



HUMANISTIC JUDAISM

Volume XXXX Number 4 / Volume XXXXI Number 1-2
Autumn 2012 / Winter - Spring 2013

A PARENTING PRIMER FOR HUMANISTIC JEWS

Jerald Bain
Rabbi Binyamin Biber
Stephanie Blum
Rabbi Adam Chalom
Rabbi Daniel Friedman
Dale McGowan
Joy Markowitz
Jennifer Naparstek Klein
Baudelia Taylor

Wisdom from Wine:
Demystifying Family Values

The Atheist Rabbi and the Orthodox Women's Seminary

and more

Humanistic Judaism is a voice for Jews who value their Jewish identity and who seek an alternative to conventional Judaism.

Humanistic Judaism affirms the right of individuals to shape their own lives independent of supernatural authority.

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FOCUS

What does Humanistic Judaism have to say about raising children? What parental goals and methods are consistent with a humanistic philosophy, and how do members of the movement apply them? In our HJ Forum, we explore what is special about humanistic parenting.

Also in this issue are reports on a Humanistic rabbi's trip to Israel and on Hasidic Jews who reject ultra-Orthodox life; poems of remembrance by a Holocaust survivor; and a review of a new book by the Israeli philosopher Amos Oz and his daughter.

– R.D.F.

Ed. Note: The transliterations used in the articles in this issue reflect the authors' preferences.

LETTERS TO THE EDITORS

To the Editors:

Some years ago, when Rabbi Sherwin Wine visited Denver, a committed humanist suggested we should identify ourselves as Jewish Humanists. Emphatically, Rabbi Wine responded that we are Humanistic Jews, standing firmly with our core identity. Surely, what he meant was that we identify with the Jewish experience from its inception, but of course, without the supernatural.

I raise this because, in spite of the excellence of the discussions about social and political action in the Spring/Summer issue of *Humanistic Judaism*, neither Jewish history nor the wisdom of Judaism's wise men and women seemed of the moment. This is not an argument that tradition should control our positions; that is how some others proceed. But, we surely can find inspiration and guidance in the ongoing development of our Jewish experience. Otherwise, we are de facto a humanist organization.

It seems to me that instead of making political statements about issues facing our society, we should make public statements based on our understanding of Judaism. We are a Jewish organization, not a political one. Where does our heritage take us concerning Israel, abortion, LGBT issues, care for the needy and others?

Bertram H. Rothschild
Denver, CO

To the Editors:

Rabbi Karen Levy's positive review of my latest book contains two mistakes. First, its title is *The Association of Jewish Libraries Guide to Yiddish Short Stories*, and the publisher is Ben Yehuda Press. Second, she needn't scratch her head and wonder why I omitted Sholem Aleichem's short story, "Kapores," because it is there under the topic "When Workers Organize," on page 15.

Allow me to take this opportunity to thank her for the review.

As the author of *Humanist Readings in Jewish Folklore*, published by the International Institute for Secular Humanistic Judaism and Milan Press in 2011, I share Bertram Rothschild's enthusiasm for the "oven of abnai" story in the Talmud, Baba

Metzia 59a-59b, but the complete story (which I admittedly omitted from my book) has a dark side. The rabbis kick Rabbi Eliezer out of the academy for refusing to accept the majority ruling. He then wreaks terrible vengeance, using his supernatural powers to kill Rabbi Gamliel, who is not only the head of the rabbinic academy, but his brother-in-law! Even at its best, the Talmud has troubling features for Secular Humanistic Jews.

As the author of *Let Justice Well Up Like Water: Progressive Jews from Hillel to Helen Suzman*, published by the Congress of Secular Jewish Organizations and the Center for Cultural Judaism in 2004, I applaud the SHJ for its Humanistic Jewish Role Model program. I agree with the choice of Freud. but the article quotes Freud rejecting religion as "the opiate of the people." Wasn't that Karl Marx's characterization?

Bennett Muraskin
Parsippany, NJ

Ed. note: We apologize for the errors with regard to Mr. Muraskin's new book, which are ours alone. Muraskin is correct with regard to the quotation about religion as the "opiate of the people." However, Freud did make some similar statements on the subject.

To the Editors:

It is disingenuous for Michael Egren to compare the interpretation of biblical passages to the interpretation of the U.S. Constitution. His is a case of the proverbial apples-and-oranges argument. On the subject of scripture, Sherwin Wine was simply articulating a tenet of the historical critical approach to such documents as one finds in Torah and the writings when he said that their authors or compilers should be supposed to have meant what they actually wrote. That also, by the way, is part

Letters continued on page 39

Send your LETTERS to *Humanistic Judaism*, 28611 West Twelve Mile Road, Farmington Hills, MI 48334, or to info@shj.org on the Internet. All letters become the property of this magazine. Letters may be edited or condensed. Shorter, typed letters will be given preference. All letters should be signed originals, with the full address and telephone number of the writer. No unsigned letters will be published.

HJ FORUM: A Parenting Primer for Humanistic Jews

Humanistic Jewish Parenting: Theory and Reality by Rabbi Adam Chalom

Having worked as a Humanistic Jewish leader and rabbi for fifteen years, I have answered many questions from adults and children about beliefs. Eight years ago, in “Dealing with the God Question,” (*Humanistic Judaism*, Summer/ Autumn 2004),* I tried to give appropriate Humanistic Jewish answers to such challenges as, “What do I say if other kids ask me what I pray for?” “X told me we’re not good people because we don’t believe in God,” and “X said we can’t be Jewish if we don’t believe in God.” I presented two sets of answers: one aimed at children ages 7 and under, the other for children 8 and older. I was pleased at the positive reception I received from many adults, who found the answers helpful for themselves.

Although these answers were drawn from years of Jewish education experience, I did not become a parent in my own right until 2005. And that is when theory collided with reality. Like most of my pre-parenthood theories, my perspective changed once I actually became a father, and even more so when my children began to interact unaccompanied with the outside world.

Sometimes we subconsciously assume that the way we were raised is “usual,” and so our default setting is to react as we saw our parents

react. Upon reflection, we may decide to make different choices. But parenting is often a collaborative affair. Both my wife, AJ, and I were raised as Humanistic Jews at the Birmingham Temple in suburban Detroit, but our family experiences were very different because our parents and their choices were very different from each other. Her family regularly visited the cemetery where relatives were buried; mine did not. She lived in a largely Jewish neighborhood; I did not. We sang different songs to light Hanukka candles; both Humanistic, but different. And each family, even each parent, applied Humanistic Jewish philosophy and identity in their own way.

As we became Humanistic Jewish parents, we had to make our own parenting choices,

Rabbi Adam Chalom, Ph.D., dean of the International Institute for Secular Humanistic Judaism for North America, is rabbi of Kol Hadash Humanistic Congregation in Lincolnshire, IL. He holds a doctorate from the University of Michigan and sits on the editorial board of this journal. His wife, AJ, is Humanist Giving Program Coordinator at Foundation Beyond Belief and past chair of the HuJews Youth Committee of the Society for Humanistic Judaism. They live with their two children in Highland Park, IL, and they reserve the right to change their minds again the more they parent!

*“Dealing with the God Question” also may be found online at http://www.myjewishlearning.com/beliefs/Theology/God/About_God/Speaking_about_God/Speaking_to_Kids/Humanistic_View.shtml.

taking into account our distinct formative emotional experiences. Fortunately, with regard to those choices we share much more than we differ on. We believe that honesty is the best policy, and that a clear affirmation of other people's right to different conclusions is the best model both for getting along and for credibly demanding the dignity to differ with the opinion of the wider community. If we Humanistic Jews want to be respected while disagreeing with others, then we have to be willing to respect their disagreement with *us*. AJ and I believe even more strongly that a positive focus on what we *do* believe, what we *can* do, how we *are* responsible is a better approach than being on the defensive and defining yourself by what you are not. We have also made a commitment to bring into our home such Jewish experiences as Shabbat dinners, Passover diets, and an occasional Havdala observance. But even there, theory has sometimes yielded to reality; speaking Hebrew at home gave way to Spanish when our older child entered a dual language program in kindergarten.

A few key lessons learned from actual parenting experience:

- *Your issues are not their issues:* Our daughter says the Pledge of Allegiance every day (in English and Spanish!) and has not yet asked about those infamous two words, “under God,” added in 1954. Before enrolling her in school, AJ – on the basis of her own childhood experiences – felt strongly that our child should not participate in this ritual; however, we took a wait-and-see approach. Perhaps someday one of our children will raise an objection or question what those words are doing there or whether we agree with them. Their school life doesn't have to be one test case after another. If they have questions about this, we will tell them our honest opinions. If they have an issue with the Pledge, we will absolutely support their expressing it. They might decide they are just amused or indifferent, or come up with alternative wording that works for them. Our issues don't have to become their issues – they will have plenty of their own to deal with!
- *Kids figure things out on their own:* When it came to Santa Claus, we faced a double dilemma. We did not want to lie to our child, particularly since we are Jewish and a Santa, if he existed, wouldn't visit us anyway! But our daughter's best friend and his family are culturally Christian and were definitely into Santa, particularly for promoting good behavior. Again, we took the wait-and-see approach, answering her occasional question with, for example, “Some people think there is, other people don't and make sure *they* get gifts for people they love. What do you think?” One day, from the back seat of the car, out of nowhere she declared, “There can't be a Santa Claus. How could he visit all those houses, and the reindeer would break the roof. And no one can get down a chimney – you would die!” No more needed to be said.
- *Give your children real, scientific answers to their questions:* As with all children, ours ask *many* questions each day. We try to give them scientific explanations to help them understand their world. The other day, AJ was discussing with our 5-year-old son why it was raining, talking about water vapor in the clouds. He turned to her and explained the *entire* water cycle, a combination of lessons received over time from us and from PBS television. There is always a way to simplify a scientific explanation so children can understand it; it just takes practice to translate *condensation* into “little bits of water coming together to make drops.” Later that week, our 7-year-old daughter taught her brother the water cycle song from camp, which has now become part of our family song repertoire.
- *Don't fear the traditional:* Before we had children, we were struck by a story another Humanistic rabbi shared with us. Her son had come home from a Jewish Community Center preschool and told her that the Humanistic blessings she was using were “wrong” and that he had been taught the “real” blessings. We were very concerned lest our children have a similar experience

or feel alien in other Jewish settings or read a Bible story and think the god character was real. What we've learned is that we do not have to isolate our children in a Humanistic Jewish bubble, and it wouldn't work anyway. Jewish literacy does not mean you believe everything you read, and the experience the children have singing our songs, or our version of the traditional songs, creates positive emotional associations that can overcome the feeling of being different. Try singing "Ayfo Oree" to your children as a bedtime song. When they start singing it back, you'll know that they know who they are, even if other Jewish children don't know that song. Our son has chosen to improvise the words to "Ayfo Oree," at the end singing not just "and in you" but rather "and in you, and you and you" (to all the people or stuffed animals in the room). At a recent Society for Humanistic Judaism board meeting, AJ was introduced to a new version of "Ayfo Oree" that made a similar alteration to the original.

- *Kids learn by example:* If you live a life of humanistic values, doing good because of

consequences and experience rather than arbitrary commands, exploring the world through reason and evidence, asking and encouraging lots of questions, then your children will get the message without didactic lecturing. This approach is much more effective than "Do as I say, not as I do!"

- *Give your children reasons for good behavior:* I've found that if I have the patience to explain discipline or restrictions with *why* the rule is important, it works much better than "Because I said so!" If that works for ethics philosophically – not obeying divine commandments just "because" – why not for everything else?

Sometimes you can find just the right way to get the message across. My daughter still remembers a Yom Kippur family service discussion I led a few years ago on the difference between "need" and "want." You don't have to call it a "hierarchy of needs" to teach a lesson in humanistic ethics to a child of any age. Living your life as a parent with Humanistic Jewish integrity goes a long, long way.



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Humanistic Parenting

by Rabbi Daniel Friedman

No parent wakes up in the morning planning to make his child's life miserable. No mother says to herself, "Today I'll yell, nag, and humiliate my child whenever possible" Yet, in spite of good intentions, the unwanted war breaks out again. Once more we find ourselves saying things we do not mean in a tone we do not like.

– Haim Ginott
*Between Parent and Child**

Why is parenting such a difficult job? Ostensibly it is the most satisfying and exhilarating of experiences: nurturing one's own seed to maturity, to productive existence. Why is this wondrous opportunity for the expression of love, benevolence, tenderness, generosity, and sensitivity so often fraught with tension, unhappiness, failure, and pain?

One reason is lack of training. As our first-born emerges into the world, most of us parents haven't the foggiest idea what parenthood is about. We have spent less time and attention studying how to be parents than we did learning to drive a car. Courses in parenting are rarer than courses in cooking and needlepoint. Our main guides are the other ignorant parents around us and the experience of our own upbringing, which (many of us are all too ready to admit) was botched by our parents; yet we proceed to commit the same mistakes they did, even as we valiantly try to avoid them.

We have another resource: several thousand years of accumulated "wisdom," which teaches us what parents are supposed to be and do. A venerated authority on parenting is the Bible, which instructs us: I, the Lord your God, created you. Therefore I own you. And you owe me obedience. You must listen to me; and if you do, and if you obey my commandments, I will love you and I will reward you. If you disobey, I will be very unhappy with you. I will punish you with untold suffering. Whether or not you agree with my rules, you must obey them. As your creator, I know better than you do what is good for you.

Sound familiar? "Drink your milk because I say so." "If you finish your homework, then you can watch TV." "If you want to go with us to Cancun, clean your room, be nice to your brother, and go to Sunday School."

The Bible is but one source of the authoritarian, threats-and-punishment model of parenting, which has become deeply embedded in the unquestioned assumptions of Western culture. Mothers and fathers who long ago abandoned the Scriptures as the word of God still believe:

1. That they own their children;
2. That therefore, they have the right to command them and require obedience;
3. That the purpose of parenthood is to discipline children with rules, restrictions, prescriptions, and proscriptions so that they will grow to be responsible adults.

This is the context in which families become battlegrounds and parents and children become enemies locked into bitter power struggles.

