

“I have come away with
a greater understanding
of my heritage...and a
greater sense of the
responsibility I have to lead
a Jewish life.”

PARTNERSHIP FOR SERVICE SURVEY

Exploring *the* Potential *to* Expand
Volunteer Opportunities *for* Young Jewish Adults

Jewish Life Network & Partnership for Service

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Dear Friend,

During this Passover season, I would like to pose four questions regarding Jews and service in America:

1. Why are more American Jews engaged in service than at any time in recent memory?

Look around. Everywhere from college campuses to community boards, the rates of volunteerism are increasing, and Jews comprise a healthy percentage of the volunteers. We have reached the point in America where the pursuit of material wealth is no longer a satisfactory end in itself. As America experiences an era of unprecedented prosperity, people have begun to look beyond themselves, to realize the limitations of amassing money for its own sake and to seek ways to give something back to society.

2. Why is it that so many unaffiliated American Jews do not recognize the Jewish dimensions of their service? Ask a soup kitchen volunteer whether she is doing service out of a Jewish sense of obligation, and chances are she'll deny it, citing humanist or universalist reasons instead. The decline in Jewish cultural literacy has spawned a generation unaware of the Jewish roots of service. The organized Jewish community has not stressed that giving of yourself is a core Jewish value. Those who are knowledgeable about Jewish service often feel that such work is strictly parochial—Jews only helping other Jews. As a result, many unaffiliated Jews view service through a non-sectarian lens with nary a tint of Jewish values and ethics.

3. How can we reach out to the majority of American Jews who feel disengaged from their religious heritage? We must meet American Jews where they are. If many American Jews prefer helping the homeless to sitting in synagogue, we should connect with them and work in the areas they find most meaningful. Since service has become a vital component of the secular culture of unaffiliated Jews, we should be seeking ways to teach the Jewish roots of service and to promote Jewish service programs that meet this need. As we create a comfortable Jewish platform for all kinds of service, we can begin to impart the distinctively Jewish ethics that make service a fundamental human obligation.

4. How can service in a Jewish context help revitalize American Jewry? By creating a Jewish framework for secular service and incorporating Jewish teachings into the service experience both inside and outside the community, we can inspire a generation of American Jews who would otherwise have no contact with the Jewish spiritual tradition. Once people understand that service is one of the most profound values in Judaism, they will begin to explore other facets of their heritage. They will be more inclined to delve deeper in celebrating holidays, in sending their children to day schools, in living a Jewish life. Indeed, service is the spark that can ignite a passion for Jewish living.

Two facts are paramount: American Jews volunteer more than ever, and service is a bedrock Jewish value. If we can synthesize the two, we have the potential to create one of the strongest pillars in a portal back into Jewish living. I urge you to read the attached survey with an eye towards using the ideals of tikkun olam to effect a renaissance of American Jewish life.

Sincerely yours,

Michael H. Steinhardt, Chairman
Jewish Life Network

Introduction

For young Jewish adults, being Jewish and “caring about the world and working on it” are intimately connected and mutually reinforcing. They regard community service work as a “part of being Jewish.” They report that, in turn, their volunteer work has strengthened their own Jewish identity, giving them a “greater understanding” of their Jewish background and a “greater sense of responsibility” to live a Jewish life in the future.

Throughout the winter and spring of 2000, Jewish Life Network sponsored a study conducted by Dr. Steven M. Cohen of Hebrew University. He surveyed hundreds of young Jewish adults in an effort to understand the widespread volunteerism among this generation of Jews, and to assess the potential of Jewish service programming to welcome and engage them.

Though these findings form only the first part of a more conclusive longitudinal study currently underway, there is already much for the Jewish community to learn from the preliminary results. We invite Jewish leaders who struggle to meet 20 and 30 somethings “where they are” with compelling Jewish programming to respond to the findings and listen to the Jewish voices recorded on the pages that follow.

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“I think a major part of being Jewish is caring about the world and working on it.”

“Volunteering is an integral part of my Jewish identity.”

