



Photo by Ben Forman

Sidney Schwarz

politics and religion

by **Mitchell Bard**

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Who says religion and politics don't mix?

Rabbi Sidney Schwarz believes that a grounding in Jewish ethical values helps people make better political decisions. The organization he founded, The Washington Institute for Jewish Leadership and Values, is celebrating its 11th anniversary this year and has become a part of the Washington Jewish political establishment. This he achieved through his determined effort to show Jews of all denominations that the sacred texts and Jewish scholars of yesterday can teach us how to think about and solve contemporary problems.

Our interview is conducted over lunch in between sessions of the Institute's Panim el Panim

("face to face") High School in Washington programs. Earlier, I listened to day school students who had come from New York, Illinois, New Jersey, Michigan and Maryland debating the "Jewish position" on affirmative action in the context of commentaries by scholars like the Ramban. Another group of students discussed what Jewish sources can teach us about the question of whether to support or oppose the building of a low-income housing project in a neighborhood adjacent to the Jewish community. Not surprisingly, views are mixed and passions sometimes heated. It's exactly the type of intense engagement Schwarz hopes to stimulate.

Schwarz does not come across as a political activist or radical. He's soft-spoken and thoughtful. He wasn't raised in a particularly political household, but was bitten by the political bug in high school in a special program called the Presidential Classroom for Young Americans, which would be a prototype for the program he later developed.

Schwarz describes his religious upbringing as "conservadox." He became active in USY on Long Island and worked his way through college as a Jewish youth worker and program director at Kfar Masada and Cejwin Camps. He also became active in Israel-related activities, particularly the Soviet Jewry movement after visiting Russia. Rather than go into politics directly, however, he took the unusual step of entering the rabbinate. Though he didn't have much interest in a pulpit, he thought that he had other valuable skills, in particular the ability to reach kids, which he'd discovered working at camps. "I was interested in so many things—Israel, Jewish community,

social justice, politics, youth work—I felt that a rabbinical degree would open the door to many possibilities," he says.

Schwarz chose the Reconstructionist Rabbinical College because that was where his heart was; he agreed with Mordechai Kaplan's view that being Jewish in a democratic society meant more than ritual practices. Despite himself, Schwarz fell into congregation work. During rabbinical school, students had to work in the community and he landed in a *shul* in Media, Pennsylvania. He spent four years there while he was finishing his studies and then four more after he graduated. "It was a community that was interested in innovative ideas and it was a great laboratory for me, given my interest in redefining the synagogue."

Schwarz moved to Washington, D.C. where he became the executive director of the Jewish Community Council of Greater Washington, D.C. After four years, however, "I realized that I traded one partial view of the Jewish world for another. The synagogue world was too parochial for my tastes and interests. I wanted the CRC to be more Jewish, but people thought I tried to be too much of a rabbi and thought politics and Judaism were separate."

Frustrated by this limited vision, he returned to the pulpit in 1988 and founded Adat Shalom Reconstructionist Congregation in Bethesda, Maryland. He simultaneously set out to create an organization that would marry Jewish study, social justice and politics. Thus, the Washington Institute for Jewish Leadership and Values was born.

Like many good ideas, it wasn't easy to translate into financial support. "I funded the original budget for six months and worked out of my house. I had a two-year-old and another baby on the way. My wife was very supportive.

She said, 'Go ahead and try.' I started calling bureaus of Jewish education and Jewish community centers, to sell them on sending teens on our leadership seminars blending Judaism, public policy and activism."

Finally, in November 1988, after nearly a year of preparation, a group of students from Connecticut came to Washington for the first *Panim el Panim* session. "The leader of the first group asked how many times I'd done the program before. I said this is the first time. She said you didn't tell me that. I said you never asked."

Since then, more than 100 communities have sent more than 7,000 students to the four-day workshops. The day I sat in, the group was composed of high school yeshiva students. This was atypical. Schwarz says most of the groups come from non-Orthodox backgrounds and are conversant with the political issues, but don't see the Jewish angle. They're interested in politics, but see their bar/bat mitzvah as the end of Judaism."

