



Humanistic Judaism

Magazine

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with Paul Golin

Get Out the Vote

by Victoria Ratnaswamy

Revolt Against Democratic Modernity

by Prof. Ronald Aronson

Community News

and much more

Winter 2020

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From the Editor

This issue of *Humanistic Judaism* comes to you just as the 2020 primary elections in the United States are heating up. What better time for an issue focused on politics?

We are fortunate in this issue to have a number of interesting features. Especially exciting is an interview by SHJ Executive Director Paul Golin with Congressperson Jamie Raskin (MD 8), the U.S. Representative from Maryland's Eighth Congressional District. Rep. Raskin is among the founding members of the Congressional Freethought Caucus, a group of congresspersons dedicated to preserving the separation of religion and politics and to the place of reason and evidence in government in the United States. A former constitutional law professor, Rep. Raskin talks in this interview about the present political situation in the United States and the very real threats to freedom of religion and freedom from religion the country faces.



Professor Ron Aronson has appeared in the pages of *Humanistic Judaism* before and has written on a number of issues. This time, Professor Aronson addresses the rise of the anti-democratic movement that led to the election of Donald Trump as President of the United States, and the connection of that political movement to Christian evangelicalism and nationalism. His article provides insight into what motivates far-right Christians to support a politician whose personal history is antithetical to the values these religious groups have previously espoused as central to how leaders should be selected. His observations are especially important at this political moment for understanding how deeply-rooted in the American past Trumpism is.

SHJ board member Victoria Ratnaswamy has invested much of her personal time and energy into efforts to register people of all ages to become voters and to get to the polls. She writes here to reflect on her experiences, to explain what goes into registering voters, and to encourage all who are eligible to vote.

SHJ's initiative, Jews for a Secular Democracy, continues its work. This issue, we present a book review by SHJ member-at-large William Thompson, which he wrote for the Jews for a Secular Democracy blog. Thompson reviews Andrew Seidel's recent book, *The Founding Myth*, which explores Christian nationalism and shows how its purposes, assumptions, and ideas are contrary to the principles and documents upon which the United States was founded.

Bill Parsons writes about his adventures with his son in creating a Humanorah for Hanukkah.

And as always, we present news from SHJ-affiliated communities throughout North America. This issue provides an overview of the social action work many of our communities have undertaken, as well as general news updates from several communities. 🔥

J. M. K.

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Congressman Jamie Raskin

Interview with Paul Golin



1. Thank you on behalf of the members of our openly-secular movement for co-founding the Congressional Freethought Caucus in 2018! Why was it important for you to help start a Freethought Caucus? What do you hope to accomplish with it? And what reactions have you received about it from your fellow Representatives?

America is all about free thought, free speech, free people. It is the boundlessness of our freedom—and the fact that millions of people have fought and will continue to fight for it—that everyone loves about America. We have no kings here, no queens, no thought-control censors, no more slaves and no more slave masters. Just the people and the big blue sky.

At a time when right-wing forces are claiming a special religious right to discriminate in housing, employment and public accommodations and Secretary of Energy Rick Perry is telling people that President Trump is “God’s chosen one,” I thought it was probably a good idea to remind people that our Founders broke from centuries of theocracy, religious warfare, Inquisition and witchcraft trials to establish the separation of church and state and the sovereignty of reason in public institutions. I try to remind more theocratically minded colleagues that Donald Trump was selected not by God Almighty but by the Electoral College, an obsolete relic which can and should be replaced today by a national popular vote. If there was an invisible force giving Trump a special campaign boost in 2016, it was coming not from Heaven but from Moscow. In any event, I hope the Freethought Caucus will be a place for unsparing critical thought, muscular defense of science and reason, and serious moral inquiry and reflection.

2. How important is it to you to maintain the separation of church and state, and why?

It’s very important to me. As the Founders argued so beautifully, the merger of church and state demoralized and prostituted religion, corrupted and degraded government, and subjected people to a combined political and religious tyranny. The separation of church and state makes the individual’s spiritual beliefs and practice a matter of voluntary personal choice. It keeps members of minority religions safe from tyranny and discrimination by the majority, protects people against official ideological coercion and saves the government for practical progress rather than endless theological arguments.

3. What do you see as the key church-state separation issues Americans face today and in the near future? (And are there political issues that have church-state separation aspects to them that voters may not realize are tied to church-state separation, but should?)



The big challenge today is keeping corporations from gaining the right to discriminate against people in the name of religion. This was the agenda set by the outrageous *Hobby Lobby* decision, which found that business corporations can exercise religious rights. This is just conceptual confusion. Private for-profit corporations are not persons, much less pious and religiously observant persons who have a right to worship freely. This is indeed what the Civil Rights Movement was about—it insisted that all citizens have a right to participate in the stream of interstate commerce at restaurants, motels and lunch counters even if the owners claim they have a First Amendment free association right or religious exercise right not to serve people based on race or other arbitrary factors.

We also need to defend science and scientists against the relentless polemical, budgetary and political attacks of the Trump network. Science is the key to saving our species from the mounting calamities of climate change, and so we must protect science so that science can protect us.

4. What can ordinary citizens do (beyond the voting booth) to help make a difference on those issues?

Stand up for civil liberties, civil rights and the wall of separation between church and state. Fight for science and reason. Puncture theocracy when it steps on your toes.

5. Humanistic Judaism recently launched an initiative called Jews for a Secular Democracy because we feel Jews have a unique story to tell and role to play on issues of church-state separation. How do you think the Jewish community can be of help in keeping religion separate from government?

