

Funder Roundtable

A Conversation with Jenn Hoos Rothberg, Rafi Rone, Rabbi Jennie Rosenn, John Ruskay, and Jon Rosenberg

Moderated by Liz Jaffe

On November 30, 2011, Jenn Hoos Rothberg from the Einhorn Family Charitable Trust; Rafi Rone from the Joseph and Harvey Meyerhoff Family Charitable Funds; Rabbi Jennie Rosenn from The Nathan Cummings Foundation; and John Ruskay from UJA-Federation of New York gathered at Repair the World's offices for a conversation exploring their motivations as supporters of Jewish service-learning, where Jewish service-learning fits into their foundation/organizational priorities, and their visions of the future of the Jewish community. Liz Jaffe, a board member of Repair the World and UJA-Federation of New York, moderated the conversation, and Jon Rosenberg, CEO of Repair the World, participated as well. This transcript was edited and reviewed by all participants.

LIZ: How does Jewish service-learning fit in with your funding priorities?

RAFI: The Meyerhoff family has rightly seen it as one of the multiple portals of access to next generation Jews. It's not just service; it's service within the context of meaning, leading to deeper involvement and leadership.

JENN: The foundation I represent looks at this in a universal frame, rather than a particular Jewish frame. The mission of the Einhorn Family Charitable Trust is helping people get along better, and what that means to us is how to raise the next generation of empathic citizens to create a more civil society. Research tells us that people further develop empathy and prosocial behavior—such as teamwork, kindness, and cooperation—when they experience the joy of helping others. Empathy, the root of many prosocial behaviors, is like a “muscle”—we all have it, but it's strengthened with use. We therefore seek to fulfill our mission by providing such opportunities to flex that muscle. As you might imagine, service is a great one. By engaging in authentic service, we are able to raise a generation of citizens whose values are based on our shared humanity, who seek opportunities to care for others, and choose to “give back” throughout the rest of their lives. Because the Jewish community has a strong tradition of “repairing the world,” we have an unprecedented opportunity to embrace our tradition and inspire American Jews to give their time and effort to serve those in need.

Jennifer Hoos Rothberg is Executive Director of the Einhorn Family Charitable Trust. Rafi Rone is Director of Jewish & Israel Initiatives at the Joseph and Harvey Meyerhoff Family Charitable Funds. Rabbi Jennie Rosenn is Director of the Jewish Life and Values Program at the Nathan Cummings Foundation. John Ruskay is Executive Vice President and CEO at UJA-Federation of New York.

¹PANIM, now the PANIM Institute of BBYO, trains and inspires a new generation of teens committed to service, advocacy and philanthropy focused on issues that make a difference in the world and the Jewish values that support civic engagement (<http://panim.bbyo.org/>).

²AVODAH: the Jewish Service Corps strengthens the Jewish community's fight against the causes and effects of poverty in the United States by engaging participants in service and community building that inspire them to become lifelong agents for social change whose work for justice is rooted in and nourished by Jewish values (<http://avodah.net/>).

³Weinberg Tzedek Hillel is a public service and social justice initiative devoted to transforming the culture of Hillel campuses (<http://www.hillel.org/tzedek>).

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

JENNIE: The Nathan Cummings Foundation has been involved in supporting service since the early to mid-90s, giving seed funding to PANIM,¹ AVODAH: The Jewish Service Corps,² and Tzedek Hillel.³ Our funding priorities have service as an integral strategy to engage Jews, Jewish communities, and Jewish resources more effectively in issues of social and economic justice. Social justice as part of our strategy is at the core of Jewish values; it is integral to Jewish life and to the creation of a more just, vibrant, and sustainable society. We also see it as a way of cultivating the next generation of Jews who are engaged as full citizens.

JOHN: In the past five years, thinking purely financially, in a flat world where funding is pretty static, UJA-Federation of New York has put \$2 million into this area. Some would say that was significant, but obviously, in the total picture, it is only a part of what is needed. I think this area is pregnant with possibility.

