

# How to Turn a Year of Service Into a Lifetime of Commitment

*A Case Study of AVODAH: The Jewish Service Corps*

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AVODAH, founded in 1998, strengthens the Jewish community's fight against the causes and effects of poverty in the United States by engaging participants in service and community building that inspire them to become lifelong agents for social change whose work for justice is rooted in and nourished by Jewish values. This article describes how AVODAH has come to understand that ongoing work with alumni is of critical importance to fulfilling its mission, and it explains the implications for the field of immersive Jewish service learning.

## **WHAT IS AN IMMERSIVE JEWISH SERVICE PROGRAM AND IS IT ENOUGH TO ENSURE A LIFETIME OF COMMITMENT?**

An immersive Jewish service-learning (JSL) program should be like a prophetic moment of standing on "the mountain." Analogous to receiving the Torah at Mt. Sinai, this experience should be a period of time in which an individual's social justice and Jewish identities come together in ways that inform and nourish each other. These experiences should serve as a model of what **can** be, in a perfect world.

Like all mountaintop experiences, immersive Jewish service experiences end. Participants find their way back among people who did not have that experience with them and who may not have a reference point for Jewishly engaged service. This was the situation in AVODAH: The Jewish Service Corps, a few years after its founding and it is true for other short- and long-term immersive Jewish service programs.

## **A YEAR OF SERVICE IN A SUPPORTED PROGRAM IS SIGNIFICANT... HOW COULD IT BE INSUFFICIENT?**

Inspired by existing Christian service corps, in 1998 AVODAH's founders created a one-year opportunity for participants to serve in antipoverty agencies, while living together and studying the root causes of poverty, methods of social change, and Jewish values and texts that inform and nourish a Jewish commitment to service and justice work.

The founders envisaged that this opportunity would become the beginning of a lifetime of commitment, as reflected in a combination of the following: serving over time as a mentor for Corps members or alumni, receiving mentoring

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from AVODAH stakeholders, financially contributing to AVODAH and other Jewish social justice efforts, raising a family committed to Jewish social justice, choosing and advancing in a social justice career, and becoming a Jewish social justice lay leader who helps make social justice part of mainstream Jewish life. These activities are all in service of achieving AVODAH's "Ultimate Impacts": (1) alumni becoming lifelong agents for social change whose work for justice is rooted in and nourished by Jewish values and (2) strengthening the Jewish community in its fight against the causes and effects of poverty in the United States.

However, within a few years of AVODAH's creation, graduates of the program raised a question that has since altered the way that immersive Jewish service work is done. They asked "Is a one-year service program enough to instill a commitment to a lifetime of service?" And if one powerful year was not enough, what would it take to make this commitment sustainable?

Like alumni of most immersive service programs, these AVODAH alumni were experiencing that moment when the "high" wears off and reality sets in. Most had continued to work for social justice on their own, without the support of an organized community of peers or additional training. They also were trying to determine whether their commitment to justice was welcome within the organized Jewish community. An informal 2008 survey revealed that while nearly all AVODAH alumni participated in some Jewish activity in the year prior to being surveyed, only 50% took *action* on a social or political issue through a Jewish organization. Most respondents, although their Jewish identity served as a source of inspiration for social justice work and imbued them with a sense of responsibility toward marginalized individuals and communities, took action through secular outlets. AVODAH inferred from this information that, for its alumni, Judaism inspired their social service work, but the Jewish community was not an easily identifiable place through which they could take action.

During their year of service, corps members felt invested in and supported as they learned how to serve across boundaries of race, class and power and as they struggled to organize adult Jewish lives that incorporated a commitment to justice. However, they did not feel that this foundation equipped them to develop as Jewish social justice leaders.

These emerging Jewish social change agents were not content to simply raise a provocative question. They also had an answer: They wanted an alumni program, and they wanted it fast. Institutionally, AVODAH arrived at a similar conclusion. A robust alumni program would be essential to its ability to fulfill its mission of contributing to the Jewish community's fight against poverty by creating agents for change whose work for justice is rooted in and nourished by their Jewish lives. This realization meant that AVODAH had to make a more long-term commitment to its corps members. The organization's ability to make change in the world would be directly linked to the strength of its alumni network and its ability to weave together alumni working in service, advocacy, and organizing.

