

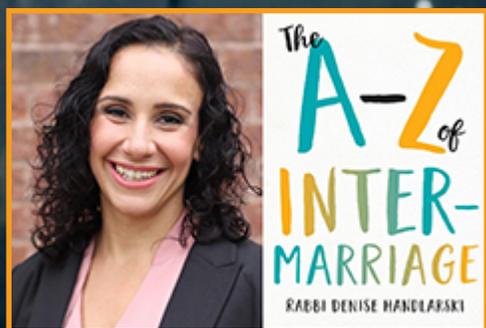
Humanistic Judaism

Magazine

My “Jewpanese” Family
by Paul Golin

Joining and Belonging
by Ryn Phelps

**Open Hearts,
Open Gates**
by Rabbi Miriam Jerris



Rabbi Denise Handlarski:
An Excerpt From Her New Book

Spring 2020

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Contributors

- **Dave Berman** is an itinerant software engineer who chose to retire in Boulder, CO to be near family, to enjoy his favorite activities of hiking and bike riding in the mountains, and to write.
- **Alex Chernyakov** is the Secretary and webmaster for Kol Haverim, the Fingerlakes Community for Humanistic Judaism.
- **Lincoln Dow** is the Community Organizer for Jews for a Secular Democracy.
- **Steve Evans** is a member of the Society for Humanistic Judaism from New Zealand, and is serving as Guest Editor of this issue of *Humanistic Judaism* magazine.
- **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.
- **Denise Handlarski** is the Rabbi of Oraynu Congregation for Humanistic Judaism in Toronto, Ontario.
- **Marti Hirsch** is Beth Ami's Cultural Director, Song Leader, and creative force!
- **Miriam Jerris** is the Rabbi of the Society for Humanistic Judaism and the IISHJ Associate Professor of Professional Development.
- **Jon Levine** is a member of Kahal B'raira, Greater Boston's Congregation for Humanistic Judaism and represents KB on the SHJ Board.
- **Gladys Maged** is a longtime leader and Managing Director for Kahal B'raira.
- **Sheila Malcolm** is Beth Ami's Madrikha and an SHJ Board Member.
- **Ryn Phelps** is an independent member of the SHJ from Orlando, Florida.
- **George Rockmore** is a long-time (30 years and counting) member of the Congregation for Humanistic Judaism, Fairfield, CT, and a retired special education teacher.
- **Hildy Sanders** is a retired biology professor who loves all things Jewish, and who has been a member of the Baltimore Jewish Cultural Chavurah, Baltimore, MD, since the 1990s.

This issue of Humanistic Judaism comes to you during a time of transition and disruption, when much of what we have learned to depend on in daily life is no more. It is fitting that we use this issue to explore how Humanistic Jews have taken a less-traveled road in the way we welcome others into our community, our willingness to embrace those seeking to be part of Humanistic Judaism, and to celebrate and engage in other cultures without hesitation.

We are grateful to Steve Evans from New Zealand who served as a “guest” editor and supported us in the development of this issue of the magazine. Continued gratitude to Deb Godden who oversees the SHJ Community News section.

As the focus of this issue, we are thrilled to feature Rabbi Denise Handlarski in the publication, this past March, of her first book, *The A-Z of Intermarriage*. As a rabbi who herself is intermarried, Handlarski takes a direct, honest, and unapologetic approach to intermarriage. As a graduate of our movement’s Rabbinic Seminary, Rabbi Denise is “one of us” and we congratulate her on this achievement with a strong sense of pride and joy.

Rabbi Miriam Jerris in her article, *Open Hearts, Open Gates*, shares her more than thirty-five years of working with intermarried families and how she and Humanistic Judaism face, with great openness, how to be both Jewish and live in a multicultural household and

society.

Paul Golin explores the benefits and challenges when families merge cultures, as seen through his own “Jewpanese” family experiences. He shares his evolution on the issue after many years working on advocacy for, and outreach to, Jewish intermarried households.

Embracing those who desire to become Humanistic Jews is central to the philosophy of Humanistic Judaism. In this issue, we have the stories of Steve Evans (Atar) from New Zealand and Ryn Phelps (Rina Yehudit) from Florida. Dave Berman, a member of Beth Ami, Colorado Congregation for Humanistic Judaism shares his story of finding Humanistic Judaism.

Not forgetting our current reality, Rabbi Jeffrey Falick offers sage counsel in his article, *Living Through This*.

Lincoln Dow, Community Organizer of Jews for a Secular Democracy (JFASD), updates us on issues before the Supreme Court.

Our community news features, among others, suggestions of new strategies for programming during a pandemic and photos depicting this reality.

We thank Rabbi Jeremy Kridel, former editor of this magazine, who has resigned his position. He created a model to emulate and we are enormously grateful to him. 

M.S.J.

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Editorial Board:

Rabbi Adam Chalom
Rabbi Jeffrey Falick
Paul Golin
Rabbi Miriam Jerris

Community News:

Deb Godden

Graphic Design:

Raya Kridel

The A-Z of Intermarriage

by Rabbi Denise Handlarski

The A-Z of Intermarriage, published this past spring, is a fresh look at intermarriage written by Denise Handlarski, a rabbi from our own movement. These excerpts will introduce you to the book and to a positive presentation of intermarried Jewish life today. In her own words, "Less Oy. More Joy!"

Introduction

When I was a teen, I attended a talk called "The Disaster of Intermarriage." At that time, I remember seriously wrestling with the idea that if I married someone who wasn't Jewish, I'd be giving up my identity. I also, however, had a tinge of a feeling that this was racism or xenophobia, in some way. Couldn't you be both proudly Jewish and open to creating a family with someone who was different? There are many thousands of intermarried Jews in North America, most of whom are raising children Jewishly, practicing Judaism in some way, and participating in Jewish community. Yet the narrative of intermarriage as "disaster" remains firmly in place.

