

Tzedek and Chesed: Re-Thinking the Relationship Between Advocacy and Service

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by *Sid Schwarz*

I come to questions about the relationship between *tzedek* and *chesed* both as a professional in the justice world and as rabbi who thinks about ways that the Jewish tradition might inspire Jews to advance positive social change.

When I founded PANIM Institute for Jewish Leadership and Values in 1988, it was with the express intent to inspire the next generation to become as politically active as were their parents' and grandparents' generation. During the Shoah, Jews realized to their horror that they had little ability to impact U.S. policy. After the war, American Jewry set about to correct this situation by becoming the most politically effective sub-community that the United States has ever seen. The U.S. alliance with Israel is just one legacy of that political clout.

But American Jewish teens born in the last two decades of the twentieth century were like the proverbial "generation that knew not Joseph." Born into affluence and the full acceptance of American society, it was a generation without a (Jewish) cause. Add to the mix the fact that politics in the post-Watergate era was no longer an admired pursuit, and you had a recipe for apathy. My goal was to recommit these young Jews to the pursuit of justice, advocacy and activism. It was *tzedek* writ large.

PANIM offered young Jews a way to experience political life up close and face-to-face. We called our flagship program *Panim el Panim*, not only because it translated as "face to face" but also because the use of that phrase in the Bible is restricted to the encounter with God. Thus, I would often *drash* the meaning of the program's name as "a deep encounter with Truth."

The program functioned on several levels simultaneously. First, Jewish teens from all over the country had a chance to meet with policy experts in Washington and engage in debates about issues that affected their communities, their country, and the world. Wrestling with how elected officials might address poverty, human rights, the

environment, Israel, and more, teens saw that politics was a process that could change the world for the better. Second, we made teens proud of the legacy of Jewish activism and aware that Jewish values could be actualized through political advocacy. Third, we gave our participants the skills to begin taking action themselves on issues of their choosing and, because we were non-partisan, from a perspective that suited their own ideological position.

From Advocacy to Service

Over the course of 21 years, more than 16,000 Jewish teens from all over the country have come through these *Panim el Panim* leadership seminars held in Washington D.C. However, we came to realize that not every Jewish teen was interested in a program heavily geared toward political advocacy.

One program that I created, almost by accident, became the inspiration to modify our pedagogic approach. One evening when I was leaving our hotel in the Foggy Bottom section of Washington, I passed by an African American man who I greeted and who proceeded to tell me that he was the “mayor” of a village of homeless people just a few blocks away. Somewhat skeptical but also intrigued, I followed Jesse to the Federal Reserve Building that sits opposite the State Department. Sure enough, next to each column of the building sat or lay a homeless person or a cluster of homeless individuals on blankets, easily 40-50 in total. As Jesse walked me around the building to introduce me around, many greeted him with the salutation: “Mayor”.

Jesse had gathered homeless folk from around the city to create a small homeless community. It would form each evening and would disappear each morning as the Federal Reserve returned to its “day job” of controlling the U.S. currency. Jesse understood that the community could provide both safety and companionship. Jesse was more than a community organizer (thus his title of “mayor”). He was also part social worker and part rebbe. With Jesse’s permission, the next night we modified the PANIM program and brought 65 Jewish teens to the Federal Reserve to get briefed by Jesse about the plight of the homeless in the nation’s capital. Then, under staff guidance, we encouraged teens to sit down at a column and introduce themselves to the homeless.

The conversations that took place that night were life changing. There is a rabbinic teaching that says that a person who gives a poor person a coin receives six blessings; one who shares with a poor person a friendly greeting, receives eleven. It didn’t take me long to modify the PANIM program so that every seminar included an encounter with the homeless. We had teens prepare sandwiches and/or bring out gloves or scarves to share. We called the program Street Torah because during those encounters, the students learned more Torah than in all the Jewish classroom time they had accumulated in their lives up to that moment.