The more observant students have a different problem: they sometimes have little interest in non-Jews. Schwarz recalls one workshop to which he brought a teen from El Salvador, who told a story about how he was arrested and tortured for protesting against the lack of water in his school. His friends had already been picked up by the police. Later their bodies were found at the side of the road, murdered. Because he knew he was next, he fled to the U.S. One of the participants asked if the kid was Jewish and when he learned that the Salvadoran was Catholic, he didn't see what the story had to do with him!

"Therein lies just one of the many challenges of making our participants both better Jews and better human

beings," explains Schwarz. "The most vexing issues today are moral ones and we come from a tradition of morality." Over the years, Schwarz has helped thousands of young Jews understand the relationship between Judaism and a life of committed activism. "My definition of politics is 'the process through which you can change the world for the better.' The Torah offers an approach to life informed by the teachings of Judaism to make the world closer to the messianic ideal." As the Institute's literature says, "not only is *Panim el Panim* a vehicle to attract otherwise marginal Jewish youth to a program stressing Jewish identity and involvement, but it provides a way to broaden the horizons of students who do benefit from quality formal Jewish education."

The Rabbi also believes his program fosters greater tolerance, which is much needed because "kids today are getting messages from their movements that invalidate every other approach to Judaism."

Discussing morality and public policy is stimulating, but Judaism is a religion of deeds. Five years ago, Schwarz created a much more ambitious version of *Panim el Panim* called the Jewish Civics Initiative (JCI). The year-long JCI program is now being conducted in 19 communities and four day schools around the country. The centerpiece of the initiative is the Institute's curriculum titled *Jewish Civics: A Tikkun Olam/World Repair Manual*. "Our goal is to help students identify community problems such as homelessness, environmental degradation, inadequate educational opportunities for disadvantaged populations, and then have them develop creative responses to a given problem,

which they can act on through community service or political advocacy. We've found that kids more readily internalize Jewish values when they apply them in non-Jewish settings. It becomes more than just taking care of your own; it is acting on the lesson that every human being is made in the image of God. We need to help kids to reach across boundaries of differences."

While it may seem like a difficult enough task to build tolerance among Jews, Schwarz believes this is not the only goal. "Religion is one of the primary sources of division in the United States. The more committed to faith someone is, seemingly the less tolerant they are of others. Our challenge is to get people to become more interested in their own faith and reach out to others." Toward that end, in 1997 the Institute launched the *E Pluribus Unum Project*, which brought together 60 Jewish, Protestant and Catholic entering college freshmen from around the country. The group discussed religion, social justice and the common good in a program that integrates theology, the arts and volunteer service.

Schwarz's success at creating an intentional spiritual community across faith lines has drawn attention from clergy, educators and funders from across the country. *EPU* is now supported by the Lilly Endowment, the Ford Foundation and Steven Spielberg's Righteous Persons Foundation.

After 11 years, Schwarz is beginning to see the fruits of his labors. Today, the Institute is on stable financial footing. It received grants from major foundations like the Meyerhoff Foundation, the Nathan Cummings Foundation and the Covenant Foundation. The organization

now employs 12 people and has a budget of more than \$1.6 million. More importantly, he's seeing the difference he's made in students' lives. Students always leave his sessions fired up to change the world. Now, he's also seeing his alumni taking leadership positions, in the Jewish community and in American society.

Schwarz also acknowledges that if other faiths aren't providing similar training, he might be setting kids up for failure and disenchantment. He remains fundamentally optimistic, however, despite the low regard most Americans hold for politics. "Cynicism is poisonous and corrosive. I believe politics is a noble enterprise. There are always crooks, but most policy people have tremendous commitment. Public affairs and community service are about looking beyond the self and advancing the common good. In Hebrew it is called *tikkun olam*, repairing a broken world."

Though it required a long struggle to establish the Institute, Schwarz has found it tremendously gratifying. He has seen each of his programmatic ideas take shape, attract a strong following and inspire thousands of young people.

"The greatest experience for an educator is to see students become passionate about their Judaism and become motivated to make a difference. Young people are rarely supported in their idealism and encouraged to live out their dreams. That is what we do best."

Indeed, in his single-minded drive to create some of the most innovative and successful educational programs in the Jewish community today, Schwarz is a role model for the kind of visionary life work that he encourages others to pursue.

Like another man who combined politics and Judaism, Theodore Herzl; Rabbi Sidney Schwarz's dream has come true.

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