



judaism beyond god

# HUMANISTIC JUDAISM

Volume XLV  
2016, Number 2

## **Change, Fear, and Hope in the Twenty-First Century**

**Peter Schweitzer**

**Jeffrey L. Falick**

**Laura Feldman**

**Frederic S. Pearson**

**Fred L. Pincus**

**Stephen Greenspan**

---

**Humanistic Voices**

---

*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.*

*Humanistic Judaism* is published twice a year by the Society for Humanistic Judaism, a non-profit organization, 28611 West Twelve Mile Road, Farmington Hills, Michigan 48334, (248) 478-7610, info@shj.org, www.shj.org.

Signed articles do not necessarily represent the viewpoints or policies of the Society for Humanistic Judaism. Transliterations used in articles reflect the author's preferences.

All material © Copyright 2016 by the Society for Humanistic Judaism. No portion of this work may be reprinted or copied without written permission of the publisher.

Subscription Rates: \$21.00 per year. Canadian Subscriptions \$31.00. Overseas Subscriptions \$43.00 per year (U.S. Dollars). No refunds. Sample copies available at single issue price plus postage. Additional copies of a single issue are available from the Society for Humanistic Judaism at the cover price plus postage. Address all inquiries and subscriptions to *Humanistic Judaism*, 28611 West Twelve Mile Road, Farmington Hills, Michigan 48334.

Listed in *Index to Jewish Periodicals*, *American Jewish Yearbook*, *Encyclopedia of Associations*, and *Standard Periodical Directory*.

Manuscripts are welcome and may be sent to shjjournaleditors@gmail.com. Word documents preferred.

ISSN 0441-4195

#### Co-Editors

JEREMY M. KRIDEL  
SUSAN A. WARROW

#### Editorial Board

RABBI ADAM CHALOM  
RABBI JEFFREY L. FALICK  
RABBI MIRIAM JERRIS  
RABBI PETER SCHWEITZER

---

---

# Introducing the Society's New Executive Director

**PAUL GOLIN** is a writer, speaker, advocate, and consultant on the most important issues facing the organized Jewish community in America today, including intermarriage, outreach, engagement, disaffiliation, and inclusion.

For nearly two decades, Paul has helped Jewish organizations and movements better understand the key trends affecting North American Jewry. Paul provides training and consultations with staff and boards of synagogues and other Jewish organizations on topics such as engaging more intermarried households, barriers to participation, understanding outreach and inclusion, growing the participating community through “Public Space Judaism” programs, “outreach marketing,” and future trends.

Paul’s writing has appeared in the *Forward*, the *New York Jewish Week*, *Tablet*, the *Huffington Post*, and many other outlets. He co-authored with Rabbi Kerry Olitzky the books: *20 Things for Grandparents of Interfaith Grandchildren To Do (And Not Do) To Nurture Jewish Identity In Their Grandchildren* (2007) and *How To Raise Jewish Children...Even When You're Not Jewish Yourself* (2010).

Paul served as associate executive director of Big Tent Judaism/Jewish Outreach Institute, a national, independent, trans-denominational organization reaching out to unaffiliated Jewish families with an emphasis on engaging intermarried households and helping the organized Jewish community better welcome them in. He was responsible together with the executive director for budget,



development, board stewardship, strategic planning, and the day-to-day operations of the organization. He was also charged with managing all marketing, communications and public relations; coordinating the company’s online presence; and devising advocacy campaigns and program proposals. He previously served as the organization’s director of communications and strategic planning.

Prior to joining Jewish Outreach Institute, Paul worked at the Steinhardt Foundation for Jewish Life as program associate for information technology. Paul has a background in media, having worked at HBO Studio Productions and a startup multimedia games company. He majored in Communications and Political Science at the University of Michigan, Ann Arbor.

Paul is the white Ashkenazi half of a “Jewpanese” (Jewish/Japanese) Jewish multiracial household. He maintains the Jewpanese page on Facebook and tweets at @paulgolin.

---

---

## 2016, Number 2

### HJ FORUM: Change, Fear, and Hope in the Twenty-First Century

- 2    **Hubble at 25**—Rabbi Peter Schweitzer
- 5    **We Are Not as Open-Minded as We Think**—Rabbi Jeffrey L. Falick
- 12   **Humanity Denied: The Migration of African Asylum-Seekers to the State of Israel**—Laura Feldman
- 18   **Fear and Hate in Political Vernacular**—Dr. Frederic S. Pearson
- 24   **Changing Race Relations**—Dr. Fred L. Pincus
- 28   **Should Humanistic Judaism Oppose Capital Punishment?**—Dr. Stephen Greenspan

### HUMANISTIC VOICES

- 32   **Introductory Essay**—Stephanie Blum
- 33   **Subtlety of White Privilege**—Barry Swan
- 35   **T'shuva and Breaking the School-to-Prison Pipeline**—Alana Shindler
- 38   **Truth and Reconciliation on Race**—Rabbi Denise Handlarski
- 40   **Review of *Between the World and Me***—Rabbi Jeffrey L. Falick

### DEPARTMENTS

- 43   **In Review**  
    *At Home in Exile*—Bennett Muraskin

---

---

# FOCUS

We live in interesting times. This issue of *Humanistic Judaism* comes in the midst of a presidential election in the United States, shortly after a series of protests against police violence in the Black community and the murder of a number of police officers. The United Kingdom voted in a referendum to leave the European Union, which is in the midst of an ongoing refugee crisis in Europe. Fear of violence perpetrated by those claiming to wage war in the name of Islam grips many. All of this lays bare the unease of many in society with social change of all sorts—economic, social, ethnic, racial, and international.

How are Humanistic Jews to respond? How can we approach change and the fear it creates to bring about better outcomes? In this issue, we present rabbis and scholars from inside and outside Humanistic Judaism with a variety of viewpoints on change, fear, and hope for a better future: in race relations, our intellectual lives, criminal punishment, gender and sexual rights, and Israel's relationship with the world. No one will likely agree with all of this issue's contributors. But hopefully we all will be moved to consider our own positions and what we can do to respond to social change. Throughout the issue we employed "Black" to indicate a cultural heritage and identity, and "black" as an adjective simply describing color, unless an author cited a work which uses these terms differently.

This issue, we have handed the Features section of the journal to the Society of Humanistic Judaism's Ethical Concerns Committee, which solicited members' opinions on the question of institutional racism in a new discussion forum called Humanistic Voices. We are excited for this collaboration, and pleased that we could provide Humanistic Voices with its first published discussion.

J.M.K. and S.A.W.

---

---

# HJ FORUM: Change, Fear, and Hope in the Twenty-First Century

---

---

## Hubble at 25

by Rabbi Peter H. Schweitzer

For many years I had a favorite sign that I saw posted on a Catholic church in Cincinnati. It read, “Noon Mass, 12:10 pm.” I figured they were running on Jewish-delayed time.

But now I have a new favorite sign along the West Side Highway along the Hudson River. It is a big banner that hangs on the battleship Intrepid. It reads, “Hubble at 25 – An exhibition 13 billion years in the making.”

I chuckle every time I drive by. So much for the world being only 5776 years old. So much for the anti-science community who promote Biblical creationism, climate denial, and otherwise silly thinking. And so much for taking the short view of history.

As part of his COSMOS television series, Carl Sagan famously depicted the path of history as if it all transpired during one year. Each month, essentially, represented the passage of a little over a billion years. Based on this model, it took the forces of the universe a very long time, until about September, the equivalent of some five billion years ago, for the sun to be born. It took another billion or so years for early life forms to appear. Dinosaurs finally entered the scene on December 25, but were extinct by December 30. Archaic Homo sapiens, the forerunner of anatomically modern humans, evolved between 400,000 and 250,000 years ago.

Then, in a flurry of action on the last day of the year and, even more compressed, in the last minute of that year, we take note of all the incredible developments associated with human beings, including the cultivation of agriculture, the invention of writing, music and art, the machinery of the industrial revolution, the amazing discoveries of science and medicine, and, to cap it all off, in the last millisecond, electing an African-American president, legalizing same-sex marriage, and, taking down the Confederate flag.

But let’s not get too cocky. Even as we say, with justified incredulity, “It’s amazing! I never expected these things in my lifetime,” we also know how long have been the struggles, how much blood has been spilled to get this far, how accomplishments are often met with hateful and painful retrenchment and an erosion of hard won rights, how symbolic changes are critical and important, but also how they don’t get at pervasive rage and hostility and systemic dysfunction, and how much more work there is to do.

On April 9, 1865, General Robert E. Lee surrendered to General Ulysses S. Grant at the Appomattox Court House and brought an end

---

---

**Rabbi Peter Schweitzer** is rabbi of the City Congregation for Humanistic Judaism in New York. Rabbi Schweitzer is a member of the editorial board of this journal.

---

---

to the Civil War, the bloodiest conflict in the nation's history. But it was not until this past July 6, some 150 years later, that *The New York Times* saw fit to run an editorial that was titled, "The Civil War is Winding Down."

"It has taken too long," reads the article, "but even an overdue miracle can be stunning to witness." But, as you know, just two days later, the removal of the Confederate flag from the state capital in South Carolina wasn't a done deal. After the South Carolina Senate rapidly and resoundingly approved the flag's removal by a vote of 37 to 3, a diehard contingent of pro-flag lawmakers in the House of Representatives offered a raft of amendments that would have delayed the flag's removal if not derailed the proposal altogether. This last ditch stand obviously did not succeed—in fact, it was decisively beaten 94-20—but that does not mean that this "contentious issue" is "behind us", as one Republican lawmaker said. To the contrary, it is obvious that generational hatred, animosity, and racist activism will not be simply voted away. This ferment and furor is stoked not just by an array of hate groups and right-wing militias, but by the rhetoric of fear-mongering talk show radio hosts, calculating politicians, and mainstream cable journalists who demonize illegal immigrants, disenfranchise and dehumanize African-Americans, and blame GLBT advocates, along with humanists and atheists, for the rest of society's woes. Considering the fact that generations of Southerners have referred to the Civil War as the "War of Northern Aggression," one can easily make the case that *The Times* was premature with its article. We have a long way to go, many miles to walk.

When Barack Obama ran for president in 2008, he spoke out in favor of patience. He said, "I have never been so naïve as to believe that we can get beyond our racial divisions in a single election cycle, or with a single candidacy."

We also know that he has been criticized for being too well-mannered, cool-tempered, and soft spoken. If only he would speak out more forcefully, show more passion, many have demanded. But we also know that Obama has

assiduously avoided any tough talk or outrage that would feed the stereotype of the "angry Black man." The best, at least until recently, was to occasionally express annoyance and nuanced indignation. Now, it seems, as Obama gathers strength for the final phase of his term, with the days dwindling and the finish line ever-nearing, he is less guarded, more outspoken, speaking hard truths and throwing caution to the wind. As Maureen Dowd put it, in "the sunset of his presidency, Obama's bolder side is rising. He's a lame duck who doesn't give a damn."

When the relatives of the slain Mother Emanuel church-members confronted Dylann Roof and told him they forgave him and had mercy on his soul, they shocked a nation with the power of faith. They weren't going to let hatred rule them. They would defeat the killer with the power of their love. The media immediately and uncritically extolled this narrative as if to bring us all along and challenge any of us for harboring ill will.

I believed that these family members were guided by the strength of their church and their teaching, but I didn't trust it. I also thought it was the trained response to the shackles of centuries of enslavement and subservience, where the master always gets forgiven for his actions and obsequiousness and complaisance are learned survival strategies.

A few days later, I read an Op Ed by Roxane Gay, an author and essayist, who expressed better than I could what I had been thinking. Her article was entitled, "Why I Can't Forgive Dylann Roof." Here is what she had to say:

"Black people forgive because we need to survive. We have to forgive time and time again while racism or white silence in the face of racism continues to thrive. We have had to forgive slavery, segregation, Jim Crow laws, lynching, inequity in every realm, mass incarceration, voter disenfranchisement, inadequate representation in popular culture, microaggressions and more. We forgive and forgive and forgive and those who trespass against us continue

---

---

to trespass against us.” She ends by saying, “I, for one, am done forgiving.”

To this I want to add, “And how patient must we be?” How motivated and worked up will we get to continue striving to achieve even more social advances in our own lifetime, to fulfilling the imperatives of a just society that have been imbedded in our consciousness from the days of the Bible when it first talked of feeding the hungry and clothing the naked. What steps will we take to bring forth a just society where human rights are protected, where black lives matter, where all people are valued equally, where economic inequalities and lack of opportunities affect everyone?

In my congregation, we frequently quote Rabbi Tarfon who said, “It is not your duty to complete the task, but nor are you free to desist from it (Pirke Avot 2:21). This is a positive mantra, it’s motivational, but its one failing is that it doesn’t give voice to any sense of urgency. That’s why we must also combine it with Rabbi Hillel’s quote, “If not now, when?”, which ought to be punctuated not just with a question mark, but also with an exclamation point.

The list of issues is long—from gun control and background checks to a higher minimum wage and sustainable incomes, from a broken incarceration system to impending climate change, from restrictive voting rights to access to health care, from safe and affordable housing to adequate nutrition, and on and on it goes.

There is also no shortage of organizations to join, to support with your time and your resources.

Nor is there any lack of candidates to work for, to support with your time and your resources.

The big question is: What trajectory are we on? Will we travel passively, sit idly by, fall into complacency, waiting for small incremental shifts, inch by inch, like glacial speed, like slow-flowing molasses—or get agitated, get passionate, get energized, and take action to speed it up and push things forward?

In Carl Sagan’s schema, time is of the essence. Every second counts.

Give the gift of **Knowledge**

Give the gift of ***Humanistic Judaism***

Gift subscriptions \$21 (Overseas \$43, Canada & Mexico \$31)

Order online from

**the Society for Humanistic Judaism**

<http://www.shj.org/store/hj-journal/>

---

---

# We Are Not as Open-Minded as We Think

by Rabbi Jeffrey L. Falick

It's hard to believe that it's been over ten years since the debut of Stephen Colbert's *The Colbert Report* in October 2005.

The program featured Colbert playing the role of a fictional conservative who just happened to share his name. On the very first episode of the show, he set its tone when he introduced a long-running segment called "The Wørd." His first entry was a word that no one had ever heard before, but it was destined to enter the American lexicon from the moment it splashed onto the screen:

"I tell it like it is," he said. "I calls them like I sees them. I will speak to you in plain simple English. And that brings us to tonight's Word: *truthiness*."

He continued:

Now I'm sure some of the 'word police,' the Wordinistas over at Webster's are gonna say, "Hey, that's not a word!"

Well, anybody who knows me knows I'm no fan of dictionaries or reference books—they're elitist. Constantly telling us what is or isn't true or what did or didn't happen. Who's Britannica to tell me the Panama Canal was finished in 1914? If I want to say it happened in 1941, that's my right.

Do you know you have more nerve endings in your stomach than in your head? Look it up. Now somebody's gonna say, "I did look that up and it's wrong." Well mister, that's 'cause you looked it up in a book. Next time, try looking it up in your gut. I did. And my gut tells me that's how our nervous system works.

Now I know some of you may not trust your gut...yet. But with my help you will (*The Colbert Report* 2005).

Colbert's coinage caught on. In 2006, Merriam-Webster declared it the "Word of the Year" ("Press Release: 2006 Word of the Year" 2016), and dictionary.com provided a formal definition: "the quality of seeming to be true according to one's intuition, opinion, or perception without regard to logic, factual evidence, or the like..." ("Truthiness" 2016).

Colbert's intention, of course, was to satirize conservatives. But the truth about *truthiness* is that it's really about everyone because every single one of us has a similar approach to information processing and decision-making.

A few centuries before Colbert, the philosopher Francis Bacon had already noticed this tendency:

The human understanding, when it has once adopted an opinion (either as being the received opinion or as being agreeable to itself), draws all things else to support and agree with it (Bacon 2009).

Both Colbert and Bacon raise a very important challenge to which evidence-minded Secular Humanists should pay special attention: are we really as open-minded as we think?

Psychologists have another term for the phenomenon addressed by both the humorist and the philosopher: they call it confirmation bias. It describes the unconscious likelihood that we all possess of preferring information that is consistent with our hypotheses, even as

---

---

**Jeffrey L. Falick** is the rabbi of the Birmingham Temple, the first congregation for Humanistic Judaism. He serves on the Executive Committee of the Society for Humanistic Judaism, and is a past president of the Association of Humanistic Rabbis. He sits on the editorial board of this journal.

---

---

we reject propositions that are not (Plous 1993). This bias occurs even when we firmly believe that we are acting in an open-minded way, working to challenge ourselves and our preconceived notions. No matter how much we are convinced that we are avoiding this in-built propensity, it is constantly working against us, preventing us from really weighing all sides of an issue through unbiased investigation or critical consideration of our own positions.

So while we each really want to believe that we are open-minded—making decisions by drawing on our intelligence, experience, and sense of fairness by engaging solely in reason—the real truth (and not the *truthiness*) is that most of the time we are doing nothing of the sort. Rather, we are usually engaged in an unconscious process of seeking information and facts that confirm our pre-existing biases or conform to our own worldview. Simultaneously, we are ignoring or dismissing evidence that might suggest that we are wrong.

The good news is that it's completely normal. We are all doing it almost all of the time. The better news is that once we are aware of it, we can take steps to counteract it when necessary.

Don't believe me? Kendra Cherry, a journalist covering the field of psychology, provides an easy-to-grasp and pretty non-controversial example of how it works:

...[I]magine that a person holds a belief that left-handed people are more creative than right-handed people. Whenever this person encounters a person [who] is both left-handed and creative, they place greater importance on this "evidence" supporting their already existing belief. This individual might even seek out "proof" that further backs up this belief, while discounting examples that do not support this idea (Cherry 2014).

