

GOOD JOB

growth of service learning for the jews >> jessy gross



Community service in New Orleans. Photos by Rachel Gold.

Some Jewish Sources on Social Justice

Talmud Tractate Gittin 61a—The rabbis taught: We sustain the non-Jewish poor along with the Jewish poor and visit the non-Jewish sick along with the Jewish sick, and bury the non-Jewish dead along with the Jewish dead for the sake of peace.

Moses Sofer, *Sh'elot and Teshuvot of the Chatam Sofer* (2.231)—[The principle of] “The poor of your city take precedence,” only if both the poor of your city and the poor of the other city need food or clothing. But if the poor of your city have what they need to live, but just don’t have any extra money [and the poor of the other city don’t have food or clothing], then the poor of the other city take precedence over the poor of your city, for the neediest takes precedence.

Talmud Tractate Pesachim 50a—Rav Yosef, the son of Rabbi Yehoshua ben Levi, got sick and had a near-death experience. When he returned, his father said to him, “What did you see?” He said to him, “I saw a world turned upside-down—those who were on the top in this world were on the bottom, and those who were on the bottom were on the top.” His father said to him, “My son, you saw a corrected world.”

It’s a chilly morning in New Orleans. Eager, spirited young adults ascend scaffolds and ladders, buckets of paint and paintbrushes in hand. The morning’s task: to paint a house purple. The New Orleans jazz and heritage station plays in the background while 30 Jewish Funds for Justice educators swap stories and share personal accounts of previous experiences at the intersection of Judaism and social justice.

Service learning has a growing presence as a means of Jewish education. It is a form of experiential instruction that combines issue-based learning, hands-on projects, and reflection. Discovering that painting a home in 2009 is rooted in age-old Jewish values frames our work in a Jewish context.

During the week of service in New Orleans, participants study what Jewish tradition says about providing service, pondering their obligations to Jew and non-Jew alike and considering their universe of obligation. Questions asked of those engaged in physical service include: what is the value of traveling to New Orleans to work on projects addressing similar issues that affect the cities we live in—issues that include race, poverty, and class? The week is thus more than just about the purple house we paint. It is an opportunity to hear the testimonies of Hurricane Katrina survivors, of life inside the Superdome in the days that followed, and of rebuilding efforts in a city that takes its time to do anything. Participants—in this case, myself included—consider these narratives alongside traditional Jewish texts, illuminating our charge, as Jews, to be a light unto the nations.

In studying texts—like Deuteronomy 16:20, where the Torah commands the Jews to pursue justice—Jews exploring new ways to relate to their Jewish identity may find a universal connection to Jewish particularism. For some, knowing that social justice is a cause championed by the Torah strengthens their imperative to participate in service. For others, service learning can be an opportunity to make Judaism relevant. It can be an entry point for those estranged from Jewish involvement, providing a comfortable way to step into Jewish community. It can also be an opportunity for highly involved Jews to directly link that which they study to the act of doing, an important relationship in Judaism.

Service learning’s short-term structure is meant to have long-term impact. Hunter Owens, a high school sophomore who is a member of University Synagogue in Brentwood, California, participated last summer in the North American Federation of Temple Youth’s “Mitzvah Corps” program. Hunter says of the experience, “I went in wanting to do something. After, I wanted to do more.” Hunter is looking to spend his summer as an intern in the California state government—embodying the hope that participants will go on to integrate service and political action as an important part of their lives.

Hunter’s experience can be a common one with some further adaptation, says Lydia Medwin, a fourth-year rabbinical student at the Hebrew Union College in Los Angeles researching Jewish service learning. According to Medwin, “Because our generation was the first to participate in service learning programs, we are in the position to ask why and how these

trips help to build Jewish identity.” Medwin is exploring how Jewish service learning inspires action, fuels the desire for ongoing learning, and heightens one’s sense of obligation. She believes that Jewish service learning could be an integral model in helping to create sustainable Jewish communities.

An example of the way American Jewish organizations seek to provide opportunities to engage in service both locally and in Israel in order to build community is a group traveling to Israel through Baltimore's Jewish Volunteer Connection (JVC). After spending a day in Ashkelon working with the local community to build a playground, the visitors and locals dined together and compared experiences of growing up as Jews, either in the U.S. or in Israel. The stories and narratives of the people who worked together proved to be just as important as the work itself, serving as an explicit expression of the essence of who we are, both as individuals and as a collective people.