There must be another way, and, happily, there is. The alternative to the authoritarian

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*New York: Avon Books, 1965, p. xiii.

mode of parenting is humanistic parenting, a radical departure from the conventional philosophy of child-rearing. Like humanism in general, it is not a very popular idea. It contradicts the inherited wisdom of several thousand years. But it does seek to accomplish what most of us earnestly desire: to become the parents of happy, responsible, competent, self-respecting, self-confident children, who will be able to live independent, creative, productive lives.

Humanistic parenting begins with the understanding that parents do not “own” their child. No authority in the universe, including parents, owns human beings – this is humanism’s unique ethical principle. Children are not the property or the servants of their parents. They are self-owned human beings with the rights to which every human being is entitled – only more so, because no child has chosen to be born.

This obvious but profoundly significant fact imposes upon all parents an awesome responsibility: to live up to the implications of their decision to bring a human being into the world. In general, parents are obliged to do everything possible to equip the child to live successfully in that world: not merely to feed, clothe, and educate the child, but to provide the emotional, psychological, and ethical environment within which the child can grow to a wholesome maturity. The rights of children with respect to their parents thus exceed those of human beings in general. All other human relationships are (or ought to be) voluntary, and the individual is (or ought to be) free to terminate these relationships. The child does not possess this option. He is an involuntary member of his family and is thus entitled to special rights beyond ordinary human rights.

Food, shelter, and education are not gifts to be granted the child conditionally; nor are they rewards to be given if the child “behaves.” They are unconditional rights, which parents owe their children by virtue of having chosen to give them life. It is furthermore the duty of parents not to harm the child physically, emotionally,

or psychologically. They may not physically abuse or humiliate, tease or ridicule their child without violating the fundamental principle of the parent-child relationship: Parents owe their child the conditions most likely to produce a healthy, happy, independent person. These conditions are children’s rights.

Independence is the ultimate purpose and result of proper parenting. Ideal (not perfect) parents are those who, through their behavior and guidance, enable their children to live on their own, as eventually they must.

The best training for independence is the experience of being independent. Parents who allow children to make their own decisions (that is, who allow freedom) and to enjoy or suffer the consequences provide far more beneficial and realistic guidance than those who say, in effect: “Do it my way until you are old enough to think for yourself.” How can people learn to think for themselves (or learn anything else!) unless they do it?

Parents may offer suggestions and advice and, through their example, may provide models of the behavior they hope their children will emulate. They may help children understand the implications of their decisions and point out the dangers (as the parents see them) of the “wrong” choices. However, unless children’s health or safety is jeopardized, it is better to permit them to reach their own decisions, as unwise as they may appear to the parents, than to undermine their judgment and independence by overruling them.

Children will make mistakes. (Don’t we all?) They may suffer inconvenience, embarrassment, or pain when they err (an important lesson to be learned at any age). They may cause their parents inconvenience, embarrassment, or pain (the price of parenthood). But they will mature as the result. They will be better able next time to act wisely. The right to be wrong is as important to a child’s welfare as is the right to nourishment.

Let your children stay up too late. They will learn soon enough the value of a good

night's sleep. (Nature is a better teacher than are scolding parents.) Don't force them to finish their homework. Their performance at school and the inherent punishments and rewards will eventually convince them to study; and if not, what, in the long run, does your standing over them really accomplish? Sooner or later (better sooner!), each of us must do what we do for our sake, for our reasons, for our happiness, rather than to satisfy the wishes of our parents. Is this not central to our humanistic philosophy?

We must overcome the impulse to protect children from pain and shield them from error by intervening when they are about to err. By waking them up so that they won't be late, or typing a school assignment so it will be on time, or prohibiting children from associating

with certain friends, we deprive them of the freedom to learn from their mistakes.

Freedom is not a privilege to be earned. It is a child's right as a human being. What better context in which to learn the meaning, value, and difficulty of freedom than the family, where the love, concern, and understanding of parents help to cushion the blows when errors are made?

Humanistic parenting, then, encourages children to live their own lives free of the fear of parental force, punishments, threats, and ridicule. The reward of humanistic parenting is not only a child who has learned self-respect and self-confidence necessary for independent thought and action; it is a child who will genuinely return the love and respect his parents have shown.

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celebrating Jewish holidays with meaning and relevance in our time,
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Parenting Beyond Belief

by Dale McGowan

Parenting is an astonishing undertaking. After creating life – no small thing itself – parents exert a direct and profound influence on the future of our species by helping to decide what knowledge, attitudes, and values continue into the future. Should each generation hand off a box of settled opinions to the next and say “Please pass the box along”? Conservative religious parenting operates in essentially this way, conserving and transmitting a received, predefined good.

Some nontheistic parents ironically advocate the same technique with a different box of settled questions. I’ll yell at these people in the last portion of the talk, but for now let me just pose a question: What if all we had today in terms of knowledge and values was what previous generations had figured out for us? Would we be better off? Clearly not.

What if, instead, each generation helped the next develop the ability to think well, to discover the world for themselves, and to improve on our understanding? It is this model that the majority of nonreligious parents, as well as many progressive religious parents, favor and practice.

The Question of Confidence

Regardless of the model they adopt, the profound significance and complex questions surrounding the parent-child relationship lead most parents to feel underconfident to some degree, especially in the early years. This uncertainty, coupled with the intense desire to do well, leads us to seek confidence and advice.

Diapering, teething, tantrums, and similar practical concerns are easily laid to rest. But we quickly reach a point beyond which issues increase in complexity and importance even as our expert resources dwindle. Moral development. Spirituality. Meaning and purpose. Dealing with death. Sexuality. The bigger and more

amorphous the issues get, the less confidence we have. The gap between what you know and what you feel you need to know as a parent is enormous.

And it’s into this breach of confidence that traditional theistic religion confidently steps.

That’s what theistic religion is for – for stepping into gaps, giving confidence in the face of doubt. Parents raising a child in the context of an inherited theistic tradition get the confidence that comes with a tradition hundreds of generations in the making. They join a lineage of parents measured in millennia, all nodding approvingly at the choices they have made. As a bonus, they receive the endorsement of the Creator of the Universe.

That kind of thing does wonders for a parent’s confidence.

It’s not surprising, then, that millions of completely nontheistic parents continue to take their children to mainstream theistic churches and synagogues. They don’t know how else to close that confidence gap. But many end up wondering whether the benefits are worth the detriments.

All three of my own children attended a preschool run by a Lutheran church. I wondered at first whether I was going to regret that. In fact, the religious component was very low-key and the academic quality very high, and our kids received a basic, brimstone-free exposure to Judeo-Christian ideas – a vital part of cultural literacy.

Dale McGowan is editor and coauthor of *Parenting Beyond Belief: On Raising Ethical, Caring Kids Without Religion and of Raising Freethinkers*. He teaches nonreligious parenting seminars nationwide and was named Harvard Humanist of the Year for 2008. He lives in Atlanta with his wife, Rebekah, and their three children. This article is reprinted from the Winter/Spring 2009 issue of *Humanistic Judaism*.

But one day when my son was 4, I became concerned that something else had crept in. I was following him up the stairs of our home, and I said, “Connor, look at you! Why are you growing so fast?”

And he said, “I don’t know. I guess God just wants me to grow.”

My jaw went slack. It was his first completely incurious reply. He didn’t have to care or wonder about his transformation from infancy – he’d handed off the question to God. I didn’t know quite how to respond in the moment without forcing my own worldview on him, so I said nothing.

Over the years the issues kept coming. How do we talk to kids about death? How does moral development work? How can kids become knowledgeable about religion without being indoctrinated into it? How do I avoid indoctrinating them with my point of view? And how do we deal with pressures from religious extended family?

I went looking for the resources I figured must be out there. There were a few essays on the Web and a couple of memoirs, but not a single comprehensive resource tackling nonreligious parenting topic by topic. So, in 2003, I decided to float a proposal to agents and publishers for the first book on nonreligious parenting. No takers. Their argument? If there were a market for such a thing, there would already be books on it.

In 2005 I reworked my proposal, this time with a twist: it would be an anthology, bringing together a number of voices on the topic of nonreligious parenting. I created a list of eight main topics – living in a religious world, holidays and celebrations, morality, values, questioning, science, death, and community – and developed a wish list of thirty contributors. In the end, all but three on my wish list said yes, including doctors, psychologists, philosophers, educators, and everyday nonreligious parents.

Three weeks after my agent began shopping the proposal, we had a signed contract for *Par-*

enting Beyond Belief. The book was released in April 2007 and has found a large and receptive audience of parents, often grateful and surprised to find that they were not alone. This has been the single most important achievement of the book – the simple revelation that there are other nonreligious parents out there.

One of the definite feelings you get from religious parenting books is that the writers are representing an existing community, an existing tradition. There is a set of unspoken assumptions, a common lexicon, and even a style of delivery that must seem very familiar and comforting to members of that community. This is one of their real advantages, and it brings us back once again to the question of confidence.

It’s not that nonreligious parents haven’t been out there, of course – there are more than nine million in the United States alone – but, until recently, it was not possible to say that a community, in any sense of the word, existed among nonreligious parents.

Even though *Parenting Beyond Belief* is more individual than communal, many people have described the feeling of a community being born in its pages – that as you go through this first gathering of these voices, you hear them sounding the same themes, hitting the same notes, coming to many of the same conclusions. That’s right – what emerged from all these individuals was an amazing degree of consensus.

I was not ready for this. I was fully prepared for wild contrasts, for a din of conflicting views from the twenty-seven freethinkers in the project. And yet, though there are differences, the surprising result was relative consensus on the major issues in nonreligious parenting.

One of the benefits of consensus is confidence, and out of that growing confidence, a community is definitely coming into existence.

Influence vs. Indoctrination

I want to turn now to what I’ve come to see as the central concern in nonreligious parent-

ing. It isn't morality, nor even mortality. It's the question of parental influence, usually phrased as: *How do I avoid indoctrinating my children into any point of view?*

If you want to see an atheist turn purple, call atheism a religion. To see the same color on a nonreligious parent, accuse him or her of indoctrination. It's easy to see why. Indoctrination is "teaching that demands unquestioning acceptance of that which is taught." It is the precise opposite of freethought. It is the cheat that preempts reason, that makes it so difficult for people to think their way out of religion once they're in it. "Give me the child until he is seven and I will show you the man," and so on.

Once in a while I do run across atheist parents who are determined to indoctrinate their children into atheism. I once ran across an online comment by an atheist mother who said she would never "let" her child develop religious belief. She won't *let* them? I'm not even sure what that could possibly mean.

At the heart of indoctrination is the distrust of reason. The indoctrinator simply can't entrust something as important as [insert doctrine here] to the process of independent reasoning. But freethought parenting should have confidence in reason at its foundation. We ought to know that either reason leads to our conclusions, or our conclusions aren't worth the neurons they're written on. Teach kids to think independently and, well, then trust them to do so. And part of that education is encouraging them to resist indoctrination of all kinds – even if it's coming from Mom and Dad.

I have heard more than once that I am fooling myself. One Australian journalist put it this bluntly: "All children are indoctrinated by their parents. It cannot be avoided." In making this claim, he was confusing the concepts of *indoctrination* and *influence*. All parents can and should influence their children, and that influence is bound to be enormous. Influence becomes indoctrination only when you forbid them to question what they receive from you. For extra insurance, you should explicitly invite them to do so.

This suggestion is often met with derision. *Children are not in a position to critically evaluate what they hear! When they're young, they accept things uncritically whether we like it or not, so influence is indoctrination whether we like it or not.*

The first statement is true. When they are young, kids will tend to absorb and reflect the values and beliefs of their parents uncritically. There's a good reason for this. Children have the daunting task of changing from helpless newborns into fully functioning adults in about six thousand days. That's why kids are so credulous – they have to be.

My kids know and are surely influenced by my religious views. But I go to great lengths to counter that undue influence so they won't be ossified before they can make up their adult minds. That's influence without indoctrination.

Freethought, not atheism, is the heart and foundation of my parenting. I am completely honest about my point of view, but I make it clear to my children that they are invited to differ from me. I invite and expect them to ask questions about what I believe and why, to actively explore other beliefs, and ultimately to choose their own.

Am I suggesting that theistic religious families shouldn't take their kids to the church or synagogue, shouldn't fully engage them in the family faith? No. It wouldn't be reasonable to ask that, as so much of the identity and context for religious families is bound up in their faith community. I would simply like to see religious families remind their kids that the choice in the long run is theirs – and mean it.

Key to this principle is the refusal to label children. My kids have believed in a fairly standard version of the Christian God for months at a time, but I did not call them Christians during those times. Likewise, when they lapse out of belief, as they now have, I don't want them calling themselves atheists. The one thing I value most in my own worldview is that I came to it myself. Why should I deprive my kids of that authenticity?

I encourage my kids to try on as many beliefs as they wish and to switch back and forth whenever they feel drawn toward a different belief. In the long run they'll be better informed not only of the identity they choose but of those they have declined.

That's all I would ever ask of a religious parent as well – not that they forego sharing the experience of their faith, but that they say “Here's what I believe with all my heart. It's very important to me and I think it's true, but these are things each person has to decide for herself, and I want you to talk to people who have different beliefs so you can make up your own mind. You can change your mind a thousand times. There's no penalty for getting it wrong, and I will love you no less if you end up believing differently.”

Imagine if that attitude were the norm. Imagine kids growing up with an invitation to engage these profound questions without fear. I don't need a world free of religion – I'll gladly settle for a world free of indoctrination.

The Greatest Need

Among the enduring delusions among the nonreligious is that religious membership and practice are primarily about God. In fact, only 27 percent of churchgoing U.S. respondents to a 2007 Gallup poll even mentioned God when asked for the main reason they attend religious services.* Most go for personal growth, for guidance in their lives, to be encouraged, to be

inspired – or for the community and fellowship of other members. These, not worship, are the primary needs fulfilled by these communities.

