

JEWISH EDUCATIONAL LEADERSHIP

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Teaching Ethics

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Perspective on Jewish Education

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Areyvut: Teaching Jewish Ethics through Action

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The authors describe underlying principles and specific programs designed to teach Jewish ethics.

A group of teens spend a couple hours each week discussing local charitable causes; friends set aside a day to bring cheer to hospital patients; a boy collects 3,000 books to donate to young cancer patients; a girl holds the elevator for a man who is rushing to get on. Like the thousands of others whom Areyvut has touched, each of these individuals has chosen to put the needs of others before his or her own needs, and each has helped to make this world a better place.

Each of these acts of kindness is fraught with ethical considerations that only begin with the doer's decision to help a fellow human being. Participants in Areyvut programs must consider a range of factors in deciding how they can better the world around them in an effective and meaningful way, and the program's goal is to support students as they navigate this process. This article briefly outlines some of our programs and describes how they emphasize practicing skills that help students choose ethically, exploring what it means to behave ethically, and putting students' skills and content knowledge into a thoughtful context. We believe that careful planning around these three elements can significantly alter the experience and impact of programs in ethics education.

Areyvut and its programs

Established in 2002, Areyvut was created to provide children and teenagers with opportunities to think about and practice Jewish ethics in a meaningful way, supplementing the work in Jewish day and congregational schools. At its core, our mission

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is to infuse the lives of Jewish youth with the core Jewish values of *hesed* (kindness), *tzedakah* (charity) and *tikkun olam* (social justice). Our work with students and their families focuses on several key programs: the A Kindness a Day Calendar, *bnai mitzvah* consultations, *mitzvah* clowning, and Teen Philanthropy Programs.

- The "A Kindness a Day" Calendar (available online at www.areyvut.org) encourages individuals to look at everyday activities as experiences in Jewish ethics by suggesting that Jewish values are organic, natural and implementable on a daily basis. The calendar provides a suggested kindness that can typically be completed in some form on any given day. Each kindness is also matched with a traditional Jewish source, primarily from the Bible, a rabbinic text, or a prayer. These texts demonstrate that each kindness has a basis in Jewish tradition.
- *Bnai mitzvah* consultations engage students in *mitzvah* projects that add a service component to their *bnai mitzvah* celebrations. These consultations coach *bnai mitzvah* students through the process of fundraising, volunteering and donating time to causes which are meaningful and inspirational to them. Staff members meet with the student to discuss his or her general interests and how he or she wants to make a difference in the world. By speaking with the students about community and global needs, the *bar* or *bat mitzvah* is able to put their projects into a context. Our *bnai mitzvah* have organized bowl and bike-a-thons to benefit Israel-based agencies, created craft kits for children in hospitals, raised awareness about organ donation, read books on tape, rehabilitated homes for those in need, and much more.
- *Mitzvah* clowning teaches teens new skills that can be employed to improve the lives of those in need. Staff members train *mitzvah* clowns and organize volunteer sessions where participants bring kindness, good wishes, and smiles to hospitalized patients and senior citizens residing in assisted living residences. During the training, teens are taught about

the importance of *bikkur holim* (visiting the sick), the positive impact it can have on others, and the most effective way to interact with patients and senior citizens. In addition, they learn the art of balloon animal creation, clown make-up application, and several magic tricks to entertain their audiences.

- Teen philanthropy programs provide a strong foundation for Jewish teens who are interested in learning about philanthropic giving, financial priorities, and non-profit organizations. Students gather roughly twice per month to create a request for proposal (RFP), meet organizational representatives, and work together as a board to allocate funds to organizations in need. In the process, they learn important skills such as

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team building, critical thinking, and public speaking. By visiting the organizations they are researching, meeting with the organizations' leadership and clients, and volunteering in the organizations' programs, the students see – firsthand – the impact their funding can have on an organization. Not only does this program have an immediate impact on the organizations that are funded, but it also has a significant impact on program participants.

Learning to choose

Each of our programs provides opportunities for individuals to experience the world through the lens of Jewish ethics. Based on the notion that *tzedakah* and *tikkun olam* are central to the Jewish worldview, our programs ask students to make choices that reflect their dedication to these values. At the most basic level, our programs promote ethical living by engaging students in critical thinking so that they can make ethical choices.

Ethical decision making and deep reflection play a central role in *bnai mitzvah* consultations and teen philanthropy programs, where participants are guided through the process of selecting projects and causes that are both personally meaningful and widely beneficial to society. The teen philanthropy program requires that participants negotiate an additional dimension by placing this decision making process in a group context. As a result, participants not only have to choose an action that aligns with their ethics but must also promote their choice to other members of the group. This learning experience teaches students to articulate justifications for their choices and forces them to remain reasonably consistent with their values.

Though self-reflection and critical thinking are more subtly incorporated into the calendar and clowning programs, they too are based on the premise that the welfare of those around us must be a guiding factor in our lives. Rather than focusing on the process of making ethical decisions, these programs provide students with

the content needed to live ethically. They offer numerous ideas for incorporating ethical behavior into students' daily lives and empower students to choose ethical behaviors that are personally meaningful to them.

