



HUMANISTIC JUDAISM

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HUMANISTIC and JEWISH: WHY BOTH?

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**Wisdom from Wine:
Thoughts on Humanism & Humanistic Judaism**

**Rational Judaism: It's Not New
Secularism, Atheism, Humor & Jewish Identity**

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

Our HJ Forum theme for this issue of *Humanistic Judaism* is: “Humanistic and Jewish: Why Both?” The articles in the Forum explore our movement’s special blend of humanistic ideology/philosophy and Jewish culture/celebrations.

Implicit in the question “Why both?” are other often-asked questions: Why not just one or the other (humanistic *or* Jewish)? How do we combine the two, and how well does the combination work? How can we be Jewish if we reject such fundamental elements of Judaism as the belief in an interventionist God, the efficacy of prayer, and the accuracy of the Torah’s version of Jewish history? If we subscribe to universal ethical values, why choose a tribal identity?

We would like to continue this important discussion in future issues of this journal. Please send us your comments and concerns.

– R.D.F.

BRIEFLY SPEAKING

SHJ Engages in Battle for Marriage Equality

The Supreme Court's October 6 denial of *certiori* in five cases on marriage equality was a historic victory for gay marriage advocates. By allowing lower court rulings in favor of gay marriage to stand, it opened the way for same-sex marriages in the five directly affected states – Virginia, Indiana, Wisconsin, Oklahoma, and Utah – plus six others in the same federal circuits: Colorado, Kansas, Wyoming, North Carolina, South Carolina, and West Virginia. The Society for Humanistic Judaism (SHJ) joined the Anti-Defamation League and a coalition of twenty organizations in an amicus brief in the Virginia case, *Bostic v. Schaefer*, arguing that overturning the state's marriage ban would ensure that religious considerations do not improperly influence which marriages the state can recognize and would allow religious groups to decide the definition of marriage for themselves. The July 28 ruling by the Fourth Circuit Court of Appeals permitting same-sex marriage in Virginia was the first such decision in a southern state.

The SHJ also joined an amicus brief in the Idaho case of *Latta v. Ogge*, in which the U.S. Court of Appeals for the Ninth Circuit struck down a constitutional amendment banning gay marriage. On October 14, Idaho Governor Butch Otter declined to take further appeals, and the next day same-sex couples began marrying across the state.

Still pending as of this writing are four cases in the Sixth Circuit Court of Appeals, heard on August 6, in which the SHJ joined amicus briefs. Although the facts in each of these cases – in Michigan (*DeBoer et al. v. Snyder*), Ohio (*Henry v. Hines*), Tennessee (*Tanco v. Haslam*), and Kentucky (*Bourke, et al. V. Beshear*) – are unique, all four briefs argue that district court decisions striking down state same-sex marriage bans should be upheld. The briefs contend that the marriage bans in these states “violate not only the Fourteenth Amendment’s Equal Protection Clause, but also the First Amendment’s Establishment Clause. A decision overturning the Marriage Ban would assure full state recognition of civil marriages while allowing religious groups the freedom to choose how to define marriage for themselves.”

Recognizing that religious views differ regarding what marriages qualify to be solemnized, and that the constitutional guarantee of religious freedom for all must be protected, the briefs argue that “selective religious understandings cannot define marriage recognition under civil law” and that all states are subject to the First Amendment Establishment Clause’s prohibition against denying individuals the right to marry simply because such marriages would offend the tenets of a particular religious group.

Before the recent court actions, nineteen states plus the District of Columbia allowed marriage equality. That list now tops thirty, representing approximately 60 percent of the American people; but some of these states are still trying to block same-sex marriage or haven’t yet instituted mechanisms for such weddings. Forty-one federal and state courts have ruled in favor of same-sex marriage in the past year; only one federal and one state ruling went the other way.

SHJ Joins Efforts to Prevent Anti-Discrimination Exemptions for Religious Organizations

The Society for Humanistic Judaism (SHJ) joined ninety religious, education, civil rights, labor, LGBT, women’s, and health organizations in a request to Attorney General Eric Holder that the Office of Legal Counsel (OLC) withdraw its June 29, 2007 Memorandum, which exempts religious organizations from adhering to the nondiscrimination provision in the Violence Against Women Act (VAWA). VAWA bars organizations from engaging in employment discrimination with VAWA funds, but because the OLC memo governs administration policy, the administration is permitting religious organizations to use religion as a criterion when hiring employees using taxpayer dollars. Such exemptions threaten core civil rights and religious freedom.

The SHJ also joined more than one hundred organizations in urging President Obama to sign an executive order that would bar discrimination by federal contractors on the basis of sexual orientation and gender identity. The letter urged the president

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HJ FORUM: Humanistic and Jewish: Why Both?

“Dancing at Two Weddings ...”

by Rabbi Jeffrey L. Falick

In the short history of our movement, among the most interesting issues that have concerned us is how we express our dual commitments to humanism and Judaism. Since our earliest days, we have endeavored to claim a place for ourselves in the Jewish community even as we seek to play a visible role in the larger constellation of organized humanism.

These efforts transcend philosophical matters or the compatibility of Judaism, Jewish identity, and humanism. Ideologically, we are quite clear about how our humanism and Judaism fit together. Our journals and web sites are brimming with articles and statements about how they coexist. But even for us overly intellectualizing Humanistic Jews, there have always been practical considerations. Our balancing act is far more than some demonstration of ideological consistency. It is really about how we involve ourselves in these distinct communities.

Consider how this has played out. On the one hand, both our North American body and local communities have maintained associations with many of the scores of atheist, agnostic, skeptical, freethinking, and humanist organizations. Yet at the same time, we have participated as full members of the organized Jewish community with its various federations, synagogues, and charitable bodies. Sometimes these groups work at cross-purposes, and we

find ourselves in the middle with serious questions: To what extent can we comfortably cast our lot with Jewish tribalism? Does it contradict the universalism that humanistic organizations present as among their highest goals?

There is a Yiddish maxim that says, “You cannot dance at two weddings with one *tuches*.” Yet for more than fifty years, this is precisely what Humanistic Jews have been attempting to do.

As it happens, these tensions are not new to post-Enlightenment Jews, and we are not the first generation of Jews who have dealt with what it means to belong to two worlds. Such efforts can be traced back to the very beginning of European Jewish emancipation, when Jews first experienced secular citizenship and found themselves with an invitation to participate in the wider world. This radical new reality posed substantial challenges for them as they sought to find their place in societies where, for the first time, they were being asked to interpret Judaism and Jewishness in a broader context.

There was not much in Jewish history to help them navigate these waters. No models suggested how Jews should participate as

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equals with their Christian neighbors while remaining Jews. They were forced to entirely rethink Judaism and their Jewish identities.

I. First Time Around: The Reform Jewish Debate over Particularism vs. Universalism

The reformation of Judaism, which yielded all of today's non-Orthodox forms of Judaism, began with a practical issue. Jews wanted to participate as full members of the larger society. Once they were permitted to hold an identity independent of Judaism, it did not take long for many to begin to lose interest in being Jewish. Consequently, early Jewish reformers began the project of finding new ways to be Jewish. It required them to create a new Judaism, one that would be more harmonious and complementary with membership in secular society.

Though these efforts began in Europe, it wasn't until central European Jews immigrated to America that the undertaking really flourished. Here they found themselves citizens of a nation where, religiously speaking, you could be anything that you wanted to be. Or nothing at all. And this is what tens of thousands of central European Jews discovered when they immigrated here in the mid-nineteenth century.

Although some traditionalists attempted to accommodate participation in secular society with adherence to Jewish law, most found this approach untenable. They imagined it an impossible task to reconcile law-laden Judaism with membership in a free society. They believed that preserving an antiquated form of Judaism was a guaranteed formula for Jewish irrelevance. Who would choose that way of life over full participation in America?¹ Instead, they put forward an extensive program of reforming Judaism itself in a way that would stress its universal message and commitment. Thus was born the most significant tension of modern Jewish identity.

In order to make Judaism more acceptably American, these reformers invented a kind of Judaism that would have been unrecognizable to earlier generations. Much like later Humanistic Jews, they concentrated on developing the philosophical underpinnings of their new

reformed Judaism. But in all of their endeavors, practical considerations were never very far from their minds.

Perhaps the most fascinating example of their balancing act is the Pittsburgh Platform, American Reform Judaism's nineteenth-century manifesto. It remains history's most radically expressed redefinition of the place of the modern Jew. It presents a thorough reformulation of the very definition of Judaism.

In a sharply worded statement that denounced Jewish separatism and excessive particularity, its authors fully dismissed the entire body of Jewish Law, the basis for those traditions. Calling it "Mosaic legislation," they rejected the Law as no more than a "system of training the Jewish people for its mission," which no longer possessed the power "to impress the modern Jew with a spirit of priestly holiness. . . ."²

At the same time they articulated a new universal mission for Judaism, calling it "the highest conception of the God-idea." If the Jews had so long persisted in their insularity it was only because they had "preserved and defended, midst continual struggles and trials and under enforced isolation, this God-idea as the central religious truth for the human race." The new Judaism, a faith for a more enlightened people with universalist goals, would now take its seat at the table of modern religion alongside the Protestant and Catholic faiths. Its new mission was to spread the "monotheistic and moral truth" and to work for "the establishment of the reign of truth and righteousness among men."³

Yet for all their universalist ambitions and their drastically new definition of Judaism, these reformers still sought to remain Jews. They spoke about "the utmost necessity of preserving the historical identity with [their] great past." They invested all of their efforts in building and maintaining congregations, seminaries, and other particularistic Jewish institutions to teach and preach their new universalist Judaism.

Efforts to balance particularism and universalism remain, in many ways, characteristic of

all Diaspora Jewish groups. Yet they are particularly acute for Humanistic Jews. Like the early Jewish reformers, we are committed to a profoundly universalist philosophy. Also, like them, we pursue our universalist goals from inside a particularistic Jewish enterprise.

As we work to do so, we keep trying to dance at two great weddings. This effort has met with mixed success.

And it has split our movement once before.

II. Choosing a Wedding: The Story of Cincinnati's Beth Adam

In 1994, the Union of American Hebrew Congregations (UAHC, now known as the Union for Reform Judaism) rejected the application for membership of Congregation Beth Adam, a Humanistic Jewish congregation in Cincinnati, Ohio. With a vote of 115-13, the decision was not even close.

For the Reform movement, the vote decisively defined its theistic boundaries. As opposition leader Rabbi Gunther Plaut said, "Freedom is a major aspect of Reform Jewish philosophy . . . but there is no freedom without limits." Most Reform Jewish leaders agreed with him that Beth Adam's membership "would infuse our community and our national movement with divisiveness, discord, and disharmony."⁴

Beth Adam was certainly aware of these sentiments before submitting its application. Cincinnati is the historical heart of American Reform Judaism and home to the oldest campus of its seminary, the Hebrew Union College-Jewish Institute of Religion (HUC-JIR). Beth Adam's rabbi, Robert Barr, is a highly visible alumnus of that school. What, then, could possibly explain this almost quixotic quest for membership in a religious movement that clearly did not want it?

Beth Adam submitted its application to the UAHC shortly after terminating its association with the Society for Humanistic Judaism (SHJ) — a decision that resulted from significant disagreements about the direction of the

Humanistic Judaism movement. These objections were voiced at a special joint meeting of the SHJ's executive board and leaders of Beth Adam in October 1988.

At the meeting Beth Adam's leaders stated their central complaint that the SHJ was becoming too secular and "moving away from religion." Rabbi Sherwin T. Wine, the movement's founder, and others viewed Humanistic Judaism as a radical new creation, revolutionary rather than evolutionary. But Barr saw it as no more than a "logical development" in the history of religious Judaism — a view that helps explain why Beth Adam sought to join the explicitly religious UAHC.

A second, related concern on Beth Adam's part was the dearth of Humanistic rabbis. The SHJ was certainly in favor of recruiting more rabbis, and both sides believed that doing so would help the movement. But for Beth Adam the lack of rabbinical leadership was yet another indication that Humanistic Judaism was moving away from its particularistic Jewish religious roots. As they saw it, SHJ communities without a rabbi — the vast majority — were no more than just groups of secular humanists.⁵

Wine's solution to the problem only made matters worse. Having provided funding for two Humanistic Jews to attend HUC-JIR only to watch them desert the movement, he was unwilling to depend upon that school any longer. Consequently, he decided to establish a North American branch of the International Institute for Secular Humanistic Judaism (IISHJ) that would train Humanistic rabbis. Ironically, one could reasonably argue that this was a fairly particularistic Jewish decision on Wine's part. Beth Adam's leaders saw it differently. In the context of their growing dispute with the SHJ, they could only interpret it as a hard break from continuity with religious Judaism.⁶ Their application for membership in the UAHC made it clear that they wanted to be part of the greater Jewish community. They were not interested in trying to dance at two weddings. They wanted a spot at only one. As *The New York Times* reported:

The congregation . . . saw the [application for] affiliation as leading to greater dialogue with others in the [Reform] movement and giving its members a sense of context within the nation's Jewish community.⁷

Beth Adam's rabbi and leaders were intent on being counted as fully recognized players in the largest and most successful liberal religious Jewish organization. They saw their humanism as nothing more than a variation on the theme of liberal Judaism. They had no desire to dance at two weddings. Only one, the Jewish wedding, was fit for them. And when they failed to secure their longed-for membership in the UAHC, they did not return to organized Humanistic Judaism. Instead, they chose to remain independent. To this day they maintain no associations with the wider humanistic world. There is only one wedding for them.

III. Dancing with Humanists

As I mentioned earlier, there was some degree of irony in the fact that the establishment of a North American branch of the IISHJ contributed to Beth Adam's disaffiliation from the SHJ. But if Beth Adam's leaders were wrong about Wine's motivations for founding the IISHJ, they were not wrong about the bigger picture. Since its founding, Humanistic Judaism has indeed placed a high value on building and maintaining meaningful relationships with the larger web of humanist organizations. Sherwin Wine himself worked intimately with some of the humanistic world's greatest leaders.

In 1976, citing the need for "well-trained leaders who will be able to mobilize people to embrace our philosophy of life," Wine joined forces with Howard Radest, Paul Beattie, Paul Kurtz, and Khoren Arisian to create the Humanist Institute.⁸ Almost thirty years later it continues to thrive as a key department of the American Humanist Association (AHA). When Wine was named the AHA's Humanist of the Year in 2003, he was recognized for his contributions to both Humanistic Judaism and world-wide humanism. One might say that his award recognized his attempts to dance at two weddings.

