



## Chesed and Tzedek

Ruth Messinger is Executive Director of American Jewish World Service, an organization working with and on behalf of the American Jewish community against poverty, hunger, and oppression in the developing world. Yossi Prager is the North American Director of The AVI CHAI Foundation, a private, independent foundation with the mission of promoting Jewish commitment primarily through Jewish education. Simon Greer is Executive Director at the Jewish Fund for Justice, an organization that addresses social and economic issues. They spoke by phone with Susan Berrin, Editor of Sh'ma .

**Susan Berrin:** In recent years, it's been suggested that service become an integral part of the teen or post high school experience. What impact would that have on the Jewish community?

**Ruth Messinger:** I'm hugely in favor of this. Real hands-on experience, the action component of worship and study, helps people understand the issues that confront them in the world and connect faith-based teachings with actual ways to put them into practice.

**Yossi Prager:** I think that a service component, chesed work, is already built into the structure of many day schools, which see their mission as building the character and the sense of communal responsibility of the students. In some high schools there is a chesed requirement, and lower grades integrate chesed into numerous projects. For example, in my daughter's school, the third grade renovated the waiting area of the pediatric outpatient clinic of a local hospital.

**Ruth:** It's different when young people do service in a concentrated way, when it's the central piece of what they're doing, thoughtfully accompanied by Jewish text and values education. Doing hands-on work intensively makes all the learning more real.

**Simon Greer:** It would be great if we could get to a place where there was a universal service obligation throughout the Jewish community, whether it's through your attendance at day school or affiliation with a synagogue or working with some other Jewish group, or just knowing that it's a piece of what it means to be a Jew. This would signal to the world what we stand for while impacting the lives of each individual Jew. I worked to help start a hunger action club when I was in 8th grade, and years later as a result of that club, I lived in Poland working for Solidarity. I know the incredible personal transformation that can be sparked by a service learning experience. But we need to see that this is a portal, an entryway. While it's tremendous that people would work to renovate and improve a wing of a hospital, I would also want us to have our children think about why many people can't afford to go to the hospital or use the hospital as their primary care rather than having access to a doctor for primary care. And why does the hospital need volunteers to renovate it?

**Yossi:** Simon, you shifted from the concept of service as such to political advocacy for a particular point of view. And I would try to bracket that out. It is important, I agree, for students and adults to learn to think about the causes and solutions to the situations faced by the most disadvantaged among us in society. I want to make a separate point: In thinking about the meaning of service, it is important that we expand the term beyond social needs to educational needs. For example, there are many Jews today who are not conversant with Hebrew, Jewish texts, or Jewish tradition. Educating these Jews should also be viewed as important service.

**Ruth:** I'm talking about every possible kind of service: urban poverty, global development, and needs of Jews and others around the world. But when I talk about a "term of service," it has only to do with the length of

concentrated time in which that's the primary activity, not who the receiving population is. Second, I agree that programs need to be structured differently for people at different life stages. And third, we need to engage the questions about root causes, open debate on the answers, not dictate them.

**Simon:** A service project in a hospital where there's no commentary on why the hospital needs this done through volunteers effectively condones a society's decision to rely on volunteerism rather than public goods provided through a tax base. While the intentions of your daughter's teacher were just and righteous, she is teaching a skewed view of the world. Service learning must teach the importance of volunteerism while at the same time teaching about systemic inequities, their causes, and possible remedies.

**Yossi:** I'm not sure we agree on this. Volunteerism is, I think, the right answer.

**Susan:** Yossi, how would you distinguish between the Jewish values of chesed, lovingkindness, and tzedek, justice? And would you comment specifically on the widespread chesed within the Orthodox community?

**Yossi:** Chesed includes activities such as providing clothing, money, medical supplies, food for new mothers and people sitting shiva, job training, resume services, and networking for people who are unemployed. These activities might be undertaken simply because gemilut chasadim is, according to the Mishna in Avot, one of the foundations of the world. However, in practice, chesed flows also from a sense of areivut, mutual responsibility. In many Orthodox communities, the extraordinary amount of chesed is a function of people living in a close social and geographic community. The fact that people all live near each other, in walking distance to a shul, that virtually all the children go to the same schools, means that people's lives are so much more interconnected with each other and, as a result, people feel a much greater responsibility for one another. Tzedek, on the other hand, is not attributable to community, but is a universal value to which all are entitled and all people should promote.