Cherry goes on to note that there really are no reliable data to back up the assertion that lefties are more creative, though I'm sure that many of them are. She concludes by observing that if you happen to hold this belief, every time you meet a creative lefty, it adds to the

mountain of "evidence" that you've accumulated to support your pre-existing belief. Just as significantly, you are simultaneously (and unconsciously) rejecting evidence to the contrary, such as the existence of the statistically expected number of left-handed people who don't have a creative bone in their bodies.

You can easily imagine how this in-built bias might lead us to make some questionable decisions, as it closes our minds to newer and better information. It can also present a fairly significant obstacle to properly conducting our lives in a more rational manner.

Many years ago, I worked with a woman who seemed like quite the reasonable sort. Little did I know that she had created an entire identity for herself as a psychic. One day she came to speak to me about it.

Now I have never been convinced that psychic phenomenology is any more real than gnomes or fairies. As a result, my own pre-existing belief system biased me toward rejecting her unusual claims. Nevertheless, I knew enough about my confirmation bias to try to hold my own in check. In the interest of true open-mindedness as demanded by my Humanistic philosophy, I declared myself ready to be convinced.

What had she experienced, I asked, that would lead her to conclude that she possesses this extraordinary sensory perception? She told me that every single time she found herself thinking about her mother, something involving her mom occurred. These occurrences ranged from a spontaneous visit by her mom, to hearing important news about her, to encountering someone talking about her mother. It happened all the time and every single time. Thus, she concluded, she must possess psychic abilities that have been conjured forth by the closeness of this family bond.

How else, she demanded, could I explain this? Inspired by a similar anecdote related by famed skeptic and science historian Michael Shermer (Shermer 2002), I offered my response. I told her that I could explain it, but that it would require her to be rigorously honest with

---

---

herself and with me. I gave her a little assignment to record each and every time that she found herself thinking about her mom during the next ten days.

She returned on the eleventh day, a little down in the dumps. She had completed the task only to discover that thoughts about her mom were, indeed, much more common than she realized. Only occasionally were they actually coincidental with a call or visit or some other mom-related event. She admitted that even right there in my office where she and I were talking non-stop about her mother, nothing of particular note was taking place between her and her mom.

Now I have no doubt that before our experiment—one in which I served as a kind of “peer reviewer”—she really believed that there was some kind of psychic link present. Yet what was really taking place was that she thought about her mom a great deal. So it happened that there were many memorable occasions when these thoughts coincided with a call, visit or even news about her mother. Her own confirmation bias added each of these instances to the mountain of “evidence” that she possessed psychic powers. Just as significantly, it caused her to forget all the times when it did not.

The cognitive traps set for us by confirmation bias might be easily avoided if we were more aware of its presence. Unfortunately, conquering it is not so easy. Even when we are aware of it, we frequently engage in it anyway.

### **“Creationists Are Just Dumb”**

Consider another example, an assumption that is held by a large number of very rational people: “Creationists are dumb.”

We are, rightfully, baffled by these people. They consistently ignore evidence that has been piling up since Charles Darwin first uncovered the power of natural selection in biological evolution. What other explanation can there be for this? When I asked a number of my own congregants what they thought of creationists, they typically called them imbeciles

and idiots. One of them said that they were all “as dumb as rocks.”

Only our own confirmation bias could lead us to such a conclusion. In fact, if we try to lift its veil from our eyes, we would discover that the objectively verifiable fact is that there are some very smart people who believe in creationism. In fact, creationists frequently trot these people out in their videos or feature them on their websites or other literature. These include brilliant engineers and talented physicians.

If you had asked me a few years ago about the intelligence of creationists, I, too, would have labeled them dummies. My eyes were opened by the famous debate between Ken Ham, founder of the Creation Museum in Kentucky, and Bill Nye, popularly known as the “Science Guy” (“Bill Nye Debates Ken Ham – HD (Official)” 2014).

To be very clear, I found no merit whatsoever in Ham’s presentation. It did not fit any of the facts, and completely ignored the real implications of the amazing evidence attesting to evolution by natural selection. He himself was quite obviously the victim of his own religiously motivated confirmation bias.

However, I was stunned to discover that his arguments extended beyond my own particular field, the claims of scriptures. In fact, he seemed to be familiar with the arguments of evolutionary biologists. His entire presentation was grounded in refuting them. Yet while his conclusions were so very wrong, at no point did he evince any stupidity. In fact, what his reasoning lacked in scientific validity, it made up for in sheer creativity!

My own confirmation bias made it difficult for me to reconcile the fantastic degree of his wrongness with the possibility that he was anything but a drooling fool. Yet I realized that had I not been familiar with the evolutionary theory, I would not have known how to counter many of his arguments!

Michael Shermer has explained how someone who is as smart as Ham could be so wrong:

---

---

Smart people believe weird things because they are skilled at defending beliefs they arrived at for non-smart reasons (Shermer 2002).

And, as Shermer and many others have pointed out, they can employ their smarts even in service of spectacularly bad ideas. We fall victim to our own confirmation bias when we decide that they are merely foolish. We do so at the peril of undermining our own goal of achieving more widespread scientific literacy.

Debates between religious fundamentalists and promoters of science are a great arena for our clashing confirmation biases. Yet another is in politics.

### **“Is Michele Bachmann Really Stupid?”**

Social media has rapidly developed into one of the surest ways for us to demonstrate our biases on a grand scale. Never before have so many people been in conversation with one another about the issues of the day. And because we tend to engage in these exchanges with like-minded people, we are doing ourselves no big favor if our goal is to limit bias. Anyone with a Facebook account knows exactly what I’m talking about.

One favorite technique for bolstering our own positions is the now ubiquitous meme, frequently a picture of someone whom our crowd holds in disdain, accompanied by some outrageous quote.

One of my favorite memes featured conservative lightning rod, Michele Bachmann. It claimed that during an interview with Fox News she said, “The nation has gotten away from the principles of the founding fathers under the failed leadership of Barack Obama. This country could use a president like Benjamin Franklin again.” It appeared repeatedly in my Facebook News Feed.

Oh boy, did I laugh! Of course she said that, I thought. What a maroon! I forwarded that meme and repeated the quote for several days.

But then I had a shocking thought. Bachmann is an attorney, an educated woman. Is it possible that she was accepted to law school without knowing that Benjamin Franklin never served as president?

I directed my browser to the debunking website, [snopes.com](http://snopes.com) where, as I had come to sheepishly suspect, the site confirmed that Michele Bachmann had said nothing of the kind. She knew as well as you and I and the average fifth grader that old Ben was never president. My own confirmation bias had struck again.

Unfortunately, it wreaks more havoc than simply delivering false quotes on social media. Worse still, confirmation bias affects both sides of the political divide in our nation, working against us even when we are very, very sure that we are on the correct side of an issue. We may each believe that we arrive at our positions by a reasoned consideration of the available evidence, but this is never completely the case.

Journalist David McRaney has pointed out that the modern American media have actually created an entire industry built on exploiting our confirmation bias. It’s called punditry:

Punditry is a whole industry built on confirmation bias. Rush Limbaugh and Keith Olbermann, Glenn Beck and Arianna Huffington, Rachel Maddow and Ann Coulter—these people provide fuel for beliefs, they pre-filter the world to match existing world-views. If their filter is like your filter, you love them. If it isn’t, you hate them.

And truthfulness is not really the issue:

Whether or not pundits are telling the truth, or vetting their opinions, or thoroughly researching their topics is all beside the point. You watch them not for information, but for confirmation (McRaney 2010).

We’re never as open-minded as we like to think we are.

### **Stereotyping**

Psychologist Catherine Sanderson has researched the effects of confirmation bias on perpetuating group stereotypes. She conducted

---

---

an experiment in which participants were presented with differing sets of facts about a number of national and ethnic groups. What she discovered is that the facts that matched either pre-existing or commonly held stereotypes about certain groups were more easily remembered than those that did not:

We are more likely to remember (and repeat) stereotype-consistent information and to forget or ignore stereotype-inconsistent information, which is one way stereotypes are maintained even in the face of disconfirming evidence.

If you learn that your new Canadian friend hates hockey and loves sailing, and that your new Mexican friend hates spicy foods and loves rap music, you are less likely to remember this new stereotype-inconsistent information (Sanderson 2010).

It would seem that this manifestation of confirmation bias contributes to more than a few of our worst human traits. That we are more likely to remember stereotype-consistent facts about groups of people certainly points to the insidious effects that the phenomenon can have on our society as we go about negatively stereotyping certain groups.

As I write, we are in the middle of one of the most nativist-driven presidential campaigns in modern history. Every day we hear politicians who make the most horrendous—and demonstrably untrue—claims about certain minority groups in our country. Those who are flocking to hear these completely unsubstantiated claims seem to be utterly immune to fact-based reasoning. Overwhelming statistics about Mexican immigrants or American Muslims cannot compete with some politicians' demagogic exhortations about the threats that they pose to our nation's well-being. Confirmation bias plays no small part in this.

It also works in smaller ways, sometimes sabotaging our own most intimate relationships.

### **The Interpersonal Costs of Confirmation Bias**

Drs. Chuck and Jo-Ann Bird are Florida-based psychotherapists who are also married to each other. They have noted how confirmation bias can lead us into cycles of resentment about

our partners. They offer this very relatable example of how it works:

You're going through your daily routine, and you notice your partner hasn't been picking up his socks lately, or she keeps leaving the lid off the sugar jar in the mornings after her coffee. Then it's the thing he forgot at the store, which happened to be the one thing you really needed. Or she completely forgets about your date night, and winds up going out with the girls instead. Over time, you start forming beliefs about your partner based on these behaviors: He's lazy...she just doesn't care.

And then you notice the damn socks and the sugar lid again!

What may be happening is a psychological phenomenon known as **confirmation bias**. ...[I]f you believe your partner is lazy or doesn't care, you will subconsciously look for evidence throughout the day to support your beliefs (Bird 2015).

Almost any of us in this situation will seek out confidants most likely to sympathize with our dilemma. This is a way of searching for confirmatory evidence that what we are experiencing is real and it's just another way of confirming our bias. Unless we are aware of it, we will probably fail to take the steps that the Birds suggest: to challenge ourselves "to look for evidence or proof that disproves or contradicts [our] negative beliefs" and really test those beliefs that we have about our partners.

### **Where Did Confirmation Bias Come From?**

If we really want to do battle with confirmation bias, it might help to understand where it originated. To do that, we can turn to the fascinating field of evolutionary psychology, which studies human behaviors in an attempt to determine whether, at some time in the past, they conferred some kind of survival benefit for our species.

In a 2011 paper in the journal *Behavioral and Brain Sciences*, two researchers, Hugo Mercier and Dan Sperber, proposed an answer (Mercier 2011). Their theory is quite intricate, but it boils down to this: Our ability to reason is very good, but our application of reasoning

---

---

evolved in ways that rewarded our ability to argue effectively, a key to our ability to collaborate and cooperate in pro-social ways.

To be good at arguing—as opposed to mere reasoning—we need to be good at gathering and organizing evidence that supports the claims we are trying to make. In other words, our ability to reason co-evolved in concert with our pro-social need to persuade others. When you're trying to achieve that goal, you seek arguments that support you.

Mercier and Sperber call this idea about reasoning “argumentative theory.” They believe that it explains confirmation bias by understanding it not as a flaw of reasoning, but as a feature. It helped lead to group cohesion, an essential ingredient in our species’ survival.

The theory is disputed by some, but I believe that it provides an important insight into the extent that pro-social evolutionary advantages contributed to fashioning a bias that affects our reasoning behavior. This may pose a pretty big challenge in our complex modern world, but I think that we are smart enough to overcome it. Our creation of the scientific method, with its distinctly *anti-social* emphases on peer review and falsification, demonstrates that we can consciously engage in bias-resistant reasoning.

### Encouraging Debate

I hope I have demonstrated pretty clearly (and without too much bias) that we are not as open-minded as we think. As is the case with so many human shortcomings, awareness is the key to change.

In the case of confirmation bias, there is another key, too: diversity.

Confirmation bias exercises its strongest hold on us when we are reasoning alone or in like-minded and homogenous groups. Therefore, it stands to reason (!) that minimizing its effect can be helped along by opening ourselves up to a diversity of opinions and world-views. This can be challenging, but it can also be enlightening.

One of the biggest challenges it poses is forcing us to face the flaws in our own arguments. Sometimes we will be left with no honest choice but to change our minds. Yet at other times, we may find that exposing ourselves to other voices can actually aid us in strengthening our own positions and better shaping our reasoning.

Believe me when I tell you that I dreaded sitting through that Ken Ham and Bill Nye debate. I was sorely tempted to fast-forward through the creationist’s arguments. Yet my decision to listen carefully helped me to identify the biases in my own reasoning—about Ham’s intelligence and the quality of his ability to argue—and to better reason my own position. It was not a lot of fun to do, but in the end it was worth it to explore another way of looking at the issues.

We Secular Humanists organize our lives around the idea that all of our commitments and beliefs must stand up to the scrutiny of reason. We celebrate this and the scientific method as the only paths to true knowledge.

Such a commitment also requires us to be skeptical, not only of the claims of others, but about the ideas and positions that *we* hold dear. Overcoming confirmation bias helps us to more fully explore the truth—and not just the “truthiness”—of every claim we make.

### Sources

Bacon, Francis. 2009. *The New Organon (Novum Organon)*. Translated by James Spedding. Seattle: Amazon Digital Services LLC. Kindle e-book.

“Bill Nye Debates Ken Ham – HD (Official).” 2014. *YouTube*. February 4. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=z6kgvhG3AkI>.

Bird, Chuck and JoAnn Bird. 2015. “What Beliefs Are You Confirming?” *Chuck and JoAnn Bird*. November 17. <http://chuckandjoannbird.com/what-beliefs-are-you-confirming/>.

Cherry, Kendra. 2014. “Why We Favor Information That Confirms Our Existing Beliefs.” *About.com Health*. October 27. <http://psychology.about.com/od/cognitivepsychology/fl/What-Is-a-Confirmation-Bias.htm>.

---

---

Colbert Report, *The*. 2005. "Stone Phillips." Season 1, Episode 1. Directed by Jim Hoskinson. Written by Stephen Colbert, et al. Comedy Central, October 17.

McRaney, David. 2010. "Confirmation Bias." *You Are Not So Smart*. June 23. <http://www.youarenotsmart.com/2010/06/23/confirmation-bias/>.

Mercier, Hugo and Dan Sperber. 2011. "Why Do Humans Reason? Arguments for an Argumentative Theory." *Behavioral and Brain Sciences* 54 (2): 57-74.

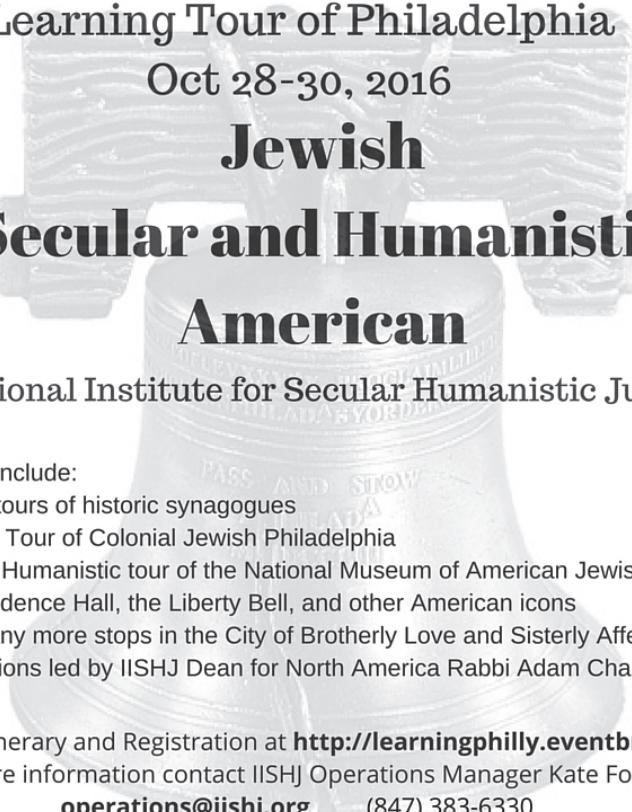
Plous, Scott. 1993. *The Psychology of Judgment and Decision Making*. New York: McGraw-Hill.

"Press Release: 2006 Word of the Year." 2016. *Merriam-Webster*. Accessed February 19. <http://www.merriam-webster.com/press-release/2006-word-of-the-year>.

Sanderson, Catherine Ashley. 2010. *Social Psychology*. Hoboken, NJ: Wiley.

Shermer, Michael. 2002. *Why People Believe Weird Things: Pseudoscience, Superstition, and Other Confusions of Our Time*. Rev. and enl. ed. New York: Holt Paperbacks.

"Truthiness." 2016. *Dictionary.com*. Accessed February 19. <http://dictionary.reference.com/browse/truthiness>.



Learning Tour of Philadelphia  
Oct 28-30, 2016  
**Jewish  
Secular and Humanistic  
American**

International Institute for Secular Humanistic Judaism

Highlights include:

- Private tours of historic synagogues
- Walking Tour of Colonial Jewish Philadelphia
- Secular Humanistic tour of the National Museum of American Jewish History
- Independence Hall, the Liberty Bell, and other American icons
- Plus many more stops in the City of Brotherly Love and Sisterly Affection
- Discussions led by IISHJ Dean for North America Rabbi Adam Chalom

Complete Itinerary and Registration at <http://learningphilly.eventbrite.com>

For more information contact IISHJ Operations Manager Kate Forest

[operations@iishj.org](mailto:operations@iishj.org) (847) 383-6330

---

---

# Humanity Denied: The Migration of African Asylum-Seekers to the State of Israel

by Laura Feldman

## Introduction

Due to a complex history of struggle amongst its diverse population, Israel has not always been regarded as stable, inclusive, or safe, either by its citizens or by the rest of the world. Nevertheless, over the past decade, thousands of African asylum seekers have migrated there, leading to a currently estimated population of fifty or sixty thousand refugees residing in the country today (*Al Jazeera* 2015), constituting nearly one percent of Israel's total population ("Refugees" 2015). The influx of refugees seeking sanctuary within Israel's borders has prompted, as well as exacerbated, conflicts and challenges faced within the country.