Too many freethought groups have drawn their purposes far too narrowly. They are about inquiry, reason, the search for truth, and the rejection of religion. If freethought communities wish to build their membership well beyond the 60-ish white male demographic that currently dominates the rolls, they must begin considering the real reasons people flock to churches and synagogues. It's not about theology. It's about belonging. It's about acceptance. It's about mutual support and encouragement. Most of all, it speaks to needs beyond the intellectual into the emotional. And these are among the greatest needs of nonreligious families.

Humanistic Judaism is one of the most successful and vibrant nontheistic movements precisely because it is built not merely upon the negation of theism, but upon the fulfillment of universal human needs for human community. The nascent nonreligious parenting movement would do very well to look to Humanistic Judaism, Ethical Culture, and similar movements for inspiration as we seek our own best practices for building meaningful human community without theistic religion.

*“Just Why Do Americans Attend Church?” Gallup poll published April 6, 2007. Available online at www.gallup.com/poll/27124/Just-Why-Americans-Attend-Church.aspx.

Children of the Rainbow: We're Much More Than the Blue Stripe

by Rabbi Binyamin Biber

Twice as many of the couples and children in my congregation, Machar in Washington, D.C., are multicultural as are of exclusively Jewish heritage. These statistics are strikingly similar to those that exist throughout the Humanistic Judaism movement and among younger U.S. couples and families in which at least one adult is of Jewish parentage. Ours are the children of the rainbow, and our membership is much more than the blue stripe in that rainbow. To help these children grow up healthy, we need to foster the development, not only of their Jewish identities and values, but also of the other diverse cultural “stripes” that form the wholeness of their personhood. Just as we explore, wrestle with, celebrate, and evolve Jewishness in progressive, secular, and humanistic ways, we should do likewise with the other cultural stripes in our mix.

The statistics were significantly different when our movement first emerged in the 1960s, but even then “the times they were a-changin.” Intercultural weddings were less frequent in that period but were a significant enough phenomenon to move the U.S. Supreme Court in 1967, in *Loving vs. Virginia*, to strike down as unconstitutional the racist laws against interracial marriage. During that same period, the majority of Jewish community leaders – in the hip lingo of the day, the Jewish “Establishment” – declared that intermarriage among Jews and non-Jews had created a crisis threatening Jewish survival, a crisis some compared to the Holocaust. But, regardless of these denunciations of intercultural marriage, Jews increasingly chose to marry non-Jews.

Simultaneously, many Jews were moving beyond conformity to religious law and other authoritarian dogma, choosing instead to explore and live their Jewishness as a part – if not

the whole – of their personal identities, their families’ ethnic/cultural heritage, their sources of values and inspiration, their spiritual paths, or some blend of these. Thus, an array of new movements developed among American Jews during this period. Congregations and schools were created by the Secular, Humanistic, Reconstructionist, Renewal, and Havurah movements. Various political issues became focal points for new groups organized by and for Jewish women, sexual minorities, and progressives (for example, New Jewish Agenda).

Secular and Humanistic Jewish groups have been the most welcoming to intercultural couples and families, and so our movement’s affiliates appear to have higher proportions of such families than other non-Orthodox organizations. For example, my wife, Catherine, is Irish and I am one-quarter Irish, and although we grew up in different ethnic and religious communities, we arrived by our different paths at the same broad byway of humanism. Moreover, just as she celebrates with me the best in my Jewish heritage and supports my struggles with its most problematic aspects – ethnic chauvinism, racism and sexism, religious extremists and ultra-nationalists – likewise, alongside her I celebrate the best and struggle against the worst in Irish Catholic culture. Machar and all of our other Society for Humanistic Judaism affiliates include many intercultural couples and families like us.

I believe that our movement must integrate with and help build the growing multicultural humanist movement of which our rainbow

Rabbi Binyamin Biber is president of the Association of Humanistic Rabbis. He serves Machar, the Washington, DC, Congregation for Secular Humanistic Judaism, and operates the Humanist Chaplaincy at American University and the Humanist Chaplaincy of Greater Washington, D.C.

children are the harbingers. Five years ago, during my sabbatical year, I began to explore starting a daycare/preschool for our congregation. I proposed drawing together humanists from a rainbow of ethnicities, with a focus on six communities where:

1. a considerable number of local families wanted their children to learn their culture's language, literature, and most enlightened values in a secular and humanistic setting, rather than in a traditional religious one; and
2. an unresolved history of religious and ethnic conflict was being addressed by a significant number of people who wanted their children's education to be part of a solution to such strife, rather than part of the problem.

These two characteristics are found in six local ethnic groups that form three pairs of cultures with historical conflicts: the Jewish and Arab, Turkish and Greek, and Indian and Pakistani communities.* I believe that bringing together diverse groups to educate our children can help build a vital grassroots movement for peace and reconciliation. Humanism provides a key philosophical element in helping people to resolve and transcend intergroup conflicts, particularly those framed by ethnic and religious differences.

For two years I searched with one of my congregants – alas, in vain – for a possible location in or near an area where our congregation had some member households with preschool-age children. We connected with some interested families, educators, and funding sources but shelved the project as the economic downturn decreased our resources and turned our focus to other pressing matters. Now that an economic recovery is slowly proceeding, I hope that such a multicultural humanist community development project can and will be successful.

*Members of three other local ethnic groups – the Chinese, Iranian, and Irish communities – also have shown an interest in humanistic cultural education.

Resources

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My aim is to recruit organizers from each of the above-mentioned ethnic communities to coordinate efforts focused on their own respective groups, so that a core of active volunteers from each of these constituencies can come together to help start the "rainbow" daycare. Ul-

timately, this program may grow to become the basis for a K-12 school with the same humanist, multicultural, and peace education goals. But whether or not we pursue a K-12 school, my hope is that a successful daycare would help Machar, the American Humanist Association, and other like-minded groups to serve the community by providing high quality daycare and would recruit new members for our humanist groups and movement. Eventually, I envision our buying and operating a building together as a home for our humanist organizations and a community center for progressive activism

and cultural arts programming in the greater Washington area.

I encourage other Humanistic Jewish communities to consider undertaking similar projects. We need to fully recognize and equally value the other cultural stripes in the vast and growing humanist rainbow of which we are a part, both for the health and wholeness of our children and of generations to come, and to fulfill our shared ideal of striving to be partners in the improvement of the world, *tiqqun ha-olam*.

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Our Biblical Father: Commentary on the Akeda

by Jerald Bain

In the famous popular Yiddish song of the early 1900s, “Mein Yiddishe Mama,” there is a line that reads: “*durch feier un vasser volt zie gelofen far eer kind*” (“through fire and water would she have run for her child”). I had such a Yiddishe mama. Not only through fire and water would she have run for her children, but through virtually any danger or deprivation. Selfless – passionate about the well-being of her children. She had struggled to raise them. She would struggle to see them thrive, and so she did.

There is a beautiful Yiddish folk song about a father who works from morning till night and who has a young son whom he sees only infrequently. Father comes alive with joy when he arrives home after a hard day’s work and sees his son asleep in his bed.

*Ich hob a klayne yingele
A zunele gor fein
Ven ich derze eem dacht zich mir
Die gantze velt iz mein*

I have a small boy
A young son so fine.
When I see him it seems to me
The whole world is mine.

I had such a father who loved his children – who worked to see them grow and who faced the kind of adversities that our children would have a tough time envisioning and comprehending. My parents undertook a journey of the unknown in an effort to improve their lot in life. And when children came, whatever they wished for themselves became secondary to seeing their children maximize their potential.

These were parents who did all in their power to ensure the safety, security, and future

of their children. This is what we expect of parents. We expect them to put their children’s needs ahead of their own. How then, should we regard a father, Abraham, the mythological father of the Jewish people, who resolved to murder his own son?

The Akeda – the biblical story of that near infanticide – has been a troublesome passage for theological commentators and sermonizers. The theistic response, of course, is based on two precepts that form the immutable foundation for responses to theological issues: God exists; and God is all-powerful, all-knowing, and all-good. God, therefore, can do no wrong; and if he can do no wrong, the theists must explain how God could instill murder into the heart of a father.

Various *midrashim* suggest that God never told Abraham to slaughter Isaac. All he wanted was a symbolic sacrifice. Then there is the view of some Hasidic rabbis who reject the idea that this was a test of Abraham’s faith in God; rather the sacrifice is interpreted as a punishment for Abraham’s earlier mistreatment of Ishmael, whom Abraham, at the urging of Sarah, had banished along with Ishmael’s mother, Hagar. Another theory suggests that this was not a test of Abraham’s unswerving obedience to God but rather this was Abraham testing God’s moral fiber. Others rationalize that Isaac was not a young boy when this event occurred but rather an adult of either 25 or 37 years and hence old enough to have resisted his father if he wished, thus implying consent on Isaac’s part. There is also the proposition that the Akeda story is really a metaphor for Jewish martyrdom in

Jerald Bain, a madrikh, is a member of Oraynu Congregation in Toronto, ON. This article is adapted from his presentation at Oraynu Congregation’s Rosh Hashana Service on September 19, 2009.

that the Jews are ready to give up life itself to sanctify the divine name. Another explanation holds that since God could resurrect the dead, even if Isaac had been slain, God would have brought him back to life. This concept, of course, fits in with Christian doctrine, which holds that God was willing to give up his son, Jesus, for the sake of humanity, much as Abraham was willing to give up his son, Isaac, for the sanctity of the divine name.

All of these responses are rationalizations based on the belief that God exists, that he can do only good, and that the details found in the Torah are true. Why should Secular Humanistic Jews care about this? Why should we even introduce these Torah readings into our service and deliberate over their meaning, their message? Indeed, why? We repeat a story based on mythology and legend. We explore commentaries of human beings who make up stories about stories. We construct theories on the basis of no facts, no evidence.

These stories are part of the historical journey of the Jews and have come to be used in traditional ways, such as having them read and commented upon at Rosh Hashana. Whatever we select for the expression of our Jewishness is open to debate, discussion, deliberation, and to being discarded if reason suggests that is appropriate.

In making commentary about the Akeda or about any piece of writing or about any idea or any thought, it's not necessary to rely absolutely on the rabbis or on any authority if there is a text that we ourselves can read. We can read. We can understand the words. We can deliberate. We can make conclusions. We don't need the priests to make conclusions for us. We may expand our understanding of a tract or proposition by turning to outside sources to help inform us about the historical context of the story, about the political agenda of the author of the piece we are reading so that we can know why he or she selected certain elements of a story and not others. But in the end we can understand the story best by the words that are there and not by what is not there.

The Akeda story tells us very clearly, "God put Abraham to the test," not the other way around, as some rabbinic commentators have suggested. The story also tells us clearly, "Abraham picked up the knife to slay his son." The meaning is clear. Why complicate it with imaginary possibilities because killing your son isn't nice? That's what the story says.

The Akeda ends with Abraham and his servants departing for Beersheba – no mention of Isaac. The commentators and writers of fiction have had a field day with what the story doesn't say about Isaac being left behind. Was he actually killed and subsequently resurrected? Was he left to find his own way back home? And how could you leave a young boy on his own in the wilderness, unless, of course, he was an adult by this time? Did he actually depart with Abraham and the servants despite the reader's not being told this explicitly? We could all invent a few *midrashim* about these possible events. In fact, we could write a whole other book, a large part of which would be focused on Isaac spending many hours on the psychiatrist's couch because of the psychological trauma of almost being murdered by his father. What about Sarah? Did she know that her husband had responded to a voice from the wilderness instructing him to take her son to a height in Moriah and cut his throat as a sacrifice to the owner of the voice? Can you imagine the scene when Abraham arrives home? "*Bist in gantzen meshuggah?* Are you totally crazy, you, the so-called father of the Jewish people who can't even be a father to his own son?"

Is there anything in the Akeda story that Secular Humanistic Jews can relate to today? Is there a message or moral that has any meaning for us? I can think of two:

1. Abraham's murderous intent was an act of self-gratification in answer to a command from a voice that came to him under unclear circumstances. In achieving this self-gratification he used his son as a chattel, a mere thing, without considering the consequence for Isaac, for Sarah, and even for himself had Isaac died. Abraham used his son as a means, not as an end in him-

self. Humans have a way of using others for their own selfish purposes. This is the striking case of the Akeda story.

2. Abraham bowed to authority without question, without argument, without considering all the facts. We do this constantly. We accept what we consider truths even though their validity and authenticity remain in doubt. We acquiesce too easily to the power of authority, to the power of the opinions of others. We are too afraid, ashamed, or embarrassed to stand out from the crowd, to take a stance that is less popular but nonetheless may be the right stance from an ethical perspective. Blind acceptance may be the popular route, the route of least resistance, but is it the right route?

Identifying with the Jewish people takes many forms. Attending a Rosh Hashana service is one of them and for some it may be the only one – a time when Jews join with other Jews as a community to consider what was right and wrong about the year gone by and how we, as individuals and as a community, might improve upon the way we deal with ourselves and our fellow humans in the year to come.

We humans are not saints, but we can strive to deliberate and weigh the possibilities in what we do and say. We can make an effort to engage in acts that have saintly qualities and try to minimize and avoid altogether acts that are self-serving in a manner that intrudes on the dignity of others. We are endowed with a privileged power, the power of choice. Exercising it with insightful deliberation is the challenge.

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The Truth About the Tooth Fairy

by Stephanie Blum

As parents who are committed to raising our two children with humanistic values, my husband and I have always emphasized critical thinking. We have encouraged them to challenge ideas that do not make sense to them while also being open-minded. I had no idea that raising them with such values would be a death knell for the tooth fairy.

When my daughter was 6, she lost her first tooth. I happily explained the tooth fairy concept, and as I recounted that she would get money or a prize from a fairy in the middle of the night, she looked at me incredulously. And then it happened: a million questions. As an attorney, I was not usually the one being cross-examined. Her questions came flying: “Well, how does the tooth fairy know that I lost a tooth? How do we contact her? How does she get here? So she can fly? How does she get into the house?” And I had an answer (or a white lie) for each of her questions, and each white lie begot another white lie. I knew it was not going well for the tooth fairy. At one point, exasperated, I just blurted, “Well I knew the tooth fairy from college, and so she told me how it works.” My daughter looked up at me and point blank inquired: “Are you the tooth fairy?”