Because my own professional background was in political advocacy, the initial methodology of PANIM did not sufficiently take into consideration the need to

incorporate experience with direct service. The homeless encounters changed that. Not coincidentally, there was a lot of talk about service in the air.

George Bush Sr. signed the National and Community Service Act of 1990 and then Bill Clinton expanded the possibilities even more with the creation of the Corporation for National and Community Service in 1993. As more high schools began implementing community service requirements for graduation, PANIM decided to provide both a Jewish context in which to understand the value of service and a mechanism to fulfill community service requirements. It resulted in us rolling out a program called the Jewish Civics Initiative (JCI) which eventually spread to over 20 communities nationwide.

What surprised us was that service provided its own route to advocacy. In New Haven, Connecticut, for example, students organized a homeless fair and transported homeless from around the city to a central location where volunteer doctors, nurses, social workers and job counselors met with the homeless to address their needs and concerns. They had moved from helping the homeless finding shelter to mobilizing a whole city to meet their needs.

In San Antonio, Texas students got involved in tutoring young, at-risk children in reading. After some time, they recognized that part of the problem was the unequal distribution of financial resources to schools. The schools in which they tutored bore no resemblance to the suburban schools that they attended. As a result, they began to seek out meetings with state legislators to discuss the inequity in school funding.

In the Bay Area, teens decided to organize around immigrant labor. They visited a migrant labor camp made up mostly of Mexicans who came across the border, many illegally. They then engaged in an education campaign in the Jewish community to raise consciousness about the plight of these workers and the Jewish obligation to protect the stranger in our midst. From helping immigrant families they had moved to immigration reform.

There is an expression in the Talmud: *mikol talmidai hiskalti*, from all of my students I have learned. We learned a lot from the JCI students. We realized that our original framing of PANIM as a program about Jews, Judaism and politics was too narrow. We had not understood the deep connections between service and advocacy.

The Benefits of Service

By the late 1990's we started to expand the scope of all of our *Panim el Panim* seminars to incorporate experiences with hands-on community service. We saw how the service dimension was empowering in ways far different than the political advocacy training. Advocacy training did have the benefit of making the political process less mystifying. However, an experience with service affected far more teens and in deeper ways.

First, service did not require anyone to be a political junkie. It only required having a compassionate heart and being exposed to real people who were ill, disabled, or victims of social inequities. I could literally see a teen transformed as she related her experience

of preparing a meal in a soup kitchen, or sitting on the ground next to a homeless person to have a conversation or helping a 10-year old read a sentence that was beyond decoding weeks earlier.

Second, while political advocacy often requires teens to embed themselves in organizations or in the offices of legislators to learn the ins and outs of the political process, service provided an activity that was far more accessible for most teens. We began to offer workshops at our seminars on how to create your own service project back home. We began to offer mini-grants to alumni of our program to devise their own local service projects. We started an annual contest for alumni for the Young Jewish Activist of the Year. The winner was brought to Washington each spring to receive their cash prize and speak at our benefit gala. Year after year these teens and 20-somethings would “wow” our donors with their creativity, their passion and their desire to make a difference in the world.

We were not abandoning our commitment to the training of effective political activists. But we were broadening our language in several ways. We started using the term “social responsibility” to describe both advocacy and service work that advanced a just cause. The term had the added benefit of being less politically charged than “social justice,” a term that often labels an effort as progressive left, thus pushing away avowed conservatives who also care about finding ways to improve society.

The other term that we coined and used extensively was “Jewish civics.” The term had an intended double meaning. On one level it suggested the responsibility that Jews had to contribute their time, talent and resources to the society in which they lived. The second level of meaning suggested the responsibilities and privileges that Jews had as citizens of a trans-national Jewish people. For both levels, we developed an educational methodology that offered a matrix of Jewish values to inspire students to live lives that reflected a loyalty to those twin principles of Jewish civics.