While many in our parent's generation may have marched in Selma in the civil rights movement to pursue justice in their time, it is this generation's chance to weave service learning into the fabric of meaningful Jewish education. We hold the key to grow an approach to education that is both 'roll up your sleeves and get dirty' and vital in shaping one's Jewish identity. **PT**



Jessy Gross is a third-year rabbinic student at the Hebrew Union College in Los Angeles. Next year, she will be obtaining a master's of Jewish education through the Rhea Hirsch School of Education at HUC. She has lived in Washington D.C., San Francisco, and Jerusalem and enjoys everything nature and culture.

HAD ME AT SHALOM

the israeli ulpan experience

>> laura chizzali



Illustration by Lina Tuv

What educational entity encompasses every age group from first grade to retirement, exists only in the Jewish homeland, may be found in someone's home or in a government building, serves the Haredi

and super-secular, and is nearly free? Ulpan!

The ulpan is a unique Israeli creation that emerged from the ingathering of diverse Jews repopulating their homeland. German-speaking Holocaust survivors, Jews fleeing Arab countries, *olim* (immigrants to Israel) from North America, France, and Argentina, as well as one million Russian-speaking Jews have all been served by an ulpan. One can see brain surgeons from Ivy League schools grasping to learn Hebrew alongside immigrants with barely an elementary education, and a moneyed entrepreneur from the United Kingdom struggling through *poalim* (verbs) while a Ukrainian with no formal education picks them up quickly. Everyone meets and greets in ulpan, the great equalizer.

Ulpanim come in as many flavors as the Jewish people. The serious Ulpan Akiva in Netanya, with its strict homework schedule and teachers who are quick and sharp in their feedback, is often touted as 'The Ulpan of Ulpan'. "They know exactly how much they can stuff into each [four-week] segment before you have brain

What you can do:

- 1** Carve out an hour in your week to do something in your community: serve meals at a local shelter, become a reading tutor, or offer professional skills at a community center serving largely immigrant populations.
- 2** Participate in a service learning program with Jewish Funds for Justice (www.jewishjustice.org), American Jewish World Service (www.ajws.org), Jewish Volunteer Connection (www.jvcbaltimore.org), or a similarly focused local organization.
- 3** Further reading: *There Shall Be No Needy: Pursuing Social Justice Through Jewish Law and Tradition* by Rabbi Jill Jacobs; *Righteous Indignation: A Jewish Call to Pursue Justice*, edited by Rabbi Or N. Rose, Jo Ellen Green Kaiser, and Margie Klein; and *To Heal a Fractured World* by Rabbi Jonathan Sacks.
- 4** Check out these organizations: Progressive Jewish Alliance (www.pjaalliance.org), Religious Action Center/Israel Religious Action Center (www.rac.org/www.irac.org), Uri L'Tzedek (www.uriltzedek.webnode.com), and many more!

freeze," says Aliza Aziz, a new *olah* from California. "Everything I learned in two years of college Hebrew is taught in four or five months in the beginner class!" She studies in dalet-plus, the eighth level. Many who attend this serious ulpan recommend it as the fastest track to getting up and running with the language. Students are of every age and religious background—Christians visiting the Holy Land, Israeli Arabs, and new *olim*.

Kibbutz Magan Michael's colloquially coined "Ulpanapalooza" caters to the younger crowd who take socializing a little more seriously than Hebrew. But apparently fun and learning Hebrew can go hand in hand. Mike Flax, the manager of this ulpan, says that while the partying is paramount, the ulpan earns the highest scores in the Ministry of Education's exit exam.

Ulpan Etzion in Jerusalem targets the 20-to-30 crowd, just out of college and off the plane. Simi Suttner, who made aliyah (immigration to Israel) in July '08, started at Ulpan Etzion together with immigrants from 27 countries, including France, Chile, Turkey, Belgium, Brazil, Russia, India, and Argentina. Ulpan Etzion is a dorm ulpan, where the *olim* share learning, living, and adapting to a new culture. Fresh from dental school in Canada, Suttner took the Israeli licensing exams while attending ulpan, appreciating the instant social network the ulpan provided. She describes it as "five months of summer camp with new friends."

Jerusalem's Ulpan Or is a private ulpan that runs like a language school, and is priced accordingly. Claiming to teach "Hebrew at the speed of light," it offers a unique combination of one-on-one lessons with a workbook, MP3 files, and afternoon sessions of "Café Ulpan" where students converse, facilitated by a teacher. I attended this ulpan for five days and found it effective. My most memorable moment was when I told the teacher he was a *mazleg chazak* (strong fork). Clearly my ulpan days are not over yet! **PT**



Laura Chizzali would like to dedicate this article to Chana Chajes, with whom she attended ulpan, who passed away several weeks ago. *Baruch Dayan Haemet.*