



# Humanistic Judaism

*Magazine*

## **Gene Wilder**

*Humanistic Jewish  
Role Model of the Year*

**Interview:  
Filmmaker Jordan  
Walker-Pearlman**

*Nephew of Gene Wilder  
with Paul Golin*

**Community News**

*and much more*

**I'm Spiritual, Not Religious**

*by Rabbi Miriam Jerris*

**Summer 2018**

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## Contributors

- **Jeffrey Falick** is the rabbi of The Birmingham Temple, Congregation for Humanistic Judaism.
- **Paul Golin** is the executive director of the Society for Humanistic Judaism.
- **Miriam Jerris** is the Rabbi of the Society for Humanistic Judaism and the IISHJ Associate Professor of Professional Development.
- **Isabel Kaplan** is a Past President of The City Congregation for Humanistic Judaism in New York, NY.
- **Jon Levine** is a member of Kahal B'raira, Greater Boston's Congregation for Humanistic Judaism.
- **Richard Logan** is a volunteer leader of Jews for a Secular Democracy; board president of the Society for Humanistic Judaism; and a retired Professor of Human Development.
- **Sheila Malcolm** is the madrikha at Beth Ami, Colorado Congregation for Humanistic Judaism and its representative to the SHJ Board.
- **Arlene J. Pearlman** is the Program/PR Chair for the Congregation for Humanistic Judaism in Sarasota, Florida.
- **Fred Pincus** is a member of the Baltimore Jewish Cultural Chavurah.
- **Abigail Pogrebin** is the author of *Stars of David* and *One and the Same*. She moderates the interview series “What Everyone's Talking About” at the JCC in Manhattan.
- **Susan Ratisher Ryan** is on the SHJ Executive Committee and is the SHJ representative from The City Congregation for Humanistic Judaism in New York, NY.
- **Lisa Sullivan** is a board member of the Congregation for Humanistic Judaism, Fairfield County, CT and the editor of their newsletter.
- **Susan Weinberg** is a board member of Or Emet, Minnesota Congregation for Humanistic Judaism and the co-editor of their newsletter.

# From the Editor

This issue of *Humanistic Judaism* magazine devotes attention to two topics: secular spirituality (or... something like that!) and a tribute to this year's Humanistic Jewish Role Model of the Year, Gene Wilder.

Tackling the question of whether there is such a thing as secular spirituality — and if so, what it is — the Society for Humanistic Judaism's Rabbi Miriam Jerris considers what we might mean by spirituality, and what Secular Humanistic Jews might be able to make of the concept. Rabbi Jerris's article rests on her own observations after more than three decades of involvement with our movement, and on insights gleaned from other Humanistic Jews who gave their own perspectives on spirituality. As you might imagine, there is no one answer, but there's still a lot of common ground among Humanistic Jews when it comes to the idea of connection to oneself, to others, and to our broader world.

Gene Wilder's inspirational life provides a model for Secular Humanistic Jews to find connection in the world and with others. Our feature on Wilder includes two articles. One is a reprint of portions of Abigail Pogrebin's interview with Gene Wilder, which was originally published in Pogrebin's 2005 book, *Stars of David*. The interview provides fascinating insight into Wilder's understanding of his Jewishness, and into his secular view of the world itself.

In the other feature on Wilder, the Society for Humanistic Judaism's Executive Director Paul Golin interviews Gene Wilder's nephew, Jordan Walker-Pearlman. Walker-Pearlman was, in many respects, Wilder's surrogate son, and the interview provides insight into Wilder's genuinely kind and innocent personality, family life, and career.

New to this issue is a regular feature from Jews For a Secular Democracy (JFASD), a pluralistic initiative of SHJ that is open to Jews of any or no denominational or movement affiliation, as well as their family and friends. JFASD seeks to unite Jews in the United States to stand against the increasing influence of religious fundamentalism on government policy. In this issue, Richard Logan, SHJ's president, explains why truly secular government, free of religious entanglements, is important and how the US's founders tried to ensure secular government at the state and federal levels.

We also have a bevy of news from Humanistic Jewish communities around the United States in this issue. The City Congregation for Humanistic Judaism in New York City reflects on the retirement of their first rabbi, Peter Schweitzer, and celebrates the arrival of their new rabbi, Tzemah Yoreh. Other communities share news about how they are living out the principles of Humanistic Judaism and connecting with local Jewish life, history, and culture. These stories include an alternative Passover celebration at the Baltimore Jewish Cultural Chavurah, a celebration of learning for Shavuot at Kahal B'reira in Boston, extensive involvement in social justice work at The Birmingham Temple, Congregation for Humanistic Judaism, and much more.