Methodology

The Organizations

In the winter and spring of 2000, we studied 947 young Jewish adults associated with three organizations:

Makor is a Jewish cultural center in Manhattan which reaches out to Jewish New Yorkers in their 20s and 30s. The Makor building includes a live music café, restaurant, screening room, art gallery, and seminar rooms. Makor’s workshops, lectures and performances seek to engage Makor’s target population in opportunities for Jewish exploration and connection in a pluralistic and nonjudgmental environment. (www.makor.org)

Jewish InterAction (JI) in Boston, is a partnership of the JCC’s of Greater Boston, JCRC of Greater Boston, and Hebrew College, funded by Boston’s Jewish federation (CJP). JI runs social justice, Jewish educational, and personal enrichment programs for Jewish young adults in their 20s and early 30s. JI’s programs take place throughout Greater Boston and engage a broad spectrum of the Jewish young adult population. All programming is coordinated by teams of volunteers. (www.jinteraction.org)

Makor and Jewish InterAction run community service programs in which people volunteer as a group for a variety of causes. Both provide long-term weekly volunteer projects, as well as a variety of one-time volunteer opportunities. A subset of the young Jewish adults associated with these organizations currently volunteer their time through these initiatives. While Makor runs volunteer programs as part of a primarily social and cultural organization, JI more explicitly promotes volunteering. Both of these volunteering programs link Jewish volunteers with secular urban organizations on collaborative social justice initiatives and also include some volunteer opportunities with Jewish organizations.

New York Cares (NY Cares) was the only non-Jewish organization in our sample. It is a non-sectarian volunteer placement agency that connects professional New Yorkers with thousands of opportunities for team-based, hands-on community service projects at schools, social service agencies and environmental groups. (www.nycares.org).

The Participants

We studied two major categories of young Jewish adults associated with these programs:

Sample 1: Young Jews

The first category, and the largest, is a group of 733 young Jewish adults who are on the email lists of either Makor or JI, but are not currently engaged in a volunteer program through these organizations. The “Young Jews” sample is intended to simulate the young Jewish adult population that might potentially be served by Jewish community service programming.

Strictly speaking, however, the people on Makor and JI’s email lists are not “average” representatives of their generation of young Jewish adults. Comparisons with a 1998 study of the general Jewish population of New York reveal that our “Young Jews” sample, culled as it was from the email lists of two Jewish organizations, was significantly more involved in the Jewish community, and had more of a Jewish background, than the average Jewish population.¹ This sample is also unlikely to be representative of young adult volunteerism. Even with the Makor respondents who are currently in Makor-sponsored volunteer programs removed, the people in our Young Jews sample are probably above-average with regard to volunteering. Studies have established that the sorts of individuals who affiliate with social, educational or cultural agencies are likely to be somewhat more involved in volunteer work than average.²

That said, our Young Jews sample is still the appropriate one for this survey. Our aim is to probe the likely beneficiaries of Jewish community service programs, and these Makor and JI mailing list members are good representatives, not of their cohort at large, but of those Jewish young adults who are accessible to Jewish institutions. Secondly, the fact that our Young Jews sample was higher in Jewish involvement on average should

not obscure the fact that it still contains a significant number of under-engaged Jews. Almost three-quarters do not light Shabbat candles, for example, and more than half do not belong to a synagogue. Makor and JI are currently reaching many under-engaged Jewish adults, and presumably other well-designed Jewish volunteering programs could do so as well.

Sample 2: Jewish Gateway Volunteers

Our second category is comprised of young Jewish adults who currently volunteer through one of two Jewish-sponsored “gateways” to volunteer service. Ninety-nine were young Jewish adults who had participated in Makor’s community service opportunities. A majority of the service programs were followed by the opportunity for Jewish reflection, and a small number of volunteers participated in a more intensive study program integrating learning and service. Eighty-eight additional respondents were young Jewish adults who volunteer through Jewish InterAction’s service programming in Boston. All JI programs include a brief educational and/or reflective component.

Sample 3: Mainstream Gateway Volunteers

Finally, the third category of respondents included 47 Jewish members of New York Cares who were volunteering under non-sectarian auspices in a wide range of contexts. Not surprisingly, this group of young Jewish adults were far less involved in the Jewish community on a number of levels. Ninety-one percent do not light Shabbat candles, for example, and 83% do not belong to a synagogue.