Wine's commitment to partnering with the humanistic world continues to characterize the SHJ and many of its communities. If their Facebook pages and newsletters are any indication, it is still a programming emphasis. Whether they are sponsoring Darwin Days or assisting with fund raising efforts of the Foundation Beyond Belief, Humanistic Jewish communities are highly engaged with the broader humanistic world. One outstanding example is the 2011 Birmingham Temple appearance by Richard Dawkins, one of the world's most outspoken atheists.⁹ It was the best-attended event in the congregation's history. Dawkins' "warm-up" speaker was another prominent voice in the humanistic and nontheistic world, five-term Maine state legislator Sean Faircloth, a one-time executive director of the Secular Coalition for America (SCA), who spoke about his book, *Attack of the Theocrats*.

The Secular Coalition for America (SCA) itself provides a fine example of SHJ's presence on the broader nontheistic landscape. In 2005, the SHJ joined the SCA as a voting member. Voting membership in the SCA is grounded upon a commitment to cooperate with other voting members "for the greater good of all non-theistic citizens."¹⁰ The SHJ participates in this very public alliance alongside the American Humanist Association, American Atheists, the Atheist Alliance for America, and the Freedom From Religion Foundation, to name a few. Its membership in the organization asserts SHJ's status as one among equals in an exclusive club that features some of the most visible humanistic, nontheistic organizations in the country. And connections to the SCA were responsible, in part, for the SHJ's participation in one of the largest gatherings of nontheists in American history, the 2012 "Reason Rally" held in Washington, D.C.

The decision to join the SCA was not particularly controversial. Its goals are perfectly consistent with those of the SHJ. But the SCA is not the only organization lobbying on First Amendment religious issues. The SHJ might easily have chosen to support other organizations that serve similar purposes. For example, Americans United for the Separation of Church

and State (AU) lobbies on almost identical issues. Its list of cooperating organizations boasts some of the biggest names in the Jewish world. But AU is not specifically committed to the welfare of nontheistic Americans. Instead, it focuses its outreach on religious groups. Its director, Barry Lynn, is an ordained minister in the liberal United Church of Christ. Its mission is “to ensure religious freedom for all Americans.”

By choosing membership in the SCA, rather than affiliating with the AU or any number of other organizations working on church-state issues, the SHJ supports its goal of “improv[ing] the civic situation of citizens with a naturalistic worldview.” Members of SHJ might feel an affinity with other Jews. But they share a sense of purpose with other humanists.

As a result, Humanistic Judaism has danced enthusiastically at the humanist world’s wedding. But what about that other celebration, the one with just Jews? How is that dance going?

III. Dancing with Jews

Earlier, I discussed the nineteenth-century reformers’ efforts to create a new kind of Judaism with greater universalist concerns and increased engagement with the non-Jewish world. The movement that they created is now known as *classical* Reform Judaism. Why “classical”? Because it no longer exists. And there are important lessons here for Humanistic Judaism.

For classical Reform Judaism, recasting Jewish observance was the highest priority. The same is true of Humanistic Judaism. Classical Reform Judaism yielded radical changes in Jewish practice. Humanistic Judaism’s reforms are more radical still. Classical Reform Judaism has all but disappeared as a Jewish option. One by one its reforms were revised or reversed. Will Humanistic Judaism suffer the same fate?

A cursory glance at the earliest prayer books of the classic reformers reveals the extent of their changes. Hebrew was almost completely eliminated. Fundamental prayers and passages were reworded or purged entirely. In some Reform temples, Sunday mornings

became the prominent hour of worship. Jewish traditions took a back seat as Jewish services looked more and more like those of Protestant Christianity. These developments did not sit well with everyone. In a sermon delivered in 1910 at New York’s most prominent Reform Temple, Rabbi Judah Magnes advocated for a return to more tradition. His speech was reported in *The New York Times*:

A prominent Christian lawyer of another city, complained Dr. Magnes, has told me how he entered this building at the beginning of a service on a Sunday morning, and did not discover he was in a synagogue until a chance remark by the preacher betrayed it.¹¹

Sentiments like these revealed nascent Reform Judaism’s practical failings. Forced to reevaluate, the movement began to turn inward, focusing its efforts on looking and feeling more Jewish. Though the transformation would take decades, by the 1980s ritual traditionalism ruled the day. Just as significantly, the movement’s commitment to universalism was swallowed up by its quest to ensure Jewish particularistic survival.

Humanistic Judaism has faced similar problems. Active engagement with the non-Jewish world has not been the only challenge. Anyone who has tried to recruit someone to a Humanistic Jewish community has faced questions about the wholesale abandonment of traditional Jewish liturgy, the likes of which were never seen in any version of Reform Judaism.

With our movement’s use of Hebrew and Yiddish songs and readings, Magnes’ Christian lawyer probably would have recognized the Jewishness of our services. That said, Humanistic Judaism has actually preserved far less of the traditional liturgy than did those early classical reformers. Moreover, there is little room for compromise. Unlike Reform Judaism, which simply closed the doors to radical reform and turned inward, there is no such option for Humanistic Judaism. Nontheism, the bedrock of the movement, cannot accommodate theistic language or practices of any kind. Humanistic

Jews who, despite their affinity with our ideology, seek these expressions of Judaism have not found a comfortable home in the movement. They do not care that reciting the *Shema* or the traditional *Kaddish* is a betrayal of “saying what we mean and meaning what we say.” They want to say these prayers because that’s what Jews do.

Cincinnati’s Beth Adam did not leave the movement because of this issue, and its liturgy does not include these prayers. But another former member of the SHJ, Beth Chai, the Greater Washington (D.C.) Jewish Humanist Congregation, eventually reintroduced them in its liturgy. Still other congregations that have remained within the fold have made valiant attempts to replace them with sound-alike readings. Numerous Humanistic adaptations of the *Shema* and *Kaddish* can be found in the service booklets of our congregations. Some of these are lovely, poetic interpretations. Others are gratefully bad compositions.

Efforts to retain or reformulate traditional Jewish prayers and practices point to our movement’s attempts to dance at the Jewish wedding. But the built-in necessity of radical Humanistic reforms has distanced us from mainstream Jewish acceptance. Some even believe that it has stunted our growth as a movement. Whatever the case, the nature of Humanistic Judaism does not really leave much room for a Reform-style return to tradition. To do so would be to abandon what makes Humanistic Judaism unique.

Liturgy and observance notwithstanding, there remains much that can be done to shore up and promote *Yiddishkeit* (Jewishness), which might go a long way toward attracting marginal Jews who value Jewish culture. We cannot restore the *Shema*, but powerful celebrations of holidays such as Sukkot and Purim can emphasize our Jewish commitments.

Less challenging than our internal reforms of Judaism have been our attempts to remain connected to the organized American Jewish community. In 1998, we hosted a program for attendees of the General Assembly of the Coun-

cil of Jewish Federations, the largest gathering of Jewish communal leaders and organizations in North America. The following year we held a Shabbat service there. In some ways, this put Humanistic Judaism on the Jewish map as the “fifth denomination.” It was a welcome acknowledgment by the Jewish establishment of our Jewish credibility. Both before and since then, the movement has worked hard to remain integrated, nationally and locally, with the larger Jewish community. The results have been generally, if not entirely, positive.

In most places where we find a successful local Humanistic Jewish community, its members cooperate — sometimes closely — with other Jewish organizations. Our communities tend to be recognized by federations and even local bureaus of Jewish education. In Detroit, the Birmingham Temple is a fully recognized member of the local Jewish community. And in stark contrast with the early treatment of Sherwin Wine, Detroit’s Humanistic rabbis are welcomed into full membership in the Michigan Board of Rabbis. In other cities, however, Humanistic rabbis are not automatically recognized. Ordination by the IISHJ is not considered on a par with that of the older, more established seminaries and yeshivas.

On the national stage, the SHJ has maintained associations with a number of important Jewish organizations. One of the most notable of these connections is the SHJ’s acceptance as a partner agency with Hillel International, which sponsors Jewish programming on campuses throughout the world. This recognition is generally reserved for only the most legitimate Jewish groups.

Dwarfing the movement’s engagement with American Jewry is its connection to Israel. The movement there, founded as a result of Sherwin Wine’s outreach to some of the Jewish state’s most prominent secular leaders and thinkers, has grown strong under the leadership of Rabbi Sivan Malkin Maas.

By providing a distinct link to that most particularistic of all Jewish places, Secular Hu-

manistic Judaism in Israel has helped to supply the North American movement with important resources that encourage involvement in the concerns of world Jewry. But if this Israeli connection helps to anchor the movement's Jewish interests, there are other forces working against them.

Since its establishment, the IISHJ's North American branch has ordained eleven talented rabbis and nearly forty nonrabbinic leaders (leader/*madrikhot/madrikhim/vegvayzer*). Yet the Institute's first graduate, Rabbi Tamara Kolton, today identifies with the Jewish Renewal and Reform movements.¹² Two other graduates, Rabbis Greg Epstein and Binyamin Biber, have become prominent as humanistic chaplains at Harvard University and American University, respectively. As such they do not concentrate on the particular needs of Humanistic Jews.

The movement's difficulties with Jewish particularism are also visible in our failure to create a program – or even an argument – for a robust Jewish lifestyle. Our movement cannot point to anything like the Jewish outreach that is Beth Adam's focus. With its website (ourjewishcommunity.org) and other highly visible features, the Cincinnati congregation has aspired to draw attention to its specifically Jewish commitments. In this it joins the Reform, Conservative, Renewal, and Reconstructionist movements, each of which promotes vigorous participation in Jewish life. Humanistic Jewish communities cannot point to any similarly vigorous commitment.

Arguably, few efforts of these liberal movements have succeeded in making any real impact on the lives of non-Orthodox American Jews. And as a movement with very, very few resources we must ask ourselves whether we can really afford to invest in this kind of windmill-tilting. To be clear, I am not recommending that we should.

I mean only to call attention to the undeniable fact that, despite our best attempts, efforts to dance at both weddings with one *tuches* have not been entirely successful. At best,

we've managed to move back and forth between them depending upon our immediate goals. Inevitably, we have a hard time managing this trick. It's not easy to leave one party in order to attend the other.

IV. Choices

If there is one thing that characterizes our small movement, it is realism. Humanism is a philosophy that insists upon rigorous honesty and a straightforward evaluation of all the facts in evidence.

The accepted wisdom of most conventional Jews is that the only way for Jews to survive and thrive as Jews is to focus inward. Classical Reform Judaism, the one grand attempt to swing the doors of our community completely outward, was a failure. Owing to its theistic frame of reference and its reverence for the past, its pilots steered it back toward particularistic shores.

Humanistic Jews do not have this option. By our very nature we reject the supremacy of accepted wisdom. So we must ask ourselves, would looking inward serve our purposes? Could we do so without betraying our humanism? And to what end? Beth Adam's decision to do so has left it alone in the world, orphaned in both the Jewish and humanistic communities. More significantly, we are far too committed to the legacy of our founder and our network of relationships with the humanistic world to abandon it now.

Consider the popularity in many of our congregations of that great humanistic anthem, John Lennon's "Imagine." Here is a song that expresses a longing for the ultimate unity of humanity. It lauds the disappearance of boundaries; of nations and religions. Like many humanists, I, too, love this song.

Yet for a movement that is committed to saying what we mean and meaning what we say, we should pause for a moment to consider its vision. Is this what we want for the Jewish people? Is it the disappearance of differences? That vision rejects tribalism in favor of a strong universalism. It is not the vision of the Jewish

federations, bureaus of Jewish education, or boards of rabbis.

Most of us would say that we want the best of both worlds. We rightly see very little conflict in our day-to-day simultaneous embrace of universalistic humanism and particularistic Judaism. But our children – at least those who take these things seriously – are increasingly attracted to one or the other.

Those seeking Jewish immersion find little of value in our movement. They are far more attracted to Orthodox Judaism, though liberals among them will find a comfortable home with the other movements. Those who identify most strongly with the goals of humanism find little of interest in particularistic Judaism. For them Humanistic Judaism is insufficiently universalist.

Traditional Judaism holds that prophecy is dead. We believe that it never existed. For that reason I won't even attempt to predict what lies ahead for us. Perhaps we will win the day as more and more thinking Jews reject the lessons of their establishment rabbis and flock to our rational shores. Perhaps we will slowly disappear into the larger humanistic world, becoming nothing more than an interesting footnote in the history of humanism.

For now we have no choice but to continue our efforts to defy that Yiddish maxim. We've placed these two weddings as close to each other as possible. We can't dance at both with one *tuches*, so we'll just have to keep moving our *tuches* from one to the other, doing the best we can to honor our commitments to both Judaism and humanism.

NOTES

¹In the twentieth century a new generation would seek once again to live as both Orthodox Jews and modern Americans. Whether they will succeed remains to be seen. Latest trends indicate that

more and more traditional Jews are seeking the insularity of Hasidic and Yeshivish Judaism.

² Michael A. Meyer, *Response to Modernity: A History of the Reform Movement in Judaism* (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1995), p. 270.

³*Ibid.*

⁴David Gonzalez, "Temple With No Place For God Seeks a Place." *The New York Times*, June 11, 1994, <http://www.nytimes.com/1994/06/11/nyregion/temple-with-no-place-for-god-seeks-a-place.html> (accessed Aug. 20, 2014).

⁵Society for Humanistic Judaism, Minutes of Special Meeting of Executive Committee with Board Members of Beth Adam, October 28, 1988.

⁶The minutes of the October 1988 meeting, though terse, exhibit a tension between religious humanism and secular humanism. Beth Adam's commitment to the former over the latter suggests that its leadership saw the "secularization" of the SHJ as an indication that it did not share this identity. An understanding of the history of these two terms might be helpful. As originally conceived, "religious humanism" was a nontheistic approach that saw itself as a kind of continuation or evolution of religion (Barr's "logical development"). Despite this evolutionary view, religious humanism was philosophically identical to secular humanism, differing mainly on the question of whether and how to reposition religious rituals. Their arguments suggest that Beth Adam's leaders were firmly committed to the idea that Humanistic Judaism should be considered a form of religious humanism, and thus firmly planted in the larger Jewish religious context.

During the past few decades the original definition of religious humanism has largely evaporated. This happened when some progressive theistic clergy coopted the term, using it to describe their vision of a liberal theism focused on the needs of humanity. Though Wine's decision to utilize the term "Secular Humanistic Judaism" had more to do with recruiting secular Israelis, it proved to be both prescient and fortuitous, providing a clear statement of the movement's nontheism.

⁷ Gonzalez, *op. cit.*

⁸ Carol Wintermute, "A Visionary Story: The History of NACH and The Humanist Institute." *The Humanist Institute*, <http://humanistinstitute.org/about-us/history> (accessed Aug. 20, 2014).

⁹Not insignificantly, Dawkins' *The God Delusion* includes the SHJ as a resource in an appendix.

¹⁰"Voting Member Organizations," *Secular Coalition for America*, http://www.secular.org/member_orgs (accessed Aug. 20, 2014).

