

Getting Comfortably Uncomfortable

Youth Perspectives on Community Service from the Ma'yan Research Training Interns

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with

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Ma'yan Research Training Interns

After a year of studying the question, “Who is served by our community service?” Ma'yan's Research Training Interns—nine Jewish girls in New York City area high schools—have some ideas about what makes service matter and where it is failing to live up to its ethos and ideals. This article, adapted from a conversation with five teen interns, highlights critiques, insights, and ideas gleaned from their internship experience and personal observations. Bringing youth voices directly to bear on the discussion of Jewish service-learning, interns raise concerns about contradictions between the structure and the mission of many community service programs in the Jewish community and in secular programs and high schools. Excerpts include interns' critiques of immersive travel-based service models, their analysis of the benefits of service-learning approaches, and acknowledgment of the short-term frustrations inherent in working toward long-term social change.

Ma'yan, a research and education incubator focusing on the lives of Jewish girls in contemporary society, created the Research Training Internship four years ago to bring the voices and concerns of Jewish teen girls into discussions about policies and programs that affect them. Over the past year, the third cohort of nine Research Training Interns (RTIs), all students in New York City area high schools, has met monthly with Ma'yan staff to examine the question, “Who is served by our community service?” They have developed research and critical thinking skills, learned about the history of *tikkun olam* and Jewish service-learning, read accounts of direct service and social justice activism, and studied how young peoples' service is portrayed in popular culture. Finally, they created their own research instruments, interviewed school and program administrators, collected documents, and surveyed both Jewish and non-Jewish high school students in the New York City metropolitan region.

Recently, five Research Training Interns—Alex Cohen, Emma Goldberg, Alice Kallman, Carolyn Kettig, and Leah Schwartz—sat down with Beth Cooper Benjamin, RTI advisor and Ma'yan Director of Research. Over a pizza dinner at

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Alex Cohen, is a senior at Millburn High School in Millburn, New Jersey, where she also lives. *Emma Goldberg*, is a senior at the Abraham Joshua Heschel School in Manhattan where she also lives. *Alice Kallman*, is a sophomore at the Bronx High School of Math and Science in the Bronx and lives in Manhattan. *Carolyn Kettig* is a junior at Hunter College High School in Manhattan and lives in Queens. *Leah* is a senior at the Solomon Schechter School of Westchester and lives in Dobbs Ferry, New York.

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The JCC in Manhattan, they discussed their work together and offered recommendations for adults who work with teens on service and social justice issues.

HOW TO DO GOOD BETTER

Although the interns remain committed to preserving traditional community service opportunities for young people (“at least everyone is doing something”—Leah), their training and research over the past year have led them to identify several concerns about the ways service requirements and programs are structured and presented to teens. They consistently express a deep desire for their service activities to be impactful and effective in addressing real problems and needs in the world around them. In this regard, they find many service experiences wanting—from schools offering service credit for assisting with school events, to service trips abroad that allocate the bulk of their time to recreation and touring. The RTIs have developed keen radar for what strike them as overhyped or illegitimate forms of service. As Leah put it, “I want to make sure that there’s actually going to be an impact.”

To maximize impact and meaning, the RTIs feel that service programs should prioritize opportunities to build relationships with community partners. In our focus group discussion, Carolyn offers a cautionary tale:

[My friend] had always mentioned to the leader of [her] youth group...that, “We should really spend more time in the shelter [affiliated with our] temple...We can create relationships with the people that go there, and it will just be meaningful for them and for us, and I think that’s something we should really do.” And the youth group leader always brushed her off...it was all about the fun for the kids in the group.

Carolyn sees youth service providers trying to “mix up” their service activities or service sites to keep youth engaged and interested. Yet she feels that this effort is misguided: “You don’t necessarily have to do that, you know? You can make a really big impact, focusing on one area and trying to fix that.” Alice agrees, arguing that program leaders are “so focused on making sure that the kids involved are having fun and staying interested, that they’re not really focusing on what’s really important in [the] community service that they’re doing.”

The RTIs agree that service-learning approaches contribute greatly to both the meaningfulness and the impact of service. Alex sees the benefits of “the beforehand conversations, and the afterwards” where teens can reflect, “Wow, this is the impact that we made” as opposed to just like, “Okay, see you later...in synagogue.” Emma feels that teens should work on issues they truly care about, but that “before jumping into them, they [should] learn about them.” She argues that service-learning “is really effective, because...it’s great to really understand the issue, and then start to say, like, ‘Question #1: What needs to be fixed? Question #2: What specific skills do I have that I can contribute to fixing it?’”