#### **WHAT MIGHT AN ALUMNI COMMUNITY BE?**

Chief among the roles of alumni community members is to form a sacred community to remind one another of that moment when their Jewish and social justice identities became inextricably bound. An alumni community could become

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a powerful tool to help alumni strive to make the rest of the world look like the well-integrated moment up on the mountain. It is lonely in the valley.

There are developmental reasons why one year is not enough time to fully develop Jewish social change agents. Corps members do their year of service when they are between the ages of 21–26. One key advantage of this age group is that this immersive experience can set the path for future careers and lay leader positions. However, as these individuals continue to work after their AVODAH year, they encounter increasingly complex questions about systemic injustice, become at risk for burnout, and wonder why their Jewish identity, if they have one at all, feels so separate from their daily work for justice. An ongoing network of people who continue to inspire, support, and learn together is required to keep the fire burning and continuously remind them how their justice work and Jewish lives can be integrated.

### **MAKING ALUMNI WORK A PRIORITY**

AVODAH is currently making alumni work a priority of its next stage of development. For Marilyn Sneiderman, AVODAH's executive director, focusing on alumni has two essential purposes: (1) increasing AVODAH's ability to help disenfranchised communities through the effective work of alumni and (2) supporting alumni to engage more Jewish communities in service and justice work. With this focus, AVODAH is reconceptualizing its constituency, expanding it beyond the 65 corps members who serve annually. Now when asked how many people are in AVODAH, staff are retraining themselves to proudly reply "over 500 and growing."

### **WHAT IS THE LONG-TERM IMPACT? "RUINED FOR LIFE" OR "SYSTEMIC CHANGE"**

To develop an effective model for work with alumni, AVODAH looked to several other successful programs for ideas.

For example, the Jesuit Volunteer Corps (JVC; <http://www.jesuitvolunteers.org>) maintains a lean model that is aimed at maximizing individual impact. JVC refers to its alumni as Former Jesuit Volunteers (FJVs) and has one staff person deal with this 12,000-person network. Alumni gatherings are largely potluck meals in regions where many FJVs live.

The JVC's official motto is "ruined for life." It believes that the Catholic lay people who serve with them for two years—during which there are short, periodic, yet intense times of education and spiritual direction provided by clergy—will independently make meaning out of the experience and discern their particular path for serving the world. As individuals they will find ways to have an impact on the world, but JVC does not attempt to guide its alumni to make any one type of systemic change. As individuals they are, in fact, "ruined for life." They can never see the world in the way they saw it before their two years of service.

Though AVODAH was founded with a "ruined for life" philosophy, it is focusing on alumni with the intention of helping them organize to pursue systemic change. This systemic change falls into two areas: issues of economic justice and ensuring that service and justice are organic expressions of mainstream Jewish life. To make change in these two areas, the AVODAH

alumni community is transforming itself into a network that trains leaders and supports them in taking leadership roles through ongoing education and mentoring. AVODAH is also working to increase the visibility of its network so that its members are sought out for their experience, having not only served in an intensive year of service and study but also continuing their growth and development in solidarity with others in a directed and intentional alumni network.

### **MOVING ALUMNI TO THE CENTER OF THE ENTERPRISE**

Two secular examples, Teach for America (TFA; see the article by Aaron Dorfman in this issue) and Princeton University, can serve as models of alumni work for the field of immersive Jewish service. TFA views its alumni work as advancing its mission that every child has the opportunity to attain an excellent education. To do this it uses four interconnected and reinforcing strategies (Fine, 2010):

- Cultivate alumni as responsible stewards of the organization
- Strengthen alumni leadership capacity
- Build strong networks of alumni
- Advance alumni thinking

Identifying alumni as the people who would ensure that TFA achieved its intended impact meant that TFA had to change its staffing structure. Over the course of four years, its alumni staffing model changed from one in which, for more than 16,500 alumni, there were 6 or 7 national staff and 2 staff in each region, to a model with 48 national staff dedicated exclusively to alumni programming and an additional 62 staff located in regional affairs teams in regional offices. This is 10% of their total staff.

