

# Planning Mitzvah Projects for your school and synagogue





## Introduction

Judaism does not have a monopoly on social justice values. Care for human life, the dignity of others, and the uniqueness and equality of all people are core elements of many traditions. While they are Jewish values, they are also human values. But perhaps there is a Jewish way of doing social justice work, as there is a Jewish way of praying, a Jewish way of eating.

Jewish tradition places enormous weight on *mitzvot bein adam l'chavero*—on our obligations to the people around us. *Mitzvah* projects sit at the intersection of Jewish education and the wide world. They are an arena for the application of learning and the relevant and meaningful expression of Jewish identity. Social justice work is a core Jewish practice.

This booklet is designed to help educators and lay leaders develop substantive, significant and comprehensive Jewish social justice projects.

## Framework—Setting the Stage

Susan Sontag, "Regarding the Pain of Others" (New York: Picador, 2003)

So far as we feel sympathy, we feel we are not accomplices to what caused the suffering. Our sympathy proclaims our innocence as well as our impotence. To that extent, it can be (for all our good intentions) an impertinent—if not an inappropriate—response. To set aside the sympathy we extend to others beset by war and murderous politics for a consideration of how our privileges are located on the same map as their suffering, and may—in ways that we prefer not to imagine—be linked to their suffering, as the wealth of some may imply the destitution of others, is a task for which the painful, stirring images supply only the initial spark.

We exist on an intricate map of relations where our clothing, our food, our electronics, our building supplies, are made outside the country we live in. Additionally, as we spend money, portions go to wages of migrant laborers—food delivery workers, dishwashers, domestic workers, farm workers—who in turn send payments to family back home. Our economies are linked, our lives are connected and our reach for a better world involves everyone.

Our society is complicit, even culpable, for many of the injustices faced around the world. Yet, as individuals, even as families and communities, we did not create the systems as they are. Like all people, we were born into a world already in process. It is common for young people and adults to have feelings of guilt and shame when faced with the economic disparity and overwhelming prejudice in our global community. It is important that we remind each other that these systems are not our fault. Feeling bad about ourselves is not helpful because it limits our sense of capacity to create change. Social justice is not about giving away our stuff because we feel bad that someone else is destitute. Social justice is about unpacking the systems of injustice and changing them.

We must see that we all live on the same map.

We must search for ways to make things better.

We must continue, step by step, to move toward a world of fairness, equality and dignity for all.

## Behind *Mitzvah* Projects—Core Texts

Themes of social justice are pervasive throughout the Jewish textual tradition. Often, texts are used to substantiate why what we're doing is Jewish. In this way, text study often happens before that action of a social justice project.

Another approach is to use texts as an expression of experience. Much like a song we hear on the radio or a character in a movie, texts can express the feelings or thoughts that come after that action of a social justice project.

We invite you to use Jewish texts in both ways. The texts below are a mere sampling of what is available in Jewish sources.

<p><b>Pirkei Avot 2:10</b> Rabbi Eliezer said, "Other people's dignity should be as precious to you as your own."</p>	<p><b>פרקי אבות ב:י</b> רבי אליעזר אומר יהי כבוד חברך חביב עליך כשלך.</p>
<p><b>Deuteronomy 24:17-18</b> You shall not subvert the rights of the stranger or the orphan; you shall not take a widow's garment in pawn. Remember that you were a slave in Egypt and that your God redeemed you from there; therefore I command you to do this thing.</p>	<p><b>דברים כד:יז-יח</b> לא תטֹה מִשְׁפֹּט גֵר יְתוֹם וְלֹא תִחַבֵּל בְּגֹד אֶלְמָנָה: וְזָכַרְתָּ כִּי עֶבֶד הָיִיתָ בְּמִצְרַיִם וַיִּפְדֶּךָ ה' אֱלֹהֶיךָ מִשָּׁם: עַל כֵּן אֲנֹכִי מִצְוֶיךָ לַעֲשׂוֹת אֶת הַדָּבָר הַזֶּה:</p>
<p><b>Micah 6:6</b> And what does God require of you but to do justice, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God?</p>	<p><b>מיכה ו:ו</b> הַגִּיד לְךָ אֲדָם מַה טוֹב וּמָה ה' דּוֹרֵשׁ מִמֶּנּוּ כִּי אִם עֲשׂוֹת מִשְׁפָּט וְאַהֲבַת חֶסֶד וְהִצְנֵעַ לִכְתּוֹת עִם אֱלֹהֶיךָ:</p>
<p><b>Babylonian Talmud, Sanhedrin 73a</b> How do we know that if a person sees another person drowning, mauled by beasts or attacked by robbers, he is bound to save him? From the verse, "You shall not stand idly by the blood of your neighbor" (Leviticus 19:16).</p>	<p><b>תלמוד בבלי סנהדרין עג עמוד א</b> מניין לרואה את חבירו שהוא טובע בנהר, או חיה גוררתו, או לסטין באין עליו, שהוא חייב להצילו - תלמוד לומר לא תעמד על דם רעך.</p>
<p><b>Proverbs 14:31</b> He who oppresses the poor, blasphemes his Maker. He who is gracious to the needy honors God.</p>	<p><b>משלי יד:לא</b> עֲשֵׂק דָל חַרְף עֲשֵׂהוּ וּמְכַבְּדוֹ חֲנִן אֲבִיו:</p>
<p><b>Babylonian Talmud Shabbat 54b</b> Whoever can prevent his household from committing a sin but does not, is responsible for the sins of his household; if [he can prevent] his fellow citizens, he is responsible for the sins of his fellow citizens; if [he can prevent] the whole world, he is responsible for the sins of the whole world.</p>	<p><b>תלמוד בבלי שבת דף נד עמוד ב</b> כל מי שאפשר למחות לאנשי ביתו ולא מיחה נתפס על אנשי ביתו, באנשי עירו נתפס על אנשי עירו, בכל העולם כולו נתפס על כל העולם כולו.</p>