These three perspectives—from young Jewish adults who are not yet volunteering through a Jewish gateway, young Jewish adults who currently volunteer through a Jewish gateway, and young Jewish adults who volunteer through a mainstream gateway, New York Cares—offer much insight for Jewish leaders eager to re-engage young Jewish adults in the Jewish community.

THE STUDY

All respondents were asked by email to complete a web survey and to answer a number of open-ended follow-up questions. In addition, Dr. Cohen and his associates conducted five focus groups with members of the Jewish Gateway Volunteers and the Mainstream Gateway Volunteers to further explore how they understand their Jewish identity in light of their service experiences.

Findings & Implications (1)

Today's young Jewish adults are already volunteering in significant numbers. Fully three quarters of the Young Jews in our sample had volunteered at least once in the past year, and about half had volunteered for multiple causes. Almost a third volunteer "regularly," and another third volunteer "occasionally." They volunteer in direct service roles (serving food, providing companionship, or tutoring) as well as volunteering to serve on boards, fundraise, offer professional skills or participate in advocacy. Three quarters of the Young Jews said that volunteering gave them a great deal of satisfaction, and nearly as many reported that they were motivated to volunteer primarily out of concern for the people whom they were serving.

In this regard, young Jewish adults are very much in step with their non-Jewish contemporaries. "Without any doubt," writes political scientist Robert Putnam, "the last ten years have seen a substantial increase in volunteering and community service by young people...A wide range of evidence suggests that young Americans in the 1990s displayed a commitment to volunteerism without parallel among their immediate predecessors. This development is the most promising sign of any that I have discovered that America might be on the cusp of a new period of civic renewal."³

Many of the Young Jews regarded their service as an expression of their Jewish heritage despite the fact that most had volunteered under non-Jewish auspices. Almost 40% of the Makor respondents in the Young Jews sample, for example, volunteered mostly or only for general society causes. Half of the Makor respondents reported that their Jewish friends don't do any regular volunteer work that exclusively serves Jews. Yet when asked in focus groups, many Young Jews regarded their service, even in general society, as an expression of their Jewish identity. Over a third of the Young Jews sample that had volunteered in some capacity said that volunteering was an "integral part of their religious beliefs." Even among the Mainstream Gateway Volunteers, more than 20% said their work through the non-sectarian New York Cares reflected an "integral part of their religious beliefs."

Clearly, the Jewish community has an opportunity to re-engage young Jewish adults through providing Jewish "gateways" to volunteer service. Young Jewish adults, like the American "Generation X" of which they are a part, volunteer their time with unprecedented enthusiasm in a wide range of social service organizations. Jewish organizations seeking programming that is appealing to young adults would likely find this group very receptive to new Jewish-sponsored volunteer programs.

Furthermore, a significant minority of young Jewish adults already conceptually link Judaism and service, even in the absence of any institutional reinforcement. If young Jewish adults already regard their volunteering under non-Jewish auspices as somehow "Jewish," how much more so might new programs which could bridge this volunteerism to explicit Jewish content be able to deepen their Jewish identity.

"It is extremely important to me. It is part of who I am and what I live for. I would be truly lost without volunteering."

“I find myself more comfortable [and more] at home when I do anything with a Jewish context.”

Findings & Implications (2)

Jewish Gateway Volunteers value the opportunity to serve together with other Jews. Would young Jewish adults, currently so involved in non-Jewish social service agencies, want to volunteer in programs where they would volunteer together with other Jews? Our findings, and the feedback from our focus groups, suggest that the answer is yes.

On the one hand, the Young Jews emphasize that their primary motivation for service is to help others, and that other benefits were peripheral. As discussed later in this summary, a number of our respondents even reported feeling turned off by volunteer programs that seemed to be entirely about socializing.

That said, less than half of the Young Jews sample reported that “most of their close friends were Jewish,” and yet a whopping 70% of the unmarried Young Jews said it was “very important” to them that their future spouse be Jewish. Not surprisingly, then, when in our focus groups we asked young Jewish adults why they came to Makor, participants often cited the company of other Jews as an attractive feature. Participants in Makor’s volunteer programs were not different. Young Jewish adults who had volunteered through Makor’s community service programs readily acknowledged the social appeal of volunteering in a Jewish context. “Being single,” one explained, “[I think an opportunity for] meeting fellow Jews is always a plus.”

