



Rabbi Rachel Cohen decided that the best approach to changing the Mitzvah Projects at Temple Beth El was to find allies among the newer members of the leadership team. In the coming months, Cohen planned to speak with the other Assistant Rabbi and the Director of the Religious School, and ask: “Can we brainstorm about the Mitzvah Projects?”<sup>1</sup> Cohen knew that any changes would represent significant work and that the young people would need more guidance in the early stages.

I would be willing to, at least for the first few years, say, ‘I’m not only going to make it easier than you think, but [also] fun. I’m going to build community around it, I’m going to almost handhold you into the process until we get the culture, where its ‘Oh right, it’s your Mitzvah Project, you have these choices, here’s the booklet, here are the key leaders, here are the people that did it last year.’

For those who wanted to do a project outside of the five core areas, Cohen thought, they could meet with a rabbi for a half an hour. “And the rabbi has the right to really push you and say, ‘Show me your project, show me the impact, and then you need to come back and show me that you’re really doing that. And then you have to come back and report on what you’ve done.’ So there’s a higher level of accountability.” Through rethinking and restructuring, Cohen also hopes to build greater community:

The goal of doing a Mitzvah Project is that it makes you really think and exposes you to some painful truths about how we live, and what resources we have, what our future might look like. It’s not a vision quest, where you go out into the world and ‘Best of luck, if you survive you come back and we give you a spear.’ It’s ‘Go out into the world, and come back and talk to us about it. Go out into the world, bring some people with you, and have a community as you experience this. Come back and brainstorm with more people about how twenty people can address this problem instead of just one. And if you come back and you fail, that’s ok too. Because the goal is not that, in ten hours, you’ve solved hunger. But that you have learned about yourself, and what scares you and inspires you, you have a new vocabulary, you have met people beyond your sphere of comfort, you have new skills that you didn’t have before.’

Even in a best-case scenario, Cohen didn’t imagine there would be significant change for at least one year. Until then, she knew that out of the thirty kids she works with each year, “I would say five of those I’m able to walk into the Bar Mitzvah and know the kids and families really well ... and they’ve done some great work around social justice. I’d probably say another ten do a decent job and maybe check in once, and the rest-- there was one year I tried to track them, but there is no system, there’s no time.”

While she acknowledged that many at Temple Beth El may not recognize the source, or the importance, of the words above the doorway -- *Tedzek Tedzek Tirdof* -- Cohen remains patient and resolved. “I try to use the words as much as possible, and hope people remember them.”

**Endnotes**

<sup>1</sup> All quotes from interviews conducted by the author Elinor Pierce with “Rabbi Rachel Cohen” (pseudonym) in December 2010.