



Jewish Service-Learning: The Outward Turn

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by Adam Gaynor and Rabbi Brent Spodek

Nearly twenty years ago we shared a room on a kibbutz in the far north of Israel. For the better part of a year we were immersed in a world of labor, Zionism and Hebrew, which was wonderfully foreign to us. More importantly, we were invited to go deep into our roots and from there, travel outside of ourselves and engage with the world as a whole. After a year of breaking our backs on a date field and our teeth on Hebrew conjugations, we went our separate ways, one to pursue a calling to the rabbinate, the other to aliyah, the IDF and a career in Jewish communal service.

Now some years past our age of teenage exuberance, we find ourselves facilitating opportunities for young Jews looking to turn outward to something larger than themselves. The one who pursued a career in Jewish communal service is the executive director of The Curriculum Initiative, a program which addresses the needs of students whose connection to Judaism is most tenuous; the one who pursued a career in the rabbinate was most recently the Rabbi-in-Residence for the American Jewish World Service, where he ran a program in human rights education for other rabbis. Yet in many ways, the lesson of the kibbutz remains: immersion in the traditions of Judaism leads us to help carry the burden of our fellows.

That lesson shapes the way we think about seemingly different populations: loosely affiliated private school students and deeply connected rabbinical students. The challenges and opportunities of facilitating immersive experiences for these groups are instructive at this moment when service-learning is emerging as the latest silver bullet to solve problems of Jewish continuity in America. For both populations, service-learning experiences offer unparalleled opportunities for hands-on work, meaningful engagement with the complexities of the Jewish tradition, learning from peers, leaders and hosts, and discussion of what it means to live a Jewish life turned outward to the world. These experiences also carry some dangers: we risk investing dollars and years in resume burnishing, we risk harming the communities from which we seek to learn and, perhaps most dangerously, we turn the people we aspire to serve into simple props upon which the Jewish community can play out our fantasies and desires.

With that in mind, we submit that a high-quality Jewish learning program is one in which participants turn outward from themselves to seek, cherish and elevate the divine element present in every human being. It's not Americans of Jewish extraction doing a service-learning program that makes it Jewish; it is the focus on needs other than our own.

We posit that for service-learning programs to be ethically sound and substantively Jewish, they should incorporate the following components:

- **Serving:** This is the actual work in the local community. At the risk of stating the obvious, service-learning must include actual work as surely as Yom Kippur must include actual fasting. For the Jews of North America who take part in these programs, the

experience of working with their hands is often revelatory, both in terms of the difficulty of the work and the recognition that they are usually ill-equipped to do it. For many participants, simply receiving instruction from a human being whom they might consciously or unconsciously think of as an inferior can be revelatory.

- **Preparing:** Service-learning is not about simply parachuting students into a community to dig an irrigation ditch or staff a soup kitchen. A central goal of any service-learning program must be to teach students about the socio-political context of the service so that it is experienced as a reciprocal act between the local community, which determines the service needs, and the student participants, who gain skills and enrichment through the experience.
- **Advocating:** In Jewish thought, there are many commandments which a person performs directly with their own bodies. However, there are many for which people usually appoint a *shaliach*, or emissary, who is better equipped to perform large or complicated mitzvot, such as circumcising a son or writing a Torah scroll. There is tremendous virtue in performing the *mitzvah* of carrying a burden with one's fellow directly, as we do when we serve with our hands; there is also great value in mobilizing the power of the American government to address injustice by writing letters to newspapers, contacting and even visiting the offices of elected officials and documenting and publicizing injustices witnessed.
- **Deliberating:** In the course of even the shortest service-learning experience, students have an unparalleled opportunity to confront their pre-conceived notions about people, communities, and struggles. The paradigms that participants use to organize the information of the world are often upended, and this can spur complex emotional reactions that can be the site of great learning and growth. An authentic Jewish service-learning program must build in significant time for reflection with leaders who have been well trained to convene difficult conversations.
- **Enduring:** while the core of any service learning experience is clearly the intensive, immersive experience, it would be distorting to end the experience there. The problems we encounter in New York, New Orleans' Lower 9th Ward or Guatemala are complicated and multi-layered, and so must be our engagement with them. What differentiates education from dilettantism is the cultivation of virtue, not the accumulation of stories. Every Passover, as we recount the Passover story, we're reminded that the hard work of the challenge of the Exodus was not the exciting, explosive liberation from Egyptian oppression; rather it was the 40 years of building a just society in the desert of Sinai. Giving our students exciting experiences which will sparkle in application essays, sermons and cocktail party conversations is difficult, but actually relatively easy compared to maintaining the outward turn which these experiences engender. For that, we need schools and synagogues and communities which support the outward turn of Judaism.

Service learning programs that operate in this way can be incredibly effective in cultivating a Judaism which is authentically turned outward to the world with its myriad blessings and challenges. However, when we allow our focus to shift from the needs of others to the needs of Jewish identity and continuity, we profane our tradition in the exploitation of our more vulnerable neighbors.

We call on all who are building Jewish service programs to carry a SPADE with them to ensure that programs are **S**ervice-oriented, well-**P**repared for, inclusive of **A**dvocacy, **D**eliberative and **E**nduring. Programs which operate at this level of sophistication can connect the deepest and strongest values of Judaism with the needs of contemporary Judaism and the needs of the world.

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