RESPONSE
A CONTEMPORARY JEWISH REVIEW

AMERICAN JEWS
AND THE WORLD:

VISIONS AND ISSUES

including

The Case for Communal Conflict
The Crisis in Israel
The Jewish Question Becomes the Zionist Question
Theological Options
Why I Don't Give to the UJA
Is There a Jewish Photography?
The New Halacha
A Poetic Reinterpretation of Isaiah I
Jewish Alternative Education

Poetry, Fiction, Calligraphy

and more

SPECIAL DOUBLE ISSUE

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10TH ANNIVERSARY ISSUE

Ten years ago, when a small group of Columbia College undergraduates published the first RESPONSE, many of the issues and trends which would innervate student and young adult Jewish life were yet to emerge.

Ten years ago was before the Haverot, the Jewish Catalogue and other expressions of young people's search for religious alternatives. Ten years ago was before the federation sit-ins and other expressions of young people's ongoing critique of the so-called Jewish Establishment, a term used quite gingerly more recently. Ten years ago, the Soviet Jewry movement was still in its infancy, the first Jewish student newspaper of the most recent era was yet to appear, and the Jewish counter-culture / counter-politics of the late sixties were yet to emerge. Ten years ago, many of the people now talking about alternatives in Jewish education were still students in Yeshivas and Talmud Torahs or summer campers. And ten years ago, criticism of Israeli and American Jewish foreign policy was unheard of in respectable quarters of organized Jewry. Ten years ago, one could not speak of an emerging group of young Jewish poets, story writers, literary critics, photographers, artists, and calligraphers.

As a way of commemorating the beginning of our tenth year, we thought it wise to bring together a number of articles which can only illustrate the wide range of concerns of the loosely connected young people's movement with which RESPONSE has always maintained an intimate bond. We could not represent the full variety of diverse opinions surrounding the many issues treated in RESPONSE 30-31. Rather, we hope merely to provide representative critiques, analyses, models, and alternatives in the several topical areas mentioned above.

Finally, we note that one area - Jewish feminism - was not specifically treated in this issue for several reasons. Perhaps most critically, we believe the topic is best treated in more lengthy collections of essays such as our initial The Jewish Woman: An Anthology (RESPONSE 18) and its much expanded and updated version just published by Schocken, The Jewish Woman: New Perspectives, edited by Liz Kolton.

We hope you enjoy this issue and we would welcome your comments either on the entire issue or specific pieces. With your continued support, we look forward to fifteenth and twentieth anniversary issues in years to come.

—The Editors

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A PERSONAL LOOK
AT PROJECT EZRA

In 1972, a small group of Jewish students and young professionals organized Project Ezra, an effort to reach out and assist the Jewish elderly in New York’s historic Lower East Side. Starting with a staff of four, thirty clients and thirty volunteers, Ezra has multiplied in size: it now has a staff of seven, ninety regular clients, an additional thirty-five other old people who come to special group events, upwards of seventy-five weekly volunteers, and thirteen young people who, with the staff, comprise Ezra’s Board of Directors.

Those of us who are involved in Project Ezra see it as an alternative to the more conventional ways in which the Jewish community helps its aged. Yet, in what specific sense Ezra serves as an alternative is not at all clear. Does it fulfill a particular mitzvah? Specifically, is Project Ezra a form of Tzedaka?

To answer these questions I’ve decided to examine two sorts of issues below. First, how did Ezra begin, what were the motivations of the small founding group? Second, how do I understand my own involvement and commitment to Ezra and to the particular old person I worked with the past two years?

Origins of Project Ezra

The original group of people who started Project Ezra, did not know each other, but were gathered together by one Zev Mindlin, a student who knew a number of us individually. When we met, most of us were looking for a community — people who we felt could daven and study together. Although some of us had friends in the Havurah, we didn’t feel quite comfortable there, wanting a more traditional community. This search for a community of people we felt close to religiously and philosophically was the main reason
many of us started Ezra. We decided also to initiate a service project, so that we wouldn’t be solely turned inward but would be doing something for the larger Jewish community. A number of articles were appearing in the press at the time about the Jewish poor. After some discussion, we decided to set up a storefront on the Lower East Side and begin a project to search out, befriend, and help the elderly Jewish poor. Many of these people were living isolated lives in a changed neighborhood, their existence unknown to other Jews except, perhaps, a last living friend, a kosher butcher or a storekeeper.

The community we envisioned didn’t work out. Since we did receive grant money however, we decided to go ahead with our service project. We hired four part-time staff people from our own group who went out to find the old people and to recruit volunteers from college campuses to visit them. Our goal was to provide this forgotten and neglected segment of the Jewish community, the elderly poor, with nonprofessional social services such as shopping and letter writing, and to find for the old people, who wanted friendship, volunteers who wanted to provide that friendship.