So I had a decision to make. Should I continue with this fantasy? Should I tell her the truth? Believing in the tooth fairy is fun; I did not want to take that pleasure away from her. And I certainly did not want her to spoil it for her younger brother or her friends. So I fell back on humanistic parenting.

I gave her a choice. I asked her if she wanted the truth or if she wanted to believe in something fun. Without hesitation, she responded that she wanted the truth. So I confirmed that I, indeed, was the tooth fairy. To my surprise, my daughter looked relieved and satisfied. I urged her not to tell her friends or her brother,

and she agreed. I thought this was the end of it. There was still my son who might find this fantasy fun.

About a month later my daughter lost her next tooth. I gave her a hug and told her she could take three dollars out of my wallet. But now she looked at me aghast. She explained that she wanted to put the tooth under her pillow, and she wanted the tooth fairy (*i.e.*, me!) to sneak into her room in the middle of the night, after she was sound asleep, and swap the money for the tooth.

Now I was confused. “But why?” I asked. “You know I am the tooth fairy.” She explained that while she knew that I was indeed the tooth fairy, the concept and ritual were fun, her friends were doing it, and she wanted to participate. As I thought about her explanation, it actually made sense. A lot of sense. To me, her explanation epitomized why we chose Humanistic Judaism. She does not want to just blindly believe in something that does not make sense to her but still wants to participate in the rituals and traditions that bind us and give us meaning as a community. Do we have to believe in something supernatural or magical (in this case, the tooth fairy) for the rituals to continue? For my daughter, the answer is clearly no. She appreciates the truth but wants to participate in the rituals that others have been doing for generations.

As a Humanistic Jew, I found the tooth fairy conversation with my daughter both challenging and enlightening. Challenging in that I did not want her to have to forgo the fun of a childhood ritual because I could not weave a convincing web of white lies. But enlightening

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in that she taught me that she could have both: truth as she viewed the world with her own sense of integrity and ritual and tradition that was fun and had meaning to her. I am grateful that I was able to rely on humanistic values in dealing with the issue, a very helpful tool in navigating thought-provoking questions.

I wonder how my Christian friends handle Santa Claus and the Easter Bunny. Once their children discover that both of these characters are made up, do these same children ponder whether Jesus Christ and God are made up too?

One of my Jewish friends, who is more conventionally religious than I am, asked me

whether I was affirmatively teaching my children that there is no God within Humanistic Judaism. I explained that I was actually encouraging them to critically think and answer such questions for themselves. Then I asked her whether she was affirmatively teaching her children that there *was* a God.

Critical thinking, rituals, tradition, meaning, and integrity. Those seem to be foundational blocks of Humanistic Judaism. For each person, the “truth” or outcome may be different. Some rituals have more meaning for some than for others. And that is fine. I respect not only the way my daughter handled the tooth fairy, but how she approaches and questions other aspects of the world around her.

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Humanistic Parenting: Three Stories

God and the Facts of Life by Joy Markowitz

When our daughter was about 6 years old, our family was invited for lunch at the home of a colleague of mine. My husband and children (we also had a son, age 3) had not met this family with three sons about the age of our children. Our daughter, who was quite chatty, asked the host why they had three boys and no girls.

The host said “That’s what God gave us.”

Our daughter responded, “We don’t talk about God in our house.”

There were a few very uncomfortable moments, but luckily lunch was ready! In order not to embarrass anyone, we saved our parent-daughter chat until later. But this gave us a chance to begin talking with our daughter about the biology of procreation – at an age-appropriate level, of course.

Preparing for a Humanistic Bar Mitzvah by Jennifer Naparstek Klein

As my son, Caleb, goes through his Bar Mitzvah preparations, I am acutely aware of the style of religious practice that comes with my membership at The City Congregation of New York and the implications for my children. Caleb is not having the Bar Mitzvah that his father, my father, my father-in-law, and the other men in our families had. His will be unique and new. This year of preparation has pushed us, as a family, to explore our beliefs and our values, and I do wonder, if we had gone a more traditional way, whether this exploration would be occurring to such a degree.

Caleb and I have sat together at our family computer discussing and attempting to name his values, which is a requirement for one of the papers in his Humanistic Bar Mitzvah. Initially we could not find a compatible rhythm for this discovery process. I would say, “How about ‘education’?” He would say, “Nah.” I would retort, “What do you mean, ‘Nah?’ Education is important to our family. Then how about ‘kindness’?” “Nah,” he would say. And so on. This went on for a while. Just when I was feeling that this task might be true agony to complete, his thoughts began to crystallize, and he came up with “acceptance,” and later, “intellectual passion,” and the one that really blew me away: “humility.”

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I was floored by his precision in identifying what truly mattered to him as an 11-year-old. Together, with me as typist and him as author, we wrote about anecdotes from his life and family history that illustrated these values he had identified. I realized that he and I were doing something very special together, and I believed in my core that he was coming of age. The concept behind a Bar Mitzvah is the transition to adulthood, and I saw Caleb move from a child into an adult as he pondered and spoke about his values and beliefs.

In our family, we do not have many explicit discussions about belief in God and our atheistic orientation. My husband and I wish to leave this very abstract idea to our children to consider and decide for themselves. I feel, as a Humanistic Jew, that religious ideology is not something I want to implant in my children's minds. I'd like their beliefs to evolve. Caleb is not sure how he feels about the concept of God, and I am fine with that. What I do care about is his evolution as a human being, and I can see this happening before my eyes.

Encouraging Divergent Thinking **by Baudelia Taylor**

My 10-year-old daughter and I joined Adat Chaverim, a Humanistic Jewish congregation, this year to explore our Jewish history and identity. We had celebrated holidays and discussed our heritage, but it seemed something was missing. It was important to me that my daughter could gather with other children that were open to the complexity of Jewish identity in a place that allowed and encouraged her to question while not judging her for thinking divergently.

We found such a place to gather and reflect each week in this congregation for Humanistic Jews. She loves learning lessons from the stories in Torah, as well as from other Jewish literature, in a relevant and thoughtful manner, particularly when she can act them out. Every Sunday she looks forward to Cultural School where she can learn to interpret her Jewish identity from a humanistic perspective in a welcoming environment.

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WISDOM from WINE

In each issue of Humanistic Judaism, we are reprinting a selection from the writings of Rabbi Sherwin Wine that has meaning in our lives today. This article is adapted from his presentation at the Twenty-third Annual Meeting and Conference of the Society for Humanistic Judaism in San Diego, California, April 24, 1993. It was first published in the Winter 1994 issue of this journal.

Demystifying Family Values

by Rabbi Sherwin T. Wine

The family is the oldest continuing human institution in the world. It has a long history of rules and regulations. Why? Because a force as powerful as sex and a need as important as the appropriate rearing of children are incompatible without rules and regulations. What are those rules and regulations that developed over the past eight to ten thousand years?

- 1) The ideal family consists of at least a mother and a father.
- 2) The ideal family has many children.
- 3) The ideal family is one in which the mother recognizes that her primary role is to produce and to take care of the children.
- 4) The ideal family is one in which the father has authority.
- 5) The ideal family is one in which men know what male roles are and women know what female roles are, and they dress accordingly.
- 6) The ideal family is one in which children are reverent and obedient and do not talk back to their parents.
- 7) The ideal marriage is one that is not preceded by premarital sex.
- 8) The ideal marriage is one in which the two partners under no circumstances contemplate divorce.

9) The ideal marriage is one in which neither partner engages in extramarital sex.

10) The ideal marriage is one in which all the children grow up knowing that they, too, will marry.

11) The ideal marriage is one that any thought or act of homosexuality will threaten.

A lot of that has collapsed. We now live in a world in which at least one of every two marriages ends in divorce. We now live in a world in which mothers work outside the home. We now live in a world of unisex, in which sometimes you can't tell from the costume or the job whether it's a man or a woman. We now live in a world in which there is gender equality, and the chain of command is not clear, and couples spend a lot of time on negotiation. We now live in a world in which children feed on the largesse of their parents and then open

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their mouths and tell the parents off. We now live in a world of contraception, in which it is possible to have frequent sex without serious consequences. We now live in a world, therefore, of sexual liberation. We now live in a world in which homosexuality has gone public – gone public and gone political, and is demanding equality. We now live in a world where there is hardly a family in which at least one person isn't living with another person without marriage.

To better illuminate the significance of these changes, let me give a little background drawn in large part from Helen Fisher's *Anatomy of Love*.^{*} For most of human evolution, people lived in a hunting and gathering culture. It was in that culture, which lasted for hundreds of thousands of years, that the family emerged as a unit to arrange for the rearing of children. As far as we know, monogamy generally prevailed. Men had to organize themselves into hunting parties, and if one man were to monopolize all the women, that would have been unacceptable. In this hunting culture, there developed strong male bonding but also a fair amount of gender equality, because while the men went hunting the women went gathering. Families tended to be small because food was hard to find and disease cut down the number of children.

Farming caused the big change. About ten thousand years ago, people settled down on the land, and they developed the concept of property. They began to raid each other's property, and they developed organized war. In this culture the owners of property were men, so there was male authority. In an agricultural world, cheap labor was needed, and the cheapest way to get labor is to have babies. Thus, the function of women was to produce children and more children and more children; and every child stayed and worked on the farm, and, when the parents grew old and feeble, the children took care of them. That is the world we think of as traditional. Actually, in evolutionary history, it represents only a little drop in time.

^{*}Helen Fisher. *Anatomy of Love: The Natural History of Monogamy, Adultery and Divorce*. New York: Norton, 1992.

In this world, women often became the property of their husbands, and polygamy developed. If one wife couldn't produce enough children, and if a man was rich enough, he could have more wives. And, since agriculture now produced more and more food, the population began to increase and families grew in size.

All of this was reinforced by the institution of religion, which in itself is a reflection of the agricultural family. Every family has at its head the papa. Therefore the community or the nation must have at its head the papa, the king; and the universe must have at its head the papa, God. These relationships were justified by mythology. The story of Adam and Eve is very clear: Women are the source of evil. They tempt men. Therefore, they must be restrained. Woman is to obey her husband in all things.

Ultimately this agricultural world fell apart. We Jews were one of the first peoples to enter into urbanization. And out of that emerged an economic system called capitalism, which revolutionized the structure of society. The fundamental unit of a capitalistic society is not the family. The fundamental efficient unit of a capitalistic economy is the individual who can move freely from place to place. It's very expensive for the individual to schlep his family along. So the family interfered with mobility. Also, the role of children changed. The role of children on the farm is cheap labor. The role of children in an urban culture is that of parasites. Children are very expensive. You invest hundreds of thousands of dollars, and then, when they're eighteen, they go away to school and you're lucky to see them again. Or they may show up when they're thirty-two, having failed the first time and wanting to come back home for a short while. So, having children in a bourgeois culture suddenly becomes a matter of choice.

The consequence of this change was the emergence of the nuclear family. The historic family was you, your mother, your father, your Aunt Sadie, your Uncle Hymie, your *zayde*, your *bubbeh*, and they all lived in a family

compound. If you didn't like your husband, that wasn't a problem. There was always somebody else in the family you could talk to. Today, two people live alone. They have moved to San Diego. They could have moved to Detroit or Chicago. It's the new urban world. You now have nuclear families. A nuclear family is this vulnerable couple without *bubbeh*, without *zayde*, without Aunt Sadie, without Uncle Hymie, and they're there in the house together. And, because of medical science, they may stay together for sixty years. In addition, in an urban capitalist culture, men and women no longer work together as on the farm. When the nuclear family emerged, the husband began leaving the house to go to work, and the woman was left alone with the children.

Now we have another tremendous change in family life. How do we evaluate it?

When we as Humanistic Jews deal with the question of family values, we do not ask, "What is it that God commands?" We try to find answers by turning to the authority that we recognize, the moral authority that lies within us. That authority consists of three things. First, our needs. It is legitimate to say that a moral enterprise should serve basic human needs; but what are our needs? A lot of people are deceived as to their needs. The second source of moral authority is reason. Reason says, "What will happen if I do this? What are the consequences for me and for other people?" And the third is conscience or empathy, the ability to identify with the pain and suffering of other people. So, referring to the moral authority embodied in human needs, reason, and conscience, I have, not ten commandments, but ten suggestions or guidelines.

Guideline 1: There are no absolute rights. Ultimately all rights are tempered by virtue of living in a community. There is a moment when the community is surrounded by the enemy, and you have to defend it, and you say, "I don't believe in the draft," but you fight. There is the moment when somebody says, "I am your parent, I have an absolute right to control you," and you say, "Not if you're abusing me." It's not an absolute right.

Guideline 2: No choice is perfect. Life involves weighing advantages against disadvantages. Take a woman in a hopelessly troubled marriage who is considering divorce. The advantage is that she would be free of this impossible relationship forever. The disadvantage is that her child, who is deeply attached to his father, would suffer the consequences. If you're a realist, you recognize that all lifestyle decisions have both advantages and disadvantages.

Guideline 3: Dignity is the need to be increasingly in control of one's own life. A resulting value that we treasure highly in our culture is individualism. I as an individual have the right to be the master of my own life, to make my own choices. It's a fairly new idea – only an affluent culture can produce it. I know somebody who has decided to remain single. She likes having her own space. She likes being in charge of her own life and not having to go through continuous negotiation, which she did for six years in a marriage that didn't work because she didn't want to compromise. This is her space, this is her life, and she likes it.

Guideline 4: Life is always a balancing act between the personal agenda and the social agenda. Let's take the situation of the woman who is unhappy in her marriage. If she did not have a child, she would sever the relationship. But there is a child, and he might be adversely affected. So she may say to herself, "Well, I'm only moderately unhappy."

Guideline 5: The test of moral behavior is the consequences. Studies have been done on the long-term consequences of divorce. The findings are that the children of divorce have less stable lives and perform less well in school, on the average, than children whose parents remain married. Of course, there are instances of success, but divorce can be a traumatic event for children, and whoever makes the decision has to weigh carefully the consequences.

Guideline 6: Every decision has social consequences. If you live in society, there is nothing you do – nothing! – that does not have social consequences. Everybody who acts in a society is a role model. If you have a lot of promiscu-

ous people in your neighborhood, they're role models for the children. If you have a lot of single people, they're role models for children. If you have a lot of gay people, they're also role models.