Why a reference guide to intermarriage? There is no how-to-guide for marriage or for life but, perhaps, we can come close to creating one. *The A-Z of Intermarriage* is a compendium of story and strategy; a coming together of religious source material, cultural context, personal narrative, and the learning I've done along the way.

The reason I am so passionate about this book is that I am intermarried and serve many intermarried couples in my role as wedding officiant and rabbi in the Humanistic Jewish movement. In this movement, we serve cultural and secular Jews, offering community, celebrations, and ceremonies without the language of prayer. Because we let go of what Jewish law tells us we have to do and, instead, use Jewish ethics to guide a sense of what we believe to be ethical and just in the contemporary moment, we were officiating and celebrating intermarried weddings long before any other Jewish group. This wasn't a marketing ploy or done as a way to ensure our own continuity, although our communities have no doubt grown and thrived as

a result of our openness. The goal was simply to serve the people in our communities well. And, to do that, we had to recognize that intermarriage is a positive result of the openness of North American society (and other societies too). We are accepted! We are even loved! This is great news for a people who have been expelled and excoriated in most corners of the globe. It is my goal to use my experience and expertise as an intermarried rabbi, one of only a handful in the world, to try to help others create meaningful, engaged, wonderful lives.

I am a believer in the power of intermarriage. I think it is healthy for individuals and families to experience and express pride in who they are, in the diversity and divergence that makes them (us) who they (we) are. I believe intermarriage can be a positive and healthy-making force for Jews, Jewish families, and Jewish communities. Judaism has traditionally denounced intermarriage, even excising and rejecting folks who want to join in Jewish activities and groups. All while worrying about Jewish population numbers and the decline

of communities. I have often found there are two parallel threads, completely in contradiction with one another, in Jewish life: (1) "Oy vey, there aren't enough Jews" and (2) "You aren't Jewish enough, so-and-so isn't Jewish enough, let's keep really tight boundaries to keep 'others' out."

Look, I get it. We are a minority and minorities have felt and continue to feel under threat. Many people talk about assimilation as the greatest threat Judaism has ever known. And they're not wrong! Assimilation is a threat, but the anti-intermarriage narrative only intensifies that threat. When the Jewish community is insular, closed-minded, and exclusionary, many of its members will choose to leave. No one is itching to join a club that does not respect their families, and their values. Many Jews today welcome universality and equality and celebrate justice and openness. Even for those who do not choose to intermarry, openness to intermarried families is attractive to many contemporary Jews who





want their own groups to be diverse and welcoming.

Community

The real tragedy in the fear-mongering over intermarriage is how destructive it has been to the Jewish community. So many people have been hurt, truly harmed, by rejection. I'm talking about the kids of intermarried parents who grew up hearing they're not a "real" Jew (usually by the kid who ate bacon for breakfast and wouldn't know a Shabbat candle if it smacked them in the face). I'm talking about the parent of the kid having a Bar Mitzvah who isn't allowed on the *bimah* (podium) because they aren't Jewish. I'm talking about people who can't get married by their family rabbi, people who get dirty looks in synagogue, people whose families won't welcome their spouse to the Passover table. *Oy vey*. We have caused some real damage. Why? Oh, you know, "Jewish continuity." It was so important to continue Jewish communities that we excluded a bunch of people who wanted to be a part of them. Now, not enough people want to join us, and we don't get why?

The reason more people are raising their kids with a Jewish identity and practice, are connecting to communities, and are breathing new life into Judaism is because (finally!) there are communities that will welcome them. I'm a proud member of the Humanistic Jewish movement, founded on the principles that secular or cultural Jews need celebrations and communities that do not use the language of prayer but instead focus on human and earth-centered concerns. Because the movement's founder Rabbi Sherwin Wine, along with the other leaders and community members who started this branch of Judaism, was less interested in what Jewish law had to say and more interested in what would serve human needs, Humanistic Judaism was completely groundbreaking on intermarriage. I joined this movement partly because I appreciate serving communities that maintain no barriers for intermarried folks from participation to board leadership to who a rabbi could marry (in officiating or in their own spousal relations) and so on. We were visionaries (despite being

"non-prophet societies"). Other movements and some independent congregations are catching up. It is now more possible to find your rabbi, find your people, and find your space, and so more people are more likely to engage.

And I do want you to find your community. I am such a believer in the power of community for so many reasons. We live lives that are overwhelmingly busy. We juggle so many demands. If we have to come up with all our own spiritual programming and learning, it's going to sink to the bottom of a long to-do list. I think we need teachers and leaders who inspire and challenge us. We need peers who offer support and friendship. We need people to eat challah with. We need people to sing with.

Notice, the tragedy of the anti-intermarriage garbage was not that it hurt the intermarried people. That is awful, of course. But, to me, the tragedy is what it did to our Jewish communal spaces, turning them into places built on a model of fear and scarcity, meanness and a lack of compassion. Frankly, it's all pretty un-Jewish. Judaism, the way I understand and practice it, is about being welcoming, kind, giving, and good. At Passover we say, "Let all who are hungry come and eat" not "let all who agree with and practice like us come and kvetch (complain) about how other people do it." We lost out on all those families and folks who could enliven us with different points of view and experience. We lost out on all those kids who, after being told they weren't a "real" Jew, went on to become many wonderful things but not in our Jewish spaces. The good news is that the spaces are changing. Find one that will see and welcome you for who you are and for who your family is. You need community, and your community needs you.

