

Jewish Civics: A Field Emerges

Sid Schwarz

I was still an undergraduate working my way through college as a USY advisor and helping direct a Zionist summer camp when I first heard teen after teen saying in a thousand different ways: "There is nothing in Judaism for me."

I founded PANIM in 1988 to put forward a new formula for Jewish civic identity: to be Jewish means to feel connected to the history and community of the Jewish people, to act on the prophetic mandate of social responsibility, and to be knowledgeable about the values of Judaism that inform such social responsibility. PANIM's programs expanded not only as a result of successfully identifying a niche and meeting that need with quality programs, but also as an organic outgrowth of our understanding of the term Jewish civics.

In my opinion, it is a mistake to think about youth philanthropy in a vacuum. For many Jewish teens, too much of Jewish life is about "the money," and they resist it. I think the question we need to start with is: How might we produce Jews who both act in socially responsible ways in relation to the community, nation, and world they inhabit and, simultaneously, accept the responsibilities that come with being a citizen of the Jewish people?

I would suggest five elements that would nurture Jewish civic responsibility. All of these components cross denominational boundaries because they occupy a common ground around which the broadest spectrum of the larger community can collaborate. The five components are: 1) working toward social justice/political activism; 2) service-learning combined with an understanding of the importance of advocacy to advance social change; 3) acknowledging the centrality of Zionism and the state of Israel to Jewish life; 4) incentivizing social entrepreneurship; and 5) mod-

eling philanthropy.

While PANIM now serves over 100 communities with an array of programs that deliver some combination of the first four elements, many other organizations have emerged with similar mandates, including a sudden explosion of initiatives addressing youth philanthropy. There is much work yet to be done. The handful of organizations that have been pioneering the field of Jewish civics have been doing a lot of improvising because Jewish civics is not yet a "field" and there is no road map. We can and we must do better.

Following is a short list of what would help Jewish civics emerge as a field with the ability to make a dramatic impact on the programs of synagogues, religious schools, JCCs,

youth movements, summer camps, and federations. All it takes is a few visionary philanthropists to provide the necessary funds.

1. Professional development. We need more quality people coming into the field.

2. Forums for collaboration. We can learn a lot from each other, form partnerships, and avoid wasteful duplication of effort.

3. Standardized evaluation protocols. We need to better understand which programs work and why.

4. Marketing. We could capture many more program participants if marketing was a collaborative effort.

5. Funding. Properly showcased, we could attract new funding from Jews who care about contributing to the welfare of society at large.

We are at a tipping point. It is time to act.

Rabbi Sid Schwarz is the founder/president of PANIM. A winner of a 2002 Covenant Award for his social entrepreneurship in Jewish education, he is the author of Finding a Spiritual Home (Jewish Lights) and Judaism and Justice: The Jewish Passion to Change the World (Jewish Lights 2006).

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