Some interns also identified the benefits of engaging in less traditional forms of service, such as working with organizations engaged in promoting longer term change. Leah, who interned last summer with AVODAH: The Jewish Service Corps, gained a new perspective on the value of indirect service: “It was sort of a domino effect, but what I was...doing was actually going to affect someone else. I felt that was a better use of my time than going [on an immersive service trip abroad].” Carolyn agrees that interning with social change organizations

can be a powerful service and learning experience: “I think it would be so beneficial for someone to...intern for a few months” with a “credible” nonprofit, “and learn what...those people...have to do, the behind-the-scenes work of getting these things done, because I feel like no one understands that.”

An appreciation of the context surrounding teens’ service activities can deepen the meaning the experience can bring them. Ideally, it can also help them identify the root causes underlying the problems addressed by their service. Early in our work together, the interns heard a lecture by the historian and activist, Dr. Rachel Mattson, in which she offered a reassessment of *tikkun olam*, the *mitzvah* to repair the broken world. Mattson emphasized the importance of choosing the right “broken” thing to repair: identifying the wrong “brokenness” can lead to victim-blaming, a focus on symptoms, and failure to recognize root causes.

This challenge has informed much of the RTIs’ thinking over the past year. As Emma explains, “I think...there is a lot that’s broken in the system, even the fact that, I never really thought about this so much before, but just that we do service without questioning...if we’re doing it in the most efficient way, and if we’re addressing actual problems, or like problems that we invented.” Leah looks back at her own development over the course of the program and decides that her original assessment of what’s broken was wrong: “So what I said was broken was that not enough people know about [what’s wrong in the world], and...that was such a naïve thing to say, because I wholeheartedly believe that most people do know about what’s going on.” Revising her previous assessment, Leah argues that “instead of awareness, I think the focus should be on action...because raising awareness only goes so far.” Emma agrees, suggesting that people need to develop the skills to lobby and advocate for policy changes, “because...it’s great if you’re going to go tutor an underprivileged student, but what if you could reform education so people are getting what they need in school, rather than needing hundreds of teenage volunteers to tutor?”

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ON THE ETHICS OF SERVICE TRAVEL

Interns singled out immersive travel-based service (a.k.a. service trips or Alternative Breaks) for criticism because of their structure, impact, and potential misuse. Leah, who participated in a service trip to Africa before becoming an RTI, has come to think differently about that experience:

Not to discount my experience last summer, because it was a really, really meaningful experience, and I did see the tangible ways in which we impacted the community, but I don’t think that was the most effective way...I don’t think what they needed most was the community center [we built]. If I’d known their situation personally, I would’ve gone out to Old Navy and bought 100 pairs of flip-flops, and that’s what I would have brought. And I think that would have served them so much better than the community center that we built.

Emma relates a similar story from a friend, who went abroad on a program with the similar goal of building a community center. Yet as Emma explains, locals told her friend that “what they needed most was a hospital clinic, because their clinic...really didn’t house enough people and there was so much illness in their community.” In both cases, the teen participants have come to feel that such experiences, although rich in some ways, were insufficiently aligned with the real needs of the communities they were meant to serve.

Emma is particularly concerned about the lack of context and critical reflection built into some immersive service-travel programs and their tendency to “just jump right into an area you don’t know,” where “you don’t understand the culture, you’re not equipped to do the kind of work that you’re doing. And maybe even, you’re not addressing the community’s most dire needs.” Carolyn worries about a different lack of critical reflection: in this case, on the part of a synagogue youth group sponsoring a service trip to the Caribbean. The trip was prohibitively expensive for Carolyn’s friend (“if she had paid [for it], she wouldn’t have been able to afford to do anything over the summer”), so she stayed home and volunteered locally on her own during the break. Yet when the group returned, “they taunted her for not having gone on this trip, and made her feel guilty and bad about it.” As Carolyn is quick to point out, this “was really ironic, because they’d just come back from one of the poorest places in the world, and they couldn’t understand why one of their own peers couldn’t afford to go on a really expensive trip.”