Finally, we wish farewell to Susan Warrow, *Humanistic Judaism's* co-editor for the last three years. Susan is moving on from the magazine in order to take up the mantle of Director of Youth Education at our movement's founding synagogue, The Birmingham Temple. Her valuable contributions to the magazine will be missed, but the next generation of Secular Humanistic Jews will gain tremendously from the magazine's loss.



**J. M. K.**

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**Editor:**  
Rabbi Jeremy M. Kridel

**Community News:**  
Deb Godden

**Graphic Design:**  
Raya Kridel

**Editorial Board:**  
Rabbi Adam Chalom  
Rabbi Jeffrey Falick  
Paul Golin  
Rabbi Miriam Jerris  
Rabbi Peter Schweitzer



**Summer 2018**

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# A Personal Reflection on Gene Wilder

## Interview With His Nephew Jordan Walker-Pearlman

*Gene Wilder's nephew, Jordan Walker-Pearlman, is an award-winning filmmaker and political fundraiser who helped Barack Obama become president. Walker-Pearlman's relationship with Wilder was much closer than the typical nephew/uncle; he describes Gene Wilder as a co-parent. From a very young age he spent weeks at a time with Wilder as his only parental figure (Gene Wilder did not have biological children of his own), and that close relationship continued into adulthood.*

*When Gene Wilder died, it was Walker-Pearlman who released a statement publicly identifying the cause as Alzheimer's. He has since spoken around the country on behalf of research to end the disease, and he raises funds to contribute to the cost of care for families that cannot otherwise afford it.*

*After learning that Gene Wilder had been named the Humanistic Jewish Role Model for 2017–18, Jordan Walker-Pearlman was kind enough to speak by phone with Paul Golin, executive director of the Society for Humanistic Judaism. They happened to speak on June 11, 2018, which would have been Gene Wilder's 85<sup>th</sup> birthday.*



Photo: Courtesy Jordan Walker-Pearlman

**Paul Golin:** Gene Wilder obviously brought joy to millions through his talents and was an inspiration to so many people because of his warm and caring public persona and charitable work. As Humanistic Jews, we especially appreciate that he was open about what he believed, and that his ethics were derived from a human-centered philosophy. But we of course only ever knew him from the perspective of fans. As a close relative, what more can you tell us about Gene Wilder's ethical core? How did you see him live out his values?

**Jordan Walker-Pearlman:** I experienced how he lived out his values in two distinct ways. One was with a sense of urgency because he co-parented me; when Gene and I were together when I was growing up it was just Gene and I, so it was very much a single-parent atmosphere. There were no other parents or siblings when I lived with him, until he married Gilda, whereas in other households I experienced more people. So at a very early age he tried to instill lessons in me, to urgently convey what he wanted me to understand, though always in a gentle way. The second way I experienced his values was observing him in the world, and that was very striking because sometimes you can hear parents say one thing and act another way. But on almost no occasion did I witness him compromise what his core values were.

And his core values basically came down to: treat others as you would want to be treated. That was most important to him, and when he failed at it or thought he lost his temper with someone, he would immediately express remorse for it or try to make amends.

He described himself as a Jewish-Buddhist-Atheist, kind of came up with that phrase as a shorthand so nobody would try to “sell him” anything. It made sense if you knew him, he'd been approached by enough people pushing religion that he felt if he said that, “people will know I'm a lost cause.” He did identify culturally as Jewish. He absolutely considered himself a humanist. As for Buddhism, he liked what he heard but he didn't study it or practice it. Regarding being atheist, he was open to any possibility but he didn't like religious rules that set what the possibilities could be.

His parents were Jewish, he was bar mitzvahed, but around the time he was a late teenager, a part of his family had gone into a different faith and came to him claiming that he was a divine reincarnation, and he began to have a great deal of demons and compulsions, which he later put to good use in terms of acting technique — but that formed his reluctance to be brought into any repeated religious circumstances.

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# Gene Wilder

## Humanistic Jewish Role Model 2017–18

*The Society for Humanistic Judaism named Gene Wilder the Humanistic Jewish Role Model of the Year for 5778. Beyond bringing joy through his acting, writing, and directing in classic films like *The Producers*, *Blazing Saddles*, and *Willy Wonka & the Chocolate Factory*, Wilder also worked to make the world a better place. He promoted cancer awareness and treatment, helped found the Gilda Radner Ovarian Cancer Detection Center, and co-founded Gilda's Club, a community organization for people living with cancer. Wilder himself would later survive cancer in his 60's before passing away in 2016 at age 83.*

*Gene Wilder was openly secular and proudly Jewish. In the below-excerpted interview, he said, "I feel very Jewish and I feel very grateful to be Jewish. But I don't believe in God or anything to do with the Jewish religion." Throughout the year, SHJ-affiliated communities offered programs to celebrate Wilder's life, revisited the laughter he gave us through his films, and honored the causes through which he expressed his humanism.*

### **From *Stars of David: Prominent Jews Talk About Being Jewish* (2005) by Abigail Pogrebin**

[Gene Wilder's] mother died when he was fourteen. His second wife's daughter, whom Wilder adopted, is estranged from him. His great love, Gilda Radner, died only five years after their wedding in 1984. Ten years later, he was diagnosed with non-Hodgkins lymphoma, which he's managed to fend off. When we meet, he's nursing Karen's [his fourth wife] mother through her dying days under their roof. I ask him whether Judaism has helped him through any of these hard times and he shakes his head. "I think Freud got me through," he says. "When I was in desperate trouble for maybe eight or nine years, I went to a neuropsychiatrist."