Desperate to avoid persecution in their home countries, groups of African asylum-seekers began migrating to Israel just over ten years ago, primarily through Egypt's Sinai Peninsula, which borders Israel. Nearly two-thirds of asylum-seekers are from Eritrea, while many of the rest are from Sudan (Wedekind 2015). Both are East African countries situated along the coast of the Red Sea that have endured ongoing war and political unrest under tyrannical regimes.

Under international legal conventions, the term "asylum-seekers" denotes individuals who move to a foreign country and declare they will be in danger if they are returned to their home country. Typically, asylum-seekers' claims undergo review through a Refugee Status Determination Process, which examines whether asylum-seekers are eligible for refugee status. In Israel, however, since 2009, less than 2% of all refugee claims

have been processed, according to the United Nation's High Commissioner for Refugees (Lidman 2016).

The Convention Relating to the Status of Refugees states that a refugee is a person who fears returning to his or her country of origin due to apprehension of facing persecution for reasons of "race, religion, nationality, membership of a particular social group or political opinion" ("Refugees" 2015). The significance of an asylum-seeker being classified a *migrant* versus a *refugee* is an important distinction because under UN convention, refugees cannot be deported, whereas "nations are free to deport migrants who enter without legal papers" (Schwartz 2015).

Prior to 2006, the number of African asylum-seekers in Israel was small, and few Israelis were aware of either the presence or plight of African asylum-seekers in the country. But with the rapid growth of this population, their situation has become a controversial, pressing, and widely discussed issue within Israel and among international human rights organizations. Until 2013, Israel did not allow individuals from Eritrea, Sudan, or the Congo to apply for the Refugee Status Determination Process ("Refugees" 2015). As of June of 2016, of the

---

---

**Laura Feldman** is a Detroit activist primarily focused on community building and social justice. She graduated magna cum laude from Wayne State University, with a Bachelors in Cultural Anthropology and Peace and Conflict Studies. Laura grew up as a member of Congregation Shaarey Zedek, a Conservative synagogue located in Southfield, MI. Her experiences working at Isha L'Isha, Israel's oldest feminist organization, prompted her investment in the plight of African asylum-seekers' migration to Israel and she continues to raise awareness.

---

---

5573 refugee status requests filed by Eritrean and Sudanese asylum-seekers in Israel, only five requests total have been granted (Lidman, 2016). This means that Israel approves less than one-tenth of a percent of African asylum-seekers' claims for refugee status. This figure is significantly lower than that of most other countries, which have approved such status for 70% of Eritrean and Sudanese asylum-seekers on average (Ibid.).

The Israeli government's and the media's portrayals of African asylum-seekers fuel the fears of and animosity directed towards incoming African refugees among Israeli citizens. News outlets in Israel often refer to African asylum-seekers as "infiltrators." This term carries an exceptionally negative connotation for many Israelis because it is connected to refugee Palestinians who attacked the State in the 1950s and were also called "infiltrators." Highly-placed officials in the Israeli government have, in essence, launched a smear campaign against asylum-seekers in Israel ("Refugees" 2015). Today, the question of Africans seeking asylum in Israel has become a highly charged issue.

### **African Migrant Countries of Origin: Eritrea and Sudan**

Examining the dire situations and volatile political circumstances from which Africans asylum-seekers flee to seek refuge in Israel helps us understand motivations for enduring the oppressive conditions the Israeli government imposes upon Eritrean and Sudanese asylum-seekers upon their arrival and throughout their time in the country. Understanding this context in the lives of African asylum-seekers prior to their perceived "infiltration" also reminds us of their humanity.

Eritrea and Sudan are both countries in which dictatorships oppress citizens and violate human rights. According to the Hotline for Refugees and Migrants, most refugees seeking asylum in Israel hail from "regions in a prolonged state of humanitarian catastrophe" ("Refugees" 2015). Migrants from Eritrea and Sudan flee to escape conditions of rape, torture, murder, forced labor, and extended detention

without trial in their own countries. Sudan has for over a decade accommodated the genocide of Darfuri children, women, and men; Reporters Without Borders has characterized Eritrea as the "least free country in the world" (Ibid.). Many refugees have been traumatized in their countries of origin and faced the deaths of one or more family members (Ibid.).

Most asylum-seekers coming to Israel do not travel as whole families; the journey is fraught with danger, which makes successful travel as a group unlikely. As a result, refugees flee alone, often abandoning their families to make the trek. Leaving, or even raising suspicion that one plans to leave, often has potentially deadly consequences. It is not uncommon for people to leave without saying goodbye to their loved ones because of such threats. If the government discovers that an individual plans to flee, it may result in his or her torture or execution. These penalties both punish would-be asylum-seekers and warn others against making similar efforts ("Connect" 2016). Despite the personal risks of leaving, African refugees nevertheless flee because staying behind is a worse fate.

### **Influential Policies and Israel's Response**

According to the Israeli magazine of independent commentary and news, *+972 Magazine*, the State of Israel "is pursuing a string of restrictive measures to stem the tide of arrivals" ("Seeking Asylum in Israel" 2015). The State's strategy is one of deterrence; it seeks to manage the influx of asylum-seeking Africans attempting to immigrate to Israel overall by limiting refugees' access to social and economic resources ("Refugees" 2016). Israel's ideologies and beliefs about asylum-seekers from Eritrea and Sudan guide its official responses and policies toward them. In accordance with the Refugee Convention, Israel's policy of "temporary protection" or "delay of removal" is consistent with the "non-refoulement principle," which maintains that all states are compelled to not deport individuals back to a nation in which they will be endangered ("Refugees" 2016). This principle is central to the Refugee Convention, by which Israel is expected and pressured to abide.

---

---

Guidelines set forth by the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (also known as the UN Refugee Agency) also grant asylum-seekers protection from deportation to their countries of origin. Nevertheless, and in apparent contravention of international law, Israel continues to deport Eritrean and Sudanese asylum-seekers back to their home countries, where escapees and defectors are commonly arrested and tortured, or are sometimes simply executed outright (Ibid.).

Not only does Israeli policy deny asylum-seekers work permits, which often results in their working temporary jobs for less than minimum wage, but the State also denies access to medical and welfare services (T'ruah 2014). On top of all this, the current version of the Anti-Infiltration Law in Israel, most recently amended in August of 2015, requires the imprisonment of asylum-seekers for three months after entering Israel. After completing this sentence, refugees are transferred to the Holot detention camp for an additional period of internment. Holot, “sands” in Hebrew, is a “specially constructed internment camp” located in the Negev desert, situated across the road from a prison near the Egyptian border. Holot is the largest detention center of its kind in the world (T'ruah 2014).

Throughout this ordeal, the only way an asylum-seeker can affect his or her chances of leaving Holot is to agree to be deported back to Eritrea or Sudan, potentially to be killed for having fled (“Connect” 2016). Otherwise, an asylum-seeker must simply wait out the twenty-month term of detention (this was temporarily reduced in 2015 following petitions by Israeli human rights organizations). As of April 2016, the detention center hit capacity, now that over 3300 asylum-seekers are being held in Holot (Lior 2016). The majority of these are asylum-seekers who have already been living in Israel for years (T'ruah 2014). Since the beginning of 2016, those who have been detained for over nine months have gradually been released to make room for new arrivals while the State makes plans to expand the detention center (Lior 2016). Meanwhile, any asylum-seeker already living in Israel is at risk

of being interned in this detention center at any time (“Refugees” 2015). Despite the decree reducing the term of detention, how long and how often refugees are placed in jail or at Holot is ultimately a case-by-case determination made at the Israeli government’s discretion (Lior 2016).

These policies are continuously amended or criticized by both local and international organizations. Despite challenges, the State of Israel has regularly acted to overturn or circumvent backlash and refutation. Since the non-refoulement principle prohibits the Israeli government from legally deporting asylum-seekers inconspicuously, the state does all it can to encourage asylum-seekers to leave the country of their own accord. There is a great deal of discrepancy in Israel’s policies. Considered in conjunction with international decree, the legality of the measures taken and laws made by the Israeli government are debatable and indefinite.

### **Controversy and the Conditions for African Asylum-Seekers in Israel**

The State’s decision to not process asylum-seekers’ claims leaves them suspended in “legal limbo,” which limits their ability to seek legitimate employment. Both in status and practice a fringe group, African asylum-seekers must seek means of survival, which at times falls outside of the boundaries of legality, given the pressures that make living difficult for them in Israel. Thus, the migration of African asylum-seekers into certain territories is also accompanied with an influx of crime and violence, which further exacerbates tensions. Exacerbating these problems is that the burden of absorbing the asylum-seekers has fallen on those living in Israel’s disenfranchised regions (T'ruah 2014). Refugee populations are the most densely concentrated regions of the State, such as southern Tel Aviv and other areas “in the economic [and social] periphery of Israel.” These include low-cost, impoverished neighborhoods in Jerusalem, Eilat, Arad, Kiryat, Gat, Be’er Sheva, and Ashkelon (“Refugees” 2015). Many Israeli citizens hold asylum-seekers responsible for the deteriorating fiscal state of these regions. But they do not factor

---

---

in that these areas were already impoverished, “suffer[ing] from declining infrastructure such as poor sanitation”—the very reasons asylum-seekers were able to migrate to those regions (T’ruah 2014, 3). Taken in combination with the government’s policies toward asylum-seekers generally, asylum-seekers cannot be held solely responsible for the gradual decline of these areas.

Meanwhile, many Israelis know that these areas were already struggling precisely because of the pre-existing problem of inclusion which Israel grapples with. These Israelis claim that the country and its citizens do not have the means to support the problems which refugees are perceived to bring with them. Further, the State’s efforts to make asylum-seekers’ lives difficult results in them finding themselves cornered into extreme circumstances. This exacerbates Israelis’ negative views of asylum-seekers’ subsequent actions.

Aggravating the situation still more, incitement campaigns are actively waged against asylum-seekers, carried out by Israeli officials at all levels (“Refugees” 2015). Prominent politicians and legislators, including members of the Knesset from the Likud party, have fanned the flames of xenophobia and racism against asylum-seekers for years. High officials, such as culture minister, Miri Regev, and other present or former members of parliament, have labeled asylum-seekers as a “cancer in the body of the nation,” “rapists,” and carriers of “contagious diseases” (Schwartz 2015). Israel’s treatment of refugees, denial of their rights, their imprisonment upon arrival into the country, and Israel’s ‘broken’ Refugee Status Determination Process, are all reflective of the State’s desire to deter refugees from both arriving and remaining, by making it difficult for them to exist happily or with dignity. (“Refugees” 2015).

The anti-refugee incitement campaigns are crafted to justify Israel’s overall response to incoming asylum-seekers. As part of such campaigns, “asylum-seekers are presented as ‘infiltrators’ who came to Israel solely to work” (Ibid.). In Israeli society, well-paying jobs are difficult to find. By skewing the understanding

of reasons African asylum-seekers migrate to Israel and positioning refugees as job competitors with Israelis, incitement campaigns are effective at creating opposition to African refugees. That these campaigns fail to find a way to explain why asylum-seekers are not just deported from the State, as is routine in Israel in the case of undocumented migrants, does little to hinder the campaign or to undermine its message (Ibid.). The “work infiltrator” mislabel has thus been a particularly effective aspect of the incitement campaign against asylum-seekers.

Ministers and elected politicians also paint asylum-seekers as a demographic threat, interfering with Israeli growth. Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu stated in 2012, “If we don’t stop the problem, 60,000 infiltrators are liable to become 600,000 and cause the negation of the State of Israel as a Jewish and democratic state” (Schwartz 2015).

After surviving genocide at the hands of the Nazis, displaced Jews sought refuge, but were denied entry to many countries. Though the creation of the Israeli State was promoted as a safe haven for an oppressed minority, State policies have made Israel a place of security and refuge *exclusively for those of Judaic lineage*. As a result, the Zionist Movement has contributed massively to the present demographics of Israel.

When incitement campaigns rile fears of African refugees affecting the ethnic makeup of Israel, many Zionist citizens resent non-Jewish migrants and perceive them as a threat to the Jewish demographic majority, as described by Zionist doctrines (“Zionism: A Definition of Zionism” 2014). For instance, even though Ethiopian Jews were deliberately brought to the country to aid a diasporic community’s “return to the Homeland,” many Israelis still do not accept them (Westheimer and Kaplan 1992, 14). Given animosity toward culturally different “Jewish outsiders,” it is perhaps no surprise that non-Jewish Eritreans and Sudanese, who were not invited to come to the country, have been objects of hostility and trepidation.

---

---

The polarizing discussion surrounding African asylum-seekers in Israel is also a product of the apparent contradictions between upholding Israel's ethno-national foundations and having a Western-style democracy. According to a report published by the UN Refugee Agency, "While refugees fleeing oppressive regimes do not contribute to strengthening the 'Jewish' nature of the State, they do symbolize Israel's commitment to humanitarian and liberal democratic values" (Afeef 2009, 20). In this sense, Israel finds itself between the devil and the deep blue sea; it can do nothing regarding asylum-seekers that will not run contrary to the beliefs of citizens, government officials, or organizations that prioritize one set of ideals over another. This conflict in values, and whether to give more weight to the ethnic-national or liberal-democratic facets of Israeli identity, further inflames the debate about African asylum-seekers.

Controversies within Israel surrounding African asylum-seekers are numerous. Impoverished Israeli citizens suffer consequences from the influx of refugees and the economic, social, and infrastructural pressures placed on the peripheral communities to which they move. Fear-mongering perpetrated through incitement campaigns carried out by government officials effectively results in Israeli Jews' rejection of incoming migrants, and Israelis are wary of asylum-seekers as job competitors. They also fear the impact African asylum-seeker populations will have on national security, specifically by making the State vulnerable to terrorist attacks or by impacting the demographics of the State. Thus, human rights organizations find themselves at odds with the Israeli government, which may skirt the law or impose illegal policies, disregard international conventions, and simply neglect the humanity of those seeking refuge within its borders.

## Conclusion

The State of Israel has long struggled to aid protect its citizens and residents. Up until this point, it has lacked the resources, knowledge, and ultimately, the will to support refugees who arrive in Israel. In response to these limitations, the State has undertaken systematic efforts to make life difficult for asylum-seekers to encourage them to leave. Incitement campaigns

against asylum-seekers stigmatize them, and results in little support from Israeli citizens for amending existing policies to be more accepting and caring of refugees. Instead, many Israeli citizens want their government to dismiss the non-refoulement principle and deport African asylum-seekers, despite the fact that asylum-seekers will possibly meet their demise upon their return (Schwartz 2015).

Israel's lack of support for asylum-seekers may be shortsighted, but it is also a pragmatic response, given how vulnerable the Jewish State has been, historically and presently. One might expect a country created as a safe haven for an oppressed minority to have a more compassionate outlook toward those seeking safety within its borders. Sudanese refugees escaping genocide and seeking asylum in Israel mirrors, in many ways, the experience of Jews being persecuted during the Holocaust and struggling to find refuge. Moreover, other nations might perceive Israel's policies toward asylum-seekers as a reason not to support Israel in the future, should it need help from those who wish them harm.

But Israel's decision to deter asylum-seekers from entering the region is actually driven by some logic. Israel is a small country with many challenges and struggles. Setting aside the fears spawned by incitement campaigns, Israel is in a difficult situation because of the practical and economic challenges of providing for those who come with nothing and are culturally different from Israelis. Refugees do not speak Hebrew or practice Jewish or Israeli customs, which makes their integration difficult. One could argue that Israel aggressively looks out for the welfare of its own citizens first, by attempting to stave off an influx of people who may disturb the uneasy balance of cultural forces in Israel today.

Although it is easy to condemn Israel for its actions, it is also important to reflect upon the country's history to understand its policy decisions. Given the repeated attempts to wipe out the Jewish people over thousands of years, the Israeli State acts out of both fear and pragmatism which is, at least arguably, expected. Despite the injustice of government policy

---

---

and incitement campaigns, it is important to recognize, as many Israelis do, that the country has yet to develop the tools and knowledge necessary to absorb and integrate refugees, a problem that is far from unique to Israel. The question then follows: how can Israel strike a balance between its own well-being and social stability, and the humanitarian crisis that the country unexpectedly finds at its front door?

### Sources

Afeef, Karin F. 2009. *A Promised Land for Refugees? Asylum and Migration in Israel*. <http://ardc-israel.org/sites/default/files/4b2213a59.pdf>.

Al Jazeera. 2015. "Israel Releases Hundreds of African Asylum Seekers from Detention Center." *Al Jazeera*, Aug. 25. <http://america.aljazeera.com/articles/2015/8/25/israel-releases-migrants-from-detention-center.html>.

"Connect." 2016. *Sense Writing*. Accessed July 16. <http://www.sensewriting.org/read-1-1>.

Lidman, Melanie. 2016. "After 3,165 Requests, First Sudanese Man Gets Israeli Refugee Status." *The Times of Israel*, June 27. <http://www.timesofisrael.com/after-3165-requests-first-sudanese-man-gets-israeli-refugee-status/>.

Lior, Ilan. 2016. "Asylum-seekers Released From Holot to Make Room for New Arrivals." *Haaretz*, January 9. <http://www.haaretz.com/israel-news/premium-1.695880>.

"Refugees." 2015. *Hotline for Refugees and Migrants*. Accessed November 22. <http://hotline.org.il/en/refugees-and-asylum-seekers-en/>.

