

and ideas of people from other faiths. No person can or should try to handle all matters alone. Instead, he or she should empower others to share in the workload—it’s through teamwork that we create a just society. Second, family comes first, followed by the needs and concerns of others. Once the tribal leadership subgroups were created, Moses’ family could return home and be with him once again.

To be most effective we need balance in our lives. When I prepare my 7th grade temple school students for becoming b’nai mitzvah, I always tell them that doing their own social justice work will add to the joy of this milestone, creating a balance between being the center of attention/receiver of gifts and helping others in the community. This is how we perform God’s work on Planet Earth.

Liz Cohen: When my husband and I joined our congregation 20 years ago, I wrote in “social action” on the interest form. As a “wannabe activist,” I felt this would be my path to acting on my good intentions. Eventually, from that note, I was asked to form and chair a social action committee. This turned out to be a transformative moment for me—finding my place to do social action creatively and consistently.

For the past 15 years, as host congregation in our county’s Interfaith Hospitality Network, we have been welcoming homeless families into our synagogue in up to 6 weekly rotations per year. I feel this embodies all that is best in our Jewish tradition: welcoming the stranger, seeing the worth and dignity of every guest, joining together as a community to help, and addressing root causes through advocacy.

My activism is strongly guided by the teaching in *Pirkei Avot*, “It is not for you to complete the task, but neither are you free to desist from it.” Initially I focused on finding the task, the piece of healing that felt within reach. But over time I have found that it is the reaching out and joining with others that really gives this text its meaning; there is great power in connection and shared values, and it is our task to find and build on that with others.

Part of this means reaching out, one

person at a time. For our temple’s social action service last year, I asked several people to share their stories of how they got involved in social action, and much



Bonnie Sax of Temple Israel, West Palm Beach, Florida listens to Lillian Mueller, 97, a Joseph L. Morse Geriatric Center resident, as part of the congregation’s Mitzvah Day, February 2008. This event, one of 4 held throughout the community, was the brainchild of Bonnie’s daughter Sarah, who didn’t want a typical 16-year-old’s birthday party. “It would be a true mitzvah,” she said, “to be with those who may not have the opportunity to share their birthdays with friends and family.”

to my surprise, a repeated refrain in these stories was “Liz asked me.” It was a valuable affirmation that efforts to engage others really do matter.

Still, I do struggle with meeting my “ideal of social action.” At times I feel I fall short by not getting others to share in the work, and then I feel isolated and sometimes overburdened. Also, occasionally I get excited about so many issues and needs, I’m ineffective in acting on any of them. I am trying to be more aware of attaining balance in my efforts; my growing attention to building relationships in the work is very helpful here.

Mark Young: Do our lives have a divine purpose or are we just specks of dust in the universe? No matter which answer is true, you can’t go wrong by reaching out to help other living creatures on Earth. I can think of no better way of doing God’s will than performing *mitzvot* and acts of *gemillut chasadim* (lovingkindness).

For me, one of the most attractive aspects of Reform Judaism is its emphasis on social action. Before I became a Jew by choice, participating

with my synagogue in supporting food banks, homeless shelters, coat drives, etc. gave me time and space to become familiar with practical Jewish values

and teachings.

These days, one of the greatest joys for my wife Jane and me is when our 24-year-old musician son visits children’s convalescent hospitals with us, our temple’s *mitzvah* group, and recently our cantor and junior choir. Many of the patients we see have profound congenital disabilities and will never

fully recover. Some people think they’re unable to communicate, but we’ve learned this is far from the truth.

Our son finds ways to make contact, soul-to-soul, by singing and playing music. So-called “unresponsive” children begin to smile, laugh, clap, move, vocalize. One teenager was even moved to write a beautiful poem, which Harrison set to music on the spot. The kids let us know they don’t want the music to end, so the Youngs are usually the last ones to leave. At these times we

THE RABBIS SPEAK

“We are obligated to pursue *tzedek*, justice and righteousness, and to narrow the gap between the affluent and the poor, to act against discrimination and oppression, to pursue peace, to protect the earth’s biodiversity and natural resources, and to redeem those in physical, economic and spiritual bondage.”

—A Statement of Principles for Reform Judaism, CCAR, 1999