

If We Build It, They Will Come

A Case for Developing the Field of Jewish Service-Learning in Israel

Dyonna Ginsburg

Director, Jewish Service Learning, The Jewish Agency for Israel

The time has come for a concerted effort to build the field of Jewish service-learning in Israel. But, before exploring the hows of field-building, it is worthwhile to ask why: Why should Israel be the focus of a concerted effort to grow immersive Jewish service-learning programs? This article makes the case that Israel presents an ideal platform for immersive Jewish service-learning programs, because Israel has genuine needs coupled with world-renowned expertise in areas of social justice and environmental import and, as a Jewish country, Israel is perfect for an integrated, Jewish conversation about justice.

Currently, the field of Jewish service-learning in Israel is characterized by a handful of programs that target young North American Jews and that are officially recognized and funded by Repair the World, an organization founded in 2009 to “make service a defining part of American Jewish life.”¹ Although these programs are known for their high educational standards, many have struggled to fill their ranks and reach financial sustainability. Alongside these accredited programs are others, often larger and better endowed programs that include some aspects of volunteerism, but have yet to adopt the more stringent *Standards of Practice for Immersive Jewish Service-Learning Programs* developed by Repair the World (Repair the World, 2011).

Many—myself included—believe that the time has come for a concerted effort to build the field of Jewish service-learning (JSL) in Israel—exploring ways of expanding the smaller, high-quality service-learning programs; adding necessary depth and authenticity to the larger, volunteer-oriented ones; and identifying additional program areas that can appeal to core concerns of young Jews not addressed by existing program offerings. Yet before time and energy are devoted to the *how* of field-building in Israel, it is worthwhile to take a step back and explore the question of *why*. Why should Israel be the focus of a concerted effort to grow JSL programs?

Until now, we have allowed fluctuating forces of the marketplace, such as the relative cost and convenience of individual JSL programs, and humanitarian crises, such as Hurricane Katrina in New Orleans, to dictate where most young North American Jews volunteer. There has not been a proactive effort to promote the focused growth of immersive JSL in any one particular geographic location.

Dyonna Ginsburg is the Director of Jewish Service-Learning at the Jewish Agency. Previously, Dyonna served as the Executive Director of Bema'aglei Tzedek, an Israeli social change organization, and was a founder of Siach: An Environment and Social Justice Conversation, an international network of Jewish social justice and environmental professionals.

¹As of November 2011, the Israel-based Jewish service-learning programs officially recognized and funded by Repair the World include B'Tzedek LIFE, Habonim Workshop in Israel (the “Kaveret” portion), JDC Service Corps and Short-Term Service, Jewish National Fund Alternative Spring Breaks, Livnot Galilee Fellowship, Ma'ase Olam, NISPED service-learning program, OTZMA, Tikun Olam in Tel Aviv/Jaffa, Yahel Long-Term and Alternative Breaks, and Yeshiva University Center for the Jewish Future's Counterpoint Israel. See www.werepair.org for more details.

Visit <http://repairlabs.org/jjcs/> for additional articles and resources, as well as to view parts of the *Journal* online.

This laissez-faire approach has yielded the following results. When asked to describe their “primary volunteer responsibilities,” either intermittent or immersive, 92% of young North American Jews report working on domestic causes, locally or nationally. Only 4% address issues in the developing world, and an even smaller percentage, 3%, tackle issues in Israel (Chertok et al., 2011).

When it comes to participation in immersive JSL programs, which range in length from a week to a year, the picture is more balanced. The latest data, published in 2008, indicate that approximately half of participants served in the United States (51.3%), and the other half abroad (31.2% in Israel and 17.5% in the rest of the world; Irie & Blair, 2008). Yet even in immersive JSL programs, Israel attracts less than one-third of participants.

Some may read these statistics with equanimity. “Charity begins at home,” they assert. Jews have a moral responsibility to redress ills and fight injustice in every society we call home and all the more so in the United States, which has enabled us to reach the highest levels of economic and political success. Moreover, most young Jews are interested in “low-threshold activism,” which demands minimal time and monetary investment (Chertok et al., 2011). It is just not realistic to assume that the majority will set aside the necessary resources to serve abroad, at least not in the near future. And regarding those who serve abroad, can we do anything but respect the ones who go to the developing world, where the needs are acute and the suffering great?

These arguments—both idealistic and pragmatic—resonate and are but a few of the many reasons to support JSL programs in North America and the developing world. Yet if we continue to have a largely hands-off approach to field-building, we may be missing out on the huge opportunity that Israel presents as an ideal location for immersive JSL programs.

ISRAEL: A PLATFORM FOR AUTHENTIC SERVICE

Repair the World’s 2011 *Standards of Practice for Immersive Jewish Service-Learning Programs* stipulate that programs must provide opportunities for “authentic service”—that is, “participants [must] engage in service that addresses genuine and unmet community needs.” By this standard, Israel is a great platform for authentic service. Despite its recent admission into the family of OECD countries and its popular image as a “start-up nation” populated by hi-tech entrepreneurs, Israel needs help.

Israel has one of the highest income disparities in the Western world, and one of every three children lives under the poverty line (National Insurance Institute, 2010). Since its inception, Israel has struggled to overcome deep systemic and cultural barriers to creating an equitable society for all its citizens, Jew and Arab alike. Over the last three decades, Israel has absorbed staggering numbers of immigrants from the former Soviet Union and Ethiopia, many of whom are elderly and infirm, placing a tremendous strain on its health care and welfare systems. More recently, it has provided a temporary reprieve for tens of thousands of refugees from war-torn Sudan and Eritrea, many with profound medical, psychological, and physical needs.