So while our respondents largely value volunteer opportunities for non-social reasons, they also indicate that Jewish gateways for service might be appealing to them and to many of their contemporaries. Though it is not at all surprising that those who chose to volunteer in a Jewish context as opposed to a nonsectarian one like the idea of volunteering with other Jews, their enthusiasm may also suggest that other Jewish adults, currently volunteering in secular organizations, would participate in Jewish volunteer programs if such programs were more widespread.

Findings & Implications (3)

Jewish Gateway Volunteers say that volunteering under Jewish auspices strengthened their Jewish identity. As discussed in the introduction, we would expect young Jewish adults who volunteer through these organizations to be slightly more involved in Jewish life than average. It is hard to know for sure (prior to forthcoming longitudinal data) whether Makor or JI’s volunteering component itself might have augmented Jewish connection and identity for its participants.

Our one preliminary clue in this regard comes from the Makor focus groups. In their own words, numerous volunteers told us that volunteering through a Jewish gateway had influenced their sense of connection to Jewish tradition and community.

What is particularly interesting is that focus group participants largely made these connections themselves, without the benefit of much Jewish content or guided “reflection” after volunteer experiences. A majority of the service programs were followed by the opportunity for Jewish reflection, and a small number of volunteers participated in a more intensive program integrating learning and service. But the Jewish content of these programs was largely not explicit. The focus group itself might have been the first time some of these volunteers were asked about the connection between being Jewish and volunteering, and yet merely participating in a Jewish-sponsored volunteer effort had prompted these volunteers to consistently consider their experiences in these terms.

It is not hard to imagine that an explicit curriculum which would connect Jewish teachings and principles to volunteer work, might reinforce this tendency among volunteers. The many service-learning programs now popular in colleges and universities emphasize the value of reflection following service work as a way of

“I always am inspired when I see people whose Judaism causes them to help others. I feel my commitment deepen whenever I am out there doing volunteer work of any kind.”

“It’s made me want to do more for the Jewish community. They share my beliefs and values. I learn something as I give something back.”

reinforcing the values and issues raised by volunteering. In addition, research on the service-learning approach to volunteerism now prevalent in high schools suggests that volunteer work is more likely to influence other civic commitments when it is followed by structured opportunities for reflection.

The under-engaged young Jewish adults participating in service through a Jewish gateway offers Jewish educators a “teachable moment.” Many of our respondents already feel a strong association between Jewish values and their moral commitment to volunteer work. Here is a place where Jewish discussion and learning appropriate to diverse levels of Jewish education might seem both relevant and interesting.

Findings & Implications (4)

Jewish Gateway Volunteers are more likely to support the Jewish community in other ways. “Volunteering is among the strongest predictors of philanthropy,” writes Robert Putnam. “Altruistic behaviors tend to go together.”⁴ Will young Jews who volunteer to help a range of clients through Jewish gateways subsequently get more involved in the Jewish community?

It is clear from our data that Jewish volunteering, Jewish philanthropy, and Jewish identity tend to go together. A young Jewish adult who is immersed in any of these is statistically more likely to also be involved with the other two. Thus a young Jewish adult who volunteers is statistically more likely to give money to a Jewish cause and to light Shabbat candles. In our study, correlations among Jewish gateway volunteering, Jewish philanthropy and Jewish identity are on the order of .5 (a moderately strong relationship).

But this “bundling,” or correlation, does not imply causation. Does going to synagogue inspire young Jews to sign up for volunteer opportunities at *JI* or *Makor*? Or does *Makor* and *JI* volunteer work inspire a young Jewish volunteer to take a trip to Israel, or contribute to a Jewish cause? It seems likely that the causative arrows may work in several ways at once. Perhaps involvement in the Jewish community promotes Jewish gateway volunteering and Jewish philanthropy, while Jewish gateway volunteering, in turn, plays a role in promoting both Jewish involvement and Jewish philanthropy.

The comments by respondents quoted on this page further suggest that, at least for some Jewish gateway volunteers, volunteering was a route into greater Jewish involvement in other ways.

Findings & Implications (5)

Young Jews have high standards and high ideals for the programs in which they participate. All of the study’s respondents who volunteered in some capacity were asked what they disliked most about the experience. Their answers form an excellent list of precautions for any potential Jewish volunteer program for young adults.