Princeton University, which is reputed to have the most successful alumni program in higher education, describes its alumni work as follows:

*We support the idea that Princeton is a lifetime experience, not limited to the time on campus, and thus that the University must do all it can not only to facilitate the preservation of the relationships that were developed at the University but also to incorporate the insights and energies of alumni in the on-going life of the University, and to maintain a continuing educational interplay with alumni. Our goal is full participation by all alumni who wish to do so in the broader community of Princeton and in the continuing search for knowledge and learning.*

Princeton has 21 staff members who direct and support its alumni work, as well as numerous alumni volunteers.

For both TFA and Princeton, participation is a lifelong commitment, and the staffing and volunteer structures were brought into alignment to support that model. These examples are groundbreaking for the immersive JSL field. None of the immersive JSL programs can achieve their intended impacts without an adequate staffing structure to support their alumni. To enable the alumni to serve as a sacred community to each other, reminding one another of their shared experience and what they most wanted to achieve, an alumni staff must ensure that they receive ongoing training, spiritual sustenance, and help refining their vision. In the immersive JSL and social justice sector that aims to make service and justice work organic expressions of contemporary Jewish life, alumni networks

must also work with the organized Jewish community to identify why and how it is in their best interest to engage in that work and create leadership opportunities in these areas. The alumni networks must also work together to bridge the connection between the social justice sector and the organized Jewish community.

We are living at a time of “Occupy Everything” and small boutique communities like Moishe Houses, in which young adult Jews, alumni of immersive JSL experiences, make their Jewish lives. Moishe House and other boutique communities may be perfect for young adults, but they are not places where alumni can live their entire adult Jewish lives, because they will age out. Additionally, the organized Jewish community has facilities, infrastructure, and resources. It is in everyone’s interest for the immersive JSL field to increase the number of staff working with alumni and see a key feature of their work as bridging the connection between their alumni and the organized Jewish community. Ideally the result will be an engaged Jewish community that participates in service and justice work regularly and sees that service as part of what inspires the rest of their Jewish lives.

## HOW TO BUILD AND NURTURE A LIFELONG COMMITMENT

### Connecting Through Opportunities

The Bronfman Youth Fellowships in Israel (BYFI) is an example of a program that nurtures lifelong commitment among its alumni. Its mission is to create Jewish leaders who are guided by the Jewish values of Jewish learning, pluralism, deep engagement between Jews in Israel and North America, and social activism. As with AVODAH, it is impossible to complete this mission within the time frame of a summer program in Israel for high school students. That is why BYFI focuses on alumni, counting them in its 900-person network. Among BYFI’s most innovative accomplishments is its Alumni Venture Fund, which receives 100% of its funding from alumni. Alumni who have innovative ideas that will enhance the Jewish community and amplify the values BYFI is striving to create in its leaders can apply to their peers and receive funding, as well as capacity-building support from staff. BYFI’s Alumni Venture Fund is successful because it offers alumni two opportunities: alumni who have creative ideas can fund their dream with a grant from their peers, and those who do not have one big idea, but who do want to make strategic communal decisions can gain experience as philanthropists and shapers of the communal culture and agenda. Both types of people participate because they both get something they consider valuable from the experience.

