

GIVING LIFE TO THE NEEDY

ENGAGING IN ACTS OF SERVICE

There are many ways to care for those in need. In the language of traditional Jewish texts, our obligations to those in need to fall into two distinct categories: righteous giving (*tzedakah*) and acts of kindness (*gemilut chasadim*). Traditionally, the goal of *tzedakah* has been to offer financial assistance to the poor within one's community, while *gemilut chasadim* applies to acts of personal service, encompassing acts of kindness shown to the sick, mourners, strangers, or others who may be in need of care or compassion. In this discussion, we will consider both our obligation to serve others and the ethical issues raised by our efforts to assist others through volunteering our time.

Consider the following texts:

Our Sages taught: Gemilut chasadim (acts of loving kindness) is greater than tzedakah in three ways: Acts of tzedakah involve only one's money – gemilut chasadim can involve both money or one's personal service. Tzedakah can be given only to the poor – gemilut chasadim can be done both for the rich and for the poor. Tzedakah can be given only to the living – gemilut chasadim can be done both for the living and the dead.

— Babylonian Talmud, *Sukkah* 49b

If you want to raise a person from mud and filth do not think it is enough to keep standing on top and reaching a helping hand down to the person. You must go all the way down yourself down into the mud and filth. Then take hold of the person with strong hands and pull the person and yourself out into the light.

— Rabbi Shlomo of Karlin (18th Century, Poland)

[T]he most powerful statement of human value is not made by giving money or transferring goods from one person to the other. However valuable, such gifts are of finite value. The deepest confirmation of the preciousness of a human life comes when a person gives his or her own infinitely valuable life to the other. Normally this is not done by literally giving one life for the other – say in dying to protect or save another. The fundamental ongoing communication of human value takes place when one person spends a piece of his or her life—some unique and irreplaceable amount of time—in relationship and service to the other.

— Rabbi Yitz Greenberg¹

¹ Yitz Greenberg, "Personal Service: A Central Norm for Our Time," *Contact*, Vol. 4, No. 1, 2001.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS:

- (a) These three texts offer a number of different arguments about why engaging in acts of *gemilut chasadim* is preferable to giving *tzedakah*. Do you find any of these arguments persuasive? If so, which ones? Do any of them make you uncomfortable? Why?
- (b) How might you argue that giving *tzedakah* is greater than *gemilut chasadim*?
- (c) Which comes more easily to you: volunteering your time, or your money? Why?
- (d) Do you think it is possible to discharge your ethical obligations to the needy by either only giving money or only engaging in direct service? Or should we expect everyone to engage in both kinds of giving?

Rabbi Yitz Greenberg, an influential modern Orthodox rabbi and scholar, argues that we are obligated to set aside a certain amount of our time for personal service to others:

The central value affirmation of the Jewish tradition is that every human being is created in the image of God. According to the Talmud (Sanhedrin 37a), this implies that every human being has three intrinsic dignities: infinite value, equality, and uniqueness. The Jewish vision of *tikkun olam* envisages improving the world – politically, economically, socially, culturally – until it fully sustains these dignities for each and every human being.

...

After the Holocaust, in which the fundamental dignity of the Jews – their infinite value, equality and uniqueness – was denied, degraded and over-ridden, Jews have a special obligation to uphold *tikkun olam* by restoring, nurturing and enhancing the image of God of all in need. This obligation is met through personal service. The service obligation applies legitimately to all need; economic (the poor); social (the devalued and degraded); cultural (the outsider); physical (the sick, the disabled and the old); psychological (those who need confirmation and healing); mental (those who need teaching); emotional (those who need relationship and love)...