"I'm going to tell you what my religion is," Wilder announces, leaping to the point. "Do unto others as you would have them do unto you. Period. Terminato. Finito." (I can't help hearing Wonka's voice in the factory: "Finito!") "I have no other religion. I feel very Jewish and I feel very grateful to be Jewish. But I don't believe in God or anything to do with the Jewish religion."



*From Start the Revolution Without Me (1970) Photo: Wikimedia Commons (Public Domain)*

Wilder — formerly Jerome Silberman — says his Jewish background consisted of attending an Orthodox temple where his grandfather was president. His sister and mother had to sit separately — “not being equal to men,” he jokes sardonically. His father was born in Russia, his mother in Chicago, of Polish descent, and neither was particularly observant. But he was bar mitzvahed — “I don't know to please whom,” he says. “I practiced singing the maftir a year before my bar mitzvah,” he says, referring to his designated Torah portion. “And I was so distraught—because I had a high soprano voice and no one could hear me in the temple when I started to sing. So I said, ‘I'm not going to be bar mitzvah if you don't have microphones next year!’ And they put the microphones in. And then, of course, my voice changed.”

His father switched the family to a Conservative synagogue when they moved to a new neighborhood in Milwaukee, but Wilder jettisoned the temple visits altogether when he was offended by the rabbi. “I went back to visit Milwaukee, Wisconsin, and heard the ignorant rabbi giving his views on the Vietnam War, and I wanted to get up and start hollering at him. But I thought, ‘My mother and father will be embarrassed and their friends will say, Why did he do that?’ So I didn't. But that's the last time I went to a temple.”

When I ask whether Wilder was conscious of being in a minority growing up, he tells a doleful story. “My mother was very ill and she had heard from distant relatives that there was a military academy in Los Angeles [the Black-Foxe Military Institute]. And she talked my father into sending me to the military academy to stay there for a year. And I got so excited — I thought we'd be playing war games. I got there and I was the only Jew — I was 13 — and they beat me up or insulted me every day that I was there.”

That wasn't the last of the childhood hazing. He was mocked in junior high school, and he reproduces the jeering so quickly, I realize it's at the tip of his memory. “Hey, Jew Boy! Why don't you ask the Jew Boy?”

I remark that this experience must have had some kind of impact. “I don't know how it could not have,” Wilder allows. “But again, I didn't associate it with any religious philosophy; only the fact that I was something called ‘Jewish’ and why did they hate me just because of it? I was always afraid to talk about the teasing at home because my mother was so ill.”

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# I'm Spiritual **Not Religious**

by Rabbi Miriam Jerris

Photo: Courtesy Greg Rakozy on Unsplash



More than 25 years ago, my friend Rabbi Eva Goldfinger taught me something valuable. Before we begin speaking or writing, we must define our terms. It was important then. And on this topic, it is mandatory.

When Sherwin Wine developed and articulated the philosophy of Humanistic Judaism in the early 1960s, he drew people into a congregation and movement who either did not believe in the notion of a higher power, or, more commonly, did not believe in the god of the Hebrew Bible. The liturgy was non-theistic, giving those who did not believe in the efficacy of prayer a Jewish home. In those days, most people attracted to the organization understood their belief system and whether, or not, it was compatible with this new notion of a congregational, yet non-theistic Judaism.

However, it didn't take long for some individuals to describe their discomfort with the Holiday or Shabbat services (celebrations or commemorations) being offered in Humanistic Jewish communities. They were too intellectual, not emotional, or not moving enough, on the one hand; on the other hand, the meanings of certain words were no longer clear. If you were a secular or humanistic Jew, could you say the words, "blessing," "rabbi," "service," "amen," or "spiritual"?

Most people have some understanding of the word "religion." It often means a belief in a god or a higher power. Attendance at services and participating in certain rituals also identify religious behavior.

We know that in the 1970s and 1980s only 10% of U.S. adults said they had no religious affiliation. By 2015, the Pew Research Center reported that 23% described themselves in this way. The "no religious affiliation" category (the "nones") to which we are referring includes agnostics, atheists, and

people who identify as being nothing in particular.

