



DIAKONIA
PROJECT

Case Studies in Faith-based Social Service

Ve'ahavta

A Jewish Humanitarian Response to Poverty

Rev. Dr. Andrew Bennett



About Ve'ahavta

Ve'ahavta is a faith-based initiative of the Toronto Jewish community. Its focus is on bringing about positive change in the lives of people who have been affected by poverty, homelessness, and related forms of hardship. Its outreach activities are available to anyone who might benefit, regardless of their faith or belief.

Ve'ahavta's Faith Community

Ve'ahavta is a Jewish faith-based initiative. It is led by members of that community and the majority of its volunteers and donors are Jews from a variety of denominations and theological perspectives.

Out of a national Jewish population of approximately 392,000 (1 percent of the Canadian population), the Jewish community in Toronto is the country's largest, constituting roughly half (48.2 percent) of all Canadian Jews.¹ The Toronto Jewish population is divided roughly among the three main denominations of contemporary

Judaism: Orthodox/modern Orthodox (16 percent), Conservative (27 percent), and Reform (21 percent), with another 27 percent describing themselves as having no denomination or "just Jewish."¹

The Jewish community in Toronto can trace its roots back to the 1840s when Jews from western and central Europe began to settle there. The first organized community, the Toronto Hebrew Congregation, was established in 1849.² It was a founding congregation of Holy Blossom Temple in 1856, with 117 members; it is now Toronto's largest Reform congregation, with 6,500 members.³ There are now approximately 130 synagogue congregations of varying sizes in the Greater Toronto Area, embracing various traditions including Ashkenazi, Sephardi and Mizrahi, and Yemenite, and across denominations from ultra-orthodox Hasidic to egalitarian/progressive.⁴ The community also supports a wide variety of institutions, including an extensive network of Jewish day schools at both the primary and secondary levels, community centres, seminaries



(*yeshivot*) and institutes of Torah and Talmudic study, health-care institutions, including the Baycrest Centre and Mount Sinai Hospital, summer camps, university campus-based organizations such as Hillel, a film festival and various arts centres, and a plethora of philanthropic agencies.⁵

Theological Motivation

The work of Ve’ahavta in ministering to the poor and homeless is defined by its very name. The Hebrew compound word *v’ahavta* translates as “and you shall love.” It is the word that begins chapter 19, verse 18, of the book of Leviticus: *v’ahavta lareyacha kemocha*—“and you shall love your neighbour / the stranger / the other as you love yourself.” The commandment to protect, love, and care for the stranger is central to Judaism and is a command that is repeated thirty-six times throughout the Torah. The commandment to love God with our entire being, as found in the book of Deuteronomy, chapter 6, verse 5, is therefore manifested in the worship of God but also through our outward response to that worship, by following the commandments and undertaking good deeds that reveal God’s presence in the world. In Judaism, as in Christianity, love of God is bound together with love of neighbour. For Jews, the performance of *mitzvot* is essential to Jewish life, whether expressed in that way or not. A *mitzvah* in its most fundamental sense is a command. Jews believe that God gave 613 *mitzvot* to Moses on Sinai, which religiously observant Jews seek to follow. In common parlance, a *mitzvah* has become synonymous with a “good deed.”

There are lots of organizations within our community that do incredible work, helping people struggling with poverty or all kinds of other issues, but they tend to focus on the needs within our community. What is so special to me about Ve’ahavta and what really drew me to it was the opportunity to help everyone, to recognize that I’m blessed to be a part of a community that has such a broad safety net that will help. But there are so many that don’t have that safety net. To try and extend that beyond ourselves was very important to me.⁶

—Tom Chervinsky, board member

There are various categories of positive *mitzvot* (what you should do), including kindness *mitzvot* such as loving your neighbour, giving of your material means through charity, honouring parents, comforting the sick, and consoling mourners.⁷ There is a concept called *tikkun olam* that appears in both the Talmud and in the mystical texts of the Kabbalah. It gives Jews the mission to perform the commandments, learn the Torah, and restore the world to a place of holiness and create a dwelling place for God in this realm.⁸ It thereby informs the actions of Ve’ahavta, which reaches out to people affected by homelessness to bring G-d’s justice to our world and so “repair the world.”⁹ Although Ve’ahavta is a Jewish organization, it encourages people of all backgrounds to get involved as volunteers and, central to its mandate, it provides service to all who are in need, regardless of their faith.

