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## Giving Priority to the Jewish People\*

By Jack Wertheimer

At a time when Jewish communal institutions are failing to attend to the needs of Jews at home and abroad, the hot trend in Jewish philanthropic and organizational circles, incredibly, is to channel ever more of their resources to *nonsectarian causes*. Preachers in every corner of the Jewish community are intent on urging the faithful to drop their parochial concerns for the welfare of fellow Jews and instead think globally. How can Jews worry about their own, they ask, when so many unfortunates in Africa, Latin America, and parts of Asia are suffering even worse afflictions? Last May, at my own institution, the Jewish Theological Seminary, the commencement speaker exhorted newly ordained rabbis and cantors, along with graduating educators and communal workers, to do nothing less than focus their energies on eliminating poverty and injustice from the world, even as she gave short-shrift to the impact of the economic downturn on Jewish needs.

“What is required, first,” declared Ruth Messinger of American Jewish World Service, “is that we embrace those with whom we do not share a faith or a neighborhood, a country, a language, or a political structure. We must bend our minds and our voices, our energies and our material resources, to help those most in need, both at home and abroad.” In today’s American Jewish community, this kind of talk is hardly an exception: representatives of every denomination have discovered a Jewish imperative to “repair the world” (*Tikkun Olam*), a commandment unknown to Jews for most of their history but that now, in the view of its most outspoken advocates, is preeminent.

Last spring, a partnership of Jewish foundations even saw fit to launch a new initiative, called “Repair the World,” with the self-declared “mission...to make service to others a defining element of American Jewish life.” Who are these “others”? The organization’s website helpfully points people to six domestic and international service opportunities—not a single one of which is under Jewish auspices or serves specifically Jewish populations. A bit more exploration of the website, in fact, did unearth a list of Jewish organizations offering Jewish service opportunities, which then raises the question of why yet another effort is needed to convince Jews to engage in “healing the world” when they do so already, and in vast disproportion to the contributions of other groups. Indeed, surveys regularly make clear that big Jewish givers channel the preponderant bulk of their philanthropic largess to nonsectarian causes—such as universities, museums, and hospitals—and only a small percentage of their philanthropy to aid fellow Jews. And hundreds of synagogues of all denominations sponsor social-action committees to spur volunteering at local soup kitchens, homeless shelters, and other venues aiding the downtrodden.

No one in a position of responsibility in Jewish organizational life has suggested that Jews should be indifferent to the plight of their fellow human beings, and all the evidence suggests that American Jews engage actively in civic and philanthropic activities. Why, then, the incessant barrage of exhortations to do more for the world, even as Jewish needs go unmet?

The rationale for the latest push to involve Jews in universal causes now focuses specifically on young Jews, and goes something like this: Jews in their teens, 20s, and 30s are deeply invested in contributing to the world at large—a commitment, we might add, many have imbibed from their

parents. To get their attention, Jewish organizations must harness this idealism and teach young people that their quest to aid fellow human beings is in fact congruent with the deepest teachings of Judaism. In this way we can do good for the world, while simultaneously bringing together Jews of different backgrounds and educating them about their traditions.

One could ask, of course, why this effort to repair the world cannot also extend to aiding fellow Jews. Proponents of Jewish service learning express great confidence in the sufficiency of resources in the Jewish community to address all needs—a demonstrably incorrect assessment, as we have seen. Alternatively, they will say that young Jews do not want to be bothered with their fellow Jews. If we are to attract anyone outside the committed core, they argue, programs must direct young Jews to nonsectarian causes, bearing out the truth of Cynthia Ozick's dead-on observation that "universalism is the parochialism of the Jews." And so, based on these rationalizations, an entire set of organizations under Jewish auspices now seeks to rally Jews to help everyone except their own co-religionists.

But even this is no longer good enough for those marching under the banner of universalism. Under the headline "Not Only for Ourselves," the *Forward*, the country's only national Jewish newspaper, editorialized in November 2009 against "elevating Jewish identity to a goal of [Jewish service programs, for it] undermines their very purpose." The argument seems to be that the cause of social justice is perverted if it is motivated even partly by the desire to connect Jewish volunteers to each other and to Jewish teachings. Lest we miss the point, David Rosenn, a rabbi in the forefront of such efforts, adds, "The last thing we want the Jewish community to do is use communities in distress as a vehicle to build identity." The measure of *Tikkun Olam's* authenticity, it would seem, is that it be solely a Jewish mission to the Gentiles.

Before they invest even more funding and direct still more volunteers to nonsectarian causes, Jewish philanthropists should consider a different path. Think of what they could do for the cause of Jewish literacy by creating a Jewish Teach for America. Such a program would serve the dual purpose of deepening the Judaic knowledge of volunteers, while simultaneously directing much needed personnel to the understaffed field of Jewish education. Philanthropists could also create a Jewish Service Corps with the mission of sending volunteers to Jewish communities in the United States and around the world where poverty, inadequate Jewish education, and social problems exist. Imagine what several thousand dedicated volunteers serving in Jewish educational and social-service institutions for two years might do to lessen the two-fold crises of affordability faced by families and understaffing afflicting most major agencies.

New initiatives might also strive self-consciously to teach Jews what they need to know, not only what they want to hear. They could begin by explaining that Jews, too, suffer from poverty and illiteracy. Remarkably, this obvious point is not widely understood. After working in a service program aiding Jews in the former Soviet Union, a volunteer expressed amazement that in all her years in a Jewish day school, she had never heard about poor Jews who require help. With some knowledge, idealistic young Jews who have grown up in the suburbs of the large American cities will discover that they do not have to trek around the globe to find human beings living in poverty; all they have to do is look in their own communities to find Jews trying to make ends meet and who could benefit from their help.

A program of serious Jewish education could also open some eyes about the unique perspectives offered by traditional Judaism. There is, for example, a rabbinic injunction proclaiming that “all of Israel is responsible one for the other.” Another fundamental teaching regards the study of Torah—deep Jewish knowledge—as equal in value to all the other commandments combined; the corollary is that helping people learn Torah by offering them scholarships is a communal value, and ignorance of Jewish tradition is woeful.

To cite but one more example, we might broadcast the fundamental Jewish belief, widely understood until the day before yesterday, that when Jews guide their lives in accord with the religious commandments, they fulfill God’s will. Jewish values are expressed through a lifetime of observing specific religious rituals and active participation in a sacred community, not through episodic service activities. Something quite important and enduring could come from spreading such basic Jewish teachings: not only would many more Jews be enriched by exposure to authentic Jewish values, but they might also enlist to address the physical and spiritual poverty afflicting their own people.

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