What has become increasingly clear is that while Americans may be getting less religious, more of them are describing themselves as spiritual. Remarkably, among the unaffiliated "nones," a sense of spiritual well-being increased from 35% in 2007 to 40% in 2014, and a sense of wonder about the universe increased from 39% to 47%. This includes an increase in a sense of wonder about the universe from 37% to 54% among self-defined atheists.

In September of 2017, the Pew Research Center reported 27% of U.S. adults say they are "spiritual, but not religious," an increase of eight percentage points over a five-year period. Younger people, women, whites, Democrats, those with some college education, and the religiously unaffiliated fall into this category. They seldom or never attend religious services and say that religion is "not too" or "not at all" important to them. Ten years ago, it wasn't even a "thing" to be spiritual, but not religious. And now it most certainly is a *big thing*. I have been interested for some time in knowing more about what this all means.

In describing spirituality for secular and humanistic people, Jewish, or otherwise, I always turn to Carl Sagan as my source. Sagan observed that the word "spirit" comes from the Latin word *spiritus*, which means "breath." Sagan said, "What we breathe is air, which is certainly matter, however thin. Despite usage to the contrary, there is no necessary implication in the word 'spiritual' that we are talking of anything other than matter (including the matter of which the brain is made), or anything outside the realm of science" (*The Demon-Haunted World: Science as a Candle in the Dark*, 1996).

Furthermore, Sagan explains, "Science is not only compatible with spirituality; it is a profound source of

spirituality. When we recognize our place in an immensity of light-years and in the passage of ages, when we grasp the intricacy, beauty, and subtlety of life, then the soaring feeling, that sense of elation and humility combined, is surely spiritual” (*Ibid.*). Many of us involved in Secular Humanistic Judaism have referred to this notion as Naturalistic Spirituality, a concept in which I am comfortable.

What do people involved in or connected to Humanistic Judaism feel and think about being spiritual, but not religious? Is that a label that fits? I asked a group of 481 members on the Humanistic Discussion Facebook Group whether any of them identify as spiritual, but not religious. Specifically I asked, “Do you identify as spiritual, but not religious? If so, how would you describe what is spiritual? What do you feel like when you are experiencing spirituality? What conditions/ circumstances create a spiritual experience for you?”

Of the twenty-three people who replied, all but five who answered are also members of the Society for Humanistic Judaism.

Eight of those responding, identified as spiritual, but not, or possibly not, religious.

- CG said, “I identify as spiritual, but not religious. Yoga, therapy, nature, and interactions with animals and children often give me warm feelings. I consider those feelings to be both psychologically and spiritually uplifting.”
- SE shared with me, “Spirituality the way I see it means connection with the world around one. It is constructive, life affirming, and while remaining conscious of the self, is other directed. If it’s ‘about me,’ it’s wrong. It’s about me in my community, variously described. It does not solve all my problems, but opens me to challenges that I can address creatively and clearly.”
- SA suggested, “Once you have experiences that take you out of your usual comfort zone/ego, you have a sense of connection with everything and move beyond the self.”
- BF affirmed, “My group gives me a sense of spirituality, a feeling like no other when we are together of just that, togetherness and bonding while exploring and discussing...”
- BC was comfortable with the spiritual label, “When I feel in tune with the natural world, I am at my most spiritual, if I can even give that name to it... Similarly, the sound of children’s laughter, beautiful music, and a wonderful novel and I’m lost happily in another world that is somehow beyond this one.”
- FE declared, “For me the spiritual has always been about the sense of gratitude and wonder engendered by that which is beyond language — mystery — Hillel said the essence of Torah was the golden rule — the way I look at that is I have to be in a state of gratitude to follow the golden rule — wonder at the beauty and mystery of the world engenders the gratitude I need to follow Hillel’s golden rule. ‘God’ is a metaphor to me of the experience and enjoyment of mystery — sunsets, rain, volcanoes, etc. No more or less. We don’t need the supernatural — the natural is more than enough because it is always beyond human description.”
- WM articulated the following: “I identify myself as spiritual, but not religious. What does that mean? I don’t believe in ‘gods’ of any sort... I am not a pure rationalist. I believe there are non-rational, or intuitive ways of knowing, and that way of relating to the universe I choose to call spirituality. No supernatural, not ‘spirits’ inhabiting the world. When I relate to the world with my intellect, I am being rational. When I perceive the world with non-discursive intuition, I am being spiritual. Of course, I am doing both together, all the time. It is like my favorite line from Hamlet: “There are more things in heaven and earth than are dreamt of in our philosophies.”
- A couple of people indicated that they were neither spiritual, nor religious.
- AL said, “Not spiritual; not religious. Compassionate.”
- PB mentioned, “I don’t think in ‘spiritual’ terms. That to me implies something other-worldly, and I’m very much in this world. This is not to say that I don’t appreciate the beauty in nature, or my grandchildren, or anything else that makes me appreciate what I am experiencing. Religion, to me, is the set of ethics/ values by which I live. As I’ve said before, Humanism is my religion and Judaism is my culture.”



