

Jewish Service-Learning

History and Landscape

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This article traces the background and current landscape of the field of Jewish service-learning. It describes the field's theoretical and historical roots and tracks how it has been changing since Repair the World, the platform organization dedicated solely to Jewish service, was founded in 2009. The article also summarizes some of the major issues in today's Jewish service-learning landscape, such as the role of Jewish identity, the cost factor of immersion experiences, and leveraging immersion to foster long-term change, and it describes some challenges facing the field.

I am responsible for the Other without waiting for reciprocity...and I am "subject" essentially in this sense.

—Emmanuel Levinas (1982, p. 98).

Throughout his writings on ethics, philosopher Emmanuel Levinas presents a radical formulation of what it means to be in service to others. Rather than locating service in the realm of activity—as things we do—he locates it at the very heart of being—as who we are. Every act in service of the other is an expression of that original responsibility to be in service. According to Levinas, there is no identity without service to others. In an analogous fashion, the field of Jewish service-learning is attempting to undergo this shift from a model of service as an episodic or exceptional act to one that locates it at the heart of individual and communal identity. This article traces the background and current landscape of the field of Jewish service-learning and describes the challenges and opportunities that the field is facing in its attempt to make service a defining element of Jewish communal life.

DEFINING THE KEY TERMS

The term “service” has a number of different valences in the Jewish vocabulary. It finds its root in the Hebrew word *avodah*, defined as serving God—in prayer specifically and also more generally as a mode of relationship to the divine. In the Jewish communal context, the term “service” has historically referred to the professional staff of the communal apparatus (“Jewish communal servants”), rooted in the field of social service and social work.¹

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¹Lately, there has been a move to replace the language of service with that of management or leadership to describe the staff of the Jewish professional field. See the examples of two graduate programs for this sector that both moved away from the language of communal service: Hornstein Jewish Professional Leadership Program at Brandeis University and the School of Jewish Nonprofit Management at Hebrew Union College – Jewish Institute for Religion.

Visit <http://repairlabs.org/jjcs/> for additional articles and resources, as well as to view parts of the *Journal* online.

Today **service** is generally more broadly defined as “giving of one’s time and effort to bring about positive community, societal or global change” (*Glossary*, n.d.). In this line of thinking, service is closely related, though more expansive than volunteerism, which is generally known as “productive work, performed with minimal or no compensation and intended to further the ‘social good’” (Chertok et al., 2011, p. 1). Unlike volunteerism, service (for example, public service) can also include work in salaried positions, but the underlying goal of furthering the social good remains the same.

Service-learning is a methodology that “incorporates instruction and reflection with meaningful community service” (*Jewish Service-Learning Overview*, 2011). It teaches students civic responsibility through strengthening the community being served. Service-learning can occur in the classroom (in K–8, high school, or the university) or at community- or faith-based organizations. It is essential that the service is authentic: it must be a real project that supports the needs of a given community, rather than one manufactured just for the sake of a given program (*Making Jewish Education Work*, 2011, p. 2).

From a pedagogical perspective, service-learning is derived from the work that Jon Dewey pioneered in experiential education. Going against the grain of the classical methodology of frontal classroom instruction, Dewey argued that education should be interactive and grounded in the world around us, incorporating “real life experiences that students are interested in and can apply to the world outside of their school” (Carter, 1999, p. 29). Dewey was an advocate for the process of reflection, which he described as “an intentional endeavor to discover specific connections between something which we do and the consequences which result” (p. 28). This reflective process remains a cornerstone of the service-learning experience.

Jewish service-learning (JSL) flows directly from service-learning, combining direct service in response to a real community need with structured learning and reflection. Yet it also has roots in Jewish education and Jewish social justice, because the learning component is framed in the context of Jewish text and values. Just as with service-learning, the community being served can be either Jewish or non-Jewish (*Overview*, p. 1). According to the 2008 report, *Jewish Service Learning: What Is and What Could Be*, which described the landscape of this nascent field, JSL places equal attention on the impact that service has on “community, personal development, content knowledge and Jewish knowledge” (Blair & Irie, 2008, p. 1). The understanding is that both the community and the individual are transformed by the act of Jewish service-learning.

