



SARA Cowen speech at Tzedek major donor event – 14th Jan 2014

Last year I won a charity competition and the prize was a trip to southern India. Going to India with a team from Hasmonean came with its challenges. We had to make sure we were fully kosher, kept Shabbat and stayed true to the Jewish values of our school. What made the trip a true success was when Tzedek came on board. Hannah Gaventa - a former student of Hasmo, worked for Tzedek and she organised a week the office beforehand in order to prepare us for the trip.

This meant we benefited from all the educational resources that Tzedek has – we learnt about understanding cultural differences and problems in the developing world. We learnt in detail about what it means to carry our Jewish values to the wider world.

Tzedek runs on 5 main values, Tzedek - Justice or charity, Ahavtah et haGer - you shall love the stranger, Naaseh v'nishma - we will do and we will understand, Shutafut - partnership, and Lo alecha HaMelecha ligmor - it is not your duty to complete the work, but you must start it.

As Jews, we look always after each other. Throughout the diaspora, we form communities that support the needy and the elderly. But I think it is equally important to look outside of our own religion to those who also need help. This is why I found the Tzedek approach of Ahavtah et haGer - you shall love the stranger, such a powerful idea. And Tzedek is proudly Jewish in its approach to global poverty and helps those regardless of race or religion.

When we were in India we visited a project that Tzedek runs in the slums of Chennai called the SAVE trust. It is a micro-finance project that offers small loans to women to help them set up their own business. Walking through the slums, the ground was muddy and litter was scattered everywhere. People stared at us. It was overwhelming and shocking.

We were told that a huge fire had recently destroyed many people's homes and businesses. So the SAVE trust needed help more than ever. We arrived in the centre where the worst damage had taken place. One of the women pointed to a pile of rubble "this was my house" she said. We saw how people lived with just the bare minimum and thought about our own lives and how much unnecessary stuff we own. The contrast between our lives was huge.

What was so inspiring about this project was to see the Jewish values of charity in action. The women weren't just given money, they were given the means to be able to earn their own money and keep their dignity. SAVE was investing in them and their future. If we had just been sightseeing as tourists in India, looking at the slums from the outside – it would have been depressing. We would have only seen the poverty. We wouldn't have known how much good is being done by such inspirational and dedicated people. It was such a privilege to be able to see inside this hidden world.

Last summer I spent a week doing work experience in Tzedek's offices. Not only did I get a flavour of life in an office, but I also learnt so much more about Tzedek's work. Tzedek may be a small charity but the work they do has enormous impact and influence all over the world.

Tzedek has taught me to see the world through a different perspective. When I see the news, so much emphasis is placed on the negative stories and rarely on the good that is being done in the world. And it is then that I remember when I was in the slums of Chennai and I saw firsthand the power of chesed and Ahavtah et haGer.