¹¹"Rabbi Attacked Reformed Judaism." *The New York Times*, May 12, 1910, p. 8.

¹²"Tamara Kolton," *Wikipedia*, http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Tamara_Kolton (accessed Aug. 20, 2014).

Judaism for Humanistic Jews

by Rabbi Adam Chalom

In the traditional Jewish narrative, Moses came down from Mount Sinai with the two tablets of the Ten Commandments. He found the Israelites worshipping the Golden Calf and broke the tablets in his rage. After a bloody purge of the idolaters, Moses returned to the mountain and received a new set of two tablets of the Ten Commandments. A different version, according to Mel Brooks' *History of the World, Part I*, is that Moses came down the mountain with fifteen commandments, dropped and broke one tablet with five of them, and settled on Ten Commandments.

What does this story mean to us? After all, we Humanistic Jews, true to the tradition of our ancestors, are definitely a “stiff-necked people” – we don't want anyone to tell us what we have to do. We've gone from being the Chosen People to being the “choosy people.” We don't like commandments, and we're doubtful that there's a commander behind them. The Ten Commandments are ours, but we don't agree with all of them. No murder, no stealing – no problem. Not worshipping idols and keeping the Sabbath require some interpretation to be useful. “I am YHWH your God” and “Thou shalt not covet” (as if we could control momentary emotions) – these are more problematic than inspirational. We face a central question in contemporary Jewish life – not “What is Judaism,” but “What does Judaism, what does being Jewish mean to me?”

Let us examine five ways to think about Judaism for Humanistic Jews. Each of them is a piece of the puzzle that defines who we are and what we believe.

We begin with an image from the Israeli poet Yehuda Amichai called “Poem without an End.”

Inside the brand-new museum
there's an old synagogue.

Inside the synagogue
is me.
Inside me
my heart.
Inside my heart
a museum.
Inside the museum
a synagogue,
inside it
me,
inside me
my heart,
inside my heart
a museum

Jewish identity is all of these: Judaism is the new museum, Judaism is the old synagogue, Judaism is the living individual, Judaism is the wordless emotion of the heart, Judaism is the memory of a people, Judaism is the heart in the person in the synagogue in the museum. Let us begin, then, on the human level – the person standing in the synagogue, the individual human being.

We humans are thinking beings. The first piece of our picture of Judaism for Humanistic Jews, is *Judaism as Jewish thought* – the process and products of thinking about what it means to be Jewish. Why are *you* in the old synagogue in the new museum? Why does your heart contain the past (the old synagogue), the future (the new museum), and the intersection of the two? Why did you choose to explore the museum with the synagogue in it?

If your only authoritative source was the Bible, what would being Jewish mean? There would be strict rules to follow: Do not eat from

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the tree of knowledge of good and evil, make no graven images, thou shalt not murder, thou shalt not have other gods before me; thou shalt not and thou shalt never. There would be commitments to honor – a covenant entered by your ancestors and binding “from generation to generation” without the right to question or renegotiate. There would be boundaries to maintain: ethical rules (“love your neighbor as yourself”) and also social and ritual boundaries – clean and unclean, male and female, Jew and outsider.

For Humanistic Jews, the closest we could get to ten commandments would be “Ten Strongly Worded Suggestions for You to Consider in Your Free Time.” Our commitment to Jewish identity is strong because we have *chosen* it out of all other possibilities, including the possibility of vanishing into general American culture. Our boundaries are defined by our values – not by what happens to us, but by how we act and react; not by our birth but by whom we have become; not by who our mother was, but by where our hearts lie. We know the Ten Commandments, we understand what they mean, and we respect what in them still has value today. But we are not subjected, subservient, or submissive to *any* directives that would undermine our dignity and autonomy as thinking human beings who have come to new conclusions.

We Humanistic Jews are a part of Jewish thought, for we think about what it means to be part of the Jewish people. If we celebrate our past, we have thoughtfully chosen from our heritage. If we create anew, we are adding our voices to the Jewish chorus of the centuries. In other words, we are part of Jewish culture.

Thus, for Humanistic Jews, *Judaism is also Jewish culture*, the second piece of our puzzle. The old synagogue is Jewish culture, but so is everything else in that brand new museum, including the words of the poet standing in an old synagogue in a new museum. Not only the story of Moses and the Ten Commandments that we find in the Book of Exodus, but also how later generations of rabbis understood it, and how medieval Jewish artists created

beautiful Passover *haggadot* with vivid scenes of Moses crossing the Red Sea dressed in medieval clothing, and how Mel Brooks imagined Moses being clumsy and dropping a tablet.

Jewish culture has always been more than what the Talmud’s rabbis said it was. If you go back to the beginnings of Rabbinic Judaism, there were two insults for those who disagreed with the early rabbis: *apikoros* (heretic, free-thinker, skeptic), and *am ha-aretz* (ignoramus). The *am ha-aretz* didn’t follow the rules because he didn’t know them, but the *apikoros* knew the rules and didn’t agree with them, or chose what he followed and what he didn’t, and for the rabbis he was worse. The word *apikoros* comes from the Greek philosopher Epicurus, who told people not to fear the gods because there weren’t any, and not to worry about punishment in the afterlife because there was none. And there were evidently enough Jews who had read Epicurus to be given this dirty name of *apikoros*. (By the way, I’ve always longed to have a singing group full of Humanistic Jews that could be called “The Api-Chorus.” And *that* would be Jewish culture too.)

This, then, is our model – the *apikoros* – someone who knows the tradition and has chosen what is meaningful based on his or her personal beliefs. To be Jewish, one can go to an old synagogue, or to a brand-new museum, or have a personal experience with Jewish culture, or simply feel in one’s heart the pull of a melody that speaks to us with a Jewish accent.

When we combine our first two puzzle pieces, Jewish thought with Jewish culture, we begin to see the contours of our identity. The individual standing in the synagogue thinks of his Judaism in his heart, and there he finds both the museum and the synagogue, Jewish religion and Jewish memory, Jewish music and food and literature and texture and color, traditional and modern Jewish thoughts on what it means to be a part of the Jewish people.

In Amichai’s poem, the poet is not just standing in a synagogue; he stands in a synagogue in a museum, placing his Jewish connection in historical and social context. This

is the third piece of our puzzle, because for Humanistic Jews, *Judaism is also Jewish history* – how we developed into who and what we are. Moses himself may never have actually existed – our study of history and archaeology finds basically no evidence in Egyptian sources, no evidence in the Sinai desert, and even contradictory elements in the Bible itself. What is affirmative about this historical exploration is the process of trying to discover the real history of our people, and not just what we read in our first story book. Imagine the young George Washington and the cherry tree he confessed to having chopped down (“I cannot tell a lie”). Will we ever find the stump of that cherry tree? No – the story has clear ethical and mythological value, but it is not history. And the same is true of Moses writing the entire Torah, or of the rabbis carrying on an oral tradition that was supposedly given on Mount Sinai, or of the idea that the Jews created their own culture in ghettos entirely disconnected from the hostile world around them that hated and persecuted them at every turn. All of these are interesting stories with their own purposes, but they are not history. The Torah was written over centuries by many authors, the rabbis evolved intellectually and debated their laws centuries later, and Jews have had a mixed experience among the nations, learning and sharing with some while fleeing others. We have to have the courage to look honestly at ourselves and to seek our real past.

With respect to Jewish history there are “creationist” Jews and “evolutionist” Jews. “Creationist” Jews believe that Judaism was created at a certain point in time and has never appreciably changed. At their extreme, they believe that Abraham ate *matsa* at his Passover seder, even though the Exodus happens in a later book of the Bible, or that David studied the Torah with his rabbi, even though historically the Torah was written centuries after David may or may not have lived. For creationist Jews, Judaism was, is, and will be essentially as it began. They may not agree on what that was – some claim it is based on ritual observance while others highlight ethical monotheism or certain prayers – but they are sure that what *they* do is the core of what Judaism has always been.

As Humanistic Jews, *we* believe in evolution; not only the evolution of species, but the evolution of Judaism. Like every living thing, Judaism has changed in response to its environment and internal needs. Like every living thing, Judaism contains old elements from its past, contemporary innovations for new settings, and active pieces adopted from the outside world that support its survival. Moses never had a Bar Mitzvah with a DJ, and King David never read the Torah. The early rabbis may have felt that women could not read from the Torah, but we believe in the equality and dignity and freedom of every human being.

We often hear of “the Jewish tradition” as an authoritative force, but as the following story indicates, even that can be problematic. There was great conflict in the main synagogue in Hotzeplotz. At a certain point in the service, half of the congregation would stand, the other half would remain seated, and both sides would start arguing with each other. After several weeks, they decided to visit the oldest man in town to find out what the real tradition was. The first group explained that they stood at that point in the service, and the old man said, “No, that’s not the tradition.” The second group exclaimed triumphantly, “So we should stay seated at that moment!” But the old man replied, “No, that’s not the tradition.” “Well, right now half of us stand and half of us sit and everyone argues!” “Ah, *that’s* the tradition!”

There *is* no one tradition, no single understanding of Jewish history and Jewish identity, unless we define it as an active debate about Jewish identity. *That’s* the tradition – to argue about the tradition. Because of *that* tradition, *we* have every right to stand up for our values, to celebrate our connections through our beliefs, and to learn from our heritage as we choose.

For choice is at the heart of the connection between Judaism and Humanistic Jews, and that is the fourth piece of our puzzle. For Humanistic Jews, *being Jewish is the freedom to create Judaism*. Some will tell you that the Sabbath created the Jews; the truth is that the Jews created the Sabbath, and since we as the

Jewish people created it, we can modify it to respond to our needs as did earlier generations. I never believe it when someone tells me that an object or an idea or a text is untouchable, unquestionable, absolutely authoritative.

I think back to *The Wizard of Oz*. Why do absolutely no work on the Sabbath? “I am YHWH your God.” Why kill the Wicked Witch of the West? “I am the great and powerful Oz.” When faced with unreasonable commands from a distant, authoritative source, I refuse to listen to the command: Pay no attention to that man behind the curtain! If I *do* see a man behind the curtain, if I *do* see the evolution of Jewish tradition, the variety of Jewish culture from which to choose, the diversity of opinions of what it means to be Jewish, I know that I am free to make my own decisions, to live my own Jewish life as it has meaning to me.

Freedom is not always easy – Jean Paul Sartre famously wrote that “we are condemned to be free.” In other words, if there is no external authority to take responsibility, it is all ours. When we make our free choices, we are not always popular for doing so, for we are humanists in a non-humanist world, as well as Jews in a non-Jewish world. Humanistic Jews are “The Jews of the Jews” – the people who never quite fit in. Our convictions demand songs and celebrations and texts that articulate our beliefs, and although some of our literary heritage fits the bill, much does not. This freedom is a serious responsibility – the culture we create will be the culture our children inherit, the new museum housing the old synagogue.

But where is the heart, the final piece of the puzzle? In the individual human heart, for the individual Humanistic Jew, *Judaism is a family identity* – Judaism is being an active, contribut-

ing member of the Jewish people. You do not stop being part of your birth family or your Jewish family because you have new ideas, or because you have a different understanding of what happened in the past, or because you continue some family traditions and also create your own, or because you fall in love with and marry someone from another ethnic family, or because you speak a non-Jewish language, or because you participate in the world of American culture, or because of any of the incidents of modern life. We are all a part of the Jewish family.

Our family connections to our heritage are stronger than the distance that separates us from the past. The Ten Commandments are part of my Jewish family, and Mel Brooks is part of my Jewish family, and Yehuda Amichai is part of my family.

Turn back to the image created by our puzzle pieces. What do you get when you combine Jewish thought with Jewish culture with Jewish history and Jewish freedom with Jewish family connections? In a phrase, you get Humanistic Judaism. In an image,

Inside the brand-new museum
there's an old synagogue.
Inside the synagogue
is me.
Inside me
my heart.
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Inside the museum
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“Just Jewish?”

Why Humanistic Judaism Matters

by Rabbi Denise Handlarski

By now the results of the Pew survey, “A Portrait of Jewish Americans” (October 2013), are well known and widely discussed. I will not rehearse most of the findings here. However, having recently attended a discussion of the survey and its implications, I want to share some thoughts that are pertinent to the questions, *Why not just Jewish? Why not just humanist?*

Pew researcher Greg Smith’s presentation of some of the survey findings confirmed something I had suspected: most of the Jews we would call secular don’t fit in with the “just Jewish” designation. The first question the survey asked was with which religion the respondent identified, listing several including Judaism. Respondents who said “none” were asked follow-up questions that revealed other sources of Jewish identity. Nearly six out of ten respondents identified as religiously Jewish; about one in four identified as Jewish via ethnicity, ancestry, or background.

But I would have answered the initial question about religion by saying “I’m Jewish.” This is not because Judaism as a religion supersedes all other ways of defining or thinking about being Jewish, but rather because Judaism is so important to me that I would count myself in with Jews compared to other religious groups. For this reason the vast majority of Secular Humanistic Jews are lumped in with “religious” Jews in the survey’s findings.

This, for me, answers the question: “Why not just humanist?” Although my humanistic values are important to me, I identify much more strongly as Jewish. Judaism affects how I relate to my family, what cultural programs interest me, and how I see myself in the world. Being Jewish is crucial to my identity. Whereas

humanism is demonstrated through my *behavior*, Judaism is inherent in my *being*.

The tougher question, I think, is “Why not just Jewish?” The Pew survey indicates that many Jews feel this designation to be enough. Jews of all affiliations, including the Jews who reported no affiliation at all, responded similarly to the question “What is essential about being Jewish?”

The top answers were the same for both “Jews by religion” and “Jews of no religion.” The first was “remembering the Holocaust,” the second “leading an ethical and moral life,” and the third “working for justice/equality.” I find it highly significant that Jews, regardless of upbringing or affiliation, consider ethics and justice to be inextricable from their Judaism. If we boil down what is essential, as the question does, we see that Judaism is, itself, inherently humanistic.

And yet we know that, in the name of Judaism, or Yahweh, or Torah, or Israel, terrible things go on. We know that if humanistic values can be found in Judaism, so too are decidedly unhumanistic ones such as sexism, xenophobia, and sometimes violence. We know that the very passages of Torah and Talmud that we feel argue strongly for moral behavior can be used by some Jewish leaders to foster actions we abhor. We know all of this, and that is one reason we find meaning in Humanistic Judaism.

Until I became part of the Humanistic Jewish community, I felt very Jewish but had no interest in any kind of organized Jewish

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affiliation or practice. Many of you are probably like me in this regard, and the Pew survey suggests there are many more like us out there as well. Humanistic Judaism aims to take the best of both humanism and Judaism. Humans need culture and community, and we find ours in Jewish custom and celebration. Judaism

needs goodness and justice to stay relevant. For this reason, we are not “just” Jewish, but aim to find what is just in what is Jewish, what is Jewish in and about our humanity, and what is human about the pursuit of creating a self and a movement that encapsulate our truth.

