

Last November we had the opportunity to visit India with the American Jewish World Service (AJWS). As Jews we are commanded to work for Tikkun Olam. AJWS is a remarkable organization through which we personally have been fortunate to express our Jewish values in the developing world.

When you think of India last November, you recall with horror the tragic massacre in Mumbai. In fact, we were in Mumbai only a few days before. We stayed in one of the hotels that was attacked and held a Kabbalat Shabbat service with our group in the lobby. That evening we attended services and had a wonderful Persian-Indian Shabbat dinner with the congregation at the Keneseth Eliyahoo Synagogue. Solomon Sofaer, the community patriarch, talked about Rabbi Holtzberg, the Chabad Rabbi who often attended services with them, not knowing that memorial services for him and his wife would soon be held there.

Reflecting on the terrible events that happened in Mumbai, we are drawn to Unatanah Tokef: Who shall live and who shall die? Who shall reach the end of his days and who shall not? Events like Mumbai shock us, realizing that we can never know what will befall us.

But the Unatanah Tokef is not just a message of fear and anxiety. Terrible things do happen, both from nature and other humans. But the prayer's message is one of hope – of the power of our own acts, of Tshuvah, T'filah, and Tzedakah to “avert the stern decree”.

Our personal learning from India is also a message of hope, not fear. The violent acts of a few made the headlines, but in our travels we saw many people whose acts were based on building a future in accord with the Jewish traditions of justice and love. Questions from the Unataneh Tokef like “Who by famine and who by thirst?” and “Who shall become rich and who shall be impoverished?” are calls to action.

In contrast to the murderous scene in Mumbai's train station, we remember standing, on the train platform in Bhubaneswar, along with a dozen other Jews like ourselves,. Sitting cross-legged on the platform were dozens of kids aged 3 to 15 learning to read, write, and do arithmetic. They had chalkboards and workbooks, the teachers taught songs and games and used flashcards to teach language and math.

Those of you who saw the film Slumdog Millionaire saw these kids with their ragged clothes, scruffy faces and thin bodies– they're the ones who survive by selling food and trinkets on trains, travelling from station to station, eking out a life. We were there with the Ruchika organization that provides education and training to children living on the streets.

Twenty years ago, Inderjit Khurana, created Ruchika to provide schooling for these children who don't have regular families and homes. By bringing Platform Schools to the stations, she could tap into the enthusiasm and ability they had for learning. Other Ruchika programs provide homes and teach trades like sewing, tourist hospitality, and mechanics. Ruchhika's website proclaims “Every child has the right to an education”

So why was our study group from AJWS standing there on the tracks watching the little ones sing alphabet songs and the teenagers fill out math workbooks? Neither the kids, nor the teachers nor the people leading the organization were Jewish. We were there because education is at the heart of the Jewish values that inspire the work of AJWS. Jews have always recognized the deep link between literacy and social and economic empowerment. Ruchika embodies a fundamental Jewish value: a parent should teach a child a trade. It

expresses Maimonides' highest rung of **Tzedaka**: Enabling another to become independent with a livelihood. Education can break the cycle of poverty.

Jewish tradition recognizes poverty as one of the greatest threats to human dignity: "Our teachers have said: If all the sufferings were assembled on one side and poverty on the other, poverty would outweigh them all." (from Midrash Shemot Rabbah 31) Without fundamental economic security, the security of other human rights – education, access to healthcare, political freedom – is at risk.

In working to ameliorate poverty, AJWS aspires to a particularly Jewish ethic of giving that respects the poor person and recognizes the shared humanity of both giver and receiver. The renowned scholar Jacob Neusner said, "When we give to the poor, we must do so in such a way that the equality of the giver and the receiver is acknowledged. This is not an act of grace or an expression of affection. It is an act of respect, an expression of duty." AJWS's grant making and service work in the developing world is informed by this ethic – the grantees are partners in a shared endeavor.

Our tradition commands us to bring justice, knowledge, and sustenance not only to those in our own community, but to strangers and all the the world – **Kol yoshvey tevel**. As it says in B'raysheet [Genesis 12:2-3]

V'neevrchu b'cha kol mishpachot Haadamah

Through you all the families of the earth shall be Blessed.

The American Jewish World Service takes its inspiration from this pasuk . It helps support over 400 grassroots social change projects in 35 countries in Africa, Asia, and Latin America. AJWS also educates Jews through study tours like ours and volunteer opportunities for young people, like Shuli Eisen, for rabbinical students at all levels of observance to work and pray together in Africa and Central America, and for older people to share their professional skills. AJWS also takes stands on issues that have special resonance for Jews. Its president Ruth Messinger has been one of the global leaders in raising awareness about the genocide in Darfur. AJWS works so that "Never again" applies not just to us as a people, but to the way the world treats all its minorities and the oppressed.

The projects we saw on this tour embody the profound questions of the High Holidays. For many of these "who shall live and who shall die" is an immediate everyday question. In Delhi, we visited the Network of Positive People, a grassroots group of people with HIV-AIDS, organized for mutual support and activism. They built a community of outcasts and found ways to help each other get needed medicines and live a productive life. Our visit with Udaan, another AIDS group, led us to the tiny shed where a frail woman lived with the two sons she had left, after losing her husband and two other sons to AIDS.

Jewish tradition recognizes the importance of offering support to people who are ill, **Bikhor cholim**, visiting the sick, is among those ethical actions that are incumbent upon us.

The mitzvah of **Bikhor cholim** goes hand in hand with saving a life. Jewish tradition is unequivocal on the value of human life, as it says in Mishnah Sanhedrin 4:5: "For this reason, the first human being was created alone to teach that whoever destroys a single life is as though he had destroyed an entire universe, and whoever saves a single life it is as if he had saved an entire universe."

Saving a life can be immediate and local, as with the HIV/AIDS programs or global by taking actions that save children's lives by changing the world.

Another community we visited was working to help both its residents and the larger needs of the world. The people of Kesharpur, a small village in the forest near India's Eastern Coast, gets AJWS support to find new ways to profit from non-destructive forest products and to develop sustainable agriculture. At the town meeting where the elders addressed our group, we asked the community if they had any questions for us. They wanted to know why we had come to support their village. We talked about the traditions of Jewish values and why healing the world is part of our religion. Few of the people had even heard of Judaism. We felt pride in the visibility of doing this work as Jews.

So this year, what if we read tshuvah, tfilah and tzedakah differently? Instead of seeing them personally, we can look at Unataneh Tokef as pointing to ways to make a better world. A world in which more people live full lives and fewer die unnecessary deaths. A world in which hunger is less persistent and no one dies of thirst. A world where no one is forced to live on less than \$1 a day, and we close the distance between the rich and the poor.

This year, let us read tshuvah, tfilah and tzedakah as "reflect," "aspire," and "pursue justice," to commit ourselves to Tikkun Olam, repairing the world. Our own commitment has been through the work of AJWS. We invite you to join us or to find your own ways to bring blessing to all the families of the earth.

May you be blessed with peace and plenty, for yourself, your family, your community, and the world.

Shabbat Shalom