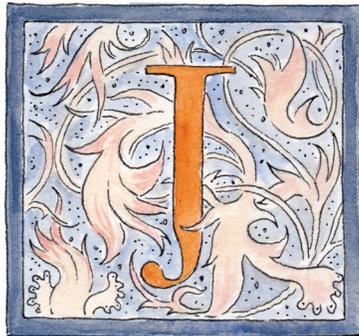


CINDY GREENBERG

More Than Money

Why Jewish values call us to serve



JEWISH INSTITUTIONS exist because generous Jewish donors invest in the Jewish future. From the mutual aid societies that welcomed 19th- and 20th-century Jewish immigrants to today's Federations and foundations, *tzedakah* (charitable giving), has enabled the continuity and reach of Jewish communal life: building synagogues, funding schools and camps, supporting Israel, caring for the vulnerable, and sustaining the infrastructure that makes Jewish life possible. Philanthropy is often how we embody the imperative to repair what is broken in the world.

Yet something essential is missing when we define Jewish responsibility primarily through financial contributions. Judaism calls us to a more complete engagement, one that pairs the efficiency of giving money with the transformation that comes from giving time—that is, from service.



In Hebrew, the word *avodah* means both “work” and “worship.” The Torah uses this term to describe the labor of the Israelites in Egypt and also the sacred service of priests in the Temple. This linguistic connection reflects a profound theological truth: Judaism teaches that we encounter the Divine not through withdrawal from the world, but through engagement with it. Service is a form of prayer, a ritual expression of our commitment to justice and repair.

Whether we devote our time to the Jewish community or more broadly to universal justice, service is the spiritual work of our people and essential to thriving Jewish life. We are commanded 36 times in the Torah to care for the orphan, the widow, and the stranger, more than any other commandment. This is a sacred obligation—and a healthy one. It strengthens Jewish engagement, cultivates a sense of purpose, makes a real social impact, and builds bridges across lines of difference. The well-being of our communities, the development of individual character, and our responsibility to contribute to the world all depend on recovering this foundational truth.

“Service” includes the full spectrum of volunteer engagement that makes Jewish life possible, like sitting on a nonprofit or synagogue board or volunteer committee, participating in political advocacy, organizing social action initiatives, and performing the countless acts of *hesed* (lovingkindness) that bind communities together. It also includes volunteering to embody the value of caring for the stranger by contributing our time to causes that serve our non-Jewish neighbors, that help the environment, and so much more.

Research consistently shows Jewish Americans volunteer at exceptionally high rates—ranging from 49 to 80 percent across different studies—compared with 28 percent of the general population.

The Talmud (Sukkah 49b) elevates *gemilut chasadim* (acts of lovingk-

indness) above *tzedakah* (charity), because they require not just money but personal involvement. Visiting the sick, comforting mourners, and welcoming guests are rituals of compassion, expressions of holiness embedded in daily life. I've experienced this firsthand—the sense of being part of something sacred, something larger than myself—when performing acts of service. I've felt a transcendent connection with the Divine simply by showing up for someone in need. It is as though the act itself becomes a kind of sanctuary.

Historically, Jewish communal life was built on this foundation. Before the rise of Jewish professional roles in the 20th century, communal needs were met almost exclusively by volunteers. *Chevra kadisha* (burial societies), mutual aid groups, and study circles were all led by volunteers. The Jewish institutions that shaped American Jewish life were direct-service organizations, meeting urgent needs from housing and food insecurity to Americanization classes and employment training within their own communities. Beyond rabbis and educators, there were few of what we now call “Jewish communal professionals.”

As Jewish communities gained economic power after World War II, a new sector of paid professionals emerged. This shift brought scale, consistency, and efficiency. But it also created distance. Many Jews began to see their financial contributions as sufficient. They trusted paid staff to meet communal needs, instead of showing up themselves. In the process, we lost sight of the Torah's vision of a people fully engaged in sustaining community and repairing the world. This is the vision we need to recover: a Jewish people who see service as part of their Jewish identity.