Project Ezra has also felt it important to involve other Jews in our project and to sensitize them to the needs of the Jewish elderly. Through speaking engagements and tours of the Lower East Side we try to inform the greater Jewish community about the problems of the Jewish elderly poor and to encourage them to help in whatever way they can. Special projects such as Chanukah and Purim parties, picnics, and theater parties are often done in conjunction with synagogues in Manhattan and the suburbs. Jewish youth groups help occasionally in the cleanup of vandalized synagogues and in Pesach cleaning with our clients.

That Project Ezra should have started seems so logical and clear in retrospect. But I never knew that this is how projects actually begin. I think many of us were surprised at our ability to gradually turn our idea into a reality. Setting the money is difficult — involving hours and hours of writing proposals for grants, and speaking to synagogues, youth groups and individuals about the project. Ezra is an independent organization with no constant source of full funding. Therefore, each year we have to worry about how to meet our budget. For our first three years the Jewish Association for
College Youth (JACY) gave us partial funding which enabled us to begin. Last year, part of our budget which is now $45,000 a year, was met by two one-year grants which JACY helped us obtain. One grant was for our health counselling program. The other was for general support and special outreach efforts to find old Jews still living in the area north of Houston Street, one of New York’s worst slums. The neighborhood’s high rates of crime and drug addiction make it frightening even for a young person to walk the streets (volunteers go in pairs). The aged or sickly persons who must live there do so with the utmost fear and dread. While most of them receive the government funds to which they are entitled, their greatest problems are loneliness, isolation and fear and this is where we have something concrete to offer — the human element that these people desperately need.

In addition to trying to raise money to maintain the Project and to working on the technical, and legal problems that inevitably arise in running an office and servicing old people efficiently, we have had to work out critical philosophical questions as well. For example, should all the staff and board adhere to traditional Jewish practices when representing Ezra at speaking engagements? What should we do when non-Jews wish to become volunteers? What should be the relationship between the nonpaid members of the board and the paid staff? To what extent can the board supervise and evaluate the day-to-day activities of the staff?

Yet above all these organizational problems plaguing any venture involving more than one individual, each of us in Ezra derives a certain satisfaction from our work which helps us all survive the difficulties of working in a structured organization. It is to that personal aspect of my own work that I now turn.

My Personal Involvement in Ezra: Is it Tzedaka?

For two years every week I went to see Katie (a pseudonym), my old person. To me my involvement in Ezra did not seem to be Tzedaka perhaps because there is so much that I gain from it and because whatever I did for Katie stemmed from the relationship we had. What did I gain from the involvement? First, it is a way for me to maintain a link with the Jewish past and feel that I am part of the continuity of the people. I never knew my grandparents but I had
often heard about them. When my father died suddenly this past October, I felt even more strongly the need to learn as much as I could about, and preserve the memory of the preciousness of the Jewish past, particularly of European Jewry. I thought that if each individual life is so transitory, at least the whole history of the Jewish people, to whom my father committed his life, is lasting. I wanted to hear the rich life stories of the people who had immigrated to this country and felt strongly with others in Ezra that we should tape their oral histories before the people die with their stories untold. As one volunteer said about his visits with his old person, "I learn so much about the way she is and something about the culture from which she came."

For me, Ezra was a weekly visit with someone who opened up a window on the past. For Katie, it was a chance to share with someone her life and what she had learned, which most of the world didn't seem interested in: the guilt of living when all her brothers and sisters in Europe were killed; the anguish of realizing her mistake in deciding not to have children during the Depression because her husband didn't have a job; and now no husband, no children, no sisters or brothers; the joy of remembering funny stories — which are so funny she can hardly finish telling them — of how men used to chase her; the bitterness and acceptance of her physical ailments, and the death of her husband.

My relationship with Katie then, also exposed me to a different perspective on life — what an old person looking back now sees as what really mattered, and what was not so important, the things that brought happiness and the mistakes so easily seen from hindsight. Not having grandparents of my own and not having most of my family here in New York, I was glad to have someone of another generation to talk with and be close to. This was especially the case since most of my contacts here were with peers of my own age, colleagues, and the students I teach.

Another thing I gained was the joy of seeing Katie's face light up when I came. As one volunteer put it, "It's good for me to see her happy and I know I make her happy when I come." Another volunteer pointed out that for him his visits with a very difficult old person were an authentic Jewish experience. "Her whole life centered around Jewish matters: the Yiddish paper, the East Side
activities. She was very Jewish in her mental illness, decrepitude and poverty."