Guideline 7: Parenting is the primary profession. Without the raising of children who can function adequately in society, the society has no future. Generally, two parents are better than one: a man and a woman, two women, two men, whatever – but two parents. Sometimes the father is the better parent. I know two situations in which the man has decided to stay home, and the woman goes to work. It's a very rational relationship. The roles have been reversed, and, consequentially, it works.

Guideline 8: What is old is not necessarily good. Let me mention some things that are traditional: Polygamy. Female subordination and confinement. And male stereotypes that condemn men to macho roles whereby they cannot express themselves either in terms of their own personal happiness or for the social good.

Guideline 9: What is new is not necessarily good, either. Let me mention some things that are new: Single parents. (You may have to make the best of it, but it's not necessarily the best of the alternatives.) Multiple partners. (Once I was asked to perform a marriage ceremony for three people. Where's the limit? Eight? Twelve?) Then there's sequential promiscuity. The person chooses somebody, and it lasts for three months, and then chooses somebody else, and it lasts for two months, and so on. Of course, it's people's right to marry whomever they choose, but what is the damage in terms of social relationships?

Guideline 10: We all need support. All of us, no matter how much dignity we have, no matter how much strength we have, need the emotional support and input of other people. Although one of the original reasons for marriage was reproduction, now an increasing reason for marriage is the need for companionship. Most people want a significant other, a partner. But

there are some people who are single, whose family consists of themselves and their friends. I know a lot of people who develop very effective friendship circles. To be a friend today means more than it meant a hundred years ago because today you often can't call up your cousin, or in some cases even your brother or your sister. The family of choice that you call upon in a moment of crisis is your family.

A family, therefore, is a partnership or a group of people that is bound together by three things: love, and by that I mean nurturing behavior; respect, which means that I choose to protect the dignity of the other person in this relationship; and loyalty, which means that when problems occur I am willing to put forth effort to maintain a relationship in which I have invested time and energy.

What are the implications of all this for Humanistic Jews?

First, you cannot prejudge a relationship. Relationships are to be judged by their consequences. You can use information from the past about similar relationships to begin the evaluation. But in the end, your evaluation of the nature of the relationship has to be determined, not by old rules, but by the consequences of what that relationship produces.

Second, we are committed to the defense of dignity. As a Humanistic Jew, the primary value I seek in terms of human relations is the opportunity to achieve my own dignity and to defend the dignity of others.

Third, there is no single lifestyle that is appropriate to all people to protect their dignity, affirm their happiness, and arrange for appropriate social consequences.

Fourth, tradition is not always bad. Nobody has yet found a desirable alternative to two parents. You may have only one parent functioning, but two parents certainly are better.

Fifth, single life can and does work. In this country, a large percentage of households consist of one person, and all of these people

are not desperately unhappy. Most of them are functioning and are socially productive.

Sixth, living together can work. There are many relationships in which people live together with love, respect, and loyalty, relationships that promote dignity and happiness and are socially useful.

Seventh, homosexual unions can work. There are people who live together as homosexual partners, are supportive of each other, and do productive work. They are good for their society, and in some cases, if they choose, they even are able – very, very creatively – to raise children.

Eighth, divorce can work. There are many cases in which the difficult struggle of single parents to raise their children is necessary, because to maintain the marriage would adversely affect both the parents and the children. And, in some cases, even if the children would retain benefit from it, the marriage has such adverse consequences for the parents that their needs will be totally ignored if some change is not made.

Ninth, we have the right to make mistakes. If we affirm personal dignity, we're saying that people are free to make a choice. And if people are free to make choices, they make mistakes.

Finally, we have the right to be courageous. I say this to people who choose a new and sometimes difficult lifestyle. I say, "The

advantage is that you're now in a meaningful relationship, or separated from a disastrous one. But you may be encountering public hostility." A lot of people don't want the hassle. They would rather go into the closet or just conform. It's easier. But without courageous people, we never would have pioneers. The first step is always regarded as dangerous, as socially disruptive.

DeWitt Parker, a philosophy teacher I had at the University of Michigan, said: "I am not completely happy with what is, but I am less happy with what was." I recognize that there are many things from the past that we as Humanistic Jews find valuable. We want to protect the two-parent family. But there were so many other things about that society that were restrictive and had bad social consequences. So much talent, the talent of women and others, was inadequately used. So, I am not happy with what was. I like many of the changes that have occurred. But, as a rational Humanistic Jew, I must recognize that in our society today there are problems. There are advantages and disadvantages.

One thing I can say: If we are going to begin the exploration of this issue, we cannot come into the discussion with slogans. We have to come into the discussion with evidence. We have to look at the consequences of behavior. And we have to go into it with open minds, because we are defending the two most important things we have: our personal dignity and our society.

A Humanistic Rabbi's Trip to Israel

by Rabbi Miriam Jerris

In May of this year, I traveled to Israel for the sixth time. It was my best trip ever, and there was some very good competition for that distinction.

My first trip was in July of 1967, one month after the Six Day War. Opportunities to go places where Jews had not been allowed since the end of the 1948 war opened up. On my second trip, in 1977, I spent two weeks with Rabbi Daniel and Felice Friedman and members of Congregation Beth Or, the third congregation for Humanistic Judaism. In 1981, with Rabbi Sherwin Wine and others, I participated in a conference at Kibbutz Shefayim, which established the Conference of Secular and Humanistic Jews. Afterwards, on a tour for those who had been to Israel before, Sherwin schlepped fewer than 10 of us on a small minibus from one not-usually-visited stop to another. In July 1985, I was part of a group of North American and Israeli leaders who met at the Hebrew University and established the International Institute for Secular Humanistic Judaism. In the late summer of 1987, I traveled to Brussels, Paris, and then to Israel with Rabbi Wine alone. It was an extraordinary experience, as those of you who knew Sherwin Wine might expect.

So, what made this sixth trip the best ever?

1. It was the first time I've been to Israel as a rabbi, and my additional knowledge enhanced my experience.
2. Everyone on the trip was a humanist, though not everyone was Jewish.
3. The trip combined sightseeing with experiences with Israelis.
4. Rabbi Jeffrey Falick was a remarkable group leader. His knowledge, passion for the State of Israel, humanism, personal

style, and sense of humor made for a special experience.

5. Our group of fifteen included eleven people who had never been to Israel before. Seeing Israel through the eyes of Israel "virgins" is like seeing the world through the eyes of your grandchildren.

A sense of humor was a necessary prerequisite when traveling in small groups. We needed it more than once. It was hot, we were jet-lagged, the arrangements were not always seamless, we walked a lot, and food was not always available when everyone wanted it. Flexibility helped, yet what kept us from getting out of line most of the time is that we really cared about each other.

For me, these were some of the highlights of the trip:

Meeting Rabbinic Students

As soon as I arrived in Jerusalem, I had emails and text messages from Rabbi Sivan Maas asking me to meet with the rabbinic students from T'mura (the Israeli rabbinic program). The questions were challenging, and a few were surprising. Who would have thought that Israeli Humanist rabbis would be grappling with the issue of coofficiation? The Israeli rabbinate is not congregationally based, yet we talked about what Humanist congregations do and how that experience might apply to Israeli society. Other questions concerned our

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*Wine, Sherwin T., *Celebration: A Ceremonial and Philosophic Guide for Humanists and Humanistic Jews* (Buffalo: Prometheus, 1988), p. 224.

approach to reframing religious symbols, Jewish and otherwise, and how we differentiate between the terms *secular* and *humanistic*. We spoke about the possibility of Israeli rabbinic students coming to North America and doing internships with larger congregations, where they could be supervised by North American rabbis or leaders. We hope to explore additional ways to cooperate. (If this project interests you, please let me know.)

Shabbat in Jerusalem

We arrived on a Thursday, so the very next day was Shabbat. As evening approached, we walked from our hotel in Rehavia to the Kotel, the Western Wall of the ancient Temple. I had decided that I wasn't going to go into the walled-off segregated women's section and then changed my mind so that I could be with the women from the group who were there for the first time. We arrived about an hour before sundown. Inside the women's section was a young Hasidic man presiding over the prayer books, talking on his cell phone. The old and the new – the contrast was startling. Lined up next to the wall separating the men's from the women's section were chairs with women standing on them, looking over the wall at the men.

Rabbi Maas and her husband, Yiftach, and Rabbi Efraim Zadoff joined us for dinner at the YMCA, one of the few places other than the major hotels open for dinner on Friday evening. We welcomed the Shabbat with some readings, a new song, and the Shabbat symbols of candles, wine, and bread. After one day in Jerusalem, I was already feeling oppressed by the extreme religious dominance of the city. Sivan's welcome was warm and genuine. Having Shabbat together was a moving affirmation that we were among philosophical friends. As it was only our second night in Israel, that sense of welcome was particularly meaningful. At the end of the trip, a number of people in our party mentioned the first Shabbat in Jerusalem as a highlight.

Israel Museum

If you have been to the Israel Museum, you know what a remarkable place it is, but going

to the Israel Museum with Rabbi Maas falls into the category of a peak experience. The Israel Museum is open on Shabbat morning, so there we were. For Humanists, it was a little bit like, but better than, being in *shul* on Shabbat for theistic Jews. There is very little open in Jerusalem on Shabbat. That the Orthodox-controlled city allows the museum to be open and money to change hands is an oddity. According to Rabbi Falick, the museum remains open because of an Israeli concept called *status quo*, or “continuing what has been.”

As we entered the museum grounds, we approached a model of ancient Jerusalem and gazed on the Temple Mount, which included government, commercial, and administrative buildings as well as the city's religious center. As we sat in the amphitheater overlooking the model, Rabbi Maas encouraged us to consider the challenge facing the new nation of Israel – the challenge of creating a Capitol Hill. What would you include? You would certainly include the seat of the government, the Israeli parliament, the Knesset. And what else resides on this new Capitol Hill? The Israel Museum. There is a kind of sanctification (holiness), albeit secular, to this place.

We walked through the sculpture garden and entered the James Tarell sculpture, which Sivan referred to as her synagogue, where she has celebrated Bar and Bat Mitzvah ceremonies. The sculpture has an open “sun roof” and seats all along the sides. The sky was blue. The space provided peace and quiet, and we sang *Hinnay Ma Tov* together.

Western Wall Tunnels

Excavation began on the Western Wall tunnels in 1967, and the Western Wall Heritage Foundation took over the responsibility for the wall and the tunnel in 1987. It wasn't until 1996 that the current extensive tour was opened to the public. At one point on the tour, we found ourselves under the Dome of the Rock, which legend says was the site of the Holy of Holies. Now it is a prayer cave, monitored by women rather than men. It was one of the most exciting archaeological experiences I have had. Its power could be attributed

to the fact that we walked through what were once actual streets, now underground, or that women were in charge of the Holy of Holies. We stood where, in ancient times, no one but the High Priest was permitted to enter. Whatever the reasons, being there had a huge impact on me. It was similar to how I feel when I stand at the altar of a Catholic Church coofficiating – a place where women are not usually allowed – and I think to myself, woman, Jew, Humanist, what am I doing here? But being on the Temple Mount moved me in a way that standing at the altar of the Catholic Church could never equal.

A Discussion with Hebrew University Students

While we were in Jerusalem, Rabbi Falick arranged an evening with a small group of Hebrew University students. Most of them were studying international relations and political science, and many had lived abroad. They spanned the religious spectrum from atheist to Modern Orthodox and the political spectrum from right to left. They were all post-army – young, intelligent, opinionated, and dynamic. The dialogue was honest, powerful, respectful, and complex. I was impressed by the diversity of opinion and the multi-layered discussion of everything we spoke about. One student mentioned that life in Israel is good for most people – the economy is stronger than before, so there is more contentment. Another student commenting on Israeli-Palestinian relations spoke about the grass roots initiatives, the personal relationships being developed and promoted, and suggested that change will not take place at the level of government, but rather person to person.

From Jerusalem to Masada to Tiberias

We spent two days on the road in a bus, traveling from Jerusalem to Masada and Ein Gedi and then north to Tiberias. We took Route 90, officially entering and then leaving the West Bank through a series of check points. Looking at the map of Israel after I had traveled the route, I became much more aware that the “West Bank” encompasses the center section of Israel, with portions of the state to the east, west, north and south – a little like having a section of Canada embedded in Maine, New Hampshire, and Vermont.

Galilee

The second day on the road we spent in the Galilee and the Golan Heights. We stopped at Beit Alpha, a sixth-century Byzantine synagogue near Beit Shean in the upper Galilee. This synagogue, like the one in Tiberias, which was designed by the same artisans, contains mosaics of biblical legends as well as a zodiac. The Tiberias synagogue was vandalized this past summer by ultra-Orthodox Jews who were objecting to the removal of human remains from archaeological sites. They insist that the remains must stay where they are in order to participate in the resurrection of the dead at the end of times. The graffiti they left gave a clear picture of their intent. It was as if to say, “You dig up graves, we destroy the ancient sites.” (Don’t ask me to explain the logic.)

The Golan

I had been up in the Golan Heights once before in 1977 on my trip with Congregation Beth Or. The experience stayed with me in a powerful way. We were returning home in the dark on the bus singing a beautiful song, *Shir Hu Lo Rak Milim* (A Song Is Not Just Words), which I can still hear in my head. This time, to see the Golan in the light was maybe not as powerful, but certainly more illuminating. The Golan, a plateau that looks down upon three river valleys, consists of almost 700 square miles. It was part of Syria until 1967 and was annexed to Israel in 1981. We took a jeep tour through the rocky terrain, and as we stopped to look down over the valleys, realizing that we stood on what was once Syrian soil, I appreciated the vulnerability of the kibbutzim and small agricultural villages below and the strategic value of the area for security reasons.

We stopped in Katzrin, a small town that is the administrative center for the Israeli settlements on the Golan Heights. Katzrin is also the site of an ancient Jewish town dating back to sometime between the fourth and seventh centuries, which has been uncovered and partially restored. At the entrance there is an oil press, quite common in those days. We saw the remnants of ancient homes. Black lines on the walls differentiated between the original stones and the reconstructed ones, so it was easy to

see what had survived. The synagogue, which was found in 1967 and excavated between 1971 and 1984, was a sixth century structure built on top of an earlier, fourth century synagogue.

