TZEDAKAH IN AN URBAN TEMPLE

THESIS FOR FTA

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SEPTEMBER 1995
Our lives are sustained by three things - Torah, Avodah and Gemilut Chasadim. Gemilut Chasadim, performing acts of loving kindness, is a mitzvah that we can all perform if we take the time to be sensitive to others. Our Rabbis teach that this is greater than tzedakah in three ways:

An act of tzedakah involves only one's money - - gemilut chasadim can involve both money or one's personal service.

Tzedakah can be given only to the poor - - gemilut chasadim can be done both for the rich and for the poor.

Tzedakah can be given only to the living - - gemilut chasadim be done both for the living and for the dead.  

Jewish legend says that the world is filled with nitzotzot, sparks of God's light and with klipot, useless pieces of broken shell. We are left to figure out which is which. Sefer Yetzirah says even more. Jews have a lot to do. We have to gather the sparks of God's light and do tikun olam, repair of the world. The Jew is supposed to be a fixer - - God's partner in completing creation.

In Kaballist writings, the Sefer Yetzirah states that there are ten spheres or numbers, (sefirot) each one, succeeding from the preceding one, from the most spiritual to the least spiritual, and through which the divine manifests itself in the world. They are Crown (Ein Sof), Wisdom, Intelligence, Greatness, Strength, Beauty, Firmness, Splendor, Foundation and Kingdom. Kingdom created the physical world. Through these spheres God rules the world and His activities are explained. Man can achieve union with God through his acts of piety and moral conduct. Man is judged by his soul and the soul which remains pure after its contact with the body becomes a part of the world ruled by the Ten Spheres after death. Evil is the negation of good and can be overcome by prayer, repentance, self affliction and strict observance of the Laws.

Anshe Emeth Memorial Temple was founded in 1859 and is located in New Brunswick, New Jersey, an urban area with a population of approximately 40,000. About fifteen years ago the
congregation made the decision to remain in New Brunswick and at the same time to continue to draw its members from the surrounding suburban communities. Tremendous population growth has occurred in this area over the past twenty-five years. Anshe Emeth has grown from a membership of 350 families twenty years ago to 700 families. New Brunswick has been undergoing a renewal during the past twenty years, but this is a slow process. The urban problems of today's city exist in the New Brunswick area. When the congregation chose to stay in New Brunswick, it accepted the responsibility to participate in the life of the community.

Our senior rabbi and lay leaders knew that in order to attract congregants from the outlying suburban areas, Anshe Emeth would have to be a very special place, with programs and educational opportunities that were not offered in the "neighborhood congregations." One of the unique programs is our Caring Community program and now our Tzedakah Committee. This commitment to *Gemilut Chasadim* and *Tikkun Olam* sets Anshe Emeth apart from the other area temples. Each of the temples has some programs, but the range is far broader in scope and involvement at Anshe Emeth.

The community programs that we have adopted are a wonderful way for new and seasoned congregants to become involved. Young, old, single, married, families, from all of our socio-economic levels meet as equals and feel wonderful about being able to participate and contribute.

About fifteen years ago we established a Caring Community Committee. This committee reaches out to the Jewish community by visiting the sick, shut-ins, helping congregants who are in need of support (rides to doctors, visits, rides to the supermarket, shopping for those unable to do their own marketing, and Holiday food collection and distribution of baskets.) It became apparent to our rabbi and some of the congregants that there was a need for lots more to be done, that the Caring Community Committee was not expanding its program, and that new people were not
joining this committee and new ideas and programs were not being added. There was not growth on an individual basis or that of the committee.

In 1990, Rabbi Bennett Miller, the senior rabbi at Anshe Emeth, delivered a High Holiday sermon in which he called upon the members of Anshe Emeth to help set a standard of excellence in living for the generations to come. He expressed his concern that many had experienced great increases in personal wealth during the '80's but that we had become the most selfish generation of the twentieth century. He called for the establishment of the Tzedek Society. He asked everyone to set a standard so that "in years to come it will be said that this was the generation of Jews who battle for life, that in 1990 a call went out to restore the dignity of life for justice, Jewish values and heritage. In New Brunswick, in a place called Anshe Emeth, the people heard that call, they responded, and they prevailed."