History and Goals

Ve'ahavta was established in 1996 and launched its first programs in 1997. It was founded on the initiative of Avrum Rosensweig, an active member of the Toronto Jewish community who felt dismayed by the Jewish community's lack of coherent response to the Rwandan genocide, especially given the commitment of "never again" that was made following the Holocaust.¹¹ He sought to establish a humanitarian organization that would marshal the Jewish community to support those most in need: "The mission statement was for a Jewish humanitarian organization. My original thought was that we would take the gifts, the talents of the Jewish people, and we would share them with the rest of the world."¹¹ From its very beginnings in the late 1990s, Ve'ahavta embraced the mission of the Jewish people in the world: "The idea behind Ve'ahavta was really to be a light unto the nations, to implement *tikkun olam* on a very high level. And I was most excited about our ability to do that."¹¹

The goals of Ve'ahavta are simple: to help people affected by homelessness and poverty find a path forward so as to make positive changes in their lives. As Ve'ahavta executive director Cari Kozierok puts it, Ve'ahavta "is dedicated to promoting positive change in the lives of people of all faiths and backgrounds who have been affected by poverty and homelessness. We mobilize volunteers through meaningful hands-on activities and experiences to fulfill our collective responsibility: to care for our neighbour."¹⁰ In this sense, Ve'ahavta



A unique feature of the Jewish community is that people can feel very passionately that "I am a Jew, and I am a proud Jew, but I don't do the religion stuff." And I know that's different from other religions and communities, but it's very central to Judaism. At the same time, there are also people who are not from the Jewish faith, and because religious practice isn't central to our everyday volunteer experience, there's an acceptance and comfort there, because you don't have to be Jewish. You're not going to stand around and feel like "I don't know what these people are talking about." We're here to serve people who have been affected by poverty and homelessness, and we all show up together, whatever our backgrounds.¹⁰

—Cari Kozierok, executive director

has a two-fold goal: to address poverty and homelessness in response to the commandment to love one's neighbour, and at the same time to enable members of the community who serve as volunteers to fulfill that commandment in a meaningful and direct way.

Activity and Impact

Ve'ahavta is acutely aware of the significant challenges that it faces in confronting homelessness and poverty in Toronto. The situation is grave. Currently, 10,000 people on average experience homelessness on any given night in Toronto, and shelters have a 98 percent occupancy rate.¹² The levels of poverty are also significant, with 25 percent of children and 20 percent of adults living in poverty (below the low-income cut-off).¹³ In 2018, the Statistics Canada low-income cut-off for a city of Toronto's size was \$21,481 for a single-person household, and \$26,143 and \$40,614 for a two-person and four-person household, respectively.¹⁴

Ve'ahavta has developed innovative programs that help to address the serious situation of poverty and homelessness in Toronto. Core programming for clients falls into four categories, each of which incorporates one or more specific forms of outreach:

> RELIEF AND REFERRAL

Mobile Jewish Response to Homelessness is one of the most foundational components

of Ve'ahavta's work. Its outreach van travels through the city's core to provide immediate relief to those who are most in need. The outreach and peer-support workers provide essential clothing, hot meals, and personal-hygiene supplies to the homeless. The care does not end there but continues through follow-up support, including referrals to shelters, mental-health resources, and other community partners.¹⁵ In 2019 the outreach van served 22,571 clients, which represented a 10 percent increase from 2018.⁹

> EXPRESSIVE ARTS

MYTORONTO Photo Contest and Exhibit provides an opportunity for people affected by homelessness to engage in artistic expression. It incorporates online creative workshops that enable clients to develop photographic and digital media skills. A photography contest held three times a year offers an opportunity for participants to submit photos of their surroundings, providing them the opportunity to share their unique perspectives of the city.



The vendor program equips clients with skills in marketing and communications so that they can sell products, such as greeting cards featuring the winning photographs, and earn money.¹⁶ In 2019, 101 participants engaged in Ve’ahavta’s creative programming such as MYTORONTO.⁹

> WORK AND LIFE SKILLS TRAINING

Ve’ahavta Skills Academy occurs in partnership with George Brown College in downtown Toronto. It incorporates a free, nine-week digital program that equips participants with essential skills and the ability to explore various career options. It supports “those facing poverty and instability in their lives due to socio-economic, mental health, and other circumstantial factors.”¹⁷ Among the various benefits of the program are the setting of personal and career goals; individual case-management, informal counselling and referrals to community services; assistance in navigating social-service resources; support in personal development, including self-confidence, resiliency, and mental agility; and six months of post-program support. In 2019, twenty-nine participants graduated from Ve’ahavta’s work and life-skills programs, a 78 percent increase from 2018.⁹

Building Foundations for Women offers a similar nine-week program for women experiencing poverty and social isolation. It offers one-on-one coaching through an “intensive digital