First, Young Jews resent programs they regard as poorly organized or programs which they feel waste their time. At least some of the respondents had the impression that Jewish volunteer programs are more likely to be disorganized than non-Jewish ones.

Second, a number of our respondents perceive Jewish gateway programs as having ulterior motives. As described above, the respondents from all samples who volunteer in any capacity do so largely out of a “genuine desire to help those in need.” Hence they were turned off by programs which they felt were functioning primarily as singles clubs or which they felt were designed to obtain their money rather than their time.

Jewish service programs need to be well-run, respectful of the time and intentions of their recipients, and advocate the importance of Jewish service *l’shema*, for its own sake.

“[My Jewish volunteer experiences] remind me that the Jewish tradition is a valuable and caring one.”

“I would like to utilize my skills and interest as a Jew in any community. I want to bring my generation of Jews...the reputation of being socially-minded.”

Findings & Implications (6)

Young Jews want to volunteer in flexible programs that benefit a wide range of recipients. Young Jewish adults are, of course, individuals, with a range of preferences about the volunteer programs that appeal to them. Some respondents like to volunteer to help other Jews, but many are uncomfortable with what they perceive as the widespread tendency of Jewish organizations to serve “their own” first. Respondents unfamiliar with Makor and JI’s volunteer programs held a widespread misconception that Jewish gateways to volunteer work only benefit other Jews: “What the hell is a Jewish context?” asked one respondent, when asked if he would consider volunteering through a Jewishly-sponsored program. “Does that mean service that only helps Jews? Service by Jewish organizations? If I helped the Red Cross distribute food to flood victims, isn’t that still in the Jewish context of loving thy neighbor?” Jewish communities would need to offer gateways to service on behalf of both Jewish and non-Jewish recipients, and would have to widely publicize that there are ways to serve humanity at large through Jewish gateways.

A number of respondents, particularly those not currently volunteering through a Jewish gateway, enjoyed volunteering for local organizations through serving on boards and committees, offering professional skills, or helping with fundraising and advocacy. Perhaps they would have been more interested in volunteering through a Jewish gateway if programs had offered opportunities besides only simple direct service. Jewish communities should offer opportunities for not only direct service volunteer work (on the model of the Makor and JI gateways), but also professionally skilled volunteer work, so that a maximum number of young Jews can contribute in a range of valuable ways.

Some volunteers prefer a flexible, one-shot volunteer program which they can attend at will. Others want to make a more long-term, regular commitment to a single program. And, as Putnam writes, “Volunteering fosters more volunteering, in both formal and informal settings.” So the Jewish community would be wise to offer volunteer opportunities at a range of commitment levels, particularly since volunteering in one such program will only reinforce and encourage participation in the others.

Findings & Implications (7)

Many young Jewish volunteers learned these values early. Not surprisingly, our respondents were more likely to be volunteering currently if they had been raised in families with parents who volunteered. “Those of us who were involved in youth groups or did youthful volunteering,” writes Putnam, “are half again as likely to donate to charity as adults and twice as likely to volunteer as those of us who were not so involved as youngsters.”⁵ Similarly, in our study, the young Jewish respondents with the highest levels of volunteering also tended to have parents with high levels of volunteering.

Jewish service programs should aim not only at young adults but also at school children, and should encourage service learning, family education and volunteer programs.

“I was raised in a family that...has given lots of money and time and work to various organizations throughout my life...I don't know if it's rooted in religion as much as it's definitely rooted in my family.”

Mainstream Gateway Volunteer

Conclusion

Throughout the winter and spring of 2000, Dr. Steven Cohen and his associates studied three samples of young Jewish adults—Young Jews, Jewish Gateway Volunteers, and Mainstream Gateway Volunteers—who were associated with one of three organizations: Makor, Jewish InterAction (Boston), and New York Cares. Through a web survey, open-ended follow-up questions, and focus groups with almost a thousand respondents, we found that:

- Today's Young Jews are already volunteering in significant numbers.
- Jewish Gateway Volunteers value the opportunity to serve together with other Jews.
- Jewish Gateway Volunteers say that volunteering under Jewish auspices strengthened their Jewish identity.
- Jewish Gateway Volunteers are more likely to support the Jewish community in other ways.
- Young Jews have high standards and high ideals for the programs in which they participate.
- Young Jews want to volunteer in flexible programs that benefit a wide range of recipients.
- Many young Jewish adult volunteers learned these values early.