Conversion

In Judaism, it has often been seen as a victory if the partner converts. And it may indeed be a victory for that person and their partner, but only if the conversion comes out of a genuine interest and feeling of affinity for Judaism. Conversions of convenience really serve no one. In fact, I believe they detract from the health of the cultural life of the family as they foreclose the

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Open Hearts Open Gates

by Rabbi Miriam Jerris

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For thirty-five years, as a Humanist ceremonialist and rabbi, I have been championing the rights of individuals to choose their life-partner based on the quality of their relationship, rather than on religious identity. A desire to have a Jewish presence at their ceremony is the measure I use when considering whether I will involve myself in a couple's wedding ceremony. As I honor their right to choose their life partner freely, as a rabbi, I choose to celebrate with them. If you ask a young couple in love to choose between Judaism OR the person they love most in the world, there is no contest. How could there be? Turning young Jews away because they have fallen in love with someone not Jewish is bound to turn them away from the Jewish community. Secular Humanistic clergy hold the gates to the Jewish community open. Our welcoming and accepting behavior is met with relief and appreciation, resulting in countless numbers of Jews having access to their Jewish identity, regardless of the cultural or religious background of their partner. What flows from our acceptance and willingness to embrace Jews who are intermarrying is often a lifetime of involvement in the life of a family and their involvement in Judaism.

I consider myself a "gate opener" rather than a "gate keeper." A most profound example of our "gate-opening" stance is that the International Institute for Secular Humanistic Judaism (IISHJ) is one of very few rabbinical programs to open admissions to Jews married to or in committed relationships with someone not born Jewish who has not converted to Judaism. I have been involved in numerous discussions with Jewish community leaders who ask, "What kind of a model are you providing to the Jewish community if you are married to someone who is not a Jew by birth or choice?" My answer is that I am demonstrating that you can retain your Jewish identity and remain a significant part of the Jewish community by marrying the person you love and not expect that they change their identity to fit into your world.

After more than three decades of an ever-increasing intermarriage rate, there now exists a significant number of children from these marriages. Secular Humanistic Judaism recognizes the need for many of these children to explore their Jewish identity. Accepting multiple identities gives intermarried families the tools to bravely grapple with the realities of modern Jewish life.

If the Jewish community is open, welcoming, creative, and willing to consider different kinds of Judaism for the future, it can draw many of those families into Jewish community.

Secular Humanistic Judaism is clear about who is a Jew. In 1988, the International Federation of Secular Humanistic Judaism (IFSHJ) declared: "A Jew is a person of Jewish descent or any person who declares himself or

Humanistic Judaism

herself to be a Jew and who identifies with the history, ethical values, culture, civilization, community, and fate of the Jewish people.”¹

We posit that there are at the very least two kinds of intermarried families, “intercultural” and “interfaith.” the *Guide to Humanistic Judaism* states, “An interfaith marriage consists of one Jewish partner and one non-Jewish partner, either or both of whom are attached to their theistic traditions...An intercultural marriage consists of one Jewish partner and one non-Jewish partner, who share a similar worldview but who enjoy and participate in the cultural aspects of their differing backgrounds.”² Most of the couples and families I’ve worked with have been intercultural, even if they did not know or understand the terminology.

In addition to officiating at ceremonies between someone Jewish and someone from a different religious or cultural background, clergy within Secular Humanistic Judaism will typically co-officiate with clergy from other religious traditions. Generally there are three guidelines that we recommend: 1) that the ceremony blend the symbols and cultures of both partners; 2) that the ceremony be equally shared between both officiants; and 3) that any theistic language used be language common to both traditions.

In co-officiation the blending of the ceremony is primary for me. Blending ceremonies takes flexibility and a willingness to deviate from traditional formats. The ceremony sends a message. The message most couples want to share is “you, your culture, religion, and background are important to me.” An equally shared ceremony is a model for the possibilities for the couple’s future. My mantra is “Make sure your ceremony sends the message you want to send.”

Almost every potential grandparent of intermarrying or intermarried children wants the answer to the question, “How are you going to raise the children?” Intermarried couples are presented with (or present themselves with) choosing from three alternatives when deciding on how to raise their family. Will it be one or the other, both, or neither?

Choosing “one” is complex. And when you choose one, what exactly does it mean? I counseled one Jewish/

Catholic couple who had decided to have a Jewish home and raise their children Jewish. They had been told by another clergy person there could be no Christmas presents and no presents wrapped in Christmas wrapping paper. After hearing this, the Catholic grandparents were devastated. The emotional hurt was not solely related to wrapping paper. It was based on the feeling that they could not share who **they** were with their grandchildren. In choosing “one,” is it necessary to completely exclude the religion or culture of the other partner’s family, often alienating and straining the relationships between adult children and their parents?



In the early 1990s I facilitated a monthly intermarriage group for the couples at whose weddings I officiated. Most of the couples in the group had decided to raise their children Jewish. What none of us expected was the intensity of the loss that the not-born-Jewish parent might feel when realizing that they would not be sharing **their** childhood cultural or religious experiences with their own children.

Raising the children “neither” and letting them decide when they are old enough is something I’ve heard many times. And deciding to raise the children neither does not necessarily mean “nothing.” I have never figured out what “nothing” looks like. How does one go about raising children neither? One way would be to pick something new

or neutral, something that neither parent was raised in, possibly Unitarian Universalism or Ethical Culture. Another way would be to totally deny the background of one of the parents. This is less likely to occur today, but a generation or two before, many Jews denied their identity altogether and raised their children in secular culture, their children discovering their Jewish heritage as adults. Today I receive many emails from individuals from all over the world inquiring about conversion to Humanistic Judaism because they have discovered that someone in their family was Jewish. They were raised with no religion and had long abandoned a belief in a personal god. Humanistic Judaism is attractive to them because it stresses the cultural and historical connection to the Jewish people, rather than a set of religious beliefs.