Schwartz, Yardena. 2015. "Non-Jewish Refugees Get a Cold Shoulder in Israel." *Newsweek*. Newsweek, Oct. 13. <http://www.newsweek.com/2015/10/23/what-europe-can-learn-israels-refugee-crisis-382523.html>.

"Seeking Asylum in Israel." 2015. +972. Accessed November 22. <http://972mag.com/special/asylum-seekers-2/>.

T'ruah. 2014. *Resources for Rabbis and Educators: African Refugees & Asylum Seekers in Israel*. <http://www.truah.org/images/stories/Refugees-materials-for-rabbis.pdf>.

Wedekind, Vera. 2015. "The Crisis of Eritrean Refugees in Israel." *Humanity in Action*. Accessed November 22. <http://www.humanityinaction.org/knowledgebase/544-the-crisis-of-eritrean-refugees-in-israel>.

Westheimer, Ruth K., and Steven Kaplan. 1992. *Surviving Salvation: The Ethiopian Jewish Family in Transition*. New York: New York University Press.

"Zionism: A Definition of Zionism." 2014. *Jewish Virtual Library*. Accessed November 24. <http://www.jewishvirtuallibrary.org/jsource/Zionism/zionism.html>.

## Coming in Our Next Issue:

### "Evolution or Revolution"

– Papers from the 2014 IISHJ Colloquium

### Commemorating Fiction

– Grappling with Real Jewish History

And More

---

---

# Fear and Hate in Political Vernacular

by Dr. Frederic S. Pearson

## Introduction

Many commentators have noted parallels between the recent upswings of strident and exclusionary rhetoric in American and European political discourse and electoral campaigns on the one hand, and the fascist and Nazi periods between the world wars on the other. Styled, at least in the United States, as a bare-knuckles response to the timidity of “political correctness,” politicians have given license to people once again to castigate individuals and entire groups in ways not seen much in public since the days of the U.S. civil rights movement. Aggravating this are social media sites that seem to produce “shoot from the hip” responses in postings and blogs with the ease of venting through the “send” button.

There are two key underlying factors in all this, shared as well in the fascist era and other historical periods (e.g., colonial Salem, Massachusetts; open housing and school bussing debates): the politics of fear and hate. These are two separate emotions, but they are closely related and intricately intertwined. One picks up where the other leaves off. When an electoral candidate says we must “temporarily” bar all Muslims from entering the country until we “figure out what’s happening” with terrorist incidents, her or his basic appeal is to those who fear for their security and harbor anti-Muslim sentiments. The easy transference of fear into resentment of an entire group mixes fear and hate in a powerful way. And when that same candidate advocates building an ever higher physical wall on the border to keep out “undesirable” elements (“they are not sending us their best citizens”) migrating across that border, again the play is to identify a group to both castigate and fear: “they” are taking over, and the country will soon be majority non-white. All the while, these candidates offer little or no perceptible

condemnation of individuals and groups that practice other acts of violence—particularly with firearms—and perpetrate hate crimes at home. This calls up the worst recollections of the inter-war years, when thugs and militia were enlisted to give effect to hate speech.

It is possible to hate others without much fearing them and vice versa. Harmon (2009) reports on initial brain studies show that the emotional neurons related to hate—at least for individuals—are located closer to parts of the brain that spawn love emotions (think of the old saying, “love can turn to hate”) than to parts of the brain that give rise to fear, anger, and danger responses. Group, as opposed to individual, hatred and fear may be more complex, however. They may involve not only static reaction to a situation or repeated experiences, but also the transmission of cues, myths, and memories across time and place (see Ross 2013). Did the Nazi Party really fear Jews when it singled them out for vitriolic and politically profitable scapegoating and hatred? Perhaps not. But presumably some in the public who subscribed to the Party’s hateful views also feared (and in some cases perhaps secretly and jealously admired) the Jewish “race” out of superstitious and primeval myths (e.g., blood sacrifice, etc.) that were derived from and propagated by religion. Playing on unconscious fear is a long standing tactic of political demagogues.

Spectacular events that seem to threaten our security often lead to backlashes of fear and hatred, sometimes triggering new prejudices,

---

---

**Dr. Frederic Pearson** is Professor of Political Science and Director of the Center for Peace and Conflict Studies at Wayne State University, where he has been named Gershenson Distinguished Faculty Fellow. He publishes and speaks widely in the community on issues of international and local conflict management, including the reduction of violence, inter-ethnic relations, civil war trends and solutions, arms and warfare.

---

---

sometimes playing on old ones. Fear can lead to prudent measures to improve security, as witnessed at airports and public places. But it can also lead to excesses often seen in draconian clampdowns and excessive restrictions on civil liberties or rights (“Red Scares,” McCarthyism, aspects of the Patriot Act, etc.). Major shocks can drastically alter public opinion and play into prejudices, as occurred with British acceptance of cameras on many if not most of their city streets, and in backlashes against immigration in many European countries.

It is not only perceived crises that may drive peoples’ fears and hatred, but also more subtle trends and developments as well. These can include individuals’ social circumstances and frustrations, which, combined with existing hatreds, may cause them to blame or lash out at others (see Gurr 2011). These responses can be aggravated by realization or supposition that conditions are getting worse. Perhaps this is why a slogan such as “make America great again” resonates with those who see the world as dangerous, unappreciative of American efforts, out of control, and going the “wrong” way in any number of respects. No one is totally free of prejudices, and these also come into play in giving voice to discontent. In the next section we seek to better understand the complex fears prevalent in today’s political rhetoric as they relate to scapegoating.

### **What Do Americans Fear?**

Fear and even hatred in American politics exists today on both ends of the political spectrum. People on both the right and left seem to be focused on many insecurities, often related to inter-ethnic relations and foreign affairs. We are familiar with those on the right resenting a “flood” of illegal immigrants, “radical *jihaddists*,” and the “loss” of American dominance overseas. Many on the left, however, wrestle with demons associated with the police and criminal justice system, “racism and sexism,” environmental crises, unemployment, globalization, and eroding income levels. These concerns can generate movements and counter movements for change, such as “Black Lives Matter” and the responsive slogan, “All Lives Matter.” Left to fester, these movements can

eventually generate violence and rebellion, as similar “consciousness raising” did in the 1960s and ‘70s (see Burrough 2015). Those in the center of the political spectrum also seem fearfully concerned with issues like crime, the fate of the “middle class,” pandemics, and American economic competitiveness abroad.

Many of these themes have been seen before in America, especially under conditions of international warfare, the Great Depression, and the Cold War—where fear of nuclear annihilation first surfaced. An American president memorably sought to calm an entire nation by saying, “We have nothing to fear but fear itself,” but the course of the Depression and World War II gave reasonable grounds for fear.

Of interest for our present discussion is a recent (2015) random poll<sup>1</sup> of 1500 Americans by researchers at Chapman University. The study revealed what people fear and how great their fears were, at least when prompted to choose from a list of potential concerns. Man-made disasters, especially relating to terrorism and bio-warfare, topped the list (a reading of 2.2 on a 4 point “fear scale”). These were followed closely by technological concerns such as government or companies tracing personal information, and governmental concerns related to corruption, “Obamacare,” and other political trends. A cluster of fears related to the environment, personal future, and natural disasters came in next on the list, followed by issues of crime, personal anxieties, daily life stresses, and judgment of others. As for specific issues, the highest percentage of respondents were afraid or very afraid of government corruption (58%); followed by cyber-terrorism, corporate tracking of personal information, terrorist attacks, government information tracking, and bio-warfare (all at 40% or more); and then identity theft, economic collapse, running out of money, and credit card fraud (all above 30%).

Some of these fears give fodder to political campaigns. Others appear to be responses to everyday news reports. Social issues and inter-ethnic tensions such as illegal immigration and the country becoming mostly non-white came in considerably lower in the 2015 Chapman

---

---

study, and were classified as part of governmental fears. Nevertheless, it appears that these can be elevated by a political drumbeat that dwells on them along with new violent incidents, as in 2016.

Do people act on these fear “drivers”? Nearly a quarter of the survey’s respondents reported voting based on their fears. More than 10% reported purchasing a gun on that basis. Governmental fears were ranked highest by those taking both of these actions. It would appear that the majority of the electorate is not particularly fear driven, but there is an active and sometimes vocal minority who are, and who may carry their fears toward aspects of hatred.

Many of the basic fear categories—ethnicity, government, man-made and natural disasters, threats to personal future, crime—can be shared in various forms across the political spectrum. Some on the left and some on the right both express fear and resentment of government, though usually for different reasons. They may view government as “big brother,” watching and restricting personal freedom and “free markets” or “dictating” social behavior (“right to life,” gun rights, medical coverage or religious expression). Or they may focus on police brutality, “school-to-prison pipelines,” denial of voting rights, war-mongering, or attacks on organized labor. Similarly, regardless of partisan preference, many Americans remain worried about how low or receding incomes or economic collapse—reverberations of the Great Recession—will affect their lives and families. Fear of crime, too, can range from worries about safety in the streets to hate crimes. Some of the fears studied in the Chapman survey, such as Obamacare and crime, appear to have roots in other prejudices and resentments or hatreds, such as views of the President and factors of racial or ethnic resentment (first Black president, “birther” claims, Islamic myth, etc.), or stereotypes of Black youths in hoodies. Finally, there is fear of new social trends and, on the other hand, fear of violence against communities of change, such as those opposing or backing LGBTQ rights.

All this fear and attendant hatred, as noted, may not afflict the majority of Americans. But

with worsening conditions, such as severe economic downturn or a couple of additional terrorist acts on US soil, individuals’ reactions can become magnified enough to swing elections. Such fears appear to have tipped the UK vote toward exit from the European Union, and it is worth remembering that both Hitler and Mussolini originally obtained political office through a combination of street demonstrations and electoral processes. These movements seemed to offer quick and easy solutions to fears, and they cleverly played on prevailing and latent nationalism and public prejudices, even in countries with generally high education levels. In our own time, American politics and political expression seem polarized into hostile camps. Lest we forget, polarization of the American public is nothing new, as seen during the Civil War era, Reconstruction, and the New Deal. Politically opposed segments seem to talk past each other and to demonize opponents.

### **Approaches to Moderating Fear and Hate**

Are there any antidotes to the possibly lethal combination of the emotions of fear and hate in politics?

When confronted with the conundrum of overcoming fear and hatred, both the Buddha and Mahatma Gandhi advised facing fears head on. Buddha famously counseled monks afraid of confronting tree spirits at night when meditating in the forest to meditate with loving kindness for the tree spirits. Gandhi advised a grieving Hindu father whose son had been killed by Muslims to eschew revenge and instead adopt a Muslim orphan and treat him as his own son (Chen 2006, 84). These “transpersonal” and even nurturing approaches to facing fears and hatred offer some insight into strategies that might stem the spread of public fear and hate mongering (as an action example see Yee 2015).

For example, there is longstanding evidence that overlapping and cross-cutting group memberships in organizations, such as clubs, business, and civic associations, can help allay prejudice by making people more familiar with and accepting of one another on a personal

---

---

level. In some situations involving public insecurity and fear, such as after the September 11<sup>th</sup> attacks in the US, people have vouched for one another across ethnic lines because of their common affiliations.

There have been effective approaches to addressing moderate inter-group hostility within various age groups at the individual level to diminish prejudice (see Hewstone, Rubin, and Willis 2002). Among these are exercises among children and adolescents about the inaccuracies and harms of stereotyping, including the famous brown eye-blue eye school simulation exercise that familiarizes participants with being perpetrators and victims of arbitrary discrimination based on eye color. Inter-group strategies have also been especially effective in increasing the quantity and quality of group contact to promote social “recategorization” (589-593). In one such case, a parent who objected to having her daughter bussed from the suburbs on a daylong visit to a “sister school” in Detroit’s inner city was invited by the school principal to come along on the bus to make sure everything would be okay. Upon return at the end of the day, she approached the principal in abject apology saying, “I feel so ashamed; these are all just children.” Clearly this mother had confronted and overcome her fears and an aspect of prejudice as well.

Walking in others’ shoes can be a very effective way to overcome fear and temper hatred. Though there may be some gaps that cannot be bridged, experience shows that the more people become real to each other and not merely faceless symbols to fear and resent, the more they truly get to know each other as humans. To foster in-depth dialogue in this way, it may be necessary to go beyond joint memberships and simulation exercises. Polarized viewpoints and deep-seated prejudices will not simply melt away through discussion: meetings can degenerate to the type of shouting matches and jostling seen at various political rallies in 2016. The key is to develop carefully calibrated, step-by-step approaches to promote the first priority of conflict management: getting people to thoroughly and actively *listen* to each other so they understand where the “other” is

coming from—even if they ultimately do not agree with their positions. Reflective listening—being able to repeat back to someone their viewpoint to their satisfaction—is the first step to gaining mutual respect.

One way to develop reflective listening and dialogue in public spaces is to structure a series of nested and facilitated dialogue groups in various parts of a community, such as a large metropolitan area (Rothman 2015, regarding his approaches to overcoming racial and ethnic conflict in Cincinnati and Jerusalem). The process starts with small and fairly homogeneous groups in various corners of the community, with the goal of allowing group members to express and explain their fears. These groups might be recruited with the assistance of local organizations, such as the League of Women Voters, religious congregations and Rotary clubs. In these small groups, participants determine whether and to what extent they share fears, and prepare for the next step in the process: sending delegates from their small groups to larger, more heterogeneous group clusters from across the community.

At cluster meetings the representatives share what is most worrying to their respective local groups, and begin a dialogue process to clarify myths and stereotypes and to provide corrective information that can help people meet or overcome local fears. The goal is to chip away at walls of resentment, misunderstanding, or outright hatred, and to lay down plans for a common future (see Handelman 2011, on the “Minds of Peace” project linking ordinary Israeli and Palestinian citizens in formal grassroots negotiations).

To be successful, the larger diversity clusters must be broadly representative and include members of diverse racial and ethnic, immigrant, age, gender identity, and sexual orientation backgrounds. Representatives sent to diversity clusters return to their local groups to recount what was said and learned, and to develop further feedback for the next set of inter-group meetings. The longer and more frequently these cluster representatives meet, get to know each other, and develop

---

---

rapport,<sup>2</sup> the better able they are to inform local groups about others' viewpoints. This might lead to the local groups themselves visiting one another's neighborhoods in order to experience cultural and political diversity, much as exchange students do by going overseas. In this way, prejudices and fear of the "unknown" can gradually be eroded and overcome. People will still disagree politically, but the goal is that they do so with less anger, fear and blame.

These meeting programs may hold considerable promise on matters such as police-community relations, racial discord, environmental threats, immigration, and crime. Fear of the "other" can be a pervasive problem in both small, intimate communities and large, impersonal ones. This is especially difficult where people remain spatially separated at home, at work, in school, and at play. Conflict specialists have referred to the importance of how parents explain the "stranger" or outsider to children—as people to fear or to trust, thus affecting children's later degrees of openness or xenophobia. Progress on this dimension, as for example in mutual group neighborhood visits and the initiation of joint community improvement projects, would go far to defuse the tensions which allow opportunist politicians to rise on the tide of public discontent.

If feasible, these diversity cluster and grass roots dialogue programs can culminate with training institutes for those interested in building skills in reassurance and reconciliation between groups that see themselves as adverse to one another. It is one thing to understand people's viewpoints and painful fears or experiences, and while that is valuable in itself, beginning to reassure, reconcile, and heal the divides calls for additional skills and training. As with the dialogue process, not everyone may be reachable, but this kind of training, put into action, can reduce levels of distrust and agitation. Finally, citizen groups built from the dialogue process might develop joint policy proposals for political leaders, in order to foster more inclusive and less divisive social relations. These proposals would carry

considerable additional weight if they came from multi-partisan citizen groups, on the example of the remarkable grass roots organization, "Common Cause."

The increasing use of fear and hate in political language is a great cause for concern. Fear, which can have positive effects on constructive and effective remedies and preparations, becomes toxic when linked to hatred. But, as we have seen, the power of these kinds of appeals can be fought—if we focus upon bringing people together so they can learn in depth about one another and begin to see and share their commonalities while appreciating differences.

### Notes

1 These days one has to be especially careful about polling methodology because so many people communicate mainly on cell phones and social media. One also has to be aware of the list of choices people are given for response and what might be left out. Still the results are instructive.

2 It may be no coincidence that the period of intensified polarization and vilification plaguing American politics these days corresponds to the adoption of strict term limits in public legislative bodies across the country. Gone are the days when lawmakers served together for long periods and learned mechanisms and established norms and expectations to moderate and resolve their conflicts constructively in the public interest (see, for example the work of Sarbaugh-Thompson, et. al., 2006).

### Sources

"America's Top Fears 2015." Wilkinson College of Arts, Humanities and Social Sciences, Chapman University, Orange, CA.

Burrough, Bryan. 2015. *Days of Rage: America's Radical Underground, the FBI, and the Forgotten Age of Revolutionary Violence*. New York: Penguin.

Chen, Yu-His. 2006. "Coping with Suffering: The Buddhist Perspective." In *Handbook of Multicultural Perspectives on Stress and Coping*. Ed. by Paul T.P. Wong and Lillian C.J. Wong. New York: Springer.

Gurr, Ted Robert. 2011. *Why Men Rebel*, updated edition. London: Routledge.

Handelman, Sapir. 2011. "A Palestinian-Israeli Public Assembly and the American Black Church: Two Grassroots Efforts to Build the Foundations of a Decent Social Order." *Israel Affairs*, 18, December.

Harmon, Katherine. 2009. "The Origin of Hatred." *Scientific American*, 301, August.