For us, Jewish service-learning is not a discrete program; it comes from a broad perspective of understanding where we are in Jewish history. We believe the overarching challenge is to create Jewish communities that can lead Jews to self identify because of the meaning, community, and purpose that Jewish life infuses in our lives. It is in this context that we believe that service-learning can play an integral part in strengthening the community—the way a visit to a home of *shiva* (week of mourning), *bikur cholim* (visiting the sick), and caring for one another itself creates the web of community, which for us is critical. It's about caring about our own community and beyond. Service-learning does not stand in and of itself; it is part of a much broader vision of the place of the Jewish community at this time.

I always say, "We're in the first inning of this experiment." The questions are, What are we learning from it? Who is participating in service-learning experiences? Do these experiences engage new people? Can we use service-learning to strengthen community? What will the impact be long term and short term?

LIZ: How should funders and practitioners approach Jewish service-learning to maximize the value for the server and the served?

RAFI: This question goes to the nature of partnership in general. Always with partnerships, you have to be very clear at the outset about what each side's expectations are going in because if there is no clarity, it will eventually lead to disappointment or to one side feeling like it's not achieving its objectives or its goals. Partnership needs to be seen purely as a live relationship with clarity—clarity is the most important piece.

JOHN: You know we at UJA-Federation are one step removed from the server and the served; in fact, I'm probably a lot of steps removed from the server and the served. Volunteerism—service-learning—is a strategy to actualize a longer term vision. You must have a view of where you want to move community and society. What is needed Jewishly or in terms of society?

Service-learning is not only about doing good things. Anyone who designs a volunteer effort is in theory doing good things. We need to focus on doing service more effectively for the server and the served. What are we doing to move the needle on broader isolation, of connecting more strongly to those in need? Or, to use Jenn's term, on broader empathy for the other? For example, there's a great opportunity in going into the home of the elderly—connecting with that person, seeing how she lives—as we've all done, and one experiences that in a way that changes your frame of the world.

John Ruskey: "I always say, 'We're in the first inning of this experiment.'"

JENN: For me, maximizing the value of Jewish service-learning is all about authenticity. We need to look at what Jews are already doing to repair the world. What we will find is that many are already engaged in ways where they're making meaningful differences in the world. As a Jewish community, we need to celebrate that as being part of what a Jewish journey looks like.

RAFI: The Meyerhoff Foundation takes the novel approach that the practitioners actually know what they're doing and they are pretty good at it, which is why they are doing it. We offer to be thought partners, but we trust good solid leadership and organizational savvy. As someone who was a practitioner and a participant in Jewish service-learning experiences, I have tremendous respect for that approach.

LIZ: I promise you, all our practitioners would say “thank you” to that approach. Repair the World is very serious about being sure that, as Jenn said, the service is authentic: we are supporting programs in our grant-making that are needed or requested from a community, not what we think, from on high, needs to happen for the community.

JENNIE: A key element we've found in any authentic Jewish service program is that there's a community partnership, and those partnerships take a fair amount of time and energy to build. But without them, we're not really engaging the server or the served in an authentic or deep way.

LIZ: I think most of you have addressed the community issues and civic engagement, but what potential does Jewish service-learning have for engaging young people and nurturing Jewish identity?

JOHN: As I understand it, the early research says there's a surprisingly high percentage of participants in Jewish service-learning programs who are already quite Jewishly identified. Steven M. Cohen said we're going to be “leaner and meaner,” so this is certainly a way to strengthen our community, to deepen it.

JENNIE: Three thoughts: First, just because someone has a religious school or Jewish camp background, we cannot assume they are feeling connected to the community. “Affiliated” and “unaffiliated” are the wrong frame for where we are now, which has to do with the way people have multiple identities and complex identities, and being Jewish is only a part of them.

The second point relates to what Robert Putnam talks a lot about in *Bowling Alone*: the use of social capital. What's so striking about Jewish service-learning is that it's both bridging *and* bonding capital—bridging across differences and bonding within the community.

Third, what makes Jewish service-learning transformative in terms of people's own Jewish identity is the way in which there is intensive Jewish learning and reflection and in the way in which a Jewish community is being formed as participants are processing their experience. So, it's not enough to *do* service—that in itself is not transformative. A lot of the research shows that the process of doing Jewish service-learning and reflection, and doing it in the context of community, is what results in that transformational part and the strengthening of Jewish identity.

RAFI: The piece that's important is that now everything educationally is done in groups. I was visiting Towson University [outside of Baltimore] the other day, and they were knocking down the old cubicles with doors on them. Instead, everything is now one computer with five or six chairs around it. Everything is collaborative. Yet as Putnam says, we're still struggling with this sense of isolation.

