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The road to peace is filled with stones

by Rabbi Sidney Schwarz

Sometimes history comes right to your doorstep. Last week we received the report of the beating deaths of two young Israelis, Ya'akov Mandell and Yosef Ishran.

The two young teens were taking a hike in the Judean mountains near their home in Tekoa, a settlement town that most of the world considers illegal. Their bodies were found, stoned beyond recognition, in a cave. Until a couple of years ago, Ya'akov lived in Silver Spring. His father, Seth, was the rabbi and Hillel director at the University of Maryland.

Being connected to a victim of the violence in the Middle East doesn't make it a worse tragedy than other deaths, Jews or Palestinians. It just brings it closer to home. The cycle of violence has more than enough blame to go around. It is now quite obvious that Yasser Arafat can no longer control events emanating from the Palestinian Authority. To the extent that terrorist activity against Israelis is still heralded as the highest form of religious commitment to Muslims in the region, it is hard to envision a slowdown in what is effectively Intifada II.

On the other side, Israelis turned Ehud Barak out of office, feeling that once all the

negotiating cards were on the table, Israel was still left without a peace treaty with the Palestinians. The Sharon government has no illusions about peace and is now pursuing a policy of retaliation against Palestinians. By restricting the ability of Palestinians to move freely in the territories and restricting their access to jobs in Israel proper, the lives of Palestinians grow more desperate by the day. The demolition of homes and the uprooting of olive groves that are often the sole source of income for poor Palestinian families, will poison relations between the warring neighbors for another generation, at the very least.

I have had an unusual perspective on the changing tides of war and peace in the Middle East. Every year our Panim el Panim: High School in Washington program brings more than 1,000 of the most outstanding Jewish teens to Washington to learn about Jewish values, social justice and political activism. When the program started in 1988, Israel advocacy was a keen interest of the students. Sessions at the Embassy of Israel and with the American Israel Public Affairs Committee were among the most popular as participants learned about the Intifada, Arab anti-Semitic propaganda and the importance of lobbying for Congressional aid packages for Israel.

In the years following the Oslo accords, the intensity of interest in Israel-related advocacy waned. Israel seemed well on the road to peace. As terrorist activity subsided, students, as with their parents, felt less of a need to be Israel's protectors.

Nonetheless as educators we felt that there was still much to learn. We created Israeli Supreme Court Simulation, a program that had students wrestle with the complex moral issues confronting Israelis who must be vigilant about real security threats but who cannot totally ignore the fairly high Jewish values standard of respect for human rights that constrains many types of military actions aimed at retaliation or collective punishment.

In March, one of our seminars attended the AIPAC Policy Conference and participated at a rally outside the Washington Hilton in the District where the conference took place. There were both pro- and anti-Israel demonstrators in attendance. Two of our students were hit by rocks thrown by teens from the counter demonstration. Fortunately, they weren't seriously hurt. The entire group, though, was shaken by the realization that many Israelis live with the threat of stoning — and more — on a daily basis.

There is a lot of confusion in the American-Jewish community today about the proper role Jews need to play regarding the

conflict in the Middle East. There are Jews who feel that Israel can do no wrong and must be supported with all the political influence at our disposal.

Many other Jews are appalled by reports of Israeli behavior in the face of the rising tide of violence, feeling that the Israelis are the responsible power in the area and that they are reacting with excessive force and violence.

The majority of Jews, I believe, are people of conscience who care deeply about Israel and find themselves torn by doubts and ambivalence buffeted in their opinions by the news of the day.

One thing is clear. American Jews can no longer turn their back on the issue. To be sure, there is a homeland we care about that is desperate to live in peace. At the same time, that homeland was meant to live out a legacy of our prophetic tradition that must affect the way the Israeli government and people respond at this time of trial.

We are all learning, the hard way, that the road to peace and justice is filled with stones.

Sid Schwarz is the founder and president of The Washington Institute for Jewish Leadership and Values, and author of Finding a Spiritual Home: How a New Generation of Jews can Transform the American Synagogue.