



*Based on NPR's long-running radio show, THIS I BELIEVE, an eclectic group of City Congregation members offered their own reflections and joined this international conversation. Presentations were shared at Shabbat, Nov. 20, 2009.*

### **I Believe in Paying it Forward**

Renee Fields

When I was younger, much younger, I went to Girl Scout Camp. One year my favorite counselor left partway through our session. It was 1964 and she had more important things to do—she was going to volunteer with the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC) to help register African Americans to vote.

As an even younger child I was aware that my mother was our Brownie troop leader. And she was the District Cookie Chairperson, coordinating the distribution of hundreds of boxes of thin mints and shortbread cookies in Morris County, New Jersey.

Both of my parents were active in our temple—my father on the Board and my mother as president of Sisterhood.

I was aware that one of my father's mother's cousins had taken a year away from his dental practice in Newark, telling his wife and children only that he'd be back soon, and traveled all around the United States raising money for the nascent State of Israel so that they could purchase guns and ammunition to survive.

My sister, living in NYC, attended our greatuncle Nat Orbach's funeral. She reported there was an honor guard of Boy Scouts. Dad explained that Nat and Irving Berlin spearheaded fundraising campaigns together, raising much money.

As a Girl Scout I pledged "On my honor, I will try: to serve God and my country, to help people at all times, and to live by the Girl Scout Law." (Of course I didn't absorb the serving "god" part, but the rest of it made sense....) And I learned in Sunday School that Maimonides had a list of ways to give—there were different levels of giving charity and giving of your time and efforts were "better" than giving money. But what really stuck in my mind was the famous quote, "If I am not for myself, then who will be for me? And if I am only for myself, then what am I? And if not now, when?"

Remember the movie, *Pay It Forward*? Even though it was a bit sugary, I liked the idea of helping people with no expectation of any personal reward.

I believe in paying it forward. I see this commitment as my legacy.

- When I was in junior high school, my twin sister volunteered at Morristown Memorial Hospital. Sometimes the two of us would do more harm than good, since as identical twins we would confuse people as we delivered flowers and filled water pitchers.

- After college I volunteered with a rape crisis center, knowing what victims were going through from personal experience.

- In 1996 when black and white churches in the South were being burned I volunteered with Habitat for Humanity, spending my vacation in the Appalachian mountains of Tennessee, hammering nails and spreading plaster.

- In 2000 I participated in the 3-Day Avon Breast Cancer walk from Bear Mountain to Manhattan, raising over \$3000.
- Some of you may remember when I was Social Action Chairperson and the congregation participated in cleaning up the park by the Hudson, collected winter coats and clothes, and joined the JCC's Mitzvah Day.
- I have mentored bar/bat mitzvahs as they prepare work their way through important ideas and concepts.

I know that God doesn't tally up my good deeds and bad deeds each year to decide if I'm going to live, or die by fire or ice. But someday, in about 30 or 40 or 50 years, someone, hopefully, will say that along with a couple of quilts, I left a legacy of helping people.