Rafi Rone: “The Meyerhoff Foundation takes the novel approach that the practitioners actually know what they’re doing and they are pretty good at it.”

That's some of the core of the Jewish identity piece of it: Jewish identity is so "high art" and nuanced. To create a safe space within any Jewish service-learning—or Jewish text study—setting is also high art *and* high-touch, though if done with a few specific set of guidelines and the tenets of effective experiential education, you can create real impact.

Using Jewish service-learning and immersive Jewish service-learning to get to the effective exploration of identity is high art, and it's really important because this is what will separate universalistic from particularistic service-learning experiences—between those that serve non-Jews and Jews and those that only serve Jews in need. You have people who started Teach for America (TFA)⁴ and AmeriCorps⁵ and City Year⁶, so many Jews in this industry, and there's no connecting the dots of what's Jewish about what they're doing.

JENN: I'd like to echo some of Rafi's points. Some of this is about rewriting our communal narrative of what it means to be engaged in Jewish life and Jewish identity. As a Jewish community, we used to say, "Come to us and we will provide meaning and belonging." At the time, that was appropriate. But as Jews today, we have multifaceted identities—we no longer need to lead with our "Jewish selves" to find community.

This is where there's an opportunity for Jewish service-learning and our practitioners in the field—to not just meet the ones who are knocking on our doors, but to go out and engage with Jews where they are. We have the opportunity to validate them by saying, "Yes, who you are—and that service piece of you—is also important to us. Engaging in service is very much part of what it means to be engaged in Jewish life." We need to recognize that what they are doing is absolutely part of who we are as a people, and we need them to help us rewrite this narrative of what it means to be engaged in Jewish life. That's the opportunity: to have the universal aspect of service-learning be recognized as a defining element of American Jewish life.

And that opportunity will provide the bonding we need within our own community; we can say, "You see, we do have something in common because service and being engaged in the community are inherently Jewish acts." That's the bonding we desperately need in our Jewish community. And the bridging piece occurs when the Jewish community recognizes our obligation to serve those in need in our midst as central to what it means to engage in Jewish life.

JENNIE: I'm not sure that the universalistic/particularistic paradigm is still the right one. We've exploded that dichotomy. Part of what's compelling about Jewish service-learning is that it's inherently both.

RAFI: There's a difference between doing the Peace Corps⁷ in Kazakhstan and doing the JDC Jewish Service Corps⁸ in Morocco, not that there's anything wrong

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⁴Teach For America is growing the movement of leaders who work to ensure that kids growing up in poverty get an excellent education (www.teachforamerica.org).

⁵AmeriCorps supports a broad range of local service programs that engage thousands of Americans in intensive service to meet critical community needs (www.americorps.gov).

⁶City Year is an education-focused nonprofit organization that unites young people of all backgrounds for a year of full-time service to keep students in school and on track to graduation (<http://www.cityyear.org/>).

⁷The Peace Corps helps the people of interested countries in meeting their need for trained men and women; promotes a better understanding of Americans on the part of the peoples served; and promotes a better understanding of other peoples on the part of Americans (<http://www.peacecorps.gov/>).

⁸The JDC Jewish Service Corps (JSC) offers young Jews the opportunity to directly engage with JDC's global mission and actively fulfill the value of Jewish responsibility through a yearlong or 8-10 week service opportunity connected to JDC's overseas programs (<http://www.jdc.org/>).

with either, but the challenge is: Why and how are these programs American and why and how are they Jewish? I still think that answering that question is a good challenge.

JENN: I think Jewish service-learning's role is to create the translation of why that service is both Jewish and American. I don't think doing a year of service in AVODAH is any better than doing a year of service in Teach for America, but we have the opportunity to translate why the latter is Jewish. People make choices, so we need to help them see why the choice they made to do TFA or City Year is as Jewish as doing AVODAH. This generation is committed to repairing the world, and hearing from multiple places that service is part of the Jewish identity experience will strike an incredibly meaningful chord with them.

JOHN: Hearing that service is valued?