Why prioritize direct volunteer service when professionals can often address problems more efficiently? The answer lies in what service accomplishes beyond its direct impact—alongside the clear benefits that accrue to those being helped.

Service can also address the epidemics of loneliness and anxiety

that plague our society. A 2020 report found that 79 percent of Gen Zers and 71 percent of Millennials considered themselves lonely. In an age of disconnection, service builds community, repairing not just the world but the self. It offers a sense of purpose—a connection to something larger than yourself. And it provides opportunities for moral, emotional, and spiritual development. Research consistently shows that volunteers experience lower rates of depression, greater life satisfaction, and stronger social connections.

For the broader work of social change, service provides what Bryan Stevenson of the Equal Justice Initiative calls “proximity”: the close contact with social problems that generates both understanding and motivation for sustained action. Jewish tradition affirms this wisdom. “If you want to raise a person from mud and filth, do not think it is enough to keep standing on top and reaching a helping hand down to the person,” taught the 18th-century Hasidic rabbi Shlomo of Karlin. “You must go all the way down yourself, down into mud and filth. Then take hold of the person with strong hands and pull the person and yourself out into the light.”

Some problems require professional expertise and institutional resources; others require human presence, relationship, and the kind of patient accompaniment that only volunteers can provide. A grieving family needs both professional counseling services *and* friends who will sit with them. A struggling student benefits from professional tutoring *and* a mentor who believes in his potential.



Making service widespread again will yield multiple benefits for Jewish communities.

First, service is a powerful mechanism for strengthening Jewish identity. One of the accusations leveled at the identity-based poli-

tics of recent years has been its supposed self-absorption. But Gen Z is the most civically engaged generation in recent American history. Sadly, many of them hesitate to walk into Jewish spaces. Service opportunities can meet the predilections of this generation: action-oriented, justice-minded, and community-seeking. In evaluations done by Repair the World, the organization I lead, 71 percent of Jewish participants report that their volunteer experience deepened their sense of belonging to the Jewish community.

But to have this kind of impact, service also needs to be rooted in thoughtful and relevant Jewish learning. In the field we call this “service learning”: rigorous and inclusive learning before, during, and after service experiences. Across the Jewish Service Alliance, a coalition of more than 60 organizations, we’ve discovered that meaningful engagement through service requires wrestling seriously with our texts. But we don’t cherry-pick sources to support predetermined positions; we grapple with complexity, competing values, and multiple perspectives. For example, while serving at a food pantry, rather than looking at a simple text on the imperative to feed the hungry, we will explore the tension between individual and collective needs, or explore the question of whom we prioritize in our circles of responsibility.

Second, service strengthens Jewish relationships with non-Jews. In a time of rising antisemitism, serving alongside our neighbors fosters solidarity and mutual understanding. Rather than focusing on countering extremists, we have an opportunity—through service—to engage with neighbors who share our commitment to building a better world. When people work with the Jewish community to meet urgent community needs, they form real connections and gain a deeper understanding of who we are. Most of our non-Jewish partners and participants report feeling more connected to Jewish communities or spaces and many of our non-Jewish participants have taken on leadership roles, facilitating service and

even Jewish learning. Since October 7, while many Jewish communal alliances have been strained, all of the relationships we have forged at Repair the World have endured. This aligns with research showing that proximity alone is not enough to counteract antisemitism. It's only through proximity and shared action, which service readily brings to life, that anti-Jewish attitudes are reduced. Service builds what dollars alone cannot: trust.

Third, especially in this moment of deep ideological divides in the Jewish community, service is a powerful mechanism for building connections. Finding ways to serve together across difference can offer a priceless opportunity to strengthen Jewish peoplehood.

The approach to service in Orthodox Jewish communities, for example, embodies the value of *hesed*. From a young age, Orthodox Jews are expected to contribute their time and talents to community welfare through volunteer-driven community care, *gemachs* (free loan societies), and ritual leadership. This expectation is supported by social structures that make service accessible, meaningful, and integrated into Jewish life.