[W]e must move to establish *mitzvah* norms in the realm of service. A Jew is commanded not just to do individual acts of *chesed* [loving-kindness] to others but to set aside regular time for volunteering and giving personal service. What is the minimum number of hours a week, a month, or a year that one must dedicate to nurturing the equality and uniqueness of other human beings? We must create a Jewish culture in which the final measurement of 'was this life worthwhile' will be: Did one set aside regular times for nurturing other human beings? At every stage of life, the individual must ask him/herself: in what professions or paid work do I give of myself to nurture and enhance the infinite worth of other human beings? In what volunteer setting? How can these roles be expanded? As we develop these norms, I believe that we will come to the idea that every Jew should set aside a portion of his/her life for *gemilut chasadim*.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS:

- (a) Rabbi Greenberg's understanding of our obligation to serve others is grounded in the universal rights and dignities of all human beings. But he argues that Jews have a particular obligation to engage in personal service. Do you agree? Or is this a universal human obligation?
- (b) Rabbi Greenberg suggests that we should measure our success by asking whether we set aside regular times for serving others. Do you agree? How many hours per week or per

month is it reasonable to expect each person to dedicate to service? What might we do as a community to foster the “emerging norm” of personal service?

- (c) In some cases, advocacy, rather than direct service, might be the most efficient way to enhance the dignity and equality of individuals in need. Do you think Rabbi Greenberg would see advocacy as a type of *gemilut chasadim*? Do you?

Returning to our opening discussion of the goal of community service, consider the following:

What do students learn through their community service? If students serve the homeless and enjoy the rewards of volunteering but do not study the various causes of homelessness, what lessons are they learning? If they ladle soup for those who are hungry but do not explore the conditions that brought individuals and families to their counter, is there a risk? We think so. Volunteerism will always be an important support for our society and for our humanity. It will also always be insufficient.... When the emphasis is on helping but not on the factors that create the need for help, we risk teaching students that need is inevitable, that alleviating momentary suffering but not its origins is the only expression of responsible citizenship.

— Joel Westheimer and Joseph Kahne, “Service Learning Required.”

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS:

- (a) When considering a problem like homelessness, how do you decide how to act? Are you more likely to volunteer at a shelter? To engage in political advocacy?
- (b) If you were to donate money to an organization, would it be one that provided direct service? Or one that sought to enact systemic change?

Whom are we serving?

CONSIDERING THE EFFICACY OF “SERVICE”

Please consider the following description of the financial realities of a “service learning” program provided by the American Jewish World Service (AJWS):

An AJWS alternative spring break participant spends about 25 hours engaged in active volunteer work—usually performing manual labor—during his or her week of service. In the impoverished regions of Central America where most of our groups travel, hourly wages run about \$5 or \$6. That’s something like \$150 worth of labor. The direct cost of sending said college student—including airfare, room and board, insurance, group leaders, etc. (but leaving out, for simplicity’s sake, salaried staff and administrative overhead)—averages around \$1,800, a cost shared by funders and participants’ families. So, for an investment of \$1,800, we’re delivering about \$150 worth of manual labor to a poor community in the developing world.²

Now imagine that a college student comes to you in search of advice. (She knows that you are involved in social justice work, so she trusts your opinion). She is required to do 25 hours of “service” work in order to graduate. Her school will pay up to \$500 in support of her work, or as a charitable donation upon her completion of the requirement.

She is passionate about addressing issues of poverty, domestic violence, and women’s rights. She has the following options for her service “hours”:

- (1) Take part in an AJWS service trip to India, where she will meet with local activists who are counseling victims of domestic violence. She will also take part in repairing and painting a shelter for clients of the organization. The trip would cost her \$250, and she would need to commit to raising an additional \$1000 from friends and family when she returns. (As suggested above, the total cost of her trip would exceed the money she raises).
- (2) Volunteer at a local soup kitchen. This would allow her to donate the \$500 to the organization of her choice.

WHAT DO YOU ADVISE HER TO DO? WHY?

² Aaron Dorfman, “Beyond Good Intentions: A Values Proposition for Jewish Service Learning” (Nov. 17, 2010), available at: <http://zeek.forward.com/articles/117067/> .