

## Service that Changes People's Lives: AVODAH by: David Roseann

Each year, 50 college students and recent graduates compete for the opportunity to work demanding jobs on the front lines of urban poverty, live on a subsistence stipend, and attend night classes that connect their social concerns with their Jewish identities. Eighteen of these fifty are chosen as participants in AVODAH: The Jewish Service Corps, a new program that aims to create the interest and capacity within young people to develop serious, life-long involvements with Jewish life and social activism.

AVODAH participants work on urban poverty issues such as hunger, literacy, child welfare and domestic violence as full-time employees at nonprofit organizations in New York City (and soon in other cities as well). But AVODAH is not just another job. In addition to this work, corps members participate every Monday and Wednesday evening in program sessions that include Jewish study, social activist training, reflection, and meetings with a wide variety of local teachers and activists. AVODAH participants also live together during their year of service, forming a community of young people committed to social change, Jewish life, and creating connections between these areas of their life so that each enriches and strengthens the other.

AVODAH is an independent organization, and recruits young people from every Jewish background. Some recent AVODAH participants include:

- Amy Ravis, from Leawood, Kansas, who worked at Genesis, a shelter for battered women sponsored by the New York Jewish Board of Family and Children's Services.
- Brian Fink, from Cleveland, Ohio, who is an advocate at the Urban Justice Center. Brian helps people facing eviction from their homes to avoid homelessness.
- Elizabeth Lamin, an immigrant from the Former Soviet Union, who managed New York City's largest food pantry at the West Side Campaign against Hunger.

### Experiments In Learning

AVODAH, now in its third year, employs a mix of formal and informal educational approaches, all focused around three main areas: social activism, Jewish life and community building. Whenever possible, we attempt to emphasize areas in which all three areas connect.

For example, one Sunday morning, AVODAH participants met to study Jewish teachings connected to aging. We looked at Biblical verses, talmudic passages, and an essay by Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel called "To Grow in Wisdom." Participants compared their own experiences with elders in their family and community with the messages taught by the texts we studied.

Following the study session, AVODAH corps members delivered Rosh Hashanah food packages to homebound elderly people in Manhattan as part of a yearly event coordinated by a multigenerational social service agency called DOROT (one of the AVODAH participants works at DOROT throughout the year). AVODAH participants traveled in teams of two to visit with their elderly neighbors, bringing the morning's teachings from the realm of the theoretical to a very concrete encounter.

After lunch, we met with a community organizer who works on housing issues for an Upper West Side

settlement house, and he spoke about the housing options for people living on fixed incomes in New York. The conversation touched on the history of recent city housing initiatives, the role of religious communities in caring for the elderly, and the role of a community organizer in promoting social change.

Another AVODAH program involved comparing three methods of Holocaust education (art exhibits, ritual seders and the curriculum from Facing History and Ourselves) in an effort to understand how Holocaust education can connect to a broader agenda of resisting emergent oppression and injustice before they become widespread. We viewed pieces of art from the exhibit, performed a part of the Shoah seder, and studied a curriculum unit on the remarkable response of the residents of Billings, Montana, to anti-Semitic incidents in their town.

These programs exemplify several of the core educational principles of AVODAH: multiple methods of learning (text study, human interaction, lecture, ritual, etc.); constant searching for the relevance of Jewish teachings and tradition to issues of the day; and an effort to integrate elements of Jewish life, social activism and community building at every turn.

### Reflection

AVODAH is an intense program, packed full with new information and experiences. Since so much of the learning occurs at worksites and in individual conversations among housemates, we build regular opportunities for reflection into the schedule. Reflection sessions provide participants with a chance to pause and consider the lessons they are learning, to articulate questions and observations with the help of other members of the group, and to synthesize the many connections made between their study and their service.

As we have experimented with different techniques for reflection, several general principles have emerged:

1. There are many different forms of reflection: We have found that just as people have different learning styles and styles of expression, people have different styles of reflection. Consequently, AVODAH offers multiple methods for reflection such as journal-writing, structured discussion, art projects, dramatic performance, debates, letters to the editor, video production, and presentations to outside groups. Sometimes the best reflection comes from a pointed question asked at the beginning of a service project or a planning meeting, such as: "What will have changed as a result of our work and what will remain unchanged?"
2. It's hard to teach what you don't know. The best facilitators of reflection are people who regularly practice reflection themselves.
3. The best reflection is a mix of "processing," sharing, and critical assessment. While the first two tend to make participants feel more settled and comfortable, the third – critical assessment – can often raise feelings of frustration and unease. That's perfect. Reflection should make us aware of things that need to change, and change is frightening. On the practical level, it's important to remember that it's not necessarily a bad reflection session if people leave feeling unsettled.
4. Celebrations after a program or project are an excellent opportunity to reflect on what's been accomplished, while also rewarding participants and having good fun. Not all reflections is calm and deliberate!
5. Many of the faculty at local schools and college campuses are involved in facilitating student reflection, some of them in the context of service-learning programs. Find out who is teaching service learning

some of them in the context of service-learning programs. Find out who is teaching service learning courses and learn best reflection practices from them.

6. Although it seems like something we all do naturally, good reflection is a skill that requires study and practice. Reflection sessions tacked onto programs without sufficient thought are likely to fail. When this happens, bad reflection experiences can lead people to reject the importance of reflection. We have found it worthwhile to take the time necessary for integrating good reflection into programs.
7. Finally, reflection is not only a tool for social justice work and community building. In many ways, the practice of reflection is itself a move towards positive social change and stronger community ties.

### Multiple Gateways

Along with structured reflection sessions, AVODAH provides materials throughout the year to spark spontaneous reflection and learning. Every week, our participants receive a piece of paper with a Jewish teaching on social justice on one side and something connected to community life or events in New York City on the other. We don't study these sheets as a group, we simply make them available to participants and encourage them to use them in whatever way they can. Several people report that the sheets make excellent subway reading. One person began weekly lunchtime study sessions with a colleague at work.

A large collection of the Jewish teachings AVODAH has put together -- along with information about the program, bios of our participants, and a description of the work they do -- can be found on our website at [www.avodah.net](http://www.avodah.net).

AVODAH is still very much a work in progress. But our efforts to find ways of engaging young people in sustained commitments to social activism and Jewish life have begun to bear fruit. As we expand the program in the years ahead, we hope to document and pass along some of our best practices to educators in the Jewish community and the field of service learning.

Because the program is just in its third year, it is difficult to tell what long-term affects it will have on participants. However, information gathered from interviews with alumni every year indicate that many are offered jobs at the organizations where they work during their year in AVODAH. Some go off to graduate school (including programs in anthropology, social work, law, and medicine). Some have taken jobs that focus on increasing the Jewish community's involvement in social issues, including two who have worked as TZEDEK Hillel coordinators on college campuses.

Additionally, in an independent evaluation commissioned by AVODAH, Dr. Jessica Bloom wrote that "(AVODAH's) group living arrangement has given the participants a community that endures beyond the year in AVODAH. As such, it provides them with an ongoing link between Judaism and social justice. Each participant has internalized and shared this link, and can call upon one another in an ongoing manner to continue the discussion of links and consideration of how to incorporate them into their ongoing work. As such, AVODAH creates a community dedicated perhaps for a lifetime to the link between Judaism and social justice."

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*Rabbi David Rosen is the Executive Director of AVODAH: The Jewish Service Corps. Those interested in finding out more about AVODAH's approach to integrating social activism, Jewish study, and*

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*community building should contact the organization at (212) 545-7759. Information is also available online at [www.avodah.net](http://www.avodah.net).*