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Social action may be our big chance to engage young Jews

by rabbi sid schwarz

For the second year in a row, the Israeli Parliament has declared the Hebrew month of Cheshvan, which began Oct. 24, as Jewish Social Action Month.

Living in the United States, a country that declares honorary weeks and months for everything from stamps to dairy farmers, it's tempting to dismiss the strategy as empty hype. Yet there is cause for Jews to take serious notice: There's tremendous energy in the American Jewish community around social action that has all the markings of a renaissance.

The ritualistic naming of a month devoted to social action is a good time to assess the phenomenon and encourage its development.

Cheshvan comes right after the High Holy Days, so it's as good a time as any to call upon Jews to behave in accordance with Jewish principles that go back to our origins. In one of Abraham's first encounters with God (Gen. 18:19), he is told that his mandate was "to extend the boundaries of righteousness and justice in the world." In the next chapter, Abraham demonstrates why he deserves his status as the father of the Jewish people when he goes out on a limb with God to plead for the people of Sodom and Gomorrah.

Rabbinic commentators admire the fact that tribal ties or bloodlines never limited Abraham's compassion. They hold him up as a model for ethical behavior in the world.

At Sinai the Jewish people would embrace a covenant that set forth a way of life to ensure that Jews would remain a distinct and discreet people in the world. It included rituals regulating festivals, the life cycle, diet and sexual mores.

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Yet no less an authority than Rav Joseph Soloveitchik, considered one of the greatest Orthodox rabbis ever to have lived in America, taught that the covenant that drove Abraham's universal behavior (brit avot) was more important than the covenant at Sinai (brit Sinai), which provided most of what we recognize today as Jewish customs and practices.

This is a message for our time. Surveys tell us that with each generation of American Jews, ties to the collective enterprises of the Jewish people — Israel, the federation system, Jewish membership organizations and synagogues — are getting progressively weaker. Those who care about the future of the Jewish community will have to find a way to speak for a post-tribal generation.

Because those same surveys tell us that the most important component of Jewish identity to Jews is the mandate to make the world a more just and compassionate place, Jewish institutions will have to find ways to make social justice a more central part of their message and program.

This is not an experiment any more. Jewish organizations devoted to "extending the boundaries of righteousness and justice in the world" are flourishing. The American Jewish World Service has provided a way for Jews not only to contribute money to some of the poorest countries in the world, but to go on service missions to those countries.

MAZON is a remarkable Jewish fundraising success story based on the simple idea that there should be a Jewish response to hunger. My own organization, PANIM, sponsors a dozen different programs for close to 10,000 young people a year, training future leaders of the Jewish community in political activism, community service and social justice, all framed in the context of Jewish values.

There's more. Last year, Hillel invited college students to spend their winter and/or spring breaks helping to rebuild flood-ravaged areas in Louisiana and Mississippi. Over 800 students signed up, and more are expected this year.

The Center for Leadership Initiatives, a new entity created by the Charles and Lynn Schusterman Family Foundation, is making it possible for 500 young adults to go to northern Israel to help that region rebuild after the summer war with Hezbollah, and more than four times that number have applied.

Rallies for Darfur in Washington, D.C., and New York were overwhelmingly attended by Jews, and the number of synagogues that have "Save Darfur" signs on their lawns reminds us of the heyday of the Soviet Jewry

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movement, when similar signs made political activism part of the civil religion of American Jews.

Today, Jews don't need the Jewish community to engage in social action. With fewer Jews predisposed to joining Jewish organizations, one can find Jews active in, even predominating in, the leadership of a host of secular groups advancing human rights, fighting poverty, promoting peace and the like.

Yet if the Jewish community made social action a signature part of what it means to be Jewish in the 21st century — not in lieu of Jewish learning and practice, but as a complementary part of it — we have a good chance to capture a new generation of Jews with a legacy that traces back to our biblical ancestors.

Rabbi Sid Schwarz is founder and president of PANIM: The Institute for Jewish Leadership and Values. He is the author of "Judaism and Justice: The Jewish Passion to Repair the World."

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