Tel Aviv

Tel Aviv is a cross between New York City and Miami Beach. We arrived late in the day, got settled, and walked toward the sea. When we reached the boardwalk, I had flashbacks to winter vacations with my grandparents in Miami Beach – the weather, the smell of the sea, the restaurants lining the beach. And the New York connection – the clothing stores, the shoe stores, the crowded neighborhood streets with restaurants and bars, shops and small groceries, and prices to match. The secularism of the city hit me immediately. We had a very different kind of “Shabbat.” We all walked together to have dinner. Other than the walking, there was no outward sign that this night was different from any other.

One morning, we walked to Rabin Square (formerly Kings of Israel Square). This is the largest public square in Tel Aviv and is used for public events, parades, and rallies. A memorial stands on the spot where Prime Minister Yitzhak Rabin was assassinated at a peace rally on November 4, 1995. Small brass medallions embedded into the concrete indicate where Rabin was standing, where each of the secret service members was standing, and where the shooter, Yigal Amir, was standing. Those brass medallions are reminders that even in Israel, the Jewish state, those who seek peace are not safe from extremists. A young Israeli woman told us of her memories of Rabin’s assassination, where she was, and the circumstances of her surroundings, not unlike how many of us remember the assassination of President John F. Kennedy.

At Independence Hall, we stood in the room where David Ben Gurion declared Israel’s independence on May 14, 1948. The room has been recreated to look as it did on that day. Nameplates designated where each person sat or stood. We sang *Hatikva*, passionately led by Jeff, the emotion palpable. It was an extremely powerful emotional experience.

Looking Back

Writing my reflections on this trip has enabled me to ponder not only what we did, but how I felt and what I learned. Being in Israel captivates me every time I am there. I am at home in a way that I am not in other places. What fascinates and attracts me is the connection I feel to the Jewish people of the past and present.

These are some of the impressions I came away with:

- Living in a Jewish state switches what is particular and what is universal. In North America everything Jewish is particular, whereas in Israel Jewishness is everywhere. This difference makes for a very interesting paradigm shift.
- There is so much diversity within Israel! The issues are complex and require, at the very least, a deep understanding of Near Eastern history, Zionism, and Israeli politics and government.
- I experienced a shift in attitude regarding the West Bank settlements. I have typically been on the left regarding this issue and am still adamantly opposed to the religious settlements. As we drove in a straight line from Masada to Tiberias that brought us in and then out of Israel and in and then out of the land governed by the Palestinian authority, I reflected on what it must be like to live in a land whose boundaries require both peoples to be continually confronted with the complex reality of dual authorities in the region.
- There are many ways to connect to Israel regardless of your political opinions. If you disagree with the government, there is still much of value that is not specifically political: the ancient history, the beauty of the country, the cosmopolitanism and vibrancy of Tel Aviv, to suggest a few.
- As Secular and Humanistic Jews, we have a growing presence in Israel, spearheaded by T’mura and the work it is doing to sup-

port pluralism there. With the development of Zionism, the people living in the land learned how to be Israelis, but many, if they were not Orthodox, forgot how to be Jewish. The Secular Humanistic Jewish perspective can be valuable to the many

non-Orthodox Israeli Jews. The cultural approach resonates.

This trip was a pilot. Rabbi Falick is open to leading other trips. If you are interested in a Humanistic trip to Israel, please let me know.

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Off the Path: Haredi* Meets Humanism

by Rabbi Frank Tamburello

Deborah Feldman's *Unorthodox* has caused a stir in the Jewish community by exposing a world and a lifestyle unimaginable to most of us. For me, however, growing up on the Lower East Side of New York in the 1950s, Hasidic life was something with which I was already somewhat familiar.

Shopping on Orchard Street on Sundays, my mother and grandmother were goaded into purchasing items that they never set out to buy with phrases like "Such a deal it is!" or "You think you can find something like this someplace else?" The black-and-white-clad, Yiddish-accented storekeepers spoke at least a few words in Spanish, Polish, Russian, Ukrainian, Hungarian, Greek, every dialect of Italian, and even some Mandarin Chinese. Their tiny shops were an explosion of boxes – blouses, shirts, shoes, you name it. They totaled your order with pencils on bags and wrapping paper. Dozens of charity boxes taped to every counter, prayer books, and, of course, the ever present Jewish calendars crammed with, it seemed to us, exotic holidays and observances. This was a fascinating world to me, as were the rest of the insular, ethnic worlds that made up New York City.

I am a retired high-school language teacher and presently serve the Westchester Community for Humanistic Judaism as their rabbi. I enjoy community service and am an educator for the Lower East Side Tenement Museum. Upon learning that the ex-Hasid support organization Footsteps was looking for tutors and mentors as volunteers, I quickly became involved.

Footsteps supports people who are looking to expand their vision beyond the confines of the insular communities of Williamsburg and Borough Park and other ultra-Orthodox

communities in the tri-state area. It provides counseling, life and work experience programs, scholarships, and tutoring to those who want a secular secondary school diploma as well as higher education degrees. It also promotes social activities that are secular in nature to help prepare these young people to interact with the outside world. Many have left Hasidic life altogether and call themselves OTDers (Off the *Derekh*, or Path). Organized more than ten years ago by Malkie Schwartz, Footsteps has helped more than six hundred men and women discover their potential as rational, intellectual, and free-thinking individuals.

At a recent Footsteps function, I had the privilege to become acquainted with Jacob Gluck, an eloquent spokesperson for the organization. I asked him to explain to our Humanistic Jewish community his involvement in the *ex-haredi** movement.

Rabbi Frank: Jacob, will you tell us a little about yourself, and how you came to leave your community?

Jacob: I grew up in the Satmar community of Borough Park, a relatively pluralistic and tolerant *haredi* community. I had parents who valued secular education, Torah scholarship, and experimentation with different streams of ultra-Orthodoxy. My dad was the ultimate skeptic and a consummate contrarian. If everyone in the crowd said something was white, he would assert it was black. When everyone at his yeshiva rooted for Lyndon Johnson, he actively defended Barry Goldwater. This criti-

Rabbi Frank Tamburello is a member of the Board of Directors of the Society for Humanistic Judaism and rabbi of the Westchester Community for Humanistic Judaism.

**Haredi* refers to ultra-Orthodox Jews.

cal approach to convention and dogma rubbed off on me in a very profound way. One kid at my yeshiva called me “*ipkha mistabra*,” a talmudic phrase meaning “it may be reasoned to the contrary.”

At some point I started philosophizing to justify Jewish ideology and the “chosen nation” doctrine. I was also asking historical questions regarding scriptural passages and talmudic discourses and thus was drawn into the fields of history and anthropology, which have remained favorites of mine ever since.

Ultimately, I didn’t arrive at the sort of answers that would have allowed me to feel comfortable in my community structure, which operated within very strict limits regarding faith and practice. After some intense soul-searching, I decided to leave the community and “Americanize.” I wanted to enroll in college, graduate with top honors, and be the next star in my professional field. Things didn’t work out quite as I had anticipated, but I did graduate in 2006 with a degree in social sciences and a concentration in history.

In recent years I have become more involved in my ex-community. I currently report *haredi* news from a no-holds-barred liberal/critical standpoint in my HasidicNews.com website. I also conduct walking tours around Hasidic Williamsburg to introduce its hermetic culture to outsiders.

Rabbi Frank: What would you say is the level of familiarity in the ultra-Orthodox world with other Jewish denominations or with the wider Jewish community?

Jacob: There is very scarce familiarity with other Jewish streams. The *haredi* sector has crafted a very sophisticated autonomous structure in which all socioeconomic needs are supplied from cradle to grave. Education in any subject matter other than traditional Torah and Talmud, including education in modern Jewish history and other Jewish denominations, is seen as hazardous to the continuity of a pure and faithful Orthodoxy. Some Reform ideas and their corresponding Orthodox

apologia are discussed, but it’s not done in an impartial, scholarly manner. The reformists are prejudicially seen as evil because they do not view the authority of the Torah as binding. The notion that humans may have a legitimate right to provide input into the rabbinic legislative process is never really considered. The discussion thus takes more of a devotional tone than an objective exploration of facts.

Rabbi Frank: What would be some of the most compelling reasons for those *haredi* who want to leave?

Jacob: The reasons for leaving the *haredi* community are varied. Many experience some acute constraint or a chronic grievance that festers unremittingly, which leaders in the community won’t address. Examples of the former are incompatible arranged marriages, nonheterosexual orientation (gay, lesbian, or transgender), a desire to go to college and pursue a profession, and a desire to be more sexually or otherwise explorative before committing to marriage. Examples of the latter are physical abuse (many boys report being viciously beaten by their fathers or rabbis), sexual molestation, mental abuse in the form of parents, teachers, and peers who are apathetic in the face of personal problems, and, finally, social isolation when someone becomes stigmatized by not fitting into the cookie-cutter mold, such as being divorced or growing up in a divorced or *baal teshuvah* (one that has returned to Orthodox Judaism) home or having a family member with mental illness. Finally, there are those, like myself, who leave for ideological reasons. When the teachings of the Torah as interpreted by contemporary *haredi* Judaism appear to be contradictory and hypocritical and too rigidly enforced without nuance and common-sense exceptions, the Torah and the system lose their relevance and moral high ground. When one starts seeing a system in which God may be on people’s lips but is very far away from their daily practices; when priorities are so conspicuously misaligned; when one is urged to be intellectually active in Torah study but is prevented from making logical inferences, which sometimes are heretical – then the system becomes a heavy burden, an odious,

perverse, and crushing prescription that one would rather die than live under for the rest of one's life.

However, the general reason for leaving and the proximate cause are not always identical. In my case, for example, I left the community for ideological reasons but it is also true that I endured physical and mental abuse at the hands of family and educational faculty. Others in the system are chafing under its weight for years but do not find it in themselves to make the move – therein throwing away a network of family, friends, and business connections – unless they get divorced and suddenly find themselves being treated as second-class members for no good reason. Or, perhaps they are experiencing an especially fierce dispute with a former spouse or business partner and the rabbinical court is enriching itself from their misery by protracting the proceedings and charging exorbitant fees, but if they dare go to secular court, the community will ostracize them. So they've got you over the barrel, between the devil and the deep blue sea.

Rabbi Frank: What does the world look like through the eyes of someone who has just made that first step out of the ultra-Orthodox world?

Jacob: I cannot speak for others, but I suspect it's similar to my experience. I felt as if the rug had been pulled from under my feet, like the nation felt after 9/11. My entire world crumbled before my eyes. I realized that morals I was indoctrinated with for so many years are all man-made. Now that I've read sociology books, I understand how and why humans artificially resort to strict religion in order to avoid doing the hard work of making real choices in their lives and owning their actions. I saw a new world that was ice-cold to me. I had to fight and prove myself at every move. There were many decisions to be made and a great deal of adjustment was necessary to become the "American" I so desperately wanted to be.

Rabbi Frank: What would be the most pressing concerns for the OTDers? Is there interest in preserving Jewish identity? If so, in what form?

Jacob: The most pressing concern is acculturation. *Haredi* kids, starting with the third-generation Holocaust survivors, of whom I am one, grow up in an incredibly cloistered, highly controlled environment. Every aspect of our lives is prescribed and regulated. We don't get to enjoy nursery rhymes as kids, and we don't experience the joy of Disney characters. When we grow up, we never listen to any secular music at all, neither classical, nor rock, nor pop. We don't get to watch movies, and we are barely exposed to secular radio and newspapers. Etiquette is a huge challenge. For example, in *haredi* culture it's okay to stand closer to each other during conversations than is normative in mainstream America, to abruptly leave a one-on-one conversation without warning in large social gatherings, and to interrupt each other while conversing. Learning so much so fast is very challenging and demanding. Keep in mind that most who leave do so in adulthood and are unable to predict their own heretical proclivities in advance. Once out of the system, they are suddenly cut off from all social, financial, and occupational support from their erstwhile communities.

Jewish identity is a substantial question that departees must grapple with sooner or later, but it isn't one of the more urgent issues they face in the most turbulent epoch of their transition into mainstream society. When I first decided to leave the community, I wanted to be a secular American, and I naively believed that it's simply a matter of turning the switch. Get an education, adopt new values, work hard at your education and profession, and the cream will rise to the top. I didn't realize at the time that the average American is religious to some degree and that people don't easily abandon their religious convictions completely, nor should they. Religion had a very bad rap for me at the time and I wanted as far away from it as possible.

Rabbi Frank: What is the ratio of men to women in the OTD community, and how do the challenges facing women differ from those facing men?

Jacob: In the early years of the OTD movement, the women were vastly outnumbered. This

created a tense atmosphere for the few women who did choose to leave and associate with men from a like background. Women would often be vigorously courted with blunt, unpleasant, and unwanted advances. In recent years, however, as the movement is maturing into its early adulthood stage, so to speak, women feel more comfortable leaving the *haredi* world in response to divorce, abuse, ideology, *etc.* They feel that the OTD community is nourishing, stable, and sustainable. Footsteps annual data show that the ratio of women to men applying for services leaped from 26 percent in 2009 to 42 percent in 2011, a phenomenal jump, which is very telling with respect to the movement's maturity. It seems to me a bit analogous to the Wild West, which likewise had a heavily skewed men-to-women ratio in the early towns until it was "tamed" and became inviting territory for women.

The tension regarding sexual relations, nonetheless, seems to linger. Sex is such a repressed topic in the *haredi* world that the adolescents emerging from its shadows in the prime of their sexual life are virtually exploding with erotic lust the moment the lid pops off upon shedding their *haredi* inhibitions. The men pounce on the women without regard to tact or commonality between the sexes. This, in turn, puts the more restrained but perhaps more virtuous men at a disadvantage and clouds women's ability to thoughtfully and methodically choose their mates from within the OTD community. As a result of these tensions, it seems, I have noticed that many OTDers are casting an eye outward in their courtship choices despite the raft of hurdles such "strangers" pose to the long-term viability of a relationship.