Raising the children “both” is another one of those categories that is not clear until you deconstruct it. What does “both” mean? Does it mean raising children

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Jewpanese

by Paul Golin

How Jewish and Japanese Converge in My Household

“Jewpanese” is an irreverent-sounding word that always garners a chuckle when I’m introduced before presentations as, among other things, “the white Ashkenazi partner of a Jewpanese (Jewish/Japanese) multiracial household.”

While I didn’t invent the word—and don’t know who did or I’d credit them—I did register the Jewpanese.com domain name way back in 2004, which must count for something. Ever since, I’ve pointed the URL to a Facebook page where I share articles connecting Jewish and Japanese people, culture, and history. Topics range in gravity from the ongoing legacy of “the Japanese Schindler” Chiune Sugihara to the matcha tea-flavored bagels sold throughout Tokyo.

Despite a minimalist effort of no more than 10 minutes a week administering the Jewpanese page, it currently serves nearly 1,500 followers. The best part of the endeavor has been connecting to other Jewish-Japanese couples, a few of whom have become real friends, and to the remarkable adult children of such unions and to Jews-by-choice of Japanese descent.

Because as cheeky as the word Jewpanese may sound, the identity is tremendously meaningful to me. Having a mixed culture is one of the most significant aspects of my family, and I feel a strong responsibility to my children to celebrate it—and to work for racial justice and equality on their and everyone’s behalf.

I never take for granted how remarkable a moment in time we live in that my household configuration can even exist. Ancestors on both my parents’ sides have been ethnically Jewish for thousands of years, as far as I know, ostensibly since before “Ashkenazi” arose. Likewise, both sides of my wife’s family have been Japanese since that culture emerged. For all human history until only the most recent few decades, our pairing would have been exceedingly rare if not outright impossible.

Today, while mixed-race and mixed-culture households remain a small minority globally, it is safe to say there are more Jewish-Japanese marriages than ever before!

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Joining and Belonging

by Katherine (Ryn) Phelps רינה יהודית

I first learned about Judaism when I was around five years old and I was questioning the implausible things I had been told by my grandmother's church when I accompanied her to services. My understanding of what Judaism was, was still minimal, but still, the next time I accompanied my grandmother, I announced to the whole rural, Bible-belt Methodist congregation that I was now a Jew.

Not long after this I realized I couldn't get myself to believe in any god at all, even the Jewish god, and I gave up on religion altogether. I became a Humanist like my parents, but there were still times throughout the years I was drawn to the culture of Judaism: the Hanukkah section of our Family Fun cookbook and the Rugrats Passover and Hanukkah episodes when I was young; the concept of *Tikkun Olam* (which seemed to embody my own conviction that we all had a moral obligation to try to make the world better), the comparative dignity of humanity in the face of an all-powerful god in comparison to the Christianity I saw around me, and the emphasis on study and questioning and thinking when I was older. But, I was not born Jewish and I didn't believe in the supernatural. There did not seem to be any way to do more than admire Jewish culture from the outside.

Then, I discovered Humanistic Judaism. It was fantastic. It spoke to me. The ceremony and ritual that I craved, the Jewish culture I loved, the Humanist worldview I already shared. I jumped in at first, despite the fact that I was geographically isolated from any Jewish people at all at the time, let alone a Humanistic Jewish community. I bought and read books by Rabbi Wine. I celebrated Purim and Shabbat. I researched and picked a Hebrew name. But then I hesitated. So much of Jewish culture is about Jewish community. And I lacked it, even in my own family. There were no Humanist Jews around to welcome me in, and if I am not embraced and welcomed by those already in the community, could I really consider myself a part of it? The SHJ website said yes (kind of), but it didn't feel quite right. Joining a family can't be a one-way thing, and that's what it was feeling like. Purim became the only holiday I celebrated that year, and my Shabbat celebrations petered out. I figured I would eventually move to a bigger city with a Humanistic Judaism presence, and I would join there.

This didn't satisfy me for long, if it ever really satisfied

me at all. I joined the SHJ Facebook discussion group, and it became one of my favorite groups; the people in it were my kind of people. It became clear I wasn't going to move to New York City or Toronto or someplace like that any time soon; if I were to wait until I had a physical group nearby, I would be waiting a long time. I



tried creating my own kind of Humanistic ceremonial tradition based on the Christianity of my ancestors, but adapted to a Humanistic philosophy, but it was unsatisfying; the tradition of Christianity ended up being too problematic for me to use at all, beyond using the name and date of Christmas for my family's winter solstice celebration. Again, Humanistic Judaism called to me. And this time I realized that an online community is still a community, and fully capable of

welcoming me in, and that this is where I wanted to be, and so I should work to be here.

I started becoming more active in the Facebook group. I started celebrating Shabbat again, taking advantage of the presence of a full kitchen (and a bread machine) in my new living arrangements. I saved up money and joined the SHJ officially, and then joined Secular Synagogue, which I had looked into before but held off on because of financial concerns, as well. And I started planning an adoption ceremony, because I am human, and we humans often crave ritual and ceremony to mark things in our lives. And I started answering the question (when asked by the little forms you often have to fill out when requesting to join a Facebook group) of "are you Jewish" with a new answer: yes. And that felt wonderful.