The learning itself takes a number of different forms, but usually involves a combination of contextual learning, which introduces the participants to the community they are serving and the root causes of the issue they will be addressing, and a curriculum that places the service work in a context of Jewish values and textual tradition. Sarah Eisenman (see her article in this issue), Director of Next Generation and Service Initiatives at the American Jewish Joint Distribution Committee (JDC), describes how learning is incorporated into JDC trips, which are typically around 10 days long. She states that the service itself is only the middle part of an experience, which begins months before the trip and extends long after (S. Eisenman, personal communication, September 2011). As with other forms of service-learning experiences, the assumption here is that learning

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is not only a bookend that frames the service experience but also takes place in and through the act of service itself.

Most service-learning experiences also include a reflective component, which enables participants “to pause and consider the lessons they are learning, to articulate questions and observations with the help of other members of the group, and to synthesize the many connections made between their study and their service” (Rosenn, 2001). Although time spent in reflection takes away from the number of actual service hours, the consensus in the service-learning field is that this element deeply informs the act of service itself and also helps participants internalize what they are doing and what they have learned. It goes a long way toward ensuring that service is not merely an episodic activity, but instead becomes the fabric of the lives of active citizens who remain engaged in working for social change. How to allocate time between service and reflection is a question of balance, and Jon Rosenberg, CEO of Repair the World, emphasizes that the reflective component should not form the majority of the service experience (J. Rosenberg, personal communication, 2011).

There are three main types of Jewish service-learning (*Jewish Service-Learning Overview*, 2011):

1. *Immersive Jewish Service-Learning (IJSL)* engages participants in full-time, direct service for at least seven days. Usually, participants leave their home communities to travel to another community to learn and serve. Programs include week-long Alternative Breaks and summer and year-long service programs and take place in the United States, Israel, and around the world.
2. *Local Jewish Service-Learning* is done on a recurring basis or a “one-off” program in one’s own community and also incorporates an educational aspect and reflection. At best, local Jewish service-learning enables individuals, Hillels, synagogues, JCCs, camps, and other Jewish groups to make long-standing connections with the organizations where they are serving and to be engaged with their community’s long-term efforts to become more caring and just.
3. *Service-Learning in Academic Settings* incorporates this methodology in academic settings, both K–12 and university-based.

A CENTURY OF SERVICE; A DECADE OF JEWISH SERVICE-LEARNING

Service is a longstanding value in American Jewish life (*Jewish Service*, 2011). The bulletins of the National Conference of Jewish Charities from the turn of the 20th century are full of descriptions of volunteer activities in the Jewish community, such as guardianships for orphans and settlement volunteer workers. These trends continued throughout the decades, mostly in the context of Jewish social service organizations.

Although no precise data on the number of Jewish volunteers in the United States exist (Chertok et al., 2011, p. 1), there are indications that the number has remained high, burnished in part by investment in volunteering on the federal level. The National and Community Service Act of 1990 created the Corporation for National Service, which worked to connect young adults to volunteering opportunities and also to raise the profile of community service in general (Schwarz, 2000, p. 191). A recent study, *Volunteering + Values*, sponsored by Repair the

World, found, “The majority of contemporary Jewish young adults engage in volunteer work. However...for many volunteering is an infrequent and episodic activity” (Chertok et al., 2011, p. 1).

Although the line is often blurry between service and service-learning, up until recently programs did not include the reflective element in a systematic way, thus marking service-learning as a recent phenomenon (J. Rosenberg, personal communication, 2011). As in many cases in the Jewish communal sphere, the field of Jewish service-learning developed after the field of secular service-learning, though in both cases their precise beginnings are hard to pinpoint. Some look at the formation of the Peace Corps during the civil rights era of the 1960s as the start of the service-learning field (*Making Jewish Education Work*, 2011, p. 1). This program offered the first demonstration of the benefits and tensions around having privileged Americans entering and working in less-privileged communities (J. Rosenberg, personal communication, 2011). However, service-learning was not widely implemented until the 1980s, and it only became a defined field by the early 1990s through a combination of federal and philanthropic funds (*Making Jewish Education Work*, p. 1). Today, estimates are that 13 million young people per year are exposed to the service-learning methodology (Blair & Irie, 2008, p. 7).