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Appreciating Pluralism and Multiple Identities

by Rabbi Miriam Jerris

My forty years of involvement in Humanistic Judaism have offered ample opportunity for others to question my dual commitment to humanism and Judaism. The question often begins with, “How can you...?” or “Why do you...?” “How can you be both a humanist and a Jew?” “How can you be Jewish and not believe in God? My typical response is, “Because I am” or “Because I do.” I have never been a fan of people questioning my ability to be exactly who I am. I experience these questions the same way I would experience such questions as “How can you be both a woman and a rabbi?” or “How can you be both a mother and a daughter?” I simply am all these identities simultaneously. In today’s world, who has the audacity to tell anyone who they can or cannot be when it comes to identity? The beauty of living in North America in these pluralistic times is that there is plenty of room for multiple identities and the freedom to express them.

Being a Jew does not require a certain set of beliefs. Depending on who you ask, you are a Jew because you were born to a Jewish mother or have converted to Judaism appropriately (Orthodox and Conservative Judaism); because you were born to a Jewish mother or father or have converted to Judaism appropriately (Reform and Reconstructionist Judaism and Jewish Renewal); or because you declare yourself to be a Jew and identify “with the history, ethical values, culture, civilization, community, and fate of the Jewish people” (Secular Humanistic Judaism, 1988). The definition of Judaism is also significant. Humanistic Judaism sees Judaism as the evolving historical and cultural experience of the Jewish people.

I am a humanist because I believe that truth is based on evidence, and the discovery of truth is based on scientific inquiry and the empirical

method. I believe that truth matters. I believe that humans have the capacity to determine ethical behavior based on their use of reason and their evaluation of the consequences of the behavior in question – we can be, as Rabbi Greg Epstein has taught us, “good without God.” Because there is no empirical evidence for the existence of an intervening personal deity, belief or disbelief in a god is irrelevant to me. This position is called *agnosticism*, but I much prefer the positive label of *humanist* to describe who I am and what I believe.

From the time I was a very young adult in my early twenties, I was at odds with Judaism as a religion. Prayer – addressing a deity that clearly was uninterested in what I had to say – offended me. Although I had been a very active Jewish teen, I was finding every post-teenage Jewish communal experience painful. I turned to academia and family celebrations for Jewish experience to continue my connection to Judaism.

Today I am Jewish by birth, family connection, and expression, and because Humanistic Judaism exists. I engage in Jewish study and celebration because it enriches me and my family and professional life. Humanistic Judaism offers the opportunity to marry the philosophy of humanism to Jewish culture. It enables my identity as a Humanistic Jew, which is the most accurate description of my philosophy, values, and interests.

Humanistic Judaism resolved my Jewish identity crisis. It answered my questions. It

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did not create more questions or send me into the abyss of existential angst. I was easily able to dismiss the eternal questions of “How can you...?” and “Why do you...?”

A new complication arose when I married a born Roman Catholic of Polish descent who is also a humanist. My husband had strong cultural ties to his Polish Catholic family traditions. He had given up the religious aspects of Catholicism but didn't see any need to curtail family celebrations of Christmas and Easter. It was this interrelationship of identities that raised questions for me. I valued my Jewish identity; he appreciated his Christian background. It wasn't until I faced creating a family with an additional cultural dimension that I began to ask the questions that had been asked of me with a slight twist: “How can we be both humanists and culturally Jewish and secularly Christian?” (I can hear the rebuttal, “What do you mean, secularly Christian? There is no such thing.” My answer is, of course, there is such a thing. It is exactly what my husband is – a secular Christian.)

By the time Steve and I moved in together, I was already a seasoned Humanistic Jew and a certified leader/*madrikha/vegveyser*. I had no issue with accommodating additional identities. I had been working with couples seeking to do just that for some time. Steve was an equal partner in our relationship. It was a no-brainer – until he nonchalantly mentioned that he was going to buy Christmas lights for the outside of the house. My brain exploded. This was unthinkable!

When I examined my reaction, I realized that something was going on that had nothing to do with the present day or the actual circumstances. What in the world was upsetting me so much? And then it hit me like a flash of lightning. I had a memory of being a child in my father's car, driving through our neighborhood at Hanukka/Christmas time. I remember pointing to the houses with lights and saying, “This is a Christian house” and then pointing to the houses with no lights and saying, “This is a Jewish house.” I realized that I clearly had an issue with our house being identified as a “Christian” house. Steve understood. There are

no lights on the outside of our house. There is a lovely Christmas tree in our family room that allows him to share memories of his childhood family with his present family.

We call the tree a Christmas tree, not because it has a connection to organized Christianity or Christian beliefs, but because that is how trees with lights and ornaments are described in secular society. We don't call it a Hanukka bush because the term *Hanukka bush* has no meaning for me, and the tree represents Steve's identity, not mine. Some families may choose to have a tree and call it a Hanukka bush. I do not have feelings against that practice. Many researchers who have studied Jewish-Christian intermarriage have a strong negative reaction to such *syncretism*, the blending of traditions from different cultures or religions. Although I have never had a need to do this with my husband's cultural traditions and mine, most of human history has embraced the practice of syncretism. How did the idea of Jesus as the Messiah ever become connected to a tree with lights? It did not develop out of Christianity. It was an act of syncretism, merging the pagan Germanic tradition of lighting trees during the winter solstice with the story of the birth of Jesus of Nazareth, who became known as Jesus Christ.

Identity is a complex psychological and sociological phenomenon. It is for each of us to decide what identities we choose to embrace and how to express them. There was enough interest on the part of Jews who were humanists in becoming part of a community that remained connected to Jewish traditions, the Jewish calendar, Jewish symbols, and Jewish literature for them to participate in the founding of a new movement in Judaism. As long as individuals find value and meaning in the association, it is plain *chutzpah* on the part of others to question the legitimacy of that connection. It has nothing to do with them. It seems to me the statute of limitations on the questions “How can you be...?” and “Why do you...?” has expired. I would much rather ask, “Who are you and how do you express your identity?” It is so much more interesting. Diversity created by multiple cultural backgrounds and philosophical perspectives enriches us all.

Sherwin Wine and the Core of Humanistic Judaism

by Joseph Chuman

I write as a friendly outsider and former colleague of Sherwin Wine, the founder of Humanistic Judaism. My colleagueship with Sherwin, whom I knew from the early 1970s until his sudden and shocking death in 2007, was primarily through associations other than Humanistic Judaism. Yet, ironically, Sherwin's commitment to organizations outside of Judaism revealed the substance that Sherwin placed at the center of Humanistic Judaism.

Before elaborating what I believe lay at the heart of Humanistic Judaism as he understood it, it is important to make explicit the relationship of any movement to its founder. There are some movements in which the vision and utterances of its founder have an absolute and unchanging significance. For the conservative Christian, the proclamations of Jesus are true because he said them. His authority reigns supreme and in a transcendent sense reflects unalterable truth. Clearly, Sherwin was not this kind of authority, nor did he assume that Humanistic Judaism asserted truths that would not change with changing conditions. As a modern, Sherwin Wine knew well that the movement he founded would evolve, just as Humanistic Judaism itself is a product of the evolution of Judaism from ancient times until the present.

Yet this evolving reality does not suggest a condition of intellectual anarchy or unbridled license for members to assert any individual belief they may hold and to do so in the name of Humanistic Judaism. The movement has boundaries. Intellectual maturity and integrity require, in my view, that members of the Society for Humanistic Judaism be responsible to the cumulative history of the movement and to the principles articulated by its seminal thinker, which Sherwin Wine assuredly was.

So the question is, what did Sherwin Wine envision as the essential core of Humanistic Judaism? There is no doubt that even during the period of his active leadership, the movement had expanded beyond his initial vision to provide a broad tent for Jews holding a multitude of differing perspectives. The common denominator was, and I presume remains, the disavowal of a supernatural being or divine custodian. In this regard, Humanistic Judaism has been attractive to Jewish secularists, Yiddishists, Zionists, and a panoply of religious skeptics who seek to sustain and reinforce their ethnic identities as Jews.

But this wider social reality, while describing the communal life of Humanistic Judaism, does not of itself fulfill Sherwin Wine's understanding of the philosophical principles of the movement he ushered into existence and nurtured for almost five decades. In his view Humanistic Judaism was more than a meeting ground intended to reinforce Jewish ethnicity and to celebrate Jewish identity. On the contrary, Sherwin took his humanism very seriously. He believed that the direction of the evolution of Judaism in the modern period yielded a cluster of philosophical principles that replaced the historically central commitment of Judaism to a commanding God. It is because Sherwin believed in the compelling character of humanism that he traveled comfortably through humanistic organizations that had no link to Judaism or Jewishness. Among these were the Humanist Institute and Americans for Religious Liberty, both of which he co-founded; and the Center for New Thinking, in which he discoursed on

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a broad range of philosophical and social issues with no Jewish character. He also was involved in the North American Committee for Humanism and the International Humanist and Ethical Union, among other organizations.

Humanistic Jews might have wondered why he spent so much of his time and devotion on such associations. But in my view, there can be no doubt that they represented his abiding commitment to the principles of a broader humanism as central to a meaningful and compelling philosophy of life. It is these values that he believed needed to occupy the binding center of Humanistic Judaism as well.

His commitment to humanism as essential to contemporary Judaism was most fully elaborated in his seminal text *Judaism Beyond God*. Therein he reinforced his notion that modern Jewish sensibilities emerge out of the distinctive history of the Jews, which ensured that they readily identified with the project of the European Enlightenment. In his view, the experience of Jewish persecution through the ages engendered both an attitude of skepticism and a commitment to self-reliance. These values dovetailed well with the secular revolution, the dethroning of God, and the valorization of reason, ethics, integrity, and human dignity. It is this cluster of values that lie at the philosophical center of Sherwin Wine's understanding of Humanistic Judaism. They did not comprise a mere nod to modernity or bromides to reinforce a sense of superiority among those who belonged to the Humanistic Jewish congregation. They constituted the essential core of a philosophy that was meant to inspire, to center life, and to give it meaning.

Has the membership of the Society for Humanistic Judaism taken its humanism as seriously as its founder intended? I am doubtful. A good number of years ago, I was invited to give the Friday evening address at the Sarasota congregation, then the second largest in the movement. The topic was "Reclaiming the Enlightenment." I spoke about the undermining of Enlightenment values in the form of fundamentalism from the right and the emergence of postmodernism from the left. I discussed prob-

lems emergent out of cultural relativism and an excessive commitment to tolerance in the face of values and practices that ought not to be tolerated. I concluded by proffering humanistic norms which, I believe, make for a civilized life.

My talk was light on Jewish substance but emphatic in its explication of humanistic values and principles. I found the audience pleasant, gracious, and warm. But I left feeling that what I thought would be of compelling significance to an audience committed to humanism was at best of marginal interest. The concerns I attempted to convey were far from the center of gravity that apparently attracted people to the group. The love of Jewish identity was strong; an intellectual and ideological commitment to humanism in a positive philosophical sense, as opposed to a stand-in for nonbelief in supernaturalism, much weaker.

Admittedly this was just a single, long-ago event. It may mean little. But if my suppositions are correct, then I think the place of humanism within the Society for Humanistic Judaism needs to be reconsidered and developed with greater seriousness and appreciation for its importance as a philosophy for the movement.

Why so? Practically speaking, in the absence of a commitment to a deity and scripture, a focal commitment to ideas held in common is one of the most powerful forces that can bind a group together. In other words, a commitment to a shared philosophy has great functional value in sustaining an organization and group life. But more significantly, an articulated philosophy can inspire people beyond self-interest and can serve as a matrix out of which they can explore and find greater meaning in life.

Humanism, as Sherwin Wine knew well, is a worldview that can elevate life, ennoble our efforts, and inspire us to ethical action that can make for a more just and dignified human condition. In my view, any religion worth having (including Humanistic Judaism) needs to be centered on such an elevated and clearly elaborated philosophy of life. It needs to conduce toward the ethical. Without it, we are left with mere tribalism.

Humanism's Jewish Voice: A Musical Illustration

by Cantor Jonathan L. Friedmann

Questions about the validity of Humanistic Judaism generally stem from a faulty premise. In the mind of the questioner, Judaism is a pure stand-alone entity in need of no adjectives. To be Jewish *and* humanistic (or Jewish and anything else) is to espouse a contaminated and fragile identity. Not only does this simplistic criticism overlook the diversity of Jewish systems, but it also presumes that humanism is arbitrarily grafted onto Judaism. This is a false dichotomy. Judaism is a broad framework encompassing heterogeneous streams of thought. Humanistic Jews are drawn to Judaism's humanistic aspects, just as gastronomic Jews are drawn to its recipes, Zionist Jews are drawn to its nationalism, and so on. And because most of these convictions and cultural components have parallels outside of Judaism, it is perfectly natural to be drawn to those as well.

This phenomenon can be illustrated musically. One of the first lessons learned from the study of Jewish music is that there is nothing uniquely "Jewish" in the music of the Jews. Assumptions about distinctive sounds or exclusive traits quickly melt into an image of Jews assembling musical vocabularies from endless sources. No single melody is shared by all Jewish groups, nor are any modes or sonic signatures the sole possession of the Jewish people. However much we might salivate over *Hava Nagila*, its "Jewish mode" (*freygish* or *Ahavah Rabbah*) – characterized by an augmented second interval between the second and third scale degrees – likely came to Eastern European Jews by way of the Tartars (a Turkish ethnic group) and is basically identical to the Arabic *maqam hijaz*. It became "Jewish" only through its incorporation into klezmer, Hasidic, and Eastern Ashkenazi synagogue music. Similar stories of selective borrowing are associated with all the music of the Jews.

Three general points emerge from this musical example. First is the regional nature of Jewish customs. Cultural artifacts – music, food, ritual, clothing, folktales, philosophies, and so forth – are always and everywhere influenced by exposure to neighboring communities. As a diaspora people, Jews have adapted to far-flung areas of the globe, accumulating all sorts of new habits and customs along the way. Second, Jewish life is not a stagnant, fixed, or monolithic entity, but a living record of the ways in which various groups have defined themselves. Whatever is considered intrinsic to Judaism or the Jewish people is really a fusion of elements molded together into "identity packages." Third, Jewish groups usually have good reason for appropriating the elements they do. Although Jewish music has historically had an open-door policy, varying according to the strength or weakness of the existent musical mainstream, the choice to incorporate certain sounds and not others is hardly haphazard.