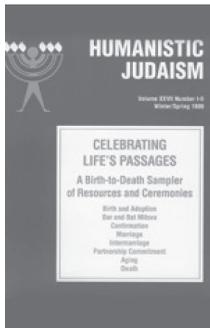
Hewstone, Miles, Mark Rubin, and Hazel Willis. 2002. "Intergroup Bias." *Annual Review of Psychology*, 53, pp. 575-604.

Ross, Andrew A.G. 2013. *Mixed Emotions: Beyond Fear and Hate in International Conflict*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

Rothman, Jay. 2015. Presentation to Conference on Urban Public Policy Dispute Resolution, Wayne State University, Detroit, May.

Sarbaugh-Thompson, Marjorie, Lyke Thompson, Charles D. Elder, Meg Comins, Richard C. Elling, and John Strate, 2006. "Democracy among Strangers: Term Limits' Effects on Relationships between State Legislators in Michigan." *State Politics and Policy Quarterly*. Vol. 6, Winter, pp. 384-409.

Yee, Allie. 2015. "7 Ways Southerners are Fighting Hate and Fear after Paris Terror Attacks." *Facing South*. Institute for Southern Studies, November 20.



## Observe life's passages **humanistically**

Read our guides to creating Secular Humanistic

**Jewish** observances of life cycle events

**Celebrating Life's Passages** \$25.00

**Coming of Age: Bar/Bat Mitzvah Manual** \$18.00

**Intermarriage** \$10.00

**Death, Dying, and Bereavement** \$10.00

Order online from the Society for Humanistic Judaism <http://www.shj.org/store/books/life-cycles/>

---

---

# Changing Race Relations

by Dr. Fred L. Pincus

In order to improve race relations, it's first necessary to know from where we are starting. This is, of course, a highly contested issue.

It's easier to begin with where we are not. The early twenty-first century is not the same as the Jim Crow era of the 1950s, when government-sanctioned racial segregation was rampant and explicit racial slurs could be uttered in polite company in many areas of the country. Much has improved since then. On the other hand, 2016 is not a post-racial society where intentional racial discrimination has been eliminated and racial tolerance and understanding is the rule. We are somewhere in between these two extremes. Much work remains to be done.

In order to understand current racial conditions, we need to view racial discrimination at different levels of analysis. Actions by an individual small business owner or landlord are different from actions of large corporations, non-profits, or government agencies. This is the difference between *individual* and *institutional/systemic* discrimination; both are important, but they are different.

Second, actions and policies that *intend* to discriminate are different from those that seem to be color-blind, but that have *disparate impacts* on people of color. This unintentional discrimination can have the same harm as those policies intended to harm. Consider the issue of voting rights for people of color. Until 1965, many southern states illegally prevented blacks from voting, using the racially-oriented policies like grandfather clauses, literacy tests, and poll taxes. The Voting Rights Act of 1965 outlawed these practices, which many now see as examples of intentional institutional discrimination.

Yet, an increasing number of states have since passed voter identification laws that

require voters to show specific pieces of identification, which African-Americans and Hispanics have a harder time getting. Although the stated intention of these laws is to prevent voter fraud, they clearly have a disparate impact on people of color. At best, this is an example of unintentional institutional discrimination, whereby a state's concern for preventing voter fraud outweighs the negative impact these policies have on Black and Hispanic voters. More likely, predominantly white, Republican state legislatures are using these laws to intentionally deprive Black and Hispanic citizens of their right to vote, probably because most would vote for Democratic Party candidates.

The college admissions process is another interesting case. Traditionally, colleges and universities have been ranked on how academically selective they are, and have admitted students with the highest test scores and grades. Given the history of American racism, the schools attended by most Black and Hispanic children have been inferior to those attended by whites. Therefore, fewer children of color have qualified for admission to selective colleges. This is compounded by the overrepresentation of Blacks and Hispanics among lower income populations, which further disadvantages their educational chances.

Many college administrators, faculty, and governing boards insist on keeping these meritocratic criteria as key to admissions despite their disparate impact on most students of color. College rankings, based on grades and test scores, are seen as more important than the effects of admissions policies on Blacks and Hispanics—if the effects of these policies are considered at all. At the same time, selec-

---

---

**Dr. Fred L. Pincus** is an Emeritus Professor of Sociology at the University of Maryland Baltimore County where he taught race relations for 43 years. He is a founding member of the Baltimore Jewish Cultural Chavurah, an SHJ affiliate.

---

---

tive colleges fall over one another, trying to attract the relatively small number of “qualified” Blacks and Hispanics—those with high test scores and grades. Again, these meritocratic admissions policies are an example of unintentional institutional discrimination.

Of course, the reality is that colleges have always deviated from meritocratic admissions criteria by giving some students an edge, either because their parents are alumni (i.e., legacies), or because they have some special characteristic like athletic ability, or because they are veterans, or because of the college’s desire for geographic diversity for their students. None of this has been seen as controversial or unfair, even when many of these special cases had lower grades and test scores than many students who didn’t gain admission. These are all seen as legitimate reasons to give preference to some students.

It’s only when some colleges began experimenting with *racial* preferences in admissions that conservative critics, and some liberals, began howling about the dangers of deviating from meritocracy. Many whites began seeing themselves as victims of reverse discrimination, and believed that the reason they didn’t get into a college was because a less qualified person of color “took their seat.” More important, since the 1970s, the US Supreme Court began to limit what colleges can do to increase the racial diversity of their student bodies.

Jews have been divided over affirmative action, given the history of anti-Semitism at elite institutions of higher education. Although Jews have been harmed in the past by *numerical ceilings* limiting how many Jews can be present at an institution, current affirmative action policies try to increase the number of Blacks and Hispanics above *numerical floors*. Since Jews are now overrepresented at many elite institutions, some want to protect their overrepresentation.

Yet eliminating affirmative action will further exacerbate the underrepresentation of Blacks and Hispanics in higher educa-

tion. This is another example of institutional discrimination. To the extent that critics of affirmative action are simply trying to uphold some ideal standard of meritocracy, regardless of the disparate impact on students of color, the discrimination is unintentional. To the extent that they are trying to use meritocracy to protect white privilege, it is intentional discrimination. Ironically, selective institutions like the Universities of Michigan and Texas seem to be interested in pursuing affirmative action, but they are constrained by conservative court decisions. Fortunately, the US Supreme Court upheld the principle of affirmative action in June 2016.

The nature of racial prejudice (negative attitudes toward people of color) has also changed. Most whites today reject the traditional beliefs that Blacks and Hispanics are biologically inferior and must be segregated from everyone else. The use of pejorative terms like “nigger” are also eschewed, especially in polite company. Instead, many whites express what sociologists call “color blind racism,” which includes several different components: 1) systematic racial discrimination is largely seen as a thing of the past; 2) *cultural inferiority*, like broken families, drug addiction, and welfare dependence, is seen as the cause of Black and Hispanic poverty; 3) since the United States is basically meritocratic, it is argued, those Blacks and Hispanics who can overcome this negative culture have just as much chance of succeeding as whites. Asians are seen as a successful non-white group because of their culture. President Barak Obama is often seen as living proof of Black success.

Racial stereotyping—holding and expressing exaggerated and distorted views of members of a particular racial group—is also a continual problem. Racial stereotypes are part of American culture, and it is often difficult to avoid them; they rear their heads in movies, music, television, religion, and virtually all other areas of life. Although the current stereotypes are usually not as grotesque as back in the “Amos ‘n’ Andy” days, they still portray Blacks and Hispanics in a negative light.

---

---

Some sociologists have talked about implicit or unconscious racism where people may not even be aware of the stereotyped and prejudiced beliefs that they hold. These beliefs can be manifested in how police officers view young Black males or how teachers view Hispanic kindergarten students.

What does this all have to do with change? On an individual level, we have to address the prejudiced attitudes of individual whites, especially stereotypes about the “defective culture” of people of color. Problems like broken families, street crimes, unemployment, and welfare use are the *results* of racism and poverty, not the cause. Social scientists have amassed extensive literature about the best ways to achieve attitude change. Some of this individual change in attitudes can be accomplished through effective teaching, diversity training, conscientious efforts by the media, and personal interactions. Of course, none of this will necessarily change our politics, economics, education or other institutions, and voting is only one way to affect change. Grassroots, multi-racial social movements are also necessary to achieve institutional change because that’s the only way to confront power.

Black Lives Matter (#BLM) is one of the important contemporary social movements that deserves support. Activists want to expose and punish the individual police officers who unjustly kill young Black men, due, in part, to the officers’ prejudiced attitudes. More important, #BLM targets the *culture* of many police departments that either encourages or permits the mistreatment of young Blacks. In addition, #BLM targets the entire criminal justice system that often fails to prosecute police officers who kill young Blacks and fails to convict them in trials. Even the laws themselves are often written in ways that protect police officers instead of their victims. Police culture and the legal system are institutions that both intentionally and unintentionally discriminate against people of color.

In the first Freddie Gray trial in Baltimore, the prosecution charged Officer William Porter with not using a seatbelt to secure Gray in the

police van, a direct violation of department policy. Yet, testimony showed that most officers routinely ignored official policy and failed to use seatbelts on prisoners in vans. The culture of the department ignored official policy. Who is to blame? The jury couldn’t decide and the trial ended with a hung jury. Two other officers were also acquitted and, at the time of this writing, three others remained to be tried.

#BLM has helped expose these systems to demand change, and this movement deserves our support. Jews United for Justice, an activist group in the Baltimore/Washington area, has worked to support #BLM and other groups who are trying to make the Baltimore City Police Department more responsive to community needs after the post-Freddie Gray uprisings in April 2015.

There are so many problems in the education system that it’s hard to know where to begin. Supporting calls for better funding is a no-brainer. One major cause of skyrocketing college tuition at public colleges and universities is the decline in funding by state and local governments. Students and families are forced to pick up the slack. Communities of color around the country have also called for changes in the public school curriculum to reflect their own experiences and learning styles. An excellent resource for this change is *Rethinking Schools*, a quarterly publication that offers concrete lesson plans that engage diverse populations of students and inform students about the history of social movements. Teachers of any background can implement these lesson plans.

Getting a living wage is another area of concern for all workers, but it is especially important for workers of color who are over-represented in low-paying jobs. Grassroots movements, sometimes using the ballot box, have forced local and state governments around the country to increase the minimum wage, in some cases to \$15 per hour. These movements are often led by people of color and immigrants.

This is how institutional racism can be confronted. Progressive Jews can and should play a supporting role in these struggles.

### Sources

Bonilla-Silva, Eduardo. 2015. *Racism Without Racists: Color-Blind Racism and the Persistence of Racial Inequality in America, 4th Edition*. Rowman and Littlefield.

Omi, Michael and Howard Winant. 2015. *Racial Formation in the United States, Third Edition*. Routledge.

Pincus, Fred L. 2011. *Understanding Diversity: An Introduction to Class, Race, Gender, Sexual Orientation and Disability, Second Edition*. Lynne Rienner Publishers.

Spence, Lester K. 2015. *Knocking the Hustle: Against the Neoliberal Turn in Black Politics*. Punctum Books.

# JOIN THE AMERICAN HUMANIST ASSOCIATION

- Get a subscription to the *Humanist*
- Support the humanist movement!
- Get a free book from the Humanist Press!
- Enter a world of intellectual and ethical adventure

**Join Now!** 800.837.3792 [www.AmericanHumanist.org](http://www.AmericanHumanist.org)



---

---

# Should Humanistic Judaism Oppose Capital Punishment? Racism and Other Reasons Why the Practice Should Be Abolished

by Dr. Stephen Greenspan

The United States is the only Western democracy, and one of only three G-20 nations (the others being China and Saudi Arabia) that still actively executes people. Within the Western hemisphere, it is only the United States, Cuba, and a few small Caribbean islands that still engage in this practice. In Europe, Byelorussia is the only country still executing its citizens. Even Russia, which still has capital punishment on its books, has essentially stopped executing people. The UN General Assembly adopted, in 2007, 2008, and 2010, non-binding resolutions calling for a global moratorium on executions, with a view to eventual abolition, but the United States opposed it. Although the practice of capital punishment has declined in the US—for example, the rates in Texas and Arizona have plummeted—executions still happen, as I can attest (one of the people whose case I was involved in was executed by the Commonwealth of Virginia in late 2015) (Ford 2015).

Within the United States, 19 states have abolished capital punishment, the most recent (May, 2015) being Nebraska. Reasons cited for the abolition of capital punishment vary from state to state, with some reasons being: excessive cost (Nebraska), arbitrary exercise of prosecutor discretion (Connecticut), and a number of later exonerated wrongful convictions (Illinois). In some states (Oregon, Colorado), while abolition efforts have fallen short, the governors have announced that no death warrants will be signed, thus essentially putting executions on long-term hold. One little-known ploy that is

used to get around state death penalty bans, is to federalize a crime and pursue death in a US Court (the federal government reinstated capital punishment, thanks to the efforts of then president, Bill Clinton). This often does not work, as in abolitionist jurisdictions, jurors are more likely to hold out for life (as happened in notorious cases where I consulted in Hawaii and Puerto Rico). However, sometimes it does work (as in the Boston bombing trial). I have summarized seven reasons often cited for opposing the death penalty, which can be found on my blog (Greenspan 2013). The seven reasons are unequal administration, excessive cost, wrongful convictions, lack of support for deterrence, closure for victims' families, cruelty of languishing for decades on death row, change in moral climate. In listing so many reasons, my aim was to show that a policy with so many problems is broken beyond repair.

## Racism and the Consistency Principle

The US Supreme Court essentially agreed with my position that capital punishment is a profoundly flawed policy when it imposed a ten-year moratorium on the practice, from 1967 to 1977. It is because of that suspension that Charles Manson and Sirhan Sirhan received life sentences in California, the state that currently houses the most (over 700) condemned

---

---

**Dr. Stephen Greenspan** is a frequent expert mitigation witness in death penalty trials. An emeritus professor of educational psychology at the University of Connecticut, he is a member, and a former leader, of Beth Ami-Colorado Congregation for Humanistic Judaism. He can be contacted at [stephen.greenspan@gmail.com](mailto:stephen.greenspan@gmail.com).

---

---

prisoners. California takes the prize in numbers of condemned prisoners not because it pursues death more often, but because California courts allow the appellate process to drag out longer. As a consequence, I have been involved in cases there (but also elsewhere) where someone has been in a condemned state for three or four decades. That in itself is grounds for abolition, as this prevents closure for victims' families, and also can be considered cruel and unusual punishment. Compare this to when the United Kingdom had an active death penalty: more than a three months' (let alone three decades!) wait to be executed was considered cruel.

The main reason why the Supreme Court has established so many opportunities for condemned defendants to appeal their sentences, a task that becomes very difficult after multiple decades as witnesses die off, is because of concern over the highly arbitrary manner in which the death penalty is pursued. Retired Supreme Court Justice John Paul Stevens has written that he regrets having voted to reinstate capital punishment as he cannot discern any reason why death is pursued or carried out in one case, while in a very similar or even more heinous case it is not. It is well known that race (both of offender and of victim) is a major factor in determining whether death is pursued. When I visit a death row anywhere in the country, the faces I see are mostly brown or black. But this arbitrariness is also geographical. In Arizona, an offender is much less likely to face death in (more liberal) Tucson than in Phoenix; while in Colorado, all of the (few) death cases are located in a single county, where the elected prosecutor was a religious zealot. Interestingly, the reason Colorado reinstated capital punishment in 1901 (it was one of the first states to abolish it) was because of many lynchings. Unlike the South, where those who were lynched were almost all Black, in Colorado and the West they were Latino or Indian.

Although the Supreme Court mandated procedures to make administration of the death penalty fairer, it is still a very broken system and the problem of arbitrariness, often

based on race, is still pervasive. As example, a new report by the Fair Punishment Project at Harvard Law School found that although the death penalty is declining nationwide, "a tiny fraction of counties, and under the leadership of specific prosecutors" continue to pursue execution at a high rate, with as many as half of these later thrown out for prosecutorial misconduct ("The Prosecutors Who Aim to Kill" 2016). In ethics, the core principle is termed the "consistency principle" (the commandment "do unto others..." is a variant on this principle) and there are those who consider consistency (the idea that rewards and punishments should be meted out fairly) to be the essence of ethics (see, e.g., Gensler 1985). Basing execution on race, or any personal characteristic or advantage (such as having a reasonable prosecutor), is a fundamental violation of this principle.

Most of my capital testifying is in so-called *Atkins* cases, where a petitioner is claiming exemption from the death penalty due to having Intellectual Disability (ID, my academic specialty). When the Supreme Court ruled in *Atkins* that it is unconstitutional to execute people with ID, one of the reasons cited is that when there are two defendants for the same crime, the more competent defendant (who is typically the ringleader) is often able to negotiate a reduced sentence by being smart enough to pin the crime mainly on his less savvy or culpable co-defendant, who lacks the street smarts to play that game. That inconsistency dynamic has not been eliminated by the *Atkins* decision, as I see it all the time in my cases where—in spite of someone having significant cognitive impairments—getting a court to rule favorably on an exemption petition is usually an uphill battle. The problem of race bias (termed "cultural overshadowing") enters here as well, as it is more difficult for a brain-impaired person of color to get *Atkins* relief, even when there is clear evidence of, for example, birth complications, and even when all the defendant's siblings have not been diagnosed with any form of ID. That is because there is an assumption by forensic experts that "slowness" in minority individuals reflects deficient upbringing, while their offending behavior reflects defects

---

---

in character. With minority defendants, the possibility of brain-based judgment impairments is typically not even considered, even when evidence for a developmental disability is relatively strong.