The RTIs suggest that teens are counting on trip providers to attend carefully to addressing the real, critical needs of service beneficiaries. Equally, trip leaders may need to help teen participants become more conscious and compassionate about the ways the injustices they encounter abroad relate to inequities that persist in their own communities at home. Or alternately, as Carolyn suggests, “Just focus on your own community. You don’t need to go to Africa or [the Caribbean] and fix their communities, because guess what? Your own community is pretty...broken too.”

GIVING UP INSTANT GRATIFICATION

The RTIs have wrestled a lot this past year with the challenge of long-term structural and social change work (which is how we see the RTI itself). Certainly the absence of easy solutions or quick fixes is less immediately gratifying for volunteers. As Alice explains, “All we really want is immediate gratification. Like, we don’t want to do something that we don’t really know what the effects are going to be, [where] we’ll have to wait awhile to see how it works out.” Alex has struggled to accept the idea that even the RTIs’ best work would not be enough to resolve the problems they have been identifying. “I wanted to fix the world,” she says, laughing. When asked what it was like to be told that their work alone would not solve these problems, she says it was “so incredibly frustrating... I just want to be like, ‘Yeah, it’s fixed. We don’t have to worry about it anymore.’” Alex likens this frustration to an impossible-to-complete task list:

Alex: How aggravating is it when you make a list and you can’t cross [any items] off? I’m trying, I’m trying, I’m trying, but it’s not happening.

Carolyn: Yeah, you constantly can’t finish this list.

Giving up the fantasy of easy solutions to complex social and structural problems is a painful but important growth process for young people interested in working for change. It may be particularly challenging for affluent youth, accustomed to experiencing themselves as efficacious and powerful in the world.

FROM SERVICE TO SOCIAL RESPONSIBILITY

In addition to discussing reform of community service and service-learning, the RTIs spoke eloquently about how to cultivate a sense of social responsibility and

the challenge of becoming “comfortably uncomfortable.” We conclude with their call for young people to develop the willingness to wrestle with what is broken in the world and keep working for change:

Carolyn: Today I was sitting on the subway, and it was really hard, because there was a homeless man sitting there. . . . He was talking about what needs to be changed in this country: [that] funds are going to places where they shouldn't be going, homeless people and social repair organizations don't get funding, things like that. He was sitting there with his bags and everything, just talking. . . . And it was just hard to sit there, because people were moving away. . . . [It's] abrasive, you know? A homeless man, sitting there, clearly in dire need of help, telling them what society needs to change. He was not even begging for himself. It was just, “Look at me, this is wrong and this is your fault.” And I couldn't bring myself to move, and I was listening to him, and I just felt so bad and so guilty. I didn't go anywhere [to experience that], you know? I was taking the subway home from school.

Beth: So you don't have to go halfway around the world to have that kind of confrontation.

Carolyn: Exactly. I don't know, that was heartbreaking for me.
(dialogue omitted)

Carolyn: And the sad thing was that there was a group of high school kids, and the minute they heard him talking, they were like, “Oh, we're not going to listen to this.” And they went to the other car. But the most important people to hear that are people that age. They actually have time and power to change something, and they don't even want to deal with it, you know?..

Beth: I keep thinking about the difference between moving and being moved. That what you're describing is that you have to be willing to *not move to be moved*. It's so easy, especially when you live a life of relative privilege, to move, to build yourself a gated community, to move to another train, whatever, and to avoid being confronted, and moved by somebody else's suffering.
(dialogue omitted)

Emma: I think there's something to be said for being, like, comfortably uncomfortable, acknowledging just how much suffering there is, and how limited we are in alleviating it. But that we aren't limited in really grappling with it, and thinking, “What are the roots?” and “How can we not only address the symptoms, but also diagnose the whole problem?”

The Research Training Interns acknowledge that not every teen will be interested in wrestling with others' suffering or be willing to become “comfortably uncomfortable.” Some people are going to be in it for the fun and the instant gratification. And as Leah argues, “I have to believe that shoving them aside is worse than catering to them and saying, ‘Hey, let's go surf.’” Because at least those teens are still laying some bricks down that need laying. But if the RTIs' experience and their insights teach us anything, it is that inviting teens to engage deeply and complexly with the problems of the world can pay off. These teens understand that making a real impact requires real commitment and sometimes leads to real heartbreak. What they want is to be met by adults who are prepared to challenge and support them, who understand that helping teens to wrestle with the brokenness in the world is the first step toward repairing it.

Want to hear more? An extended version of this discussion with Ma'yan's Research Training Interns is available at www.RepairLabs.org/JJCS.

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