Eastern European Jews embraced the augmented second of the migrating Tartars because it was emblematic of the Middle East. *Shtetl* dwellers yearned for Zion and found a musical mode to match that sentiment. German reformers of the nineteenth century adopted hymns, organs, and choirs to accentuate ties with the Christian majority and call attention to the common roots of Judaism and Christianity. Liberal American Jews gravitated toward folk-rock because it was the soundtrack of social justice. Their emphasis on prophetic Judaism resonated with the countercultural aesthetic.

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If this process can be summed up in a single phrase, it is this: External elements amplify internal values. It is not simply that Jewish groups had a taste for tones emanating from their neighbors. Rather, each community matched musical symbols with its favorite Jewish theme(s). Likewise, those interested in Kabbalah tend to seek out similarities in other mystical traditions. Jewish philosophers regularly use insights from non-Jewish thinkers to bolster their views. Those engaged in *tikkun olam* fortify ancient teachings with modern social and scientific concerns. In most cases, a seamless hybridity develops in which “Jewish” and “non-Jewish” features become inseparable.

This is possible because Judaism is part of the larger continuum of human experience. Just as there is nothing exclusive in Jewish music,

so too is there nothing wholly unique in the teachings or customs of Judaism. Of course, Jewish practices and ways of expression take on identifiable norms, forms, and conventions. But beneath the culturally specific externals are needs, values, affinities, and ideals shared with other groups.

Humanistic Judaism, then, should not be viewed as an uneasy combination of two opposing forces, but as the interaction of Judaism’s humanistic stream with compatible perspectives from other sources. The resulting worldview is as authentic as any Jewish modality. It is organically woven into holiday celebrations, life-cycle events, educational programs, cultural functions, and the like. This makes Humanistic Judaism a “normal” option in the spectrum of Jewish possibilities.

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Humanistic Judaism Beyond Sherwin Wine

by Michael J. Prival

The following series of four short articles, expressing thoughts about the future of the Humanistic Judaism movement following the death of its founder, Sherwin T. Wine, in 2007, is reprinted in updated form from the October 2008 through January 2009 issues of the monthly newsletter of Machar, the Washington Congregation for Secular Humanistic Judaism.

Part 1: The Continuity of Secular Humanistic Judaism

Since the death of Rabbi Sherwin T. Wine, the founder of our Humanistic Judaism movement, at age 79, it has become clear that what he created was much larger than himself. The leaders he trained and nurtured have taken the reins, and the organizations he started and led are thriving even in his absence. This is a great tribute to a great man.

But the loss of the founder raises important questions. To what extent should our movement adhere strictly to the principles articulated and promoted by Rabbi Wine? All religious movements change over time. Obviously our movement will need to evolve beyond Rabbi Wine's ideas to keep up with developing member needs. But how are we to change and how much?

Sherwin Wine's single greatest contribution was the idea that secular Jews should,

like religious Jews, have congregations that provide community, education, life-cycle events, holiday observances, and even clergy. He insisted, however, that our rituals and ceremonies express a positive humanistic outlook and affirm our ties to the Jewish people without including prayers whose words we do not believe. This is the bedrock difference between our movement and others. You can find atheists and agnostics in many Jewish congregations. What makes our movement unique is the fact that we select the words we use with what Rabbi Wine called "integrity" – consistency between words and belief. There will be debates in the future about the wisdom of some of Rabbi Wine's ideas, but integrity – the strict adherence to humanistic and nontheistic language – is not something that can legitimately be debated. It defines who we are.

Part 2: The Humanism in Secular Humanistic Judaism

Back in 1963, Rabbi Sherwin Wine and a group of eight Detroit-area families made the decision to break with Reform Judaism and create something new – a liturgy that reflected their true beliefs. They struggled with the question of what to call this new idea and settled on "Humanistic Judaism." Ever since then, people have been asking what the "Humanistic" in "Humanistic Judaism" actually means. How does the word *Humanistic* differentiate us from other Jewish groups?

First, it's important to understand what *Humanistic* doesn't mean. It does not mean "humanitarian." Deeply religious and even fundamentalist groups can be heavily engaged in humanitarian work. It is often said that *humanistic* means "people-oriented," but this is not a sufficient definition as it does not distin-

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guish our views from the religious humanism of liberal Jewish and Protestant denominations whose outlook and works are clearly directed toward positive human values. The Catholic Church also has within it a longstanding humanistic train, and it can be said that the last pope, John Paul II, despite his theological and social conservatism, was within this humanistic church tradition.

Humanism, as a general term, implies that promoting human welfare is central to the expression of our values. But for us, *humanistic* also means, more specifically, that we are not theistic. We don't do God. This is what distinguishes our form of Judaism from the others and also separates our brand of humanism from religious humanism. It is one reason we often put the word *secular* before *humanistic*.

Part 3: What Is Secular about Our Humanistic Judaism?

Rabbi Sherwin Wine co-founded the Society for Humanistic Judaism (SHJ) in 1969. The SHJ is an umbrella organization that now consists of dozens of groups around North America. We in Machar have chosen to add the word *secular* to our name: Machar, The Washington Congregation for Secular Humanistic Judaism. What does the word *secular* mean to us?

First, the word *secular* shows that we identify with the longstanding tradition of secular Jews. Starting in the late nineteenth century, many secular Jews in the United States fought for progressive social change. They threw off their traditional religion and embraced political activism. Many were steeped in the culture of the Yiddish language. They created school systems across America that thrived until the middle of the twentieth century. Many of those schools and other secular Jewish communities that are still active are now part of the Congress of Secular Jewish Organizations (CSJO) or the Workmen's Circle/*Arbeter Ring*. The CSJO works in coalition with the Society for Humanistic Judaism in a number of ways, particularly in the training of rabbis and other leaders. As Secular Humanistic Jews we identify with this secular Jewish tradi-

In the 1960s, the humanism of Rabbi Wine and others was steeped in a philosophical tradition that found its modern expression in the work of such humanists as John Dewey. For example, Dewey promoted the idea that ethical decisions should be based on the likely consequences of an action rather than on adherence to any preexisting rules or laws. This was a clear difference between humanism and traditional religion. But we now understand that ethical decision-making is more complex than Dewey and his followers envisioned. Our thinking must evolve to encompass complexities and uncertainties unanticipated fifty years ago.

We in the Humanistic Judaism movement are fortunate that Rabbi Wine recruited and trained a new generation of leaders who are prepared to help us find our way when some of the apparent truths of the past no longer suffice.

tion though we may no longer speak Yiddish or accept the political "isms" that many secular Jews embraced in decades past.

Putting the word *secular* before *humanistic* in our congregation's name also helps identify us as secular humanists, in contrast to religious humanists. We proudly bear the "secular humanist" label, which was made popular as a term of opprobrium by such anti-humanist religious leaders as Jerry Falwell. This means that we accept a naturalistic worldview based on science rather than relying on tales of the supernatural as revealed in ancient texts.

However, the naturalistic outlook has often been associated with a certain type of dogmatism – a belief that everything can be neatly understood through the scientific method. This was the underlying principle of logical positivism, a philosophical movement that first attracted Rabbi Wine when he was a college student in the late 1940s. Its bold assertions that statements about the world can be valid only if they meet certain standards of scientific verification are now widely understood to be overly simplistic. As secular humanists, we still

accept the scientific outlook but we also recognize its limitations. All important questions may not be answerable by infallible processes of observation, experimentation, and reason, as was once thought. What is the relationship between consciousness, or sentience, and our material brains? Can matter have subjective feelings? And if so, then how? Such questions may be beyond the scientific method, at least as it has been understood in the past. As science

advances, it often raises more questions than it answers and sometimes reveals that previously accepted answers need to be reassessed.

So the word *secular* in our name helps us find our place in the history of the Jewish people and also clarifies our naturalistic philosophical position. In both of these areas, however, we must constantly be questioning and updating our thinking.

Part 4: The Jewish Part of Humanistic Judaism

When Rabbi Sherwin Wine and a few families created the first congregation of Humanistic Judaism in Michigan in 1963, there was no question about whether their new organization would be a Jewish one. They had been part of a Reform temple. While they wanted to modernize their ideology and liturgy, being Jewish was at the core of their enterprise. They created a Jewish congregation that did not pray.

Rabbi Wine liked to tell the story of how he grew up embracing his Jewish identity. He loved the holidays that brought his family together, he loved the food, he loved the humor. The only part of being Jewish that he rejected was the religion. The Humanistic Judaism movement he founded was designed to foster everything about Jewishness except its traditional religion.

But what does it mean for a congregation to be Jewish once the traditional prayers and references to the deity have been eliminated from the services? Jewish food, at least that of Eastern European Jews, is often of the high-fat variety that we avoid today. Most of us are far removed from Jewish music or Jewish languages in our everyday lives. And yes, there are still a lot of very funny Jews, but their appeal, like that of bagels, is surprisingly universal so there's nothing uniquely Jewish about reveling in their humor. Of course, the linking of Jewish identity with concern for what is happening in the world, whether directed toward progressive politics or toward Israel, has helped sustain Jewish identity for many, but such activity is not a central focus of our movement.

Many of us see history as our strongest link to the Jewish people – both our own personal family histories and Jewish history in general. Rabbi Wine often said that Jewish history, with its many dark moments, validates the humanistic outlook. After all, he would ask, how could a benevolent and powerful administrator permit such things to happen?

One way we express our shared history is in holiday and life-cycle celebrations that link us to an extended family of Jews, past and present. We reinterpret the meanings of these occasions or strive to find their original pre-religious meanings. We universalize the message and welcome all who choose to join us, but these communal events are, for many of us, the most joyously Jewish part of Humanistic Judaism. While we work hard to avoid the exclusivism that typifies Jewish religious groups, it is the Jewishness of holidays and other gatherings that provides the warmth that binds us together. It is what makes us far more than just a secular or humanistic study group.

Of course we do also study, both as children and as adults. Our study focuses heavily on Jewish subjects, particularly history. But it is important for us to remember Rabbi Wine's repeated admonition that the Jews we admire lived in the past 250 years. He felt strong ties to those Jews who embraced the Enlightenment ideal that reason triumphs over faith. He saw the texts of the ancient Jewish religion – Torah, Talmud, prayer books, and so forth – as worthy of our study but not our praise. He was not one to take a harmonious snippet

from the Bible or the Talmud and weave a story or a sermon around it to illustrate some ethical point. The ancient Jewish religious texts are not only pervasively theistic but also fundamentally authoritarian, theocratic, xenophobic, and anti-rational. Rabbi Wine was concerned that citing a phrase from one of them that seems to express a positive human value could mislead others into thinking that the belief system of the author was somehow compatible with our values of individual freedom and respect for all people. In my observation, the use of these sources to make a positive point, even when accompanied by appropriate qualifiers and caveats, also fosters the feeling of superiority that is widespread even among secular Jews, starting with the belief that our ancestors were smarter or more ethical than others.

Rabbi Wine was a brilliant and genuinely funny man who could fascinate, entertain, and teach about Humanistic Judaism by discussing a recent film or novel or remark that he heard someone make. Retaining a strong Jewish identity without increasing the use of traditional religious texts will be a serious challenge for Humanistic Judaism as we move forward in the absence of Rabbi Wine. Accomplishing this will require finding and utilizing relatively modern writings by, and stories about, those who can honestly be said to share our values. Expanded reliance on the works of Rabbi Wine himself would be a good way for our movement to begin as we rededicate ourselves to the process of developing liturgy, songs, poetry, and other expressions of our philosophy based on the words and actions of those whose outlook was similar to our own.

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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. The passages that follow, excerpted from Wine's *Judaism Beyond God* and from Cohn-Sherbok, Cook, & Rowens, *A Life of Courage: Sherwin Wine and Humanistic Judaism*, summarize his views on the dual nature of Humanistic Jewish identity.*

Humanism: An Excerpt from *Judaism Beyond God*

Humanistic Jews have two important identities. They are Jews, part of the Jewish people, members of an ancient kinship group, bound together by a social destiny with all other Jews. They are also connected to all other humanists – whatever their kinship attachments and whatever their ethnic origin. For some Humanistic Jews, their Jewish identity is the strongest emotional bond. For other Humanistic Jews, their intellectual and moral commitment to humanism is more powerful than their tie to Jewishness. Both groups value their Jewish

identity – but in differing degrees. Humanistic Judaism has room for both commitments.

Humanistic Jews share a Jewish agenda with other Jews. Holidays, Israel, antisemitism, and the study of Jewish history are some of the items on this list of common activity. They also share a humanist agenda with other humanists. Humanist philosophy, ethical education, and the defense of the secular state are some of the items on this second list. Neither excludes the other. They are both necessary.

Jewish Humanism: An Excerpt from *A Life of Courage*

Are we “Humanistic Jews” or “Jewish humanists”? That question appeared very early in our development and remains persistent. We have two powerful connections – one Jewish and one humanistic. Which is primary? Or are they both of equal significance?

The people who join our movement have minds of their own. They do not easily fit into formulas that we may choose to create. Most people who join want to find a way to live their lives Jewishly with integrity. Others who enter our movement enjoy Jewish culture but the message of humanism is what motivates them to stay. Both groups are legitimate parts of our movement. Frequently, in the case of intermarriage, the non-Jewish partner will be a humanist. (We designate these couples

as intercultural rather than interfaith.) If the humanist partner joins the community, the humanism generally will be of greater interest to him than the Judaism, though I know of many cases where non-Jews are enamored with Jewish culture and want to be part of a Jewish community.

Rabbi Sherwin T. Wine (1928-2007) was the intellectual framer of Humanistic Judaism, founding rabbi of the Society for Humanistic Judaism, and founder of the International Institute for Secular Humanistic Judaism, as well as a prolific writer, speaker, and public figure. He served as rabbi of the Birmingham Temple in Farmington Hills, Michigan, for more than forty years. In addition to innumerable periodical articles, including the lead article in almost every issue of this journal, he was the author of *Judaism Beyond God*, *Celebration: A Ceremonial Guide for Humanists and Humanistic Jews*, *A Provocative People*, and *Staying Sane in a Crazy World* (all of which are available from the Society for Humanistic Judaism, www.shj.org/store, as is *A Life of Courage, Sherwin Wine and Humanistic Judaism*).

Frequently people who are members of humanist groups will challenge me. They want to know why our communities have this parochial interest in Jewish culture when they should be promoting a universal humanism. They claim that our Jewish loyalty diminishes or is incompatible with humanism.

From the beginning we have been Humanistic Jews, rooted in the history and culture of the Jewish people. Our humanism has always been enhanced by our Jewish connection, because the message of Jewish experience is that we cannot rely on the kindness of the fates. Most of us are humanists because the memories

of Jewish history are “in our bones.” The rabbinic establishment may have told us that we are the Chosen People. But our memories tell us that we are the victims of a cruel destiny. If the Jewish people survived, it was only because of human self-reliance, courage, and cooperation. Our survival is a tribute to people power.

