
Learning *Chesed*: Community Service in a Kindergarten Classroom

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JUNE, 1993. A KINDERGARTEN CLASSROOM, THE UPPER WEST SIDE OF MANHATTAN. EACH FRIDAY, THE CHILDREN HAVE ENTERED THE CLASSROOM WITH COINS IN SMALL PALMS AND CAREFULLY SLIPPED their money through the opening of the plastic top of our *tzedakah* (charity) container. Now it is time to decide where to send what we have collected.

My co-teacher and I post a list at the beginning of the week: Where Will We Give Our Tzedakah? I have written one idea down to get the ball rolling, a personal favorite: Dorot, the organization for which the children have visited homebound seniors and packed holiday packages.

By Friday, the list has grown and decision time has arrived. Some of our ideas, in the children's own words are: Project ORE (care for Jewish homeless people), toys for kids who don't have any, learn how to help sick people in hospitals (otherwise known as medical research), poor people, the Jewish Home and Hospital (where we have visited), people on the street. Carefully, we go through each option as I ask the child who wrote it to explain whatever he or she can about the destination. When we are sure that everyone understands the choices, we vote. Dorot gets three votes, medical research one, and poor people/people on the street, four.

We have approximately forty dollars. My class is clamoring to take the pennies and quarters in the empty yogurt container, walk down the street and give all the change to Andy, the man who regularly stands on the corner.

My co-teacher and I look at each other and she asks the children what they think about donating our money to Project ORE. We suggest to the children that if we give the money to an organization, trained professionals will make sure that the money goes to good use, and that as many people as possible will benefit from it. “You mean so that no one will buy drugs?” says Shoshana. My co-teacher and I look at each other again, and I say, “That’s part of what I mean; we want to make sure that whoever gets our money will use it in a way that is healthy for them.”

Nothing doing. We gave our fall collection to Project ORE, and the kids are worried about Andy. And why shouldn’t they be? After all, they see him every day. These children haven’t yet learned what most children believe steadfastly: that school is miles away from life, that what we learn within the walls of the school building is fragmented and irrelevant and ultimately uninforming of our lives. This is my chance to prevent that learning from taking place. These children instinctively know that the value of *tzedakah va-chesed* (charity and compassion) is deeply rooted in concrete situations and our relationships to those situations and the people in them. Their suggestion to feed Andy must be seriously entertained.

And so, after discussing with the children the problems of handing Andy forty dollars in dimes, nickels, pennies, and a few quarters, I suggest a compromise. I will take our money, go to the store and buy peanut butter, jelly, bread and any other nutritious food the children suggest. That way we can be sure Andy will be nourished by our *tzedakah*, we solve the problem of Andy having to prepare food with no facilities, and also we can spread out our help among many other people who need it. The children agree to this plan, and the next day I come in with the supplies. Kids work in pairs making sandwiches, and I overhear David say to Sarah, “I’m not going to take one bite, because a lot of people need this stuff.” Sarah nods.

We put the sandwiches in bags and talk about how it might be scary to go out and talk to people we don’t know. They might not be so clean, and they might even talk differently than we do. Ari says, “Yeah, but we know Andy at least. We see him every day.” “He’s my buddy,” says Dina. And so we set off, bags in hand down the block.

We reach Andy. Ari grabs the bag and walks up to Andy. “Hey Ari!” says Andy, “How ya doin?” Ari: “Great. We’ve got some sandwiches for you.” Andy: “Thanks Ari! I never say no to food.” Ari: “See ya!” Ari and the children

exchange looks. The children look happy and proud that their project is succeeding. They look moved as well, this contact with need and hunger sobering them. We move on. Walking at the back of the line, I watch Ari’s small back, and his head, covered by his green *kippah*, moving animatedly as he talks to Miriam. I imagine that he will remember this experience in his body and his mind for a very long time, as I will.

Another block and we still haven’t seen anyone clearly asking for help. As we near a restaurant, I spot a man outside the door, looking in through the window, whispering. “Just some soup.” I immediately tap Yonatan on the shoulder; he is ready. Taking a bag in hand, Yonatan approaches the man with great seriousness, all the while checking behind himself to see that I am still there. “Sir?” “Hi there.” “Sir, we have some sandwiches we made. Do you want them?” The man bends down, puts out his palm for Yonatan to slap. As I hold my breath, waiting to see how Yonatan will handle this challenge, Yonatan without a second thought slaps the man five. “My buddy,” says the man, “that’s sure nice of you. You be safe, you and all your friends. Be safe. Be safe.” And he waves to our class standing in a line of partners. Yonatan hands him the bag and the man says, “I am hungry.” Yonatan nods and walks away backwards; a physical reminder of how these children do not turn their backs on the world. We walk on. Not finding as many people as sandwiches, the children ask if they can take the leftovers home with them because many of them know needy people in their neighborhoods.

LOOKING BACK ON THE YEAR, IT SEEMS TO ME THAT THIS EXTENDED experience—beginning with the children’s creation of the *tzedakah* can, continuing through the act of putting coins inside it each week, culminating in listening, discussing and choosing among worthy *tzedakot*, watching the money turn into food and seeing hungry people eat it—was successful. But successful by what criteria? What makes this experience a deeply educative one, and a deeply Jewish one?

First, what happened in our classroom was relevant, connected to the children’s lives outside the classroom. When we ask children to take on tasks or responsibilities in the classroom, or to learn skills, there must be a reason that applies beyond the confines of school walls. After the can was filled, the teachers could have spent ten minutes after school one afternoon counting

it up and writing a check to the general fund of JUF for that amount. The children would still have given the money. Instead, the children sorted the pennies, dimes, nickels and quarters; slowly and laboriously they stacked dollars and counted cents. With effort, they sounded out the words, “GV T PR PPPLA” (give to poor people) and formed letters on paper. When we were still contemplating sending our money to an organization, one child asked, “Won’t it be heavy to send all these coins?” and the children learned that checks stand for money.

How many times had they seen a parent write a check and not made the correlation between dollar bills and these strange papers? Then we went to the store, and they watched money buy food. In Hebrew we made sandwiches, and they saw the language live. Finally, we transferred the sandwiches into the hands of needy men and women. The experience was rich in language, in mathematics, in everyday living skills and underlying it all, in mercy and kindness.

If we think of the classroom as a model for an *olam mitukan*, a corrected, rightly balanced, just world, this lesson of *tzedakah* bridged the world of the classroom and the troubled outside world. By making the tasks of the classroom transferable to the larger world yet also providing children with a vision of a kinder, more just environment, we help them become *mitaknei olam*, repairers of the world. At the end of the year, we asked the children to draw self-portraits. One child drew herself packing food packages for the elderly with bags that said in large letters DOROT. In her six-year-old way, this child had learned the meaning of *olam chesed yibaneh*: let a world of goodness and mercy be built. Perhaps most importantly, she knew and celebrated that it was her job, with the help of friends, teachers and parents, to build that world.



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