**Ruth:** And indeed right now the entire spectrum of the Jewish community, along with those of other faith and secular backgrounds, is trying to bring attention to the problems of Sudan. In some communities humanitarian service is expected of everybody, and the place to do it is in shul or exclusively with one's own community. Other people engage that activity outside their own communities. There is a dramatic difference for the future of the Jewish community if they do that service work -- regardless of the recipient population -- with a Jewish organization and complemented by Jewish study.

**Simon:** I thought that the chesed commitment came from the concept that the world is made in the image of God and had nothing to do with geographic proximity at all. It is profoundly powerful to imagine that people I've never seen are equally dignified because they're made in the same image as me. The efforts to engage Jews in struggles, concerns, service, learning outside of our community is based on the understanding that our values call on us to transcend the limitations of geography. Our efforts are based on our deep awe of God's presence in the world and what it means to live in this global community and feel the obligations that we, as Jews, have to people far beyond the people we see regularly.

**Yossi:** Traditional Judaism has always seen the need to prioritize action; we all have limited time and financial resources. Jewish law defines concentric circles where your first obligation is to your immediate family, then your extended family; then to your Jewish community and Israel; finally to people in other communities. In other words we are most responsible to those with whom we have a relationship.

**Ruth:** As we draw those concentric circles, we must think about how each of us and our community as a whole looks at those various circles. And what makes up those circles? How do I identify who is in my immediate family and who is part of my community? What, for example, are our obligations to the person who picked the beans for our morning cup of coffee?

**Simon:** I really like your premise, Yossi. The only place I'm grappling with the concentric circles is, even if we accept that I want to maximize the impact on my family and the people closest to me, we could debate whether serving the people closest to my family is the biggest benefit for my family. In such a complex global environment, we have to look much more broadly if we're going to understand the best ways to serve the people closest to us.

**Yossi:** I take your point that at times the root cause of something affecting the people in my city might be something happening elsewhere -- for example, energy policy. I was thinking in terms of responsibility, not maximizing leverage.

**Susan:** How do you see service as a pathway into Judaism? Can service, like art, provide a gateway into Jewish life?

**Ruth:** Yes, especially if the service program or project is initiated by a Jewish organization that, as one of its explicit motives and intentions, teaches why this is a Jewish value. For example, our programs all include a Jewish educator who uses both rabbinic and contemporary texts that reflect specifically on what's Jewish about what the participants are doing and what the Torah and commentaries say about the issues they are confronting. This is critical, because for many Jews whose last serious encounter with Judaism was at the moment of their bar or bat mitzvah, this is their first adult immersion in Jewish community. And we are hoping to continue working with these people when they come home, both to keep them working on the issues of poverty and oppression and to keep them working on issues from a Jewish perspective. Many of our graduates, in fact, end up working for Jewish communal service organizations, although that had been the farthest thing from their minds before they traveled with us.

**Simon:** The Jewish and the service are like a braided challah, completing each other. We need to create Jewish communities and American communities that can deal with the tension and apparent contradictions in our texts and values; we can't seek simple answers. It's a complex world, and our tradition has been trying to help us make sense of the world for thousands of years. There's powerful stuff in the text with which we may or may not feel comfortable.

**Yossi:** I agree with Ruth and Simon, with the clarification that the Jewish contribution to service is more than the concept of service. The Jewish community, for much of its history, was autonomous, even in exile, and had its own legal system and its own legislative system within the construct of the ruling government. There is not only wisdom but experience in Jewish tradition that addresses some of the social issues that people are considering today, and that experience should be mined as part of the ongoing thinking about addressing both chesed and tzedek needs.

---

(c) 2005 Sh'ma. All rights reserved. The information contained in this article may not be published, broadcast, rewritten or redistributed without the prior written authority of Sh'ma.