

The Importance of Community Service

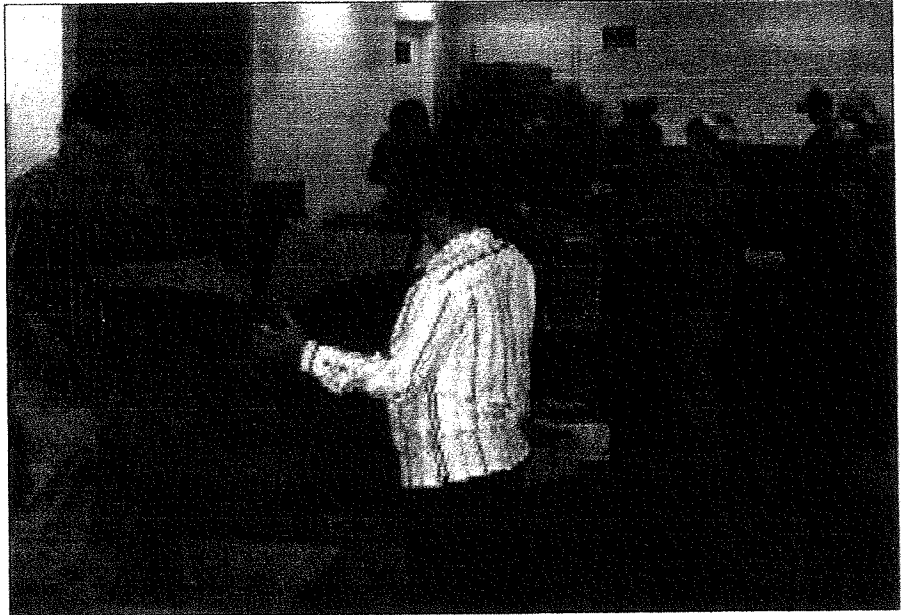
David M. Beresh

When I was a freshman at the Yeshivah of Flatbush High School and was forced to hand in 40 hours of community service for the year, I went to my grandma's synagogue, Congregation B'nai Yosef, to help clean up the main sanctuary each Sunday morning from 9-11:30 am. I brought all the prayer books and Bibles from inside the sanctuary to the bookshelves in the hallway (only to have all that work undone by the following Sunday). The labor was tedious, lonely, and backbreaking. My grandma recorded my hours each week for about a month on her special bulletin board.

By the end of the semester when I asked for the letter signifying that I had completed my hours, she got out her calculator and added each date. We then arrived at the total of 20.5 hours, far below the required 40 hours for the year. When I hinted to her that it was okay to 'round up' a little, she adamantly refused to conform with this deceitful practice and made sure that I did the remainder of my hours elsewhere. I was furious at my 'uncool' grandma.

Earlier that same year, my father arranged it with the Youth Minyan of Sephardic Synagogue *not* to grant me any community service hours for the *hazzanut*, Torah reading, and other volunteering that I had already been doing for the synagogue many years prior to this. I was not happy with my father's arrangement because I easily could have received all 40 hours (in an honest way) if I were just to factor in all the hours I spent practicing to sing Torah portions throughout the week on my own time.

My father's rationale was that since he brought me up to believe it



was my obligation to be involved in all aspects of synagogue services, it would be wrong to take credit for it for the community service requirement at the school. I respected that point of view at the time, because I knew he was right. Besides, it was time to get involved in new things.

At that point, I was forced to look elsewhere to find ways to earn a couple of more hours to complete my quota of 40 hours. Then I realized that the opportunities to get involved were literally endless. There were dozens of opportunities to get involved in services—and that was just on one school bulletin board!

The opportunities I recall seeing on that board (I recall these in particular, because these are the ones that I chose to get involved in throughout high school) were as follows:

- *Hallot* (Shabbat bread) deliveries each Friday with the Sephardic Community Center—students would walk to the Ahi Ezer Senior Residences to hand-deliver

Shabbat meals and *hallot* to senior citizens. Some of our seniors waited all week for us to come and visit!

