

Jewish Service: A New Option for 21st Century American Judaism

By Ruth Messinger

We are at a new point in our lives as American Jews. We enjoy affluence and security unique in Jewish history. At the same time, there are immense needs in the world. Millions of people are victims of poverty, hunger, disease and oppression. American Jewry will be significantly shaped by our ability to reach beyond our focus on Israel and on Jews in need to help the lives of all people in need around the world. A new model of Jewish service needs to be articulated that is informed both by Jewish sources and by the radical new challenges of our time.

What we need are ways to carry out the primary Jewish obligation to be of service to others--in our own religious communities, in our cities, in our nation, in the world. We need to feed the hungry and care for the stranger and help to throw off the oppressions that plague people in our time. We need a structure for Jewish service precisely because it is an important way for us to fulfill our responsibility to our world.

My vision is of a place and time when service by Jews, in a Jewish context, has become a rite of passage in and for the Jewish community -- something that Jews are expected to do. This service will be done globally, in the U.S., Israel, Europe and the so-called developing worlds of Asia, Africa, and Latin America. It will be done by people ages 15-75, and it will involve work with Jews and with non-Jews. The programs that provide the opportunity for this work will have several things in common: they will take people outside of themselves to work for social justice in a place or with people who are "the other," who are in some ways different from themselves; they will do this in a Jewish context and the work will, in the process, transform the participants.

To help imagine what this vision would look like and how it might come about, I will present a success scenario in which such programs come to thrive in a single city. Imagine that in 2015 in [let's say] Portland, Oregon, Jewish service has become the norm. Each year, for the past 10 years, more and more Jews of all ages have engaged in service projects. Some college students have worked over spring break, building homes in El Salvador. A few congregations are part of a vast network of literacy volunteers in the Portland schools, and some of these volunteers find the work so compelling that they then enroll in longer programs that take them outside of their own community. A local Jewish high school has seen students from its senior class sign up to work on an Indian reservation each of the last five summers. Many adults have spent two months sharing their professional skills with NGOs in Latin America. Some professionals are part of a health team that is staffing three clinics in rural Uganda. Others have given a summer to help rebuild the Jewish community in Argentina or to

reclaim a synagogue alongside a community in the Ukraine. Another large group has gone to Israel for six months each year to teach English to Israeli Arabs. And each year a sizeable group of recent college graduates has lived together and worked with poverty agencies throughout the state, learning organizing and advocacy skills.

What is different in Portland in 2015 is not the types of service that people are doing, since programs of most of these types already exist in the Jewish community. What is different is the expectation that at some point in their lives active and involved Jews ought to join a service program, ought to give some time to one of these efforts at social change.

In Portland, in my imaginary construct, this happened because two rabbis of large congregations, a Hillel Director, and the head of the federation committed themselves to developing and promoting the concept of Jewish service. They communicated to students and to congregants that service was something Jews were expected to do. They attracted the attention of significant funders, and the existing service programs, largely originally based in the Northeast, flocked to Portland to set up local branches.

What is different, as well, is the sense of critical mass. In the last 10 years, 1,200 students have gone on spring break, 1000 have spent at least a year doing local service, and 5000 Jews of all ages have been part of other projects. The numbers have shaped the community. The various returned volunteers speak regularly about their experiences. Often they refer to this work as having transformed their lives, as giving them new perspectives on the world and on their own ability to make a difference. Many of them say that realizing that social justice was a critical pillar of Judaism has made them more serious about their involvement in Judaism.

People are recruited for the various programs by the alumni who preceded them. Many program graduates have committed to work in the non-profit social justice community, creating and staffing local change organizations, working as volunteers, raising money for people they got to know in Kiev or Gaza, in Portland or Peru. Some have chosen to take their social change experiences into the Jewish community, and they are today leaders of projects in which they once participated or they help promote new service opportunities for the groups with whom they work. There are annual retreats and conferences to provide further training in advocacy. Service for social justice is an expected and a rewarding activity that defines Judaism in Portland.