### **Humanistic Judaism and the Death Penalty**

Many religious organizations (notably including Roman Catholicism) are opposed to the death penalty, often taking the position that the taking of a human life—outside of situations like war or self-defense—is morally wrong. Within Judaism, only two sects have not taken a stand against the death penalty: Orthodox Judaism and Humanistic Judaism. Perhaps not surprisingly, many Orthodox Jews are neutral or mildly pro-death penalty, noting that the Torah lists 36 crimes, such as violating the Sabbath, where death is justified, and the Talmud contains many discourses on the conditions under which execution can be carried out. There is, however, considerable variety on the topic in the very decentralized world of Orthodox Judaism. One condition in *halakha* for imposing the death penalty—that there have been two witnesses to a murder with the perpetrator being warned ahead of time that he could be executed—was even cited by one Orthodox scholar in Israel (which abolished capital punishment in 1954, and which made an exception only for Eichmann) as a sign that in Judaism the death penalty is supposed to be difficult to carry out (“Does Judaism Support the Death Penalty?” 2008). (I hardly need to point out that the conditions cited in the Talmud rarely apply to homicide as it actually occurs in the modern, and likely in the ancient, world.) Another Orthodox scholar even made the questionable argument that the death penalty is good because it honors the dignity of the criminal, in allowing him the chance to repent just before execution. This scholar even went so far as to argue that if an offender does not repent, then he should be denied the honor of being executed (Plaut 2004).

Most who oppose the death penalty apply the concept of dignity differently, in arguing that execution diminishes, rather than enhances, the dignity of the executed person. Furthermore, repentance (and most of the condemned

people I know deeply regret their offense) is generally held to be a reason for granting, rather than withholding, mercy. Certainly, the notion that all people have innate dignity that should be respected is a core concept in Humanistic Judaism. For the most part, however, the more progressive Jewish sects have based their calls to end (Reconstructionist, Conservative) or suspend (Reform, Progressive Jewish Alliance) the death penalty not on moral/ ethical grounds but on policy grounds (e.g., cost, wrongful conviction, lack of research supporting deterrence, etc.) similar to the ones cited by abolitionist state legislators. Such reasons are important to mention, but I would expect any religious organization that claims authority in moral matters (and they all do) to base its opposition to the death penalty primarily on ethical, rather than economic or efficacy, grounds.

I believe it is high time for Humanistic Judaism to join other Humanists and the rest of the progressive world (both Jewish and non-Jewish) in taking a public position in opposition to the continuance of a practice that defines oppression (ISIS, Iran) rather than freedom (every democracy in the Western world except our own) (Bulger 2015). One can think of several moral reasons for justifying such a position, but one that seems especially relevant to Humanistic Judaism is this: we value rationality and the ability to avoid being swayed by appeals to revenge and hatred. There is only one justification for execution and that is revenge / hatred (portraying the offender in semi-human and solely negative terms). Revenge and dehumanization are behaviors, which we as Humanistic Jews, must reject if our rhetoric is to have meaning. We should define ourselves by our capacity for mercy and compassion rather than by our capacity for hatred.

### **Sources**

“Does Judaism Support the Death Penalty?” 2008. *ProCon.org*, July 31. <http://deathpenalty.procon.org/view.answers.php?questionID=001181#answer-id-005983>.

Bulger, Matthew. 2015. “Should Humanists Oppose Life Sentences without Parole?” *The Humanist*, June 16. <http://thehumanist.com/commentary/should-humanists-oppose-life-sentences-without-parole>.

Ford, Matt. 2015. "The Death Penalty Becomes Rare." *The Atlantic*, April 21. <http://www.theatlantic.com/politics/archive/2015/04/the-death-penalty-becomes-unusual/390867/>.

Gensler, Harry J. 1985. "Ethical Consistency Principles." *The Philosophical Quarterly* 35 (139): 156-70.

Greenspan, Stephen. 2013. "A Foolish and Barbaric Practice: Seven Reasons for Abolishing the Death Penalty." *Psychology Today*, March 25. <https://www.psychologytoday.com/blog/incompetence/201303/foolish-and-barbaric-practice>.

psychologytoday.com/blog/incompetence/201303/foolish-and-barbaric-practice.

Plaut, Steven. 2004. "Judaism's Pro-Death Penalty Tradition." *Frontpagemag.com*, April 22. <http://archive.frontpagemag.com/readArticle.aspx?ARTID=13290>. (Originally published on *JewishPress.com*).

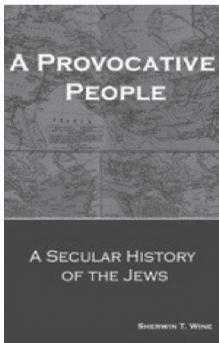
"The Prosecutors Who Aim to Kill." 2016. *New York Times*, July 2. [http://www.nytimes.com/2016/07/03/opinion/the-prosecutors-who-aim-to-kill.html?\\_r=0](http://www.nytimes.com/2016/07/03/opinion/the-prosecutors-who-aim-to-kill.html?_r=0).

*For the skeptical and questioning, an alternative history of the Jews,  
told by one of the most provocative rabbis in Jewish history*

## **A Provocative People: A Secular History of the Jews**

by Rabbi Sherwin T. Wine

*Edited by Rabbi Adam Chalom*



***A Provocative People***, Rabbi Wine's final work, presents a history of the Jewish people, from their origins in the ancient Middle East to their existence as a global people in the modern world. From their beginnings as a religious people through their transition to a largely secularized people, Wine once again distills complex ideas and developments into easily understood concepts, offering his readers a compelling, distinctly humorous, and readable history of the Jewish people.

**Paperback \$25 Order online from the Society for Humanistic Judaism at**  
<http://www.shj.org/store/books/rabbi-sherwin-t-wine/>

---

---

# HUMANISTIC VOICES

---

---

Welcome to the Ethical Concerns Committee’s (ECC) first iteration of “Humanistic Voices” where Humanistic Jews explore ethical issues from different perspectives. This idea represents an evolution of the ECC by trying to take meaningful stances on critical issues facing our world, while also being mindful that our membership has diverse views, and there is not always one “correct” solution consistent with humanistic values.

Several years ago, to address this issue, the ECC adopted three criteria for deciding which issues SHJ should take a stance on. Recognizing that the SHJ is not a civil rights organization, and that we needed to be cognizant that our positions represent most of our membership, we decided to take stances only on issues that concerned 1: separation of church and state, OR 2: Jewish identity, OR 3: issues on which an overwhelming majority of our members would agree. The thought was that the third criterion would avoid dividing our membership, even though it would also mean that we would not be taking stances some important issues. We later amended the third criterion to be “Policy solutions that promote the core ethical values of freedom, dignity and self-esteem and are based on persuasive arguments from compelling evidence.”

As the criteria played out over the years, the first two criteria (separation of church and state, and Jewish identity) served us well, but it became clear that the third criterion (even with the amendment) was unwieldy, as there was an inherent tension between wanting to take meaningful stances (and not just repeat platitudes) and being non-controversial. In 2015, this tension resulted in some members feeling uncomfortable with a resolution against institutional racism, which the ECC was planning to adopt. As a result of some of the feedback received, the ECC decided not to adopt the resolution, but instead to open up the topic of institutional racism for a debate among our members, using a new forum called “Humanistic Voices.”

We are honored that the SHJ’s Journal *Humanistic Judaism* has agreed to host the first platform for “Humanistic Voices,” in which we explore the topic of institutional racism. Evidence and reason can often point to more than one solution to address a complex problem. We hope you find reading about institutional racism from a variety of perspectives from Humanistic Jews valuable and interesting, as we introduce this new platform: “Humanistic Voices.”

– Stephanie Blum, Ethical Concerns Committee Chair, SHJ

---

---

# The Subtlety of “White Privilege”

by Barry Swan

It is understandable that my father used to talk about “pulling yourself up by your own bootstraps.” When he was 7 or 8, his mother died in the Spanish flu epidemic in 1918, his newborn baby sister was adopted, and for several years he lived in the Jewish orphanage. He hawked newspapers on Saturday nights, which turned into his weekly poker game Sunday morning for his fellow newsies. He quit school before high school, worked in a bakery and in many restaurants. He owned neighborhood bars and restaurants, opening in the morning and closing at night. He raised a family with whom he eventually lived in a nice suburb, and his kids all went to college. He did this without outside help, and actually in spite of a couple individuals who made his efforts to succeed more difficult. He was not particularly sympathetic to the need for the federal government to intercede and create programs to help those in need of assistance. That is when we could hear about “bootstraps.”

One evening after another news discussion story about government help and his usual response of needing to do it yourself and not make excuses and how he had not gotten any help, I brought up the first house he bought for his family. In 1945, he purchased the bottom unit of a two-family house. My *bubbe* (mother’s mother) bought the upper half with money that came from the insurance settlement from the death of my grandfather as a result of a truck accident. My father wanted to know what was I talking about. No one had helped him buy the house; he had worked and paid for our part!

I asked him if an African-American family in 1945 could have bought that house if they had the money. He knew that they could not. (He also knew that 20 years later neither an African-American family nor we, a Jewish family, could buy a house in the community across the street from where our nice suburban

house was.) I asked about the houses African Americans could find. The father of that family would not be even shown houses outside of a small area of town. Buying would have required a mortgage, which was usually not an option. African-American WWII veterans could not get a mortgage for houses in “their” neighborhoods (even through the GI Bill) and were not shown houses in better neighborhoods. The option was usually to rent, usually from absentee landlords. This small area usually did not have quality police protection, garbage pick-up, street cleaning, reliable public transportation, access to supermarkets, and schools compared to other parts of town. Most people would not rent to African Americans. Because they were restricted as to where they could live, the market was tight and rents were often higher than they should be.

The house we had bought with my *bubbe* was near a park, with a pond for fishing and ice skating, a playground with swings and sandbox, and baseball fields. There was a nearby armory lot with fields for football and baseball, and a weeded area for playing soldier or explorer. We lived in a well cared-for and safe area with great schools. My father was told that he was able to buy a house and have his family live in an area which, if he had different colored skin, he could not. In buying his house, he was probably paying less monthly to live in a nicer area with better civic and recreational services and better schools than if he had been African-American living elsewhere. He had personally done nothing to make this happen. This advantage was nothing he schemed to have and nothing he even knew he had. This was his “white privilege,” a term neither of us knew back then. He knew about the disadvantages he had experienced as a Jewish man, in

---

---

**Barry Swan** is a madrikh of Beth Haskalah in Rochester, New York”. He sits on the local boards of American United for the Separation of Church and State, and The Interfaith Alliance of Rochester.

---

---

both his personal and business life. He could rattle off examples from his life. But his having an advantage was a foreign concept.

The “bootstrap” argument left his conversations with me ever since. We knew now that we both could look at American social and economic development from both sides of the

street. He personally had known the disadvantages of growing up as a Jew. Now he could start to understand how he had benefited from a system he did not create, a system that had worked against him in another formulation. It was a system that could play favorites, and often had lines that determined who benefitted and who suffered.

# Humanistic Judaism

Strengthening our **connection** to our Jewish heritage

Celebrating Jewish holidays with **meaning**  
and **relevance** in our time

Providing a **community** for ourselves,  
**continuity** for our children

Enhancing pluralism in the Jewish community

**Become a part of this exciting movement in Jewish Life!**

**Join the Society for Humanistic Judaism**

Membership includes a subscription to *Humanistic Judaism*

<http://www.shj.org/about-shj/membership/>

**The Society for Humanistic Judaism (SHJ) is a 501c3 charitable organization.**

**Donations to the SHJ, including membership dues, are tax-deductible as provided by law.**

---

---

# T'Shuvah and Breaking the School-to-Prison Pipeline

by Alana Shindler

Absent an American “truth and reconciliation” process regarding our 200 years of slavery followed by 100 years of Jim Crow, the effort to extinguish racism from our institutions is a continuous struggle without national consensus. Although overt race-specific laws are no longer a feature of our legal and justice systems, institutional racism continues to exist through covert historical, psychological, and cultural biases, all slow to change. Often there are no solutions that seem fair to all concerned.

For example, in recent years, research on institutional racism in our criminal justice system has revealed that the 1970s’ “War on Drugs” resulted in mass incarceration of minorities for non-violent crimes. Additionally, unequal treatment of similar drug offenses by race has resulted in differing sentences for similar crimes more likely to be committed by whites (methamphetamine) versus those committed by minorities (crack). (See Alexander 2012, for a compelling and excruciatingly documented account of how we have come to incarcerate far more African Americans now than were slaves at the end of the Civil War.)

Shockingly, a second path into our criminal justice system begins in our nation’s schools of predominantly black and brown children, all the way from Pre-K through high school. A recent study, based on 60,000 American schools, concludes that Black children who misbehave are channeled into juvenile courts and detention centers far more often than white students, who may be referred to behavior therapy (Haglage 2015). “Zero-tolerance” policies designed to cut down on criminal behavior after Columbine have also accelerated the presence of so-called “School Resource Officers”—police stationed at schools, who, not

surprisingly, funnel children into suspensions, juvenile detention, and arrests (Nelson and Lind 2015).

Although no classroom teacher should have to do their jobs in an arena of disrespect or danger, the effects of transferring the resolution of student misbehavior from school personnel to police are major and life changing. Research shows that those students who have been remanded to the courts, expelled, or suspended from school as punishment, even once, are more likely to continue down the path toward prison than those who have not (thus the moniker “school-to-prison pipeline”). Classrooms need order, but a long-range vision for future generations of productive citizens cannot come from criminalizing students, especially our most vulnerable. We need the resolve to do better, think smarter, be kinder.

I became aware of this dilemma through a theater piece I attended last summer, a one-woman show written and performed by Anna Deavere Smith called *Notes from the Field: Doing Time in Education—the California Chapter*. The play gives voice to the real actors in the criminal justice system, derived from over 150 interviews by Smith of teens, teachers, parents, siblings, victims, judges, principals, probation officers, prison guards—a panoply of perspectives putting despair, skin, and bones on to faceless statistics. And Deavere Smith challenges her audience to continue this dialogue in their own communities.

---

---

**Alana Shindler**, Chair of Rituals and Celebrations, is a board member of Kol Hadash, the Northern California Community for Humanistic Judaism. Alana holds an MSW in Social Work Policy, Bachelor degrees in English and Design, and a near miss in Jewish history. She is a board member of the Society for Humanistic Judaism.

---

---

When I saw the play, the High Holidays were nearing, and the focus of our Rosh Hashanah service included both African-American and Jewish histories, and a call for justice in the schools. My commentary included a video of one proposed solution in nearby Oakland, shown to be successful in reducing the number of school suspensions, expulsions, or involvement by police and courts, called restorative justice (Restorative Justice for Oakland Youth, 2016). Restorative justice practices in schools include facilitated group methods to explore and resolve conflicts, with direct participation of all parties involved, who are encouraged to share their perspectives on what happened and what would correct the situation. It is less a process to determine fault and punishment than an airing of how it occurred, what those involved were thinking at the time, who has been harmed, and how the harm done can be repaired and harmony restored. Community harm or disruption requires community healing. School personnel, students, and parents participate in this process.

Restorative justice calls to mind the humanistic interpretation of *T'shuvah* in the period between Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur. Judaic scholar Marcia Faulk has written about *T'shuvah*, often translated as “repentance,” but suggests we consider instead, “the turning of the heart: turning away from ordinary matters of the world in order to return to oneself... *Aseret Y'mey T'shuvah*—ten days of meeting oneself face-to-face, opening the heart to change” (Falk 2014, xx-xxi). When translated into a community context, fear of punishment and repentance for sin becomes introspection, apology, reparations, forgiveness, and healing, the transformational process for personal, family, and community growth.

Last year, the Oakland, California school system announced that its use of restorative justice programs in a handful of schools was so successful that it will be expanded to all 86 schools within the next five years. In schools with current programs, suspensions have dropped by more than half over three years starting in 2011, from 34% to 14%, according to a new school district report (Oakley 2015;

Oakland Unified School District 2014). The graduation rate increased 60% at participating high schools, compared to 7% at schools without them; chronic absenteeism dropped 24% at middle schools with the programs, compared to a 62% increase in middle schools without. Additionally, in mid-May of last year, the Oakland school board voted unanimously to eliminate “willful defiance” as a reason to suspend students, and to invest at least \$2.3 million to expand restorative justice practices. This is a school district with typical California urban demographics: in the 2013-14 school year, white students comprised 11.8%, 2.6% were not specified, and the remainder were comprised of 30.6% African-American, 14.1% Asian, 1.0% Filipino, 38.1% Latino, 0.5% Native American, and 1.3% Pacific Islander (Oakland Unified School District 2016).

Like Anna Deavere Smith’s intension to engage community through theater, ethical behavior counts most when it goes beyond words, and results in action that changes lives. Although institutional racism is difficult to overcome, good people can generate solutions that will work, like restorative justice as one example, to chip away at racist outcomes, thereby strengthening our communities, and in the end, all of us. May we all meet ourselves face-to-face, and open our hearts to change!

### Sources

Alexander, Michelle. 2012. *The New Jim Crow: Mass Incarceration in the Age of Colorblindness*. New York: The New Press.

Berkeley Rep. 2016. “Notes from the Field: Doing Time in Education, the California Chapter.” Accessed July 15. <http://www.berkeleyrep.org/season/1415/9293.asp>.

Faulk, Marcia. 2014. *The Days Between: Blessings, Poems, and Directions of the Heart for the Jewish High Holiday Season*. Waltham: Brandeis University Press.

Haglage, Abby. 2015. “New School Study Shows Black Kids Get Cops, White Kids Get Docs.” *The Daily Beast*, July 30. <http://www.thedailybeast.com/articles/2015/07/30/new-school-study-shows-black-kids-get-cops-white-kids-get-docs.html>.

Nelson, Libby and Dara Lind. 2015. "The School-to-Prison Pipeline, Explained." *Vox*, October 27. <http://www.vox.com/2015/2/24/8101289/school-discipline-race>.

