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Volunteering "With" and Not "For"

January 14, 2017 by Howard Blas

It is a common practice for middle- and high-school children to "do" community service. Through their work with people who are elderly, homeless or poor or who have disabilities, students learn empathy and compassion for those "less fortunate," and they learn to better appreciate what they have. Bar- and bat-mitzvah age students are similarly encouraged to complete a "mitzvah project". Now that they are becoming Jewish adults, they are expected to take greater responsibility for fellow humans. While helping others and showing lovingkindness is important, it may inadvertently come at cost. The "doer" of the kind act may come to view the "recipient" as being in a "lower," perhaps even pitiable position. The following story suggests it may be time for a new approach to how we teach our children about chesed, "doing mitzvahs" and voluntarism.

Several years ago, I was asked to represent the Jewish disabilities inclusion camping program I direct at a "Mitzvah Fair" for a large synagogue religious school. I was to sit at a table with literature and slides on my computer, showing the children with Down syndrome, autism, cerebral palsy and other disabilities having fun at camp. The children would walk the aisles and learn about my program, as well as such fine US- and Israel-based programs, which help people "in need." After the fair, children would decide which organizations they would elect to get more involved with in conjunction with their bar/bat mitzvah. They might decide to ask guests to donate money, or they might elect to work directly with the organization and its participants.

Something didn't feel right about this approach. There was something uncomfortable about neurotypical students raising money for or "helping" children with disabilities. I was picturing well-intentioned 7th graders planning a Purim carnival for children with disabilities, or perhaps taking them on a special outing.

It didn't sit right. I kept hearing in my head the title of an op-ed written by Jewish comedian and educator, Pamela Rae Schuller, who happens to have Tourette's syndrome. Her article is entitled, "I'm Not Your Mitzvah Project." Were the campers inadvertently becoming "Mitzvah Projects?"

I called a few parents of my campers for input. Was I overacting? Perhaps the students were simply doing a "good thing?" The parents also felt uncomfortable with the Hebrew school students doing something FOR their children. They suggested that, perhaps a better, more collaborative approach is for a group of children without disabilities (the Hebrew School children) and a group of children with disabilities (their children), get together to jointly "do good" for an organization that "does good." Through their joint efforts they would get to know each other and form relationships. While members of the two groups would clearly have differences, they would also have a lot in common. Everyone would benefit from the experience.

This joint venture would replicate the approach and experience we have been having at camp for decades through various buddy and peer mentoring programs. While the older neurotypical campers, ages 14 to 16,

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have the opportunity to interact on a daily basis with campers with disabilities, it is not by “volunteering for;” rather, it is through “doing an activity with”—like swimming, sports, baking challah or making up rooms in the guest house. They work, play, laugh, and get to know each other—as people—with both strengths and weaknesses.

Volunteering together is a wonderful way for people of all abilities to get to know each other. And to do good TOGETHER!

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