For an alumni relationship to be successful, both parties—the alumni and the organization—must be able to identify what they are getting that is valuable from the continued connection. In the immersive Jewish service and social justice field the breakdown might be as follows:

Benefits to Alumni:

- A strong network of peers with a set of shared values who support each others’ efforts to pursue justice
- Access to future jobs and other service-learning opportunities
- Further training on social justice issues, leadership development, and Jewish life

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- A Jewish community that shares their values and can connect them with the organized Jewish community  
Benefits to the Organization:
  - The relationship to the alumni makes it possible to achieve its mission.
  - Alumni leaders embed the philosophy of the organization out in the world.
  - The world is a more just place and there is progress on the issues the organization addresses.
  - The organization plays a role in creating a Jewish community that views justice and service as organic expressions of Jewish life because their alumni are living breathing ambassadors for this type of Judaism.
  - Support and visibility for the organization ensure that another generation of leaders can participate in the program and engage in a life of training and support through the alumni network.

### **Connecting by Place**

Immersive programs, secular and faith-based, all struggle with the same issue: how to build a network of people who share an experience in common but have never met in person. Universities have a variety of network-building tools at their disposal. For example, they can use their sports team as one rallying point. University of Michigan alumni are notorious for greeting each other by saying “Go Blue,” regardless of whether they have ever met or played on the football team. Additional ways to engage alumni include enlisting their help in interviewing prospective students, providing continuing online education, offering career development support, and creating opportunities for alumni to come back to visit the campus. In contrast, most immersive service-learning programs have people serving at a variety of sites, in different placements, around the country, and sometimes the world. Even AVODAH, which has a residential component, changes houses with enough frequency that they do not serve as a grounding location for alumni.

### **Connecting to People**

Though social movements are made up of people who have some shared values but have never met each other, there usually is a core leadership group that have met each other and have deep relationships. The Jewish social justice and service movement needs to cultivate this core to realize its ultimate impacts.

At AVODAH, among the efforts that alumni most request and believe will strongly bind them to each other and to AVODAH is an annual retreat. In imagining what the best use of a retreat would be, we have looked to American Jewish World Service (AJWS), which conducts a high-quality alumni retreat for one of its key constituencies: emerging Jewish leaders (clergy and communal professionals) who participated in Rabbinical Student Delegations and Young Rabbis Delegations. The purpose of the AJWS Alumni Retreat is to provide greater knowledge and training on global justice issues, develop collegial and supportive relationships between participants, deepen their bond to AJWS, enable them to renew themselves spiritually, and share best practices in making global justice part of Jewish identity in the community in which they

operate. In the words of one participant, it is a chance to “recharge and go forward!” This opportunity to recharge and go forward is supported by a generous foundation grant.

This model of a donor-funded retreat is quite different from the model of the Jesuit Volunteer Corps. The JVC expects its alumni to fund all of their own activities, thereby limiting programs to potlucks and local retreats that focus on connecting individuals who had a similar experience and live in the same region, as opposed to movement building for social change. As AVODAH sets its course in alumni work, it is exploring whether it is possible, beneficial, and sustainable to find a funder to support movement-building retreats or if it should follow the JVC model and require alumni to fund their own, more limited retreats.

The field of immersive Jewish service-learning must determine what the intended outcome is for its alumni. If it strives for alumni of all of its programs to take service and social-change-making jobs, then organizations need to raise funds for ongoing retreats if they want to build a movement of alumni. The alumni of all of the programs in the sector should be the core group of leaders who are brought together to leverage the power of their allies who did not commit the time to extensive service. The difference between “ruined for life” and “systemic change” hinges on the decision to support alumni retreats.

### **CAN WE COLLABORATE ON ALUMNI PROGRAMS?**

With foundation support of the foundation, AJWS and AVODAH are building Pursue: Action for a Just World, a network for Jews in their 20s and 30s interested in learning about and engaging in service and justice. Although each organization is working to achieve justice in different parts of the world, and their alumni are distinct in some ways, they realized it would be more powerful to create a joint program for their alumni and to have this group also work with others who did not participate in either service program. AVODAH and AJWS are proud of the partnership and believe that Pursue meets a need for young Jews who care about global social justice. However, because this is a partnership between a domestic antipoverty agency and an international development agency, it is sometimes challenging to find issues on which they can act jointly while still continuing to serve each agency's stated goals. Additionally, although Pursue is meeting a need of young Jews and should continue to reach out broadly, AVODAH alumni still require a program that is uniquely intended to build community and cultivate their leadership as a separate community.