JENN: Valued, yes. Hearing that however they choose to repair the world—it's the fact that they're doing it—is meaningful. And the communal aspect to that is hearing that other people find it meaningful too. The reason why is that it validates something already inherent in who they are as important and valued, providing a link and ultimately a sense of belonging to a Jewish community.

LIZ: I'm going to take us in a slightly different direction to talk about the value there is in Jewish service-learning achieving more prominence in the Jewish community. Do you think it should have more prominence on the Jewish communal agenda?

JOHN: I find this conversation really interesting; it reflects the learning stage we are at in the present moment in Jewish life. There's a search for a silver bullet, for the one most important and most critical program or service; I think this search is unnecessary and unproductive. The great news is that this community, which has many external challenges that could have consumed our interest, focus, and money, has the ability to say we're going to see what can strengthen Israel trips, summer camps, synagogues, Hillels, Jewish service-learning, and invest in a whole set of start-ups—some of which will succeed and some will not. We're 15 years into this. The truth is, I think the research and experience matter here.

When you ask if Jewish service-learning should be more important, the question you're really asking is if it should deserve more communal funding in a time of really flat money. The increasingly important question facing everyone—funders and federations—is, Where can philanthropy have substantial impact? Getting the metrics on that is easier said than done, particularly on the identity front. The great news is that we're all in this trying to figure this out.

RAFI: I think what John is alluding to is R&D (Research & Development), which is usually 10–15% of any company's budget. I sit on the Israel & Overseas Commission at the ASSOCIATED: Jewish Community Federation of Baltimore, and recently we had the choice whether to send six kids from Baltimore to do follow-up Birthright programs in Israel *or* to support the Ethiopian National project. Are you going to use communal funds to feed people, or to educate people about feeding people, or to strengthen this incredible, so savvy, so smart generation coming up, or can you figure out a way to do all three?

JENNIE: I want to take up John's challenge of what the community is that we're seeking to create. We're talking about this as if Jewish service is new. We are a people who serves. Jewish service is part of the DNA of who we are as a Jewish community. There are two things we know as Jews: we know that we have an obligation to meet the immediate needs of vulnerable populations; we know that from our tradition. And we know that there will always be hungry in our midst.⁹ And therein lies the tension. We're not going to solve in our generation all the social issues that create these needs, so part of what we need to be nurturing is a Jewish community for whom this service is central to how we live out our values in the world. To create a community that is sensitive and responsive to the needs in our midst is part of what it means to live our lives as Jews.

LIZ: Do you think that Jewish service-learning advances Jewish learning, creates communities of meaning, meets pressing community needs, and cultivates the next generation of engaged Jewish citizens?

JOHN: Service-learning takes service to the next level in multiple ways by bringing groups together to study and reflect on service, making it a collective experience, and embedding it in learning. Now we're trying to figure out the investment we as a community need to make in Jewish service-learning. In national bodies—whether the Jewish Funders Network or the Jewish Federations of North America's General Assembly—service is on the agenda. At one point we had the audacious notion of making it a norm that every person at some stage of life would undertake a service-learning experience.

JENN: There's an opportunity on the agency side too...

JOHN: What agencies?

JENN: Oh, meaning YOUR agencies <laughter>

JOHN: Ah!

LIZ: The 100 agencies supported by UJA-Federation of New York.

JENN: Across the board, we have an opportunity to recognize the human capital that can be used to meet pressing community needs. Instead of asking how we mobilize hundreds of thousands of Jews to go do service, we have an opportunity to look at our agencies, our nonprofit organizations, the ones on the ground serving the people who are in need of service, and ask them, "How could you use an additional set of hands? What can we do to help you as an organization utilize people who want to come to volunteer?"

JOHN: Would it be helpful for me to convene three, five, seven of our largest human services agencies that do our highest quality work, to think together with you about this question? We have all learned that managing this process is hugely more complicated than we knew when we started.

JENN: When the Jewish community has flat financial resources to do this, we need to change the way we look at service. We cannot only see Jewish service-learning as a high-touch intervention to engage Jews—which means it's a high-cost intervention too. If we do this, then we'll never be able to make service a communal norm. We must flip this paradigm from focusing on the person doing

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"Jewish service is part of the DNA of who we are as a Jewish community."

⁹Deuteronomy 15:11 "For there will never cease to be needy ones in your land, which is why I command you: open your hand to the poor and needy kinsman in your land." (JPS translation).

the service to instead focusing on the problems we seek to address and the people in our communities who are in need of our help.