Following this sermon several congregants who wanted to do more and were ready to assume leadership roles in such a venture, met with Rabbi Miller and agreed to invite Danny Siegel, the "mitzvah maven," to be our scholar in residence for a week-end. Danny spoke at services Friday evening, to our Saturday morning Torah Study group, to the religious school students on Saturday morning and to the Hebrew high school students Sunday morning. Our religious school students have a strong curriculum on tzedakah each year and so were thrilled to meet Danny Siegel and hear about new programs that they could adopt. Their parents were excited about being able to become involved in a meaningful community program. They were just waiting for the guidance and inspiration to start such a program.

Shortly after the scholar in residence weekend, the first meeting of a new committee was held, with two congregants serving as co-chairs. They chose to call themselves the Tzedakah Committee, although their activities go far beyond the collection and distribution of Tzedakah funds. Their goal is truly Tikun Olam. The early committee had 23 members. There are currently 10 active
members. Through the year, approximately 75 people participate in Tzedakah Committee programs.

Using the ideas that were generated that week-end and some that came out of pet interests of the committee and brainstorming, the committee set about its task of Tikun Olam. At its early meetings, the group divided into subcommittees to decide what they would like to accomplish and then researched needs in their area of interest and organizations that they might work with to meet those needs. Many of the committee members are involved in community service through participation outside the Temple and so were aware of some of the needs of the community. They also used Danny Siegel's books and newsletters as a guide for new programs to initiate in our community (such as cooking and serving at the shelter) and as a resource for existing programs to support financially, including Yad Sarah, Alyn Orthopedic Hospital for Children, and Dorot. Before a new program is begun members of the committee meet with a representative of the group they will be working with and visit the site. They then report back to the committee. Proposals or requests for money are presented to the committee for its approval.

Some of the programs were easier to get started and provided more immediate satisfaction. Some of the original suggestions have not been implemented but remain goals of the committee.

In its initial stages, the committee met monthly. It now meets approximately every other month from September through May. Sub committees meet as their activities require. Now in its fourth year, the Tzedakah Committee continues to look for new needs and outlets for its energy. New ideas are presented for approval to the committee and then to the Rabbi and Officers or Board of Trustees if the nature of the program requires. When there is an emergency need, such as hurricane relief, committee members step in to action quickly.
MITZVAH CRIB - - We became aware that when abused women leave their homes, they leave without the essentials for themselves and their children. In the entry foyer, we set up a portacrib which we call our Mitzvah Crib. Congregants are encouraged to bring baby food, diapers, and new and nearly new clothing and equipment. Members of the Tzedakah Committee sort through, repair, wash and distribute these donations to a shelter for battered women and children, Jewish Family Service and to New Brunswick High School which has a program that enables and encourages teen parents to come back to school and get their high school diplomas.

FOOD DRIVE - - The Temple also keeps a container in the entry foyer for food donations that many congregants contribute to on a regular basis. Donated kosher food is given to Jewish Family Service; non kosher food is given to two food banks in the New Brunswick area.

RECYCLED CLOTHING - - One of our congregants who was a divorcee and needed to go back to work brought to our attention the need that she experienced in not having the proper clothing for an interview. To many people who have been out of the work force this is a major obstacle. In October of our first year we had a clothing drive for ten days, during which we collected career clothing for men and women and outerwear. Clothing was brought in on hangers during specified hours. We separated the clothing by size and then asked area agencies to give us sizes and items needed by their clients and encouraged them to have their clients come over and make selections of the items that they needed. One of our congregants stored the clothing that was not selected and we distributed it during the season as it was needed.