JESNA’s recent report on the field offers some data on current participation in JSL programs. Looking first at local service, the report estimates that 8,000 teenagers in the United States participate in one-day JSL projects annually (*Making Jewish Education Work*, 2011, p. 4). However, these data do not account for all the teens involved in ongoing programs (Rothner, 2011). Furthermore, J-Serve, the National Day of Jewish Youth Service, which began in 2005, now engages approximately 10,000 teens in more than 70 communities in a day of service, as part of Youth Service America’s Global Youth Service Day weekend (J-Serve FAQ, 2011). Looking at immersive programs, the JESNA report estimates that 3,500 young adults participate in these programs annually (*Making Jewish Education Work*, 2011, p. 4).

By all accounts, JSL is currently experiencing serious growth, with the number of programs and participants rising each year. At the same time, demand for service-learning programs outstrips current availability, with most programs reporting that they cannot provide opportunities for all those who seek them (Blair & Irie, 2008, p. 7). The field has grown by harnessing an increasing awareness among Jews of national and global issues and against the backdrop of the growth of national service and service-learning nationally. Interestingly, natural disasters have also played a role in the scaling up of the immersive JSL field. Ruth Messinger, president of the American Jewish World Service (AJWS), describes how her organization galvanized the Jewish community to respond to a series of natural disasters in 1998. There was general interest in responding to these disasters and in doing so with a Jewish “label.” This became even easier when AJWS sought to mobilize the Jewish community to oppose the genocide in Darfur. “This was not a hard sell,” she explains, given the Jewish community’s collective memory of experiencing genocide while the world failed to give sufficient attention to its plight (Ruth Messinger, personal communication, 2011). AJWS was ready to leverage this developing global consciousness to grow as a national Jewish organization. Similarly, AJWS was able to use a growing interest in service

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both in and outside the Jewish community to develop service and service-learning programs that have caught on.

In a similar vein, Hurricane Katrina, which struck in August 2005, became the catalyst of the major growth in the Alternative Breaks offered by Hillel campuses, which began in 2000 (Michelle Lackie, personal communication, 2011). Before Katrina, student participation peaked at 500 students per academic year. The aftermath of the hurricane prompted a tremendous response, both from students who wanted to find a way to help and from funders who wanted to support this work. In January 2006, Hillel began bringing students to the Gulf Coast in larger numbers, more than doubling its participants in that year alone. Hillel did this by organizing and providing its own Alternative Break to the Gulf Coast in response to Hurricane Katrina. Over the following years, Alternative Break participation continued to grow as other Jewish service-learning organizations, such as AJWS and JDC, expanded, and new Alternative Breaks, such as those run by Jewish Funds for Justice, were created and worked with Hillels to provide more JSL experiences. Over the next few years, the numbers would continue to rise: during the 2010–11 academic year, 2,050 young adults participated in week-long Alternative Breaks. Before Katrina, each individual organization seeking to partner with Hillel had undertaken its own marketing and recruitment. The Katrina experience prompted International Hillel to develop field-wide systems and to work with the organizers on a comprehensive application for all Hillel campuses. The application allowed Hillel to plan, implement, and evaluate the trips and think strategically about the field as a whole. This centralization and systemization allowed for much more advanced planning and eased the logistical burden for the organizational partners, enabling them to focus on the substance of the trip.

A PLATFORM ORGANIZATION

The example of Hillel Alternative Breaks demonstrates the tremendous advantage of having an organizing platform to foster collaboration and systemization instead of duplication of efforts. JSL organizations and practitioners are currently discovering how such a platform can shape the field as a whole. Repair the World was launched in 2009 by four founding partners² as the successor to the Jewish Coalition for Service (JCS), which began operating in 2001. JCS had essentially acted as a convener of various service organizations and programs, providing a venue through which to connect and represent their collective interests (Blair & Irie, 2008, p. 14). Although JCS offered useful services to organizations, it did not provide leadership and infrastructure independent of the individual organizations.

