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Jewish Service

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COMMUNITY SERVICE: The Nexus of Volunteerism, Philanthropy, and Jewish Identity

by STEVEN COHEN

volunteering and philanthropic generosity.

The first supposition is, of course, a normative assumption, best argued by rabbis, educators and communal leaders. However, the second supposition raises an empirical question, the sort that social scientists can address. Most simply:

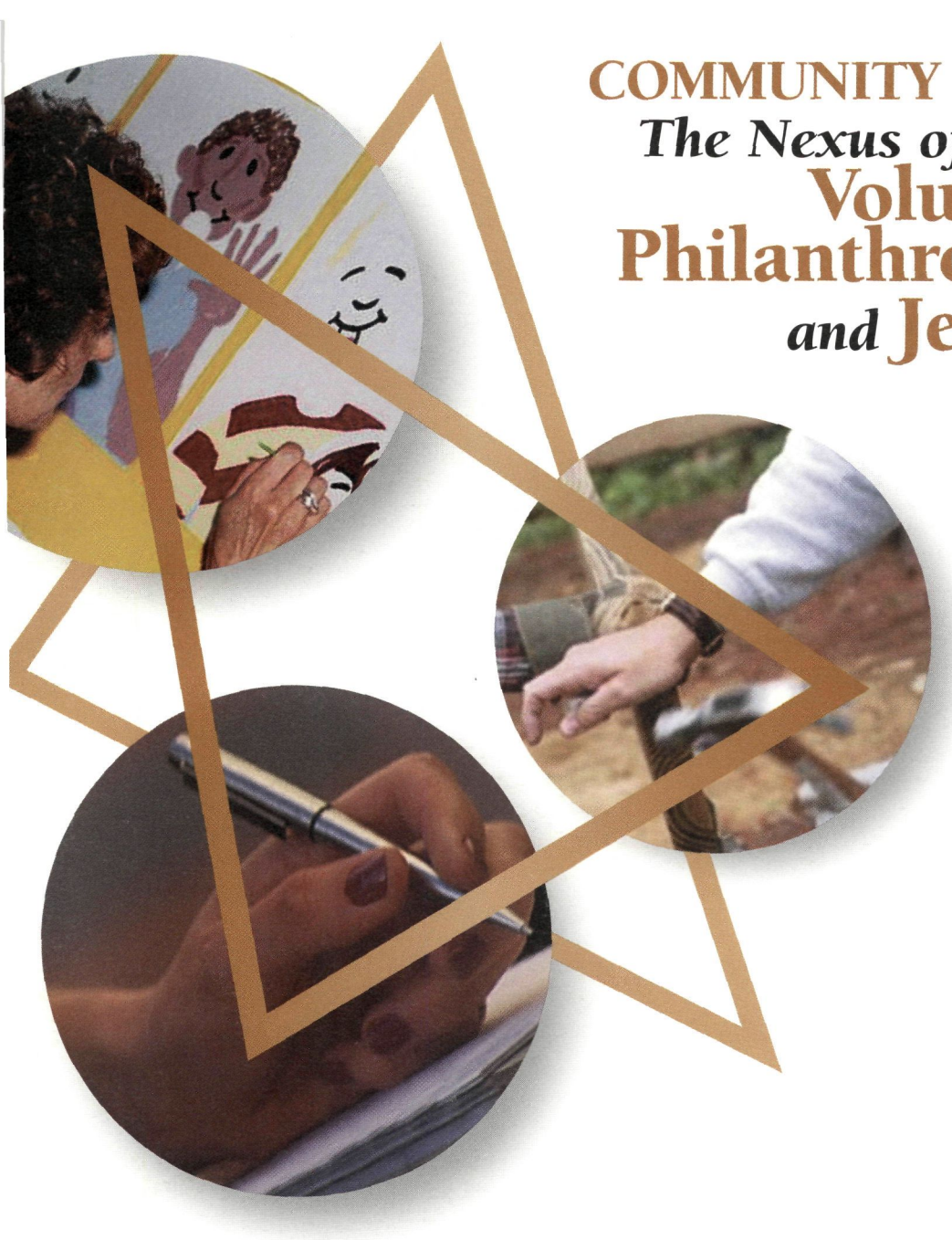
Does community service under Jewish sponsorship elevate the “Jewish identity” of young adult American Jews?

Evidence bearing upon the answer to this question emerged from a study I recently conducted under the sponsorship of Jewish Life Network. Following focus group interviews with Jewish young adults (primarily in their twenties and thirties), we conducted Web-based surveys of Jews associated with three programs: Makor, New York’s popular cultural, educational and social facility for Jewish young adults; Jewish InterAction, Boston’s lead educational, service and social programming effort for Jewish young adults; and New York Cares, a non-sectarian agency that recruits volunteers year-round and that allowed access to its participants, both Jewish and non-Jewish.

The survey, with a sample number of 700 from Makor, 220 from Jewish InterAction and 47 Jewish participants in New York Cares, assessed three critical measures:

1. the extent of recent volunteering under the sponsorship of Jewish agencies (and, in the case of NY Cares, the extent of Jewish volunteering under non-sectarian auspices);
2. the levels of Jewish engagement (as measured by Jewish friendship, organized affiliation, ritual practice and subjective commitment); and
3. Jewish philanthropic generosity, as measured by Jewish giving levels relative to income.

From a scientific point of view, the ideal study design would randomly assign people to different levels of community service, examine them “before” and “after,” and determine the extent to which community service experiences elevated their Jewish engagement and philanthropic generosity. Unfortunately, we have had to



Over the last decade, Americans have reported rising levels of volunteering. Community service has seemingly become more widespread and routinized in high school years, and is seen by many college applicants as indispensable to admission to the most selective universities. A wide engagement in community service activities apparently extends to college years and beyond.