As to the more prosaic aspects of life in the mainstream for the opposite sexes, the most salient differentiating factors, in my opinion, are secular education and language. Women in the *haredi* world almost always receive a better secular education than their male counterparts. Women's fluency in English is likewise better than men's. These higher levels of acculturation among women translate to a heightened self-confidence and an easier time

adjusting to their new habitat. This is one of those ironic, unintended effects of the sexism in the *haredi* world: since religion is so much more important than education and the English language – which are considered mere expedients to making a living – men assume control of the superior religious sphere while happily delegating the "dirty work" in the inferior temporal sphere to their subservient helpmeets.

Rabbi Frank: Deborah Feldman's book has been criticized for sensationalizing the ultra-Orthodox lifestyle. How do you view this book?

Jacob: Ms. Feldman's book was very inspiring to me. Here I see a woman who grew up in a substantially similar community as I did, and she has successfully transitioned. She is a talented writer and speaker. I read the book in the course of two to three days, and I then interviewed her for my *HasidicNews.com* website. I do not at all think that she "sensationalized." Her story is very real, and it rang very true to me. It encouraged and goaded me to strive to measure up to her success. I could vicariously identify with virtually every anecdote and incident in the book.

The accusations leveled against her stem mostly from the Orthodox camp, from people who mistakenly view the book as a condemnation of all Orthodoxy or even all Judaism. This is consistent with the black-and-white approach that is so common in the right-wing sector of contemporary Jewry: if she criticizes some form of the religion, it is assumed that she's a "hater" and traitor, seeking to bash the faith and its practitioners. I have personally met her numerous times, and I am convinced that she is simply telling her story, and how she was so immensely frustrated by obstacles put in her way at every stage of her development. As I said, I feel exactly the same way.

Rabbi Frank: This past Shavuot, we gathered together a group of OTDers for a luncheon at my apartment. These young people, five men and three women, were very candid about their rejection of their communities and their traditional practices. Do you think that a more liberal form of Judaism, such as Reform or even

Humanistic Judaism would have an appeal to them?

Jacob: At this stage there is little appeal for anything in the realm of organized religion. If it's a congregation and a rabbi, it's viewed with suspicion. In general, those who leave a *haredi* upbringing experience acute estrangement from their religious past for quite some time – often, for many years. Ultimately, most come to accept their essential heritage after discovering the variations and nuances within Judaism and learning that Judaism is not an all-or-nothing proposition – an assertion fiercely maintained by the *haredim*, who see any deviation from tradition as a slippery slope to utter apostasy and who do not deem a watered-down version of religious practice as a valid form of the Jewish religion. Since the OTD movement is still in relative infancy – it is less than ten years old – and since there are very few stable families in the community, it's still too early to tell how things will turn out.

I am personally frustrated with the lack of greater traction of Conservative, Reform and Humanistic Judaism among my OTD friends and colleagues, but in part I don't blame them. Insofar as the left wing in contemporary Judaism often seeks to imitate or adopt in some way more traditional forms of practice, the liberals are viewed as hesitant, fickle,

and insecure – hardly an inviting milieu for prospective members.

Rabbi Frank: Jacob, thanks for your candor. Your remarks have been so enlightening and informative to us, and we wish the OTDers luck in all their endeavors. As you know, our congregation adopted Footsteps this year for our *tzedaka* project. How else can the Humanistic Jewish movement support ex-*haredi* communities?

Jacob: Humanism is a sorely needed approach to Judaism, and it is in short supply. I can envision many from the thriving ultra-Orthodox community finding their way into the Humanistic camp in due course after going through the various experimental and exploratory stages. From an outreach standpoint, the OTD community – those who have recently left their rigorous Orthodox upbringing – should be prime ground for the future growth of Humanistic Judaism. There are clearly many in the OTD community who are seeking a cultural Judaism devoid of theistic references and innuendo. If the Humanistic movement can learn to accommodate them and fine-tune its message and programming for the OTD sector, then we both can benefit from each other – from the infusion of Jewish culture and fresh blood into the “classical” Humanistic community and the introduction of liberal ideas and a supportive lifestyle for the ex-*haredim*.

The Atheist Rabbi and the Orthodox Women's Seminary

by Rabbi Jeffrey Falick

I returned recently from a two-week stay in Jerusalem. The purpose of my trip was to visit my younger daughter, who is in an Orthodox gap-year program. (For some odd reason, these are generally called seminaries, even though no one there is entering the rabbinate or priesthood.)

People who don't know me may be surprised to learn that my daughters (both of them) are Orthodox. This was the result of my ex-wife's decision to find God after our divorce. Believing that it would not be in the best interests of my children, I did not fight her on this and even paid ridiculously large sums of money for them to attend these seminaries. I felt that it couldn't hurt for them to experience Israel, and I'm not afraid of letting them make their own decisions in life.

My younger daughter, whom I was visiting, has spent some time learning about my thoughts on God and Israel and so forth. I don't know (or care) what she winds up believing, but it's nice to know that she respects my point of view.

Over several months of what I can only characterize as indoctrination, she occasionally mentioned my beliefs to some of the other students. My daughter felt that some of the women she spoke to might be interested in meeting me, if for no other reason than to expose them to a different perspective. She asked me if I would sit down with them for a Q & A about Jewish pluralism, atheism, secular humanism, science, God, and the meaning of life. I – quite flattered – replied, “Absolutely!”

So invitations went out and sushi was ordered, and The Atheist Rabbi prepared to share some knowledge. I must add that my agenda most explicitly and specifically excluded any

attempt to divert these women from their faith or core beliefs. I do not do that kind of thing. Not in settings like this.

The day of the talk arrived and with it a frantic text requesting that I call the rabbi of the seminary immediately and without delay. I did as I was asked. The rabbi entered immediately into a harangue about how what I was planning was unacceptable. He declared, “Atheism is a nonstarter.” He demanded that I cancel. I refused. He insinuated that I was exploiting my daughter. I told him that it was her idea. He flattered her maturity and intellect. I agreed with him. He told me that the other “girls” were not as mature and intellectual and that I lacked experience with 18-year-olds, so I couldn't possibly understand this. I explained that I had worked in Hillels for thirteen years and that I seemed to be giving these women more credit than he was. He told me that they would soon be out in the world and exposed to my kind. I replied that in that case it might be nice for them to hear about secular humanism from a Jew who feels attached to Israel and the Jewish people. I assured him that I had no desire to bring them over to my way of thinking, and I suggested that he not be so threatened by different ideas. I explained to him that I had shelled out tens of thousands of dollars for my daughter to attend his program because I am not threatened by ideas. He did not seem to apprehend my meaning.

We went round and round like this for forty-five minutes until I told him that I really did not want to discuss the matter any longer.

Rabbi Jeffrey Falick is rabbinic advisor of Congregation Beth Adam, Boca Raton, FL, and secretary of the Society for Humanistic Judaism. He sits on the editorial board of this journal. This article is adapted from a February 18, 2013, post on Rabbi Falick's blog, “The Atheist Rabbi” (www.theatheistrabbi.com).

I explained that he had three choices. He could forbid the girls to come. He could persuade them not to come. He could remain silent. I later learned that he had called an emergency meeting and tried to persuade them not to come.

They came anyway.

Two yeshiva boys came, too. I had met one of them on a previous occasion and learned that he was not exactly typical, having recently cast his first vote as an Israeli for Meretz, the most left-wing Zionist party in the country.

What emerged was a wonderful conversation that lasted about an hour and a half and ranged over such subjects as morality, Jewish tradition, the afterlife, miracles, the divinity of the Torah, and my views on Jewish history.

The feedback was positive. Some of the participants said that they appreciated my

openness and tolerance. I shared with them that tolerance is a key feature of secular humanism and that we do not oppose religion per se. I told them that we see religion as a personal matter and that what we oppose is religion's frequent mistreatment of people. I said that people should not have the authority to impose their beliefs on others, nor may they deny to them the rights and privileges that they themselves enjoy. Certainly not in the name of a deity or some ancient authority.

In my earlier conversation with the rabbi, I had made a futile attempt to calm him down. "I'm not trying to convert them," I said. "That's not the point of the evening. It's not like I'm going to spend all of my time detailing the evils committed by religion. The evils committed by religion speak for themselves."

Quite to my surprise, he agreed with that. I don't think he grasped the irony.

Letters *continued from page 2*

of the canon of the interpretation of any literature. Aristotle, for example, really did say the universe was immutable, and such philosophy majors, as Sherwin and I read – in disbelief, of course. But then, Galileo, Newton, Darwin, and Einstein had long since shown us otherwise.

The Constitution of the United States began its life as the governing document of a dynamic nation that would grow and change from the late eighteenth century thus far into the early twenty-first century. In between came the Industrial Revolution, post-horse and buggy transportation, new modes of communication beyond the Pony Express, air and space travel, the Internet, and an ever more complex society that required and still requires new understandings of the law. I'm sure Michael approves of the Thirteenth, Fourteenth, and Fifteenth amendments and Karen of the Nineteenth.

Michael clearly implies that the Constitution, like Aristotle's universe, must be immutable and worshiped as such. Antonin Scalia may agree with him.

Clarence Thomas surely does. There's great company for a secular humanist.

In closing, let me recall a Sherwin Wine idea that we employed successfully when he and I took on the school voucher issue in 2000. He rejected the strategy then being used by civil libertarians, *viz.* that the state constitution prohibited vouchers and should not be amended or reinterpreted to permit them. As if a people could not change its collective mind about things, as they did twice in the case of the Eighteenth and Twenty-First amendments to the U.S. Constitution. Sherwin said in 2000, "If we use the argument that you can't change the Constitution, we'll lose along with plenty of other arguments. Let's just say that public schools are the genius of American democracy and argue from there." We did, and people listened.

Incidentally, there were no such things as public schools as we know them today at the time the Constitution was written.

Harry T. Cook
Detroit, Michigan

ARTS/LITERATURE

Poems of Remembrance by Helen Degen Cohen

Survivors

My parents survived.
I survived.
My grandparents and aunts and uncles were taken up into the sky.
I can see them floating
up there,
spending their eternity looking for me:
age five
in a tan little box felt hat
and a smart little suit to match, all embroidered with red.
A chubby child who loved the park. You remember? they smile.
They are baking a babka for me
in the sky, stuffing it with
raisins and blueberries
almonds and sugar;
let her have everything, they say, the whole store, the whole country,
the whole of our lives –
if only we can find her.
And so they keep on looking
for me and for each other
in the great white fog. Life goes on,
even in heaven.

The Star in the Window Is Yellow

The star in the window is yellow.
It hangs on a sleeve of heaven
and heaven is static,
heaven is Jewish
it cannot fly, my child.

Nor will it leave you.
Nor is it bright with angels, no
heaven is dark,
it is dark with millions
of yellow stars.

Helen Degen Cohen, born near Warsaw, is a Holocaust survivor and an award-winning poet in Deerfield, IL. She was named an Artist-In-Education through the Illinois Arts Council and taught at Roosevelt University in Chicago. She is a founding editor of the poetry journal *Rhino* and coordinates its Poetry Forum. These poems are reprinted with the author's permission from *Habrey: Poems* by Helen Degen Cohen.

IN REVIEW

Child Rearing for Humanists: Two Guidebooks

Parenting Beyond Belief

Raising Freethinkers

by Dale McGowan

reviewed by Barry Swan

My former spouse and I used to give copies of Dr. Spock for baby gifts. Although there are dozens of baby books, this one had the world's greatest index. At 3 a.m., with a crying baby and vague symptoms, you could almost always find out what to do. There was an explanation in plain language, and usually a remedy.

But what happens when, instead of being confronted by a fever, a cough, or a rash, your family finds it is: 1) dealing with others' expectations about the Christmas holiday season when you don't do the Christmas holiday season; 2) protecting your children from those who wish to impose the denial of scientific principles when you want them not to be dependent on the supernatural; 3) dealing with family members and others who tell your children that they will see their dead loved ones again in heaven; or 4) trying to find other families who are bringing up their children as you do?

So my gift for new parents has changed. The path to the answers to the above issues (and many more) is provided in two unique books by Dale McGowan: *Parenting Beyond Belief: On Raising Ethical, Caring Kids Without Religion* (AMACOM, 2007) and *Raising Freethinkers: A Practical Guide for Parenting Beyond Belief* (AMACOM, 2009).^{*} In these two books, McGowan has collected stories, poems, songs, activities, testimonials, lesson plans, question-

answer sessions, reflections, explanations, and lists from wonderfully diverse sources. McGowan, who is the executive director of the Foundation Beyond Belief (www.parentingbeyondbelief.com), is the go-to guy when you are confronted by intruding influences.

These books are basic survival guides for raising secular children in a country often dominated by religious verbiage. McGowan advocates no absolutes beyond the need to educate yourself and decide what is most important for you and your children. His books let you know that others have been on this path before you—that you and your children are not alone. McGowan forewarns you of some of the obstacles that must be overcome and how others have handled them.

Although there will be many specific situations you cannot anticipate, you can be on the lookout for them. When your son is kept out of the Boy Scouts because you don't belong to a church, or is told to say the "under God" phrase in the Pledge of Allegiance, you must have a response. You can be proactive. When you realize that your child probably will never learn of

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Ed. Note: See Dale McGowan's article elsewhere in this issue.

famous humanists in school, you can integrate these humanists into discussions at home. You also can encourage the school to include them in the curriculum or have your children select them as the focus of school reports. You can visit museums and other cultural institutions that reflect a naturalistic point of view.

We humanists need to act on our beliefs. Just as we celebrate our Jewish values in our holiday services and life cycle celebrations, we need to create rituals and events that reflect our humanist values, such as solstice, equinox, Darwin Day, and Earth Day celebrations. Such events can be festive, community building, and values reaffirming.