The Schusterman Family Foundation, long committed to service and volunteerism because of its potential to engage young Jews in making an impact on the world, became intent on more aggressively building up the field and taking Jewish service to scale. Partnering with the Jim Joseph and Nathan Cummings foundations, the Schusterman Family Foundation convened a conference on this subject and hired consultants to produce a report on the landscape and potential

²The four founding partners were Charles and Lynn Schusterman Family Foundation, Jim Joseph Foundation, Einhorn Family Charitable Trust, and the Nathan Cummings Foundation.

of the field, which became the blueprint for putting service more firmly on the communal map. The report recommended, and the founders believed, that establishing an independent platform would be essential to achieving their vision and creating an effective catalyst and voice for Jewish service in the United States and around the world (L. Eisen, personal communication, 2011). Repair the World was launched a year after the report was issued.

In aiming to make service a defining element of Jewish life, Rosenberg emphasizes that Repair does not promote service to the exclusion of other elements of Jewish life. Rather, it aims to make service more fully a part of the Jewish experience and life-cycle. One of Repair's goals is for service to become a "rite of passage," such that all Jews will be expected to devote concentrated time (ideally at least six months to a year) to service. The purpose of this rite of passage is not for participants to discharge or exhaust their obligation to serve; to the contrary, the goal is for this service to inculcate values and initiate lifelong habits.

WHAT IS A FIELD? WHY IS IT IMPORTANT?

Before the inception of Repair, the elements essential to a field³ were not established in any sort of organized and systematic way in the realm of Jewish service-learning (Blair & Irie, 2008, p. 14). Therefore it was founded to increase the quality and capacity of the field, to help current programs grow responsibly, to support program innovation, and to develop consistent standards to be applied across the field. In its first two years of operation Repair has laid the groundwork for several key elements of field-building, such as building and deploying tools to help connect Jewish volunteers with organizations; creating a JSL grants program to support the development of high-quality immersive programs; connecting educators and program leaders through a high-level Practitioners Council and through the creation of communities of practice; encouraging innovation and experimentation around new, cost-effective program models; and collecting tools, curricula, and best practices for the field, including hosting a website (called RepairLabs) for disseminating the growing JSL knowledge base (Eisen & Rosenberg, 2010).

Repair has also engaged in research and evaluation efforts, which are normally given low priority in the Jewish social justice world (Bronznick & Goldenhar, 2008, p. 71). It aims to make policy decisions based on real data and to have a strong sense of impact, which includes developing methodologies to measure this impact and setting benchmarks.

POSSIBLE DRAWBACKS TO A PLATFORM ORGANIZATION

Few in the field publicly voiced opposition to Repair's founding. However, Ruth Messinger, who supported this initiative in the hope that it would generate more funding for the field, mentioned one concern with its founding: that some of the funders who had supported AJWS service work in the past would decide to redirect their funds to Repair the World because of its broader agenda. She has

³The nonprofit management literature includes a number of attempts to describe the elements that constitute a field. According to Melinda Fine, a field must contain the following 11 elements: (1) identity, (2) knowledge base, (3) workforce and leadership, (4) standard practice, (5) practice settings, (6) information exchange, (7) infrastructure for collaboration, (8) resources, (9) critical mass of support, (10) advocates and systemic support, and (11) systemic support (Fine, 2001).

since noted that, to Repair's credit, it has followed the practice of "first do no harm," so that AJWS has continued to attract funds for its programs at the same or a higher level than before Repair was created (personal communication, 2011). Yet her concern does indicate the competitive nature of funding in this field and Repair's delicate role as funder and grantee.

Another concern articulated in the landscape study is that in an environment in which many JSL programs are in their nascent stage, "the launch of a significant infrastructure organization could overwhelm the community of practitioners. In effect, the house could be too big for the neighborhood" (Blair & Irie, 2008, p. 37). It is thus crucial that the development of Repair be in direct proportion to the pace of growth in the field.