We are part of the Jewish world. Even when other Jews do not share our philosophy of life, they share our culture – and we share the social fate to which all Jews are subjected when society is in turmoil. Judaism has evolved over many centuries and provides us with roots and with a distinctive place in human culture.

Balancing Act: An Excerpt from *A Life of Courage*

Life is juggling incompatible agendas. From the moment we are born, we discover that desire presents no single goal. It taunts us with having to make choices. We would love to “have our cake and eat it,” but reality intrudes.

Every day we struggle with how much to give to “me” and how much to give to others. The prudential pursuit of my welfare is not always compatible with the ethical pursuit of the welfare of others. Between being a sociopath and a martyr doormat, there is a wide range of options. Finding an appropriate balance is a personal choice without fixed formulas.

In addition to the prudentially ethical balancing act, there are two balancing acts that consume a lot of time in Humanistic Judaism. Their challenge has existed from the very beginning of our movement.

The first is the balancing act between the past and the present, between tradition and creativity, between continuity and integrity. How can I be fully Jewish if I do not feel deeply connected to the culture of my past? But how can I feel honest if I am forced to say words and use literature that does not completely fit what I believe as a humanist? This balancing act is one of the hardest we have to engineer. Some

people favor continuity over integrity. Others favor integrity over continuity.

The Reform movement has opted for continuity. The choice of the Torah as the symbol of Reform belief and commitment is problematic from the integrity perspective. The Reconstructionist movement, with its humanist ideology, has made a similar choice. Turning the Torah and the prayer book into humanist documents requires intellectual and philosophic acrobatics that defy reason. But continuity is the reward. For Mordecai Kaplan, continuity was a supreme value. The integrity of words was important, but far less important.

Some have suggested that Humanistic Judaism has pursued integrity at the expense of continuity and that we need to adjust the balance in order to strengthen our Jewish roots. My response is, of course, yes. The balancing act never ends. But for us, integrity always takes priority over continuity. That is a fundamental difference between Humanistic Judaism and its liberal opposition in Reform and Reconstructionism. If the occasion is celebratory of what we believe in, then integrity prevails. If the occasion is educational, then there are no boundaries. We simply want to listen to what our Jewish brothers and sisters have to say.

I suspect that when we celebrate, the overwhelming majority of the prose and poetry will continue to be contemporary, simply because there are not many traditional texts that pass our test of integrity. The best way to introduce our members to the Jewish past is through the educational format.

The second balancing act is between Jewish and non-Jewish wisdom. As Humanistic Jews we do not believe that all wisdom necessary for human survival and happiness is contained in the Torah or in the sacred texts of traditional Judaism – not even in the contemporary texts of the secular Jewish world. Most of the great humanist philosophy extant today was created by non-Jews, whether they

be prose writers or poets. Epicurus, Lucretius, Omar Khayyam, John Stuart Mill, Bertrand Russell, John Dewey, and Albert Camus (among hundreds of others) speak truths that we need to hear. Translating them into Hebrew will not make them Jewish.

If our commitment were to Jewish culture alone, then the wisdom of non-Jews could be legitimately excluded. But if our commitment is also to a humanistic philosophy of life, then such an exclusion is harmful. Our Jewish identity is overwhelmingly important. And so are the humanist resources within Jewish culture. But we cannot be fully developed human beings if we cannot dip into the pool of universal creativity for inspiration.

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Rational Judaism: It's Not New

by Mary Raskin

The foundation of Humanistic Judaism is a belief in the power of people to reach fulfillment without supernatural intervention. As Humanistic Jews we find meaning and dignity in our Judaism through the rational approach.

To celebrate Judaism in this way is a modern phenomenon, to be sure. However, the interpretation of Judaism through the use of reason is not entirely modern. In earlier times, there were many in the Jewish scholarly community who kept pace with the ideas of the larger world of scholars and defended Judaism as a rational philosophical approach to a meaningful life.

The first Jewish scholar to apply rational philosophy to the Torah was Philo of Alexandria. The first to produce a rational theological treatise was Saadia Gaon. The greatest medieval Jewish scholar to apply rational interpretation to Judaism was Maimonides. We are the beneficiaries of these important Jewish scholars. Philo, Saadia, and Maimonides drew upon the philosophies of their time to provide a Jewish rational response to questions about the nature of God, the origins of creation, and the purpose of Jewish law.

Philo of Alexandria (20 B.C.E – 50 C.E.)

Philo was born into the large and influential Jewish community of Alexandria, Egypt, a cultural center for Hellenistic literature, science, and philosophy. Hellenistic philosophy used a scientific approach to understand the elements of nature and the causes of change. A philosopher was thought to be someone who investigated the nature of things as opposed to those who claimed knowledge through revelation.

Philo's education included Greek poetry, history, and philosophy. He was familiar with

Greek theatre and the gymnasium. He received a Jewish education, though it has been argued that he may not have been well versed in Hebrew. An observant Jew, he is known to have made at least one pilgrimage to Jerusalem.

Alexandrian Hellenistic Jews were greatly influenced by the Stoic philosophical school. The Stoics believed in (1) the idea of a virtuous sage who lives according to the laws of nature; (2) a monotheism based on the concept of a divine mind; and (3) a divine logos or reason that was thought to be inherent in the laws of God and humanity. The Stoics used allegory to interpret the classical Greek characters of the *Iliad* and *Odyssey* as representing universal truths.

Philo wrote *midrashim* (explanations) of the biblical texts verse by verse. His intention was to show that Judaism was a universal philosophical religion in the manner of Greek philosophy. Philo's primary problem was how to explain biblical texts that were clearly not universal in meaning. This was particularly true of the early texts in which God displays human characteristics, such as talking, planting gardens, and making clothes of animal skins for Adam and Eve. Philo adapted the Stoics' use of allegory to show that these stories were symbolic representations of the divine mind.

Saadia Gaon (882 – 942)

After the destruction of the Second Temple in 70 C.E. the rabbis transformed Judaism with new customs and patterns of thought based on the oral Torah, as recorded in the Talmud. Almost seven hundred years later the Islamic

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conquest brought Jews under one ruler from Spain to Persia, and the daily language of the majority of Jews transitioned from Greek and Aramaic to Arabic. By 750 the center of Islamic rule, the caliphate, was in Baghdad. The only Jewish authority recognized by the caliphate was the exilarch. The exilarch had legal authority and oversaw the leaders or *gaonim* of the yeshivas. During the eighth century the exilarch, together with the *gaonim* of the two major yeshivas, made Babylonian Jewish law binding on the entire Jewish Diaspora.

Saadia Gaon was born in the Fayyum district of upper Egypt and studied in the yeshivas of Palestine and Babylonia. He was installed as *gaon* of the Sura yeshiva in 928. This was an unusual and controversial appointment because Saadia was the first person outside of Babylonian families to head one of the most important yeshivas.

Saadia was influenced by the Mutazilite adherents to Islamic theological schools. The Mutazilite and the Jews faced similar religious challenges. One of those challenges was the question of how God could have human attributes. The Mutazilites responded that God and God's attributes were one. Saadia argued that God is transcendent and without physical body; thus, all the human attributes of God found in the Bible were to be interpreted as metaphors.

In his major philosophical work, *Book of Beliefs and Opinions*, Saadia described three principles of science and knowledge that lead to truth and the acquisition of knowledge. First is the ability to learn through the senses: sight, hearing, smell, taste, and touch. Second is the ability to reason. Third is the use of knowledge acquired through the senses and reason to arrive at a new inferred truth.

There was a fourth way for Jews to reach certainty and truth – through the principle of authentic tradition. According to Saadia, the study of Scriptures would reveal proof that knowledge can be acquired rationally through the senses, the ability to reason, and inferred truth.

Moses Maimonides (1135 – 1204)

Moses ben Maimon (also known as Rambam from the acronym Rabbi Moshe ben Maimon) was born in Cordoba to an educated family. The family left Cordoba as a result of religious persecution and traveled to Fez and Israel before settling in Fostat, Egypt. Maimonides worked as a physician in addition to writing medical books, legal treatises, and philosophical works such as *Guide for the Perplexed*.

Maimonides was influenced primarily by Aristotelianism. The scientists and physicians of the twelfth century were drawn to a philosophical worldview built upon observations of the natural world. They studied Aristotle's writings on logic, physics, astronomy, biology, psychology, and ethics.

Maimonides believed that religious laws were required for society to function well. People needed to be trained in these laws. All people, regardless of their learning, had a place in society, and it was important that they were not troubled by doubt.

The *Guide for the Perplexed* was intended for Jewish scholars who had enough education in the sciences and philosophy to be aware of the inconsistencies within the biblical text. Maimonides held that the inconsistency between the literal interpretation of the Law and the laws of reason can be understood through the use of metaphors and allegory. The literal text found in the Bible was considered a figure of speech that could be interpreted using the language of philosophy.

Summation

Viktor Frankl, the noted psychiatrist who developed a therapy based on his experiences in Nazi concentration camps, wrote that the search for meaning is the primary motivation in everyone's life. But the search for a meaningful life is not an easy endeavor. There are times we feel so sure of our way that we wake with joy and jump to embrace the day. At other times the meaning of our life is so elusive that we wonder whether our former confidence can ever be recaptured.

This is an ancient struggle. The writers of the Torah used stories and myths to grapple with the existential questions of creation and purpose. They posited a god who created the natural world and gave us life. They promulgated laws to guide people's days and give meaning to their lives.

By the beginning of the Common Era these stories and myths were no longer believable as literal truth. Jewish scholars were studying science, literature, history, and philosophy. They believed in reason-based knowledge rather than revelation. They employed philosophical techniques to tease out universal truths from the ancient Torah stories. The meaning of existence was to be found in the natural laws that were presented symbolically in the Torah.

Rabbinic philosophy based on the oral law as codified in the Talmud dominated Jewish thought until the Islamic conquest in the eighth century. The establishment of the rational approach in Islamic theological schools inspired Jewish scholars to pursue a reason-based Judaism. Now the literal descriptions of God became metaphors for a transcendent God. All the laws of God were understood as being natural and just.

During the twelfth century Jews continued to be inspired by Islamic rational theological philosophies. Again the literal descriptions of the Torah God were abandoned for a belief in a God without form or substance. Metaphors and allegory were used to explain inconsistencies between literal Torah law and the laws of reason.

Philo of Alexandria, Saadia Gaon, and Moses Maimonides used rational arguments to make Judaism relevant and meaningful. They studied mathematics, astronomy, ethics, history, logic, and philosophy because the acquisition of knowledge was essential to a rational understanding of Judaism. As Humanistic Jews we share their drive for learning, their determination to apply reason to Judaism, and their passion for a relevant Jewish life.

As Humanistic Jews we are also inspired by the ancient Greek philosophers. Protagoras wrote that he had no way of knowing whether the gods existed. Aristotle questioned the likelihood that the Greek gods had human attributes. Today we make use of a reason-based, humanistic philosophy to guide our interpretations of the ancient stories and laws. Our Judaism celebrates human power and human achievement to create a meaningful Jewish life.



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Secularism, Atheism, Humor, and Jewish Identity

by Herb Silverman

As director of the College of Charleston Jewish Studies Program, Marty Perlmutter arranges for speakers at monthly Jewish Studies brunches, which bring together the college and broader South Carolina communities. I wanted to see more diversity, so I asked Marty whether I could speak on Jewish atheism. He was open to the idea but worried that I might offend religious Jews who regularly attend. I told Marty that I've disagreed with many conservative speakers and added, "Your brunches would be pretty boring if nobody ever disagreed with the speaker. Isn't disagreement the essence of Judaism?"

Marty was a little nervous but scheduled me to speak. My main goals were to show that you don't have to believe in God to be a good Jew and that secular Jews are an important and growing part of Judaism. I also wanted to make the case that we would all be better off if atheists in general, and atheist Jews in particular, came out of the closet. The College of Charleston Jewish Studies Program began in 1984 because of the generous gift of a local philanthropist, Henry Yaschik, who was openly secular and would periodically ask me how smart people could believe in God. The previous month's brunch speaker had been Stephen Whitfield, who spoke about Jews active in the civil rights movement. When privately I asked him what percentage of those Jews were secular, he said, "Almost all of them." Whitfield had given me permission to mention publicly that he, too, is a secular Jew. David Benatar, the next month's speaker, is an Orthodox Jew. He has written about his god beliefs, which are similar to mine. There have been quite a few other secular speakers at Jewish Studies brunch programs, whether they were public about it or not.

In my talk I said I am hoping that secular Jews will become a well-recognized community and atheists will no longer be denigrated in the United States. In the question period that followed, some audience members mentioned that my presentation had helped them change their minds about what it means to be a Jew. That was the kind of reaction I was hoping to hear. Changing minds is one of my favorite things, including my own when the evidence warrants it.

The following is a summary of my remarks.

* * *

I grew up in an era of considerable discrimination against Jews. I found it deplorable that many felt they had to change their names and try to pass for Gentiles, hoping for acceptance into mainstream culture. In Susan Jacoby's memoir, *Half-Jew*, she writes about being raised Catholic (her mother's religion) and not discovering until she was in college that her father was Jewish. Her father, she later learned, wanted to protect her from the antisemitism he had endured.

While exploring her roots, Susan spoke with a Conservative rabbi, who tried to make a case for her becoming a Jew. The rabbi said to Susan, "You can be a Jewish atheist. It's not outside Jewish history." "Half-Jewish," she reminded the rabbi. The rabbi countered, "Don't you think it's your Jewish half that made you an atheist?" This rabbi understood that question-

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ing the sacred books was part of the rabbinical tradition, as are secular Jews.

Although most Jews are now quite open about being Jewish, Jewish atheism is rarely mentioned publicly. When Rabbi Anthony Holz, from a nearby Reform synagogue, spoke to our local secular humanist group, one of our members asked him how many members of his congregation were atheists. He said, "I don't know. We don't ask such embarrassing questions."

Christianity requires a special belief about Jesus, but no God belief is required of Jews. When we think of well-known Christians, Billy Graham, the Pope, and Mother Teresa come to mind. Or maybe Pat Robertson and Jerry Falwell. Well-known Jews are usually intellectuals, such as Albert Einstein and Sigmund Freud, or comedians, such as Woody Allen, Mel Brooks, and Larry David, or perhaps the most trusted broadcaster on television today, Jonathan Leibowitz, a.k.a. Jon Stewart of *The Daily Show*. What all these Jews have in common is that they are secular and have openly criticized or made fun of religion. I'm hard-pressed to name a pious Jew, past or present, who's a household name in this country (other than Jesus).

