

[Social Justice Movements: The Good They Do \(Through the Stories They Tell\)](#)

By [Sidney Schwarz](#)

Editors Note:

This article is written in response to [Jay Michaelson's](#), also posted on the Zeek site today. Weigh in on the debate in the comments section after the article!

Jay correctly points to the tendency that both individuals and organizations have to respond to a particular “story” of injustice as opposed to those sources of much greater suffering in the world which are almost always too complex to reduce to a simple story.

Those of us who, for many years, have been trying to raise consciousness about social justice and inspire greater activism among Jews are well aware of the dilemma. I could offer numerous anecdotes that could support Jay’s argument: the one night fundraiser for Darfur; the blanket run to an inner city in January to help a half dozen homeless get through the night; the one week trip to a third world country where a handful of Jews provide “labor” to impoverished locals.

I have been in each of those settings, and many more. I am well aware how easy it is to ridicule the efforts because essentially, they address symptoms of larger, systemic problems and not the root causes themselves. Yet I believe that in making that observation Jay misunderstands the purpose of social justice work in the Jewish community.

The vast majority of social justice activities sponsored by Jewish organizations are symbolic and educational. Whether we are talking about a one-day Hazon bike ride, a week-long Hillel alternative spring break trip or a three-week PANIM summer program, the goal is not to solve a social problem. It is rather to create an activity in which a group of Jews experience an emotional connection to some social/political/environmental problem in the world or to a group of people who are experiencing pain, suffering or oppression. In the best-case scenario the activity gets framed by the host organization so that participants come to see what is “Jewish” about it. There is growing evidence that such experiences do make Jews feel more connected to their Jewish identity because they are proud that their tradition puts such an emphasis on *tzedek* (justice).

Now it may be true that both the promotional material for such programs and the enthusiastic staffers may overstate the extent to which a given program or activity is “healing the world”. But the dedicated professionals who spend months planning such

activities know full well that such experiences are more about the impact on the participants than on the specific social problem or the target population. In my own article in this issue I tell how we always used the experience of bringing teens to soup kitchens as a way to raise their awareness of the scope and complexity of the problem of hunger in America. We were very explicit about saying that the three hours in the soup kitchen did not and would never make a dent in the problem. What we did say was that there were systemic causes to the problem and that they would have to devote much more time, thought and energy to understanding the roots of the problem and committing themselves to being part of a longer term solution.

Jewish organizations need not apologize for using compelling stories to mobilize Jews to action. I have met dozens of alumni of PANIM programs who are now professionally engaged in addressing the systemic roots of a wide array of social, political and environmental problems. They include academics doing research, staffers at NGO's and public officials. Many tell me that they first got interested in the work that they ultimately pursued on a PANIM program.

And while the above examples may only represent a small percentage of our alumni, the vast majority had their understanding of the place of tzedek in their Jewish practice dramatically changed for the better. That kind of change of consciousness among a wide cross-section of a younger generation of American Jews is no small achievement and every Jewish social justice organization that I know about can claim credit for contributing to the phenomenon. It has already started to change the face of the American Jewish community and we are only experiencing the beginning of the impact that will grow over time.

Jay has set up a strawman that makes the perfect the enemy of the good. From what I have seen and know, Jewish social justice organizations have been doing a heck of a lot of good.



David ·

Both of these articles, the one by Jay and this one, are truly great and I thank Zeek for continuing to execute their mission to be a "catalyst for conversations about the Jewish Tomorrow.."

I agree with Jay (and so does Rabbi Schwarz apparently) that often these trips really only serve to make the participants feel better, than they really offer change to the communities, but I also believe (as a Jew who works at a non-profit in the Lower 9th Ward) that these trips are still valuable, even if they aren't ultimately bringing about Justice. We have had great visits from groups at JFSJ, AVODAH, AJWS, etc. and they have done good, needed work in the community, as well as donating money, and taking the time to hear from local residents about their lives and struggles. I personally tell all groups that meet with me that they should stay involved with us and offer them information about what they can do from home to help with our work.

