

TEXT 6 • A New Model of Jewish Service

Following a career in local New York City politics, including serving as the Manhattan Borough President, Ruth Messinger became the President of the American Jewish World Service. She made the following remarks on the importance of Jewish service.

My vision is of a place and time when service by Jews, in a Jewish context, has become a rite of passage in and for the Jewish community, something that Jews are expected to do. People will be taken outside of themselves to work for social justice in a place or with people who are 'the other,' in some ways different from themselves, doing this in a Jewish context and, in the process, transforming the participants.

Why? We are at a new point in our lives as American Jews. We enjoy new affluence and security. At the same time, there is immense need in the world. Millions of people are victims of poverty, hunger, disease and oppression. American Jewry will be significantly shaped by our ability to respond not only to Israel and to Jews in need but to all people in need around the world. A new model of Jewish service needs to be articulated that is informed both by Jewish sources and by the radical new challenges of our time.

From a speech by Ruth Messinger: "What is Religion For?"—November 19, 2001

What the Text Means

- ▼ What kind of "service" is Messinger referring to?
- ▼ How does Messinger's vision blend the particular and the universal trends of Judaism?
- ▼ What would service that is a "rite of passage" look like?
- ▼ How does this form of ritual behavior compare with celebrating Shabbat or eating kosher food?
- ▼ The world's very first brother, Cain, asked God, "Am I my brother's keeper?" Are we? What level of care and intervention does this responsibility place on us?

What the Text Means to Me

- ▲ At what age do you think participating in a Jewish service experience like this would be most meaningful for you?
- ▲ Have you had a service experience that has felt like a "rite of passage?"