, there are troubling signs that it has hit an "engagement ceiling." Key groups and scholars have begun to openly talk of a movement that has "stalled" (Hartley et al., 2010) as a wide variety of data suggest that service-learning has become shallowly implemented and institutionalized, to the detriment of the impact on the very communities and the social justice goals initially envisioned (Keen & Hall, 2009; Stoecker & Tyrone, 2009). The gap between the rhetoric and reality of service-learning seems to grow wider and more worrisome each year.

Although the reasons for this growing gap are complex and varied (see Butin, 2010b), numerous initiatives have sprung up to address how higher education can truly meet the needs of its local and global communities in sustained and impactful ways. Community-based research, for example, has become a powerful model for embracing and privileging community voices and needs to ensure that academic work is meaningful to its public constituencies (Strand et al., 2003; Stoecker & Tyrone, 2009). Similarly, there are dozens of academic programs—certificates, minors, and majors—focused on community engagement, broadly conceived, that integrate service-learning across multiple courses and multiple years to ensure sustained, sequential, and scaffolded opportunities for students to engage with their communities (Butin, 2012).

Thus whereas much of current service-learning practice is (unfortunately) positioned as an add-on—such that a professor could add in or leave out service-learning without substantially changing the course content or student experience—these newer initiatives place service-learning and community engagement at the heart of the academic process. Not only does the service-learning become a central component, or "text," in the course but this experiential activity also becomes the key to the course's success. A course on Jewish American History, for example, might investigate the evolution of synagogues through a partnership with local synagogues interested in creating an archive and public exhibit of their historical materials. A course on Jewish Identity might have its students work with a local immigrant aid organization helping resettle new (Jewish and/or non-Jewish) immigrants. In both cases, students support relevant community

needs and, at the same time, foster engaged and deep learning of their academic course content.

JEWISH STUDIES AND JEWISH SERVICE-LEARNING

This brings us to the state of Jewish Studies in the academy today. At a time of shrinking resources in the academy, Jewish Studies programs continue to thrive and even grow. More and more students have the opportunity to take Jewish Studies courses and to learn from scholars who approach the study of Jews and Judaism from a variety of disciplines. Yet, there are signs that students and faculty are interested in expanding the teaching and research agenda of Jewish Studies. Increasingly, students arrive at college with an interest in global issues and the desire to continue the community engagement work now commonplace for high school students. Most Jewish Studies programs do not offer courses or opportunities that address these interests. Many scholars (likely influenced by the same trends shaping their students' interests) seek more engaged, collaborative and practical avenues for their own research and teaching agendas. Jewish Studies scholars, however, have yet to identify a path toward a less theoretical and more engaged agenda that aligns well with academic standards, teaching commitments, and the desire to place the field within the mainstream of the academy. Indeed, the push for an "applied" Jewish Studies lags far behind similar initiatives in other fields.

Service-learning has the potential to expand Jewish Studies and to provide opportunities within the university framework for faculty to rethink their roles as teachers, scholars, and engaged community members. Service-learning pedagogy promises to boost student enrollment, improve student outcomes, engage a new generation of community supporters, and provide Jewish Studies programs increased visibility on campuses more interested than ever in promoting civic engagement.

Thus, the explosion of communal support for and attention to Jewish service-learning demonstrated by publications like this one serve as an exciting catalyst toward new directions in Jewish Studies. Organizations such as Repair the World offer the training, resources, and encouragement to overcome the relatively steep initial learning curve and time investment necessary for creating new course offerings. Yet, once established, the creation of a cohort of faculty committed to service-learning would have significant benefits for both Jewish and Jewish Studies service-learning. Because Jewish Studies courses reach thousands of students, Jewish Studies service-learning courses can leverage university resources to engage large numbers of students in meaningful service. In turn, service-learning pedagogy creates new opportunities in Jewish Studies for intensive, meaningful, and sustained service projects. Yet there are key distinctions between the two approaches to service-learning.

