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## A day of tikun olam from the 'Heart'

by **Michele Alperin**  
NJNJ Contributing Writer

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About 150 area teens and preteens chose to spend a recent Sunday afternoon repairing the world.

They were not alone; across the Jewish world, more than 11,000 Jewish teens took part in J-Serve, the International Day of Jewish Youth Service, most on April 17. Sponsored this year in partnership with Repair the World, Youth Service America, and BBYO, it is a day when youth perform mitzvot and acts of *tzedaka* to "give back" in their communities.

The youngsters came to Solomon Schechter Day School of Greater Monmouth County in Marlboro for the program, organized locally on April 10 by Jewish Federation in the Heart of New Jersey. Their reasons for participating were varied; besides wanting to fulfill the Jewish ideal of "*tikun olam*" — repairing the world — they came to join with friends, fulfill synagogue or school mitzva requirements, socialize, and just have fun.

The young volunteers chose one or two projects from an array of possibilities, all on site except for a group who went to a local synagogue to help bury books and religious objects in accordance with Jewish law.

Options at the school included reading Jewish-themed books to and doing Passover crafts with small children at a PJ Library area, creating *tzedaka* boxes for the Jewish Family Service agencies in Middlesex and Monmouth counties, writing letters to Israeli soldiers, and making placemats for homebound kosher meals-on-wheels clients.

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Sarah Cehelyk, left, and her friend work together on a blanket for Ronald McDonald House.

*Photos by Michele Alperin*

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Participants also made phone calls soliciting funds to further federation's community work; they raised over \$10,600 via 125 gifts.

Mia Reingold, 17, a Marlboro resident and a member of the Yad B'Yad BBG chapter and membership vice president of the BBYO region, explained that repairing the world is part of her youth group's mission, which is why many of them came to J-Serve.

Brianna Cohen, a sixth-grader, was there because students at her religious school at Temple B'nai Shalom in East Brunswick are assigned to perform six mitzva projects during the year. "My friends and I thought it would be fun, and it is a good opportunity to meet new people," she said.

Fifth-year J-Serve participant and Scotch Plains resident Tori Sciara of T'sahal BBYO told *NJJN*, "J-Serve is incredibly important to me because it shows how when the Jewish people come together, we can provide a service to the groups around us. We're able to show that we're stronger together, and that every person, no matter their age, can help those around them, whether they be a Jewish person or not."

Sixth-grader Jack Farber and 10th-grader Sarah Cehelyk, both of East Brunswick, were busy assembling colored squares into quilts for Ronald McDonald House, which houses families with seriously ill children being treated in local hospitals.

They both were inspired to make that choice by personal experiences.

Sarah came with a friend with special needs whom she visits weekly as a volunteer with Friendship Circle, which recruits teens to support youngsters with special needs. As she was fashioning her blanket, Sarah said, "In the moment it feels like sewing random pieces of cloth, but knowing in the long run that it's going to make someone's life better — it makes me feel good that I took the time out from my day to do it."

Jack, who has a brother with special needs, said, "It was a good idea to help other kids with what my brother is facing."

Another J-Serve mitzva had teens meeting with Holocaust survivors, residents of the Monroe senior communities, as they told their stories of suffering and endurance.

Paulette Wegh told her harrowing experiences as a child in Nazi-occupied France during World War II; the teens listened, rapt, and many chose to stay on to hear the testimony of Edith Reich and Helen Borenstein rather than move on to a different activity.

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Sawyer Malkin, a member of Freehold Jewish Center, was among the 14 kids who traveled to Congregation Beth Ohr in Old Bridge, where they lent a hand burying dozens of boxes of holy books, prayer shawls, and phylacteries in accordance with halachic, or Jewish legal, guidelines. The teens cleared out the congregation's basement, loaded boxes on a bus, unloaded and placed them in a large hole at the cemetery, and took turns tossing dirt on them.

"It felt good to help another synagogue," Sawyer said.

At the burial, when Jeremy Ganes told the Beth Ohr congregants there that his great-grandparents had belonged to the synagogue, they quickly told him that they had been mainstays and that their passing "left a hole in our congregation."

Palmer Stolly, a junior at Monroe Township High School and a member of East Brunswick AZA, said of his three years of experience at J-Serve: "It's important to give back to the community.... You shouldn't be someone who just lives and takes and takes; you should give back as much as you take."

Federation president Mitch Frumkin said the afternoon of service was a huge opportunity to involve young people in the community and impart an understanding of the value of doing deeds of kindness and giving back. "They work together, see what it is like to have friends of similar backgrounds, and what comes out of that is the evolution of future Jewish leaders in the Jewish community," he said.

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## 'Teach them how to be better people'

AT THE J-SERVE event, two Israeli soldiers shared memorable experiences of their service in the Israeli army — and what they see as the essential ideals of the Israel Defense Forces.

Itai and Ilana (their last names are withheld for security reasons) were brought to the event by StandWithUs, an educational nonprofit "dedicated to informing the public about Israel and to combating the extremism and anti-Semitism that often distorts the issues." J-Serve was sponsored locally by Jewish Federation in the Heart of NJ.

Itai told of his involvement as part of the unit tracking down the murderers of the Fogel family in the Jewish settlement of Itamar in the West Bank in March 2011. Three days into the search, the soldiers were frustrated and sleep-deprived and found themselves in a hostile village. They knocked on the door of a house suspected of harboring either the Fogels's killers or weapons. What they saw when the door opened was a mother with a crying baby. "Hearing a baby crying made me stop to think how the whole situation was forced on us all," Itai said. "None of us wanted to be there, not me, not my soldiers, not the innocent Palestinian baby crying."



**Itai: "None of us wanted to be there."**

Ilana, in charge of the welfare of 1,800 combat troops, recalled watching as an army cook quietly handed a soldier a bag of food. When she visited his family, headed by a single mother, she found that “the basic things I take for granted at my house were missing in his.” Recognizing that the soldier couldn’t do his job if he were constantly worried about his family’s welfare, Ilana saw to it that the army supplied them with food, furniture, and appliances.



**Ilana: “Give back to their community.”**

“When they finish the army, these 18-year-olds will be adults who will lead Israeli society,” Ilana said. “This is the opportunity to teach them how to be better people, how to be responsible for somebody other than themselves, how to care about other people, how to give back to their community, how to have each other’s backs.”

In his talk, Itai had mentioned that his girlfriend and his brother were also called up during the 2014 Israel-Gaza conflict — and that he had actually proposed to her during that difficult time. Later in the presentation, Ilana surprised the young crowd: “Remember the girlfriend Itai proposed to in Gaza? That was me.”

The StandWithUs duo, it turned out, are husband and wife.

But, Ilana said, her happiness at getting engaged was tempered by the worries of her wartime job — monitoring wounded and killed soldiers. “I could see exactly where [Itai] was on the monitor in the information room, and I was hoping that I didn’t hear his name.” — MICHELE ALPERIN