And why is this my vision? Why am I so particularly committed to service as a way to transform individuals' lives and also make a difference for people in need? The simple answer is that I have had this experience myself, firsthand, and am now watching it again with the volunteers in American Jewish World Service (AJWS) programs and with the nascent Jewish Coalition for Service, a project of

the Trust for Jewish Philanthropy, which unites fifteen Jewish service programs.

My life was shaped by early opportunities to do service, work with others, and get a sense of my own capacity to make a difference. I did my major stint not in Peru or Senegal, but in rural western Oklahoma. The culture was different, I had to determine who I was, and I had to learn fast how to work with people of very different backgrounds and beliefs. I realized that for me doing this work was a part of being Jewish.

At AJWS, we run programs for adult professionals and for college students who go to the developing world to share their energies, interests and skills. Our volunteers confront the reality of the other, learn firsthand the gross inequities in the world and discover the capacity of all people to plan and work for their own vision of social justice. They emerge with a sense of themselves as people able to make a difference. And because they do this in a Jewish context, with Jewish learning, they find a new way to connect to their faith, to take seriously its mandate to help heal the world.

I think this vision of making service a normative facet of 21st century American Judaism will address several contemporary needs: It will help people who are looking to get a sense of themselves in the world as effective agents. It will also help individuals to fight against growing alienation, and to create a sense of community. In addition, it will make a contribution in a world in which there will be an increasing need for cross-cultural experiences that promote cross-cultural understanding.

One way to move toward this vision is to concentrate energies for several years on building a service culture in the Jewish community in one city. That is part of the plan of the Jewish Coalition for Service; it would like to be funded to do this in a few geographic jurisdictions. The challenge is how to make change on this scale. I speak as a fundraiser and as a funder. Too often there is a new good idea, such as the one promoted, in my hypothetical example, by a few forward looking leaders in the Portland community. These kinds of leaders, people who can envision a future that is different from the present, people willing to run risks to make change, are essential to any such effort.

Unfortunately, in this project, as in most innovative and paradigm shifting projects, the status quo rules the day. What usually happens is that after significant effort, funding is secured and the innovative program is established. At first it is small and it is therefore seen as marginal. Even were it to be very successful, more often than not funders and evaluators would continue to see it in its initial marginal context, as having served the small number of people who were part of it. Such innovative programs would almost never be seen as the seeds of important new paradigms, worthy of funding on a grand scale.

And the institutional players (in this case the Hillels and local federations), which benefit from having the new program available to them, do little to nothing to promote it, fund it or imagine it as having a legitimate claim on existing resources. This is because the new paradigm is seen as being in competition for what it is reasonable to imagine are scarce funds, although that may not actually be the case. So funding is a constant struggle, the programs benefit those who know about them and are accepted into them, but there is no change in community norms. And people in positions of power often boast about programs that they do very little to help; they do not take the lead in trying to make such programs the accepted standard in their communities. Real change does not occur.

And Jewish service, an idea I believe could make a dramatic difference in attracting Jews to more active Judaism, in changing the ways in which Jews are seen around the world and in changing the way in which Jews understand their obligation to the world, remains a wonderful fringe activity.

I believe that forceful leadership could make the difference. In the Portland example, I imagined the opposite happening. I described a situation in which the local leaders were so committed and so forceful that they embraced the idea, recognized the huge value of building critical mass, forced local and national funders to help them do this on a large scale, and were able to show results.

Unfortunately, too many good ideas -- in this case ways for Jews to become more comfortable with their Judaism -- are born, struggle for funding, live for a while and then shrivel up because the existing institutional system has not made room for them.

It is my hope that it will be possible to alter this all-too-common pattern by joining forces in the Jewish non-profit world, by creating a consortium of all the different service programs to advocate for a shift in perspective regarding Jewish service. In this way, it might be possible for each of these innovative programs—whether it is Avodah which places college graduates in urban poverty agencies in New York and D.C., or Otzma which sends students to work in Israel, or the AJWS Jewish Volunteer Corps which sends adult professionals to the developing world—to be recognized as essential players in the organized Jewish community. In this way, it might be possible to secure the funding that would allow these groups to grow and ultimately to change the lives of a significant number of American Jews.