THE CHALLENGES OF INCORPORATING SERVICE-LEARNING INTO JEWISH STUDIES

There are several challenges in incorporating service-learning within the field of Jewish Studies. Integrating this new pedagogy requires extensive training, resources for new course development, and the creation of new community partnerships. Yet these challenges can be met with modest funds (highly leveraged

by existing university resources) and initiatives. Three bigger challenges go beyond the dimension of technical training and resource support—respecting the key differences between Jewish Studies and JSL, clarifying the parameters of “need,” and addressing the blurry lines between concepts of service and justice.

The partnership between Jewish service-learning and Jewish Studies service-learning rests on a productive tension between two distinct approaches to service and Jewish knowledge. Jewish service-learning has identity-building goals and targets its activities primarily toward Jewish students. As a recent and influential report summarized, “Jewish Service Learning combines direct service that responds to real community needs with structured learning and time for reflection, *all of which are placed in a rich context of Jewish education and values*” (Irie & Blair, 2008, p. 2, emphasis added). In contrast, programs in Jewish Studies stand on two pillars of scholarship and higher education: (1) the academic freedom to explore Judaism through as objective a lens as possible without any external pressure on classroom content or values-based outcomes and (2) a commitment to serving students of diverse backgrounds (including multiple faith communities). Jewish Studies courses do not strive to promote specific Jewish values or to build/reinforce Jewish identity. Although such courses may (and often do) achieve these two objectives, their realization is a byproduct of a critical, scholarly examination of the course material. Respecting this “church-state” distinction is the basic guideline of any partnership between Jewish service-learning and Jewish Studies service-learning.

A second productive tension emerges in identifying the types of “need” that meet the criteria for service. Jewish Studies service-learning and Jewish service-learning both place fulfilling a demonstrated community need as a central criterion of authentic service. For Jewish service-learning, these needs are implicitly tied to issues around economic and social disenfranchisement. Although this is of course also an important focus for Jewish Studies, there are additional approaches to service that have the potential to push the conversation in new directions.

The key point to understand here is that the vast majority of Jewish Studies faculty teach courses related to Jewish history, politics, sociology, culture, and languages, and as such, faculty interested in adapting service-learning must figure out how to integrate their own areas of expertise and/or teaching obligation with real communal needs. Identifying service opportunities for Jewish Studies classes (which include a broad range of topics from Hebrew Bible to medieval Jewish history to American Judaism) that are “relevant to the academic course” (to use one of the four R’s) is not an easy task and goes to the heart of the difficulty of attempting to position service-learning as integrating the theory of the academic classroom with the practice of experiential education and community needs.

Creative and fruitful approaches to integrating service into a variety of topics should emerge as Jewish Studies faculty explore the linkage between scholarship and service. Take, for instance, an American Jewish history course. Course objectives may include exploring the experience of Jewish immigration and its impact on Jewish religion, culture, and politics. To understand the immigrant phenomenon more deeply, an instructor might approach an immigrant aid

organization looking for volunteers to help resettle new (non-Jewish) immigrants. The experience of meeting new immigrants and learning about their challenges would provide an important perspective from which students could compare/contrast the process of Jewish immigration.

There is another potential avenue for the instructor of this American Jewish history course. Suppose she was interested in demonstrating the evolution of the synagogue as a Jewish institution. This professor's service requirement could build on a partnership with local synagogues interested in creating an archive of their historical materials. Students could work directly with synagogue staff and volunteer to curate an exhibit (perhaps both online and in the synagogue building itself) narrating the history of the institution and linking its particular history to trends in American Jewish life.

The first strategy integrates service by expanding students' understanding of the immigrant experience as an integral part of learning about the impact of immigration on American Jews. The second responds to a need in the Jewish community to chronicle and share institutional histories. Creating an archive of some sort provides students with hands-on experience of the Jewish past that ideally enriches their learning outcomes.