DEMOGRAPHIC FOCUS: YOUNG ADULTS

During its first two years of operation, Repair's work has focused on young adults, in particular the 18–24 age range. This focus is based on recommendations in the landscape study, which found that this age marks a particularly critical window: significant, lifelong development occurs during this time, such that if both the practice and value of service are embedded at this age they are more likely to remain with participants through their adulthood (Blair & Irie, 2008, p. 3). Furthermore, from the perspective of the quality of service provided, young adults have an increased capacity to serve organizations effectively. Compared with their younger counterparts, they make fewer demands on the organizations they serve and are thus able to provide more return on the investment (J. Rosenberg, personal communication, 2011).

Another key rationale for this demographic focus is that the lives of young adults are structured in such a way that they are able to take advantage of service experiences, in particular immersive ones that take place during college breaks (Blair & Irie, 2008, p. 3). Leveraging the fact that roughly 85% of college-age American Jews go through college, Repair has forged close partnerships with International Hillel as well as individual Hillels "to expand and deepen the service efforts of Jewish college students" (Eisen & Rosenberg, 2010).

Repair has also recognized the fact that many Jews on campus do not ever enter a Hillel and would in fact be alienated by a program run under its auspices. Because many of these Jewish students take Jewish Studies courses, Repair has decided to meet them there. It is currently working with Jewish Studies programs around the country to pilot academic courses that are grounded in service-learning methodology; one such course is called "Repair the World: Service, Civic Engagement, and Social Justice in the Jewish Tradition." Repair brings professors together with experts in the service-learning field and also gives the professors grants to develop courses tailored to their area of academic expertise and the context of their teaching environment. Professors have welcomed the opportunity to learn new pedagogical methods and to sit with like-minded peers to "workshop" their courses (W. Berkowitz, personal communication, September 2011). Repair plans to expand this project, thus building a cohort of professors and students engaged in this methodology in the academic context.⁴

⁴For previous attempts at Jewish service-learning in the academic context, see Ginsberg (1963) and Hatkoff and Myers (2002).

According to Ilana Aisen, Repair's Senior Director of Jewish Service-Learning, along with a significant focus on young adults, Repair has occasionally engaged with Jewish service-learning for other age groups. In response to interest from teens and teen programs, Repair the World will begin doing some focused work with teen Jewish service-learning programs with an initial focus on immersive opportunities (I. Aisen, personal communication, November 2011).

Although most leaders in the JSL field are in favor of the focus on the 18–24 range, others caution against this singular focus, warning that other age cohorts need serious attention as well. Stephanie Ruskay, Director of Alumni and Community Engagement for AVODAH: The Jewish Service Corps, has begun to think about what it means to engage Jews in service beyond the immersive model, which is clearly built for young adults. She calls on the Jewish community to think more seriously about this issue, stating, “Life is not all one immersive program. We will have failed in our investment in immersive programs if we don't create an expectation that Jews serve and pursue justice throughout their lives” (Ruskay, 2011).

Lately, the work of David Elcott and Stuart Himmelfarb, who cofounded B3/The Jewish Boomer Platform, has focused on re-engaging Jewish Baby Boomers in service to the Jewish community (see their article in this issue). They describe the perils of a singular focus on the younger demographic, arguing that it will cause “generational collisions and a potential collapse at the core of our community” (Elcott & Himmelfarb, 2011). Involving Boomers in service opportunities will create a successful model of keeping Jews engaged, while bringing much-needed talent, experience, and financial resources to underwrite, sustain, and grow the Jewish community.

THE ROLE OF JEWISH IDENTITY

One of the most contentious aspects of the current landscape of Jewish service-learning is the effect that service has—or should have—on Jewish identity. Many leaders in the Jewish community, such as Rabbi Yitz Greenberg (2001) and Michael Steinhardt (2001), have articulated the position that nothing is more fundamental to Judaism than service to others. Therefore, serving is an expression of Jewish identity, and it follows that engaging Jews in service enhances their connection to Judaism. Yet Steinhardt, writing in 2001, described how most American Jews do not see service as an expression of their Jewish identity and argued that service must be reframed: “instead of defining service as yet another path Jews take away from their roots, we must recognize that service is Jewish roots” (Steinhardt, 2001, p. 7). He asserted that a Jewish framework for service can be used as an outreach tool to engage Jews otherwise disconnected from Jewish life.