I think part of the solution is being more upfront with participants about what their trip is really about. Yes you will help someone in the immediate, but the goal of the trip should be to create

longer term social justice advocates by truly educating people about root causes, and informing them that while their visit did offer some help, it ultimately doesn't do too much. Some would say that would not make people want to volunteer because it will make them feel guilty rather than empowered, but I don't think we should sugarcoat things. We must be honest with people so that they can learn the facts and make a decision about whether to just check their Justice trip off of a to do list, or if they really want to commit to the movement for social change.

Better yet, anyone going on one of these trips should be required to read both of these articles!

[Story is the Peril of Service](#)

By [Jay Michaelson](#)

Editor's Note:

This article is posted together with [a response by Rabbi Sid Schwarz](#). Tell us what you think in the comments section!

We are creatures of narrative. Our sacred myths, our everyday lives, and our political minds all are built upon stories; narrative is how we organize ourselves as human beings, and it has been this way, it would seem, ever since we became human, tens of thousands of years ago. Narratives are about people – good, bad, and in between – and they imbue a sense of power and moment to our lives. If only Macbeth had chosen differently; if only Moses hadn't struck the rock. These stories, even when tragic, imbue our own decisions with a sense of importance; our decisions, they say, matter. And of course, we don't like to feel powerless in the face of tragedy.

Yet this reliance on narrative misleads us today, in a world of enormous structures, hidden villains, and forces which are not conveyed adequately in tales. If we look for “the human element,” or the human connection, in our concerns about social and environmental justice, we will be looking in the wrong place. And if we really believe that our individual choices, as opposed to collective political will, will make a serious difference, we are deluding ourselves.

This is the peril of service, as contrasted with advocacy: that we may believe that the real causes of our problems, and the real engines of our solution, are human beings in narrative human situations. They are not. What are the greatest humanitarian issues of the last few years? If you think about it for a moment, you'll probably answer the earthquake in Haiti, Hurricane Katrina, the flood in Pakistan, maybe the gulf oil spill. If you're Jewish, you'll think of Darfur; if you're liberal and young, you might think of Palestine. Widening the scope a little bit, you might add some systemic problems like urban poverty, and environmental ones like climate change. All of them, and of course many more, cry out for response: financial support, volunteerism, and taking personal responsibility for action – switch those light-bulbs to fluorescent, recycle those newspapers.

Unfortunately, the number of people killed in the Haiti earthquake is dwarfed by the number who die every year due to inadequate drinking water; AIDS in Africa is also a far more deadly killer than any photogenic tidal wave. The number of people displaced by Hurricane Katrina is nothing compared to the number displaced by urban gentrification and our lack of a real national housing program. Our recourse to narrative causes us to err. In today's world, the silent, systemic killers are the deadliest.

Narrative miscasts the nature of real tragedy. Nameless trends, faceless economic forces – these are the true villains in today's most pressing dramas, yet they are almost completely unrepresentable on screen. (Syriana and Traffic are two good attempts; their use of multiple, interlocking narratives creates, in a sense, an anti-narrative, and the real villains are multiple, half-aware, and never who they seem to be.)

Take the financial crisis of 2008. The media focused on financier Bernie Madoff. Most of us know that he was a sideshow to the real drama, which involved vast machineries of hyper-capitalism. But these machines were not necessarily helmed by demonic monsters – that, too, is a narrative myth. The problem of huge corporations is not that they are sinister, dastardly conspiracies led by Montgomery Burns-like villains. Nor was the financial crisis caused by CEOs who cheated or by managers who cut corners. Most people who work at corporations are simply trying to do their jobs and make some money.

No – the problem isn't when corporations go wrong, despite fascinating news stories about greedy individuals. The problem is when they go right. By law, public corporations are required to maximize profit for shareholders – that's it. Corporations have indeed run amok – again, not because they are run by villains, but because the system itself is, according to the traditional Jewish definition, evil. Our current system of corporate control is yetzer hara by law.