People are often puzzled about why, as an atheist, I identify strongly with Judaism. In addition to my cultural roots, I point out that denying my Judaism might seem as if I'm ashamed of who I am. When I stopped believing in God, I didn't stop believing in the ethical and moral principles of Judaism. I did, however, stop performing rituals no longer meaningful to me. My Jewish juices flow most deeply when antisemitism is present. Having relatives who died in the Holocaust, I am not about to give Hitler a posthumous victory by killing off my Jewish persona.

I was a wandering Jew, identifying with no congregation or branch, until I found a home in Humanistic Judaism. Humanistic Jews read the Torah critically, much the way we read philosophers and political writers. We embrace ideas that make sense to us, reject ideas that

are anachronistic, and ignore ideas that seem silly. Jews have been called "the People of the Book," meaning the Torah, but I like to think of us as people of *many* books.

The play *Two Thousand Years* by Mike Leigh reverses the conventional assumption that a religious Jewish identity is superior to a secular one. A secular Jewish family in London has a shy son in his mid-twenties who lives at home. He's pretty much of a social misfit, but the rest of the family tolerates his behavior until one day he starts wearing a yarmulke. His father goes into shock. He shouts, "It's like having a *Muslim* in the house!" The grandfather, a socialist who grew up on a kibbutz in Israel, breaks into laughter. He nicknames his grandson "the rabbi" and continues to fulminate about how the Zionism he once supported was hijacked by religious extremists.

The young man, who has been yearning for a sense of identity, hopes his religious "conversion" will bring him the satisfaction he craves. It doesn't. He asks his family what it means to them to be Jewish. Their answers are enlightening: "I was born a Jew"; "I can't imagine not being a Jew"; "I'm committed to social justice"; "I like to argue."

The father says he's Jewish because he likes Jewish jokes, which he tells continually. Here's one of them. A reporter asks the following question of an American, a Russian, a North Korean, and an Israeli: "Excuse me, what is your opinion of the meat shortage?" The American says, "What's a shortage?" The Russian says, "What's meat?" The North Korean says, "What's an opinion?" And the Israeli says, "What's excuse me?"

None of these rationales for being Jewish satisfies the son. Even the family members don't seem particularly convinced by their own answers. Yet they all view the religious son as somehow less Jewish than they are. Their Jewish equivalent of "real men don't eat quiche" is "real Jews don't wear yarmulkes."

After a lot of conversation, the son grows comfortable standing up to strong and accom-

plished family members. The last scene shows him without a yarmulke, confidently playing chess with his father. This indicates the son's return to secular Judaism and that he has finally become a *mensch* in the eyes of his family.

In a recent Pew Research Center survey of American Jews, 62 percent said being Jewish is mainly a matter of ancestry and culture, and only 19 percent said observing Jewish law was important, while a whopping 42 percent of Jews said being Jewish means having a good sense of humor. Because Jewish humor is such an integral part of Judaism, I will end with three jokes appropriate for secular Jews.

The first is about a Jewish atheist who hears that the best school in town happens to be Catholic, so he enrolls his son. Things are going well until one day the boy comes home and says, "I just learned all about the Father, the Son, and the Holy Ghost." The boy's father is barely able to control his rage. He grabs his son by the shoulders and says, "Joey, this is very important, so listen carefully: There is only *one* God – and we don't believe in him!"

Then there was the journalist from the *Jerusalem Post* who lived in an apartment overlooking the Western Wall. After several weeks, he realized that whenever he looked at the wall he

saw the same old Jew praying vigorously. Sensing a story, the journalist said to the old man, "You pray at the wall every day. What are you praying for?" The man replied, "In the morning, I pray for world peace; in the afternoon, I pray for the brotherhood of man; in the evening, I pray for the eradication of illness and disease from the earth." The journalist asked, "And how long have you been doing this?" The old man said, "Every day, for twenty-seven years." Amazed, the journalist asked how it felt to pray every day for those things. The old Jew replied, "How does it feel? It feels like I'm talking to a wall."

And finally, some members of an Orthodox synagogue think they should stand during a particular prayer, but others think they should sit. They argue back and forth, yet can't reach consensus. So they agree to send one member, Jonathan, to the next town where there is a learned rabbi whose opinion they all respect. When Jonathan arrives, he asks Rabbi Levy whether the tradition is to stand. Rabbi Levy says, "No." So then Jonathan says, "Good. Then the tradition is to sit." Again, Rabbi Levy says, "No." Frustrated, Jonathan pleads with Rabbi Levy, "Please help us find a solution. Members of our congregation do nothing but argue about whether to stand or sit." Rabbi Levy smiles, and says, "Aha! *That* is the tradition."

Finding What Wasn't Lost

by Marla Davishoff

“What did your great-grandparents give you for your birthdays?” my now seven-year-old son asked me as he ripped open the wrapping paper of his last present. It was a blessing for Levi to celebrate his birthday with his great-grandparents, and my husband was also fortunate to have his own grandparents share in our joy.

Until moments like these, I was unaware of what I had missed. Like most people of my generation, I never knew my great-grandparents. They either never immigrated to the United States or died before I was born. There was a mystery to their existence that fascinates me to this day. I still have trouble imagining their photos in color and their faces in three dimensions. When I look at their pictures, they look stiff and older than their years. But there is one thing in these blurry images that I see clearly. My great-grandmother had diamond earrings. I know this because I have one of the stones in a ring.

This ring found its way back to me after traveling through many branches of my family tree. It was my great-aunt Rose, my grandmother's sister, who was first given one of the diamonds from the pair of earrings. I met Rose on only two occasions in my life, but when I look at the ring I am acutely aware that its uniqueness reflects her. The ring is a combination of pink gold and platinum. The band is so thick that I can see my reflection in it. I can't help but wonder if she ever used it to help put on lipstick or, like me, glanced down at it to fix her hair. There are some rubies and other stones scattered throughout the band that add color and dimension to something that certainly wasn't lacking without them. To me, the twisted metals seem like a contemporary art sculpture that you would most definitely not find in my traditional home. When I wear the ring I get more comments than compliments. It is not my favorite ring, but it is my favorite thing.

This ring has been worn by three generations of my family: my great-aunt Rose, my grandmother, my mother and now me. It has actually been in my home before on two different people in two different circumstances. Let me explain. My husband and I are raising our boys in the same Deerfield home in which my mom's sister raised her family about twenty years ago. The home has exchanged owners several times since then but, in the end, it is back in my family. The first and only time I remember meeting my great-aunt Rose was at a party at this home when I was ten years old. She was visiting from New York and talked and dressed differently from the rest of our family. I was impressed by her warmth and the way she lit up a room. I also liked her fur hat.

Several years later, while celebrating Thanksgiving at this same home, we received a phone call that Rose had died. It was the only time I witnessed my mom or grandma board an airplane, but they weathered the trip together to New York for her funeral. My grandmother returned with the ring. I became fascinated with the ring from the moment I laid my eyes on it. “What happened to the other diamond?” I begged my grandmother to explain. She didn't know, and it remains a mystery to this day.

My grandmother wore the ring for the following ten years. Although it overwhelmed her fragile, arthritic hands, she enjoyed it and chose to wear it every day. Just prior to her death, she gave it to my mother.

“It is too gaudy for me,” my mom told me. I told her that didn't matter to me, and so the ring fell into my hands. About ten years ago I had a jeweler clean it to remove the tarnish. I still regret doing this. I am waiting for it to become blotchy again, the way I remembered it.

Marla Davishoff, a licensed clinical social worker who lives with her husband and two sons in the Chicago suburbs, is a member of Kol Hadash Humanistic Congregation in Lincolnshire, IL.

“My great-grandparents weren’t at my birthday parties,” I finally tell my son. But as I look down at my ring, I feel that they are at his. I see my reflection in the metal and feel that same warmth I remember from years back. As I watch him hug his great-grandparents

and thank them for their present, I begin to understand that I hadn’t fully appreciated the ring until I witnessed his connection to these people. Somewhere beyond the material value of the ring, I had been given something that I didn’t even realize I had lost in the first place.

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Nature and God

by Les Kaufman

A majority of people in this world take on faith that all of its diversity, from savannahs to stars, was created by God. Of the three most popular concepts of the deity – God the creator, God the father, and God the personal guidance counselor – God the creator has the most incontrovertible basis in reality. The “creation” is there, and it did arise somehow. Not only that, but it continues to arise, stubbornly and with enormous power, even when we beat it down. It is not only life that is continually reborn, but also the surface of our planet and all heavenly bodies from gaseous nebulae to galaxies. The power of destruction and rebirth, going hand-in-hand, is awesome. It is our mortality and our children. It is winter and it is spring. It is the past and the future. And it is why some people believe in God, whether a special creation god like Shiva or an all-purpose god for whom the continuity of creation is just one function.

In Humanistic Judaism, we normally do not focus on God. Some of us believe in a deity, many do not; perhaps even more do not even think about it. Rather than dwell on the matter, we underscore the importance of faith in each other and in ourselves. Beyond this one leap of faith in human potential, we do not take anything on faith, but rather on empirical evidence. We are rationalists. We are naturalists. Rationalism, combined with social history, has pre-adapted Jews to become engineers, scientists, and doctors. It is very Jewish to question, to ponder, to analyze, to emerge from this process more certain and to be able to demonstrate a rational basis for that certainty. It is also very Jewish to be more *uncertain*. Or, rather, to know how uncertain we should be about any given matter due to the current limitations of our knowledge.

Today our ability to see into nature and to read its mechanics is numbingly powerful. In one day, I might ask a student in my lab to measure all the proteins whose formulae are be-

ing read and synthesized, at that very moment, from the genes of a living coral colony, and to what purpose. I might ask another student to mathematically extract forty years of the living heartbeat of a vast stretch of ocean – the cycles of climate and fishes and scum laid bare in all their temporal majesty. We can study people in the same way. We can say how long somebody will most likely live and, barring accident, how he or she will most likely die. We can read the Book of Life in every respect and at every scale. Does this eliminate the mystery of it all? Quite the contrary. Where before human beings were dumbstruck by their ignorance, today we are struck dumb by what we know.

What is this thing that we now can know so much better, this nature? To paraphrase Scripture, it is what it is. It demands no belief or faith: it confronts us with an ever-present reality. But what is it? By what name should we call the creation, including its endless renewal? Is all that continually emerges, in accordance with the laws of the physical universe, God? It is interesting to see how leading rationalists have dealt with such questions and with the relationship between science and religion. Let us briefly consider the views of five contemporary scientists who range from deists* to atheists.

Gerald Schroeder, a Massachusetts Institute of Technology physicist who emigrated to Israel, is a deist. Among the books he has authored are *The Science of God: The Convergence of Scientific and Biblical Wisdom* and *The Hidden*

Les Kaufman, a professor of biology in the Boston University Marine Program and Marine Conservation Fellow for Conservation International, is a naturalist by avocation and a marine biologist professionally. His work has appeared in books, magazines, and television programs such as *National Geographic* and NOVA. He is a long-time member of the Boston congregation Kahal B'Raira. This article is based on a talk he presented at the Kahal B'Raira Tu B'Shvat service on January 30, 2011.

*A deist believes that God created the world but does not intervene in human affairs or respond to prayer or worship. Deism is compatible with Humanistic Judaism.

Face of God. He begins *The Science of God* by discussing Rashi's interpretation of *B'reishit* ("In the beginning"):

. . . Rashi quotes from Proverbs 8: "I am wisdom. God made me as the beginning of his way, the first of his works of old." The first of the creations was not a big bang creation of our universe. The first Divine creation was wisdom. And from that Divine source, the physical universe emerged. The evocative opening sentence of Genesis is best translated: "With wisdom God created the heavens and the earth." Wisdom is the substrate of existence and is found in every aspect. Let's use what we can of that wisdom to explore the workings of God in our magnificent universe. That is the science of God.

Frances Collins, a Christian who headed the Human Genome Project, is also a dedicated deist. In an interview about his role as "the scientist who believes in God," Collins said: ". . . a purely materialist approach, stripping away the spiritual aspect of humanity, will impoverish us – after all, that has been already tried (in Stalin's USSR and Mao's China) and found to be devastating." But he went on to say, "All truth is God's truth, and therefore God can hardly be threatened by scientific discoveries."

Richard Dawkins, author of *The God Delusion*, is a militantly avowed atheist, the polar opposite of Collins. Challenged to explain why science should not be regarded as just another religion, he replied that "it is free of the main vice of religion, which is faith."

Steven Jay Gould, an evolutionary biologist of Jewish extraction, was an atheist who self-identified with Jewish culture. In *Rock of Ages: Science and Religion in the Fullness of Life*, he explored the interface (or lack thereof) between religion and science. According to Gould, science and religion reign in entirely separate, non-overlapping *magisteria*, or domains of human understanding. Science has to do with the *magisterium* of nature, whereas religion's domain is the world of human morality. Sci-

ence has nothing to do with values, and religion has nothing to do with empirical truth. Gould advocated a dialogue between science and religion, a golden mean that could be arrived at by viewing problems from the two alternative points of view.

E. O. Wilson, father of the concept of biodiversity and author of *The Creation* and other works, is the most staunch and vocal guardian against today's unfolding environmental crisis. Raised as a Christian, he calls himself a "provisional deist." For Wilson, *belief* in God is a real phenomenon, even if God is not. Belief in the supernatural is an evolved behavior of deep significance to human nature and thus an important subject of close study if we are to understand ourselves.

But Wilson's most important, most influential position has nothing to do with the question of whether there is a God or with the differences between science and religion. The creation is on the skids. The advancing shadow of human-caused mass extinction fueled by our generation will destroy between one-fifth and one-half of all living species within our childrens' lifetimes. Wilson writes, "Science and religion are two of the most potent forces on Earth and they should come together to save the creation."

What does this problem have to do with faith in God? That depends upon whether you happen to have some. What does it have to do with faith in humanity? Everything. Faith in each other that we will act, and continue to act, in the interest of reason, until all humanity waivers, bends, yields, and finally changes, for its own good. The good news? It is only humanity that we must change. The world, the creation, is fine as is. All we have to do is keep it that way. We do not have to create life; it does this for itself. We have only to steward, to midwife. We have only to stop destroying it, and to make a place for the fathomless power that recreates the world every single moment of every single day.

Welcome to the World, Baby Boy!

by Brandy Tanenbaum

Eight years ago – and a full eight weeks before his expected arrival – our first son, Canyon, was born. For his parents, it was quite a shock; we quickly turned all our energy on our tiny baby. It also marked an end to what we had been considering: an alternative to the traditional *brit milah* or *bris*. Instead, we waited five weeks and, for medical reasons, had a circumcision performed in a pediatric office.

I was disappointed that our son did not get the welcoming part of any ceremony, Jewish (his mother’s culture) or Christian (his father’s). So when we learned, by ultrasound, that our second baby was to be a boy, our thoughts turned once again to a nontraditional naming ceremony: a *brit shalom*, or Covenant of Peace.

