

From Healing to Justice

BY SIDNEY H. SCHWARZ

Most of my professional life I have alternated between directing institutions whose main objective was the work of *tikkun olam* and working as a rabbi in congregations in which personal healing has been an overriding theme. Today, I juggle twin commitments. I head a national educational foundation whose main objective is to bring a Jewish values perspective to the conduct of public policy. I also serve as the rabbi of a fast-growing Reconstructionist congregation. In large measure, this unorthodox job-sharing arrangement grows out of my own sense that important work needs to be done in both spheres of Jewish life. While I used to feel that these two worlds were far apart, sharing little but their Jewish character, I now see that they are part of an organic whole that we need to work hard at integrating.

The Communal Perspective

In the contemporary Jewish community, both the healing and justice agendas have their own distinct set of agencies and organizations whose primary task it is to advance those con-

cerns. In the realm of healing, the Jewish community has established and maintained hospitals for the sick, old age homes for the infirm and social service agencies for the troubled. One can also point to a universe of secular Jewish organizations whose primary agenda is to make an impact on public policy or to provide some kind of direct relief to those suffering from lack of food, clothing or shelter. While the healing agencies generally target local populations, the justice agencies are active both on the local front and with governmental and non-governmental agencies whose reach is global.

All these agencies are currently facing a threat to their long term viability. As community after community completes internal long range planning, the interest in Jewish continuity tends to put the highest priority on agencies that promote Jewish learning and education. Because of flat or declining community campaigns, this means that we are faced with an unfortunate triage between promoting learning or promoting doing. In the Talmud when Rabbi Tarfon and Rabbi Akiba argued about the relative

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importance of learning or doing, Akiba favored learning because it was likely to lead to doing. But who could criticize Tarfon's call to action? We know that we must be Jews committed to learning without turning our backs on the real needs of people.

The trend in the American Jewish community over the past twenty years has been to cut free the hospitals, old age homes and social service agencies from the federated campaign, leaving them to move toward a fee-for-service arrangement. With government sources of funding about to dry up, these agencies are facing tremendous challenges. The social justice and community relations agencies have not done that much better at making a case for themselves, especially in light of the fact that there appears to be a fair amount of duplication among local and national agencies.

One can learn a great deal about a given community's priorities by following the trail of dollars. And so it is ironic that in the face of these downward funding trends, we have seen several significant new organizations burst onto the communal scene from the ground up, signaling a tenacity of commitment to healing and justice from the Jewish grassroots, which is nothing short of spectacular. While Federation campaigns are stagnant, organizations such as Mazon, Jewish Fund for Justice, American Jewish World Service and New Israel Fund report steadily rising revenues for their respective missions. Recently, the community has witnessed the emergence of yet another new organi-

zation—The National Center for Jewish Healing. It will be interesting to see if this new group will be able to identify a market sector of Jews as committed to the healing agenda as the above mentioned organizations have done with Jews committed to social justice.

It is important to note that major financial support has been provided to many of these newer groups by the Jewish Life program of The Nathan Cummings Foundation, headed by Rabbi Rachel Cowan. Rabbi Cowan's progressive vision of Jewish life, supported by Foundation president, Charles Halpern, understands that major pockets of Jews, overlooked by the mega-agencies that run Jewish life, can find pathways into Judaism through the channels of healing, social justice and spirituality. Those who are even minimally active in any of these new groups know how true this is.

The Synagogue Orbit

Anyone who cares about Jewish life should applaud these emerging pockets of Jewish energy. At the same time, I think that we need to be alert to the danger of creating large groups of Jews who mobilize around one agenda item and who, potentially, miss the forest for the trees. Today we have "Healing Jews" and "Justice Jews," "Federation Jews" and "Zionist Jews," "Eco-Jews," "Buddhist Jews," "Gay and Lesbian Jews" and "Feminist Jews." The list could go on.