We also worked with the local soup kitchen. Several of our Tzedakah Committee members went over to the soup kitchen when the weather got cooler and distributed clothing at lunch time to those in need. Some of the children’s clothing that had been contributed to our Mitzvah Crib was given to the young children. A particular need for the young children was shoes. We sent a flyer home with the religious school students who responded by bringing in their old shoes and boots. When
we knew of particular sizes needed, we contacted congregants who might be discarding these sizes. We also had a drive in the spring. We were very specific that we were collecting only seasonal items in good condition.

The following spring we decided not to run a clothing drive, but instead to meet the needs of those with special needs. We held a Chinese Auction, BIDS FOR KIDS, on a Saturday night in May. Donations of money and articles were sought from our congregants and the general community. Money raised at this event was used to purchase clothing for handicapped children in our area. We discovered that there is a population that regularly attends Chinese Auctions, so that we had support of the community at large as well as the congregation. Over $2,000 was raised and we were able to clothe 20 children and provide some holiday gift items.

HOMELESS/NEEDY - - Through our Caring Community and Clergy Interfaith Council we had established a program of housing men for whom there was no room at the city shelter. This remains a program of the Caring Community, but our Tzedakah Committee now sponsors a Sunday "home cooked" meal twice a month at the soup kitchen. We generally prepare and serve salad, a hot main dish, such as marinated roast chicken or meat loaf, rice, green vegetable, dessert and beverage. We had so many volunteers that a once a month program was expanded to twice a month. Volunteers come in Friday morning to marinate the chicken, Sunday afternoon to cook and a third group serves the meal and visits with the men. We also now serve at the family shelter on the same Sunday and have added a week-day when we serve only. Families, our youth group and chavurot have chosen to assume the full responsibility for some of these days. This program is funded by the sale of House pins which we order from Lucinda, Inc. in Portland, Maine and sell through volunteers and our Judaica Shop, and by donations to the Tzedakah Fund.

PEDIATRIC AIDS PROJECT - - Prior to the formation of the Tzedakah Committee, a congregant who is a quilter formed a quilting group which met monthly at the Temple to quilt and then donate
their quilts to the Pediatric Aids program at one of our local hospitals. She continues to do this and has encouraged congregants to become involved in this project. We continue to sponsor the Children's Quilt Project which makes quilts for children with AIDS. Several quilts have been made by the children in our Religious School. Some of our congregants visit the patients and their families at the hospital. We donated a VCR, encouraged our children to donate their gently used books and VCR tapes when they came to the Temple Purim Carnival (their material reward was two free game tickets). When a local library heard of our project, they donated two large boxes of books from their "Books to Keep" program: As a result of this successful program, every child who attended the AIDS Project's spring party received a book and there were still books to stock the program's shelves to be used by the children when they have their hospital visits.

We continue to sponsor the Children's Quilt Project which makes quilts for children with AIDS.

BONE MARROW DRIVE - - Before the formation of the Tzedakah Committee the congregation had sponsored a bone marrow screening and screened about 600 participants. Because of the success of this drive and the support of the Tzedakah Committee, we chose to accept the challenge to sponsor a drive when we were approached by the family of Jay Feinberg, a New Jerseyan who was seeking a compatible marrow donor. The screening, which was covered by a grant, added 265 potential donors to the National Marrow Donor Registry.

JOB-A-THON - - In June 1992, the greater Middlesex County area was suffering from the economic downswing. Anshe Emeth joined with the Jewish Family Service to sponsor a Job-A-Thon. The goal was to reach Jews throughout the area to ask them if they needed or could provide a job for someone who was currently unemployed. Forms were sent to congregants and telephone calls were made on Sunday and several evenings. Jewish Family Service then matched applicants to those who had opportunities. At the time, 5% of our congregants were dealing with unemployment and there were also many recently-arrived émigrés from Russia.
SERVING ISRAEL

TREES - - Anshe Emeth has established a grove, but realizing the continuous need for trees in Israel and with the hope of expanding our grove, the Tzedakah Committee has undertaken additional efforts to encourage the purchase of trees. The Committee has encouraged the purchase of large blocks of trees to commemorate a special occasion and two families have used trees as a way of honoring each person who has attended their children's B'nai Mitzvah. The certificates were on the table of each guest or used as placecards. We have a sample of each certificate so that congregants can pick the certificate that is most appropriate for the occasion.

