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Rabbi-author ponders truth, justice and the Jewish way

by dan pine
staff writer

Poverty. Literacy. Hunger. Darfur. Pick an issue — any issue — and, guaranteed, Jews will be there, leading the fight.

Rabbi Sidney Schwarz wanted to know why.

Schwarz's new book, "Judaism and Justice: The Jewish Passion to Repair the World," answers the question. When it comes to social action, he concludes, even secular Jews with little knowledge of their heritage act in accordance with the Torah precepts of their ancestors.

"In the civil rights movement, most of the Jews were pretty distant from Jewish learning," says Schwarz, in San Francisco last week as part of a national book tour. "But Jews are hard-wired for justice. It has less to do with Hebrew school and Jewish summer camp. It seems to be passed down from generation to generation in a way that is quite bizarre."

Schwarz is no detached academic. An ordained Reconstructionist rabbi, he founded PANIM: the Institute for Jewish Leadership and Values, which works with Jewish teens. "I've been involved in the work of social justice most of my life," he says. "I've seen a flowering of new [Jewish] organizations doing social justice, a phenomenon I wanted to understand and inform."

In the first part of his book, Schwarz cites dozens of Torah references supporting the Jewish commitment to tikkun olam (repair of the world). Over millennia, those passages impacted the Jewish world view, so much so that even in



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a modern post-Enlightenment world, Jews can't help but get involved.

Says Schwarz: "The Bible says, 'The poor will always be among you,' which is a way of saying 'You'll never win this thing.' As a result there is tremendous burnout in the field. The people able to stay with it the longest ground their activity in faith. The people who made the greatest impact in social justice came out of a faith tradition: Gandhi, Martin Luther King, Abraham Joshua Heschel, Elie Wiesel. Something's going on there."

That's not to say Schwarz's book will suddenly turn secular Jewish activists into instant minyanites. "I'm under no illusions," he says, "to think somehow I'm going to take a committed secularist doing justice work, show them a [sacred] text and they'll say, 'Oh wow, give me some of that old time religion.' That isn't going to happen."

Religiously informed or not, Jews enlist in countless social causes, some with a Jewish orientation, like the anti-hunger group Mazon, the pro-labor Progressive Jewish Alliance or the legal aid society Bet Tzedek, and others more universal, such as Darfur.

Many of those causes tend to attract left-of-center progressives. When viewed through the lens of domestic party politics, that lines up with the overwhelming Democratic affiliation of American Jews.

"We are the most surveyed people on the planet," says Schwarz. "If you look at voting patterns, [Jews] clearly continue to be liberal, and it hasn't changed despite a widely held impression that Jews have moved to the right. I don't think that's happened."

Given trends toward intermarriage and assimilation, Schwarz has pondered the future of Jewish social activism, and whether that hardwiring could fray. His work with teens also gives him a glimpse at the mindset of 21st Century American Jews.

"What's coming down the pike is a generation almost stridently post-tribal," he says. "Anything that strikes them as parochial, they push back so hard and run so fast, you can't catch them. With each generational cohort, fewer are coming back. That's a reality the Jewish community is very concerned about and doesn't have an answer to."

Schwarz thinks the answer does not lie in guilt-tripping young Jews on the margins into coming back into the fold.

"We use very conventional categories [for determining Jewish identity]. Do you light candles? Do you belong to a synagogue or give to a federation? A lot of Jews have ill-defined affinities for Judaism that aren't captured by

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those metrics. For the people with one foot in and one foot out, the way the organized community draws the line has the effect of pushing them out rather than pulling them in.”

In or out, Jews will continue to rally to all kinds of social justice issues. And whatever the trends, many will continue to respond most urgently when the Jewish community itself is threatened.

“It’s not a coincidence that the most successful fundraisers raise the issue of anti-Semitism or imminent destruction,” says Schwarz. “Do it around Jewish learning, you get a \$100 check. Do it for Jews about to be wiped off the Earth and someone adds two or three zeroes to that check.”

“Judaism and Justice: The Jewish Passion to Repair the World” by Rabbi Sidney Schwarz (\$24.99, Jewish Lights Publishing, 312 pages).

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