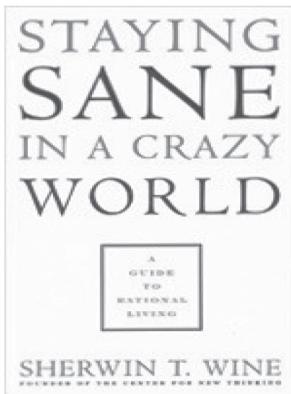
Oakland Unified School District. 2014. *Restorative Justice in Oakland Schools: Implementation and Impacts*. <http://www.ousd.org/cms/lib07/CA01001176/Centricity/Domain/134/OUUSD-RJ%20Report%20revised%20Final.pdf>.

Oakland Unified School District. 2016. *Oakland Unified School District: Fast Facts 2013-2014*. Accessed

July 15. <http://www.ousd.org/cms/lib07/CA01001176/Centricity/Domain/4/OUUSDFastFacts2013-14.pdf>.

Oakley, Doug. 2015. "Oakland: School District to Expand Restorative Justice Programs to All 86 Schools." *San Jose Mercury News*. January 14. [http://www.mercurynews.com/education/ci\\_27320766/school-district-expand-restorative-justice-programs-all-86](http://www.mercurynews.com/education/ci_27320766/school-district-expand-restorative-justice-programs-all-86).

Restorative Justice for Oakland Youth. 2016. "Videos: Videos about Restorative Justice." Accessed July 15. <http://rjoyoakland.org/videos/>.



*A book about coping with the challenges of everyday living,  
through Rabbi Wine's philosophy, personal reflections, and practical advice*

## **Staying Sane in a Crazy World:**

### **A Guide to Rational Living**

By Rabbi Sherwin T. Wine

We live in a crazy world. It often does not give us what we want, or even what we deserve. The universe does not conform to the human moral agenda. Staying sane in a crazy world requires a special kind of ingenuity and determination. Rabbi Wine explores what it means to cope successfully with an unfair world.

**Paperback \$15. Order online from the Society for Humanistic Judaism at**

<http://www.shj.org/store/books/rabbi-sherwin-t-wine/>

---

---

# Truth and Reconciliation on Race

## by Rabbi Denise Handlarski

When I was studying for my PhD in South African literature, I became fascinated with South Africa's Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC). After the end of apartheid, there was no feasible way to bring all the perpetrators of crimes and violence to justice. Firstly, many of the acts that should have been illegal were sanctioned by state policy. Secondly, there was so much secrecy and such a lack of transparency in government, military, and other institutions that there was no way to find evidence for the numerous crimes committed. And the sheer number of crimes meant that no system could possibly address and redress it all. So instead of trying to foster a model of punishing those responsible, the model became one of peace-building. Rather than pursuing punishment, the TRC's goal was to pursue truth. If one testified as a "perpetrator," and sufficiently convinced the tribunal of full disclosure, there was to be no punishment. There was no requirement to show remorse. And, of course, victims could also come forward to tell their stories. My work focused on women's testimony (the lack thereof, and then, after special encouragements were made for women to speak out about their own stories, their handling, representation, and impact). But that is a story for another day. Yet it fascinated me that this tribunal provided a space for the previously voiceless to have a voice, and was a model of restorative justice that, although problematic in many ways for many people, really did bring forth a national narrative of healing.

In Canada, we have been undergoing our own process of finding truth and reconciliation with a TRC of our own. Our TRC is focused on First Nations, Metis, and Inuit (FNMI) communities. The treatment of Aboriginal/Indigenous Canadians has been abhorrent. In particular, the history of the residential schools, where thousands of children were taken from their families, mistreated, and robbed of their culture, has never been fully understood or addressed. Up

until this day, there are missing and murdered Indigenous women whose disappearances have not been properly investigated. And there are many other examples. My brother is a criminal lawyer who recounts many stories of being shocked by the mistreatment of Aboriginal Canadians in our criminal justice system. And the statistics are clear. Nationally, a third of all prisoners are Aboriginal Canadian. In some areas in Western Canada, that figure is closer to half. It is clear there are systemic and widespread issues that need immediate attention.

There have been many comparisons made between the treatment of FNMI communities in Canada, and the groups classified as "African" under apartheid's system of classification. Our reservations are a lot like their Bantustans, which are under-funded and lacking in resources. Our institutions, including health care and education, have a history of discrimination and violence towards these populations. Our government has little representation from members of these communities, just as South Africa's government reflected only a tiny minority of the make up of its citizens.

My work in South African literature eventually turned to the Jewish experience. At once part of the "white" majority, which had clear and obvious privilege, but also a targeted minority, on the receiving end of anti-semitic violence and discrimination, the double-edged position of South African Jews fascinates me. And in Canada, again, I see similarities. We as Jews are, generally speaking, both a tiny minority still exposed to anti-Semitism and, simultaneously, part of the privileged race/class groups of our society. Just as I could never understand Jews who could reconcile themselves to living in apartheid South Africa, knowing what we know about oppression, I could never

---

---

**Rabbi Denise Handlarski** is rabbi of Oraynu Congregation for Humanistic Judaism in Toronto.

---

---

understand anti-Aboriginal racism amongst Jews here. I see it as a Jewish imperative, for reasons coming from our history, our traditions of pursuing *tzedaka* (justice) and *Tikkun Olam* (repairing the world), and loving/living with/respecting the “strangers” we live among (nevermind that from the Indigenous point of view, we are the stranger!) to understand and honor FNMI peoples.

Aboriginal Canadians are among the many groups experiencing systemic racism and discrimination in Canada (and we see parallels in other countries as well). The education system is my main realm of understanding how systemic racism works. I have taught both secondary and post-secondary classes, and now teach at a School of Education and Professional Learning (where we teach new teachers about teaching). In the research on equity and education, it is clear that students of minority backgrounds and students of color experience disproportionate marginalization in classes, have much lower graduation rates, and frequently report experiencing racism (from micro-aggressions to overt hatred) from students and staff. This reflects my own experience. I recall teaching a high school history class and remarking that the textbook included one or two pages on Aboriginal Canadians, one or two on Black Canadians, and the rest on the history of “Europeans” in Canada. One of my assignments is for students to find topics of interest that are not in the textbook, to simply show that our “history” is selected and curated. Even initiatives such as “Black History Month” make clear that we are not integrating the histories and lived experiences of many of our communities into our curriculum regularly—there is “history” and there is “Black history.” If they are not the same then the former should surely have a racial or cultural marker as does the latter. If one walks down the corridors of the average school, one rarely sees representations of people of color in powerful roles. High school and university level English literature syllabi have been largely unchanged for decades. In my tenth grade classes we’re still reading Shakespeare and Harper Lee. I love Shakespeare and

Harper Lee, but it worries me that the majority of students graduate without ever having read a book by a person of color, and have never had to think about what that means. It wasn’t until I began a PhD in Post-colonial Literature that I read widely in the literatures of Africa, the Caribbean, South Asia, and beyond, and began to realize that there was (literally) a world of ideas and dialects and experiences I had never accessed.

What does any of this have to do with being a Jew? For many, there are commitments to *Tikkun Olam*. And we as Humanists have a particular desire to see and value all of humanity equally, so the trends described above should worry us. But for me, our insider/outsider status in North America of the minority group with social power, of the once stranger who is now largely assimilated, of the original wandering cosmopolitan subject in a world that is increasingly globalized and cosmopolitan, gives us a unique opportunity to build bridges. Our concerns as Jews: exile, diaspora, language, cultural separation and assimilation, nationhood and belonging, are largely the issues of the other minority groups among whom we live. We can really talk about what it means to be different. We can really talk about what it means to be excluded and persecuted. And we can make sure we are never part of a “majority” that silences those experiences, but only if we acknowledge that systemic racism exists, in our schools, in our systems of justice, in our workplaces, and beyond.

Much of Canadian and American society has been founded on the idea of “equality,” that we are equal before the law, have equal opportunities in education and employment, and share equally in the resources of our respective nations. And yet, there is overwhelming evidence that suggests that equality remains a dream and not a reality. It can be difficult to acknowledge the fictions and frictions that surround us. But we as Humanistic Jews are in favor of reason and truth over mythology, and doing so is necessary for us to live full lives as Jews, as Humanists, and as human beings in a very complicated and still very unfair world.

---

---

# *Between the World and Me*

Ta-Nehisi Coates  
2015, Spiegel & Grau

Review by Rabbi Jeffrey L. Falick

Not too many months ago I sat in a performance space in the neighborhood of Brookland in Washington, D.C., listening to the open mic poetry of a black man describing an experience so dismaying to me that by its end I was awash in tears. He spoke of putting a shirt on his little boy one morning. Of telling him to raise up his arms. Of his fear that one day someone in a uniform with a gun would tell his son the same thing before killing him.

Not too many months later, I sat in a meeting of the Ethical Concerns Committee of the Society for Humanistic Judaism as the Chair read the rants of a member who objected to the idea that the SHJ would dare take a stand in opposition to “institutional racism.” I wondered to myself if this man masquerading as a Humanist could even begin to understand the pain of a father whose simple act of dressing his little boy evoked fears that one day he might be shot to death by an aggressive cop.

That’s when I decided to read *Between the World and Me* by Ta-Nehisi Coates.

I have no interest in ever speaking to the man who wrote the letter objecting to our resolution, but if he—or anyone—is in doubt of the persistence of institutional racism in this country, I invite them to open up Coates’ book. It is not an easy read. Despite its compactness, it is dense and difficult. Written as a letter to his son, Samori, Coates combines personal experiences and cultural criticism to illustrate the depth and depravity of America’s racial problems.

Coates grew up in West Baltimore. His highly politicized father, a member at one time of the Black Panthers, was a bibliophile

employed at Howard University as a research librarian working with “one of the largest collections of Africana in the world.” From an early age, Coates was exposed to the ideas of a wide range of black activists and intellectuals. He was also exposed to an environment in which he learned what it meant “to be naked before the elements of the world, before all the guns, fists, knives, crack, rape, and disease.” He elaborates:

The nakedness is not an error, nor pathology. The nakedness is the correct and intended result of policy, the predictable upshot of people forced for centuries to live under fear. The law did not protect us. And now, in your time, the law has become an excuse for stopping and frisking you, which is to say, for furthering the assault on your body. But a society that protects some people through a safety net of schools, government-backed home loans, and ancestral wealth but can only protect you with the club of criminal justice has either failed at enforcing its good intentions or has succeeded in something much darker.

His awakening continued as a student at Howard. It was there, at “The Mecca,” that Coates encountered a broader community of black people in all of their extraordinary varieties and unities and disunities. It was there that he met his wife. And it was there that he befriended Prince Jones, who was followed around one night at 3 a.m. by an undercover Prince George County, Maryland police officer with no probable cause to stop him. Or to shoot him. Sixteen times.

---

---

**Jeffrey L. Falick** is the rabbi of the Birmingham Temple, the first congregation for Humanistic Judaism. He serves on the Executive Committee of the Society for Humanistic Judaism, and is a past president of the Association of Humanistic Rabbis. He sits on the editorial board of this journal.

---

---

His friend's death was a watershed in his life. Jones was a "scion of a striving class," his mother a highly regarded radiologist. He writes about the enormous resources expended to investigate Jones, rather than the officer (from whom some measure of justice was pried only in civil courts), noting ironically that it "produced no information to explain why Prince Jones would suddenly shift his ambitions from college to cop killing." With a combination of pain and the power of his pen, he laments:

Think of all the love poured into him. Think of the tuitions for Montessori and music lessons. Think of the gasoline expended, the treads worn carrying him to football games, basketball tournaments, and Little League. Think of the time spent regulating sleepovers. Think of the surprise birthday parties, the daycare, and the reference checks on babysitters. Think of *World Book* and *Childcraft*. Think of checks written for family photos. Think of credit cards charged for vacations. Think of soccer balls, science kits, chemistry sets, racetracks, and model trains. Think of all the embraces, all the private jokes, customs, greetings, names, dreams, all the shared knowledge and capacity of a black family injected into that vessel of flesh and bone. And think of how that vessel was taken, shattered on the concrete, and all its holy contents, all that had gone into him, sent flowing back to the earth.

Is this really just a failure to enforce good intentions? Or is it the successful achievement of something darker?

President Kennedy once said, "This was the secret of America: a nation of people with the fresh memory of old traditions who dared to explore new frontiers, people eager to build lives for themselves in a spacious society that did not restrict their freedom of choice and action." Was there ever a better paean to this nation, fruit of the Age of Enlightenment?

But is it true?

In Act II of Lin-Manuel Miranda's *Hamilton*, the Treasury Secretary engages in a rap battle against Thomas Jefferson—whom he

derides as "Mr. Age of Enlightenment"—over creating a national debt. Jefferson, whose state has no debt, objects:

Uh! Our debts are paid, I'm afraid.

Don't tax the South cuz we got it made in the shade.

In Virginia, we plant seeds in the ground. We create.

To which Hamilton responds:

A civics lesson from a slaver. Hey neighbor. Your debts are paid cuz you don't pay for labor.

"We plant seeds in the South. We create." Yeah, keep ranting.

We know who's really doing the planting (Miranda and Carter 2016).

We live in a nation that to a very great extent was built on the coerced free labor of black bodies.

Coates' book conveys a powerful message that we remain far from Kennedy's spacious society of unrestricted freedom. Modern black bodies may no longer appear on plantation property rolls, but they still do not fully belong to their rightful owners. At any moment they are subject to entrapment or dispossession or destruction, the latter "merely the superlative form of a dominion whose prerogatives include friskings, detainings, beatings, and humiliations." Who—when confronted by the uninterrupted headlines about the next Trayvon Martin, Michael Brown, Eric Garner, or Sandra Bland—could argue otherwise?

In 2015 alone, more than one hundred unarmed black people were killed by police. That's 37% of all unarmed Americans shot by police, in a country where blacks constitute 13% of the population. As I write this review, two more black men have been killed, in as many days, by excessively violent police in Louisiana and Minnesota. These deaths may grab our attention, but every day there are

---

---

outrages being committed against black bodies; outrages like a fifteen-year-old black girl's body flung to the ground and kned in the back for the crime of making too much teenage noise at a summer pool party.

Coates does not offer simple solutions to America's racism problem because he doesn't offer any solutions at all. What he proffers instead is a painful shakedown of the root and root of America's treatment of black people by—as James Baldwin first noted—“those who think they are white.” And while Coates offers no solutions, I believe that there will never be any real progress until we stop denying that the issue even exists. Because, as Coates writes, our approach to racism is to explain it away “as the innocent daughter of Mother Nature,” deploring “the Middle Passage or the Trail of Tears the way one deploras an earthquake” or other natural disaster.

“Race,” he says, “is the child of racism, not the father.”

American racism is not, and never has been, about color or heritage or genealogy. No one arrived in this country as “white.” We invented that idea. This is something that Jews really should understand. We were not considered white in this country until we were. Neither were the Italians, nor the Irish—or anyone, really. As Baldwin wrote, “America became white—the people who, as they claim, ‘settled’ the country became white—because of the necessity of denying the Black presence, and justifying the Black subjugation” (Baldwin 1984).

These are challenging ideas. They upend conventional narratives about race and racism and our nation's history. It is much more comforting to align ourselves with the man who, masquerading as a Humanist, protested that there is no such thing as “institutional rac-

ism”—to aver that racism has been conquered in America. That we have a black president. That the problems of black people are of their own making. That black people must learn to pull themselves up from this situation just like we Jews did. That “black-on-black” crime is the real problem. That “All Lives Matter.”

A few years ago, Coates called for a national debate about black reparations. Drawing a comparison to German culpability for the Shoah, he noted that it was not until after Germany began to pay reparations, that it started to fully reckon with itself. “Perhaps,” he wrote, by doing so they “provided a road map for how a great civilization might make itself worthy of the name” (Coates 2014).

I know that America needs desperately to become worthy of our claim to be a spacious society of unrestricted freedom. I know that we will never succeed until we come to terms with what America stole and continues to steal from black people. I know that Humanism promotes a belief in the essential dignity and worth of every human being. I know that the dignity and worth of black Americans was, and continues to be, refused them.

And I know one more thing. I know that others who call themselves Humanists have an obligation to know these things too.

### Sources

Baldwin, James. 1984. “On Being ‘White’ ... and Other Lies.” *Essence*, April, 90-92.

Coates, Ta-Nehisi. 2014. “The Case for Reparations.” *The Atlantic*, June, <http://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2014/06/the-case-for-reparations/361631/>.

Miranda, Lin-Manuel and Jeremy McCarter. 2016. *Hamilton: The Revolution*. Grand Central Publishing.

---

---

## IN REVIEW

# *At Home in Exile: Why Diaspora is Good for the Jews*

by Alan Wolfe, Beacon Press, Boston MA (2014)

Reviewed by Bennett Muraskin

Alan Wolfe is a Diaspora Jew and proud of it. America has been good for its Jews, who have become prosperous and respected, and Jews have been good for America in expanding the boundaries of democracy, freedom and social justice. However, many Jewish pundits have sung a different tune. They tell us that intermarriage and assimilation threaten to erase Jewish identity, and that liberal/left Jews have become enemies of Israel.

Wolfe believes that there are two poles in Jewish life—the universalist and the particularist—and he defends the former against the later. His universalism, however, leaves room for support of a two-state solution and an Israel that is both Jewish and democratic. He sees Israel moving dangerously to the particularist end of the spectrum. Because American Jews enjoy the benefits of democracy and pluralism, they are in an ideal position to move Israel away from the nationalist abyss. The “blessings of exile” can help redeem Israel.

Although Wolfe calls himself a “liberal Zionist,” I believe this is a misnomer because he rejects key Zionist concepts of the “negation of the exile” and the “centrality of Israel.” If, as Wolfe asserts, Jews are better off living outside of Israel, and should embrace their status as minorities in the lands where they live, he is not Zionist. Neither is he an anti-Zionist because he believes that Israel has a right to exist as a Jewish state. “Post-Zionist”

or “non-Zionist” are terms that provide a better fit.