Thus, the direct service opportunities most commonly associated with community engagement may or may not lend themselves well to full integration into the academic content of Jewish Studies classes. Yet in both examples, the service-learning has fruitfully supported the Jewish Studies faculty's efforts to make the academic experience more engaging, more applied, and, one hopes, more significant both to the student and to the community. The standard of academic relevance in university service-learning can thus lead scholars to consider a more capacious range of needs, which may include Jewish religious, communal, or cultural needs. Additionally, it helps students, faculty, and higher education more broadly see the Jewish Studies field as a dynamic and engaged discipline that walks the talk of public scholarship and the relevance of the academy to the larger world.

Such a broader definition of need in academic service-learning pushes the field of service learning to articulate more clearly the meaning of "need." Does sending a group of young adults from New York City to Ghana to build houses for a week fulfill a greater need than having those same young adults work with local communal leaders to create digital archives for various Jewish institutions? Does the direct service of serving food in a soup kitchen fulfill a greater need than creating a Passover Haggadah for new immigrant families as a way of recognizing, hearing, and preserving their stories?

Given the diversity of possible community partnerships, academic service-learning remains agnostic on the relative needs of those being served. Instead, the growth of Jewish Studies service-learning hinges on clarifying best practice criteria for ensuring the relevance of the service component of the course. These criteria would include how well the instructor integrated the experience of the volunteer work into the syllabus, the relationship between the course's learning objectives and the service, and the ways in which the instructor created opportunities for student reflection. Notably absent from these criteria are questions about the specific needs of those served.

The definition of service as fulfilling needs is further complicated by the relationship between service and justice. Jewish Studies service-learning brings a more critical approach to the relationship between Jewish and service—two terms with an ambiguous historical relationship to one another. The references to “Tikkun Olam” and “repair the world” throughout Jewish service-learning weaves concepts of justice and ethics into the service-learning vocabulary. That Judaism stands for justice and making the world a better place (which in many ways may be accurate) is rarely questioned in communal conversations.

Yet scholars gravitate toward questioning the boundaries and limits of our day-to-day practices and presumptions, such as by asking questions that explore the shifting conceptions and diversity of Jewish values. Jewish Studies service-learning seeks a nuanced evaluation of the relationship between contemporary ideas of improving the world and historical antecedents. The idea is not to discredit a very real and important aspect of the Jewish tradition. Instead, the goal is to uncover a tradition that struggles with many of the same complex questions and priority setting that any individual seriously confronting ideas of justice must consider. Jewish justice enters classroom conversations not as an established premise, but as a rich topic of inquiry and exploration. It is the opening question rather than the assumed answer of whether service and justice are always aligned. To that same end, scholars’ dedication to critical assessment will also encourage students to think more holistically about the root causes of injustice and disparity. As a result, an indirect approach to addressing poverty—such as a campaign to restructure the government’s role in social services—might emerge as a fitting service-learning project. Jewish Studies thus blurs the dichotomy between an apolitical category of service and the moral and political complexity of normative claims about justice.

CONCLUSION

As both JSL and Jewish Studies service-learning fields develop, we believe that acknowledging their overlapping goals and distinct approaches will serve to sharpen and improve both areas. Jewish Studies faces the challenge of integrating a new pedagogy and broader communal engagement without sacrificing its core mission of scholarship and teaching. A partnership with Jewish Studies will push the emerging field of Jewish service-learning to clarify the meaning of service, especially its relationship to the ideals of justice.

We deeply believe that there are immense opportunities in the alignment of the Jewish Studies field with the service-learning movement. On the Jewish Studies side, service-learning can invigorate the field by creating sought-after opportunities for faculty and students to explore the intersection of scholarship and civic concerns. On the service-learning side, there is much to be gained from an academic discipline that was formed to examine and be sensitive to marginalized and often traumatized populations and peoples and one that has at its base such a strong conviction to, indeed, repair the world. Moreover, the synergy of these two areas can inform and support the already thriving Jewish service-learning movement through its careful attention to and critique of practice, theory, and impact. The Jewish service movement is already strong and growing stronger, and it behooves us as engaged scholars to join these conversations.

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