

# Spiritual Self-Interest

Lawrence Bush and Jeffrey Dekro

In his recent book, *Shared Dreams: Martin Luther King, Jr. and the Jewish Community*, Rabbi Marc Schneier tells of rabbis whose brave participation in the civil rights movement ranged from being beaten and arrested as a Freedom Rider (Israel Dresner) to speaking at the 1963 March on Washington (Joachim Prinz). These men (women were not ordained before 1972) were inspired by the unabashedly righteous nature of the struggle. “My feet were praying,” Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel said about marching from Selma to Montgomery in 1965.

These rabbis’ actions expressed more than their idealism, however. The restrictions toppled by the movement were also barriers to Jewish advancement into the upper echelons of American society. Today, when that advancement is essentially a done deal, what self-interest remains to motivate Jewish social action?

In a previous column, we proposed a new highest “Ninth Degree of *Tzedakah*” (expanding Maimonides’ traditional eight), which we defined as *partnership with non-Jews, based on Jewish values*. While there is certainly a “community relations” aspect to this concept, more important is the *spiritual self-interest*: the authentication of Jewish values so that Jewish identity becomes central, rather than peripheral, to our daily lives.

*Tzedakah* has always been seen by Jewish tradition as the principal training ground for spiritual consciousness—as a mitzvah that awakens our souls to the humanity of others, to the ties of community, and to the reality of our partnership with God. To apply this mitzvah to non-Jews is hardly a novel concept, either. “The stranger who resides with you shall be to you as one of your citizens, for you were strangers in the land of Egypt,” says Leviticus 19:34—with numerous verses reiterating the idea. Rabbinic teachings associate it with sanctification of God’s name: in the Palestinian Talmud’s Bava Metzia, Rabbi Simeon ben Shetah returns a lost pearl to a non-Jew and declares that he “would rather hear ‘Blessed be the God of the Jews’ than gain any profit in this entire world.”

Modern Jewish institutions generally have pursued the Ninth Degree of *Tzedakah* only inadvertently—by accepting

federal funding, which requires them to offer services on a nonsectarian basis. During the past three decades, however, a number of Jewish philanthropies have been established with the *explicit* purpose of mobilizing Jewish money to assist non-Jewish communities. By capitalizing on the universalist orientation of most American Jews, these foundations do groundbreaking *tzedakah*—and by rooting their work in Jewish values, they revitalize Jewish identity.

- The American Jewish World Service (800-889-7146, [www.ajws.org](http://www.ajws.org)) helps sustain economic development projects in foreign countries. AJWS makes strong connections between “Israel consciousness” and international poverty relief.
- The Jewish Fund for Justice (212-213-2113; [www.jfjustice.org](http://www.jfjustice.org)) seeks to “address the causes and consequences of poverty on a non-sectarian basis.” JFJ is strongly attuned to the Jewish immigrant tradition as a basis for empathy.
- MAZON: A Jewish Response to Hunger (310-442-0020; [www.mazon.org](http://www.mazon.org)) allocates Jewish donations to hunger-relief projects. MAZON encourages Jews to donate three percent of the cost of life-cycle celebrations.
- The Shefa Fund (215-483-4004; [www.shefafund.org](http://www.shefafund.org)) channels Jewish institutional investments into community development financial institutions and makes grants to an array of change-making American organizations.
- ZIV Tzedakah Fund (973-763-9396; [www.ziv.org](http://www.ziv.org)) distributes small grants to dozens of individuals and organizations while emphasizing the spiritual and psychological uplift mitzvah work offers those who perform it.

Two Israel-oriented foundations must also be included on our list, as they use Jewish philanthropy to better the lives of Israeli Arabs and Palestinians.

- The New Israel Fund (202-842-0900; [www.NIF.org](http://www.NIF.org)) was first to break the mold of funding exclusively Jewish/Zionist projects in Israel. NIF pursues civil rights and justice for all Israelis, regardless of religion.
- The Abraham Fund (800-301-FUND, [www.coexistence.org](http://www.coexistence.org)) is devoted to improving the living standards of Israeli Arabs.

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Today, the Ninth Degree of *Tzedakah* is more about inspiring Jewish connections than about inspiring Jewish humanitarianism, since the latter needs little inspiration. A recent report by Amos: The National Jewish Partnership for Social Justice ([www.amospartnership.org](http://www.amospartnership.org)) showed that a large majority of Jews perceive “making the world a better place” to be more central to Jewish identity than faith, Torah study, or Jewish-oriented philanthropy. Eighty percent of those polled urged “more social justice programs and activities” for Jewish organizations—yet only 15 percent expressed strong preference for doing social justice work under Jewish auspices.

The challenge, then, is to re-root the idealism of Jews in the soil of Judaism. That is the spiritual self-interest we cultivate through the Ninth Degree of *Tzedakah*. □