Volunteers who engage in real service, authentic service, where they can see the difference they are personally making in the world, are those who choose to serve again and again. So of course, we need to make sure the opportunities we're providing do just that.

However, if we do this right, ultimately the cost should not be on providing that great service experience—that should be a given—instead, our emphasis should be on how our community engages in local problem-solving as volunteers, which can lead to a collective cost savings due to the in-kind value we would add to a nonprofit's balance sheet. That means that part of our job to make service a norm is to work directly with some of our key organizations on the ground who are already helping solve community problems and to provide them the assistance they need to use volunteers more effectively to meet their organizational goals.

RAFI: One of the things that is really important is the need for funds just to make service-learning happen. I would hope that something service-learning experiences show is that someone has to pay to turn the lights on and pay for the ceramic you need to build the toilet you're building. In an effective service-learning program that sense of community responsibility is translated to the experience; this translation is really an undervalued goal for a Jewish service-learning experience. People don't parse out what is the difference between *tzedek* (justice) and *tzedakah* (charity); to me, you should not consider Jewish service or Jewish service-learning as your charity, as your philanthropic obligation. We want service-learning participants to have those experiences and say, "Great, I will do this AND I will write the check to the agencies I care about"—not "I did this and so I don't have to donate money."

<Liz invited Jon Rosenberg, CEO of Repair the World, into the conversation>

JON: And they should also say, "I will get involved in other forms of social action." One research point about service-learning and about civic engagement measures broadly—service-learning programs like City Year and the Jewish service-learning field—is that these measures and behaviors are very interconnected. Developing those civic muscles has a positive interaction with philanthropic giving, with advocacy, with issue education, with voting, with all the other things that we value as a collective.

JENNIE: I know this isn't a conversation about *tzedakah*, but I can't help but take the bait, Rafi. One of the Jewish communal norms that the Jewish community has not yet actualized is the giving of 10–20% of our resources to *tzedakah*. You're raising the issue that *chesed* (loving-kindness), *tzedek*, and *tzedakah* are branches of the same tree, and Jon, it's interesting to hear that the research is showing that they really are branches of the same tree. Rather than seeing it as an either/or, how can we be cultivating a community that understands its responsibility to act in all three of these arenas?

LIZ: Now we seem to be back to the beginning about your concerns about Jewish service-learning.

JENNIE: The challenge is how we build capacity in the field of Jewish service-learning so it still reflects our core values. How do we ensure that it's authentic

Jewish service that goes to scale not only operationally but also insofar as it maintains the transformational nature that makes it valuable in the first place—both in the communities that we serve and for the participants? What makes this work transformational are the very elements that make it cumbersome to bring to scale, and yet if we go to scale without figuring out how to ensure that these elements stay in place, there's no reason for us to continue. These elements include meaningful Jewish learning and reflection, serious community partnerships, the meeting of authentic, real needs, and connecting to the underlying social issues that create the needs in the first place. This also means well-trained, top-notch Jewish service-learning educators. These things are what make it expensive, but they are also what make it ultimately transformational for the world and for the people who are serving.

RAFI: Jewish service-learning is not the be-all and end-all. I think a sense of community is important.

LIZ: Could you relate that to your own personal experience volunteering?

RAFI: I was volunteering as the Ralph I. Goldman International Fellow at the American Jewish Joint Distribution Committee in Bishkek, the capital of Kyrgyzstan—it's the only capital in the world named for a wooden plunger used to milk a goat. The most incredible part of being there was when I would talk to people in the neighborhood who weren't Jewish, and they would say, "Oh the Jewish community, they help each other." So, delivering a food package to the only Jew, who lived two hours north of Bishkek in a small village whose population used to be half Jewish, with children from the community was great not just because it gave us a sense of "we take care of our own" but knowing that she actually shared it with her floor mates, who may not have had electricity in minus-45 degree weather. It was the melding of the particularistic with the universalistic. This is my favorite question to people when I visited every country: "How many Jews do you think there are in the world?" I'd hear these responses: "Ohhh, a billion, 500 million, 700 million." What these answers symbolized is that we care, and we don't just care about our own community.

LIZ: That's a great way to end the discussion. Thank you all for being part of this conversation.