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## Secular Government and Democracy

The need for strong secular governance institutions in our democracy could not possibly be clearer than it is now. Among many other things, freedom of religion and belief would not be possible without it.

Since the above is true, it follows that there has never been a stronger need for strong secular organizations in civil society. That is because we understand better than most what secular governance is, and how vital it is. That being true, we will work hard for secular government. (Numerous faith organizations who fully understand that their well-being depends mightily on strong secular government will also join us.)

For related reasons, JEWISH organizations also matter greatly today. First of all, Jewish support for social justice, minority rights, and human rights over history has always been grounded in the belief in, support for, and indeed in the FACT of our secular Constitution. Indeed, Jews have often been in the forefront of actions for the rights and justice found in our Constitution. So, for similar reasons as above, we understand just how much rides on secular governance and how especially vital Jewish support for that is. Our belief in evidence-based argument put forward with sound reasoning gives us exceedingly powerful tools with which to make our case for justice and rights — and democracy — in the public square.

Our secular democracy depends on all of us trying to live as public citizens and not just as private individuals. We should all be involved in the public square.

The United States is, by force of its Constitution, a thoroughly secular nation-state with secular organs and institutions of governance at every level — from the Executive, Legislative, and Judicial branches of the Federal government, through the same institutions at the state level, to local constables, alderpersons, and Justices of the Peace.

There is no specification that “men (sic) of the cloth” by virtue of being men of the cloth have any kind of role in governance, and no specification that one must belong to a certain religion or be a religious figure at all. In sum, ours a “Christian country” only in the sense that the secular nation-state houses a majority Christian culture. That can, and in practice often does, mean that a person with strong Christian values may be

elected, just as in other electoral districts an observant Jewish or Muslim person may be elected.

The importance of civil society in a secular democracy is an important way for citizens’ voices to be mobilized and heard, and as a check on government power.

Democracy can only be democracy if it remains secular. Since democracy is a process that allows differing voices to be heard, that process must not be welded to any one of those political or religious ideologies. By definition, democracy declines to the extent that a single ideology, other than democracy itself, begins to prevail. ●

**Richard Logan**

## How the States Got Their Secular Government

An important point related to why this initiative is called Jews for a Secular Democracy: look at Jewish history in America, and it becomes acutely clear that no one has had a greater interest in secular democracy than Jews, whether observant or not. That is true both on the side of benefiting from the freedom of belief guaranteed by the Constitution, but also on the championing side, where Jews have fought to see that others experience the same freedom.

Many of these Jewish champions of secular governance over history have indeed been observant, and not “secular” at all. But, probably because of their unique history in Europe, they saw — perhaps more clearly than some others — that secular governance was the one government system that would protect their freedom to practice their religious beliefs.

So we seek to mobilize all Jews to continue that tradition of being the strong and articulate defenders and advocates for secular democracy that they have always been. But the story of the Jews as a small religious minority living in

American secular democracy also illustrates the broader and most fundamental point: governance in a pluralistic society can only be democratic if it is secular.

**At the time of the founding of our republic, many of the original colonies had their official state religion: Congregationalist for Massachusetts, Anglican for**



*Photo: Courtesy Wynn Pointaux on Pixabay*

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# CommunityNews

**Beth Ami** — Boulder, CO

**The City Congregation** — New York, NY

**Kahal B'raira** — Boston, MA

**Congregation for Humanistic Judaism** — Fairfield County, CT

**Or Emet** — Minneapolis/St. Paul, MN

**The Birmingham Temple** — Farmington Hills, MI

**Baltimore Jewish Cultural Chavurah** — Baltimore, MD

**Congregation for Humanistic Judaism** — Sarasota, FL

## ACE at the J in Boulder, Colorado



Beth Ami — Colorado Congregation for Humanistic Judaism regularly participates in programming at the Boulder Jewish Community Center. On June 10, the JCC celebrated literacy with a community-wide library dedication, including a shelf of books purchased from the Society for Humanistic Judaism by Beth Ami member Gordon Gamm. The shelf is “bookended” by two permanent plaques honoring Gordon and Grace Gamm for their financial contributions, and highlighting Humanistic Judaism as a denomination, with an active local congregation.

Gordon had another opportunity to present during a local authors session, in which he shared ideas and quotes from his upcoming *The Book of Nones*.

Beth Ami appreciates the work of the Arts, Culture & Education (ACE) component of our exciting and inclusive JCC, which we like to call ACE at the J!