Our findings illustrate the degree to which well-designed Jewish volunteer programs, serving both Jews and general society, might successfully reconnect young Jewish adults to the Jewish community through meaningful service on behalf of others. At the same time, such programs would strengthen the Jewish community's own moral commitment to repairing the world.

1. Horowitz, Bethamie. "Connections and Journeys," New York: UJA-Federation of New York. 1998. Adult respondents age 22-52, in New York City, Long Island, and Westchester.

2. Putnam, Robert D. *Bowling Alone: The Collapse and Revival of American Community*. 1999. New York: Simon & Schuster. "In 1996, 73 percent of members of secular organizations and 55 percent of members of religious groups said that they volunteered, as compared with only 19 percent of other Americans" (119).

3. Putnam, *Bowling Alone*. 1999. (265, 133).

4. Putnam, *Bowling Alone*. 1999. (121).

5. Putnam, *Bowling Alone*. 1999. (122).

A Letter from Nancy Kaufman

The Partnership for Service survey results support our long-standing belief that social justice volunteer work through Jewish auspices strengthens young adults' Jewish identity. More importantly, it helps young adults understand the historic and biblical connections between Judaism and social justice. By combining particular Jewish values with universal volunteer work, we are not only doing the all-important work of *tikkun olam*, but also swelling the ranks of Jewishly-identified young adults. Recent data suggests that Jews are less likely to be aware of the Jewish traditions of social justice. We believe that programs like Jewish InterAction and Makor can provide models to other communities who want to integrate serious Jewish learning with a commitment to social justice.

We know that Jews volunteer. Whether it happens within Jewish or secular agencies, the large majority of Jews (like most Americans) do volunteer their time for myriad causes and organizations. In light of that fact, it is incumbent upon Jewish organizations to provide expanded venues for young adults (and other age cohorts) to come together as part of a Jewish community of volunteers.

From this survey, one learns that when young adults do volunteer from within a particularly Jewish organization, it reinforces their Jewish identity, strengthens their commitment to volunteerism and philanthropy, and integrates their Jewish identity and their social justice commitments. Participants in the Partnership survey who volunteer, as Jews, report many positive feelings towards the volunteer experience, their Jewish identity, and the people with whom they volunteer. In our Boston program we have noticed that not only do the volunteers have a rewarding experience, but they also form close bonds with the non-Jews with whom they work—bridging cultural boundaries that have developed due to demographic changes in Boston and other East Coast cities.

For the first time young adult Jews are finding themselves living at a time when they can “choose” to be Jewish. One of their options is to not identify as Jews, and simply be a part of American society. Yet young Jewish adults, like many Jewish Americans, are searching for the reasons to identify and to participate in society, as Jews. Volunteering through a Jewish gateway in secular organizations not only helps build Jewish identity, but also sends the important message that we care about working to make our communities, and the world at-large, a better place for all.

It is our hope that the Boston model represented by the Jewish InterAction Program (a collaborative program funded by our Jewish Federation and operated by the JCC, Hebrew College, and JCRC) will be replicated in other communities across the country. Young Jewish adults are seeking ways to participate in community life that brings meaning to their lives and strengthens their Jewish identity. Hands-on social justice projects offer one promising answer.

Nancy Kaufman is the Executive Director of Boston's Jewish Community Relations Council.

“By combining particular Jewish values with universal volunteer work, we are not only doing the all-important work of *tikkun olam*, but also swelling the ranks of Jewishly-identified young adults.”

A Letter from Richard Marker

A generation ago, those who were active in federations were generally not active in synagogues; those active in synagogues were not active in B'nai B'rith; those active in synagogues, federations, and B'nai B'rith, were not active in inter-group and social action efforts.

Since that time, the paradigm of Jewish involvement has changed. Now, involvement in one form of Jewish endeavor goes together with involvement in other forms. Different institutions maintain their unique emphases, but it is no longer surprising to find synagogue members collecting food for the hungry, or federation leaders who attend synagogue regularly.