This, of course, has been more narrative than a straightforward answer to the question "why do you want to be a Humanistic Jew?" But story is sometimes the best way to answer a question. Hopefully, in this case, it's at least an adequate way. But, to give a shorter, more direct answer to the question: because I crave it.

Because I'm already a Humanist and I love Jewish culture. Because I feel good when I'm in the SHJ Facebook discussion group. Because I love Jewish holidays, especially when adapted for Humanistic themes. Because I love *Tikkun Olam*, and quotes of Rabbi Hillel, and the magnificent history of the Jewish people. Because in all my searching, I haven't found anything that feels as right. 

Getting Here from There

Many years ago, in a pamphlet I wrote about nationalism and Marxism, I remarked that the large number of variants of Marxist thinking suggested that there might be as many Marxisms as there are Marxists. The same might be said of Judaism—that each Jew carries a unique expression of this ancient tradition, and that its very strength is founded on its individuality: to be a Jew means there is no other Jew like you.

Indeed, the way I see things, every Jew is incorporated into the rich complexity that comprises Humanistic Judaism, whether they even know of the existence of Humanistic Judaism or, knowing of it, despise it. Too bad! The wonderful inclusiveness of HJ as I'm now going to call it here, allows for this.

I came to HJ late from a poor start. As a youngster in Alabama I never knew there was such a person as a Jew. My awareness of difference was about black people and white people. Later, when my family lived in a Germany devastated by warfare, I was never told about the Holocaust. The evidence of Germany's defeat was if not omnipresent, very present, and my youthful lack of understanding was expressed in a kind of astonishment excluding other understanding. To see, for example, a three-story house that had been hit by a bomb that went through to the cellar before exploding, taking half the place with it and leaving the other half complete, furniture and fittings intact, is very dramatic. This Germany of the 1950s was the loser's fate. My jaw dropped, but I didn't get it.

In high school in the United States, I was introduced to the Holocaust and Jews. The horrors of what was done by the Nazis and their allies made me sick. I've spent a lot of time since trying to understand how people could be like that. As to the Jews of the little town in Ohio, there they were! Real Jews! A few people talked about them, not negatively but directly, that they were different somehow. So and so was a "Jew." So? I didn't get that. There were Jews who said that other Jews were communists. So? I didn't get that either. What I did get was that the Jews who were communists and the Jews who called the other Jews communists, were all attuned to something different than I was—because I was ignorant, unable to discern things in life that really mattered. I did get that.



There were people then who looked askance at Jews, though I wouldn't say down at them, just not trusting. I found that puzzling and I still do.

Not only were the Jews in my town in Ohio more cultured, they were smarter. They had tastes and abilities that were far beyond me, and I could see that they worked harder at those things than I had ever seen anyone work at anything, and I am a hard worker whose family tradition has been to work hard. What's more, if they worked like that with an eye on the material rewards that came from application, they went much, much farther than that: they worked hard because learning was good in itself. That was amazing to a young man who wanted nothing so much as to be someone of taste and intelligence and the ability that springs from those but felt both beyond my reach.

Well, shucks. I wanted to know and to understand, and to glean the value of that approach to life. While relatives warned me about becoming "Jewish"—really!—I went to a Jewish-funded university near Boston. It was fabulous, an intellectual, and what today I'd call a spiritual environment, that was beyond my wildest dreams. Sadly, for me, I was not a good enough student. I had too much fun, learned too much in the wrong way, lost my scholarship, and ended up doing the rest of my university years in publicly-funded institutions. Not surprisingly, I found most of the most interesting, more insightful, best-educated people in my classes or at the lectern were Jews.

The times were definitely a-changing and I was a part of that—the anti-war, anti-racist, politically-engaged generation of the 1960s. It was an expression of profound alienation, and I went with that, emigrated to New Zealand, changed my name, tried to be on the "right side of history," while sinking a great deal of "juice" (alcohol) and taking a lot of drugs. It took me quite a few years to get over that, and to grow up, then to expand the anti-everything into a pro-thing, and while I was doing that, to appreciate what had been evident to me but not understood: that the categorical imperative was how one should live. And in that, how the Jews I admired lived—that they understood that for example, the struggle for justice for black people wasn't just a struggle for justice

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Thank you for your interest in Humanistic Judaism!

Living Through This

by Rabbi Jeffrey L. Falick

Over the past few weeks, I have spent considerable time connecting to members of our community.

As a person who has dealt with anxiety issues throughout my life, I am learning that—at least under these circumstances—I am far from alone.

Fears and anxieties seem to be everywhere right now. To manage these—much less to overcome them—is difficult. For some more than others.

In my own case, it was a humorous line by a comedian that reminded me just how unproductive anxiety can be. She wrote: “Do you know how useless my anxiety is? Like I catastrophized throughout my life about a million scenarios yet somehow not this one.”

It gave me a laugh and it gave me pause to think about the role that anxiety has played in my life, namely, nothing particularly good or helpful. And certainly nothing prophetic!

Working to reduce anxiety, however, does not mean denying reality. After all, living with reality is part of being a Humanist.

But personally, my own “spiritual” goal—meaning the way that I intend to manage my own spirits—has included regular reminders to myself that while this is not fun ... and while this is not what I or anyone wanted our lives to be like right now ... this is what we’ve been handed.

This is our life right now. And how we choose to navigate through the parts of our lives that remain under our control—even in the face of uncertainty—can go a long way toward determining its quality.

The ability to do this is a privilege right now. It is one that many people do not have. The sickness is real. The displacement is heart-breaking. Worries cannot be

expunged by the power of positive thinking.