Outside of the Orthodox world, however, service is often inspired by the values of *tikkun olam* (repairing the world) and social justice. In Reform, Conservative, and Reconstructionist congregations and schools, social action projects are an integral part of the bar and bat mitzvah process, *tikkun olam* is taught as an essential value, and initiatives that engage directly in caring for vulnerable neighbors proliferate.

Israeli society offers another compelling version: Service that is foundational to citizenship. Military service, national service programs, and extensive volunteer networks all reflect a culture where contribution to the common good is expected and valued. The massive volunteer response following October 7 — with hundreds of thousands of Israelis immediately offering their time and

skills — demonstrates how deeply this ethic is embedded in Israeli consciousness.

Imagine approaches to service that brought all of these values and perspectives into dialogue: collective responsibility and shared sacrifice; lovingkindness; *tikkun olam*. What might emerge if diverse groups of Jews committed themselves to serving and learning together, studying the same challenging and conflicting texts, debating interpretations, and discovering shared questions and answers amid disagreement?

One excellent platform for this experiment would be volunteering in Israel. Just as Israel saw an unprecedented flowering of service and mutual aid after October 7, Diaspora Jews responded to Israel’s hour of need with a simple question: “How can I help?” The American Jewish community donated well over a billion dollars to Jewish and Israeli organizations, and countless people gave of their time as well. Facebook groups such as “Swords of Iron – Israel Volunteer Opportunities,” which currently boasts nearly 46,000 members, emerged overnight to serve as hubs for advice, support, and connections to volunteer opportunities. Birthright Israel pivoted quickly and boldly, offering opportunities for young Jews to spend 8–14 days volunteering to meet pressing needs in Israel. About 15,000 volunteers went on the initial volunteering trips, and the unprecedented demand led to a new partnership between Birthright and Jewish Federations of North America to enable tens or even hundreds of thousands more people to participate in volunteering trips now and into the future.

Diaspora Jews and Israelis are serving side by side, and the impact on both is immeasurable. Volunteering in Israel is deepening connections, contributing to Israel’s resilience, transforming abstract political differences into concrete human relationships, and strengthening a sense of global Jewish peoplehood. Yahel Israel, the longtime leader of service in Israel, is now supporting the Israel educational-travel sec-

tor to ensure that every Israel experience includes meaningful service and learning, even as it continues to run its own yearlong volunteer program in Israel.



Especially at a time when Jews, Judaism, and Israel are so embattled, our future depends on investing in every opportunity we have to build Jewish pride, knowledge, and connection. We must restore the balance between giving our money and our time, and make widespread the notion that it's not only what Jews give, but also how we show up, that matters. Philanthropic investment has already begun to shift in this direction. Twenty years ago, service opportunities in Jewish life were often informal and episodic. Today, we have the infrastructure to make service meaningful, scalable, and strategic.

This works because people want it. More than 400,000 people at JCCs, Hillels, Federations, schools, camps, synagogues, and teen groups have performed almost 720,000 acts of service over the past five years. Through coordinated efforts, Jewish service opportunities have expanded in depth, diversity, and accessibility. They are rooted in Jewish values, guided by experienced professionals, and enriched with reflection and Jewish learning.

There's more to do.

What if synagogue membership meant committing to monthly service, for the synagogue or the community? What if day schools integrated service learning throughout the curriculum as central to moral and spiritual development? What if we measured Jewish engagement not only in dollars donated, but in hours served? Imagine a Jewish coming-of-age where teens don't just chant Torah, but also begin a lifelong commitment to serious volunteering. Imagine if a service year became an expectation for all young Jews, in Israel or in

their home country. Imagine new opportunities for retirees to donate their time to Jewish communal endeavors around the world. Imagine generations of Jews who feel connected to their people *because* they have acted on their values.

When we serve, we live our values out loud. That's how we build a strong Jewish future — not just by giving what we have, but by giving who we are. *

CINDY GREENBERG is the president and CEO of Repair the World, whose mission is to mobilize Jews and their communities to take action to pursue a just world, igniting a lifelong commitment to service.