I know these pockets of Jews. I spend time with many of them. I

admire their passion and their commitment to their issues. I also find the ideological tests within each sector suffocating. Many of the Jews most active in these realms are (to use the Hebrew expression) *meshugah ladavar*, obsessed with their issue. I view the phenomenon (to pirate a recent book title) as a kind of "tribalization of the Jewish people."

My concern stems from the perception that there is all too little interaction between these various sectors of Jewish life. Because I think each has something valuable to contribute to the complex mosaic that makes up contemporary Jewish civilization, I think that we must accept the challenge to try to weave each of these "tribes" into the fabric of the Jewish community. I believe that only the synagogue can accomplish this, but it is an extraordinarily difficult task. Let me illustrate.

I have pockets of each of the above named Jewish tribes in my congregation. It is very hard to satisfy each tribe that the synagogue is sufficiently sympathetic to its agenda. The "Zionist Jews" have complained that I don't spend enough time talking about Israel. But after a recent UJA Shabbat at which I invited a speaker to speak about Israel and the Federation campaign, one of my "Justice Jews" shared with me the feeling that the entire presentation was politically reactionary. My "Political Jews" would be happy if I spent every Shabbat on a new cause that had an organization to be joined or a rally to attend. But they roll their eyes when we invite all those

people who want a blessing (*misheberakh*) for themselves or a loved one who is sick in body or spirit to come to the bimah, join arms and sing a healing prayer.

Creating Whole Jews

I believe that it is the task of every rabbi and congregation to create whole Jews. To do so requires that the synagogue be inclusive enough to attract Jews who have one particular interest. An effective synagogue and rabbi will then help such a person fill in the gaps in their Jewishness and understand the other agendas. To entice Jews to embrace new dimensions of Jewish experience requires that we present such new agendas as complementary to, not competitive with their initial concerns.

There is a lot of work to be done to get our various tribal Jews into synagogues. Most of the Jews I meet in secular Jewish organizations find something missing in their Jewish lives, but their various attempts to find synagogues are invariably disappointing. For such Jews to make the jump from secular Jewish involvement to a religious lifestyle is not easy. It requires meeting these Jews "where they are," even though we should not be content to let them just stay there. Unfortunately, most synagogues do not offer enough familiar touchstones to draw in such Jews.

I was recently at a social gathering with about fifteen other rabbis, mostly affiliated with the Conservative movement. I had just finished reading Rodger Kamenetz's, *The Jew in the*

Lotus and was talking about the Buddhist-Jews in my congregation. Not one of the rabbis was familiar with the phenomenon! On the same evening, one rabbi of a thousand family synagogues said that he was unaware of any gay Jews in his congregation. Needless to say, not many Jews who have explored alternate religious paths will find themselves comfortable in such synagogues. Nor is it likely that a homosexual Jew will feel welcomed in a place where there is little sensitivity to his/her concerns or life choices.

A Personal (Rabbinic) Perspective

Over the years of my rabbinate, I have come to appreciate the extent to which people's lack of physical, mental and spiritual wholeness can serve as barriers to the larger agenda of Judaism and the Jewish people that I would like to represent. However much I might want to balance out the interests of Jews who come to my congregation, if they are in pain, they will not hear my message about Shabbat, or Israel, or the homeless.

The educational foundation that I head, The Washington Institute for Jewish Leadership and Values, recently published along with the Coalition for the Advancement of Jewish Education, a curriculum entitled, *Jewish Civics: A Tikkun Olam/World Repair Manual*. Because we are piloting it in several communities, I monitored the classroom reaction to the book. One of the teachers told me that he could not get the class the least bit interested in *tikkun olam*, when most of them

had personal issues that were so emotionally taxing that they were literally driven to distraction. Some were from divorced or divorcing families, and some were substance abusers; others were depressed and/or suicidal. Welcome to the world of the new Jewish teen!

