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Joel Westheimer

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COMMUNITY SERVICE LEARNING: Pursuing Jewish Ideals of Compassion and Justice

by JOEL WESTHEIMER

Service learning involves community service activities tied to the academic curriculum. It has strong roots in the progressive philosophy of turn-of-the-century educators like John Dewey, Harold Rugg, and William Kilpatrick, but its widespread popularity is a contemporary phenomenon. A recent study by the National Center for Education Statistics reveals that 83 percent of high schools currently offer community service opportunities (compared with 27 percent in 1984). School-based service learning is among the fastest growing and popular education reforms of the past three decades.

Jewish educators have seen similar renewed passion for tying community experiences to the academic curriculum. There are dozens of Jewish organizations that promote both community service in general and service learning in particular. As an educator who has been involved in both developing and studying service learning programs, I relished this invitation to reflect on the possible links between my own Jewish experience and my fondness for (and reservations about) educational programs that bridge academic work with community action. My exposure to Jewish traditions and, in particular, my thirteen-year involvement with the youth movement, *Hashomer Hatza'ir*, lead me to ask: What might a Jewish perspective on service learning offer?

Education that is inextricably bound to improving community life is a deeply embedded Jewish value. Judaism undoubtedly teaches us the critical importance of texts. However, Jewish customs, traditions, and the texts themselves make clear that learning from books alone is insufficient. As Abraham Joshua Heschel pointed out in his book *The Prophets*, Judaism demands participation in the details of everyday life. It is not enough to pray for atonement on Yom Kippur, for example. Ritual acts must be accompanied by one's work and actions in the community.

The Jewish requirement to help repair the

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world is often interpreted as a call for *tzedaka* or charity. But, a second critical aspect of Jewish tradition and experience is an emphasis on the need not only for compassion and charity but also for justice—for addressing root causes of problems and inequity. Judaism teaches that acts of *tzedaka* (charity) and *hesed* (kindness) are not enough if these acts ignore or perpetuate underlying root causes of problems. The notions of *tzedaka*, on the one hand, and *tzedek* (justice) on the other offer a powerful lens through which educators can assess the worth of a variety of service learning activities.

Some of the greatest historical seekers of social justice and change were expressing a profoundly Jewish sensibility: the belief that change is possible and that justice is not some other-worldly concept but an imperative for the here and now. The Jewish tradition is committed to ideals of democracy and basic human rights, to fighting oppression and injustice, and to meaningful community participation in improving society. The fact that a disproportionate percentage of activists in the civil rights movement were Jewish is not a matter of happenstance. Professor Judith Hauptman of the Jewish Theological Seminary notes that the Torah and Talmud both present a clear vision of a just society: "The pages of the Torah resonate with a profound concern for the socially and economically vulnerable segments of society—the poor, the day laborers, the orphans and widows, [and] the resident aliens." The struggle of the Jewish people to move beyond slavery

is retold *each week* in the Torah readings; it is our common story and our common reference point for our actions on behalf of all peoples. *Tikkun Olam* means to repair the world not simply by being nice to your neighbor but also through a progressive message of change: we were slaves and we overcame our oppression; we know that it is possible to change the world, and we must act in the world to change it on behalf of those who are less powerful.

These profoundly Jewish commitments resonate powerfully with those who hope that service learning can reinvigorate a democratic community. Currently, both within the Jewish community and in the broader education community, volunteerism and charity remain the most common form of service. An emphasis on charity and on acts of kindness (collecting cans for a food drive, cleaning up a local park, etc.) allows the formation of coalitions of community workers, politicians and activists, but prevents deep investigation into solving complex social problems. As the name of the Federal legislation to "Serve America" implies, most service learning programs emphasize altruism and charity, hoping that teaching a personal responsibility to "help others" is the solution to the nation's problems. This kind of service risks being understood as a kind of noblesse oblige, a private act of kindness performed by the privileged that does little to address underlying causes of inequity and injustice. As Paul Hanna notes in his 1937 book, *Youth Serves the Community*, making Thanksgiving baskets for poor families is important work, but it does little to address "the basic inhibiting influences which perpetuate a scarcity economy in the midst of abundance." In other words, while engaging students in acts of service might produce George Bush Sr.'s now-famous "thousand points of light," it might also promote a thousand points of the status quo.

Acts of kindness and of charity are important, but citizenship in a democratic society requires more than civic decency. To repair the world, students have to learn how to create, evaluate, criticize, and change public norms, institutions, and programs. Students need to learn to contribute cans to a food drive, but they also need to learn to question why people are hungry and explore ways to solve structural causes of hunger and homelessness. "It's like a rowboat," explained one service learning instructor I observed, "one oar is compassion and the other is justice. If you don't keep both going, you move in a circle." Judaism and Jewish ideals of social action can help to reinvigorate the quest among service learning educators for both compassion and justice and ensure that neither is ignored on the road to a better society. 🌱