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VOLUNTEERISM AND JUDAISM

It is to the everlasting credit of the Jewish People that they did not wait for the call of the President of the United States to become involved in volunteerism.

What is a volunteer? The dictionary defines a volunteer as a person who offers himself for a service without an obligation to do so. Some people look upon a volunteer as a person who sees a task that must be done and goes ahead and does it. To other people volunteers are people who do work without being paid for it. However, the definition I like best is the one that describes a volunteer as a person who chooses to act in recognition of a need, with a feeling of social responsibility, with no concern of being paid and going beyond the needs or concern for his or her feeling of well-being.

That which is so impressive in the Judaic teaching is the concept of volunteerism. The Bible and Judaic teachings do not specifically talk of volunteers, nor do they identify who is a volunteer. But let us go back several thousand years and take a closer look. Moses, a precursor of Jewish thought and action was a very early volunteer. The task he saw, and that had to be done, was to lead the Hebrew tribes out of Egypt and out of slavery. He may have been a reluctant volunteer, but the need was greater than his reluctance, and so he spent forty years in accomplishing what he set out to do.

Our Jewish Teachings urge us to perform Maasim Tovim (Good Acts). These acts take the form of Rachmanut (Mercy or Pity), Tsedakah (which broadly means Charity, but more to the point means Right or Just) and Gemilut Chassadim (Acts of Loving Kindness), Rachmanut, or Rachmonos, which perhaps, is the more familiar pronunciation, is what and how we feel when we are suffering in any form. We react with a tear in our eye or a lump in our throat. We are compelled to do something to relieve this suffering.

Tsedakah, in the strictest sense, does not mean charity. It is a duty incumbent on the Jew who is in a position to give to do so. On the other hand, it is "just" and a "right" for the Jew who does the receiving Tsedakah, in a way of thinking, is not only the giving of alms. It is also the giving of one's self; the giving of time; the giving of knowledge; the giving of ability and experience.

Above all, it is the willingness to become involved. This giving and involvement are Gemilut Chassadim, Acts of Loving Kindness.

One may recall the apocryphal tale that tells of the poor man who used to receive the cast-off clothing of a Rothschild. While walking, one day, this poor man saw Rothschild smoking a cigar and letting the ashes fall on the front of his coat. The needy man brushed the ashes from the front of Rothschild's coat and chidingly said, "Please be more careful of my clothing". Only in Judaism does this tale become plausible.

The ability to help others, and incidentally oneself, excludes no one. The rich or poor, the young or old, the weak or strong, all can practice Tsedakah. History is full of people and incidents of Gemilut Chassadim. We mentioned Moses, but look upon the Prophets of ancient Israel. Consider the deeds they volunteered to do on behalf of their people. Joel who slew Sisera, the Canaanite-General, in order to save her people; Ruth, who refused to leave Naomi, and so became a forebear of King David; Samuel, the mentor of Kings; Isaiah, Jeremiah and Ezekiel, and so many more. All saw a task that had to be done then went ahead and did it.

Maasim Tovim did not end with our Prophets. Our earliest Rabbis, those who laid the foundations of today's Judaism, all were volunteers. To support themselves and their families, they became craftsmen of one sort or another. Nevertheless, they contributed their time and wisdom to the writing, commentary and the establishment of Halakah.

In more contemporary times, twenty-three Sephardim, escaping from the Inquisition in Brazil, were landed at New Amsterdam from the French vessel, St. Charles. They were not welcomed by the colonists there. In addition, they were being sued for the passage fees by the captain of the ship. Luckily for them, Jacob Barsimon, a Jewish agent for the Dutch West Indies Company, arrived just days ahead of the twenty-three. He became their patron and fought for their right to remain and helped to alleviate their financial problems. Men like Barsimon, Asher Levy, Salvador Dandrada, David Frera, and others, insisted on performing their military duties. Their insistence on this and on other rights and privileges, made it possible for a future five and a half million Jews to reside here in

peace and equality.

Later on, the volunteering of their services by other Jews to this nation, reflected to the benefits and to the credit of their people. Francis Salvador was the first Jewish soldier to die in the Revolution; Abigail Minis gave supplies to the Continental Army without hope of payment; Benjamin Nones became an officer in the legendary "Hebrew Company". These were people who, through their volunteer services, proved that Jews were desirable citizens of this new nation.

Good Deeds are not restricted to men nor to the military. In 1781, a daughter was born to Michael Gratz, an immigrant from Germany. She was beautiful and devout. Her character was so striking that Sir Walter Scott, the English writer, fashioned his Rebecca of York, in "Ivanhoe", after Rebecca Gratz. Although born to wealth, she devoted a great deal of her time and effort to help found the Philadelphia Orphans Home, the Female Hebrew Benevolent Society, the Jewish Foster Homes and the Hebrew Sunday School Society of Philadelphia.

Almost a hundred years later, in 1867, another famous Jewish woman was born. Although born to riches and raised in luxury, she devoted her life to relieving the poor and the sick. Most of this activity centered in the Lower East Side of New York City. She was instrumental in establishing the Henry Street Settlement House and a visiting nurse service. Her activities in part, led to the passing of the Child Labor Laws and a Children's Court. The playground she built in the yard of the Henry Street Settlement House became the forerunner of the New York Playground System. Her name, Lillian Wald!