Therefore, we should not be surprised by the high measures of Jewish commitment and involvement demonstrated by those who volunteer through Makor and Jewish InterAction. Nor should we be surprised that community service under the auspices of formal Jewish organizations enhances an existing Jewish identity. Community service can and should be used to develop Jewish identity and to demonstrate the responsibilities of being in a “community.”

Furthermore, the report's findings about NY Cares present a set of challenges for the Jewish community. A large number of those who happen to be Jewish have no assumption that participation in the Jewish community does or should reflect personal values. The NY Cares group would likely call the Makor volunteers “Super-Jews” who do not share their worldview or social reality. Due to the large numbers of Jews who choose programs like NY Cares over programs like Makor, the gap between the affiliated and the nonaffiliated widens. The challenge, then, is to develop appropriate contact points so that those young Jews who express their identity in secular contexts are legitimated and empowered by the Jewish community.

Two recent examples speak to this issue: at a national conference for community organizing activists, a small group held a Shabbat service. They were surprised at the number of fellow attendees who showed up! Discovering others who shared their commitment to social justice reinforced their own Jewishness. Similarly, a significant number of those involved in environmental advocacy in the United States are Jewish. Many of these advocates, however, are unaware that the Coalition for the Environment and Jewish Life (COEJL) exists, and that Jewish tradition offers powerful responses on this issue. By unifying Jewish voices, COEJL has been a catalyst for activism. It has also enabled many of those who otherwise saw no connection between their passion and their Jewish identity to begin to involve themselves in the community—or at least to take it more seriously.

The Jewish community should embrace the many forms of contemporary community service involvement. We should select and train peers to express their Jewishness in these alternative settings. Just as “engagement/outreach” efforts on campuses have learned to walk the delicate line between proselytizing and community organizing, young adult outreach could do so as well. Of course, not everyone who participates in community service is a candidate for every sort of Jewish activity. But a substantial number might find Jewish involvement appealing if there were an experiential crossover between their preexisting volunteer commitments and their latent Jewish identity.

Two potential communal policies emerge from this study:

1. To utilize community service projects as a way to enhance Jewish identity and foster commitment to the Jewish community.
2. To recognize the many ways in which young Jews are already participating in the community at large and to expand the natural crossover between those involvements and Jewish values.

Richard Marker is the Executive Vice President of the Samuel Bronfman Foundation.

At a national conference for community organizing activists, a small group held a Shabbat service. They were surprised at the number of fellow attendees who showed up!”

Partnership for Service

Who We Are: Partnership for Service (Partnership) is an emerging 501(c)(3) national organization with a bold vision. The Partnership seeks to make service more Jewish and more Jews serve.

The Vision: Partnership for Service seeks to increase the number of Jews committed to and involved in service and volunteerism. The Partnership will raise the standard of quality of Jewish service programming, intensifying the connections between Jewish identity and the work of service and volunteerism, and honoring those who devote their lives to service.

American Jews enjoy a rich tradition and history of service and volunteering. Service is an essential Jewish value, of equal importance to study, *tzedakah*, and worship. It has been one of the pillars of the life experience of Jews for generations. The time has come to build on this tradition as a means to counter the materialism of the late 20th and early 21st centuries.

Skill and energy exist within the Jewish community that can be channeled to help people and transform society. Service at the same time can add meaning to the lives of volunteers, help volunteers build significant relationships and enrich the human experience. By encouraging and supporting Jews who volunteer and also Jews working in service professions with opportunities for community, reflection, discussion and study, we can help make a bridge between doing these good deeds and living as a Jew. It is particularly significant that we do so for those between 20 and 40, who increasingly volunteer, but without connections to the Jewish community.

The Plan: The Partnership will engage diverse segments of the American Jewish population in this work, thereby encouraging Jewish pluralism. It will build a wall-to-wall coalition of Jewish organizations to model and teach service as a central Jewish value. Partnership for Service seeks to participate actively in the general societal dialogue about service and volunteerism.

The Partnership seeks to bridge the gap between wisdom and good deeds. By creating new models and supporting existing models of best practices, by designing new curricular materials and collecting and promoting the existing curricular materials, by offering technical assistance, convening conferences and organizing workshops, the Partnership will advance the field of Jewish service.

For additional information or to request a complete copy of the study contact:
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“Such work makes all the study and sitting in synagogue seem
founded on something real.”

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