Most scholars see the Six-Day War in June 1967 as a turning point in the history of American Jewry, introducing a defensive, conservative strain to American Jewish politics. Wolfe does not reject this theory entirely, but emphasizes the Jewish reaction to the Nazi march through Skokie, Illinois in 1976, a town that was the home of many Holocaust survivors. Rather than defend the First Amendment rights of the Nazis, the mainstream Jewish organizations, all bastions of liberalism, betrayed their birthright by calling for a ban.

However, the birth of Jewish neo-conservativeism, in the person of Irving Kristol, pre-dated Skokie. It focused on the purported anti-Semitism in leftist criticism of Israel’s occupation of Arab land and in Black nationalism. Although he misses this point, Wolfe accurately identifies Kristol and the writer and Yiddishist, Ruth Wisse as two key representatives of this trend. Wisse’s 1992 book *If I Am Not for Myself: The Liberal Betrayal of the Jews* best encapsulates for Wolfe the dangers of a Jewish siege mentality.

---

---

**Bennett Muraskin**, a union representative for higher education faculty and other professionals in New Jersey, is adult education chair of the Jewish Cultural School and Society of North Jersey, and an affiliate of the Congress of Secular Jewish Organizations. He is the author of *Humanist Readings in Jewish Folklore* and *Let Justice Well Up Like Water*.

---

---

Abraham Foxman, Executive Director of the ADL, has often been charged with exaggerating anti-Semitism in the US. Wolfe takes a swipe at Foxman, but fires away full blast at a British Jew, Anthony Julius, author of a study of anti-Semitism in England. Choosing a non-American to exemplify Jewish paranoia seems odd, and so does the amount of ink Wolfe spills attacking him, but he does expose Julius for condemning as a “blood libel” a placard at a rally in England accusing Israel of killing Palestinian children in Gaza.

Closer to home, Wolfe takes Jeffrey Wisenfeld, CUNY trustee, to task for attempting to deny playwright Tony Kushner an honorary degree because of his opposition to Israeli policies and his critique of Zionism. I agree completely with his defense of Kushner and other critics of Israel and Zionism, like Tony Judt, Jonathan Kovel, and Alisa Solomon against charges of anti-Semitism; but unlike Wolfe, I have no tolerance for those who use the term “genocide” to describe Israeli mistreatment and even killing of innocent Palestinians. No action against a people whose population is increasing at a rapid rate, however punitive, can honestly be described as “genocide.”

Wolfe is not blind to the recent upsurge of anti-Semitism in Europe, especially among its Muslim population, but does not sufficiently explore the conflation of anti-Zionism with anti-Semitism. When Jewish schools, museums, and markets are attacked and popular entertainers like Dieudonne give veiled Nazi salutes, there can be no doubt that we are dealing with a noxious phenomenon. This new reality makes one skeptical of his depiction of West European Jews as exemplars of “diasporic universalism.” If anything, Jews in Great Britain and France (where most are of North African origin) are becoming more insular (Cohen, 2009). Ironically, better news comes from Germany and Poland with their new Jewish museums and well attended Jewish festivals.

In the final analysis, Wolfe stakes his claim for Jewish universalism in the US, with its large, diverse, and self-confident Jewish population. “...Social scientists and historians

have uncovered good reasons for concluding that Diaspora Jews are not only surviving in the US, but they are doing so in ways that make a revival of prophetic universalism more plausible.” Here, I fully agree.

Rather than bemoan high rates of intermarriage and the waning of ethnicity among American Jews, Wolfe embraces them as an opportunity for Jewish renewal. “When religion and peoplehood are chosen rather than ascribed, individuals must call upon powers of imagination rather than memory. No longer taken for granted, Jewishness and Judaism must be recreated.” But it won’t be the mainstream Jewish organizations or institutions that will lead the way. When I read these words, I held my breath. *Jewish Currents* magazine and Lawrence Bush, its editor; Sherwin Wine, the foremost spokesperson for Secular Humanistic Judaism; Arthur Waskow, the radical rabbi who founded the Sholem Center; and Michael Lerner, the radical rabbi, editor of *Tikkun* magazine and leader of the Network of Spiritual Progressives, have all plowed this ground in one way or another. Yet Wolfe does not mention a single one.

The examples he provides of Jewish renewal are legitimate: Limmud, a grassroots organization dedicated to Jewish education and culture in the broadest sense, whose conferences attract thousands of Jewish youth; the chavura movement that connects egalitarian prayer services with social action; organizations that cater to the Jewish LGBT community. But considering Wolfe’s conviction that social justice is intrinsic to the Jewish universalist movement, it is shocking that he does not mention Jews for Racial and Economic Justice; and considering that Wolfe is based in Boston, it is appalling that he does not mention the Boston Workmen’s Circle or Kahal B’raira, the Boston Congregation for Humanistic Judaism.

Wolfe admits that he is a secular Jew, unaffiliated with any Jewish organization. He must be talking about himself when he writes that “...it would never dawn on non-religious Jews to become active in movements for Jewish revival no matter how universalistic they may be.” This statement is as wrong for the

present—in which the Congress of Secular Jewish Organizations and the Society for Humanistic Judaism exist—as it was for the past, when secular Jews formed vital organizations like the Workmen’s Circle, the Jewish People’s Fraternal Order, the Sholem Aleichem Folk Institute, and the Menorah Association. It is hard to believe that this professor of political science and director of the Boisi Center for Religion and American Public Life at Boston College can be so ignorant, but there you are. Despite these negatives, Wolfe makes a good case for why the Diaspora is indeed good for the Jews, or at least American Jews. He is clearly an innovative thinker. Although he does not provide this quote from Sigmund Freud, I think Wolfe would subscribe to it: “Because I

am a Jew I found myself free from many prejudices that hampered others in the use of their intellects; and as a Jew I was prepared to take my place on the side of the opposition and renounce being on good terms with the ‘compact majority’” (Allport 1979, 155).

Do I hear an “amen?”

#### Sources

Gordon W. Allport. 1979. *The Nature of Prejudice: 25<sup>th</sup> Anniversary Edition*. New York: Basic Books.

Erik H. Cohen. 2009. *The Jews of France at the Turn of the Third Millennium: A Sociological and Cultural Analysis*, Research and Position Papers of the Rappaport Center, ed. Zvi Zohar. Ramat Gan: Bar Ilan University.

## Celebrate holidays **humanistically...**

Jewish holidays can be celebrations of

**human** courage,

**human** ingenuity,

**human** dignity

**The High Holidays** \$4.00

**Sukkot** \$10.00

**A Hanukka Manual** \$5.00

**Tu Bi-Shevat** \$10.00

**Purim** \$10.00

**A Passover Manual** \$10.00

**Shavuot** \$6.00

Order online from the Society for Humanistic Judaism <http://www.shj.org/store/books/holidays/>

---

---

# Humanistic Jewish Congregations, Communities & Havurot

## UNITED STATES

### ARIZONA

**Or Adam Congregation for Humanistic Judaism**, contact: Jeffrey Schesnol, 7904 East Chaparral Road, Unit A110-278, Scottsdale, AZ 85250, (480) 663-7788, [www.oradam.com](http://www.oradam.com), [oradaminfo@gmail.com](mailto:oradaminfo@gmail.com)

**Secular Humanist Jewish Circle**, contact: Catherine Becskehazy, 4994 N Louis River Way, Tucson, AZ 85718, (520) 271-4830, [www.secularhumanisticjewishcircle.org](http://www.secularhumanisticjewishcircle.org), [cathbaz@gmail.com](mailto:cathbaz@gmail.com)

### CALIFORNIA

**Adat Chaverim, Congregation for Humanistic Judaism**, contact: Jonathan Friedmann, P.O. Box 261204, Encino, CA 91426, (888) 552-4552, [www.HumanisticJudaismLA.org](http://www.HumanisticJudaismLA.org), [info@HumanisticJudaismLA.org](mailto:info@HumanisticJudaismLA.org)

**Kol Hadash, Northern California**, contact: Kimberly Read, PO Box 2777, Berkeley, CA 94702, (510) 982-1455, [www.KolHadash.org](http://www.KolHadash.org), [info@kolhadash.org](mailto:info@kolhadash.org)

**Pacific Community of Cultural Jews**, contact: Leslie Zwick, 6182 Pickett Ave, Garden Grove, CA 92845, (562) 592-0999, [www.pccjews.org](http://www.pccjews.org), [PacifComm@aol.com](mailto:PacifComm@aol.com)

### COLORADO

**Beth Ami, Colorado Congregation for Humanistic Judaism**, contact: Sheila Malcolm, 280 South 39th Street, Boulder, CO 80305, (303) 499-5933, [www.bethami.com](http://www.bethami.com), [info@bethami.com](mailto:info@bethami.com)

### CONNECTICUT

**Congregation for Humanistic Judaism, Fairfield County**, contact: Alexandra Mack, (203) 293-8867, PO Box 82, Westport, CT 06881, [www.humanisticjews.org](http://www.humanisticjews.org), [info@humanisticjews.org](mailto:info@humanisticjews.org)

### DISTRICT OF COLUMBIA

**Machar, The Washington Congregation for Secular Humanistic Judaism**, contact: Rabbi Nehama Benmosche, president: Rahel Hanadari, PO Box 42014, Washington, DC 20015, (202) 686-1881, [www.machar.org](http://www.machar.org), [info@machar.org](mailto:info@machar.org)

### FLORIDA

**Congregation Beth Adam**, contact: Diane Tuschman, PO Box 2579, Boca Raton, FL 33427, (561) 443-1769, [www.bethadam.com](http://www.bethadam.com), [info@bethadam.com](mailto:info@bethadam.com)

**Congregation for Humanistic Judaism**, contact: Alice D'Souza, 3023 Proctor Road, Sarasota, FL 34231, (941) 929-7771, [www.CHJ-sarasota.org](http://www.CHJ-sarasota.org), [CHJSarasota@hotmail.com](mailto:CHJSarasota@hotmail.com)

**Humanistic Jewish Havurah of Southwest Florida**, contact: Joan Weinstein, PO Box 110285, Naples, FL 34108, (239) 254-1092, [www.hjhsfwf.org](http://www.hjhsfwf.org), [joanbw17@outlook.com](mailto:joanbw17@outlook.com)

### ILLINOIS

**Beth Chaverim Humanistic Jewish Community**, contact: Rabbi Jodi Kornfeld, 1457 Wilmot Road, Deerfield, IL 60015, (847) 945-6512, [www.bethchaverim.net](http://www.bethchaverim.net), [info@bethchaverim.net](mailto:info@bethchaverim.net)

**Kol Hadash Humanistic Congregation**, Rabbi Adam Chalom, contact: Sheila Sebor, chair, 175 Olde Half Day Road, Suite 123, Lincolnshire, IL 60069, (847) 383-5184, [www.kolhadash.com](http://www.kolhadash.com), [info@kolhadash.com](mailto:info@kolhadash.com)

### MARYLAND

**Baltimore Jewish Cultural Chavurah**, contact: Bob Jacobson, 2 Stitchberry Court, Reisterstown, MD 21136, (410) 493-2473, [www.baltimoresecularjews.org](http://www.baltimoresecularjews.org), [baltimoresecularjews@gmail.com](mailto:baltimoresecularjews@gmail.com)

## MASSACHUSETTS

**Kahal B'raira, Boston Congregation for Humanistic Judaism**, contact: Gladys Maged, 765 Concord Avenue, Cambridge, MA 02138, (617) 431-3994, [www.kahalbraira.org](http://www.kahalbraira.org), [info@Kahalbraira.org](mailto:info@Kahalbraira.org)

## MICHIGAN

**Birmingham Temple, Congregation for Humanistic Judaism**, Rabbi Jeffrey L. Falick, 28611 W 12 Mile Road, Farmington Hills, MI 48334, (248) 477-1410, [www.birminghamtemple.org](http://www.birminghamtemple.org), [info@birminghamtemple.org](mailto:info@birminghamtemple.org)

## MINNESOTA

**Or Emet, Minnesota Congregation for Humanistic Judaism**, co-presidents: Lisa Gardner-Springer & Janet Mayer; contact: Richard Logan, President Emeritus, 3140 Chowen Ave S, Apt 303, Minneapolis, MN 55416, (612) 275-7081, [www.oremet.org](http://www.oremet.org), [info@oremet.org](mailto:info@oremet.org)

## NEW JERSEY

**Kahal Chaverim, NJ Congregation for Humanistic Judaism**, contact: Craig Schlusberg, PO Box 217, Chester, NJ 07930, (973) 927-0078, [www.kahalchaverim.org](http://www.kahalchaverim.org), [info@kahalchaverim.org](mailto:info@kahalchaverim.org)

## NEW YORK

**Beth Haskalah, Rochester Society for Humanistic Judaism**, contact: Barry Swan, PO Box 18343, Rochester, NY 14618, (585) 234-1644, [www.shj-roc.org](http://www.shj-roc.org), [baswan@aol.com](mailto:baswan@aol.com)

**The City Congregation for Humanistic Judaism**, Rabbi Peter Schweitzer; contact: Amy Stein, 15 West 28th Street, 3rd Floor, New York, NY 10001, (212) 213-1002, [www.citycongregation.org](http://www.citycongregation.org), [info@citycongregation.org](mailto:info@citycongregation.org)

**Kol Haverim, The Finger Lakes Community for Humanistic Judaism**, PO Box 4972, Ithaca, NY 14852, (607) 227-5680, [www.kolhaverim.net](http://www.kolhaverim.net), [vicechair@kolhaverim.net](mailto:vicechair@kolhaverim.net)

**Westchester Community for Humanistic Judaism**, contact: Dmitry Turovsky, 84 Sprague Road, Scarsdale, NY 10583, (914) 713-8828, [www.wchj.org](http://www.wchj.org), [aristophil@yahoo.com](mailto:aristophil@yahoo.com)

## NORTH CAROLINA

**Kol Haskalah, A Humanistic Jewish Congregation**, contact: Karen Schinsky, 802 Creekstone Dr, Chapel Hill, NC 27516, (919) 260-4801, [www.kolhaskalah.org](http://www.kolhaskalah.org), [info@kolhaskalah.org](mailto:info@kolhaskalah.org)

## OHIO

**Humanist Jewish Chavurah of Columbus**, contact: Ellen Rapkin, 231 Orchard Lane, Columbus, OH 43214, (614) 285-4522, [www.hjccohio.org](http://www.hjccohio.org), [cbushumjudaism@yahoo.com](mailto:cbushumjudaism@yahoo.com)

## OREGON

**Kol Shalom, Community for Humanistic Judaism**, 1509 SW Sunset Boulevard, Suite 1E, Portland, OR 97239, (503) 459-4210, [www.kolshalom.org](http://www.kolshalom.org), [info@kolshalom.org](mailto:info@kolshalom.org)

## WASHINGTON

**Secular Jewish Circle of Puget Sound**, PMB 367, 117 East Louisa Street, Seattle, WA 98102, (206) 528-1944, [www.secularjewishcircle.org](http://www.secularjewishcircle.org), [info@secularjewishcircle.org](mailto:info@secularjewishcircle.org)

## CANADA

**Oraynu Congregation**, Rabbi Denise Handlarski, contact: Roby Sadler, 156 Duncan Mill Road, Suite 14, Toronto, Ontario, M3B 3N2, Canada, (416) 385-3910, [www.oraynu.org](http://www.oraynu.org), [info@oraynu.org](mailto:info@oraynu.org)



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.

#### BOARD OF DIRECTORS EXECUTIVE COMMITTEE

DR. RICHARD LOGAN  
PRESIDENT  
ANDREA FRIEDLANDER  
VICE-PRESIDENT  
RABBI JEFFREY L. FALICK  
TREASURER  
SUSAN RYAN  
SECRETARY  
LARRY M. LAWRENCE  
PAST PRESIDENT

LOUIS ALTMAN  
STEPHANIE BLUM  
FAITH OREMLAND  
MARY RASKIN

#### DIRECTORS

ROGER ADDELSON  
ELEANOR ALTMAN  
BARRY COHEN  
MARLENE COHEN  
PAULA CREED  
EZRA DONNER  
JEFF FRIEDMAN  
JUDI GLADSTONE  
RICK GOLD  
SUSAN HERSCHMAN  
LEE JACOBI  
MICHAEL JERRIS  
DAVID KANTOR  
ROB LASKER  
JON LEVINE

ARTHUR LIEBHABER  
JANET MAYER  
E. RONALD MILAN  
MAIA MILLER  
SHEILA MALCOLM  
DANA PREIS  
VICTORIA RATNASWAMY  
SUSAN RUBIN  
BJ SAUL  
JEFFREY SCHESNOL  
AMY SCHNEIDER  
SHEILA SEBOR  
ALANA SHINDLER  
BERT STEINBERG  
BARRY SWAN

#### HUJEWS

MIRIAM FELDMAN  
SAM GREENBERG  
TEEN REPRESENTATIVES  
LIBBY OTTO  
ABBY ULMAN  
YOUNG ADULT LIAISONS  
KATE FOREST  
HUJEWS CONCLAVE COORDINATOR

#### EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR

PAUL GOLIN

#### RABBI

MIRIAM JERRIS

#### CO-EDITORS, *HUMANISTIC JUDAISM*

JEREMY M. KRIDEL

SUSAN A. WARROW

#### FOUNDER

RABBI SHERWIN T. WINE, 1928-2007

Society for Humanistic Judaism  
28611 West Twelve Mile Road  
Farmington Hills, MI 48334

Address Service Requested

Non-Profit Organization  
U.S. Postage  
**PAID**  
Farmington Hills, Michigan  
Permit No. 349

*Membership in the Society for  
Humanistic Judaism includes  
subscription to this publication.*