But it is possible—for those of us with food and shelter—to remember that just like with every single life experience we’ve ever had—this experience is also an opportunity; that we must try very hard to engage the tool of perspective ... to understand what we are going through as a significant piece of the bigger picture of our entire lives.

Personally, this means I am trying to consider what this chapter in my life is teaching me.

It is teaching me resilience. It is teaching me coping skills. It is teaching me patience. It is teaching me how to better take care of myself. It is teaching me how to better take care of others. It is teaching me the value of living every day. It is teaching me how to live with uncertainty. And it is teaching me to even more greatly appreciate those whom I love.

To live through a time like this—may we all come through it in good health—will be to have survived something very significant.

To embrace such a perspective, we need to look at the biggest picture possible.

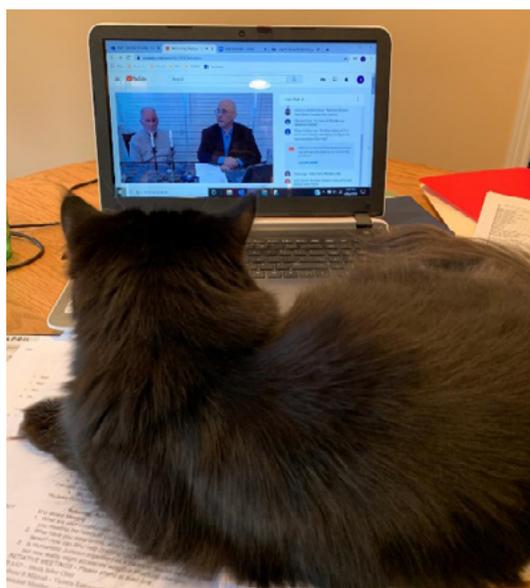
We cannot—as former prisoner-of-conscience Natan Sharansky advised us in a recent video—live only for the day when it ends. We must live for what we are learning now. About ourselves. About our society. We must accept that this is our life for now and live it to the fullest extent possible despite these limitations.

Life is short enough. We cannot allow this virus to also kill our spirits. We must rise above it ...

reaching outward to those in need ... reaching inward to our needy selves.

We must be consciously aware that we are adding

Humanistic Judaism



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Recent Challenges to Religious Liberty at the U.S. Supreme Court by Lincoln Dow

On May 6, the Supreme Court heard oral arguments in cases related to contraception coverage under the Affordable Care Act, *Little Sisters of the Poor v. Pennsylvania* and *Trump v. Pennsylvania*.

When enacted in 2010, the Affordable Care Act mandated that employers offer health insurance that included contraception to employees. Citing their religious objections to providing birth control, the craft store chain Hobby Lobby, owned by a conservative Christian family, sued the Obama Administration, claiming that the government mandate violated the company's religious freedom, and demanded an exemption.

In 2014, the Supreme Court ruled in favor of the store in the 5-4 decision of *Hobby Lobby v. Burwell*, establishing the disconcerting and harmful precedent that employers can impose their religious beliefs on employees. This decision was grounded in the federal Religious Freedom Restoration Act (RFRA), passed by Congress in 1993, which the Court interpreted to grant Hobby Lobby exemption from the contraception mandate.

But RFRA was never meant to allow corporations to impose their beliefs on individuals. That was an interpretation that, according to Rob Boston, Editor of *Church & State Magazine*, was never intended by supporters. Instead, RFRA was enacted to reverse a judicial standard for religious freedom cases that, "to many groups, seemed to be unduly harsh and restrictive—especially as it applied to the religious expression of minority faiths."

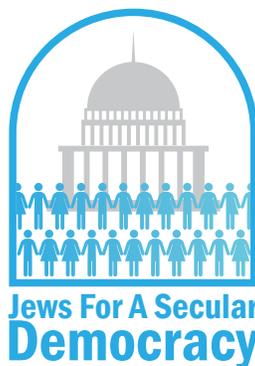
Following *Hobby Lobby v. Burwell*, the Obama Administration granted religious employers an accommodation to the contraception coverage mandate, allowing them to complete a form stating their religious objection to birth control, and triggering the federal government to step in and provide coverage for contraception.

Since then, the Trump Administration has expanded this exemption, triggering new lawsuits that challenge the Administration's exemptions. *Little Sisters of the Poor v. Pennsylvania* is among these cases. If the Court's conservative majority rules as expected, they will uphold these broad exemptions as required under RFRA, allowing conservative religious employers to force their religious values upon employees.

The Society for Humanistic Judaism has signed onto an amicus brief led by Catholics for Choice, and joined by other progressive Jewish organizations including the National Council of Jewish Women, Keshet, and T'ruah. The brief argues that the Trump Administration's exemptions "prioritize an [employer's] views over the religious or moral beliefs of the woman, increasing the cost of, and reducing her access to, contraception." As a result, these exemptions endanger both personal religious liberty and women's health, and we urge the Court to rule against them.

As the Court heard arguments, some conservative Jewish organizations alleged that a ruling against the exemptions would endanger religious freedom for Jews. In fact, nothing could be further from the truth. In a May 11 op-ed in *The Forward*, our friends Rachel Laser (who received our 2019 Jews for a Secular Democracy Constitutional Defender Award) and Richard Katskee of Americans United for Separation of Church and State explained that: "At its heart this case is really about whether the government can grant privileges to people who hold one religious belief in a way that harms many who don't share that belief—which is particularly worrisome for religious minorities."

Jews for a Secular Democracy is SHJ's social-justice initiative dedicated to defending the separation of religion and government. To learn more about Little Sisters of the Poor v. Pennsylvania and our other advocacy, please visit JFASD.org.



