

## THE CONTRIBUTIONS OF VOLUNTEER SERVICE\*

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THE full title of this brief talk, "The Contribution of American Jewry to Democracy Through Volunteer Service," has given me considerable pause for reflection. The result is that a rather broad interpretation has been arrived at, so broad that perhaps I may be considered to have violated my welcome at a meeting of social workers. In order, however, to keep within the bounds of your hospitality let me hasten to assure you that I shall also extend my point of view to the accepted interpretation of your calling, with, I hope, your approbation. After all, in the old Biblical days to widen the fields of one's host so that his flocks or his vineyards could be increased, gained favor for the guest.

A good many years ago a little book, "Road of Ages" by Robert Nathan, describing the last trek of the Jews, exiled from all the lands of this earth to the Gobi desert, very vividly brought out what has since become a commonplace of thought—that there is no Jewish stereotype. We differ not only in physical characteristics and customs, but in sectarian concepts, financial status, political and economic ideologies so that the differences and hostilities within our group itself are as great as those existing and directed at us from without. Therefore, when we speak of Jewry let us consider

this term as a categorization of a people ranging from black to white, from manual worker to international banker, from atheist to traditionalist, from extreme left to right, from boulevardier to Chalmutz, from Zionist to anti-Zionist. What then makes the term applicable? To answer is to borrow a phrase from Dr. Sidney Hook in his recently made survey of the National Council of Jewish Women—that what unites us is that common denominator of being considered a Jew by oneself and one's community. That this should be accepted with an unself-conscious pride is not germane to this subject, should nevertheless be stated here.

Now one of the basic principles of this Jewishness of ours stems from prophetic Judaism, which concerned itself not merely with man's relationship to God, but with his fellow man. It was this which established the worth and dignity of every individual, no matter how mean or humble. That concept thundered by Isaiah to "relieve the oppressed, judge the fatherless, plead for the widow," exhorted by Amos, "to establish justice," is one of the great, dynamic beliefs of our civilization, of our American civilization. It is the core of our Declaration of Independence, of the Bill of Rights of our Constitution. It is this which has made our government the servant of its citizens, and not our citizens the slaves of their government.

Here to the United States has come a

vaster, more varied assemblage of Jews than was ever gathered together in the long history of our dispersion. And here in the United States has been given the greatest opportunity for the development of this peculiar Jewish genius of ours, that social consciousness, that sense of responsibility towards our fellow man as well as our fellow-Jew, towards the environment that shapes him either by cramping and destroying, or by giving the fullest opportunity to the development of his potentials. Thus it is that true to the ancient prophetic vision of our ancestors we are natural-born volunteers, whatever our field of activity, for the attainment of that vision.

The acceptance of this broader concept of the volunteer extends the meaning of the term beyond the board member of an agency, the individual working in a clinic, a child-welfare centre, a canteen, or in the varied projects of social welfare, to include each citizen striving to make his community a better place in which to live. Thus even the professional social worker, participating in citizen activity outside his own professional field, may well be considered as a volunteer. Every one of us who is conscious of the needs to be filled in his community, who works towards that end so that the old prophetic vision of the enhancement of the intrinsic worth of each individual be achieved, is a volunteer.

It follows logically that the concept

of social welfare must carry beyond its conventional confines of case-work, guidance, group work, and all the vast developments of public and private agencies of recent decades. These are but the tools, the tools for achieving social welfare; they are not in themselves social welfare. We confuse means and ends by insisting on the limited interpretation, imposed though it is at times, by not extending the field to include all services which put into effect the democratic ideal. Social welfare embraces all of man's efforts to assert his dignity and well-being.

Thus because of the wide scope of Jewish life in America, its variety, its many-faceted approach to contemporary problems, our group has contributed in differing and different manner to their solution. What a vast outpouring has come from the cultural pluralism of our turbulent, unregimented people. But beneath that heterogeneousness has been a steady, uniform concern for man's increasing welfare, happiness and dignity.

We cannot fail to recognize this in contemplating some of the names on the long roster of American Jews whose social consciousness has been one of the irresistible driving forces in their lives. The gamut of their activities, of their economic and social concept is as wide as the variety of opportunities this vast land of ours offers, but each from his vantage point has seen the same vision to be made into a reality.

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