



Hands-on Tzedakah Education

In the classroom and extra-curricular activities, local Jewish schools are teaching today's students to be tomorrow's givers.

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In the Yeshiva of Flatbush's Sephardic Beit Midrash, faculty member Sara Ovadia is leading a few dozen students in a lunch-hour discussion about charity late one recent morning. While the students, members of the school's Tzedakah Commission, an educational-activist project, quietly pick at pizza and pasta in the crowded study hall, Ovadia outlines several upcoming programs for which she will need volunteers. A food pantry. A scavenger hunt. Pledges for teachers racing in a fund-raising marathon.

"I need new people," Ovadia declares. "I need fresh blood." Hands shoot up around the room.

In a conference room at the Brooklyn school early that afternoon, two students talk about a school trip they took to Israel last year to distribute money raised by fellow students and to volunteer at several institutions in Jerusalem and other cities.

The two were among the nearly 50 Yeshiva of Flatbush students who take part in the school's annual Chesed Mission to Israel, which takes place over winter break. Participants pay their own way, and for 10 days, for at least 12 hours a day, they visit hospitals and orphanages, soup kitchens and recreation centers, bonding with children and quietly giving checks to administrators.

"It's an unbelievably life-changing experience," says Jack Anteby, a senior. "It's very out of your comfort zone."

In a classroom, Rabbi Naftali Besser is teaching about tzedakah near the end of the school day. As students flip through photo-copied pages from the Shulchan Aruch (The Code of Jewish Law), the rabbi, pacing around the room, summarizes Jewish tradition's basic rule about giving charity: "Don't harden your heart.

"The Torah assumes we have a heart," Rabbi Besser tells the students. But the Torah — along with the sages over the centuries who have interpreted it — understands human nature, he says. "When you interact with people, the chances of getting burned" — by frauds and charlatans — "are very, very high. The Torah says it's gonna happen."

At the Yeshiva of Flatbush, one of the New York area's leading Modern Orthodox day schools, tzedakah — why and how to share one's resources, one's time and money — is a regular part of the curriculum and of extra-curricular activities.

As part of junior-year studies in halacha, which teach such issues as honoring one's parents and guarding one's speech, a few weeks each year are devoted to a review of the applicable laws from the Talmud, from the writings of Maimonides, from the Shulchan Aruch and other sources. Outside of the classroom, the school's Tzedakah Commission attracts some 70 or 80 students annually who set aside their after-school hours — as well as one lunch hour a week — to propose and review and allocate funds for worthy causes.

All this, in addition to the 40 hours of community service each Yeshiva of Flatbush student is required to spend every year. And a new volunteer program, coordinated with the borough's Sephardic Bikur Holim, in which students prepare food for in-need members of the community. And monthly food collection drives in the yeshiva's nearby elementary school. And "Special Drives" held six times a year to raise money for earmarked causes. And the annual Blood Drive, Chanukah Toy Drive, Clothing Drive and dozens of other volunteer "Chesed" activities listed in the school's annual Students Activities Guide. And individual fund-raising drives some students feel inspired to conduct on their own time.

A third-floor bulletin board keeps the school up to date on the commission's work. "We don't want to leave [the requirement of giving tzedakah] on the theoretical level," with only a reminder that the Torah requires a Jew to give ten percent of his or her income to charity, says Rabbi Raymond Harari, head of school. Instead, he says, through a wide variety of learning and volunteering opportunities, students are encouraged, if not actually required, to embrace the theory and practice of tzedakah. "You can't have one without the other."

The message for the students, many of whom come from affluent backgrounds, is that giving, not taking "should be the focus of their lives," Rabbi Harari says.

While most day schools and yeshivot offer various sorts of teaching about tzedakah and about Tikkun Olam volunteer programs, Yeshivah of Flatbush's combination is considered a model.

"It is a good example of what's going on — it is one of many examples of what's going on," says Rabbi Ellis Bloch, associate director of the yeshivot and day schools division of the Jewish Education Project (formerly known as the Board of Jewish Education of Greater New York). While all Jewish schools educate students about the precept of charity and collect money for a wide range of recipients, a growing number of Modern Orthodox and so-called black hat schools have, like Yeshivah of Flatbush, begun to offer hands-on outreach activities and to give students a voice in the allocations process.

"Certainly there is a greater level of this, hands-on," Rabbi Bloch says. "It's very effective. The kids really get into it." The earlier the children begin, the better, the rabbi says. "Habits that are learned while you are young are habits that stay with you the rest of your life."

At Yeshivah of Flatbush, says Rabbi Besser, the purpose of the multifaceted emphasis on tzedakah is to make it "a cool thing to do."

"The whole school is involved," says Shelly Hafif, a member of the Tzedakah Commission and a participant in last year's Chesed Mission. "Because we know how rewarding it is."

The school's lessons, says student Jacqueline Sasson, reinforce what the children see at home. "We learn a lot of it from our parents."

At the yeshiva's elementary school, from the first days of school, classmates go from class to class with tzedakah boxes, collecting pennies and nickels the children bring in. Before the High Holy Days this year, the coins added up to \$1,000.

"It is very hard to teach adults to part with their precious time, belongings or money," says Elementary School Associate Principal of Torah Studies Rivka Zaklikowski, "but if you start at age three or four, it becomes part of you."

Fourth-grade students participate in the Reina Varon A"H Memorial Business Fair, named for a fourth-grade student who died in 2004, in which teams of children develop business plans from start to finish — procuring products, determining at what prices the products should be sold, planning expenses, creating ad campaigns and ultimately selling their goods at the fair — and raising money, more than \$9,000 last year, which was distributed to ten charities here and in Israel.

The high school's Tzedakah Commission raises at least \$50,000 each year through funds collected at daily minyanim, and through other student-run activities, and members of the commission determine how the funds are allocated, says Ovadia, the commission's faculty adviser. The commission is on its way to achieving that goal this year, having raised some \$2,000 already, says Ovadia, a Spanish teacher at the school.

Usually, a big chunk of the yearly total goes to the Chesed Mission, to be distributed by the students among a wide variety of Israeli recipients, and the remainder is given, in amounts from a few hundred dollars to a few thousand, to such local organizations as Chai Lifeline, Tomchei Shabbos and Satmar Bikur Cholim.

Students are selected to join the Tzedakah Commission, according to an orientation sheet, "on the merit of their application essay or for previous tzedakah work in the school." In both the Tzedakah Commission and the halacha course, students learn how to prioritize giving of their limited resources, and how to guarantee that individual charities are effectively using the money.

"There are websites that check these things," Ovadia reminds her lunchtime group.

The students — future leaders and philanthropists probably among them — take the allocations process seriously, she says. Students make pitches for favorite causes, then take out their calculators. "They sit and figure it out."

Past recipients have included earthquake victims in Haiti, Katrina victims in New Orleans, and the City Harvest food program, Ovadia says. "We don't only give to Jews."

More than teaching students the halachic details about tzedakah, the "main goal" of the school's tzedakah-related activities "is to inspire them to be better Jews," says Rabbi Besser, dean of students. He tells about students whose character traits were improved by involvement in tzedakah-chesed activities, and about alumni who have continued giving their time and money once in the working world. "It's happening big time."

David Siller, a junior at the yeshiva and a student in Rabbi Besser's halacha class, says he appreciates the lessons about tzedakah that he has learned. The yeshiva teaches students how to use their hearts as well as their heads when making decisions about giving money to charity. Like most students, he says, he already knows the basic laws of charity. The school's curriculum and volunteer activities, he says, give him "a perspective."