An Advocate’s Guide to the Whys and How’s of Your Tzedakah Project

Jewish World Watch works to end genocide and mass atrocities worldwide by educating and mobilizing individuals, advocating for policy changes, and funding projects to support and build resilience in conflict-affected communities.
INTRODUCTION

This Guide is for you, a Bar or Bat Mitzvah student who is thinking about (or being pressured to do) a special project that combines both advocacy and tzedakah in connection with your Bar or Bat Mitzvah ceremony and celebration.

Advocating means talking about and trying to convince someone about something important to you. Tzedakah is the practice of giving charity or doing good works. A Mitzvah project combines both.

You are busy with schoolwork, sports or other after-school activities and studying for your Bar or Bat Mitzvah. Why should you consider doing a Mitzvah project when you already have so much to do? It’s already a big responsibility to lead the congregation in prayer, chant from the Torah and deliver a meaningful d’var Torah. Maybe you are not sure you know how to be an advocate or pick a project.

This Guide explains why incorporating a tzedakah or Mitzvah project will make preparing for your Bar or Bat Mitzvah more memorable and meaningful. It also explains how Jewish World Watch can help you make doing a Mitzvah project fun, interesting and enjoyable.
Do not be daunted by the enormity of the world’s grief. Do justly now. Love mercy, now. Walk humbly, now. You are not obligated to complete the work, but neither are you free to desist from it. – The Talmud

WHY DO A MITZVAH PROJECT?

With all the time, planning and resources that are focused on making the day memorable, it is easy to lose sight of one of the most important mitzvot: tzedakah or tikkun olam (repairing the world).

If you see what needs to be repaired and how to repair it, then you have found a piece of the world that G-d has left for you to complete.

– Menachem Mendel Schneerson

Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel taught us to “pray with our feet.”

While that could be taken literally as a challenge to join the Jewish World Watch Walk to End Genocide, it also means that living “Jewishly” requires doing something, not just using our words but also our actions. It means making a difference. It means taking the Torah’s commandments as directions for living a good life and for helping others live a good life too.
Picking Your Project: Why Jewish World Watch?

If you are reading this booklet, you are probably familiar with Jewish World Watch and our annual Walk to End Genocide. You may know that there are millions of people whose lives are affected everyday by things they cannot control – war, hunger, homelessness, lack of access to medical care or education. Some of these people live right here in America. Others live in countries far away.

Why should you care about what happens to people who are living in Sudan, South Sudan, Syria, Chad, the Democratic Republic of the Congo and other countries? What does this have to do with being Jewish, or with mitzvot?

Jewish World Watch was founded by Rabbi Harold M. Schulweis, z”l, who devoted his Rosh HaShanah sermon in 2004 to the plight of the Darfuris and the genocide in Sudan. He reminded his congregation that the Jews of the world cried out after the Holocaust – “Where was the world when such horrors were happening to us?” Rabbi said:

*We are responsible to protect each,*
  *to love and protect the stranger,*
  *the pariah, the weak,*
  *those of another color,*
  *those of another faith.*

Jewish World Watch exists to make sure that other people will not have to say “Where were you when we suffered?” because as Jews, we will be there to help.
And Rabbi Schulweis also said:

To be a Jew is to think big.
To be a Jew is to think globally.
To be a Jew is to act globally.
To be a Jew is to love God, who is global.

You are about to become sons and daughters of the mitzvot, capable of following the commandments and being actively Jewish. Let us help you to also become global citizens.

PICKING YOUR PROJECT: WHAT SHOULD MY PROJECT BE ABOUT?

So now you have decided to do a Mitzvah project. Good decision! Creating and executing a Mitzvah project will help you express your Jewish values in a way that is personal to you. It also will empower you to make a real difference in the lives of others which makes this important life cycle event something even bigger to celebrate.

One key thing is that the mitzvah project should be something the student really has thought about, that it comes from somewhere inside of them, and that they learn something about how to interact with communities that are in need.

— Rabbi Jill Jacobs
STEP 1: Your first step is to decide what you want to do to make a difference in the world. Your Mitzvah project is designed to help others but it starts with YOU. What do you think is wrong with the world? What problem would you hope to solve? Thinking about what keeps you up at night and talking about it with your parents, friends or rabbi will bring clarity and help you choose an issue that is right for you.

STEP 2: The next step is to find a link or parallel between the issues that concern, intrigue or move you and the education, advocacy and relief work that that JWW addresses. This is where a phone call or meeting with JWW staff can be a big help. Our staff is here to help you review your project ideas or brainstorm with you to come up with a project idea that fits you.

