

PEOPLEHOOD, at its core, is about a connection to other Jews who share our history and our destiny — no matter who they are or where they are, simply because they are Jews. Of course, no one feels a sense of Jewish peoplehood if they don't see themselves as a member of the Jewish people. So underlying peoplehood is an assumption of Jewish identity. And that leads to the central question of Judaism's encounter with modern, open societies: Will Jews, living as fully accepted members of these societies, retain enough of an identity as Jews to generate a feeling of solidarity with the Jewish people worldwide?

Recently, an emerging field of Jewish service and social justice organizations has begun to demonstrate that one successful way to create the ground for Jewish peoplehood in open societies is to engage Jews in work to combat the causes and effects of poverty and injustice.

For nine years, I've been at the head of one such effort, called AVODAH: The Jewish Service Corps. Each year, AVODAH brings 45 people in their early twenties to New York, Chicago, and Washington, D.C., to work full-time at local antipoverty nonprofits. During that year, AVODAH Corps members live communally and participate in ongoing programs of training and study that allow them to build their skills as activists while exploring and deepening the connections between their work on social issues and their Jewish life.

AVODAH makes at least four distinct contributions to Jewish peoplehood: First, the participants have an intense encounter with a wide variety of other Jews because the program is nondenominational and open to Jews of all backgrounds. As a result, Orthodox, Reform, secular, Conservative, Reconstructionist, Renewal, and Jews who shun labels of any kind live together in a setting where the differences between them are offset by the fact that everyone sees the antipoverty work they are doing as connected in an important way to who they are as Jews.

Communal living is a challenging part of our program, but one with precious results: young people with different conceptions of Jewish life learn to see each other as friends and teachers. These experiences offer them a glimpse of a diverse and vibrant Jewish com-

munity that can serve as a model for building broader Jewish connections.

Second, when our participants learn about poverty, they also learn about Jewish poverty and the role of Jewish organizations in addressing poverty both within and beyond the Jewish community. Few 20-year-olds know much about the contributions that Jewish communities make to combat poverty in the U.S., or the philosophy of communal responsibility that underlies these efforts.

Third, through communal living, Jewish study, and a year of service, AVODAH helps to affirm for participants the importance of devoting time, resources, and attention to people beyond oneself. In the U.S. especially, individualism and consumerism are nearly irresistible cultural forces. By creating communities that value solidarity and understand obligations as well as rights, our Corps members strengthen their ability to see themselves as a part of and responsible to something larger than themselves.

Finally, we offer a way for young people to find a version of Jewish life that speaks deeply and compellingly to the issues they care about, without limiting these issues to internal Jewish concerns. In this way, AVODAH and programs like it present a solution to strengthening Jewish life in modern, open societies where young people need not and will not restrict their activities and attention to Jewish spheres alone: experiences deeply rooted in Jewish values that extend beyond the Jewish community to put those values into action in the broader world.

The strategies we use to build Jewish peoplehood are different in the 21st century. They can no longer rely mainly on antisemitism and a sense of shared religious culture to generate feelings of attachment to fellow Jews. Jewish service and social change programs lay the groundwork for appreciating Jewish diversity, help participants see themselves as part of and obligated to a larger group, and present Judaism as a moral force in the lives of individuals and societies. Increasingly popular, these programs have not traditionally been viewed as connected to the project of Jewish peoplehood. The past nine years of my experience with the emerging field of Jewish service suggests that they should be.

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