

Jewish Service and Global Citizenship: Transforming Experience into Action

by RUTH W. MESSINGER

American Jewish World Service/H Max, courtesy www.ajws.org

Bringing young people panim el panim (face to face) with people in Africa, Asia and Latin America is life-changing. Young Jewish leaders emerge from the field inspired by their service experience and eager to act on what they have learned. However, maintaining, encouraging and channeling that enthusiasm has proven to be a significant challenge in the Jewish service movement.

Motivated by Judaism's imperative to pursue justice, American Jewish World Service (AJWS) works to alleviate hunger, poverty and disease in the developing world. AJWS service projects are distinguished not only by their innovative philosophy and curricula, but also by a thoughtful alumni program that is transforming today's Jewish leaders into activists. AJWS volunteer programs are creating a cadre of global justice leaders with lifelong, passionate commitments to both social action and Jewish learning, forging a movement for social change.

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The AJWS volunteer experience

AJWS offers numerous opportunities for young people to live and work in communities in the developing world. AJWS Alternative Breaks offer college students meaningful ways to participate in service projects over their spring breaks. AJWS Volunteer Summer is an opportunity for high school seniors and college-aged students to volunteer abroad for seven weeks, followed by a year-long domestic learning program. The AJWS World Partners Fellowship provides college graduates and young professionals the opportunity to work for a non-governmental organization in a developing country for nine months. The service programs bring students to countries as diverse as Thailand, India, Guatemala and Uganda.

These programs offer an innovative and unique perspective on the volunteer service trip. Participants work hand-in-hand with local communities, while simultaneously immersing themselves in the study of Jewish text and *tikkun olam*. AJWS takes these trips very seriously,

ensuring that the volunteer experience is mutually beneficial for both the participants from North America and the host communities. The trips are distinguished by a fresh approach to global justice and Judaism — one that lays the groundwork for change perspectives and practices.

The service programs are also characterized by the innovative curricula used in each trip. The education department of AJWS mines Jewish texts and tradition to create learning materials that demonstrate the intersections of Judaism and social justice. The AJWS educational curriculum, which is taught by trained leaders, asks important questions such as "who are the people I am obligated to, and how do I help them?" and "how does the experience of being in a developing world community change my life, now that this community has a face?" Rather than being prescriptive, the curricula challenge young Jews to integrate the answers to these questions into their personal priorities and life choices, both during and after their travels with AJWS.

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Transforming experiences abroad into action at home

Participants in AJWS service programs return with a profound sense of awareness and a strengthened commitment to social justice. "When I came back from World Partners Fellowship, I really felt like more of a citizen of the world," said Rebecca Shaloff, an AJWS alum who now works for a non-profit in Washington, D.C. that addresses issues of labor and fair trade. "I felt that I understood not only that what happens across the world is important, but that what we do every day in the U.S. impacts the rest of the world. That to me is the most powerful concept that I walked away with as a World Partner and it is what drives me still today."

Recognizing that international experiences can — and should — have resonance at home, AJWS alumni programming draws connections between domestic and global issues, and provides opportunities to explore ways for our alumni to translate their values into daily action. The alumni program aims to reinforce the participant's experience abroad, working to ensure it will continue to have ongoing value for the participant.

AJWS alumni programming works in partnership with AVODAH: The Jewish Service Corps to nurture a Jewish social justice community across the United States. Over the last year, the AJWS-AVODAH partnership has brought together young people in New York, San Francisco and Washington, D.C. for events such as "Inside the Activist's Studio," which showcased local Jewish

change-makers and offered a variety of skill-building and networking experiences; an intensive leadership development course for emerging Jewish social justice leaders; and an educational series focused on Jewish philanthropy and social justice. Additional programming includes educational and advocacy sessions with representatives from AJWS grantees, Jewish holiday celebrations and local service opportunities.

One example of an emerging Jewish leader is Rachel Steinberg. After returning from a Volunteer Summer in Thailand, Rachel wanted to make the Princeton University community more aware of issues confronting the developing world. With an AJWS grant, Rachel planned a fair entitled "Emerge! A Global Bazaar." In November 2007, over 700 people attended "Emerge!," which featured the works of entrepreneurs and artists from the developing world and included lectures and workshops to raise awareness about economic development and social change.

"Were it not for AJWS, I would never have been doing this kind of work," Rachel says.

In addition, alumni of AJWS service programs have stated that their relationship to Judaism is often changed by the experience. AJWS service programs bring together Jews of different levels of observance and education: Orthodox, Conservative, Reform, Reconstructionist and unaffiliated participants learn, pray and live together in an effort to create a pluralistic community. In survey

responses, participants continually cited Shabbat observance in a pluralistic community as having most significantly impacted their Jewish identities.

For many participants, this "wow" moment provides a new connection and relationship to Judaism. As one participant remarked: "I feel as though I actually understand the importance of Shabbat now and plan to continue observing Shabbat in my home." As a result, AJWS alumni typically commit themselves to active participation in the Jewish community upon their return.

The service programs work to transform the Jewish community so that future Jewish leaders are activists committed to global social change. For AJWS, the trip abroad is only part of a continuum which begins with orientation and, ideally, remains with the volunteer for his or her whole life. The transformative nature of the trip is channeled, through AJWS follow-up, into action and advocacy at home.

With over 2,000 alumni and a growing number of retreats, skill-building sessions, electronic newsletters and coordinated participation in ongoing AJWS advocacy campaigns, AJWS volunteer and alumni programs are expanding the constituency of young American Jews committed to a global perspective. It is our hope and our mission that these young alumni will spread their views, passion, first-hand knowledge of developing countries and visions of global responsibility to others within the American Jewish community.



American Jewish World Service/J Berman, courtesy www.ajws.org