

Orthodox students are embracing social action

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Yeshiva University students getting a lesson on how to repair and paint streets in urban Houston. (Yeshiva University)

NEW YORK (JTA) — A few months after Hurricane Ike hit Galveston, Texas, in September 2008, Yeshiva University student David Eckstein went to the devastated area with 32 other students to help rebuild homes.

“The doors hadn’t been opened since the hurricane. We took the house apart and started rebuilding it, trying to rebuild someone’s life,” said Eckstein, 23, of West Hempstead, N.Y.

“When you picture something on the news, it’s hard to imagine it, but when you go in person to see the damaged that was done and the lives that were ruined, it’s not just the impact you have on them but the impact is much stronger on the volunteers.”

Eckstein felt so moved by the experience — and volunteering at California soup kitchens the year before — that now he is spending a year as a Yeshiva University presidential fellow working with the school’s Center for the Jewish Future, a department founded in 2005 to train future communal leaders and engage them in various causes within the Jewish world and beyond.

“I think we have to realize we have a responsibility to the world around us, that we’re not just people of change for ourselves and our community,” Eckstein said.

He added that the biblical commandment of tikkun olam — repairing the world — creates an obligation to help all people, “even though they’re not Jewish.”

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To some, such a phrase might sound somewhat derogatory. In this case, however, it reflects a sea change of thinking in the Orthodox community — an increasing focus on causes impacting the wider society.

While the particularist value of *chesed* — helping out your fellow Jew — has long been a mainstay of the Orthodox community, the emphasis on universal causes is something more often associated with Reform Judaism, nondenominational Jewish groups and unaffiliated Jews. But in recent years the next generation of Orthodox Jews has increasingly seized on opportunities to tackle wider issues — to help people regardless of their Jewishness — and find ways to infuse such efforts with religious meaning.

“The majority of the Orthodox community have in the past been more parochially minded,” said Shmuly Yanklowitz, founder and director of Uri L’Tzedek, an Orthodox social justice movement guided by Torah values, with a special focus on ensuring that workers are treated fairly.

That’s starting to change, he said.

Students at yeshiva high schools, colleges and post-college programs are drawn increasingly to programs that take on social justice issues, including helping victims of natural disasters, aiding the poor and underserved and protecting the environment.

Last year, for example, seniors at Maimonides High School in suburban Boston spent their February vacation helping victims of Hurricane Katrina; in 2006 more than 300 Yeshiva University students attended the Save Darfur rally in Washington, the largest contingent from New York; the Orthodox Union’s NCSY youth groups are beginning to take part in volunteer missions to help the poor in cities such as Atlanta and Albany. Plus, in the past few years, in addition to Uri L’Tzedek, several new Orthodox organizations have been launched to deal with various issues, including Canfei Nesharim, which focuses on the environment.

Rabbi David Saperstein, director of the Reform movement’s Religious Action Center in Washington for the past 30 years, said this trend among the Orthodox was the product of an increasingly globalized world, where it’s not possible to remain concerned with only one’s own community.

“Some of the crucial universal social justice issues of our time — the global climate, the economic crisis, genocidal activities such as Darfur and the dangers of nuclear proliferation — these are issues that have captured the moral imagination of every segment of the Jewish community,” Saperstein said.

Others believe that young religious people, often from affluent communities, want the chance to help those much less fortunate than themselves.

Richard Joel, who headed the college-based group Hillel before becoming president of Yeshiva University and launching its Center for the Jewish Future, stressed the importance of tying Orthodox social action initiatives to Jewish learning and values.

“There was a period of time [when I was working at Hillel] that people thought, you want young people to be Jewish? Engage them in acts of tikkun olam. But that makes them better people, not necessarily better Jews,” Joel said.

For less religious and unaffiliated students on college campuses, social justice efforts provided an opportunity to teach people about Judaism, Joel said. But in the Orthodox world, the Torah needs to be used to teach students the value of social justice.

“Our students know Torah, they know what it means to be a passionate Jew — now they need to be exposed to the fact that knowledge can be a tremendous force for remaking their own community and the world in general,” Joel said.

“It’s powerful to be interacting with people who have experience suffering and are living vastly different lives than you are,” said Shani Mintz, 23, a graduate of YU’s Stern College for women.

Mintz works in Harlem classrooms through City Year, a one-year AmeriCorps service program.

“Social justice is spreading more, beyond just the Jewish community, where there’s a need,” said Mintz, who spent a summer on Abraham’s Vision, with Israelis and Palestinians, and a summer on a program in Uganda run by the American Jewish World Service. “It helps you learn not to take things for granted.”

Rabbi Ethan Katz, the NCSY regional director in New Jersey, said that volunteering in disaster

areas and in impoverished communities in the United States has been a life-changing experience for every high school participant. He returned recently from a five-day mission to Buffalo, N.Y., with some yeshiva and public high school students, and is about to head to Atlanta.

“These kids used to see a disaster on TV and change the channel,” Katz said. “Now when something is going on they call us and say, ‘What can we do? Can we give money? I want to help.’ ”

The element of being a "light unto the nations" is also part of religious social justice programs.

“The effects will be felt not just for one day or one week, but for years to come,” Katz tells the participants. “One day the grandmother whose house we rebuilt will tell her children that 20 Jews with ‘yamahas’ on their heads came and rebuilt this house, working in the rain.’

"The sight of Jews working together with homeless people will last forever. They can have an impact on the world.”