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Sparking a Renewed Jewish Commitment to Service

by RABBI SARA PAASCHE-ORLOW

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Where do Jews stand in relation to service and what might a Jewish commitment to service look like? By reflecting on historical Jewish understandings of service, we hope to gain perspective on the present and the need to rejoin our concepts of God, service, and worship. Such explorations can spark a radical transformation of our social and communal norms.

Historically, prayer involved a physical act: a portion of one’s material goods were given as an offering. Individuals could then experience how their sacrifice sustained others — specifically, the priesthood. The ritual sacrifices of the Temple fostered a connection to God and to a greater community that was confirmed and celebrated on the pilgrimage festivals.

Since the destruction of the Temple, the Rabbis of the Talmud succeeded in transforming the Temple services into a system of prayer services and Torah readings for dispersed individuals and communities. For almost two millennia, we have brought our sacrifices in the form of prayer rather than crops.

The Rabbis based the new prayer system on the pattern of activities of the priestly cast. This exploded the traditional hierarchies, as every [male] Jew took on the mantle of daily prayer. In certain ways, this central transformation has succeeded for thousands of years as a crucial historical link for Jewish practice. However, for many modern Jews the analogy is meaningless. The central holy work of our people, which derived from the Temple service to God, is now expressed through the synagogue service.

Bucprayer does not feel like service. To be sure, we use the same language: “How were services today?” “Oh, very nice.” But it falls flat. The cultic practices seem obscure; synagogue worship does not fulfill a sense of service, be it to God, community or humanity.

Is prayer service? Many Jews feel that the recitation of prayer is itself a service to God. In traditional terms, it is a fulfillment of what God has required of us as interpreted and re-constituted by the rabbis. In an essential way, synagogue worship sustains and supports us as a community, but it cannot be the exclusive expression of how we understand our service obligation. Ultimately, if our prayers do not move us to engage the world in constructive and generous ways, the glaring fact of our inaction erodes the meaning of our prayers.

Most modern Jews do not pray out of a traditional sense of obligation, but relate to prayer as a discretionary experience. Prayer is often experienced as a luxury, an

Rabbi Sara Paasche-Orlow and Maggi G. Gaines are National Program Director and Executive Director, respectively, of the Partnership for Service.
Partnership for Service is an emerging national Jewish non-profit seeking to increase the number of Jews committed to and involved in service and voluntarism. Traditionally, Jews visited the sick and the homeless and sought creative ways to help meet a wide range of needs. However, in recent decades community needs have become more polarized, work patterns have changed and social work has grown as a profession. As a result, we have become less comfortable as volunteers, and often when we do volunteer we do not connect it with the Jewish tradition.

Launched this Fall, with the support of four initial funding partners — Beginning with Children Foundation, The Charles and Lynn Schusterman Family Foundation, The Joseph and Harvey Meyerhoff Family Charitable Fund, and Jewish Life Network, Partnership for Service will capitalize on the need for meaning, bringing the Jewish community back to the tradition of service sector careers and volunteer engagement. In so doing, it will bring us back to finding greater purpose in our lives. It will encourage the understanding that volunteering and service are significant expressions of Jewish identity and commitment.

The organization's plan is to work collaboratively to channel the skills and energy of individual Jews and of the Jewish community toward volunteering and giving of the self. By encouraging and supporting Jews who volunteer and organizations that are developing and modeling volunteer programs, Partnership for Service seeks to connect acts of service with living a Jewish life. The initial emphasis for Partnership for Service will be on Jews in their teens, 20's and 30's who increasingly volunteer but frequently have limited connections to the Jewish community.

Partnership for Service will engage diverse segments of the American Jewish population in this work, in order to encourage Jewish pluralism. It will build and work with a coalition of Jewish organizations to model and expand the teaching of service as a cultural Jewish value. Partnership for Service will also participate actively in the general societal dialogue about service and volunteerism. In every facet of American life, Partnership for Service will advance the field of Jewish service.

Through opening our door to the stranger or those in need, we open ourselves up to a relationship with God. The agent of hesed is him/herself changed through the experience.