I enjoyed McGowan's reasoning about nontheistic beliefs and how our experience,

knowledge, and values should direct our actions. His books provide a valuable starting point for those confronting a worldview in opposition to our own. One of the selections in *Parenting Beyond Belief*, entitled "Growing Up Godless: How I Survived Amateur Secular Parenting," was particularly apropos for all these reasons. This selection was about a young woman, Emily Rosa, who, as a fourth grader, became a published scientist. Her research helped debunk a healing technique called "Therapeutic Touch." Now a college student, Rosa advises us to avoid raising "grim, cynical, god-obsessed atheist children," but instead to raise them with "social graces, playfulness, and humor"; to help them acquire information; to encourage their natural curiosity; and especially to "trust them to sort out the real from the unreal."

The Failure of Secular Society

Religion for Atheists

by Alain de Botton

reviewed by Walter Hellman

Alain de Botton tells us that he was brought up in "a committedly atheistic household, as the son of two secular Jews who placed religious belief somewhere on a par with an attachment to Santa Claus." He never wavered in his certainty that God did not exist, but in his mid-twenties he suffered "a crisis of faithlessness." He began to seek a way "to engage with religion without having to subscribe to its supernatural content."

As he considers secular society, de Botton sees an utter failure to help guide individuals through life and to address important human needs:

. . . first, the need to live together in communities of harmony, despite our deeply rooted selfish and violent impulses. And second, the need to cope with terrifying degrees of pain which arise from our vulnerability to professional failure, to

troubled relationships, to the death of loved ones, to our decay and demise. God may be dead, but the urgent issues which impelled us to make him up still stir and demand resolutions.

Religion for Atheists (Pantheon, 2012) is de Botton's attempt to find those resolutions and address those problems. He proposes to adapt the ways of traditional religion – the use of symbols, art, architecture, and human interaction – without the supernatural underpinnings:

In giving up so much, we have allowed religion to claim as its exclusive dominion areas of experience which rightly belong to

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all mankind – and which we should feel unembarrassed about reappropriating for the secular realm.

What are the “domains of experience” we should reclaim? A large part of the book identifies specific practices and aspects of traditional religious experience that secular society should, in de Botton’s view, replicate in a nontheistic context. For example, he describes a typical Catholic church as a magnificent structure that “marks off a piece of earth, puts walls up around it and declares that within their parameters there will reign values utterly unlike those which hold sway in the world beyond.” Here is a place where outside status matters not a bit. The rich and poor kneel together in common community. The near-choreographed ritual movements of the priests and congregants allow people to physically move in concert with each other, creating a feeling of belonging. Alienation and loneliness vanish.

And where in the secular world, de Botton asks, would Jews have a day to apologize to others for misdeeds as we have on Yom Kippur? Where do we find commonly understood comforting behavior for all involved when a loved one dies as in the *shiva* tradition of Judaism? Can secular society provide anything remotely as meaningful as the Bar or Bat Mitzvah to help family and friends ease a child into adulthood?

Moving on to morality, de Botton notes that a libertarian society (he uses “libertarian” and “secular” almost interchangeably) goes out of its way not to be judgmental or instructional when it comes to morality. Public spaces are purposely devoid of moral messages. In the exact opposite manner, public spaces within the religious world are intentionally filled with such messages, which are essential to help guide us. Otherwise, says De Botton, we will see the “mature sides of us watch in despair as the infantile aspects of us trample upon our more elevated principles. . . .”

De Botton believes that religious methods of education are far more effective in teaching us how to live than their secular equivalents.

Religion, he says, correctly assumes that people need endless reinforcement for everything that is taught. Religious observance causes people to stop in their tracks multiple times daily to reflect on the lessons in prayer. Religious holidays that fill the calendar are moral in nature and teach the desired lessons repeatedly through the years. The absence of this necessary repetition in secular life represents a failure of secularism.

For those of us interested in congregational humanism as a solution to the problems de Botton describes, the greatest frustration in reading his book is that he fails completely to discuss this obvious potential solution. The nontheistic congregational model adopted by the Society for Humanistic Judaism and by many Unitarian Universalist churches is clearly a way to carry out the valuable religious functions in life without belief in the supernatural. Yet neither they nor any other similar institutions are mentioned here.

Instead de Botton suggests some creative but in some cases questionable modifications of secular life as substitutes for traditional religion. Restaurants should have books at the table with serious questions such as “What do you regret?” as a means to start discussions with strangers. In order to motivate better behavior throughout most of the year, an annual bacchanal should be held, at which all rules of proper behavior and sexual restraint are dropped and a “moment of release” occurs. (This moment of release is explicitly illustrated early in the volume, and this over-the-top illustration might stop some readers from seriously considering the book any further.) Another suggestion is to build beautiful public structures, temples to moral values. A lover of architecture, de Botton has included numerous full page illustrations showing how the secular world would look if it adopted this idea.

Why are de Botton’s suggestions questionable? First, it is not clear who would be in charge of directing people’s behavior. The devil is in the details of any moral campaign. What sort of public mechanism would make the decisions regarding how to proceed? It’s also not at

all clear whether anyone would buy in to many of the suggestions. Would people really go to a restaurant and talk with strangers about what they regret? Lastly, de Botton presents no evidence that traditionally religious people behave any better morally because of the mechanisms and institutions he describes. Also, while the book's title is attention-getting, in directing it to atheists de Botton leaves out many humanists, agnostics, and alternative believers who would be interested in what he has to say even though they do not consider themselves atheists.

On the other hand, de Botton makes the best case I've seen for why secularists need to adapt the methods and institutions of religion in order to help people find guidance and meaning in life.* *Religion for Atheists* is well worth reading for humanists and secularists even if it disappoints in supplying practical responses to the important issues it raises.

*De Botton presents some of his ideas in an eight-minute video. Visit http://video.ted.com/talk/podcast/2011G/None/AlaindeBotton_2011G.mp4.

Parsing the People of the Book

Jews and Words

by Amos Oz and Fania Oz-Salzberger

reviewed by Bennett Muraskin

Amos Oz, the renowned Israeli novelist, and his daughter, the historian Fania Oz-Salzberger, have collaborated on *Jews and Words* (Posen Library of Jewish Culture and Civilization, 2012), a series of essays designed to explore the longstanding relationship between Jews and texts, primarily the Bible and the Talmud. The book, despite its brevity, covers much territory and is sure to provoke discussion. As befitting the talents of one of our greatest novelists, it is a pleasure to read and includes many references to Hebrew and world literature. This father-daughter team has much to say to North American Jews searching for meaning beyond what they learned in Sunday school or what they hear from Chabadniks.

Literacy, the Ozs argue, is the wellspring of Jewish civilization. Education for Jewish boys ages 3-13 was mandatory for centuries, with many continuing to study into adulthood. Hebrew and its cousin Aramaic were the languages of religious study. For women, there was the *Tsena Urena*, a Yiddish-language adaptation of the Bible, rabbinic commentaries, and related stories. Respect for learning and

scholarship pervaded Jewish communal life, including the right to debate points of Jewish law – a principle exemplified by Abraham's challenge to God to save innocent lives in Sodom and Gomorrah and Job's accusation that God acts unjustly. "Jewish tradition allows and encourage pupils to rise against the teacher, disagree with him and prove him wrong, up to a point," the authors note.

By way of illustration, they refer to the famous talmudic "oven of achnai" story, in which the rabbis refuse to accept a direct decree from God on the grounds that the Torah is "not in the heavens," but theirs to interpret. God then gladly admits that "My children have defeated me." This story about rabbis overruling God is indeed precious, though, as far as I know, it is also unique in the Talmud. Still, the authors are correct to

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refer to this tale as an important precedent in Jewish thought.

Unfortunately, in other instances they tend to overstate their case. Is “the young Jewish student [always and everywhere] urged to say something new?” Were students always encouraged to be intellectually curious? At best this could be true of a certain era or among certain streams of Judaism, but not “always and everywhere.” If the claim was universally true, why were there so many forbidden books, from Greek to Christian to secular literature? Certainly this is not the portrait of the *kheder* in Yiddish literature, where students were confined to dreary rooms for the entire day and beaten for speaking out of turn.

Does the Mishna really say that “whoever destroys one soul, it counts as if he destroyed a full world, and whoever saves one soul, it counts as if he saved a full world”? The authors claim that the words “in Israel,” which they find offensive, were added in the Gemara, but according to Jacob Neusner, who translated the Mishna from Hebrew into English, the offensive ethnocentric phrase is there too.

The authors relate several appealing talmudic stories that depict God as adorning the letters of the Torah or engaging in study. The concept of God as a scholar undoubtedly reflects a more advanced society than that of God as a warrior. However, one story they cite has a disturbing ending: In the Talmud, God tells Moses that in the future there will be a great Torah scholar. Moses asks to see him and is transported to Rabbi Akiva’s classroom. Moses is so impressed with Akiva that he asks to see his reward. Instead God shows Akiva’s gruesome fate, tortured to death by the Romans. When Moses protests, God essentially tells him to shut up, when he should have told him something Moses could readily understand – that Akiva was a martyr to the Jewish resistance against oppression, similar to what the ancient Hebrews suffered under Pharaoh. “Shut up” would seem to be the antithesis of the author’s theme of Jewish discussion and disagreement. Yet, although they acknowledge God’s abruptness, they excuse it by saying that the story

reveals the “the boundaries of divine revelation and human grasp.” These are boundaries that should be crossed by critical thinkers like the Ozs.

Another example of authorial overreach is the Ozs’ treatment of the rule of law among the ancient Israelites. We learn from the Book of Samuel, in which the prophet Nathan reprimands King David for sending Uriah off to die in battle so he can take Bathsheba as his wife, that Jewish kings did not exercise absolute power. The priests were empowered to interpret the law, and prophets arose to keep both kings and priests in line. In Deuteronomy we read of Moses’ decree that the law be read on a regular basis at a public assembly. Such evidence should be enough to establish that the rule of law existed to some degree in ancient Israel. Instead the authors turn back the clock to the period soon after the Hebrews settled in Canaan, about which very little is known, and weave a story of an “agrarian republic” of small landholders “where numerous citizens . . . form the back bone of a stable civil society . . . based on the political strength of the many, not the few and not the one.” Not only was there representative government, the authors claim, but it was a “realm of distributive justice,” where the laws on gleaning, the sabbatical year, and the jubilee year were in full force and effect. As an aside, they concede that they may be engaged in wishful thinking. Their description certainly bears no resemblance to the Book of Judges, which describes this period as one of anarchy.

On the positive side, the authors give prominent treatment to biblical women. From Eve and Miriam to Deborah and Esther and the “woman of valor” in Proverbs, they establish that the voices of women were heard. They make a convincing case that portions of the Song of Songs, beautiful romantic poetry, were written by a woman. In the Book of Exodus, the Hebrew midwives Puah and Shifra save lives by evading Pharaoh’s orders to kill all the Israelite babies. Tamar plays the harlot in order to bear Judah’s children and gets away with it. Bathsheba pulls strings to ensure that her son, Solomon, inherits the throne after

David's death. These are all strong women, and the authors celebrate their strength. However, in rating biblical Jewish mothers, they give Samuel's mother, Hannah, an unlikely candidate, the highest grade, A barren woman, she prays for a son and, when her prayers are granted, she turns him (Samuel) over to the priests to be raised. In my mind, she does not hold a candle to Naomi, who brought her Moabite daughter-in-law Ruth back to Israel, arranged for her to survive by gleaning in the field of a prosperous and upright man named Boaz, and then instructed her how to get him to marry her. And Ruth, a woman of non-Jewish origin, turned out to be the great-grandmother of King David.

In contrast with these biblical women, the Ozs reveal that women in the Talmud are almost invisible. Merely talking to them was considered by the rabbis to be a dangerous waste of time. The only three who are given credit for their intelligence – Imma Shalom, Yalta, and Bruria – were married to scholars. To his credit, Rashi, the great talmudic commentator, who lived in the eleventh century C.E., educated his three daughters.

Yiddish is discussed mainly as a source of Jewish humor. Sholem Aleichem is briefly quoted; he deserves more space because as a Jewish humorist he had no peer. Groucho Marx gets a nod, as does Woody Allen. The authors quote Itsik Manger's famous Yiddish poem and song "*Oyfn Veg Shteyt a Boym*" ("On the Road Stands a Tree") to illustrate the theme of the overprotective Jewish mother. They also cite a poignant short story by I. L. Peretz called "*Sholem Bayis*" ("Domestic Bliss") in which a poor, illiterate worker learns that he can earn a place in Paradise by serving fresh water to *kheder* students. Deeply in love, he asks whether his wife will join him there. When told that

she will, but only as his "footrest" (according to talmudic law), he insists that his wife sit with him whether God likes it or not. The Ozs claim that this story contains, in microcosm, almost every theme expounded in their book: "It has that persistent admixture of reverence and irreverence that singles out the best Jewish texts." But this story actually undermines their theme of literacy as an ennobling Jewish value. In the story, it is the educated Jew who would treat the woman as an inferior, whereas it is the uneducated one who would treat her as an equal.

In their Epilogue, the authors praise Jewish *chutzpa* as a weapon against the *groyser makhers*, or big shots (my choice of words) and as a form of healthy self-criticism. However, they fail to see that this characteristic is by no means wedded to Jewish literacy or learning. Hasidic folklore, for example, provides an abundance of stories in which scholars get their comeuppance from ordinary Jews or discover to their surprise that their companion in Paradise will be an ordinary Jew who performed extraordinary acts of courage or *tsedeka* (charity).

Although Hebrew is their first language, the Ozs write in English. This is surprising because one of their primary objectives is to convince secular Jewish Israelis like themselves that they have a better claim to key elements of Jewish tradition than the ultra-Orthodox and Orthodox, who wield great power in Israel. Although Jewish pluralism, an essential principle for Jews across the religious and secular spectrum, is almost taken for granted in the United States, in Israel it is a major issue of contention. For that reason, *Jews and Words* should make a bigger impact in Hebrew. The Ozs are the right people to translate it, and I hope they do.



The Society for Humanistic Judaism was established in 1969 to provide a humanistic alternative in Jewish life. The Society for Humanistic Judaism mobilizes people to celebrate Jewish identity and culture consistent with a humanistic philosophy of life, independent of supernatural authority.

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- Helps to organize Humanistic Jewish communities — congregations and havurot.
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