**Sheila Malcolm**

## A Change of Leadership at The City Congregation: It's All Good!

Rabbi Peter Schweitzer, who has led The City Congregation for Humanistic Judaism for the past 26 years, officially retired on Saturday, June 6. A retirement party was held at the NYU Torch Club in Greenwich Village to recognize Rabbi Schweitzer and his leadership, and more than one hundred people came out to reminisce, cheer, and celebrate. On July 1, Rabbi Tzemah Yoreh will take over at TCC, but the night of June 6 was all about Rabbi Peter.



Also honored at the celebration were Rabbi Schweitzer's wife, Myrna Baron, the founder of The City Congregation, and Anne Shonbrun, a longtime member and beloved song leader for the Congregation. Anne is also retiring, although she and her family will remain active members of the community, as will the Schweitzer family.

The evening's festivities were emceed by Marty Shore, one of TCC's co-presidents. Early member Mickie Mandel spoke about Myrna and the formative years of the congregation, and Molly Rose Avila, who grew up in TCC, spoke about Anne's song leading. The congregation gave \$1000 in Anne's honor to the music program at her alma mater, SUNY Albany.

Rabbi Miriam Jerris of the Society for Humanistic Judaism spoke glowingly about Rabbi Schweitzer and his many contributions during his long tenure with the congregation. In his turn, Rabbi Schweitzer reminisced about how he came to join TCC as a member, although he was already an ordained Reform rabbi, and how Rabbi Sherwin Wine, the founder of the movement, finally persuaded him to become the full-time rabbi for The City Congregation.

The congregation presented Rabbi Schweitzer with several tokens of our esteem, including a memory book filled with special comments from members, a commemorative plaque, and an engraved Kindle e-reader.

Though The City Congregation will miss Rabbi Schweitzer's leadership, we are happy to know that he and his family will maintain an active connection to us. We know that they have left us a thriving community, ready to continue into the future under new leadership, but always indebted to them for their service.

**Susan Ratisher Ryan**

**Humanistic Judaism**

## Introducing The City Congregation's New Rabbi, Tzemah Yoreh, Ph.D.

The City Congregation for Humanistic Judaism is thrilled to announce our new rabbi, only the second in our 26-year history.

Rabbi Tzemah Yoreh, raised in Canada and Israel, is the son of two rabbinics scholars. With a doctorate in modern biblical criticism, he firmly believes that knowledge of biblical texts and their critical evaluation is one of the tools to combat religious intolerance in society. He approaches religious texts with a critical eye, the better to discern the diversity and complexity of Jewish tradition.

Rabbi Yoreh was ordained as a Humanistic rabbi by the Israeli affiliate of the International Institute for Secular Humanistic Judaism. The author of an extensive body of Humanistic liturgy, he is a gifted poet as well. Rabbi Yoreh, a resident at CLAL, the National Jewish Center for Learning and Leadership, is completing his second doctorate in early rabbinics at the University of Toronto. He displays a genuine openness to and compassion for different religions and worldviews.

Rabbi Yoreh reads many languages, including Esperanto, and holds a third-degree black belt in karate. He spends his time writing, translating, editing, and teaching. He's involved in efforts to make the Hebrew language non-gendered, and his egalitarian style is evident in how he lives his life. He has three young sons and his wife, Aviva, is also a rabbi.

Upon learning of his selection, he said, "I am excited to meet everyone and feel honored to have been chosen as the new rabbi of this unique congregation."



**Isabel Kaplan**

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## KB Communicates Old School / New School

Shavuot is an old holiday with agricultural roots; it celebrates the Torah, as if it were given as a singular event in history, rather than a series of stories recorded and edited over time. As Humanistic Jews, Kahal B'raira, Boston, observes Shavuot as a celebration of learning.

An important aspect of learning is the communication of ideas. Late in the school year, we held a wonderful Sunday School *Chagigah* showcasing the learning taking place in our classrooms. Students presented their projects orally, as well as using computer projection and posters.

Once upon a time, ideas were transmitted on rolled parchment. Torah stories have been passed on this way for millennia. The Kahal B'raira Torah scroll was generously loaned to us in 2010 on a long-term basis. The anonymous benefactor said she wanted a Humanistic Jewish Congregation to have it available.

On Shavuot, we set tables end-to-end in our beloved gym and gathered the entire school and adults together. We rolled out our Torah but it was longer than the room. Our Sunday School Education Director, Rachel Schoenfeld, who is also a soferet, a Torah scribe and repairer, explained the process of putting a Torah together. KB members read from the scroll, and kids asked questions. We loved it!

In 2011, we redesigned our cumbersome website to bring it up to date. We had a committee who worked along with a web designer for months. Who knew that in a few years hand-held devices would become our major medium for communication? This summer, we intend to update our website. May it last 1000 years!