I love my people, and I very much believe in who we are and what we bring to the world. And I thought, if we can contain that within a Canadian community and the Canadian environment, we could do something very, very special.¹¹

—Avrum Rosensweig, founder

program that provides training and support for women facing socio-economic, immigration, and/or mental health challenges.”¹⁸ In 2019, thirty-two women graduated from Ve’ahavta’s women’s work and life skills training, a 107 percent increase from the previous year.⁹

> PAID WORK TRAINING PLACEMENT

Meal Box Program is a paid internship through which interns manage a kitchen and prepare hot meals to be distributed through Ve’ahavta’s outreach van. But as with many of Ve’ahavta’s programs, this is not the end of the opportunity. “Interns receive ongoing professional development throughout their placement, including certification in food handling and first aid. As they complete their placements, interns are supported by Ve’ahavta to achieve successful outcomes defined as employment, further education, or meaningful volunteer work.”¹⁹ In 2019, 16,425 meals were prepared, which represented a 104 percent increase from 2018.⁹

Speakers Bureau Program is led by volunteers who host workshops to assist participants in developing public-speaking skills so that they can share their personal stories in front of audiences. They are then offered paid opportunities to speak to different community groups about the lived experience of poverty and homelessness.²⁰

As mentioned above, Ve’ahavta is also committed to engaging the Jewish community in its work, so as to ensure that the community can respond in dynamic and effective ways. What does this response look like? In 2019, Ve’ahavta had 1,793 unique volunteers support its work, representing a near-doubling of volunteers from the 987 who supported Ve’ahavta in 2018.⁹

Four pillars guide Ve’ahavta’s community engagement and mobilization, thereby creating “a path to grow empathy, responsibility and empowerment in community members.”²¹ By way of community programming, volunteerism, leadership, and philanthropy, Ve’ahavta provides opportunity for members of the Jewish community and others to become actively involved in its work. This is manifested in such diverse ways as providing food and in-kind donations; serving on Ve’ahavta’s board of directors; building partnerships with synagogues, schools, and camps; and encouraging Jewish teens to volunteer with Ve’ahavta as a component of their Bar or Bat Mitzvah year. In this way, Ve’ahavta continues to live out Avrum Rosensweig’s vision of the Jewish community being actively engaged in the service of others—*diakonia*.



So much of what we do in mobilizing the community is around getting people to interface directly with the population we serve. They may never have a conversation with someone who’s slept on a grate last night. By bringing people into direct contact with each other, we believe that empathy happens very, very naturally, particularly when people are face-to-face and heart-to-heart with each other. But if those two people don’t ever connect with each other, through interacting with each other, real empathy can’t happen.¹⁰

—Cari Kozierok

Support and Budget

Ve’ahavta’s programs are supported largely by generous donations from individuals, businesses, and foundations in the Jewish community of Toronto and in other parts of Canada. In 2019, operating revenue generated through donations totalled \$2,076,335, which represented 79 percent of the organization’s total annual revenue for that year.²² Ve’ahavta also benefits from government

funding from the City of Toronto, the Ontario Trillium Foundation, and the Government of Ontario.⁹ Government grants amounted to 21 percent of Ve’ahavta’s revenue in 2019, for a total amount of \$548,048.²² It should be noted that Ve’ahavta has not depended greatly on government funding. Indeed, as an organization it received no government grants in the four-year period of 2015–18, according to the Canada Revenue Agency.²³

The majority of Ve’ahavta’s expenses, \$1,828,938 (71 percent) in 2019, are dedicated to its core charitable activities. In 2019, \$541,581 (21 percent) was spent on fundraising activities and \$191,624 (7.5 percent) on management and administration.²²

Conclusion

Ve’ahavta provides an excellent example of how a small faith community, representing 1 percent of the Canadian population, can have an outsized impact in meeting a particular social challenge: in this case, poverty and homelessness in Canada’s biggest city. The commitment to fulfill the commandment to love God through loving one’s neighbours is a truly beautiful and noble one. The Jewish community through the work of Ve’ahavta reveals how living out the precepts of its faith and tradition in an authentic and integral way can lead to the healing and renewal of the world, even our small corner of it.



The world has some real challenges. It needs the religious community. It does, it does. We need to get out there and we need to create a very robust structure, which allows for the true repairing of the world. We can take ideas from the Jewish community, or from a Christian community, or from the Muslim community and share them with government and corporations in a collaborative way. Together we can roll up our sleeves and get our hands dirty towards the betterment of the world.¹¹

—Avrum Rosensweig

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