

## Mitnadvim: Making the Most of Volunteerism

JONATHAN KATZ, CSW

“Mitnadvim” is the Hebrew word for volunteers. But for seven-year-old Tanya, who lives with her mother and brother in a shelter for victims of domestic violence, Mitnadvim means fun, warmth and connection to teen volunteers who care about her. These volunteers regularly take Tanya and other children from the shelter on field trips to museums, parks, zoos, and holiday parties on Sundays and school vacation days.

For Shlomo, a 20-year-old with Down’s syndrome, Mitnadvim means that a group of friendly, compassionate teen volunteers spend one Sunday every month with him, helping him enjoy the recreation activities available through NCSY’s Yachad Good Sports Program. Yachad is designed to introduce Jewish young people with special needs to other young people in order to break down barriers of fear and prejudice. This wonderful program looks to Mitnadvim for a steady supply of motivated, well-prepared teen volunteers.

These teens are taking part in an innovative outreach program that makes their interest in volunteerism a “door” through which they can enter the Jewish community. The volunteers who take part in these activities not only help make life better for children such as Tanya and Shlomo, but they also benefit themselves directly. Over the past seven years, Mitnadvim has helped more than 1,000 teens have two key adolescent experiences:

- 1 feeling connected to a peer group;
- 2 feeling successful at accomplishing something meaningful.

Mitnadvim/Teens Care grew out of a frustrating awareness shared by a number of us working in Jewish communal service: knowing that Jewish teens were deeply, passionately committed to volunteerism and social action, but that they were not connected to the Jewish community. They often had no awareness of the vital role that Jewish values, traditions, institutions and individuals have played in developing, sustaining and refining models of caring communities, not only for Jews but for people of many faiths throughout the world. Mitnadvim was developed to address this phenomenon.

The program has been effective because it is based on combining the following areas of expertise:

- 1 meeting the developmental needs of adolescents;
- 2 working with teens in groups;
- 3 organizing and conducting productive volunteer activities;
- 4 linking these activities to historical Jewish values, traditions and today’s network of Jewish philanthropic and human-service institutions.

Mitnadvim uses these areas of expertise in a well-structured program with the following components:

- 1 careful research and identification of appropriate volunteer opportunities;
- 2 thorough orientation and preparation of our volunteers;
- 3 on-site supervision of the volunteer activities;

- 4 follow-up evaluation with the volunteers, recipients of service and involved staff;
- 5 linking of activities to deepen volunteers' experiences and understanding of social issues;
- 6 ongoing collaboration designed to strengthen and support participating youth groups.

In order to make sure that these components mesh and that the program maintains its standards in the face of continual pressure to take shortcuts, we have found it essential that one person functions as the "linchpin," or the overall coordinator. In our model, the Jewish Family Service worker plays this role, holding together the network of teen volunteers, teen workers, staff at volunteer sites and resource people.

Mitnadvim is valuable not only as an outreach tool for unaffiliated or marginally affiliated Jewish teens, but also for strongly affiliated teens who want to experience how their Jewish literacy, i.e., their knowledge of values, traditions, rituals, language and history can be of use in tackling present-day social needs and challenges. As one day school administrator put it, "Our students sit at their desks and study all day. They need to get out into the world, to be active and put into practice what they've been learning."

In response to that administrator, we organized a park restoration activity that made the link between what those students were about to learn and what they had been studying. We discussed texts dealing with environmental issues, e.g., the biblical injunction against cutting down fruit trees during a siege and rabbinical responsa weighing the need for tannery owners to make a living against the needs of a town downstream to have unpolluted water.

At the park, parks department staff oriented the students, giving them an overview of the park's history and current environmental issues. Next, the students were told about the specific activities they'd be doing: spreading wood chips on badly eroded hillsides and pathways. We discussed the causes and impact of erosion. The students then spent several hours spreading the wood chips. They had a great time because:

- 1 The activity was enjoyable in and of itself.
- 2 They learned the importance of what they were doing.
- 3 They could readily see the results as the wood chips covered barren and rutted ground. We knew that this park's volunteer department was organized and helpful, and, as a result, they equipped the volunteers with rakes, shovels, wheelbarrows and even work gloves, which added greatly to the quality of the students' experience.