On a more practical, weekly level, my involvement with Ezra was a way of helping an old person do things which were very easy for me to do but almost impossible for her: writing a letter to the housing authority to file a complaint or demanding a $110 refund for a hearing aid she bought mistakenly because she didn’t understand the salesman. Yet even these things I did not consider Tzedaka because the relationship was not a one-sided one from which Katie gained and I did not. True, the visits did require commitment, much patience, and effort on my part, and were not always easy to manage in my hectic schedule. Yet the relationship was two-sided. For one thing, Katie always had something for me to eat when I came — something for her “kosher” friend — which she put in a special glass plate she bought for me. She assured me, with a twinkle in her eye that before she was sick she was much more of a Tzadekes even than I was and knew all the laws of Kashruth. (When she was in the hospital, nineteen times in all for different ailments, her husband had mixed up the plates and she slowly gave up that aspect of her life.) She didn’t like to eat alone and insisted that I eat with her so that she would eat. It was so nice, after a full day of teaching and rushing over to the Lower East Side, to be served a glass of coffee by her — to be taken care of for a few moments before we got into her problems. She had many: trying to find a suitable housekeeper after the many she rejected for one reason or another; getting eyeglasses that she wouldn’t be ashamed to wear — her present ones were so thick and heavy; finding and learning to wear a hearing aid because her shame at her poor hearing kept her from going to Ezra group activities; trying to straighten out her doctor’s bills and get her prescriptions filled. Yet while I helped her do these things in ways she couldn’t have gotten along well without, I did so not out of a conscious effort to do something good, but from her being a friend who needed help that I could give. Whatever I did stemmed from the personal relationship we had. An act does not seem to be Tzedaka if done for a friend.

While Katie had many problems that overwhelmed her, she was more fortunate in certain ways than some of our other old people. Mrs. Jay for example, lived a few blocks away on Stanton Street. She
was a tiny, emaciated woman, weighing no more than 80 pounds, who was becoming blind. To open the door to her apartment she had to poke her key around until she found the keyhole. Her building, which had no elevators (she lived on the 3rd floor) and whose halls smelled of urine, was very poorly lit because the light bulbs in the hall were broken or stolen. She lived in self-imposed clutter — perhaps in some way it was protective for her — and slept by choice on a curled-up mattress in the back room, shunning the large double bed in the front room on which her mother had died. She kept every empty cookie box and coffee can whose contents she finished although she never used them and her volunteer had to force herself to drink the tea she served her and not think about the cockroach she had just seen crawl out. Her volunteer would help her shop and more than once saw the storekeeper weigh down the scale with his fingers when he thought Mrs. Jay was alone. Mrs. Jay’s volunteer felt she gained a tremendous amount personally from her relationship with Mrs. Jay. Both Katie and Mrs. Jay are typical of the group of people we serve.

If Ezra is not Tzedaka, what is it? One of our staff members is always making the point that we shouldn’t let our volunteers get so involved in the old person’s life that the person becomes dependent on the volunteer. To make the person’s life more manageable and easier, yes — but to take away the strong grain of self-reliance that has kept the person going this long would be a terrible thing. The highest form of Tzedaka is that which enables a person to make it on his or her own and is called Gemilut Chesed. Gemilut Chesed differs from Tzedaka in that Tzedaka in its usual sense means giving a handout while Gemilut Chesed on a monetary level for example would mean lending money to enable a person to eventually be self-supporting. It can also involve actual service and speaking words of comfort and advice to a person to allow him or her to better get along. In that sense Project Ezra is a form of Gemilut Chesed. Yet what about all we gain and the fact that the service stems from friendship? The Rabbis state that if the donor gains this does not negate its value as Gemilut Chesed. Ultimately the category does not matter. Ezra is a way of participating in the Jewish community and fulfilling a basic communal obligation on a one-to-one level in which one provides a real service which will not be met otherwise. I still
give money for Tzedaka and I am involved Jewishly in my everyday
life. I belong to the Big Apple Tzedaka cooperative and am a member
of Ezrat Nashim. But Ezra fills another need — a need to be
personally involved in helping someone who is not as well off and
who, unlike me, cannot benefit from the extant Jewish communal
activities and services.

Editor's note: Despite large amounts of favorable publicity and
numerous kudos from the organized Jewish community, Project
Ezra's funding is continually precarious. As an independent
organization, it receives little funding from assured and recurring
sources. Those able to provide assistance, either direct or indirect, are
urged to contact Sheila Rubin, President of Project Ezra, 197 East

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