

## **Tikkun Olam: Is it our place to repair the world?**

**Dr. Kate Simpson, "Is International Volunteering the New Colonialism?" from *Lonely Planet - Volunteer: A Traveller's Guide to Making a Difference Around the World***

The question of whether volunteering is the new colonialism gets asked a lot, and the short answers are: 'yes', 'no', 'sometimes' and 'maybe'. International volunteering is part of a long tradition of people from the West setting off to help or change the countries of the Global South (aka the developing world) and have adventures while they do it. Where once these people were missionaries and soldiers, colonialists and explorers, teachers and entrepreneurs - now they are international volunteers.

If volunteers travel in the belief that they have little to learn and a lot to give, then they do risk being little more than 'New Age colonialists'. No-one becomes an international volunteer for purely altruistic reasons: they also do it because it is exciting, because they might learn something, because they want to meet new people who live differently and because, just maybe, they might have something to offer. By acknowledging why you volunteer, you are telling our hosts that they are people you can learn from and with, not that they should be the grateful recipients of your altruism. You ask them to be your teachers, instead of forcing them to be your students.

So, whether international volunteering is the new colonialism or not is, in large part, down to the attitudes of you, the volunteer, and the organisation you go with. If you don't want to be a 21st-century colonialist, rule out organisations that suggest you'll be 'saving the world' or give a patronising image of the developing world. Then question yourself. Be open about why you want to be an international volunteer and what you have to learn from those you visit. Avoiding being a New Age colonialist will take some effort and research, and will require getting rid of many of the usual preconceptions about the developing world.

### **Why give at all?**

#### **Isaiah 1:17**

Learn to do good, seek justice, relieve the oppressed,  
bring justice for the orphan, seek defense for the widow.

#### **The Ari (Rabbi Isaac Luria), 1534-1572**

And when enough holy sparks have been gathered, the broken vessels will be restored, and tikkun olam, the repair of the world, awaited so long, will finally be complete. Therefore it should be the aim of everyone to raise these sparks from wherever they are imprisoned and to elevate them to holiness by the power of their soul.

#### **R. Yitzhak Aharon Korff, (Zvihil-Mezbuz Rebbe of Boston) "The fallacy, delusion and myth of Tikkun Olam", Jewish Advocate of Boston, 2013**

We cannot, and are not instructed to, save the world, or even to repair it. Judaism teaches no such thing. Rather, we are instructed to conduct ourselves properly, to observe the Mitzvos...

and in that way to contribute to society and civilization both by example and through practice and action.

For Jews those Mitzvos include not simply socially or politically correct precepts such as giving charity and engaging in political action, but also observance of the Sabbath, dietary restrictions (Kashrus), daily prayer, and other commandments... [some Jews] substitute the false panacea of... Tikkun Olam for the authenticity of true Judaism... to avoid their actual responsibilities as Jews to observe the Torah and the commandments.

... The only honest and authentic Jewish way to [engage in Tikkun Olam] is to encourage observance of the Torah across the entire spectrum of the Jewish Community. That in fact is actually what our responsibility is, nothing more and nothing less, and the rest is up to G-d...

How should we give?

### **Maimonides Eight Levels of Tzedaka, Mishneh Torah, 12th century Egypt**

1. The greatest level, above which there is no other, is to strengthen the name of another Jew by giving him a present or loan, or making a partnership with him, or finding him a job in order to strengthen his hand until he needs no longer [beg from] people. For it is said, *You shall strengthen the stranger and the dweller in your midst and live with him* {Leviticus 25:35} that is to say, strengthen him until he needs no longer fall [upon the mercy of the community] or be in need.
2. Below this is the one who gives tzedaka to the poor, but does not know to whom he gives, nor does the recipient know his benefactor. For this is performing a mitzva for the sake of Heaven. This is like the Secret [Anonymous] Office in the Temple. There the righteous gave secretly, and the good poor drew sustenance anonymously. This is much like giving tzedaka through a tzedaka box. One should not put into the box unless he knows that the one responsible for the box is faithful and wise and a proper leader like Rabbi Hananya ben Teradyon.
3. Below this is one who knows to whom he gives, but the recipient does not know his benefactor. The greatest sages used to walk about in secret and put coins into the doors of the poor. It is worthy and truly good to do this if those who are responsible for collecting tzedaka are not trustworthy.
4. Below this is one who does not know to whom he gives, but the poor person does know his benefactor. The greatest sages used to pack coins into their scarves and roll them up over their backs, and the poor would come and pick [the coins out of the scarves] so that they would not be ashamed.
5. Below this is one who gives to the poor person before being asked.
6. Below this is one who gives to the poor person after being asked.
7. Below this is one who gives to the poor person gladly and with a smile.
8. Below this is one who gives to the poor person unwillingly.

