



Editor's Note: This essay is part of a series stemming from The Conversation, a project of The Jewish Week in partnership with the Center of Leadership Initiatives (CLI), held last fall. Participants at the two-day gathering were encouraged to write about the experience and/or how it affected the work they do, as professionals or volunteers, in the Jewish community.

Connecting Community Service, Jewish Learning

Simon Greer

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The crowd was diverse enough to make it interesting. A lobbyist for the Orthodox Union; a rabbi leading an emergent sacred community in Los Angeles; the percussionist from congregation B'nai Jeshurun in Manhattan; a Chabad rabbi from Palo Alto, Calif. The 60 or so participants in The Conversation covered myriad facets of Jewish organized and unorganized life.

The format was open enough to allow prickly and substantive topics not only to emerge but be considered and reconsidered. In 48 hours we only heard from the front of the room in the introductions and during the talent show. We were given the space to build relationships, debate paradigms and smash idols.

At far too many gatherings the potential has been squandered even before the opening remarks. The wrong people are in the room, or the agenda constrains the participants, or the format precludes rather than provokes. The Jewish Week did well to avoid these pitfalls.

Still, being relatively new to my post as president of the Jewish Funds for Justice - only 18 months on the job - I was unsure how the interesting crowd and open format would play out. Would it dull the edges or make the divisions all the more stark?

When I walked into my first Open Space session on service learning I was even more uncertain. As we introduced ourselves I learned that our circle included a representative from Yeshiva University; a Washington, D.C., academic; a retired AOL executive; the director of a prominent and significant Jewish family foundation; leaders from Hillel and a member of President George W. Bush's Community Service Program staff.

The search for common ground began immediately as we sought to define terms. Did we all mean the same thing when we spoke about community service, service learning and term of service? Much to my surprise and excitement, we did. Not only did we agree on which work counts as service and the connection between service and Jewish learning,

we also identified populations we would prioritize, dividing up roles among us to move the work forward. Our unlikely cast of characters quickly identified common interests and complimentary strengths. I had entered the session a skeptic and left a believer.

Although the ideological diversity of our group was unusual, the energy our session tapped into was not new. Over the last 10 years organizations like Avodah and American Jewish World Service have put service learning front and center.

This conversation at The Conversation made me even more certain that Jewish Funds for Justice should move forward with a proposal to incorporate into JFSJ a leading domestic Jewish service learning organization based in Baltimore called Spark: Partnership for Service. In December, our board met in New Orleans. It was only appropriate that after taking a tour to see firsthand the devastation that remains 15 months after Katrina, our board approved a recommendation to merge Spark with JFSJ. This year, JFSJ will begin our service learning work by building on Spark's track record of success and bring hundreds of Jewish volunteers to the Gulf Coast region, among other locations.

At the Jewish Funds for Justice we think it is possible to make meaningful service a rite of passage in the Jewish community. I believe this is a goal shared by my new friends from The Conversation. We all envision a time when Jews engage in service learning out of a profound sense of responsibility to repair a broken world.

At JFSJ, service learning will build off our strengths. Our relationships with dozens of local community-based organizations and credit unions throughout the country will provide compelling opportunities for service and eye-opening learning. Through our relationships with thousands of individual Jews, hundreds of synagogues and many Jewish institutions, we will become a much needed bridge.

The Jewish community is beginning to respond. This response will be energized by a show of support from across a broad set of political perspectives and communal priorities. In the years to come we should all work to create high-quality service programs that emphasize Jewish learning, utilize volunteers' skills and abilities, provide much needed support to underserved communities and deepen our community's commitment to service.

The challenge coming out of The Conversation is to make this event something of lasting value rather than simply the two days of dynamism, honesty and hope. Will we provide the universe with another shining example of my favorite management maxim: "When all is said and done, more is said than done?" Or will we seize the momentum, build on the new relationships and hold ourselves to a new, higher standard for our collective work?

It remains too soon to tell, but I am optimistic that on issues like service learning, we will succeed in catalyzing a body of work and a transformation of our community.

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