CommunityNews

Kahal B'Raira, Together Apart

Kahal B'raira—Boston, MA

It wasn't so long ago that Kahal B'raira met live and in person. Then, like many communities, the pandemic forced us to transition to a community online. Our goal was maintaining our community at a time when our members needed us most. But, in addition, our online activities have had many unexpected benefits. We are having more meetings and gatherings. Attendance is up, including members returning who haven't come in a long time. Members appreciate the effort to reach them and are reflecting on how important community is to them.

In March, we met to discuss our book club selection *Lost in Translation: Life in a New Language* by Eva Hoffman. We broke up into small Zoom groups to discuss topics of universal interest inspired by the book. Actually, reading the book was not a prerequisite to joining the discussion.

We have held all of our scheduled events—Sunday School Classes, Passover Seder, and adult services. We even held a well-attended New Members Brunch (bring your own food), for people who joined our congregation in the past year. Interestingly, most new members have spent years thinking about it before joining. We will follow up with a Zoom gathering inviting all those who have shown some interest over the last year so we can hear from them and deepen engagement.

Our Holocaust Memorial is a major service for KB. This year, the service was modified to be just as powerful



on Zoom. We shared artwork on the screen. Live and recorded music set the tone. A KB member, Eva Pollack, who escaped Czechoslovakia on the Kindertransport spoke about “Gratitude” and the unexpected kindness of strangers, for no benefit to themselves. Eva, her sister, and ultimately her parents were able to escape to England.

They were able to survive and go on to lead lives which in turn, provided a lifetime of kindness to others.

We have added programs as we never did before Zoom. Discussion was lively when we met to discuss the Netflix show *Unorthodox*. It was just as lively when members viewed *Miracle of Miracles*, a documentary about the making of *Fiddler on The Roof*

and then connected for discussion. With so much free or low-cost relevant content, we will continue these “view and discuss” programs over the Summer. We began family Shabbat on Fridays at 5:00 pm. Families finding it too difficult to cross town at rush hour are happy to celebrate on Zoom.

Still to be figured out is how to ensure that everyone is able to get on Zoom and use it comfortably. There are accessibility issues for those with limited sight or hearing but we are working on those.

Many KB members had to work together to make these events happen. We plan on continuing through the summer, with thoughts of High Holidays in the planning stages. 🔥

Jon Levine and Gladys Maged

Photo caption: Kahal B'raira holding hands virtually—together while apart.

Rachel Hirsh: Beth Ami Hero

Beth Ami—Denver/Boulder, CO

Sometimes, leadership emerges in children, becomes more pronounced in the teen years, and continues on into adulthood. We at Beth Ami honor and appreciate the leadership shown by Rachel Hirsch throughout her life.

Before arriving in Boulder, CO, with her family in 2005, Rachel lived in Atlanta where the Hirsches went to a secular Passover event at a Unitarian church. This event led her family to help create a Humanistic Jewish Sunday School that the whole family attended. With

their move to Colorado, the family, parents Marti and Michael and daughters Rachel and Katya, discovered and helped build the educational foundation of Beth Ami - Colorado Congregation for Humanistic Judaism. Rachel and Katya were students in various incarnations of the Jewish Cultural School. While Marti became the Arts Director, Rachel supported her mom's lessons, winning the appreciation of participants of all ages. She taught the Hebrew alphabet to younger children and accompanied group songs on her electric piano. That accompaniment grew to playing at holiday services and cultural events.

Continued on next page

Humanistic Judaism

Community News

Rachel became Beth Ami's very first B Mitzvah in 2008. She chose her great grandmother, Valia, a Ukrainian immigrant, as her hero because of her involvement in the Zionist movement, educational pursuits, secular Jewish activities, and her gifted piano playing. Rachel noted that Valia lived the Jewish values of family and friendship, education, polite manners, ethics, loving kindness, charitable work, and community building. To the benefit of Beth Ami, Rachel also demonstrates these wonderful values.

Involvement with Girl Scouts and Jewish volunteerism overlapped when Rachel created an amazing songbook for Beth Ami, compiling music and lyrics, and earning a Girl Scout Gold award for her labors. As a college student, through undergrad and graduate school, Rachel continued to assist in holiday events such as Passover, community-wide JCC Purim



carnivals, and the Boulder Jewish Festival, where she became a true spokesperson for Humanistic Judaism.

Rachel accepted the challenge of editing Beth Ami's monthly newsletter, formatting the material sent to her and meeting monthly deadlines, starting in high school and continuing through her college years.

Currently, Rachel is working at an enterprise software company, SAP Labs, doing machine learning and artificial intelligence programming. She chose to move to southern California to join her girlfriend who works at UC Irvine in the James Lab insectary doing malaria research. And even with an advanced degree in computer science, Rachel continues to edit the monthly Beth Ami newsletter, for which the leadership team is forever grateful! 🔥

**Sheila Malcolm
and Marti Hirsch**



Virtual Seder

Kol Haverim—Ithaca, NY

Kol Haverim, The Fingerlakes Community for Humanistic Judaism, held its first virtual Passover Community Seder on April 11. More than 12 families joined the virtual event, which featured reading the

Passover Haggadah, lighting the candles, singing along to live music, and eating a traditional meal. The event was a huge success and a great alternative to celebrate the holiday for members of the community along with their long-time friends. 🔥

Alex Chernyakov

BJCC Creates a New Shabbat Program

Baltimore Jewish Cultural Chavurah—Baltimore, MD

The main topic of the Baltimore Jewish Cultural Chavurah's annual meeting in June 2019 was the program we use to welcome Shabbat. We had been using a version that had been modified and shortened from a much more extensive program used early in our chavurah's history. The five-minute version included statements about candles, wine, and challah as well as recognition of members having birthdays or *yohrzeits* that month. By last year, dissatisfied comments about it indicated the need for a change.

