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# Choosing a Life of Service

by ARIEL ZWANG

**I**n an age of material excess, it has become a challenge to reorient the Jewish community towards service work. Throughout the community, many parents encourage their children to pursue lucrative careers at the expense of less profitable positions in service fields. There is even a tacit stigma associated with careers in helping others, as compared to the social prestige of high-wage jobs or the intellectual prestige of academia and science. Despite this, as the following article indicates, the satisfaction of choosing a life of service can more than make up for these difficulties.

A friend of mine is an Ivy League-educated surgeon, a fourth-generation college graduate (one more generation than I can boast), and a member of a minority group that would like to have more clout. Recently, he asked me to name the top three reasons Jews have achieved such success in the United States. I think he expected me to talk about our community's organized structures, our emphasis on supportive family units, and the like.

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Ariel Zwang is Executive Director of New York Cares.


My response: education, education and education. I told him that we Jews call ourselves *am hasefer*, people of the Book, that our religious obligation to study has extended itself to the pursuit of secular education as a cultural value, and that in the mostly-meritocratic United States, a focus on education has allowed us to take advantage of opportunities for advancement in society.

I think my own choice of a non-profit career over more remunerative work has been possible, in no small way, because of the feeling of security

I gained as a result of my educational opportunities and early professional experiences.

The daughter of a Solomon Schechter school principal and the granddaughter, great-granddaughter and niece of rabbis, I saw the rewards, but certainly also the difficulties, of professional communal service. Thus, when it came time to make the relevant decisions in my twenties, I got an MBA and worked for an investment bank and then a management consulting firm. Being able to support myself comfortably was very important to me.

The only problem was, in spite of the income I found that the work did not satisfy me. So after acknowledging a strong interest in helping to alleviate urban poverty, I made the switch to the New York City Board of Education — not much of a surprise, looking back on it, though it was a hard decision at the time — with the goal of helping others take better advantage of the source of education that my grandparents had benefitted from. Since



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then I have also worked in the South Bronx, providing economic development services in one of the lowest income areas in the country; and in Washington, DC, helping to implement anti-poverty policies at the Federal level.

Nearly ten years ago, shortly after I had left the private sector, I met a man who had emigrated in his late teens from what was then the USSR. His family had lived through most of the serious hardships that *refuseniks* endured. During his early years in the United States, his family lived in a tiny apartment so vermin-infested that they could go into the kitchen only during the day. Today he and his brother are bankers, the family is comfortable by any standard, and I salute them. But when I told this man that I had left the business world to try to help improve inner-city public education, he said plainly that he thought I must have lost my mind. He could not understand how anyone from the privileged, easy life I had led could just

throw away an opportunity to earn a good living.

There are certainly a great many bankers, consultants, lawyers, and business people who love their work; but I believe that there are many others who would like to find more satisfaction in the way that they spend most of their waking hours. So what is it that makes it possible for some of us to abandon all hope of ever owning a country house in favor of the certainty of struggling to pay our kids' day school tuition?

In my own case, what tipped the scales is the precept that *lo alecha ham'lacha ligmor*, none of us bears the responsibility for completing the work, but we are also not free to abstain from it. It seemed important to me to feel that I was taking an active role in helping, in my own small way, to fix what I think is wrong in the world. And, yet, I must admit that a big part of what helped me take the plunge was also the feeling that, if I had to, I could probably go back to the

private sector without too much trouble. That's how I hope my *refusenik* friend's children will feel one day.

After nearly a decade working in the non-profit and public sectors, I can look back and say that my work has helped moms who were previously on welfare get decent jobs; kids in the poorest public schools learn that their horizons can include a college education; families that were in homeless shelters obtain a safe and decent place to live; and tens of thousands of impoverished children get a warm coat in the winter.

So far, I haven't regretted my career choice, even for a day. Quite the contrary: there are few things as wonderful as waking up every morning and going to a job you love, and that you also feel is worthwhile. Still, I haven't forgotten about that country house. I try to make that other grass seem less green when, during the *Amidah*, I ask God to purify my heart so that I may serve God honestly. Perhaps, some day, I'll even stop thinking about what's on the other side of the fence. ✿