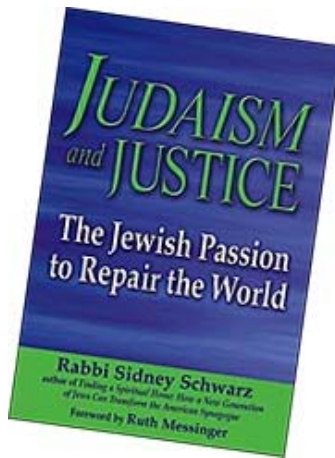


## New Jersey Jewish News Online Central Feature

Youth educator sees gap between social justice and organized Jewry



by [Elaine Durbach](#)  
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Rabbi Sidney Schwarz thinks the drive to help make the world a better place is a central part of the Jewish character and that social action is the key to the renaissance of American Jewry.

So why, he wonders, don't mainstream Jewish organizations see it that way?

"There has been a renaissance of Jewish groups involved in social justice," he said. "But there is a growing gap between those people and the Jewish establishment."

Schwarz, founder and president of [PANIM: The Institute for Jewish Leadership and Values](#), will be tackling that topic on Sunday, March 18, at 10 a.m. at the Wilf Jewish Community Campus in Scotch Plains.

The [Jewish Community Center of Central New Jersey](#) is cosponsoring his talk together with [United Synagogue Youth](#), [B'nai B'rith Youth Organization](#), and [North American Federation of Temple Youth](#). PANIM works with all of those groups, and with Jewish day schools across the denominational spectrum. Its signature programs invite high school students for seminars in Washington, DC, where they meet politicians and policy-makers and study activism in a Jewish context.

In his new book, *Judaism and Justice: The Jewish Passion to Repair the World*, published last fall, Schwarz traces the Torah roots of that passion to right wrongs, and how that has manifested itself in the organized American-Jewish community from the end of World War II to the opening years of this century.

In an interview with *NJ Jewish News*, Schwarz, who lives in Rockville, Md., said that he believes the major Jewish organizations have moved away from reflecting that idealism, responding rather to the other driving force in Jewish history — the need for pragmatism and self-preservation.

Furthermore, he thinks the politics of mainstream Jewish groups have moved to the right of the Jewish community they represent.

He wrote his latest book in an effort to bridge that gap. “You can’t build understanding between those two camps until you identify them,” he said.

Schwarz, who grew up in an Orthodox family and switched to a more progressive direction when he was in college, takes pride in the fact that people from different groups come to PANIM programs confident that they will be treated with respect.

“Life should be a pursuit of truth,” he said, “but there are many different views of the truth. As they say, it’s in the eye of the beholder.”

At the various programs around the country run by Schwarz and his associates, teens get training in how to be “agents for change and to lobby for what they believe in — which can vary from person to person.”

“PANIM is officially non-partisan, so — for example, when we’re dealing with abortion — we don’t say whether they should be pro-life and pro-choice, to use the commonly used terminology,” he said. “We let them come to their own decisions. Even when we go to Capitol Hill to do lobbying, our people don’t necessarily have the same views.”

That diversity holds true with regard to Israel. He said that the organization deals with Israel as part of a rotating roster of 15 topics, but does not teach a set point of view with regard to the country’s politics.

A committed Zionist himself, with a daughter currently studying in Israel, Schwarz said he believes the best approach to understanding the country is to seek out the whole truth about what is taking place there. That raises some hackles among those in the Jewish establishment who see any negative information about Israel as providing fuel for its enemies. “We walk a minefield,” he acknowledged. “But we’re educators, not propagandists.”

While his new book deals with Jews and their relationship to social justice, his first book, *Finding a Spiritual Home: How the New Generation of Jews Can Transform the American Synagogue*, explored that same passion with a view to showing congregational leaders how to attract and involve new members.

Schwarz, a graduate of the Reconstructionist Rabbinical College in Wyncote, Pa., served as a pulpit rabbi for 16 years. He founded and is still active with Adat Shalom Reconstructionist Congregation in Rockville, and he remains intimately involved in the struggle to build strong congregations, consulting with and addressing synagogue groups all over the United States.

His interest in social action remains very much part of his synagogue-building work. One of the most powerful forces, he says, in attracting adults and perhaps even more so with young people who no longer feel as defensive of their Judaism as previous generations, is the opportunity to pursue — together with likeminded people — their urge to do *tikun olam*, repair the world, and *hesed*, acts of kindness.

There is no admission cost to his talk, but a donation of \$5 per person is requested. A continental breakfast will be served. All proceeds will be donated to the Community Food Bank of New Jersey.

To [register](#), or for more information, [contact](#) 908-889-8800, ext. 205.

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