

FOR THE SAKE OF PEACE

CONSIDERING OUR OBLIGATIONS TO JEWS AND OTHERS

Part of being a Jew in the modern world is to have multiple identities, and to simultaneously be a citizen of many communities. Jewish tradition is based on a model of a self-governing community, in which Jews are obligated to support one another.

Albert Voorspan and David Saperstein describe traditional Jewish charitable institutions as follows:

By the Middle Ages, community responsibility encompassed every aspect of life. The Jewish community regulated market prices so that the poor could purchase food and other basic commodities at cost. Wayfarers were issued tickets, good for meals and lodging at homes of members of the community, who took turns in offering hospitality. Both these practices anticipated “meal tickets” and modern food stamps plans. Some Jewish communities even established “rent control,” directing that the poor be given housing at rates they could afford. . . . When poor young immigrants came from other places, the community would support them until they completed their education or learned a trade. The organization of charity became so specialized that numerous societies were established to keep pace with all the needs. Each of the following functions was assumed by a different society on behalf of the community at large: visiting the sick, burying the dead, furnishing dowries for poor girls, providing clothing, ransoming captives, supplying maternity needs, and providing necessities for observing holidays. In addition, there were public inns for travelers, homes for the aged, orphanages, and free medical care.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS:

Many of our current Jewish institutions (such as Jewish Federations) are successors to this model of community obligation. Is this model still relevant? To what extent do you feel obligated to support other Jews in New York City? In Israel? In other areas of the world?

Today, we are members of multiple communities, and have the ability (and perhaps the obligation) to reach out to both Jews and others in a way that is historically unprecedented. But even our earliest Rabbis were not living in isolation; Jews have always lived in and among other communities, and have had to consider what obligations they have to non-Jews.

Consider the following texts:

R. Joseph learnt: “If you lend money to any of my people that are poor with you” [Quoting Exodus 20:2]: [this teaches, if the choice lies between] a Jew and a non-Jew, a Jew has preference; the poor or the rich, the poor takes precedence; your poor [i.e. your relatives] and the [general] poor of your town, your poor come first; the poor of your city and the poor of another town, the poor of your town have prior rights.

— Babylonian Talmud, *Bava Metzia* 71a

Our rabbis taught: We sustain the non-Jewish poor with the Jewish poor, visit the non-Jewish sick with the Jewish sick, and bury the non-Jewish dead with the Jewish dead, for the sake of peace.

— Babylonian Talmud, *Gittin* 61a

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS:

- (a) What do you think “for the sake of peace” in the second reading, meant at the time it was written? How might you understand it now?
- (b) There is a tension between the first text’s suggestion that we care for Jews first and the second text’s instruction to care for both Jews and non-Jews. Do you feel this tension in your own life? Which of these approaches more closely represents your own priorities in giving or serving?

Finally, consider this argument:

I heartily disagree that money given to synagogues or other Jewish communal institutions should be considered *tzedaka*, except for Jewish groups that primarily care for those in need. Rather, such support – which is also an important obligation – is modeled after the taxes that Jewish communities in earlier times imposed upon themselves in order to support vital communal functions. These taxes were distinct from contributions to local *tzedaka* funds. Supporting a congregation is an essential communal tax, but not a form of economic justice or social welfare. In thinking about the money we contribute to organizations and individuals, we need to be clear about our commitments to Jewish community-building along with our commitments to care for those in need and to pursue justice and peace, and to make provisions for both. Giving to one does not satisfy the obligation to give to the other.

— Rabbi Toba Spitzer

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS:

What do you think of Rabbi Spitzer’s argument? In your own giving and community service, do you distinguish between your support of Jewish communal institutions and *tzedaka*? If you were to distinguish between them, do you think it would change how you give or serve?

But is it Jewish?

WHAT IS JEWISH ABOUT THE WORK WE DO, AND DOES IT MATTER?

Below are descriptions of several different types of social justice and community service work. Read through them and then assign them a score, from 1 to 5, to indicate how “Jewish” they feel to you (1 being the most “Jewish” and 5 being the least). Then assign a number, 1-5, to indicate how “important” the work is (1 being very important, and 5 being not important).

HOW JEWISH (1-5)?	DESCRIPTION	HOW IMPORTANT?
	Volunteering at a soup kitchen run by a local church.	
	Creating a Purim carnival for your synagogue’s nursery school.	
	Lobbying the City Council to expand the summer lunch program for low-income children.	
	Running a winter coat drive sponsored by a local interfaith group.	
	Fasting in solidarity with prisoners facing abusive conditions in the city’s jails.	
	Writing a letter to your Member of Congress concerning your views on U.S. policy towards Israel.	
	Giving money to a panhandler on the subway.	
	Volunteering at an afterschool program in a low-performing public school.	
	Performing in a concert at a nursing home.	
	Collecting money to support victims of a natural disaster in the developing world.	
	Contributing to a charity that supports food pantries in Israel.	
	Reading to a blind congregant at your synagogue.	
	Collecting clothing for recent immigrants to Israel.	