### **Babylonian Talmud, Tractate Ketubot, 67b**

Mar Ukba had a poor man in his neighborhood into whose door-socket he used to throw four zuz every day. One day [the poor man] thought: I will go and see who does me this kindness. On that day [it happened] that Mar Ukba was late at the house of study and his wife was coming home with him. As soon as [the poor man] saw them moving the door he went out after them,

but they fled from him and ran into a furnace from which the fire had just been swept. Mar Ukba's feet were burning and his wife said to him: Raise your feet and put them on mine. As he was upset [lit. his mind was weakened] she said to him, 'I am usually at home and my benefactions are near. And what [was the reason for] all that? Because...Better had a man thrown himself into a fiery furnace than publicly put his neighbor to shame...

### **Babylonian Talmud, Tractate-Megillah, 24b**

"Rabbi Yosee said: 'All my life I was unable to understand the verse (Deuteronomy 28:29) that says: 'And you will fumble in the afternoon just as a blind man gropes during in the darkness' (he asks) why should it make a difference whether the blind walks in darkness or light?! But then this one time I was walking in the pitch black of night and darkness, and I saw a blind man, and he was walking on the way with a torch in his hand. I said to him 'my son, this torch, what is its purpose for you?' and the blind man responded 'whenever I have this torch in my hand, other people can see me, and rescue me from the openings, thorns and lightning.

### **Rabbi Shelom of Karlin, 18th Century**

If you want to raise a person from mud and filth, do not think it is enough to keep standing on top and reaching a helping hand down to the person. You must go all the way down yourself, down into mud and filth. Then take hold of the person with strong hands and pull the person and yourself out into the light.

### **Marian Bergman, American World Jewish Service**

We also need to listen to those we are helping, and ask them what it is specifically that they need. We can't be paternalistic, and we can't tell them that we're experts in development, because as we know – we're not. Nobody is. We need to get them involved from the bottom up. I feel very strongly that we ought not to impose our values on those we are trying to help and that we should not be telling the recipients of tikun olam what they need. Rather the recipient partners should tell us what they need. There needs to be true collaboration in establishing the agenda of what can work within the local context. The local context must be the frame of reference.

### To whom should we give?

### **Babylonian Talmud, Gittin 61a**

Our Rabbis taught: We sustain the non-Jewish poor with the Jewish poor, visit the non-Jewish sick with the Jewish sick, and bury the non-Jewish dead with the Jewish dead, for the sake of peace.

### **Babylonian Talmud, Baba Metzia 17a**

Rabbi Joseph taught: "If you lend money to any of my people that are poor with you" (Exodus 22:24) - [This teaches, if the choice lies between] a Jew and a non-Jew, a Jew comes first; the poor or the rich, the poor come first; your poor [i.e. your relatives] and the poor of your town, your poor come first; the poor of your city and the poor of another town, the poor of your own town come first.

## Rabbi Yisrael Salanter/Unknown Monk

When I was a young man, I wanted to change the world. I found it was difficult to change the world, so I tried to change my nation. When I found I couldn't change the nation, I began to focus on my town. I couldn't change the town and as an older man, I tried to change my family. Now, as an old man, I realize the only thing I can change is myself, and suddenly I realize that if long ago I had changed myself, I could have made an impact on my family. My family and I could have made an impact on our town. Their impact could have changed the nation and I could indeed have changed the world.

## Jewish Guidelines for Ethical Volunteering

### Repair the World

Authentic Service:

Participants engage in service that addresses **genuine and unmet community needs**.

- The program works **in collaboration with community partners** to establish a shared vision and set common goals to address community needs
- Service has **demonstrable positive impact** on communities and/or individuals served
- Service **outcomes are valued** by those being served
- Service is **appropriate for participants' skills**
- **Sufficient service work** is available to involve all participants throughout the program.