\*\* AJWS is developing a database of Jewish social justice texts. Look for [www.on1foot.org](http://www.on1foot.org) to be launched in the spring of 2009.

## Choosing an Issue—Approaching Consensus

AJWS recommends that every community engage in a selection process to choose which issue they will engage with that year. Such a communal process is vital to the success of the project, the investment of each participant and the vibrancy brought to the endeavor as a whole. Consensus is defined not as the agreement of every person, but of the absence of dissent. There will always be diverse opinions about what issue is most important. The key is to ensure discussion and collaboration so that no individual feels coerced. There are many ways to involve communities of all ages in such a process. We invite you to use a methodology that is most appropriate for you community.

Some recommended issues to consider are:

- Access to education
- Access to healthcare
- Women's empowerment
- Poverty
- Hunger
- Labor law
- Trade, aid and debt
- Conflict and Violence
- Indigenous Rights
- Sustainable Development – The environment and human life

## Making *Mitzvah* Projects Meaningful—Threading Themes

In our global family, social justice issues at home are always connected to issues abroad, and vice versa. *Mitzvah* projects are the place to help participants explore issues across lines of nationality and geography, as well as across lines of race, gender, class, sexual orientation and religion.

AJWS thinks about social justice work as taking place in three primary areas. These form the **3-slot Tzedakah Box**:



### My Home Community

Whether you think about this as your American community or your local community, this constituency is the group of people that lives in the place you call home. How home gets defined varies widely. Still, the people we think of as our home community are often the groups that significantly overlap with our own experiences in a variety of ways.



### My Jewish Community

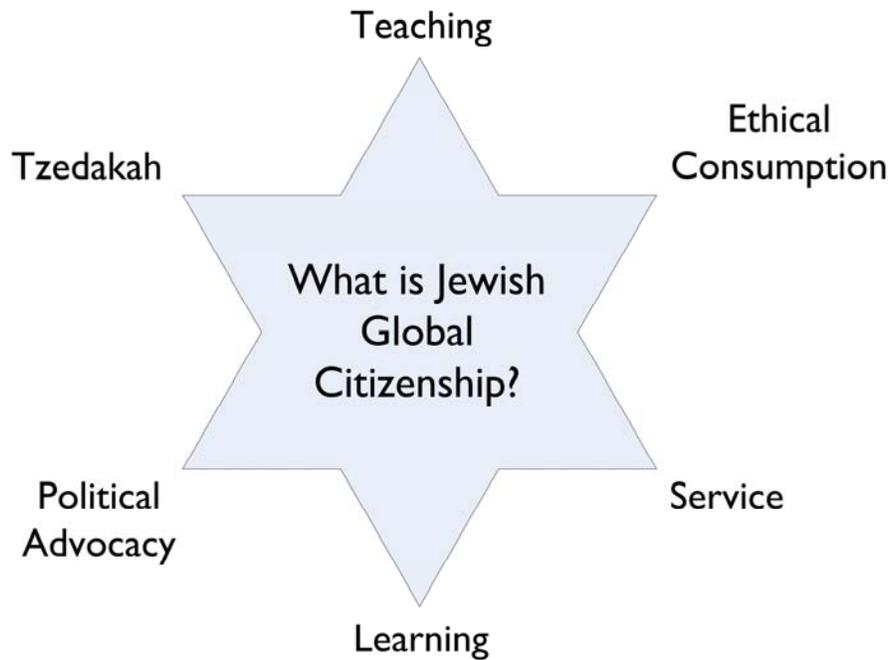
Jewish communities have survived for generations throughout the world. In Israel and India, Cuba and Canada, Uganda, Ukraine and Uruguay, there are Jewish families who need our time and attention. Jews have a long history of hardship and discrimination. For many Jews, this remains a current reality.