A SQUARE FOOT OF THE FUTURE - - A project that has not yet gotten started, but that we are enthusiastic about is A SQUARE FOOT OF THE FUTURE. Because housing sites for Russian and Ethiopian immigrants are so desperately needed in Israel we hope to work with the Jewish National Fund on a pilot project for raising the money needed to underwrite the development of several sites. The cost is $5,000 per site and we are working on ideas that would enable our congregants to purchase parcels as small as a square foot toward the development of additional homesites.

ADOPTING ETHIOPIAN FAMILIES - - Barbara Ribakove Gordon from the North American Conference on Ethiopian Jewry spoke at Shabbat services one Friday evening. She had brought baskets made by Ethiopian women, which she had available for sale. The funds from the sale were then returned to these women for their personal use.

We were so moved by her description of the Ethiopians' plight that we then chose to work with the American Rabbinic Network for Ethiopian Jewry, "Mishpacha L'Mishpachah" a family to family absorption program. Members of the congregation contribute $10 to $20 a month, which goes directly to the adopted families. There are no overhead costs to this program. The support for this
program has been so great that we have been able to adopt two families and send them each $100 a month. This helps them meet their mortgage, utilities, food, clothing, and school fees.

ENGLISH RESOURCE ROOM - - Because people know about our Tzedakah Committee, we are frequently called when there is a special need. For instance, we were contacted by Danny Siegel when he knew that an English teacher in Israel needed a small amount of funding to purchase additional supplies for her classroom. A relatively small check enabled her to purchase educational English games for the classroom's "English Fun Room." The children now choose to spend their recess in this area and are enjoying and learning from the additional supplies that the teacher was able to purchase.

The Tzedakah program is supported by contributions to the Tzedakah Fund. We do not budget for the functioning of the committee. Our goal is not to build up a large reserve, but rather to be able to get money to those who need it. The committee meets regularly and makes decisions on the distribution of its funds.

Early in the life of the Committee, the Board of Trustees approved the establishment of the Tzedakah Fund. Initially contributions were limited to $36.00 a donation because there was concern that this fund would pull money that would otherwise have gone into other Temple funds. Once this fear was allayed the limit was removed.

A new project for Purim, the sale of Shalach Manot baskets through flyers and personal contact, has been an additional source of income. The Committee delivers these baskets on Purim. The profits from this project and the sale of House Pins fund our Provide-A-Meal project at the soup kitchen and shelter for women and children.
Some beneficiaries of the funds have been:

Lifeline for the Aged in Israel - gives meaningful work to the elderly

Friends of Jay Feinberg - bone marrow donor testing

Yad Sarah - lends medical equipment (wheelchairs, crutches, oxygen, cardiac apnea monitors for high risk infants) free of charge and is staffed by volunteers. It has more than 60 distributing stations throughout Israel

Alyn Orthopedic Hospital for Children - takes in children who have been abandoned because of their crippling conditions -- The children are cared for in every way, and trained to be contributing members of society

Kol Ami Hurricane Relief Fund - Florida’s Kol Ami acted as the conduit for providing relief to the victims of Hurricane Andrew - We also boxed some of the clothing from our clothing drives and shipped it on a truck sponsored by one of the local radio stations to Florida

Dorot - provides a range of social services for elderly Jews on the Upper West Side of Manhattan -- Projects include friendly visitors, a homelessness prevention project, a kosher food program and educational and cultural activities

The AIDS Interfaith Network of New Jersey - provides AIDS/HIV prevention educational programs in religious school settings and together with local synagogues and churches develops direct service programs for people affected by AIDS/HIV disease

