Jewish service-learning is a hot topic, and rightly so. Funders, policy makers and academics have noticed a groundswell of activism and energy in the Jewish world, especially among young people, and have hopped on board. This has led to an expansion of service-learning opportunities for young Jews. This is a good thing.

But what are the goals of service-learning? Service-learning is, obviously, related to service, and dependent on it, but they are not the same thing. The goal of service is to benefit the person or community served. The goal of service-learning is, in addition to the service performed, some kind of learning from the experience. The person who is doing the service ought to undergo some growth or beneficial development. What can we say about that growth?

To begin, we want that growth to be more than the acquisition of knowledge or skills. It has to be thought about in terms of aspects of character, or “dispositions.” We may want people engaged in service-learning to know certain things, and to learn how to do certain things, but beyond that, we want them to become certain kinds of people.

What kinds of people? I tried to think about this question for the purpose of an article recently published* in a special issue of the Journal of Jewish Communal Service, using the biblical scholarship of James Kugel as a platform for my inquiry. (The entire issue was devoted to Jewish service-learning, and was created through a collaboration with Repair the World.) That may seem like an odd approach to the question, but Kugel has some interesting things to say about the idea of avodat Hashem, the service of God. Working through Kugel’s idea of avodat Hashem opened the door to thinking about service more generally.

Certain attributes emerge as particularly significant.

First, service-humility. These days, the world of non-profit management focuses not merely on doing good, but on solving problems. If we want to see significant and enduring change in the world, we have to develop strategies that take responsibility for that change and that have a reasonable shot at achieving it, in whole or in part. This makes sense. But on the other hand, this kind of gung-ho, problem-solving attitude can lead to a kind of arrogance about our roles. So, as a counter-balance, we might want to encourage a deep and abiding humility in the face of deep and abiding social problems, the kind of humility that we associate not with generating solutions but simply with doing God’s will in the world.

Second, service-discipline. We rightfully celebrate lives of moral heroism, extraordinary deeds of courage or sacrifice. Those examples give us language to articulate important values.
But they may also distract us from other kinds of service, non-heroic, small-scale work in the world. This kind of service is not characterized by great feats of valor. It is characterized by fidelity, by showing up every day, by constancy and consistency.

A Hillel director recently told me, with pride, about the student who created a soup kitchen to meet a particular need, and the way that that student has been able to enlist other students in order to sustain the project. The Hillel director is not proud of him because of his heroism, or his social innovation. The student displayed initiative and leadership, but there is nothing particularly innovative about a soup kitchen, and no one imagines that this effort is going to solve the social problem of hunger! Instead, she is proud of him because of his commitment to service, to being at the soup kitchen every Wednesday night, to serving the homeless with respect and dignity. The virtue that he displays, and that we might want to cultivate in service-learning across the board, is what we might call “service-discipline.”

Finally, service-wisdom. The paradigmatic dilemma of service-learning is this: what is good for the learner is not necessarily good for the person or community served. In fact, the history of service is full of well-intentioned efforts to help that have gone awry. We have to acknowledge that the moral path is not always a clear one, that frequently our choices require not fortitude and heroism but careful calibration of the effects of our actions in order to choose the best way forward.

But this is not only a matter of the practical difficulties of doing good in the world. Engaging in service means, at one level, submission: we submit our will and our desires to the will of the Other or to the greater good. There is great nobility in this, and great satisfaction. But the submission of will must not entail a submission of intellect. Instead, paradoxically, we must simultaneously submit our will and retain our capacity for independent and critical judgment. For theists, we must simultaneously do what God wants us to do in the world, and always pursue our own understanding of what we believe God actually wants us to do in the world. We might call this capacity “service-wisdom,” the third dispositional goal of service-learning.

Are these three dispositions the only goals of service-learning? Surely not. But our service-learning projects and programs will benefit, I think, if we can think more clearly about our goals, and in particular, if we can think about those goals in dispositional terms. Then we can ask: In what ways are our service-learning programs designed to cultivate these dispositional goals, and how well are they achieving those goals, and how might they do that more effectively?

* The PDF of this article is available for download from the Mandel Center’s website. This article is disseminated with the permission of the Jewish Communal Service Association, publishers of the Journal of Jewish Communal Service.

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