Comments included that our program was too long, that it was too short, that more ritual was needed, that there was too much ritual, that there should be singing—and that we should not have the Shabbat intro at all. The vote at our annual meeting was in favor of keeping a Shabbat program, and so we formed committee to produce a new one.

Committee members gathered examples of readings and humanistic Shabbat programs, and reviewed,

evaluated, and modified them for possible inclusion in our program. Eventually, a written version was presented to the BJCC Planning Committee, which voted to incorporate it on a trial basis.

The new program starts with an "Introduction to Shabbat" that emphasizes its Jewish, humanistic, and social relevance, followed by lighting candles, drinking wine, and sharing challah. Birthdays and *Yorzeits* occurring that month are noted. Next, everyone is invited to share "*Simchas* and *Tzores*," and the program concludes with some singing.

All were satisfied with the length (15 minutes) and the content of the new Welcome Shabbat program, and pleased with the process of incorporating the divergent thoughts and ideas of so many of our members. 

Hildy Sanders

Editor's note: BJCC uses Hebrew and Yiddish transliteration variations and spellings interchangeably so we have kept them as written.

Looking to the Past and ZOOMING Into the Future...

Congregation of Humanistic Judaism—Fairfield County, CT

Needless to say, we are living in strange, uncharted times. At the Congregation for Humanistic Judaism of Fairfield County CT (CHJ), we are doing all we can to stay viable and connected. Using technology, (computers, phones, tablets, etc.), our goal is to continue to be a vibrant and dynamic force for our CHJ community and within greater Fairfield County.

For example, we use Zoom for weekly Shabbat services, including a recent Yom HaShoah observance. Members continue to use Facebook groups as a forum for various discussions. Our monthly book discussion group, men's and women's rap groups (a sharing of thoughts and feelings) also uses this technology. Moreover, our listserv (congregation email list) is utilized for our monthly newsletter, keeping members apprised of upcoming events.

Currently, CHJ is partnering with the Jewish Historical Society of Fairfield County (JHS) to interview

and record our history, going back to our beginnings more than fifty years ago. This Oral History project (OH for short) was begun prior to the pandemic, but we have adapted it—via Zoom—with JHS to enable us to gather information on the history of CHJ and Humanistic Judaism in Fairfield County. To achieve these goals, several members in our Congregation have been trained in the interview process and have developed questions for the interviews.

We are hoping to capture the memories of longtime members about the "early days" of our congregation. Once completed, this oral history

will be compiled for members to view. It will then be made available as a permanent record at the Library of Congress. 

George Rockmore



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 "CHILDREN'S STORY TIME! BRING THE KIDS!"



Rabbis Miriam Jerris and Jeremy Kridel
 "Poetry, Liturgy, and Music for Shavuot"



Tributes

To Miriam Jerris

In appreciation for a leader and woman I am honored to call friend
 From Sheila Sebor

To Susan Mcleod

In loving memory of your husband, Roderick
 From Rabbi Miriam Jerris, Executive Director Paul Golin & SHJ

To Barry Swan

In honor of your Birthday
 From Rennie & David Greenfield

To Barry Swan

In loving memory of your mother, Marian Swan
 From Marcia Elwitt
 From Rabbi Miriam Jerris, Executive Director Paul Golin & SHJ

To SHJ Board Members

A great Board of Directors that really gets it done!
 Also honoring Richard Logan's four years of being a great president!
 From Marlene C. Cohen

To SHJ

In loving memory of Pedro Rodriguez
 From Miriam Gitler

To SHJ

In honor of Marion Hoppe
 From Christian Whittemore

To SHJ

In honor of Eugene & Susan Gray
 From Jimmy & Linda Gray

To SHJ

In honor of Bunny's 97th Birthday
 From Robert Lasker

Jews and Church-State Separation

What Are the Issues? Why Should We Care? And What Can We Do About It?
 Join the organizers of a new initiative, Jews for a Secular Democracy, to discuss how religious fundamentalists are turning the clock back on hard-won gains made for



and other issues the Jewish community cares deeply about.



Thursday, May 21
 2 pm Eastern Time
 Free and open to all but please register: bit.ly/JFASD

With staff lead Paul Golin, program coordinator Sarah Levin, and community organizer Lincoln Dine

Science, Government, and Religious Communities:

What Are Their Roles During a Pandemic?



Friday, April 17
 5 pm Eastern Time
 Please register: bit.ly/JFASD



Jews for a Secular Democracy now has a YouTube Channel!



Watch our past webinars at <https://bit.ly/JFASDvids>

Join JFASD for a Virtual Townhall with:



Harvey Epstein
 New York Assembly Member
 National Republican Security Council (NRS) (East side of Manhattan)

Separation of Church and State During a Time of Crisis

Friday, May 1
 11 am Eastern Time
 Please register: bit.ly/JFASD



Jews For A Secular Democracy

Friday March 27, 2020, 10:00am Eastern, via Zoom

Secular Education in America: An Increasing Urgency

Online Conversation With:



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NEW LITURGY BOOK!

Available on [Amazon.com](https://www.amazon.com)

This book collects some of the best Humanistic Judaism liturgy from leaders, thinkers, and clergy from across the movement and over the past half-century.

The liturgical pieces within can augment existing holiday observances (Shabbat, Passover, Hanukkah, etc.) and life-cycle ceremonies (baby namings, B Mitzvahs, weddings, etc.), and can serve as the core around which to build new services or ceremonies.