I sought out Eva Goldfinger, a rabbi at Oraynu Congregation for Humanistic Judaism in Toronto. It was Eva who had originally introduced me to the *brit shalom*. The ceremony could be “anything we want,” she’d told us. The only problem? I had never witnessed such a ceremony and was quite confident that none of our friends or family had either. And in fact, they hadn’t. No one, Jew or Christian, had ever heard of a naming ceremony for a male child.

As Rabbi Goldfinger described it, we would essentially create it with her assistance. No two ceremonies are the same, she said, since they are individualized by the parents. The beauty of the *brit shalom* is that it focuses on the values and beliefs that the parents want to instill in their children. To my mind, this was the key to bridging our families and their Christian and Jewish traditions.

In our initial consultation with Rabbi Goldfinger, she had made a number of suggestions for the ceremony, including, if we so desired,

godparents. But that wasn’t all: there could be a candle lighting, poetic readings, Hebrew readings, wine, and flowers. We opted not to include any Hebrew prayers out of respect for those in attendance who might not be familiar with them and might otherwise feel excluded.

Through the ease of email, Rabbi Goldfinger provided a first draft of the ceremony based on our discussion, and after a few modifications we were set with the final version. We selected a Sunday morning in August when Britain was eight weeks old to host the ceremony at our house. We did not send out formal invitations – a phone call or email made the task much easier. We were met with a number of quizzical eyebrow lifts and queries about the nature of the event. We had successfully generated confusion amongst all of those closest to us.

The ceremony began under the warm morning sun with Rabbi Goldfinger welcoming our friends and family and helping them to understand the intent of the gathering: to welcome Britain into our lives and our community, and to bestow upon him the gift of a name. David and I were asked to stand and give our son his name and officially welcome him into our diverse family. Rabbi Goldfinger provided the rationale for Britain’s names, secular and Hebrew, including the honoring of our loved ones.

It was a touching moment for all, which was exactly the point. We wanted to include everyone in this special ceremony, especially our parents, whom we wanted to feel honored as grandparents, and Canyon, who, we felt,

Brandy Tanenbaum lives in Richmond Hill, Ontario, with her husband and two young sons. This article is reprinted with permission and with minor adaptations from the May 28, 2008, edition of *InterfaithFamily.com*.

should understand the significance of his role of big brother. The wine ceremony provided an opportunity for this family participation. A goblet sitting atop the table was lifted for all to see – a symbol of Britain’s “cup of life,” into which each family participant poured wine to represent their hopes and wishes for him. It was explained to Britain, as well as to the guests, that the proverbial village is necessary to help raise a child and that our closest have a responsibility to help Britain along his path. Our parents and Canyon poured wine into Britain’s cup of life while Rabbi Goldfinger shared the list of values that David and I had earlier selected, which we felt represented them individually or as a couple.

This is about harmony, after all. Harmony and equality. The last thing we did was to recite our own values, along with words from a song selected by Rabbi Goldfinger. We held

Britain’s cup of life and made one last recitation before each placing a drop of wine on Britain’s lips and then taking a sip ourselves. With the ceremony coming to a close, Rabbi Goldfinger addressed Britain one last time with words of love and the encouragement that he may be part of *tikkun olam*.

The ceremony ended as beautifully as it began, and soon the crowd had dwindled to just our immediate family. For our family, it had been a long journey, and as David and I reflected on the ceremony, we were pleased to have found and created a common ground from which to build something new, something as unique as we are, something that was just “us.” It did not matter that we are from different religions; it was a blessing in itself to be able to share the message of love, commitment, and values with our friends and family and to welcome our son to the world in our special way.

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ARTS/LITERATURE

This Peace Shall Be Rebuilt by Marti Keller

This peace shall be rebuilt
In small circles
With only as many rocks
As each one of us
Will hold.

– August 7, 2014

Nocturne: Foley's Pond by Ruth Duskin Feldman

Silent woods,
darkly dense,
skirt secret shores.
Unquiet, alone
I trust my feet to an unseen trail
toward open sky.

Silhouettes:
Foliage forms
inkblot illusions.
Unrooted, astir,
I trust my weight to a leaning trunk
at waterside.

Soundless sparks:
Fireflies flit
on winking whims.
Unwinged but afire,
I trust my cry to unhearing trees,
enduring stars.

Marti Keller, a Unitarian/Universalist minister, is a member of the Executive Committee of the Society for Humanistic Judaism and chair of its Membership Committee.

Ruth Duskin Feldman, a madrikha, is creative editor of this journal. She is a member of Kol Hadash Humanistic Congregation in Lincolnshire, IL. Foley's Pond is a secluded spot a few blocks from her home. She is 2014 recipient of the Rabbi Sherwin T. Wine Lifetime Achievement Award.

Louis Altman, a patent and trademark attorney, is a past president of the Society for Humanistic Judaism and the 2012 recipient of the Rabbi Sherwin T. Wine Lifetime Achievement Award. He is a member of Kol Hadash Humanistic Congregation, Lincolnshire, IL, and the Congregation for Humanistic Judaism, Sarasota, FL.

Poetry

by Louis Altman

Autumn Drive

(written on the drive to the fall Society for Humanistic Judaism Board meeting)

The road from Chicago to Detroit
passes a million lives
laughing working loving.

But from the car I see only trees
with red and gold leaves.
Another year gone,
laughing working loving.

Doctor Sam

*(a member of the Sarasota Congregation for Humanistic Judaism
who helped rescue Shanghai Jews at the end of World War II)*

Healed the sick.
Defended the Jews.

Told me he was dying,
With no tears.

Taught us how to live,
And how to die.

A Father Speaks

The papers on the far left corner of my desk
should be moved to the right
or maybe to the front,
but on the other hand . . . I'm not sure.
Our youngest went off to college yesterday.

My wife went shopping, bought a dress, redecorated the living room . . .
Our youngest went off to college yesterday.

IN REVIEW

Why Athens Executed Socrates *A Manual for Creating Atheists*

by Peter Boghossian

reviewed by Jeremy Kridel

Peter Boghossian, a philosophy professor at Portland State University, has penned a book entitled *A Manual for Creating Atheists* (Pitchstone, 2013). The book has been well-received in secular humanist circles; less so in theist circles. Boghossian's aim is to pick up where the "Four Horsemen" of New Atheism – Daniel Dennett, Christopher Hitchens, Richard Dawkins, and Sam Harris – leave off. Rather than try to win over those who are not committed to a nontheist approach, Boghossian seeks to provide tools nontheists can use to engage the average "theist on the street," in hopes that the foundation of that person's theism will be shaken and eventually crumble. *A Manual for Creating Atheists* is, then, a book of nontheist apologetics – arguments made to defend one's beliefs and to convince others of those beliefs.

Boghossian starts by rooting the apologist's method in a particular definition of *faith*: pretending, in the absence of competent evidence, to know something one does not know. He bases this definition, in large part, on an interpretation of Hebrews 11:1, which states that faith "is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen." ("Conviction" is sometimes translated as "evidence.").

Boghossian aims to turn nontheists into "Street Epistemologists." An epistemologist studies the philosophical nature of knowledge. Boghossian's Street Epistemologist inquires into how people know what they think they know. In Plato's dialogues, Socrates is portrayed as an inveterate asker of questions who

tried to lay bare how Athenians claimed to know their world and what actions were right. Socrates revealed how ungrounded the beliefs of his contemporaries were, and Boghossian wants to allow nontheists to reveal similar flaws in the beliefs of theists.

Boghossian suggests that the Street Epistemologist not debate facts. When presented with evidence that contradicts a belief, the person on the other side of a debate may shut out contrary evidence and disregard the merits of opposing views. The discussion ends in a stalemate. Instead, Boghossian suggests his Street Epistemologists attack *how* a theist claims to know a belief is true. This is not a process of debate or pointing out contradictions – at least, not at first. Instead, the Street Epistemologist should remain open, acknowledge when she does not know something, and be gently persistent in asking questions to elicit how and why someone has faith. The goal of this process is for the Street Epistemologist to help a theist reflect upon the shaken foundations of faith and then turn toward nontheist identification and community. But Boghossian is quick to warn that the Street Epistemologist should not expect success in the form of a "conversion," and should not expect any gratitude.

The book includes a fairly thorough and readable catalog of the types of arguments

Jeremy Kridel, an attorney in Indianapolis, holds a master's degree in religion, with a focus on early Judaism and biblical interpretation. He is a student in the International Institute for Secular Humanistic Judaism rabbinic program and a member of the Society for Humanistic Judaism.

theists advance in support of faith, along with rhetorical moves the Street Epistemologist can make to lay bare each argument's epistemic problems. None of this tries to prove a point – say, that there is no God. Instead, the purpose is to demonstrate the lack of real evidence supporting the theist's beliefs.

The goal, then, is less creating atheists than helping theists find more rational, evidence-based ways of understanding the world. By laying bare the faulty assumptions of theism, Boghossian wants theists to reach nontheist conclusions on their own. (I leave it to the reader to decide whether this gives the lie to the title of the book.)

Judging from reactions in theist circles – and especially in evangelical Christian circles – I worry about the book's real usefulness. Three particular weaknesses stand out. First, Boghossian seems unable to teach (or indeed even employ) the gentleness he preaches. Second, though Boghossian insists his approach can work with theists of any sort, it would seem to work best on a less-educated mainline or evangelical Christian. Wrapped up in this is a third problem Boghossian likely did not anticipate: a relative lack of usefulness of his method in addressing nonhumanist American Jews.

First, as to gentleness. Boghossian says the Street Epistemologist should be genuinely curious and nonconfrontational, make ample use of pregnant pauses to allow an interlocutor to “get there” on her or his own, and lend support to those whose foundations she has shaken. But his sample dialogues lean toward the pugnacious and condescending. He readily pushes beyond “I'm curious – how do you know?” into “How can you believe that!” Evangelical Christian reviewers have largely dismissed Boghossian's approach as more New Atheist hostility. And one has to concede that

the reviewers have a point. It is, after all, precisely because Socrates was so annoying that the Athenian leadership wanted him dead.

Second, because Boghossian's techniques are centered on the epistemology of faith, they seem most keenly attuned to Christians, who form the greatest pool of the religiously faithful in the United States. That approach makes a great deal of sense, of course, given demography. His approach is particularly geared to Christian claims about the literal truth of biblical texts, as he ably notes that Christians will disclaim the literal truth of a text one moment, only to attempt to salvage that text in the next moment. Yet this type of argument is likely to be most effective only with less-educated evangelical Christians. Better-educated evangelicals will have ready rejoinders to Boghossian's approach to scriptural problems, and liberal Christians (not unlike many non-Orthodox Jews) aren't beholden to a single, consistent approach to scriptural interpretation in any event.

That takes us to the third problem, the lack of utility of Boghossian's method in dealing with liberal American Jews. The language of faith and the acceptance of biblical literalism are often lacking in the corners of the Jewish world in which Humanistic Jews dwell in the United States. What becomes of Boghossian's method when so many Jews don't find atheist Judaism all that remarkable? Even liberal Jews who believe in *some* kind of a god don't often hold to the traditional, god-of-history model. Much of our dispute with other Jews is more about practice than about faith, and that seems less prone to the kind of prodding the Street Epistemologist is trained to do.

Will *A Manual for Creating Atheists* create many atheists? I don't think so. Does it give humanists a toolkit to work with? Yes, if we don't let Boghossian's attitude bleed into the tools.

Briefly Speaking *continued from page 2*

“to reject calls to weaken the executive order by providing a special exemption for religiously affiliated contractors” and asked that he rescind an amendment to a previous executive order, which exempted religious organizations that contract with the government from the prohibition against employment discrimination on the basis of religion. Unfortunately, the new executive order, as issued, while expanding antidiscrimination protections long applied to “race, color, religion, sex, or national origin” to LGBT workers, left intact a 2002 executive order permitting religious groups to consult their beliefs when hiring and firing for government contracts.

Such religious exemptions, based largely on a broad interpretation of RFRA (the Religious Freedom Restoration Act), permit religious organizations and, since the Hobby Lobby decision, for-profit companies to impose their religious beliefs on employees. SHJ will continue to work, in coalition with like-minded organizations, to eliminate such government-supported exemptions permitting the imposition of one set of religious beliefs on individuals who hold other beliefs.

SHJ Joins Twitter Protest of Hobby Lobby Decision

On August 20, the Society for Humanistic Judaism joined secular and religious organizations in a social media protest aiming to focus attention on restoring

women’s and workers’ religious freedom and reproductive rights following the June 30 Supreme Court ruling in *Burwell v. Hobby Lobby*. The decision permits private corporations to impose their religious beliefs on employees and deny them access to key health benefits, including birth control, provided by the Affordable Care Act (ACA). This decision could ultimately lead employers to deny other employee protections, such as health coverage for vaccines, blood transfusions, or HIV treatment.

The goal of the social media campaign was to raise consciousness as to the need to counteract Hobby Lobby by presenting the differing perspectives of those supporting freedom of religion and equal access to healthcare for women. Passage of the *Protect Women’s Health from Corporate Interference Act* (S 2578/HR 5051), also called the “Not My Boss’s Business” act, would be a first step toward undoing the damage done by the Hobby Lobby decision. The bill not only bans employers from refusing to provide any health coverage – including contraceptive coverage – guaranteed to their employees and dependents under federal law, but also states that no federal law, including the Religious Freedom Restoration Act, permits employers to refuse to comply with the ACA requirements.

On August 20, #FixHobbyLobby messages reached more than 1,230,000 Twitter accounts. More than twenty members of Congress participated in this tweet storm – no small feat given that Congress was in recess.

Letters to the Editors

To the Editors:

I recently received my green and white covered *Humanistic Judaism* journal (Winter/Spring 2014). In it there is a fascinating description of “The Pew Study: What Did It Find?” (page 28). For example, “Six in ten Jews in the United States see being Jewish as mainly a matter of culture or ancestry.” The issue also contains book reviews, opinion pieces, poetry, non-fiction, a summary of recent amicus briefs the Society for Humanistic Judaism filed, and contact

information for other Humanistic Jewish congregations, communities, and *havurot*. Enjoy!

Cary Shaw
Norwalk, Connecticut

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.



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.

The Society for Humanistic Judaism:

- Helps to organize Humanistic Jewish communities — congregations and havurot.
- Enables Humanistic Jews throughout the world to communicate with one another.
- Serves the needs of individual Humanistic Jews who cannot find communities that espouse their beliefs.
- Creates celebrational, inspirational, and educational materials.
- Promotes the training of rabbis, leaders, and teachers for Humanistic Jewish communities.
- Provides a voice for Humanistic Jewish values.
- Belongs to an international community of Secular Humanistic Jews.

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