Trevor’s Place - When he was 11, Trevor Ferrell began working with homeless people. His campaign has led to a nightly food run, a shelter for men and another for women and children, day care, and other activities. His efforts show the difference that one person’s caring can make.
The JFTY Urban Mitzvah Corps - a six-week summer residential program that has given Jewish teens a greater understanding of social justice within the context of Reform Judaism; days are spent volunteering in the New Brunswick area with the handicapped, homeless, and elderly; evenings are devoted to educational programs focusing on important Jewish, social and ethical issues. Participants also learn to translate social awareness into political action

Parent-Infant Care Center at New Brunswick High School - "PIC-C" makes it possible for teen age mothers to complete their high school education; the result of collaborative effort between business, civic organizations, and mental health, educational, and social services, the Center provides comprehensive services including parenting education, medical referral, and help dealing with needs such as housing and job training

Home Sharing Project - brings together people looking for housing and those who need to share their homes; the majority of those helped are senior citizens and women who are widowed and divorced. Unless they are disabled or retired, most of the clients are working but do not make enough either to afford their own housing or to keep the housing they have. Home sharing screens both providers and seekers, and matches them up.

The Tzedakah Committee has been developing a cookbook which will be printed in honor of Anshe Emeth's 135th anniversary. The book will include recipes for the full range of categories, as well as anecdotes, fond memories of holidays, and suggested holiday menus. The proceeds will help local Jewish families in need by providing supermarket scrip to use at area supermarkets.

Our hopes for the near future are to establish a program of free legal assistance to those who are in need of it; form a corps of literacy volunteers to work in the community; and set up a program of
matching volunteers to those who need assistance in household chores such as maintaining their lawns, putting out trash, cleaning cabinets, snow removal, clean up/fix up.

Because of our location in an urban area, some of the programs that we have adopted are unique; some however, answer a universal need. Most temples could adopt our program to their own community's needs. We sponsor the homeless shelter only in the cold months; in warmer months, many of the homeless men prefer not to go to a formal shelter, but rather to sleep outside. We do continue the meal program throughout the year. There are always programs in need of additional volunteers and most community agencies have lots of wishes that they want to come true, but are in need of people and funds. Perhaps your Temple could make some of those dreams come true.

This paper was written to show how Anshe Emeth has worked toward Tikkun Olam and to give other congregations ideas on how they can meet their own community's needs. Some of the projects can be done by the whole family, some require just a few hours and others a longer commitment, while some require only that a check be written. This is truly a program that can meet each volunteer's needs. Some of the programs that we have pursued can be done in almost any community; some are unique to the North or urban areas.

My role as the Administrator has been to coordinate the use of the building for meetings and programs, confirm that the activity is in fact taking place and that supplies are ready, make sure that volunteers are ready and present for preparation, see that the committee chairpeople get reports of money coming into the fund and that it is then distributed according to policy and when needed, and that the funds are distributed on a regular basis, since this committee's goal is not to build the fund and gain interest on the money, but rather to distribute the funds regularly.

These programs certainly serve as a means of attracting new members and keeping people involved in the Temple. The Tzedakah program is one of the things that makes Anshe Emeth unique. We
tell all prospective members about this program and the Tzedakah newsletters are included in the prospective member packet. Once new members join the Temple, their names are sent to the Tzedakah committee chairpeople so that they can contact the new family and encourage their participation in these activities. We believe that the positive impact on the membership will be long range in that members will continue to be involved at the Temple after their children have gone through Bar and Bat Mitzvah training and will feel the need and desire to continue to be affiliated and participants.

3 See Appendix for summary of revenue and expenses.

Cherniss, Deborah. Personal Interview. Tzedakah Committee. 06 July 1995.

"Clothed with Care." Tzedakah Newsletter. Anshe Emeth Memorial Temple #1, 2, 3 & 4.


APPENDIX

SUMMARY OF REVENUES OF EXPENSES - FISCAL 1994

TZEDAKAH FUND

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<td>Revenues (Donations, House Pins,</td>
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<td>Shalach Manot)</td>
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EXPENSES

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