Feeding the World with Jewish Wisdom

A look at American Jewish World Service

by Erica Lyons
There seems to be an implicit understanding that our planet is divided into two entirely separate worlds, there is an ‘us’ and a ‘them’. The third world is the ‘them’, which we can tune out, address or not address, engage with or ignore. But Ruth Messinger, CEO/President of American Jewish World Service (AJWS), an international development organization motivated by Judaism’s imperative to pursue justice, does not divide the world in that way. As she explains, as Jews we simply can’t do this. “Jewish texts are very clear about this. Jews have a clear obligation to work towards global justice, to help both Jews and non-Jews. Everyone has been made in God’s image (b’tselem elohim).”

Listening to Ruth Messinger of AJWS espouse Jewish wisdom and Talmud, on the surface the way her message is expressed sounds different from the Ruth Messinger of New York City politics where she first made a name for herself. But even though her diction is much more haimisha, the message is very much the same. As she explains, it was her years of experience and advocacy within New York City that paved the way for her pursuit of global justice. Many of the skills she relies on in doing international development work for AJWS, came directly from her years working in government. Messinger made a seamless move from city development to global development, seeing the former as more of a continuation of her raison d’être but just on a different scale.

“A big piece of what I did in New York City politics was to look at pockets of poverty in a rich city and try to understand how government could empower these people to do for themselves.”

While the phrase tikkun olam might not have been included in her New York City campaigns, her core values have carried through.

Often though it is not only about the work that is being done but also how it is approached. Messinger, and the organization as a whole, approach their work with some of the world’s neediest and most marginalized people with a sense of true humility. “Don’t go and tell everyone what they need,” seems to be Messinger’s mantra.

And everyone is their focus. “When one billion people go to bed hungry, we need to talk about ethics. This is a global issue.” So AJWS thinks globally, operating in countries throughout the Americas, Asia and Africa but effect real change in small communities through grassroots efforts and by working with over 200 local NGOs in a diverse range of projects.

Asia is of course a large focus for them. Regionally, they are primarily focused...
Their grant making is guided by several main principles. They strongly believe that grassroots organizations are in the best position to evaluate and articulate their own needs. Likewise, they are the ones able to put these programs into place and drive them. Real change is made when it comes from within through the empowerment of marginalized people. In the same vein, AJWS recognizes that while women statistically are more marginalized than their male counterparts and suffer more from the effects of poverty, hunger and deprivation, when empowered they are real change makers. Unfortunately though, issues of gender-based violence and oppression, particularly in developing countries, often impede women from becoming the positive force for change that can improve their societies. AJWS is very vocal about the need to address issues like gender-based violence and oppression in order to overcome the obstacles they create in the fight for global justice. They know that nothing
can be gained from silence. They aim to inspire Jews to take part in the fight for a just world by becoming advocates and by helping to raise awareness of these critical issues.

Messinger highlighted recent political gains and progress within Burma in 2011 as a harbinger of positive changes for local peoples’ lives. The organization has been working with ethnic minorities and communities affected by the political crisis. And while the battle for human rights and justice in Burma is by no means over, AJWS volunteers are helping by working with organizations on the Thai-Burma border that provide humanitarian assistance to refugees as they look towards a better future.

While grant making is a central function of AJWS, there are also hands-on opportunities available in Asia. They have sent skilled volunteers to India, Cambodia and Thailand to build the organizational capacity of its grantee partners. These volunteer assignments involve staff training, project-based work and, in some cases, high-level strategic planning.

But for Messinger and AJWS, their focus is not exclusively the developing world. They seek to inspire Jews in America to understand how Jewish tradition binds them to this obligation of working towards creating a just world. By infusing textual and source study into their programming in the United States, they are able to inspire others to share in their pursuit of global justice. Sharing their understanding of the Jewish imperative to repair the world is the key to instilling sustainability among their core constituents.

It isn’t just that they integrate their volunteer service programming with Jewish text study, nor that they encourage and facilitate dialogue about Jewish values, that makes them a Jewish organization. Even without this important educational arm, they would still very much be a Jewish organization. For Messinger, the link is crystal clear. Their quest to alleviate world hunger, poverty and oppression is inextricably tied to Jewish values.

As for the positive PR attached to repairing the world and advocating for global justice couched in terms of a most definitely Jewish imperative, Messinger is seemingly somewhat indifferent, but she acknowledges that it certainly is to some extent on the mind of the foundation and on the mind of some donors. After all, a bit of positive PR never hurt anyone.

But speaking with Messinger, it is clear that it really isn’t about positive PR or fancy campaign slogans. This isn’t an organization that does lip service. They put their money where there mouth is. AJWS proves that advocacy couched in Jewish wisdom is a powerful force for change.

To learn more about AJWS and the incredible work they are doing, visit them at http://ajws.org.