United We Serve: A Call To Universal Jewish Service

Maggi G. Gaines
Sara Paasche-Orlow

Follow this and additional works at: https://digitalcommons.unomaha.edu/slcestgen

Part of the Service Learning Commons

Please take our feedback survey at: https://unomaha.az1.qualtrics.com/jfe/form/SV_8cchtFmpDyGfBLE

Recommended Citation
https://digitalcommons.unomaha.edu/slcestgen/104

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Special Topics in Service Learning at DigitalCommons@UNO. It has been accepted for inclusion in Special Topics, General by an authorized administrator of DigitalCommons@UNO. For more information, please contact unodigitalcommons@unomaha.edu.
UNITED WE SERVE
A Call To Universal Jewish Service

by MAGGI GAINES and RABBI SARA PAASCHE-ORLOW

We have reached a turning point in American Jewish history. Now that large segments of our community are living successful, integrated lives, we have an opportunity to align ourselves behind service to enrich Jewish life and to effect prophetic change in the world. In Pirke Avot (Ethics of the Fathers), Rabbi Tarfon admonishes us, “You are not obliged to finish the task, neither are you free to desist from it.” The usual interpretation is that our task is bigger than any of us in terms of the quantity of work that must be done. Rabbi Tarfon’s dictum, however, also refers to the complexity of the task. We come to understand the critical interdependence of individuals, each bringing their own skills and varied perspectives to accomplish our people’s role in the covenant.

Writing a check for tzedakah is not enough. We are called upon to act. Jews in America are involved in a vast array of volunteer and service commitments. While varied, our involvements are linked together and overlap like the strands of dough in a challah. For example, many secular Jews are deeply committed to ending world hunger, Tibetan persecution, or ozone depletion. These people have Jewishly-affiliated friends who are involved in the same causes but who are also addressing issues of Jewish poverty, rescuing Jews in peril around the world, and supporting quality existing programs, PSALM will emphasize service that is not based on any one movement’s ideology and does not assume a particular Jewish background or knowledge. By creating a service advocacy center that equally values the many ways that hesed is expressed, we will bring this broad perspective to generations X and Y.

PSALM is premised on the idea that service is a value that extends to all corners of Jewish America. We must shore up the value of service and pass it on with strength to future generations as a cornerstone of Jewish identity. The covenant is perceived in a multitude of ways, but there can be agreement on the basis by which it must be fulfilled. It requires people to step beyond their own lives to take on responsibility for others.

This month we are releasing a new study on community service and Jewish identity conducted by Steven M. Cohen of Hebrew University and the JCCA Research Center. The results suggest that volunteering is widespread among Jews in their 20's and 30's (75%). The results also indicate that those who volunteer in a Jewish context have higher levels of affiliation and are more likely to give more tzedakah. This is not to say that volunteering resulted in these other behavioral traits, but it does suggest that community service is one pillar of a healthy, vital Jewish identity. By creating more compelling Jewish options for service, we provide avenues for Jews to express and strengthen their Jewish identity. In doing so, we will establish a unifying venue through which all Jews can come together and work for the common good.

Maggi Gaines and Rabbi Sara Paasche-Orlow are Executive Director and National Program Director, respectively, of PSALM: Partnership for Service and Learning Movement.