Jewish Values and Heritage

In 1938, as the Holocaust was unfolding in Europe, the Vocational Service of the Associated Jewish Philanthropies of Boston (now CJP) was founded to assist Jewish refugees fleeing Nazi persecution in Germany. The Vocational Service helped refugees gain skills, find employment, continue careers, and begin to build new lives here in America. For over 80 years, Jewish Vocational Service’s (JVS) mission and services have been guided by a set of core values of social justice, the dignity of each person, and the value of work, which while universal, are deeply rooted in traditional Jewish teachings. JVS’s Jewish values are important to understand and explain because they are our legacy from the Jewish community, inspiring our outreach and service to people of all backgrounds and identities.

JVS’s mission in the Jewish and broader Boston community stands on the foundation of several important core values:

Tikkun Olam – The Repair of the World
A key concept in Jewish life is that we must work together with all people to achieve “Tikkun Olam” – the repair of our broken world. As the contemporary philosopher Rabbi Jonathan Sacks writes, “As long as there is hunger, poverty, and treatable disease in the world there is work for us to do. As long as nations fight, and men hate, and corruption stalks the corridors of power; as long as there is unemployment and homelessness, depression and despair, our task is not yet done, and we hear, if we listen carefully enough, the voice of God asking us, as he asked the first humans, ‘Where are you?’”

The Value of Tzedakah
Tzedakah is often translated as “charity”, although it has a much broader meaning and is derived from the Hebrew word meaning “justice” or “righteousness.” The great 12th century Jewish teacher Maimonides taught that there are eight degrees of tzedakah, one higher than the other. The highest degree is that of the person who assists another in finding employment, thereby helping to release another from dependency and poverty to achieve independent self-sufficiency. JVS’s particular focus on “skills, jobs and careers” is rooted in this teaching on the value and dignity of work.

The Value of Loving the Stranger
JVS’s history of providing skills, jobs, and careers for Jewish and other immigrants also has an important and very relevant narrative, reflecting both deeply rooted teachings of the Jewish tradition, and the Jewish community’s own immigrant experience in the United States, which helps to understand other immigrants’ challenges.

For example, not once or twice, but many times the Five Books of Moses (Torah) in recounting the Jewish history of slavery and oppression, commands: “You shall not oppress the stranger, for you were once strangers.” Indeed, we are called to “love the stranger in our midst.” Sages interpret the word “stranger” to mean the newcomer, the refugee, or one who is outside the mainstream - all of which have marked the Jewish experience through the ages. It is a response to this shared experience that JVS’s work welcomes and supports the “stranger”, whether an immigrant, a refugee, a low-income individual, an unemployed worker, or someone with a disability.