The central value affirmation of the Jewish tradition is that every human being is created in the image of God. According to the Talmud (Sanhedrin 37a), this implies that every human being has three intrinsic dignities: infinite value, equality and uniqueness. The Jewish vision of tikkun olam envisages improving the world—politically, economically, socially, culturally—until it fully sustains these dignities for each and every human being.

How do we support the infinite worth of other people? Part of the answer is economic. When people are provided with their material needs, they feel worthwhile and have the basic necessities to achieve their potential. When people are hungry and cold and no one lifts a finger, then they can get sick and die.

But the most powerful statement of human value is not made by giving money or transferring goods from one person to the other. However valuable, such gifts are of finite value. The deepest confirmation of the preciousness of a human life comes when a person gives his/her own infinitely valuable life to the other. Normally, this is not done by literally giving one life for the other—say in dying to protect or save another. The fundamental, ongoing communication of human value takes place when one person spends a piece of his/her life—some unique and irreplaceable amount of time—in relationship and service to the other.

This is the true meaning of the concept of gemilut chassadim, generally (inadequately) translated as “acts of loving kindness.” Gemilut Chassadim really means to service/help the other with money and with one’s own body, i.e., life. If we properly understand gemilut chassadim to mean personal service and relationship, then the values carried in the Hebrew language terms become even clearer and more instructive.

Judaism teaches that all humans are related and bound to each other. This is the true meaning of the concept of gemilut chassadim, generally (inadequately) translated as “acts of loving kindness.” Gemilut Chassadim really means to service/help the other with money and with one’s own body, i.e., life. If we properly understand gemilut chassadim to mean personal service and relationship, then the values carried in the Hebrew language terms become even clearer and more instructive.

If we properly understand gemilut chassadim to mean personal service and relationship, then the values carried in the Hebrew language terms become even clearer and more instructive. Gemilut comes from the verb ligmol which means to grant goodness, give overflowingly, to nurture, to nurse (and by inversion, to wean from nursing.) The image is that of direct interpersonal giving (as a mother gives milk to the child nursing at her breast.) This is giving which sustains the life of the recipient and which links the giver and the recipient in elemental (or literal) connection. Actions of personal service and relationship are the key links to all human life, they make society and human living possible. According to the Jewish value system, human beings are commanded to give direct personal service and relationship to fellow humans. In this way, they nurture, sustain and give others the wherewithal to grow.

The word chessed (plural, chassadim) describes more than loving kindness; chessed really means covenantal love, i.e., love that becomes committed and obligated to the other. Judaism teaches that all humans are related and bound to each other. To perfect the world and to become fully human, individuals enter into a covenantal community. As partners, they are obligated to serve, nurture and sustain each other and

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you shall be equal to you as the home-

the classic command “the stranger among
Jews’ actions must extend beyond fulfilling
Jew and non-Jew alike — has grown. Then
nurture the image of God of the other —
and the greater affluence, dignity and free-
cluded, embattled Jewish community which
needed this sustenance. Still, the fundamen-
tikkun olam.

Judaism is the way of life that teaches
worth, equality and uniqueness) of the other.

In stressing these norms, the Talmud and
the later Musar (ethical) and philosophical
traditions also placed great emphasis on the
religious duty to walk in God’s ways (Deuter-
onomy, 28:9), that is, to imitate God’s behav-
ior. Since creation, the central activity that
God engages in is sustaining life (Job, 12:10)
and nurturing all living things in accordance
with their needs (Psalms, 145:8-9, 14-17). Humans are commanded to imitate these
actions of God. Thus the tradition teaches us
that human beings were given God-like
 capacitivities of consciousness, power and love
(which make us images of God) in order to
join in God’s work of sustaining the dignity
and life of others and thereby perfecting the
world.

In light of the growth of the recognition of the
dignity of all human beings, the time has
come to articulate the obligation for personal
service to the other as a fundamental obliga-
tion of a human being, according to Judaism.
After the Holocaust, in which the fundamental
tuition of a human being, according to Judaism.

service to the other as a fundamental obliga-
tion must teach this norm. Even unaffiliated
Jews recognize education and family as
synonymous with Jewish values; so should
personal service become known as the indis-

pensable expression of Jewishness. This is
not to say that Gentiles do not practice this
value. Personal service to others is widely
recognized and valued in America. However,

service must be upheld as a norm expected
of Jews. We must teach and work so that
personal service is a field pioneered and
spearheaded by Jews.) Finally, we must move
to establish mitzvah norms in the realm of
service. A Jew is commanded not just to do
individual acts of chesed to others but to set
aside regular time for volunteering and giv-
ing personal service. What is the minimum
number of hours a week, a month or a year
that one must dedicate to nurturing
the equality and uniqueness of
other human beings?

We must create a Jewish culture in
which the final measurement of
“was this life
worthwhile?”
will be: Did one
set aside regular
times for nur-
ting other human
beings? At every
stage of life, the
individual must
nurture himself. In what
professions or paid work
do I give of myself to nur-
ture and enhance the intimate
worth of other human beings? In what
volunteer setting? How can these roles be
expanded? As we develop these norms, I
believe that we will come to the idea that
every Jew should set aside a portion of
his/her life for gemilut chassadim. Perhaps
the emergent norm will be to take a year — or
two — when graduating high school, or after
finishing college or upon reaching the age of
40 — to personally serve and nurture other
human beings in whatever form of need they
have.

Some day, a year or more of personal serv-

ice — be it in the Peace Corps in impover-
ished countries or in the Steinhardt Jewish
Campus Service Corps in an affluent American
Ivy League campus, be it building residences
through Habitat for Humanity or mentoring
mentally disabled in a Rais Eza home, be it
 teaching, nursing, community organizing,
Literacy tutoring full time or part time — will
be the hallmark of a Jewish life. Thus will our
generation match the Talmudic declaration
that exhibiting mercy, modesty, and doing acts
of gemilut chassadim (= personal service!) are
established, characteristic traits of the children
of Abrahams and Sarah. 🌟