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Sara Paasche-Orlow

Maggi G. Gaines

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Sparking a Renewed Jewish Commitment to Service

by RABBI SARA PAASCHE-ORLOW
and MAGGI G. GAINES

Where do Jews stand in relation to service and what might a Jewish commitment to service look like? By reflecting on historical Jewish understandings of service, we hope to gain perspective on the present and the need to rejoin our concepts of God, service, and worship. Such explorations can spark a radical transformation of our social and communal norms.

Historically, prayer involved a physical act: a portion of one's material goods were given as an offering. Individuals could then experience how their sacrifice sustained others — specifically, the priesthood. The ritual sacrifices of the Temple fostered a connection to God and to a greater community that was confirmed and celebrated on the pilgrimage festivals.

Since the destruction of the Temple, the Rabbis of the Talmud succeeded in transforming the Temple services into a system of prayer services and Torah readings for dispersed individuals and communities. For almost two millennia, we have brought our sacrifices in the form of prayer rather than crops.

The Rabbis based the new prayer system on the pattern of activities of the priestly cast. This exploded the traditional hierarchies, as every [male] Jew took on the mantle of daily prayer. In certain ways, this central transformation has succeeded for thousands of years as a crucial historical link for Jewish practice. However, for many modern Jews the analogy is meaningless. The central holy work of our people, which derived from the Temple service to God, is now expressed through the synagogue service. But prayer does not feel like service. To be sure, we use the same language: "How were services today?" "Oh, very nice." But it falls flat. The cultic practices seem obscure; synagogue worship does not fulfill a sense of service, be it to God, community or humanity.

Is prayer service? Many Jews feel that the recitation of prayer is itself a service to God. In traditional terms, it is a fulfillment of what God has required of us as interpreted and re-constituted by the rabbis. In an essential way, synagogue worship sustains and supports us as a community, but it cannot be the exclusive expression of how we understand our service obligation. Ultimately, if our prayers do not move us to engage the world in constructive and generous ways, the glaring fact of our inaction erodes the meaning of our prayers.

Most modern Jews do not pray out of a traditional sense of obligation, but relate to prayer as a discretionary experience. Prayer is often experienced as a luxury, an

Rabbi Sara Paasche-Orlow and Maggi G. Gaines are National Program Director and Executive Director, respectively, of the Partnership for Service.

THE Partnership FOR SERVICE

Partnership for Service is an emerging national Jewish non-profit seeking to increase the number of Jews committed to and involved in service and volunteerism. Traditionally, Jews visited the sick and the homebound and sought creative ways to help meet a wide range of needs. However, in recent decades community needs have become more polarized, work patterns have changed and social work has grown as a profession. As a result, we have become less comfortable as volunteers, and often when we do volunteer we do not connect it with the Jewish tradition.

Launched this Fall, with the support of four initial funding partners — Beginning with Children Foundation, The Charles and Lynn Schusterman Family Foundation, The Joseph and Harvey Meyerhoff Family Charitable Fund, and Jewish Life Network, Partnership for Service will capitalize on the need for meaning, bringing the Jewish community back to the tradition of service sector careers and volunteer engagement. In so doing, it will bring us back to finding greater purpose in our lives. It will encourage the understanding that volunteering and service are significant expressions of Jewish identity and commitment.

The organization's plan is to work collaboratively to channel the skills and energy of individual Jews and of the Jewish community toward volunteering and giving of the self. By encouraging and supporting Jews who volunteer and organizations that are developing and modeling volunteer programs, Partnership for Service seeks to connect acts of service with living a Jewish life. The initial emphasis for Partnership for Service will be on Jews in their teens, 20's and 30's who increasingly volunteer but frequently have limited connections to the Jewish community.

Partnership for Service will engage diverse segments of the American Jewish population in this work, in order to encourage Jewish pluralism. It will build and work with a coalition of Jewish organizations to model and expand the teaching of service as a cultural Jewish value. Partnership for Service will also participate actively in the general societal dialogue about service and volunteerism. In every facet of American life, Partnership for Service will advance the field of Jewish service.

opportunity for reflection, a social gathering, or a concert. Many Jews come to services seeking absolution. However, as this type of prayer is largely self-service, it is not true service.

In the Babylonian Talmud, *Sotah 10a-b*, when Abraham's guests want to thank him for his generosity, he responds, "don't thank me, praise and bless God." Through Abraham's *hesed*, or act of kindness, his guests are moved to prayer. In this model, we experience God in our lives through the actions of our fellow human beings and become motivated to offer thanks, to pray out of gratitude.

Another important model in understanding the relationship of service to prayer is that revelation is often preceded by acts of *hesed*. Acts of *hesed* often bring us in contact with people who are in difficult circumstances. We are awakened to the world as it is experienced by less fortunate people. Through opening our door to the stranger or those in need, we open ourselves up to a relationship with God. The agent of *hesed* is him/herself changed through the experience.

The emotional rushes of fear, gratitude, distress, exhilaration, or pride that emanate from service are powerful moments in people's lives. As a Jewish community, we should embrace the potential of these emotions and see in them an opportunity for the empowerment of volunteers as Jews. Jewish study, reflection and prayer are important responses to service that can help connect volunteers to our rich tradition. Our ritual and spiritual relationship to God can become deeply rooted in our actions towards other people.

The Rabbis replaced the hierarchy of the Levite blood-line with a civilization based on meritocracy. Success in the rabbinic system could be established through mastery of Jew-

ish texts or through the accumulation of great wealth. Out of this communal structure we maintain a special role for the scholar and the philanthropist. It is time, however, to assert a third axis of meritocracy in our community, by giving our respect to those who engage in service. Jews who work in professions that serve the communal good, that support the poor and the downtrodden, and that serve humanity are fulfilling the highest precepts of Torah. This is not to say that we should not study and learn, but that learning is only defensible when it results in humane activism and a response to the issues in the world around us.

Many Jews are not compelled to pray or learn in community. Some of those who do pray interact with the activity as spectators or as theater critics. The crowds who appear on Yom Kippur for propitiation often find the experience grueling. However, many Jews may be motivated to engage with the Jewish community through service. Volunteering allows for the personal declaration of principle outside of an explicitly theological framework. Through additional service learning, volunteers can engage Jewish ideas and texts and explore the ways in which their own impulse to live an ethical life and serve those in need is supported, informed and enriched by Jewish tradition. Not only should we encourage more service by all Jews, we must engage this generation of service-oriented spiritual seekers and support them in their sacred work.

When the Jews arrived at Sinai, God spoke to them and said, "Indeed, all the Earth is Mine, but you shall be to Me a kingdom of priests, and a holy nation." (*Exodus*; 19:6). By exploring and engaging in the many meanings of service, we aspire to fulfill this vision. ✨

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