

## Exodus and Sinai: New Thoughts on Jewish Identity

Sidney Schwarz

Rabbi Sidney Schwarz is Founder and President of PANIM: The Institute for Jewish Leadership and Values, an organization dedicated to the renewal of American Jewish life through the integration of Jewish learning, values, and social responsibility. This essay is adapted from his forthcoming book, *Judaism and Justice: Values, Community and Identity*.

EXODUS AND SINAI serve as metaphors for the twin impulses that are at work in Jewish history, Jewish community, and Jewish identity. The Exodus impulse is the tendency that rallies Jews in political and institutional arrangements to support the continuity of the group or tribe. This impulse triggers a communal response to outside threats to Jewish survival. The Sinai impulse is the tendency that drives Jews to ally themselves with the most vulnerable members of society in the spirit of prophetic Judaism.

Seven values drive Judaism's Sinai impulse, including: compassion (*chesed*); respect for the dignity of all of God's creation and creatures (*tzelem elohim*); pursuing peace (*bakesh shalom v'rodfeihu*); attention to the suffering of others (*lo taamod at dam re'echa*); seeking harmonious relationships with people who are not Jewish (*darchei shalom*); loving the stranger in our midst (*ahavat ger*); and pursuing truth (*emet*).

Jews have internalized these values so deeply that, even as modernity weakened the tie between most Jews and their heritage, the attitudes and behaviors implicit in these values manifest themselves as an ethnic ethos. In no small measure, this explains why Jews were so prominent in the civil rights struggle, the persistence of liberal voting patterns despite socioeconomic trends that would suggest growing conservatism, and why Jews are leaders in so many organizations that are devoted to the welfare of society and the world.

While professional and lay Jewish leaders identify with many of the altruistic values that are part and parcel of this Sinai ethic, they view their priority responsibilities as securing the health and safety of Jews at home, in Israel, and throughout the world. Add to this the anxiety generated by demographic studies suggesting that Jews are self-destructing through intermarriage and assimilation, and it is easy to understand why Jewish organizations are driven to respond, first and most energetically, to the Exodus impulse that focuses on the survival of the tribe.

What modernity has brought into bold relief is the unfortunate growing gap between Sinai and Exodus identities. While the Holo-

caust and the birth of the State of Israel were formative events for Exodus/tribal Jews, those two experiences are becoming more remote with every passing year and certainly much more complex on a moral level. Israel no longer serves as the engine driving Jewish identity or Jewish philanthropy.

How might Jews live out Sinai/covenantal Jewish identity when it is stripped of all elements of tribal association? How do we identify Jews who have no observable Jewish practice, yet live in accordance with Jewish ethical and moral principles — playing leading roles in the fields of human rights, global peace, worker justice, women's rights, civil liberties, third world development, and domestic poverty relief and identifying the Jewish historical and ethical narrative as an impetus for their work?

Here we enter the realm of Sinai consciousness, or what sociologist Herbert Gans terms, "symbolic ethnicity." Many Jews, with no identifiable pattern of Jewish affiliation or behavior, nonetheless define what drives their actions in the world in the context of Jewish heritage. But given the way that the Jewish community currently functions, such Jews — who might otherwise be open to Jewish community initiatives or programs when such endeavors align with their prophetic values and ethics — are defined out of tribe and driven away by implicit communal institutional messages.

The organized Jewish community is not very good at understanding and validating covenantal Jewish identity. Drawing hard and fast lines on who does and does not belong becomes even riskier and more complex when attempting to program and reach out to covenantal/Sinai Jews, whose identity is soft and ambivalent and yet, who see themselves as part of the Jewish people.

Jewish communities would do well to recommit to God's charge to Abraham in Genesis 18 — to do righteousness and justice (*la'asot tzedakah u'mishpat*). Doing so would have the effect of attracting tens of thousands of Jews who would resonate to that ancient message — today more relevant than ever before.