

Doing Service with the Poor: Some Notes on Language

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We in the Jewish service-learning world sure do talk funny.

Often, Jewish organizations talk about “doing service,” but “doing service” is not a natural way to talk in English. It simply does not make grammatical sense. At this moment you aren’t “doing reading” – you’re “reading.” When you sit down to your next meal, you won’t be “doing eating” – you’ll be “eating.”

We suspect that we “do service” but don’t “serve” in order to get a little bit of psychological distance between ourselves and what we are actually *doing*, or fear we are doing. Servants serve, servile people serve, but people of privilege “do service.”

Since the 1950’s a majority of American Jews have moved out of the ghetto and attained the privileges – white skin privilege, class privilege, educational privilege – that have facilitated our success in America. We are relative newcomers to such privilege, and we’re quite anxious to protect it. “Serving” sounds an awful lot like a humiliating thing that people without privilege do, and we don’t think we want to go there. But we should.

And who are those people we serve? You know, the people in the photographs who don’t go to Hillel.

Frequently, they’re “the needy” or “the poor,” as in, “that’s so great that you are going to help poor people in Africa.”

The thing is, people aren’t simply “poor” (adjective) the way some people are short. Poverty (noun) is not a neutral, random state that one happens to find oneself in.

People are *impoverished* (transitive verb) for a number of reasons that are often tied to their access to power, privilege and resources. Of course, this access is often controlled by demographic considerations such as gender, race, and religion. “Impoverished” is not just a verb, it is a transitive verb, because people are *made poor* by systems of oppression that are actively designed by people. We call the people who benefit “rich,” and we call the people who suffer “poor,” but those adjectives simply describe a person’s economic status while obscuring root causes. To use a different example, people are not simply slaves (noun), they are *enslaved* (transitive verb) by more powerful, oppressive people.

Acknowledging and naming systemic oppressions such as classism is scary, and forces us to recognize our own complicity in the oppression of others. Once we go down that road, a life of

ignorant bliss becomes impossible. Perhaps the psychological distance provided by our typically descriptive, rather than socially conscious language, helps us to avoid these introspective, difficult, and potentially life-altering questions.

And yet, engagement with oppression is hardly foreign to Jewish tradition. The most widely practiced Jewish ritual, the Seder, forces Jews to “relive” our enslavement in Egypt. This ritual is not merely a reinforcement of historical memory or of Jewish peoplehood; rather, it is an exercise in relating our historical experience to our contemporary consciousness and condition. “In every generation one is obligated to see oneself as if they personally went out from Egypt.”

As children raised in the 1980’s our families made the explicit connection between a fourth piece of matzah and contemporary suffering, whether the Ethiopian famine or the oppression of Soviet Jews. With our own children, we use the seder to raise consciousness about genocide in Darfur, enslavement of women through the sex trade, and other horrors.

However, until we consciously incorporate this type of learning into our regular service work (the true definition of “service-learning”), and start using language that accurately describes, illuminates, and critiques oppression, our attempts at true service and social change will forever remain a hollow-shell.

So let’s quit “doing service” or “engaging with service.” Let’s *effectively* serve, which requires a critical consciousness. Here are some suggestions on how to effectively serve:

1. **Learn about power and privilege.** Power and privilege control who has access to resources and to what degree. Understanding the systems which enshrine our own power and privilege enables us to understand how we can serve most effectively.
2. **Pay attention to language.** This is not simply an issue of semantics. The language that we use reinforces our understanding of ourselves and others, and projects messages about our values.

We are inheritors of a tradition that understands the power of words. We are told that the world was conjured into existence by the speech of the Holy One, and so too, we conjure worlds when we describe them. When we imply that people are our inferiors or passive victims, we make it so. Let’s instead use language to conjure a just world, where all people are our partners, seen and treated with dignity and respect.

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