This is precisely how Jewish service-learning has been adopted by the Federation system. A 2008 report commissioned by the United Jewish Communities, predecessor to the Jewish Federations of North America, was designed to ascertain whether Jewish identity increases due to participation in a Jewish service program. The report found that indeed “all forms of service, particularly those conducted within a religious context have value in the development of Jewish identity” (Rehnberg, Lee, Veron, & Zalgson, 2008, p. 69). In contrast, a

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report of an initiative of the UJA-Federation of New York, called Break New Ground found that one needed a certain baseline of Jewish identity for it to be further enhanced by the service experience (Chertok, Samuel, & Tobias, 2009, p. 1).

Many in the JSL field have questioned the authenticity of an approach that might be described as building Jewish identity on the backs of those in need. As Rabbi David Rosenn, founder of AVODAH asks, “At what point does the goal of Jewish continuity overshadow Jewish social justice goals?” (Bronznick & Goldenhar, 2008, p. 60). Speaking at the launching of the Berman Jewish Policy Archive at NYU Wagner in November 2009, Ruth Messinger described her vision of “service for its own sake.” She argued, “Service programs that exist and are being created will be successful if, first and foremost, they are about service to others and not about strengthening ourselves” (Eisner, 2009). In fact, positing Jewish identity as the explicit goal of service activities may “undermine... their very purpose” (Eisner, 2009).

Creating authentic, rather than manufactured, service opportunities is at the core of the work that Repair aims to foster. Although it is committed to service pluralism—diversity in the form and content of JSL experiences—Repair is also committed to high standards in the service experience, which means supporting programs that have a positive impact on the host organization and host community (Irie, 2010).

It is easy to see the tension between the two positions. Those who see service as an effective way of engaging young adults seek to provide service opportunities that *appeal* to the interests and aspirations of these young adults, to increase the likelihood of their participation.⁵ However, there are many indications that what young adults want is authentic service; they shun volunteer experiences that are tokenistic and do not have a clear and measured positive impact on the community being served (Chertok & Samuel, 2008, p. 12).

Repair’s position is that JSL programs should be developed with both authentic service and participant transformation in mind⁶ because these two aspects are intertwined, as “authentic service is necessary for any meaningful participant transformation” (I. Aisen, personal communication, 2011). Therefore programs should *not* be designed for the sole purpose of enhancing the Jewish identities of participants. And yet, the assumption is that people who engage in a high-quality and authentic service program will be challenged and profoundly shaped by the experience (Rosenn, 2009). In its commitment to developing “Jewish service people,” Repair finds that “great Jewish service-learning programs enable participants to develop or deepen a commitment to service, further understand and self-define who they are as Jews and to see rich interconnections between the Jewish and ‘service’ parts of who they want to be in the world” (I. Aisen, personal communication, 2011).

⁵This approach is taken to task by Jo Ellen Green Kaiser (2010) in “Don’t Meet Them Where They Are.” She asks, “By treating prospective volunteers as passive consumers of justice, how do we expect to turn them into justice activists?”

⁶This expectation is articulated in Repair the World’s *Standards of Practice for Immersive Jewish Service-Learning (IJSL) Programs*. These standards are intended to help practitioners design, evaluate, and benchmark their IJSL programs. They are available at <http://repairlabs.org/resource-new-immersive-jewish-service-learning-standards/1988>.

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THE COST FACTOR

One of the most common critiques leveled at JSL program providers is, Why spend philanthropic dollars to send affluent American Jews to the developing world when those same funds could be invested directly in the community? As Aaron Dorfman, Vice President for Programs at AJWS, admits, based on a strict cost-benefit analysis, service trips are “a pretty awful return on investment” (Dorfman, 2010; see his article in this issue). Without even accounting for overhead and staff, the direct cost—shared by funders and the participant—averages around \$1,800 per participants for what is essentially \$150 worth of manual labor provided. Furthermore, the “free labor” of the volunteers “siphons...off work that local people might otherwise be paid to do” (Dorfman, 2010).

