

# Expanding Faith

*Emily Goldberg*

I WAS RAISED IN A TIGHT-KNIT JEWISH COMMUNITY.

So it would probably seem surprising that some of my greatest friends are evangelical Christians. But going to high school for several years in South Florida, I expanded my social circle and created unique friendships. While our religious backgrounds may differ drastically, my Christian friends and I share many of the same values that are derived from our respective faiths. Although we may be different, we reached the same general conclusion: we all want to make the world a better place.

In Judaism, we promote the ethical concept of *tikkun olam*, or repairing the world. From activities varying from recycling campaigns to canned food collections, Jews have certainly left an impact in their respective communities while aiming to improve them. Through any synagogue or Jewish community center, one is always able to participate in a local charity project; Judaism strives to be an *or la-goyim*, a light to the other nations, through these daily acts of kindness. The social action that we participate in, however, seems limited to our local communities.

Christianity, on the other hand, seems to promote a more universal concept of *tikkun olam*. Every year, thousands of peace activists represent their respective churches all over the world to participate in *mission trips*, or faith-based programs to serve and enlighten others. From fundraising months in advance to leading educational seminars and receiving various vaccinations and medications, Christians diligently prepare for these mission trips. Summer after summer, I hear life-changing stories from my friends who traveled to underdeveloped areas like Tanzania, Haiti, and Uganda in order to share their faith and strengthen the Christian communities there. Rather than tanning on beaches or vacationing, my evangelical friends spend their summers taking their faith overseas.

Since the underlying goal of every mission trip involves proselytization, Bible studies, and evangelism, it was not surprising to discover that my own synagogue does not offer such programs. And yet, while the values of Judaism do not promote instant conversions, direct preaching, and “saving” the souls of others, we are obligated, as Jews, to be an *or la-goyim*; how can we emit the light in our faith if we limit ourselves to our local cities?

I have gained the utmost respect and pride for my faithful friends who have dared to spread their religious beliefs beyond the comfort of their own homes, churches, and communities. Although the missions of evangelical Christianity are different than those of Judaism, the missionaries admired today are the ones who developed their strong faith in underdeveloped countries. Generally, the people who have left the greatest impacts on our society were raised in faithful homes, believing that the concept of social action is directly derived from the Bible.

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The concept of faith-based outreach has always been always avoided in Judaism, especially since the rise of successful Christian mission trips. Throughout history, our faith has been threatened because of our enemies. Wars, inquisitions, and genocide have jeopardized the lives of our innocent Jewish ancestors; they were forbidden from publicly practicing our religion for years at a time. After surviving these horrifying acts of anti-Semitism and faith-deprivation, Jews focused on forming and preserving tight-knit religious communities in order to keep their faith alive. Today, the biggest threat to our faith is the influence of evangelism and proselytism; young Jews are approached by active missionaries on a daily basis. Perhaps out of genuine disapproval for the goals and underlying values of Christian mission trips, we discourage the overall concept of outreach ourselves. While these strong views still exist in our religion today, I hope to see a change in our forms of social action.

I believe that the world could truly benefit from sharing and growing in different faiths. In order to counteract the negative stereotypes that exist

today, Jews should be not only permitted, but also encouraged to take spiritual practices to a new level. If we are obligated to be the new light unto the nations, then shouldn't we be visiting these other nations? Rather than saving souls, we can take our values beyond the boundaries of our local neighborhoods and rebuild the underdeveloped communities in the world. By engaging in activities like visiting orphanages, building facilities, preparing food, or providing educational programs for people all over the world, we will be using the values from our faith to make a difference. Mission trips are not limited to preaching the Bible; they serve as opportunities for people to incorporate their values and faiths into improving a struggling community. In the future, I intend on traveling across the globe in order to step out of my comfort zone. I hope that along with my generation of Jewish leaders, I will be defined by not only what I choose to believe in, but also how I represent those beliefs. For faith was not created to be stifled, but rather shared with the world. We all, in fact, can improve the world with a common mission: to take our faith to new dimensions.



*EMILY GOLDBERG is a junior at the Abraham Joshua Heschel School in Manhattan. She enjoys writing and sharing her opinions about faith and religion. Emily started and chartered “Common Ground Friends,” the first student-driven interfaith group in South Florida. She also writes for “Sh’ma: A Journal of Jewish Ideas” and shares her spiritual perspective in her progressive blog, “A Leap Of Faith.” [www.Faithleaping.blogspot.com](http://www.Faithleaping.blogspot.com). In the future, she hopes to pursue a career in theology, creative writing, social action, and rabbinic literature. She hopes to lead a liberal Jewish community that promotes communal faith sharing and social justice.*