

Personal Service: A Central Jewish Norm for Our Time

by RABBI YITZ GREENBERG

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 my own life/time. The Talmud underscored this point by stating that *tzedakah* is done with money whereas *gemilut chassadim* is performed 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. *Gemilut* comes from the verb *ligmol* which means to grant goodness, give overflowing, 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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Jewry is a miniature covenantal community. Judaism is the way of life that teaches behavior which respects and embraces the image of God of every human being. All of humanity also constitutes a world covenantal community, for human beings are bound by the Noahide covenant to partner with God in *tikkun olam*. Historically, Jews have practiced these *chessed* values primarily within the isolated, embattled Jewish community which needed this sustenance. Still, the fundamental respect and obligation to sustain the infinite value, equality and uniqueness of the other is owed to all humanity — for all humans and not just Jews are created and born in the image of God.

One of the glories of modern culture is that it has brought out the image of God of every individual, of every gender, race, religion and culture and put this truth before everyone. Modern culture is in the process of breaking down the fixed categories of insider/outsider, superior/inferior, fellow tribal member/stranger. The combination of increased recognition of human solidarity and the greater affluence, dignity and freedom given to Jews means that the Jewish capacity (and, therefore, the obligation) to nurture the image of God of the other — Jew and non-Jew alike — has grown. Then Jews' actions must extend beyond fulfilling the classic command "the stranger among you shall be [equal] unto you as the home-

born (citizen) and you shall love him as yourself" (*Leviticus, 19:34*). Today, increasingly, there is no stranger — for the media bring the suffering, the plight, the reality, the humanity of the other before us every day. Thus, everyone must recognize the obligation to nurture the other as the image of God.

The Talmud has always upheld the principle that *gemilut chassadim* (i.e., personal giving and nurturing) is the highest form of behavior (outstripping even *tzedakah* or acts of justice). The highest form of *chessed* was defined as giving to the neediest, who cannot repay the kindness. (This was called *chessed shel emet* = true [pure] giving.) The classic example of such behaviors is to do loving acts of caring for the dead (such as ritually purifying and dressing the body, burial, mourning, etc.). However, caring acts of personal service are owed to all human beings. The responsibility for such deeds is derived from the broader primary obligation to serve all living images of God.

In stressing these norms, the Talmud and the later Mussar (ethical) and philosophical traditions also placed great emphasis on the religious duty to walk in God's ways (*Deuteronomy, 28:9*), that is, to imitate God's behavior. 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 capacities 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 obligation of a human being, according to Judaism. After the Holocaust, in which the fundamental dignity of Jews — their infinite value, equality and uniqueness — was denied, degraded and over-ridden, Jews have a special obligation to uphold *tikkun olam* by restoring, nurturing and enhancing the image of God of all in need. This obligation is met through personal service. The service obligation applies legitimately to all needs: economic (the poor); social (the devalued and degraded); cultural (the outsider); physical (the sick, the disabled and the old); psychological (those who need confirmation and healing); mental (those who need teaching); emotional (those who need relationship and love).

There are implications for Jewish communal policy in this analysis. One is that personal service must be brought to the fore as a central value of Jewish tradition and culture. Every synagogue, school and organiza-

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 indispensable 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 *chessed* to others but to set aside regular time for volunteering and giving 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?

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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 nurturing other human beings? At every stage of life, the individual must ask him/herself: In what professions or paid work do I give of myself to nurture and enhance the infinite 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 service — be it in the Peace Corps in impoverished 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 Bais Ezra 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 Abraham and Sarah. 🌸