### My Global Community

80% of the world's population lives on less than \$2.50 a day. The vast majority of these people are clustered in countries with stagnant economies, flailing governments and little or no social programs. These populations are subjected to severe and systemic poverty, disease, hunger and conflict. It is our obligation to put attention and resources here.

## Jewish Social Justice Education—The Six-Point Plan



Jewish social justice education involves being active in many ways. These six forms of activism are distinct yet mutually beneficial. Education around Jewish global citizenship should engage participants in each of these areas.

For schools, this extends beyond the Judaics curriculum. Developing *mitzvah* projects is an excellent opportunity for collaboration with social studies, history and government studies, and English studies—with literature, writing and public speaking.

Additionally, engagement in each of these areas offers substantive opportunities to involve parents in their child's learning. Social justice holds core values at its center and, in the context of Jewish education, these are the same values that are primary to an articulation of Jewish identity. While individuals and families will disagree about which issues are most important, such conversations are themselves part of the education. Judaism does not hold, by any account, that human life is dispensable, that humans should suffer, that neglecting human need is appropriate. In fact, social justice is, in many ways, at the core of Jewish practice. Inviting parents to participate in *mitzvah* projects can invigorate the broad school community by adding vibrancy, relevance and meaning to Jewish practice at school and at home.

## Definitions—For a middle school audience



- **Service**

Service means doing direct volunteer work. This involves meeting people affected by the issue you care about and performing actions that are helpful to them.



- **Advocacy**

Advocacy means standing up for issues that you care about. In our society, this relates to our elected representatives in government. Governments work on local, state, national and international levels. By raising your concerns with those in elected office, you can influence government policies.



- **Tzedakah**

Giving *tzedakah* means giving money—both of your own funds and money raised from the community. Jewish tradition calls on us to give 10% of our earnings to charity. This can be donated directly to those who need it or it can be given to nonprofit organizations who can reach people you may not meet—particularly people in other countries. Always research organizations you're considering.



- **Consumption**

This means that we should spend our money in ways that show our values. By making choices about how much we buy (quantity) and what we buy (product or service), we demonstrate with our money what we think is right. For example, if we buy clothing that was made by child labor in factories that do not abide by international labor laws, then we support those factories. If, instead, we buy food, clothing, goods and services that are mindful about labor law, trade practices and environmental impacts, we indirectly push the economic market to move in this direction.



- **Learning**

As with all things that happen in the world, the more we know, the more we can effect change. Learning about the events of the world, about why things are the way they are and how we can make them better, will help us work for change. Knowledge is one of the most powerful tools.



- **Teaching**

When we know about an issue and have a plan of action, we can teach others about it and invite them to get involved with us. Teaching others is a vital way to ensure that when we do social justice work, we aren't doing it alone.

# Planning the *Mitzvah* Project—Mapping

Our Issue: \_\_\_\_\_

Please use this chart to help you develop a substantive, comprehensive and relevant *Mitzvah* Project. We invite you to have at least one program in each column and in at least four of the rows.

	My Home Community 	My Jewish Community 	My Global Community 
Service 			
Advocacy 			
Tzedakah Giving 			
Consumption 			
Learning 			
Teaching 			



**American Jewish World Service** (AJWS) is an international development organization motivated by Judaism's imperative to pursue justice. AJWS is dedicated to alleviating poverty, hunger and disease among the people of the developing world regardless of race, religion or nationality. Through grants to grassroots organizations, volunteer service, advocacy and education, AJWS fosters civil society, sustainable development and human rights for all people, while promoting the values and responsibilities of global citizenship within the Jewish community.