Example: The oil spill in the gulf. Sure, there may have been corners cut here or there, and BP might have done a better job in cleanup. But the reason this spill happened is that the oil well was put there in the first place. Accidents happen, and huge offshore oil rigs are going to have accidents. The rig was there because Big Oil swayed Congress to allow offshore drilling over the objections of environmentalists and community groups. What happened in the Gulf is the direct result of Big Oil's lobbying, and the Republicans (and local Democrats) who vote accordingly.

Another example? The food/obesity/poison-food crises. Americans are getting sick and fat because they are eating lots of fake products instead of food. Sure, individual choices have a lot to do with that, but it's hard to ask working people to resist \$1 hamburgers and snacks made of corn syrup. The reason we have a food crisis is that Big Corn and Big Food have swayed Congress to prop up the outrageous corn subsidy and other corporate welfare for huge agricultural companies. What we see on our supermarket shelves is the direct result of Big Food's lobbying, and the Republicans (and corn-belt Democrats) who vote accordingly.

Or consider the financial crisis. The reason the financial crisis happened is that Big Money swayed Congress that deregulation was some kind of moral imperative, and that the freedom our Founders talked about was the freedom for huge financial corporations to blow bubbles as large as they want. What we see in the wreckage of our financial institutions, and our own IRAs, is the direct result of Big Money's lobbying, and the Republicans (and handful of Democrats) who vote accordingly.

To look for individual bad apples and black hats in these cases is precisely the wrong kind of religious/moral reasoning. I have no doubt that most of the officers and employees of BP, ADM, and Goldman Sachs are basically good people, doing their jobs. It's irrational not to make money when you can do so, and because of corporate law, it's practically illegal. But even if they exist somewhere, "evildoers" are not the problem. The system itself is the problem.

Not surprisingly, since our bias toward narrative misweights and miscasts the nature of global problems, it misdirects the nature of our response. That new fluorescent light bulb just isn't going to do a whole lot, unless we have legislative action in Washington and meaningful, binding emissions limits ratified in the U.S. and China. Neither will volunteering at the local soup kitchen or homeless shelter, until we address the yawning wealth gap in our country, reinstitute the notion of a true progressive tax code, and get serious about educational opportunity for everyone – and I don't mean Christian "moral education" in tax-funded religious schools, but a real, science-based, reason-based curriculum that prepares tomorrow's computer scientists to think critically and independently.

Of course, it is better to have fluorescent bulbs than not to have them, and it is better to volunteer than not to volunteer. But both have a tendency to delude. Soup kitchens are important, non-partisan, feel-good institutions, but while they will probably always be necessary – some degree of poverty is built in to the structure of capitalism – they are band-aids. Darfur bracelets are nice, but they "raise consciousness" in the opposite direction, away from the deep causes and toward the shallow ones. And while I feel a surge of love for humanity (really, I do) when I learn of mass responses to the catastrophe in Haiti, I wonder if it doesn't come at the expense of applying that emotional energy to systemic, structural problems in our country and elsewhere. Safe drinking water isn't sexy. And the obscene wealth gap in America is not something that will be solved by giving money to the homeless person on the street. The more we think that we're really addressing the cause of that person's misery, we distract ourselves from what the real causes are.

The state of global health, Afghanistan, the environment, economic injustice, and the world financial crisis are not reducible to personal stories. Since service emphasizes the one-on-one and the personal, it tends to take us away from real solutions and toward myths that individual action really will change the world. That sentiment goes well on a t-shirt, but it is factually untrue. What changes the world are massive, collective efforts to fight massive, collective systemic problems. Our crises are big, thick messes, and the more we continue to hunt for black hats, the more we miss the structural factors which

are really causing things to happen: the “invisible hands” that have brought our economy to its knees, the quiet inequalities of capital.

When it comes to social justice, there is no story to get – not in the conventional sense of a human narrative with good guys and bad guys. The lack of story is itself the real story.



[Ben Murane](#) ·

Well written, Jay. True evil is banal.