In the very early twentieth century, thousands of Jewish female immigrants joined the labor forces. They worked for a wage that barely was enough to keep body and soul together. They worked under the worst possible conditions. There was no drinking water, no air, no heat in the winter and light so poor it ruined their eyesight. These working conditions menaced their health and physical well-being. Then women like Clara Lemlich, Rose Schneiderman, Pauline Newman, Fannie Cohen and Bessie Abramowitz, arose in the ranks of labor to lead the fight against this inhumanity. They were beaten by goons and hounded by their employers, but they

prevailed in bringing about improved pay and working conditions.

The number of Jewish Voluntary organizations is truly great, and the number of involved men and women runs into hundreds of thousands. An outstanding example of this involvement is that of Henrietta Szold. Henrietta Szold joined Hadassah in 1907. Her efforts and devotion to attaining the goals of Hadassah helped to a very great degree in its accomplishments. Hadassah established hospitals, nurses' training schools, visiting nurse services, school lunches, playgrounds, malaria control units and a myriad of other services.

Another volunteer activist was Rebecca Kohut. She was born in Slovakia in 1864 and died in the United States in 1951. At one time she headed the Young Women's Hebrew Association's Employment Bureau. She had a special competence in the problems of the unemployed, and so was appointed to the Federal Employment Clearing House. Throughout her life, she was concerned with vocational services for young people and with Jewish Social Research.

Another noteworthy was Mary Fels, the wife of Joseph Fels, who founded the Fels Soap industry. She helped her husband in his wide-spread philanthropic activities. After his death, she organized the Joseph Fels Foundation to advance human welfare, through education. She also worked to advance the exchange of culture and ideas between nations, especially the United States and Eretz Yisrael.

Emma Lazarus awakened to her Jewish heritage by George Elliot's book, Daniel Deronda, became actively involved in Jewish immigration affairs. She did relief work among Jewish refugee immigrants on Ward's Island in New York. She protected them from virulent anti-semitic attacks and proclaimed them as pioneers of progress. Of her many Jewish writings, perhaps the best known is "The New Colossus". This poem was engraved on a plaque and affixed to the pedestal of the Statue of Liberty. It welcomed Europe's "huddled masses yearning to breathe free".

So it went, on and on. The immigrants to America from 1880 onward, gave of themselves in many volunteer endeavors. This was done not only to better themselves, but to lend a helping hand to their neighbors whoever they might be. There was the Chevra Kadesha, those concerned volunteers who prepared the dead for eternal sleep. There were the Chevras, or Benevolent Societies, formed to assist the sick and the helpless. There were the volunteers active in Settlement Houses, they

who set examples of behavior, who taught the "greenies" to speak, read and write English. There were the Club Leaders who saw to it that the young were led down the proper paths to adulthood. There were men like Epstein, the noted sculptor, who gave of his time to teach art to the people of the Lower East Side.

In 1843, eleven men, all immigrants from Germany, gathered at the Sinsheimer Cafe in the Lower East Side of New York. They saw the need of "uniting Israelites in the work of promoting their highest interests and those of humanity". This gathering resulted in founding an outstanding Jewish organization. Originally known as "Bundes-Brueder", it evolved into the Independent Order of B'nai Brith. The original eleven grew into a world-wide organization with thousands of members. It is not the size of Bnai Brith that is so impressive, but what they do. When God called to Abraham, Abraham responded "Hineni", here am I. That is the response of thousands of Bnai Brith men and women through their Community Volunteer Services. They concern themselves with every need that arises regardless as to whether it is Political, Social or Economic. Their's is a manifestation of one human's concern for another human.

In Jewish history, many other people appeared on the stage of life. Other people laid foundations for future generations to build upon. Would there have been a modern Israel without Theodore Herzl or Max Nordau? Would there have been green farms or extensive orchards without the pioneers who drained swamps and planted the trees? Of course, there were the Rothschilds and Sir Moses Montefiore to help with their capital, but it was the labor and lives of the pioneers that spelled success.

Let us come closer to home and take a look at an American Phenomenon. When East European Jews began to immigrate to America, they settled, to a great extent, in the Lower East Side of New York. They were crowded into tenements with few sanitary features. In fact, the crowding of over 1700 people per acre of space was greater than that of Bombay, India, with 760 people per acre. Although the German's Jewish cousins of these immigrants looked askance at the newcomers, they did not abandon them or sever their ties to them. Philanthropists like the Gimbels, the Schiffs and the Seligmans, helped with their money. In addition, Louis Marshall, Rabbi Wise and Jacob Riis, with their social and legal "know-how", helped fashion the ladder which the immigrants used to climb out of the Ghetto.

We must not forget the vast wealth of brains and ability that the immigrants possessed and used to help themselves and others. We have pointed out some of the volunteers who helped shape society. We now ask you to take a look at yourself and see if you recognize their feelings in yourself. If you do, you must know that there are things in you that you can give. Why not give it? Besides the Jewish Ys and Centers the Retired Senior Volunteer Program is here to help you find the proper niche for yourself. The road you will travel runs in two directions. Your helping others will reward you beyond anything you can visualize.