A great deal of effort is put into selecting volunteer opportunities that give teens a feeling of accomplishment. Today's teens are bombarded with words and images about the world's problems. The natural human response is to protect ourselves by becoming indifferent, cynical, judgmental or distracted. To counter this tendency, it is imperative to show teens how they can have an impact in very concrete recognizable ways.

The volunteer activities are neither too easy (for instance, they don't have to "make work") nor too difficult and frustrating. When volunteers visit older adults with Alzheimer's disease, these visits can be challenging. However, although these adults may have short-term memory impairment, we're sure that they also have strengths such as warmth, humor, access to earlier memories and the capacity to enjoy interacting with volunteers.

Another important aspect of the Mitnadvim model is that volunteers have the opportunity to get involved with a social issue in a variety of interrelated ways. One example is the work volunteers undertake regarding domestic violence. Mitnadvim volunteers have an ongoing involvement with children residing in JBFC's domestic violence shelters. As noted above, on many Sundays, when these children would otherwise be without any structured, supervised activities, our volunteers take them out for field trips. These outings have given our volunteers a heightened awareness of domestic violence and a wish to do more to address the issue. Some of these efforts have been directly focused on the shelter residents, such as toy drives for the kids, soliciting and assembling gift bags of toiletries for the mothers or serving as counselors in a summer program.

Other efforts address the issue on a broader social scale. A group of Mitnadvim teens worked closely with UJA-Federation and other agencies to design and conduct a conference on teen relationship violence. Some of these teens later traveled to the state capital in Albany to take part in a day devoted to educating state legislators about domestic violence. Not only did these teens come prepared by having read the background materials developed for the event, but they also were able to speak about their direct experience with children who had been victims of domestic violence.

Their presentations were deeply moving and had a strong impact on the legislators.

While working on such projects, these teens experience the way the Jewish community comes together to take on social problems, to organize effective structures to raise and distribute funds and to provide services. For unaffiliated teens, this experience shows the value of affiliation in terms of their interest in improving human society. For already affiliated teens, this experience shows them how they can actualize their values that they have learned.

Another important feature of the Mitnadvim model is that it provides a broad range of opportunities to meet the varying needs, interest and motivation of participants. Teens who are either hesitant about volunteering or heavily overscheduled can try out community service by joining in a one-time activity, such as visiting a drop-in center for the homeless. Teens who try and enjoy these activities or who are already enthusiastic can participate in more ongoing activities, such as the Yachad Good Sports program.

Volunteers who take part in these ongoing activities and want to have even more of an impact can become involved in a growing variety of efforts, such as those noted above, by which Mitnadvim teens have helped children in domestic violence shelters.

Teens who are especially committed can join our Leadership Council, a group composed of individuals from many schools, Ys, and synagogue-based youth groups. Our council does not replace the participants' original groups, which is a key point. We are not in business to compete with the primary youth groups. Instead, we try to enhance what they can

offer their members. Our council meets periodically, once a month on average, to reflect the needs and interests of their "home groups," coordinate plans and decide on priorities. For example, it was the council that decided to focus so strongly on domestic violence. The council also plans joint activities such as the annual community service day that is run with a consortium of New York City private schools.

Mitnadvim is not a "magic bullet," guaranteeing that participants will move directly into greater observance of Jewish religious rituals and traditions. However, we have seen repeatedly that teen participants have a very intense experience of Jewish community. They see and feel firsthand how the reality of Jewish community, of people joining together around central values of *chesed*, *gemilut chasadim*, and *tikkun olam*, truly helps people in need. And they see how our dedication to Jewish ideals strengthens, guides, inspires and comforts us in our efforts to face the challenges of our society.

---

JONATHAN KATZ, CSW, is the Director of Jewish Connections Programs for the Jewish Board of Family and Children's Services in New York City.