JWW staff can also help you find the link between your Torah and Haftorah portions and JWW’s advocacy and relief efforts and provide support for a variety of Bar/Bat Mitzvah tzedakah projects.

STEP 3: The third step is to make your Mitzvah project reflect who you are. Think about what you are good at and what you like to do. Most people start working on a Mitzvah project during the year leading up to their Bar/Bat Mitzvah service. Think about what could be interesting enough that you would want to do it for a whole year.
STEP 4: Once you have identified with a particular problem, now consider how you can make an impact on the lives of people who are experiencing that problem. Are you worried about refugees, or hunger? Do you worry about child soldiers being forced to fight in the Democratic Republic of the Congo? Are issues concerning the treatment of women and girls something that you would like to educate about and advocate for?

Think about how much time you have, what resources you have, what obstacles you might face, and who can assist or partner with you. With these things in mind, you can set your goals and figure out what is practical for you to accomplish.

It does not really matter how you do it. What matters is that your Mitzvah project gives you the ability to make change, help others, and experience the Jewish values that are part of becoming a Bar or Bat Mitzvah.
JEWISH WORLD WATCH MITZVAH PROJECT HINTS

You may ask how you can possibly make a difference in something that is happening far away and is as big as genocide and mass atrocities. Don’t worry. There are many ways that you can act locally while thinking globally. The first thing you can do is to use your Mitzvah project to EDUCATE your friends and family about what is going on in other parts of the world.

**Make your own Genocide Awareness Day** – Be a JWW anti-genocide educator. Give a speech at your school or hold a movie night and show a film related to genocide. JWW staff can help you find a link to a specific movie that will inspire your friends and family. JWW staff can help you show a Powerpoint or lead a discussion in your classroom or synagogue about what is going on in the world.

The second thing you can do is to ADVOCATE for change by getting your newly-educated friends and family to take action by signing petitions, writing postcards, or taking other actions that let our elected officials know that preventing genocide and helping those affected by it should be important to everyone and a priority for our government.
Hold a “Day of Activism” – Be a JWW anti-genocide advocate. Encourage friends at school or your synagogue to sign a petition to our local or national representatives urging actions to help people suffering from genocide or mass atrocities. Pick a particular JWW theme or action and ask everyone you know with a social media account to post, tweet or update their status with information or a link to an action they can take. We can point you in the right direction.

Create a Walk to End Genocide Team – Your friends and family can support your efforts and help you raise awareness (and funds) by Walking with you.

The third thing you can do is to RAISE MONEY to help make changes in those far-away places – to get food to hungry children, to send children to school, to help refugees who have been forced to leave their homes looking for a safe place without war.

Create a fundraiser around something you already do – Do you play a sport, exercise on a regular basis, have a hobby, or love to read? Do you take photographs, draw, design T-shirts? Each of these can be part of your project. You can ask your friends and relatives to donate to JWW every time you score a goal in soccer or make a homerun in baseball, reach a new weight-training goal, complete a book or get a good grade on a test.
You can also plan events that raise money to support JWW initiatives.

What you do does not have to be complicated.

You can hold a series of plant, baked goods, or jewelry sales, or offer to do chores around your house or babysit for your family, friends and neighbors. You can hold a movie night or Zumba dance fundraiser, or play laser tag. Put on a concert or display and sell your artwork. The possibilities are limitless.

Do something that interests YOU. These events or services will not only raise and family and educate them about JWW. Integrating social justice into everyday activities makes those activities even more meaningful.
MITZVAH PROJECTS, YOUR SERVICE AND YOUR CELEBRATION

You should highlight your Mitzvah project in many ways before your big day, during the service itself, and at your celebration.

There are many ways to let friends and family know about your Mitzvah project:

Invitations – You may choose to raise money to support Jewish World Watch projects or start an education and advocacy campaign about one of our initiatives. If you do, including information with your invitation about the initiatives or what you are fundraising for is a really good way to bring attention to your Mitzvah project. People are most likely to fill out a postcard or write a check when they are returning their RSVP card.

We always have a petition or advocacy issue that you could send with the invitation as a postcard that just needs to be filled out by your guests. If you ask us about our current campaigns as you are planning your invitations, we can provide you with materials to include.
Make a Bar/Bat Mitzvah website – There are templates available that make it easy to make your own Bar/Bat Mitzvah website. It’s a great way to provide your guests information – times, location, maps, hotel suggestions, etc. You can include a Mitzvah project page to explain why you are choosing to support JWW, give details about your specific project and link to JWW website pages that pertain to your Mitzvah project.