How do we address the concerns that lie so heavily on the hearts and souls of so many Jews? As with many rabbis, I am in constant agony over the many people in my congregation who are in great pain and in need of pastoral support. While we have gone to great lengths to mobilize the community to respond to people in need, the rabbi's presence or non-presence often becomes an issue. Some rabbis are committed to being there for every and any member that needs pastoral attention. Other rabbis find that impossible to undertake, and they find other ways to deal with the needs of their congregants, which can be so all-consuming.

The community itself can provide a significant source of support. I am often awed at the healing power of community. There are people who come into our community with a great sense of spiritual emptiness and emotional need. It is wondrous to see how such people are embraced and taken in by the protective care of a community that has, as one of its objectives, just such acts of *gemilut hesed*. There are also times when such people do not connect with anyone and within a short period of time, they vanish. We have not been able to fill their need. Maybe it's the commu-

nity's fault; maybe it's mine; maybe it's nobody's fault.

The Rabbi as Healer

But beyond the healing power of community, it would be disingenuous to suggest that the rabbinic office does not continue to hold a mysterious power in the psyche of many people. Despite the Reconstructionist line that rabbis are (only!) teachers, I have found that there is a need and role for the rabbi as holy person and healer.

I have seen congregants convinced that my visit to their mother on her deathbed brought her out of her coma long enough to say good-bye. I have known parents convinced that my visit brought their son out of two days of delirium and dangerously high body temperatures. Similarly, a woman was convinced that my personal *misheberakh* with her allowed her to get pregnant after a decade of failed attempts. I don't fully understand these incidents and I hesitate to share them, because they conjure up the holy roller charlatans that give religion such a bad name. Yet they happened.

I think that such experiences point to a connection between the spiritual and physical realm of life, a connection difficult to articulate, but which has been experienced by people of all faiths for millennia. As I get older, it is becoming a much larger part of my own understanding of God.

Beyond Self

Still, I have concerns about the emerging fascination with healing.

Some years ago Rabbi Harold Schulweis coined the term the "psychological Jew." We are becoming the most analyzed generation in history and the result is a level of self-absorption that strikes me as un-Jewish. While everyone is busy getting in touch with their pain—past, present and future, both real and imagined—the world is falling apart. As much as our synagogues must be places where people in pain can be heard and comforted, they must also be places that challenge people to confront and respond to the suffering in our societies.

We live in a world in which 20 million people are refugees, victims of their own governments. Every day 40,000 children die from starvation-related illnesses. Thousands of champions of human rights are currently in prison, many subject to torture. The Cold War has given way to ethnic wars that kill myriads. The most affluent society in history turns its back on over half a million people who live in the streets of our cities. These are realities of the world we live in. It doesn't make the personal pain of individuals any easier to bear. It does however, put it into a perspective that we ignore at our own peril.

We must begin to make a connection between *tikkun olam* and *tikkun ishi*, the healing of the world and the healing of ourselves. There are people who will start their spiritual journey at either side of the continuum and may find it difficult to appreciate other equally real needs. The social activist can be so busy healing the world that s/he is unaware that his/her life and/or

family is falling apart. The person who is being helped to deal with pain can be so obsessed with personal healing that the cries of others in pain cannot be heard. Our synagogues should be places that both provide sanctuary to those sick in body and spirit and champion the causes for social justice. If we can help the one-dimensional Jew to see another dimension to Jewishness, we will be both responsive to their needs, and, simultaneously, helping to make them better, more whole Jews.

If a person can come to experience some healing in body, mind and spirit through relationship with holy community and holy people, might not it be possible to apply the same

“therapy” to our society? Could we not hold out as an ideal that, after a person has experienced some *tikkun ishi*, personal healing, we challenge them to work to effect *tikkun olam*, the healing of the world?

The Jewish mystical tradition suggests that the human being is a microcosm of the universe. If that is so, then it just may be possible that these two processes may be one and the same. If synagogues can become places that embrace Jews and provide them sustenance for all manner of healing, then there is also the possibility that communities of the healed can effect healing of their societies and, ultimately, the world.