This experience can only be justified, according to Dorfman, if it leads to action:

What if the time horizon of the program isn't limited to the weeklong field experience, but instead begins when participants are accepted into the program and lasts the rest of their lives? What if the desired outcome isn't only a new fence or community center but also the volunteers' deeper, more personal understanding of the challenges of the developing world that leads to a lifetime of activism in pursuit of justice?... When we stretch our perspective this way, field-based service trips become more promising, if still complex, endeavors (Dorfman, 2010).

LEVERAGING THE IMMERSION EXPERIENCE

To fully leverage the immersive service experience, it is essential to think about the long-term trajectory of both the host community and the volunteer; otherwise the experience risks being merely service-tourism. Organizations such as AJWS work with the same grantees over time, thus ensuring that the volunteers have a role in working on actual long-term projects, not something manufactured purely for their experience (Messinger, personal communication, 2011).

Regarding volunteers, there is a risk that they will begin to conceive of service as something that only happens “elsewhere,” rather than something they will pursue throughout their lives and in their own communities. To begin forging a culture of service beyond the exceptional immersive moment, organizations have begun to pay closer attention to engaging alumni of service programs in social change efforts. The most prominent of these initiatives is Pursue, which was founded in 2006 as the AJWS-AVODAH Partnership. Pursue (n.d.) works with other organizations to offer educational programs, networking events, leadership trainings, and action opportunities to JSL program alumni and the larger community of Jews between ages 20 and 40.

In addition, Repair the World recognized early on that a weave of service opportunities, both immersive and close to home, is most likely to shape lifelong service attitudes and behaviors. For this reason, Repair is partnering with a range of organizations, including local Hillels, to create a deep culture of service on campus and to ensure that the immersive experience is not a “one-off” experience (I. Aisen, personal communication, 2011).

CHALLENGES

Balancing Quality and Quantity

One key challenge facing the field of immersive Jewish service-learning is determining how large the field ought to grow while still ensuring impact on the community served and on participants (Jon Rosenberg, personal communication, 2011). In the local context, the key challenge is to identify opportunities and develop projects that are not superficial and do not waste resources and to figure out how to develop models that actually have impact, rather than those that simply make the youth “feel good.”

Funding

The current cost model of the field also presents a unique challenge. Most JSL programs do not benefit from governmental support in the way that programs such as Peace Corps and Americorps do. At the same time, these programs are also unlikely to be funded by the Israeli government as Birthright Israel is supported. The programs are funded by a mixture of participant fees (which may prove difficult to sustain in the current economic downturn) and Jewish philanthropy. Unlike Birthright Israel, which has succeeded using a single model and operating it on a large scale, programs in the JSL field are diverse, and Repair, as the platform organization, is committed to that diversity and thus cannot choose or privilege a single model to promote on a national scale (J. Rosenberg, personal communication).

Repair the World has succeeded in attracting new funders to the field, and Lisa Eisen is hopeful that this trend will continue, suggesting that service may resonate with Jewish funders who have yet to fund Jewish causes, offering them the opportunity to connect their civic engagement to their personal identities as Jews. She also sees potential in engaging young donors through the impact that service has demonstrated on young adults (personal communication, September 2011).

Evaluation

Although most JSL programs track their inputs and outputs, and Repair is committed to generating clear benchmarks for their outcomes, the fact remains that the precision in qualitative measurement that Repair seeks is very difficult to achieve (W. Berkowitz, personal communication, 2011). It is not feasible to track individuals throughout their lives to see the exact change that an immersive service experience has had, and yet this is precisely the data that would be most useful for Repair to use in measuring impact.

THE ROAD AHEAD

If Repair is successful in achieving its aims, 10 years from now the majority of Jewish young adults will undertake service as a rite of passage. Service will be “part of the Jewish lifecycle and calendar in ways that resonate deeply with our faith, history and tradition.... Jewish young adults will have new ways of connecting with the Jewish community and of expressing and forging authentic Jewish identities” (Eisen & Rosenberg, 2010). It will be possible to see the measurable difference that Jewish service efforts have made on the world both within and outside the Jewish community. Indeed, the goal is for service to be incorporated

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into the life of Jewish institutions and individuals on such a scale that the field no longer needs the platform of Repair to encourage its growth.

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