- *Bikur Holim*, which literally means visiting the sick at hospitals or old age homes throughout the community. I personally think that there is no *hesed* (acts of loving kindness) greater than this one. You can make a hospital patient's day when you visit them.
- Chinese Auction (school or any other organization)—you can volunteer your time on behalf of the school on, or even before, the auction night. This helps the organization tremendously and it could be a lot of fun in the process
- Holiday Packaging—before each holiday, many people would get together in an assembly line and package meals for either holiday dinners, *Mishloah Manot* (Purim packaging), or *Ma'ot Hittim* (Passover packaging). Packaging could be a daunting task, but when the tasks are split amongst

Continued on page 14

Pirkei...

have to be set out before us. They should be guided by our own inspiration. A person should know himself well enough to know just what his needs are and what he must say to his G-d. The Hebrew word for "pray" (*his-palai*) is reflexive, meaning literally to pray to oneself. When we pray we turn inward as much as out. We touch our souls and allow them to touch our G-d. We communicate not only with the G-d outside of ourselves, but equally with that small piece of G-dliness within.

Thus, originally prayer was as it should be—inspira-

"G-d hears our thoughts and prayers, and the lines of communication are open."

tional, reflecting what each individual knew he or she had to express at that moment. However, as the generations wore on, people became less in touch with themselves and their needs. They lacked the self-awareness to discover G-d wholly on their own. And so, the Sages found it necessary to institutionalize the prayers. We could no longer formulate the prayers ourselves, and so the Sages drew up the outline. Prayer became formalized. We were given the perfect—if standardized—formula for what to ask G-d, when to ask, and how to ask.

Thus, in a way we are blessed to have been handed such structure in our prayers. Yet the original intention should not be missed. Jewish law enjoins us to add our own words in the appropriate places in our prayers (Shulchan Aruch OC 119:1). We should want to add a little, to speak in our own tongue and include G-d in our daily hopes and fears. There are Hassidim who make it a practice to speak to G-d during the course of their days, at any time and in their own language. This might seem intimidating to many of us—probably for fear that G-d might really be listening. In a way it's comforting to know G-d is there with us—but in many ways, it's frightening. G-d might be in the synagogue and study hall, but to think that He's there with us at all times, paying attention to our every word and thought—that is not easy to live with. But whether or not we wish to be reminded of this reality does not alter the facts. For better or worse G-d is before us. G-d hears our thoughts and prayers, and the lines of communication are open. We must only be prepared to use them. □

The Importance...

many people, a lot gets accomplished in a much shorter time frame.

- Peer Tutoring—you can donate some of your time to help a classmate in a subject that he/she needs help in. When you are able to teach a friend, your classmate won't forget this favor and it helps you as well.
- Little League Coaching—you can volunteer to coach a sports team in your community. Teaching children how to play sports is not only fun for them, but it is healthy and can improve their self-esteem.

The activities mentioned are just a handful of the more popular things that students do to earn their community service hours. It was amazing to see how much fun it was to get involved in *hesed* work, especially when joined with a lot of friends. Not only does it serve as an opportunity to help those in your community, but it also allows you to meet new friends and strengthen existing relationships in an extremely positive and warm environment. Opportunities like this don't happen everyday.

Long after high school, I still see my friends and I am fully involved in community service activities. These include fund-raising for our synagogue, organizations, bake sales, Big Brother/Big Sister and especially SBH Futures (a post-high school age organization that organizes a full variety of *hesed*, hospital visiting, 'Sunday Funday,' holiday food packing, Ahi Ezer parties and *sebets* (Shabbat lunch or party after *Musaf*), and lectures. It is interesting to note that it is not rare to see individuals who donate more hours to the community after high school than they did while they were under the high school obligation.

I think that it is very important for high school students to take advantage of the community service obligation. I hate it when I see students getting 40 hours for 5 or 10 hours worth of 'work' at community events. Not only are students cheating school policy, they are also robbing themselves of having the ability to give back to society in very positive and meaningful ways. It is my hope that after reading this, high school students will realize that the policy of mandatory community service was instituted for their own good and to offer them 'an excuse' to take a break from their vigorous studies and help them get involved in fulfilling and meaningful real-life activities.

Grandma definitely taught me well!

There are three factors that currently allow the world to continue and exist: The Torah, the Service, and the Deeds of Hesed (acts of loving kindness).— Ethics of Our Fathers (1:2). □

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