

New York Jewish Week, January 25, 2013

A Rabbinic Call for Human Rights

Rabbi Sid Schwarz

Last week I was one of several rabbis from a range of religious denominations meeting with a senior Israeli diplomat at the Israeli Embassy to deliver a letter asking Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu to cancel plans to construct a new settlement in the E1 zone. Such a new settlement would not only create a major obstacle to a two-state solution to the Middle East conflict, but would exacerbate tensions between Jews and Palestinians and inevitably lead to the violation of the human rights of Arabs living in that area. The letter was signed by over 700 rabbis and cantors representing well over 100,000 American Jews.

Last year, I was one of several rabbis who went on trip to south Florida to stand in solidarity with the Coalition of Immokalee Workers (CIW) who have been trying for years to stop the near slavery conditions endured by migrant workers in the agriculture industry. But the CIW has made significant progress to get the food industry to abide by a Fair Food Agreement that holds growers to a policy of zero tolerance for slavery, zero tolerance for sexual harassment, and minimum wage and safety protections for all workers. We engaged in several protests at local supermarkets to put pressure on grocery chains to comply with the agreement. In one, not so small victory, days after our protest at a new Trader Joe's, the company signed onto the Fair Food Agreement and also agreed to pay one penny more a pound for tomatoes—for the average worker, that translates into \$7000 a year. Trader Joe's became the ninth major retailer to sign the agreement.

And just this fall, I joined a rabbinic-led campaign that stood up to anti-Muslim hatred with a true Jewish message. Jewish "activist", Pam Geller, raised money to place an ad in the New York and Washington subway systems that read: "In any war between the civilized man and the savage, support the civilized man." It continued, "Support Israel. Defeat Jihad." Now it is hard for me to be ashamed by an ad that ends with "support Israel", but I was more than ashamed; I was outraged. Within weeks a counter ad appeared that read: "In the choice between love and hate, choose love. Help stop bigotry against our Muslim neighbors". The "love" ad made *New York Magazine's* 2012 list of Fifty Reasons to Love New York.

The common denominator in all three of these stories was Rabbis for Human Rights-North America (RHR-NA). Founded in 2002 as an affiliate of Rabbis for Human Rights in Israel, the organization has gradually broadened its mandate to include a wider range of issues. By mutual agreement with our colleagues in Israel, this week the organizations announced that even as we would continue to collaborate on Israel related issues, the North American organization would re-organize itself independently under the name, *T'ruah*: The Rabbinic Call for Human Rights.

Much of my work in the American Jewish community involves helping rabbis be more effective leaders. Whether serving in congregations, Jewish educational institutions or Jewish communal organizations, rabbis represent our link to a precious Judaic heritage. Rabbis need to be not only teachers of the values of that heritage but also guides for how Jews might navigate a morally complex world.

Yet advancing human rights is not just the job of rabbis. It is the responsibility of all people of conscience. Religion, if it is going to be a force for good in the world and not a force for division and extremism, needs to motivate people to protect the rights that are guaranteed under the Universal Declaration of Human Rights ratified by the international community in 1948. That Declaration was largely driven by the horrors that the world witnessed during the dark days of World War II. Going forward, *T'ruah* intends to mobilize the larger American Jewish community to address human rights issues in the world from the perspective of Jewish values. As a people that was so victimized by the failure of the world to take action during the Holocaust, Jews should be at the forefront of efforts to ensure that such horrors never happen again.

There are currently over 1800 rabbis and cantors that are part of *T'ruah's* network. But this is only the beginning. In the coming years, we hope that all Jews, whether religious or secular, conservative or liberal, wealthy or poor, become part of a movement to ensure that all human beings be treated as if they were made in the image of God (*b'tzelem elohim*). Standing up for the human rights of all people, regardless of religion, race, sexual orientation or national origin is one of the central mandates of Judaism. If Judaism cannot offer wisdom and guidance as to how

we might make a small contribution to heal a broken world, then it has little to no relevance at all.

Rabbi Sid Schwarz is a senior fellow at Clal-The National Jewish Center for Learning and Leadership. The author of *Judaism and Justice: The Jewish Passion to Repair the World*, his forthcoming book is *Jewish Megatrends: Charting the Course of the American Jewish Future*. He is a member of the board of *T'ruah*.