**Jon Levine**

# Community News

## CHJ Connecticut Grad Co-Edits Award-Winning School Newspaper



It could be said that Elise Sullivan, a 2013 Congregation for Humanistic Judaism (CHJ) graduate and current Norwalk High School senior, Norwalk, Conn., has journalism in her blood. Her parents, CHJ members Jim and Lisa Sullivan, both hold careers in publishing, and the couple has always encouraged their daughter to pursue her love of writing. Consequently, Elise has been involved with *The Paw Print*, her school's newspaper, for the last four years, most currently as co-editor-in-chief during her senior year.

In May, under the guidance of the school's journalism adviser, Robert T. Karl, and through the collaborative efforts of *The Paw Print* staff, the publication garnered a second-place ranking in the 2017–18 American Scholastic Press Association annual contest for scholastic yearbooks, magazines, and newspapers. The national award recognizes excellence in content coverage, page design, art and illustrations, editing, creativity, and general planning.

Elise and her parents joined CHJ in Westport during 2004, when Elise started kindergarten. She attended the CHJ Sunday school until she became a bat mitzvah in October 2013, and subsequently began volunteering in the CHJ Sunday school, first as a classroom aide and then as a CHJ teen group leader, where she, with other teen group leaders and CHJ students, has helped to plan and run fundraisers for area organizations including the Tiny Miracles Foundation in Darien and the Person-to-Person Food Pantry in South Norwalk and Darien.

Elise plans to study journalism at The George Washington University in Washington, D.C. in the fall.

**Lisa Sullivan**

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## Or Emet Member Lionel Davis Shares St. Paul Memories



Minnesota's first Jews arrived in St. Paul around 1849, nine years before Minnesota became the thirty-second state. The early Jewish population came from German-speaking areas of Central Europe and settled around the state Capitol area and in the hills near the Cathedral. During the latter part of the 1800s, Polish and Russian Jews came to St. Paul and settled in the West Side Flats.

The Jewish Historical Society of the Upper Midwest (JHSUM) is working on a history of St. Paul's Jewish communities, from early territorial days through the large Eastern European immigration, and into the mid-twentieth century. They are currently taking oral histories of community elders with deep ties to St. Paul's Jewish communities. One interview was with Or Emet member Lionel Davis, whose mother's family was from St. Paul's west side. Lionel grew up in Duluth but remembered returning to the west side to celebrate Passover with his grandparents, both of whom were very respected in the community. Lionel recalled that when his grandfather died the funeral procession stopped at three different synagogues, with a eulogy delivered at each one.

Lionel also talked about the Tilsenbilt homes that were started by Edward Tilsen, who came to St. Paul in 1932. In 1947 he started the first known interracial commercial housing in the country, working with American National Bank to build a series of row houses in St. Paul. This was a time when it was especially difficult for African-Americans to get a mortgage. The Tilsens were Jewish and their political values influenced their commitment to interracial housing. Today, Lionel lives in a Tilsenbilt home in Minneapolis.

A conversation with Lionel would not be complete without talking about music. He described a cantata in four parts that he wrote for Temple of Aaron as a memorial for President Kennedy. It had an organ prelude, choir and guitar sections, and the President's favorite Bible verses. He also mentioned the recorder solo he plays for Or Emet's High Holiday services. The Jewish Historical Society of the Upper Midwest plans to share these and other stories with the broader community through a future exhibition.

If you have memories or materials that you think may be of interest, please contact JHSUM at (952) 381-3360 or [history@jhsุม.org](mailto:history@jhsุม.org). Susan Weinberg serves on the board of the JHSUM.

**Susan Weinberg**

**Humanistic Judaism**

## Social Action, Social Justice, and Socializing Fun at Birmingham Temple

From social action to social justice to social issues to just plain old socializing fun, the past few months have been extraordinarily busy at The Birmingham Temple CHJ.

On the social action front, in February more than 200 members gathered for our annual “Winter Mitzvah” where members assembled and packed over 1,000 meals for the homeless of Detroit.

Our social justice agenda was also packed, including participation by the congregation in an “immigrant pilgrimage” from Detroit to the state capital Lansing, co-sponsorship of a non-partisan gubernatorial forum that attracted more than 1,000 people, and ongoing representation at the various demonstrations conducted by the Poor People’s Campaign in Michigan. Along the way, BT also adopted a family of Syrian refugees and raised \$10,000 for them when they lost their Temporary Protected Status.



Sybil Offen, Arthur Liebhaber, Audrey Pleasant at MI Poor Peoples Campaign.

On the social issues front, BT brought together an important program in May exploring the future of Israel and Palestine. The extraordinary panel featured Dr. Bradley Roth, an expert in international law and human rights alongside prominent Jewish and Palestinian voices.

Finally, our socializing game was pretty great too, particularly on Game Night, our annual FUNdraiser, chaired by SHJ board member Stephanie Blum. It was a huge success, bringing together an intergenerational crowd to fund scholarships for our Sunday Spinoza Program students.