Capitalizing on these trends, and drawing upon long-standing and well-established Jewish values, several Jewish institutions, educators, thinkers and community leaders have advocated an expansion

of service opportunities for Jewish young adults under communal auspices. They advance two arguments:

1. In principle, Jews ought to be engaged in community service, volunteering, *tikkun olam* and social justice activities (these terms, though distinctive, also overlap). In their view, Jewish tradition from Biblical times to the recent past absolutely demands these sorts of engagements.
2. In terms of effectiveness, community service constitutes an important gateway to Jewish involvement. This is a keen concern at a time of high anxiety over the levels of Jewish engagement among young adult American Jews. Volunteer experiences under Jewish sponsorship can, the thinking goes, bestow more positive images of being Jewish, promote Jewish social connection and teach the values of

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make do with less than the ideal research design; but, even so, the available evidence that emerged is highly suggestive.

We learned that Jewish young adults who participate in programs like Makor and Jewish InterAction are, as a group and on average, more Jewishly engaged than the general Jewish population as described in local Jewish population studies. More pointedly, Jews in such Jewish-sponsored programs scored higher on several measures of Jewish involvement than did Jews who participated in New York Cares. To be sure, the Makor and InterAction Jews are, especially at this point in their lives, uninvolved in organized Jewish life of any sort. But it seems that their Jewish center of gravity rests on relatively strong ethnic commitment. In line with this inference, the focus groups demonstrated that Jews come to Makor in large part because they like the company of Jews, and they want to meet other Jews for friendship and romance. The Jews of New York Cares, by contrast, voiced indifference or even resistance to the notion of associating with other Jews, or of participating in programs sponsored by an official Jewish agency.

This finding corresponds closely with research on JCC members around the country. With all their inclusiveness and openness, JCCs manage to attract a population that is more Jewishly engaged than average. We are led to the inference that Jewish sponsorship in any way, shape, or form — even in the most subtle and least overt ways (Makor is very skillful at this) — inevitably attracts more Jewishly committed people than do programs devoid of any Jewish content or connection whatsoever.

We also learned that the extent of recent engagement in Jewish community service activities is strongly related to Jewish philanthropic giving. That is, within the group of people who come to places like Makor or Jewish InterAction, those who choose to volunteer in Jewishly sponsored programs of community service reported higher levels of philanthropic donations to Jewish causes.

Of course, we have no way of determining what leads to what. Do more philanthropic Jews volunteer more? Do volunteer-oriented Jews deepen their Jewish commitment? Does Jewish commitment provoke philanthropic giving? The causal directions are unclear and not

at all clarifiable, even with the ideal research design. However, totally understanding causality is not, for our purposes, all that critical.

For, based on the evidence, we know that by their very nature, community service programs under Jewish sponsorship attract Jews who are more Jewishly engaged, who are more philanthropically inclined, and, by definition, who are more prepared to volunteer their time to make the world a better place. Inevitably, their socializing, sweating and saving the world together can only serve to reinforce the positive norms that attracted them to Jewishly sponsored community service in the first place.

In general, bringing people together who share distinctive values makes those values more plausible, more enduring and more deeply-rooted. This observation applies not only generally, but apparently with specific reference to community service in America. As Robert Putnam observes in *Bowling Alone*:

Community service programs really do strengthen the civic muscles of participants, especially if the service is meaningful, regular, and woven into the fabric of the school curriculum. Episodic service has little effect. ... On the other hand, well-designed service learning programs (the emerging evidence suggests) improve civic knowledge, enhance citizen efficacy, increase social responsibility and self-esteem, teach skills of cooperation and leadership, and may even (one study suggests) reduce racism.

—Simon & Schuster, 2000, p. 405.

By extension, to paraphrase Putnam, we can reasonably infer that community service programs under Jewish sponsorship really do strengthen the Jewish and philanthropic muscles of participants, especially, we suspect, if the service is meaningful, regular and enriched by a Jewish educational context. Not only do such programs serve an intrinsic Jewish purpose laden with historic, cultural and religious meaning for Jews today. In all likelihood, Jewish participants accrue additional benefits in terms of strengthening the commitments that bring them together in the first place: Jewish identity, philanthropic generosity and an actionable desire to help one's community. ✿

Many of the responses to the Service Survey (see accompanying article) illuminated a diverse range of approaches to Jewish identity. Following are selected remarks from volunteers with Makor, a Jewish cultural, educational and service center that reaches out to New Yorkers in their 20s and 30s, and Jewish InterAction, a service and social programming organization for the same age group in Boston:

“Volunteering is some form of spirituality. It helps me feel connected to the community at large, and especially the Jewish community.”

“I think [service] enforces the communal aspects of Judaism. I like the opposing forces at work in Judaism — on one side the family and community bonds; on the other the intellectual and self-discovery aspects.”

“If I had to choose between going to synagogue twice a month or [volunteering at a Jewish home for the aged] twice a month, I would volunteer, because this adds value to dozens and dozens of people's lives. And because it is at a Jewish organization, I feel like it's not a substitute or an alternative but — that's my synagogue in many regards. I find it spiritually rewarding, emotionally rewarding, and that's the feeling I would hope to get out of going to synagogue.”

“[Volunteering] allows me to express my Jewish commitments even when my religious beliefs or attitudes are at their most feeble.”

“I am always inspired when I see people whose Judaism causes them to help others. I feel my commitment deepen whenever I am out there doing volunteer work of any kind.”

“What is a Jewish context? Does that mean service that only helps Jews? Service by Jewish organizations? If I helped the Red Cross distribute food to flood victims, isn't that still in the Jewish context of loving thy neighbor?”

“[Service] work makes all the study and sitting in synagogue seem founded on something real.”