### **PRESENTING THE HYBRID**

AVODAH's experience partnering on Pursue has inspired it to consider a hybrid model. Imagine if there was one organization in the Jewish service and social justice community that trained alumni in particular skills that would be useful to all of the service-learning programs and deepened their impact, but that the networks continued to be built within the agencies with which the volunteers did their service. These skills might include advocacy, public speaking, community organizing, and leadership. This innovative approach would realize



some efficiencies while allowing alumni to still feel most connected to the organization with which they served.

### **LESSONS LEARNED**

The nonnegotiable key to greater impact is an engaged and continuously evolving alumni network. Alumni networks cannot be add-ons that exist with little or no funding to support them because without significant institutional support they default to being social circles that do not leverage their power or become strong social change movements.

Retreats/gatherings are critical. To build a movement, the immersive Jewish service sector must cultivate multigenerational and national leadership; doing so requires opportunities to gather, build relationships, and work together. In addition, mechanisms must be developed and scaled that enable alumni to continuously teach and mentor each other, and outside stakeholders must be organized to support the work by training alumni in their areas of expertise.

Developing alumni networks takes money and staff. TFA and Princeton can serve as models. To develop people the field needs organizers and talent scouts constantly stoking the coals and agitating people into becoming their best most productive selves.

The immersive Jewish service sector must look for efficiencies. Each organization may need its own alumni program, but there are trainings and resources that all JSL programs can use to reduce the burden on any given agency. The Jewish community already supports the alumni programs of a number of immersive service programs—it would be more efficient and have greater impact to collaborate and eliminate redundancies.

Just as there is a symbiotic relationship between alumni and the immersive JSL programs that helped shape them, there is also a relationship between the immersive Jewish service organizations (including their alumni) and the organized Jewish community. Neither can ensure a vibrant Jewish future without the other. Alumni who emerge from their immersive Jewish service experiences committed to pursuing justice and view that as part of their Jewish identity will be disappointed when they look for places to enact it in the organized Jewish community. They will wonder where their place is in communities that view Mitzvah Days as a sufficient response to poverty and injustice. They will imagine that their talents and commitments to justice are not needed or desired in the Jewish community. And the organized Jewish community will imagine that those “service and social justice Jews” are not serious about their Jewish lives, that they are only serious about service and justice and see Jewish life an add-on. If the organized Jewish community does not see itself as a partner with immersive Jewish service providers and their alumni we will have a crisis. As immersive Jewish service and justice programs develop their alumni departments, the alumni are the people who need to seek out partnerships with the organized Jewish community. This is a game-changing opportunity that neither group can afford to miss.

The organized Jewish community must be a partner with immersive Jewish service programs: both communities will be enriched by the relationship. Mountaintop experiences change lives, but unless the immersive Jewish service world and the organized Jewish community get serious about alumni work, those



changed people will come back to the valley and risk losing sight of the moment when Jewish life and social change became inextricably linked for them.

If not now, when?

## REFERENCE

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# Alternative Break Fellowship: Maximizing the Impact of Immersion Experiences

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Organizations throughout the world continually grapple with the task of transforming college students, many of whom are largely oblivious to the myriad social justice issues confronting society, into activists for social change. Models striving to achieve social awareness abound, but one warrants particular attention: Maryland Hillel's Alternative Break Fellowship. The fellowship seeks to motivate a small cohort of select students to see themselves as Jewish social change agents and to empower them to influence their peers to create positive change in the world. Through the story of Gita, a fellow who experienced the transformative power of the fellowship, one can witness the success of leadership training in enabling students to take ownership of the Jewish imperative of *Tikkun Olam* and be able to influence others to take action. This article offers key insight into elements of the fellowship that can be replicated in other environments to create and inspire Jewish social change leaders.

**To read the full article, please visit [RepairLabs.org/JJCS](http://RepairLabs.org/JJCS).**