As we closed out May, BT also celebrated a bittersweet passage with the retirement of our long-time and much-loved educator Rebecca Smith. Though we’ll miss her every Sunday, her family will always be part of our BT family!

**Rabbi Jeffrey Falick**



Greg Campeau with dozens of sandwiches.

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## Alternative Post-Passover Celebration in Baltimore

Declining attendance at our Passover Seders didn’t faze the Baltimore Jewish Cultural Chavurah one bit! Instead, we held an Alternative Passover Celebration on the Sunday after Passover, and we called it our Alternative Post-Passover Passover Celebration.

In lieu of a formal program, we asked attendees, in advance, to bring something around the Passover themes of freedom and liberation to share with the group. This could be a poem or other reading, a piece of music or a meaningful object. To create realistic expectations, we emphasized that this was NOT a seder. We didn’t have a seder plate or any ritual.

We began with a potluck dinner with most of the twenty attendees bringing Passover-appropriate food. The “program” consisted of people reading or speaking for two or three minutes about their selection. We allowed one or two minutes for questions and comments from the group. About two-thirds of the attendees brought readings or songs so the whole event took about 90 minutes. All of the speakers adhered to the time limits we asked them to observe.

Feedback from attendees, two-thirds of whom were BJCC members, was generally positive. Most participants had been to at least one “regular” seder so they enjoyed something different. One or two were disappointed because they expected some kind of seder even though we explicitly said that it was an alternative celebration.

This was the second time that we used this alternative structure and we will consider doing it again next year.

**Fred L. Pincus**

# Community News



Above: Tatev Baroyan, our up-and-coming operatic star.

Middle: Students and their teacher from Visible Men's Academy making Mother's Day Cards.

Right: (l to r) Alla Rabinovich, Jacques Damien, Social Action Chair Annette Wolfe, Ginny Kutikoff, VMA rep Dawnyelle Singleton.

## CHJ Sarasota Enjoys a Busy Calendar — As Usual

Our Social Action Committee provided meals and fun for the kids attending Visible Men's Academy and turned it all into a Mother's Day Breakfast Party for their Moms.

We are collecting books for seventh and eighth graders to read over the summer again, as well as reading to the younger kids ourselves.



Tatev Baroyan, the 22-year-old daughter of our long-time pianist Zara, will be knocking them out in the Ukraine this summer just the way she did at our fundraising concert last year. How good was she? We are clamoring to have her back again this year — that's excellent!

Remember the name and keep your ears open for more. Tatev Baroyan.

Among the programs to be presented this season are speakers from the Tampa Holocaust Museum, from our local but world-famous Mote Marine Laboratory, The Southern Poverty Law Center, and an array of films and education programs. We have our fingers crossed that both the schedule and the weather will cooperate so that SHJ Executive Director Paul Golin will visit in late winter 2019.

**Arlene J. Pearlman**

# Save the Date: April 26–28, 2019

**The Society for Humanistic Judaism: Brand New at Fifty  
Movement-Wide Celebration and Summit  
Farmington Hills, Michigan**



In 1969, Secular Humanistic Judaism became a movement when its founder, Rabbi Sherwin Wine of The Birmingham Temple, joined with two other communities to form the Society for Humanistic Judaism (SHJ).

To mark 50 years of SHJ, let's celebrate the accomplishments of our movement's first half-century and plan for the next 50 years! Come together with current, past, and future leaders from Humanistic Judaism communities throughout the U.S. and Canada for a weekend of joyous celebration, dynamic speakers, and meaningful learning while we rekindle old friendships, create new ones, and generate the next big ideas.

**Come help us celebrate and shape the Jewish Future.**

If you are on Facebook, please visit the Event Page at <http://bit.ly/shj50>

Clicking "INTERESTED" on Facebook is not a commitment to attend but will keep you alerted to updates. Click "GOING" if you'll definitely be attending.

If you would like to be on the planning committee and/or lead your community's contingent to the celebration summit, please be in touch with committee chair Mary Raskin at [mary\\_raskin@yahoo.com](mailto:mary_raskin@yahoo.com).

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**Looking forward to seeing you there!**

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# Tributes

## To Peter Mones

In loving memory of Renee Fields  
From Rabbi Miriam Jerris

## To Andrea Friedlander

In Honor of the Sherwin T. Wine Lifetime  
Achievement Award  
From Mary Raskin & Gary Sampson

## To Susan & Alvin Averbach

In Honor of your 50<sup>th</sup> Wedding  
Anniversary  
From Rabbi Miriam Jerris &  
Stephen Stawicki

## To Ruth Kadish

In loving memory of Paul Kadish  
From Rabbi Miriam Jerris &  
Stephen Stawicki

## To Suzanne Herman

In loving memory of Hebert Herman  
From Ron & Paula Creed

## To Joan & Cary Shaw

In celebration of their new grandchild  
Kobi Levin  
From Rabbi Miriam Jerris

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