Integrating Advocacy and Service

There was a point in time when PANIM was providing two different kinds of seminar experiences in Washington – one focusing on service and one focusing on advocacy. But soon we realized that it was more educationally effective to combine the two. In a seminar of some 75 teens, we’d have them choose from among five to seven service sites for a morning of community service. On the next day, the groups would visit a corresponding NGO or government agency that had some responsibility for the public policies that related to the problem addressed in the community service slot.

Thus, students who worked in a soup kitchen on Monday morning would visit a place like the Food Research and Action Center (FRAC) on Tuesday, an NGO that lobbies for greater availability of food stamps. Or a group that spent time in a DC public school, working with children on their reading and seeing the lack of equipment and resources in the facility, might visit with an official at the DC Board of Education the next day. Whatever the pairing, the service experience was intended to get our students closer to

the pain and brokenness of the world and to make them realize that their time and compassion could offer a healing balm for those less fortunate than themselves. The advocacy visit was to help students understand how so many of the problems they saw first hand during community service might be addressed through programs or services that could be created by legislation or policy initiatives at the local, state or federal levels.

Because students were more deeply moved by their service experiences than by their advocacy experiences, I would often have to make the case for advocacy. Assume, I would tell them, that you were motivated by your experience in the soup kitchen and you went home and convinced five of your closest friends to join you once a month to volunteer your time at a local soup kitchen. After a year, you would have engaged in some important *mitzvah* work, but you would not have made a dent in the problem of hunger in America. If, on the other hand, you took the same number of person hours represented by your year's worth of service work and put that time into an advocacy effort to lower the income standard needed to qualify for food stamps, you might make a huge difference in alleviating the problem of hunger in America.

I offered this lesson, not to discourage community service work but to teach that real social change comes when you take the experience you have in a service setting and use it to educate and influence the body politic to address the given problem in some systemic way. Since our seminars always included a visit on the final day to a member of Congress to discuss issues and concerns, students had an opportunity to put their newfound experiences and knowledge to immediate use.

The other advantage of creating a PANIM seminar experience that combined both service and advocacy was that it allowed us to give a big picture look at the issue of how social change happens. We used the term *tzedek* to describe advocacy and *chesed* to describe service. We looked at Jewish texts that made it clear that both were important even as they were pursued differently. Sometimes we would brainstorm a half-dozen social problems and ask of the students: how would you address X via *tzedek*? via *chesed*? It became clear that while some social problems could be addressed via both advocacy and service, other issues required one or the other. We also got students to think about how they divided their time between issues that were of primarily Jewish concern (e.g. Israel or fighting anti-Semitism) and those which were more universal.

The bottom line of all of this is that we were training the next generation of American Jews to be far more sophisticated agents for social change. Over the past twenty years, PANIM has been joined by many other organizations that also have found success in combining advocacy and service. Today, we can celebrate the fact that there is a growing body of educational resources and program expertise that, by joining *tzedek* with *chesed*, makes community service a socially beneficial activity. And we can be proud that this growing emphasis on social responsibility stems from timeless Jewish values and reinforces Jewish identity.

There is a long way to go to make Jewish service a standard part of the experience for young American Jews. Still the growth of the field is evidence that the Jewish tradition of giving of our time and resources back to the society in which we live is alive and well.

Resource:

Just: Judaism, Action, Social Change (2007) is a full curriculum published by PANIM along with Hillel. This book offers a state of the field model for five forms of social change action, keyed by the acronym SPACE: service, philanthropy, advocacy, community organizing and social entrepreneurship. For each social change strategy, readers will find Jewish texts, guidelines for effective implementation, and illustrations of young people who had successfully implemented each of these strategies.

Rabbi Sid Schwarz is a senior fellow at Clal: The National Jewish Center for Learning and Leadership and director of the national interfaith project Faith and the Common Good, based at Auburn Seminary. The founder of the PANIM Institute for Jewish Leadership and Values, he is the author of Judaism and Justice: The Jewish Passion to Repair the World (Jewish Lights).

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