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## United We Serve: A Call To Universal Jewish Service

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# UNITED WE SERVE

## A Call To Universal Jewish Service

by MAGGI GAINES and RABBI SARA PAASCHE-ORLOW

**W**e 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

close friend die from the disease. A fully unaffiliated Jew might find himself playing piano weekly at the local Jewish old age home where his father suddenly finds himself living. We are all connected, and we are all engaged, or should be engaged, in crucial parts of the task. This is an essential message of Judaism.

Recognizing our interdependence will go a long way towards reinforcing the ethic of Jewish unity. None of us can serve in every way, but each of us can do our part and appreciate the ways others are contributing to the larger picture. In *Hesed in the Bible*, Nelson Glueck elaborates on the concept of *hesed*, or kindness. He states, "*Hesed* is the real action of *brit* (covenant)." When we behave in ethical

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perspectives to accomplish our people's role in the covenant.

Writing a check for *tzedaka* 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 the peace process in Israel. Some of these Jews have other Jewish friends who volunteer solely within a Jewish context: to end domestic violence in the Jewish community, to serve on the *Chevre Kaddisha*, or Burial Society, of their community, or to raise money for their Yeshiva or Day School.

The patterns of behavior are often even less neatly defined. An Orthodox Jewish lawyer volunteering primarily within the Jewish community might find herself doing pro bono work for the American Cancer Society after having a parent or

ways toward other people, we engage in the covenant with God. Glueck also states that in the prophetic emphasis on *hesed*, the community expands to become humankind.

How can we begin to unite as a people in our acts of *hesed*, in our volunteerism and in the service that we do? More traditional Jews must embrace a definition of *gemilut hasadim*, or acts of kindness, that includes the sanctity and social significance of deeds that serve all humanity. Secular Jews must come to appreciate the essential importance of the deeds that sustain the physical and spiritual well-being of the Jewish people.

The social and cultural distinctions between secular, religious, and observant Jews are expressions of our rich diversity, but these divisions can frustrate our collective capacity to accomplish *tikun olam*—repairing the world. Service projects that appeal to Jews from a range of backgrounds will bring individuals together who might otherwise have little opportunity to interact with one another. Through shared experiences, they will gain a heightened sense of mutual understanding and knowledge, ultimately leading

them to respect and value one another.

PSALM: Partnership for Service and Learning Movement is a new partnership initiative founded by Jewish Life Network to increase and improve service and volunteerism by Jews in America. Based in Baltimore, Maryland, PSALM will serve as an advocacy center for the essential Jewish value of service. In addition, PSALM will use Jewish learning to enrich service activities. By creating models for effective service, producing curricular and programmatic materials, and supporting quality existing programs, PSALM will elevate the ethic of service and help transform the culture of American Jewry.

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 keystone 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 *tzedaka*. 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. ♻

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