How Not to Be a Shmuck:
A Two-Part Guide to Behavior When Serving

Part 1: Jewish Encyclopedia, "Hospitality: Duty of Guest" (citations omitted and formatting adjusted)

Volunteers take on a number of responsibilities and roles while they're serving. In some ways, a volunteer is analogous to a "guest" in the community they're serving in, with the community members functioning as "hosts." To guide our consideration of what it means to not be a shmuck while serving, let's take a look at general expectations of guests in Jewish tradition:

The guest [in Jewish tradition] was [instructed] to show his gratitude to the host in various ways. . . .:

- While the host was to break bread first, the guest was expected to pronounce grace after the meal, in which he included a special blessing for the host: "May it be the will of God that the master of this house shall not be ashamed in this world, nor abashed in the world to come; that he shall be successful in all his undertakings; and that his property (and our property) shall prosper and be near the city; and that Satan shall have no dominion over his handiwork (and over our handiwork); and that no sinful act or iniquitous thought shall occur to him (and to us) from now even to all eternity."
- The guest was expected to leave some of the food on his dish, to show that he had more than enough. If, however, the host asked him to finish his portion, it was not necessary for him to leave any.
- It was the duty of the guest to comply with all the requests of the host.
- He might not give of his meal to the son or to the daughter or to the servant of the host without the host's permission.

Questions:

- ➢ What responsibilities does this text put on guests? What are some of the other obligations guests owe to their hosts?
- ➢ What are some of the ways, both explicit and implicit, guests are required to thank the host here? In your experience, how does a good guest express appreciation?
- ➢ The phrase "being hospitable" most often refers to a host's responsibilities. How does it feel to put parallel responsibilities on the guest?
- ➢ How much does it matter if a guest's challenging behavior is unintentional? As examples, what about a guest who doesn't call before showing up, or who brings chips even though you asked for a main dish?
- ➢ When you're serving as a host, what makes for an ideal guest? What makes someone a bad guest?
- ➢ To what extent are people serving outside their own communities and organizations "guests"?
- ➢ How might the traditional Jewish responsibilities of guests be similar to or different from the responsibilities of those serving outside their own communities and organizations?
- ➢ When you think about your upcoming service, what are some of the things you should do or not do to ensure that you're a good guest?

Part 2:
Fourteen Tips on Leaving Out Shmuckiness When You Pack Your Volunteer Suitcase

This tips sheet is written using direct, perhaps even harsh, language. Here's why: good people can come across as shmucks even when not intending to. In an fair and ideal world, members of the community where you're serving would be able to raise these issues, but sadly, we don't live in a fair and ideal world; if we did, there probably wouldn't be a need for you to be volunteering. Instead, volunteers typically come with more privilege, authority, and power than community members, which makes it more difficult for community members to raise issues and confront volunteers when they're doing something unhelpful. It also means that there's often a stronger emphasis put on volunteers' intentions than on the impact their actions have on the community. This tips sheet seeks to readjust that balance.

1. **Read up and learn** about the community you'll be spending time in **before you go**. You'll get more out of your trip *and* look less clownish *and* minimize the risk of insulting community members. It's a win-win-win. Hooray for everyone!
2. **Listen much more than you talk**. Much much much more. You have two ears and one mouth: your talking-to-listening ratio should be the same or better. Others are the experts in their own lived experiences; if they're willing to share them with you, make space for them.
3. Be aware that **things you might take for granted might be scarce or unavailable** to others or at your site. Resources like hot water for showering or wireless internet might be something easily available to you at home, but far more limited where you're serving. Don't expect it for yourself, and don't expect that people in the community where you're serving have it freely at their disposal, either.
4. **Keep reminding yourself that community members also have abilities to act.** It's easy to think about people who live where you're volunteering as objects and you as the subject, choosing which verbs to put into the sentence as if it were some sort of social justice Mad Libs. Each of them has feelings, perspectives, opinions, talents, gifts, and capabilities, regardless of how easy or difficult that is to appreciate when you first meet them. Put another way, they're not helpless children waiting for you to infantilize or save them.
5. **Don't criticize, mock, or express disappointment or disapproval** with what's shared with and shown to you, especially not in front of your hosts. If you feel challenged by the food, conditions, clothes, processes or equipment because they aren't of a caliber you're used to, remember that they can hear you. And read your body language. And facial expressions. If you're having a difficult time holding things in, find a fellow volunteer to debrief with privately.
6. **Be gracious and humble**. When there's something you don't understand, assume first there's a good reason why things function the way they do. Find a way to learn about what you don't get while phrasing your questions intentionally and thoughtfully, and don't operate under the assumption that all community members are obliged to educate you about their lived experiences.

7. **Don't displace your own discomfort onto other people**. Hearing individuals' stories of adversity might leave you uneasy and struggling how to respond. Phrases like "I'm sure it'll all work out" can come across as dismissive. So can promising outcomes beyond your capabilities (world peace) or your time there (an extensive multi-year poverty-reduction project). Expressing hope for positive change might be more appropriate.
8. **Follow locals' lead**. If local personnel in positions of responsibility give you instructions or tell you what to do, listen to them; don't ignore them or challenge them, especially not publicly. If community members have prioritized a particular project or issue, follow their lead, even if it's not what you'd choose. You *feeling* useful and you *being* useful aren't the same thing; you know the former, but they have a better sense of the latter. You should also respect local norms, like disciplinary practices or expectations about how to dress that are different from yours. You don't have to set aside how you feel, but exercise restraint in how you express yourself outwardly.
9. **Remember that you're there temporarily**. You get to leave the negative local consequences of your actions behind at the end of your stay; your hosts don't. If you offend their partners or community members or otherwise make a mess, they have to clean it up. Don't be messy.
10. **Do a good job**, whatever your job is**.** This may sound silly, but even though you're a volunteer, you still should complete the tasks you take on with seriousness and dedication. If someone has to undo and then redo your work, you're actually making *more* work for others. It's the opposite of volunteering - we call it "gnireetnulov."
11. **Be aware of how you're perceived**, whether individually or as a group you're a part of. Because intent isn't the same thing as impact, something you meant positively or neutrally can still have a hurtful or destructive effect. What you intended doesn't trump what you did and how you affected others. On a larger scale, if your trip is organized by a Jewish organization whose members are mostly white and come from a higher socioeconomic background than where you're serving, you'll often be seen as "rich white Jews," and represent all "rich white Jews," whether justifiably or not, whether you see yourself that way or not. Your conduct can reflect on everyone in the entire universe who carries the identities you do or that you appear to carry.
12. **Be cautious about the topics you raise**. Matters like politics and religion can engender strong feelings, and it's difficult to be certain how community members might react. Wade into these conversational waters with special attention.
13. **Be flexible**. Just like interest rates, plans change. Whatever itinerary you have in your hand when you leave, your actual experience will almost certainly be different, whether in term of what projects you'll be working on, where you'll be going, and when events will take place. Roll with it, and keep yourself from saying, "But that's not what the schedule says!".
14. **Ask yourself what happens next.** Once you're back in your natural habitat, how are you going to continue the learning and volunteering you've begun while serving, whether by returning or going elsewhere? Which organizations or individuals in your own community provide opportunities to do this work? How will you avoid "issue fatigue" and remain committed to these particular issues when so many injustices call out for our intention? What are ways you can commit to addressing systemic issues and advocating for broader change?