Let us do the website work for you! If you are not making your own website, consider directing your guests to the JWW.org site. We will post your picture, a description of your Mitzvah project and a donation link to your personal fundraiser on our Bar/Bat Mitzvah webpage.
Highlight your Mitzvah project during the service.

- Talk to your rabbi or educator about including information about JWW and your Mitzvah project in your Bar/Bat Mitzvah speech. You can call us for help with this as well.

You stand alone while we, your parents, are seated in the congregation.

You stand on your own two feet to lead the congregation, to sing, to pray, to study.

They and we listen to you carefully,

They and we hear your words, your commentary.

My son, my daughter, your voice is heard,

Your wisdom addresses all of us.

– Rabbi Harold M. Schulweis, z”l

- Link your Mitzvah project and the cause that you are supporting to your Parshah:

Your D’var Torah – The drash (lesson) that you give is your opportunity to share what about your Torah portion feels really important to you. When you are writing your speech, think about how your Parshah relates to JWW’s mission and particularly the issue or project that you chose – genocide, gender-based violence, hunger, lack of access to education, etc.
Take your project into your party

Tzedakah boxes – Consider placing JWW tzedakah boxes on the tables or at the gift table. People may be moved to make monetary donations to JWW after hearing your d’var Torah. Make it easy for them to give.

Or, have your party guests decorate their own “Change for Change” boxes to take home and fill. We can supply the boxes and give you some decorating ideas.

Decorate a Donation Box – If you are pairing a JWW on-the-ground project with the collection of items (like kitchen or bathroom or cleaning supplies for newly resettled refugees here in Los Angeles), you should provide a box at your synagogue or party for your guests to deposit their donations. Make that box extra special by decorating it with pictures of Sudan, Syria, South Sudan, Congo or Chad and provide brief descriptions of how you and your guests are helping.
SOME TERRIFIC TZEDAKAH PROJECTS BY JWW ACTIVISTS:

**Shachar Astor – Added More Mitzvah:** Shachar shied away from the traditional Bar Mitzvah party video montage. Instead of showing a video of his life, he made a short film about Jewish World Watch to raise awareness about the genocide in Darfur. He had guests sign petitions, and he donated money toward refugee relief.

**Josh Shapiro – How to Put the FUN in Fundraiser:** Josh worked hard to organize a fundraiser that included a fun activity that he knew his friends would love to do – laser tag! He posted flyers around his school and neighborhood. He spoke to class to persuade them to help, explaining why he chose to support JWW’s refugee relief project. All of his friends had so much fun playing laser tag and, with help from JWW staff, he raised over $500 to support Darfuri refugees.

**Elizabeth Kushner – Recruited a Walk Team:** Elizabeth set up a table at her synagogue’s Purim carnival and made signs to post at her Bat Mitzvah party to recruit people to join her team for the Walk to End Genocide. Through her efforts, Elizabeth signed up 20 walkers and raised thousands of dollars to support JWW programs.
Hannah Brooks – Kept Girls in School: After learning that many Congolese girls drop out of school when they reach puberty, Hannah collected over $2000 to purchase reusable sanitary kits for 400 girls. She also set up a donation box at her synagogue and collected over two hundred new and gently used bras that were taken to Congo for those same girls.
YOU DON’T HAVE TO DO ALL OF THIS ALONE

Join Forces – Talk to your fellow B’nai Mitzvah students. Explore whether they have an interest in supporting JWW and doing a joint project. People need to hear a message multiple times for it to take hold. Think about how powerful it would be for members of your synagogue to hear about JWW’s mission several times at different services.

Use a “Mitzvah Mentor” – It is often easier to complete a task when you work with someone who has already been through it. JWW can pair you with a “Mitzvah Mentor”, trained students who have had their B’nai Mitzvah and who can be a guide, an extra pair of hands, or a source of good ideas.

Call us at Jewish World Watch – Don’t need a mentor but just want some advice? No problem. We would love to spend a little time with you in person, if possible, or on the phone, through Skype or even by email to talk about picking a project and seeing it through to its amazing conclusion.

Call us at 818.501.1836 or email us at info@jww.org

And remember,

SMALL ACTIONS X LOTS OF PEOPLE = BIG CHANGE!