Staff members empower participants to own their personal decisions by giving each individual an active role in choosing and advancing a cause. Through the student-centered learning experience that develops, participants acquire skills that will help them stay true to their ethical values in the future.

Choosing to care

Areyvut programs are designed to encourage a particular type of engagement with those in need. Underlying this approach is a

belief that acts of *tikkun olam* are more effective and more ethical when they create active, caring relationships. In line with Nel Noddings's notion of the "ethic of care" our programs emphasize direct service and other experiences that put participants in contact with those they are helping.

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As Noddings describes in her work on moral education, students must be taught to live by an ethic of care, in which individuals become fully engrossed in their responsibility to others. When living in alignment with this ethic, individuals care for others with the sole motivation of fulfilling the needs of the one for whom they care. The others, in turn, respond to the individual who is caring for them, sometimes using such subtlety as a glimmer in the eye, so that both are actively involved in a caring relationship. Though Noddings commends charity, she differentiates “caring about” another through charity from “caring for” another through service and believes that the ethic of care is only fully accomplished through engagement in service. She encourages formal and informal educational institutions to engage students in the selection of service projects that are meaningful to them.

Our programs promote the ethic of care by fully engaging students in the giving process and by fostering meaningful relationships between participants and those who they are helping. *Mitzvah* clowning illustrates the application of this ethic most directly in that participants interact firsthand with senior citizens and others who are in need of cheer. Similarly, *bnai mitzvah* students are highly encouraged to engage in hands-on work as part of their service projects.

Areyvut extends Noddings’s ethic of care by applying its relational approach to philanthropy and indirect service. Rather than endorsing service as the only way to live by the ethic of care, we suggest that individuals can develop caring relationships with organizations as well as individuals. As such, we designed our teen philanthropy program so that participants cultivate a strong connection with the organizations they fund. For example, youth philanthropy participants spend time getting to know the organizations which seek funding. They meet representatives from the organizations, conduct site visits to see the work of the organization firsthand, and volunteer within the organization they fund. This process enables them to develop relationships that epitomize the ethic of care with the organizations that they support. Similarly, *bnai mitzvah* students who cannot engage in direct service are encouraged to build relationships with those who support their causes by contacting organizations that work in the field, learning as much about the cause as possible, and connecting their work to as many aspects of the *bnai mitzvah* celebration as possible. It is the hope that emphasizing the relational aspect of caring for others will foster long-term commitment to service projects and philanthropic causes.

Contextualizing choices

Critical thinking skills cannot yield ethical decisions unless they are utilized within a framework that provides participants with meaningful contexts for their choices, and we incorporate several elements that do just that. These include Jewish texts, knowledge of the local community, and consideration for the individualized interests of the students. Though the emphasis on each element varies depending on the program, these ingredients are seen as essential in laying the groundwork for effective and meaningful action.

Our programs use Biblical and rabbinic texts to demonstrate the centrality of giving in the Jewish worldview – our calendar links each act of kindness to a related text; our consultations help students see their Torah portions and other fundamental texts as inspiration for their social action; our clowns read about the importance of *bikkur holim* from traditional sources; our philanthropy program uses Jewish texts to introduce various activities. To a large extent, such dependence on Jewish texts is what provides the programs with their Jewish character and differentiates them from typical programs in ethics education.

Areyvut challenges students to balance Jewish values with the needs and morals of the particular community where they strive to leave an impact. To this end, each program provides background that puts its work into a larger social context. Participants learn about both global needs and the idiosyncratic needs of their community of interest through readings, discussions, and meetings

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with local community organizers. Even the calendar, which appears to be highly generalized, models responsiveness to the milieu in which it is used. Its introduction suggests that users tailor entries to their own particular circumstance, and readers are encouraged to respond to daily Internet entries with reactions, suggestions, and feedback that put the calendar entries in conversation with the communities where it strives to leave an impact.

In addition to studying the global and communal frameworks for their work, participants are directed to look inward to understand how their giving resonates with other aspects of their personalities, interests, and lives. Each program encourages individualization to create experiences that are meaningful for our volunteers. For example, calendar entries vary in focus so that each reader finds at least some entries that speak to him – *bnai mitzvah* students find service projects that connect to their favorite hobbies; clowns rely on their individual personalities to guide their performances; philanthropy programs choose causes that speak to their individual members. In relating *tzedakah* to participants’ personal interests, we maximize the potential that their students will maintain long-term connections to their projects.

Conclusion

Though Areyvut values all efforts to help others, we suggest that *tikkun olam* is more effective, meaningful, and enduring when service and philanthropy projects are thoughtfully chosen and planned. By highlighting the complex processes that surround acts of kindness, we demonstrate to students, parents, and educators that determining a successful way to develop caring relationships with others is an ethical process that must be considered in its proper context.