These socioeconomic challenges would justify the establishment and expansion of service-learning initiatives in Israel, even if Israel was not “ours.” Yet

it is ours and we have “skin in the game.” If Israel succeeds in meeting these challenges, the entire Jewish world will benefit. If it fails, world Jewry, and not only Israelis, ought to be called to task.

Young North American Jews who possess some degree of Hebrew literacy and Jewish cultural competency are uniquely suited to help meet Israel’s needs and simultaneously build long-term, mutually beneficial relationships with local communities—a linchpin of authentic service. From this vantage point, Israel is an ideal place to run immersive JSL programs. Its needs are real, and other than its own citizens, no one is better equipped with the skill set and knowledge to address these needs than world Jewry.

ISRAEL: A LABORATORY FOR GLOBAL CHANGE

The challenges Israel faces are not its alone. Water shortages, environmental havoc, illegal immigration, ethnic-based tension, and terror confront much of the developing world. To meet some of its numerous environmental and social justice challenges, Israel has developed world-renowned expertise in the fields of sustainable agriculture, solar energy, and treatments for post-traumatic stress disorder among terror victims. It has also produced some very effective educational models, such as the Bialik-Rogozin School in Tel Aviv, featured in the Oscar-winning film *Strangers No More*, whose students hail from 48 different countries, many wracked by genocide, war, and famine.

Israel therefore is an ideal environment where North American Jews can gain exposure to and perhaps even further develop cutting-edge solutions to some of the world’s thorniest social problems. Situated at the crossroads of three continents and home to the three major monotheistic religions, Israel has always had a disproportionate influence on the world for a country of its small size. Israel also attracts an inordinate amount of media attention. As such, investing in social change in Israel—whether directly by funding local nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) or indirectly by providing JSL volunteers to support the ongoing work of local NGOs—has the potential to affect not only Israeli society but also the world at large. With some tweaking and necessary funding, home-grown Israeli expertise could be exported to countries around the globe, improving the lives of millions.

ISRAEL: A PRIMER FOR INTEGRATED JEWISH LEARNING

In addition to requiring “authentic service,” Repair the World’s standards also insist that “the program has an educational framework that includes activities that (1) root the service . . . in Jewish learning and (2) deepen participants’ understanding about the social, economic, and historical context in which the service occurs.”

What better primer is there for “integrated Jewish learning, contextual learning and reflection” than the living textbook of the modern State of Israel? It is hard to imagine a more fertile ground for holistic, *Jewish* service-learning experiences than a country where Hebrew is the spoken language, Jewish holidays are national holidays, and the biblical injunction to pursue justice, as well as many of its corollaries (i.e., the tithes, the sabbatical cycle, the Jubilee), first emerged. Not to mention the role that unmediated contact with young Israelis plays in fostering a sense of Jewish peoplehood and collective responsibility.

Israel is an ideal environment where North American Jews can gain exposure to and perhaps even further develop cutting-edge solutions to some of the world’s thorniest social problems.

IF WE BUILD IT, THEY WILL COME

These arguments might be compelling, but the statistics seem to indicate that young North American Jews are not interested in volunteering in Israel. Even if there were to be a concerted effort to build the JSL field in Israel, would they come?

Young Jews are far more receptive to serving in Israel than first meets the eye. The *Volunteering + Values* report, commissioned by Repair the World, indicates that 9% of young North American Jews are excited by the prospect of volunteering on Israel-related issues, but only 1% actually volunteer (Chertok et al., 2011). This discrepancy implies that an untapped 8% would potentially be interested in volunteering in Israel or around Israel-related issues, if only given the chance.

This is certainly encouraging news, but the potential numbers may actually be far higher than 8%. The same report indicates that “Jewish young adults are most motivated to serve . . . when they can work on issues about which they care deeply.” It recommends the creation of “volunteer options that relate to core concerns,” such as the “environment, education, human rights, peace and conflict resolution, economic development, and victims of violence.” As mentioned earlier, these core concerns dovetail with the major issues Israel faces today.

Young Jews have not told us they do not want to volunteer in Israel—they have simply said that they want to volunteer on issues close to their hearts. Framing Israel as an “issue” may not resonate with those outside of the 8%, but framing it as a “platform for issues” may open a world of possibilities. When asked whether they want to volunteer in the area of the environment *or* Israel, many young Jews prefer the environment. How might they respond, however, if they were asked about volunteering in the area of the environment *in* Israel? We will not know until we try . . .

So why make a concerted effort to build the field of JSL in Israel? Because (1) Israel has genuine needs, which can be uniquely addressed by Jews from abroad; (2) Israel has world-renowned expertise in areas of social justice and environmental import, which can benefit both service-learning program participants and the world at large; and (3) Israel is a Jewish country, which makes it ideal for an integrated, Jewish conversation about justice. And because, if we shift our frame of reference and listen accordingly, young Jews may actually be telling us that this is precisely what they want.

REFERENCES

- Chertok, F., Gerstein, J., Tobias, J., Rosin, S., & Boxer, M. (2011). *Volunteering + values: A Repair the World report on Jewish young adults*. New York: Repair the World.
- Irie, Ellen, & Blair, Jill. (2008, May). *Jewish service learning: What is and what could be: A summary of an analysis of the Jewish service learning landscape*. Berkeley, CA: BTW Informing Change.
- National Insurance Institute. (2010). *Poverty and social gaps: Annual report 2010*. Retrieved from http://www.btl.gov.il/Publications/oni_report/Documents/oni2010.pdf (Heb.).
- Repair the World. (2011, November). *Standards of practice for immersive Jewish service-learning programs*. Retrieved from http://www.organizing20.org/wp-content/uploads/2011/11/IJSL-Standards-of-Practice_final.pdf.