



Wednesday, February 16, 2011

Finding faith, doing service in Haiti

by Rabbi Sid Schwarz Special to WJW

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On the first anniversary of the Haiti earthquake, I traveled to the Leogane region of Haiti, the center of the earthquake's devastation. I went as the guest of an Israeli nongovernmental organization called Tevel b'Tzedek (The Earth, in Justice), founded in 2005 by Rabbi Micah Odenheimer to promote social and environmental justice in the world. With the support of IsraAid, a team of Israeli volunteers traveled to the region soon after the earthquake. Uri I'Tzedek, a U.S.-based Orthodox social justice organization, asked me to be the first of a series of rabbis to visit the team and interact with many of the Haitians that they have been helping.

Haiti is one of the poorest countries on the planet. Its per capita income is about \$350 per year. Haitians expect nothing from their government. It has been ruled by a succession of leaders who have either been ruthless dictators or incompetents. The \$11 billion to \$15 billion of aid that poured into the country after the earthquake and the hundreds of NGOs on the ground can barely make a dent in the country's problems because there are no government agencies that have effectively coordinated the aid effort.

Churches seem to be the only consistent source of hope and community in the country.

I befriended a pastor named Johnny Felix, who invited me to his Sunday worship service. The singing was spirited and every seat was filled with Haitians of all ages. I was treated like royalty. They don't meet many Jews, and I was certainly the first rabbi they ever encountered. To them, I was a minister to the chosen people of God, and Israel was the Promised Land. I taught them a song with the words Shabbat Shalom, a Sabbath of peace. They picked it up in no time; a day later, Pastor Johnny said that it would become a permanent part of their liturgy because it was taught to them by a rabbi and it was in God's language, Hebrew.

My sponsors asked me to work with the team of Jews and Israelis on the ground to frame the experience of service in the language of Jewish texts and values. It was no simple task. The group included two Russians who had never been exposed to any form of religion at all, a middle-aged man who rejected all forms of nationalism and religion, a woman raised in a Messianic Jewish congregation and a woman whose father was an Orthodox rabbi, but who rejected his teaching. It was not exactly an audience eager for lessons from a progressive American rabbi.

Yet the group also participated in several sessions that I taught to their local partners. They saw how the Haitians resonated to biblical teachings about the infinite value of human life, God's commandment to lift up the downtrodden and the belief that in working on behalf of the poor, people of faith become agents for God's love in the world. The Jews came to see the value of sacred Jewish texts not for how it would deepen their Jewish identity, but for the way it could serve as bridge to deepen their relationship with those they wanted to help.

Given that there is now a dramatic increase in the number of Jews being sent to the developing world to do service, it is worth thinking about how middle class Jews can really understand and ally with impoverished people of other cultures with whom we have so little in common. The most important bond is "faith" and it is not exactly Jews' strong suit.

The volunteers I worked with were certainly not motivated to come to Haiti to take on this challenging work because of any deep commitment to Judaism, nor to be ambassadors of goodwill from the state of Israel to the people in the developing world. It will be for others to make such a case if they so wish. Yet sometimes we are agents for God's work in the world without being conscious of it.

It is among the mysteries of the cosmos that continues to amaze me.

Sid Schwarz, a senior fellow at CLAL: The National Jewish Center for Learning and Leadership, is the founder of both the Panim Institute for Jewish Leadership and Values and Adat Shalom Reconstructionist Synagogue in Bethesda. He is also the author of *Judaism and Justice: The Jewish Passion to Repair the World (Jewish Lights)*.

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