Like all minority religious groups, the Jewish community understands well the dangers of allowing particular religious groups to capture state power and spread religious propaganda and intolerance. Why not call your initiative Jews for Secular Democracy and Religious Pluralism and Tolerance? These values go together.

6. How has your own Jewish identity informed your work and your life's mission?

My favorite part of Sunday School is when we learned what Rabbi Hillel had said: "If I am not for myself, who will be for me? But if I am for myself only, then who am I? And if not now, when?" That's a pretty excellent statement of moral and existential values. I was also always moved by Passover and the command that we view ourselves as having escaped from Egypt. We are called always to think of ourselves as slaves, to identify with the oppressed and not with Pharaoh. And we are also enjoined to understand that the stranger amongst us shall be treated as the native-born amongst us for we ourselves were strangers once in the land of Egypt. And God is so serious about that, He reminds us that he is the Lord.

7. Anything else you'd like to mention?

Humanism calls upon us to recognize the humanity and strivings of all people all over the earth, and that is also the essential best premise of all the religions too. But in the real world, religion becomes a powerful institution that can be used for repressive and authoritarian purposes, which is why the Enlightenment Founders of America got it right. If we are to make progress, we must separate church and state and then call upon all people to live with compassion and reason along with their specific religious creeds and commitments.



Revolt Against Democratic Modernity: The Unholy Marriage of Trump and His Base

Prof. Ron Aronson



Note: the feature below is an excerpt from a longer article under the same title that ran in issue 84 (June 2019) of the Journal of the Helen Suzman Foundation, and is reproduced here with the permission of the author. The views expressed in this article are those of the author and do not necessarily reflect the official position of the Society for Humanistic Judaism.

What brought this resentment to a boiling point in 2016?

Trumpism is a response to a crisis. The upheaval lying behind the intense embrace of Trump is suggested in a survey taken before the 2016 election: a majority of whites (56%) said that American culture and way of life has mostly changed for the worse since the 1950s, compared with a huge majority (over 60%) of African Americans who believed it had changed for the better. Among the whites, evangelical Protestants were the most dissatisfied of all, 74% of them agreeing that things have gotten worse (Cooper 2016). Another study gives a major reason why: a majority of whites believe that whites are being discriminated against in American society today. Whatever other reasons evangelical Christians may have for gloom—abortion, homosexuality, pornography—more of them (57%) say that there is discrimination against Christians in the United States than acknowledge discrimination against Muslims (44%) (Gonyea 2017)!

Amid the explosion of multicultural and secular America, white Christian America has been experiencing shrinking numbers and shrinking importance. This is the central theme of *The End of White Christian America*, published in early 2016. In it, Robert P. Jones makes an extended analysis of the historical displacement of white

Christians, and especially those considering themselves evangelicals (Jones 2016).

Jones begins with descriptions of three great twentieth-century monuments to White American Protestantism, the mainline United Methodist Building in Washington, D.C. (1928), the ecumenical Interfaith Church Center in New York (1960), and the evangelical Crystal Cathedral in Garden Grove, California (1980), all of which have since been abandoned either to other owners or other purposes. After replacing mainline churches as the demographic center of White Christian America in the late twentieth century, and after a generation of dominance, including wielding considerable power in the Republican Party, evangelical Christian churches, most notably the Southern Baptist Convention, are now themselves losing numbers and importance. Jones's study takes off from two significant events: the launching of "Black Lives Matter" in 2014 and the 2015 Supreme Court decision legalizing gay marriage. He might also, of course, have mentioned the transformation of the role of women in much of America, which focused the evangelical mind over the past generation on the issue of abortion. A wholly unanticipated drop in relative and absolute numbers of white evangelicals is being caused by a steep falling off of churchgoing among those age 18 to 29. Moreover, they are following in their parents' religion at a far lower rate than mainline Protestants and Catholics. On the one hand "nones"—those professing no religion—have risen steeply compared with any time in the past, and now are approaching 40% of the entire younger generation. On the other hand, while white evangelical Protestants now comprise perhaps one-sixth of the U.S. population, they

make up only 8% of 18 to 29-year-olds, meaning that white evangelical children are half as likely to follow their parents' religion as mainline Protestants (*Ibid.*)

During the high tide of white Christian evangelical political presence between the Reagan and Obama presidencies, all Americans became aware of its doom-laden messages of moral decline allegedly caused by feminism, abortion, and homosexuality. Jones strikingly captures the contrast between its social, political, and cultural nostalgia and the forward-looking struggle for increasing equality symbolized by Obama's election. A Happy Thanksgiving email was sent out by the right-wing Christian Coalition shortly after Obama's reelection in 2012. It features a black and white photograph of a white family around a dining-room table with the caption: "Saying grace before carving a turkey at Thanksgiving dinner, Pennsylvania, U.S.A., 1942." Jones comments: "The multiple layers of meaning in this single image make it a nearly perfect exhibit of the lost utopian world of white Christian America" (*Ibid.*, 42).



The contrast couldn't be sharper with Obama's second inaugural address the following January, when the African American president brought the Declaration of Independence up to date by expounding a progressive vision of how American history expanded what it means to be "created equal." The litany included forming a government of, by, and for the people, ending slavery in a bitter Civil War, creating a modern market economy governed by rules to ensure fair play, providing transportation networks, schools, and colleges, protecting the vulnerable including through Medicaid, Medicare, and Social Security and on and on, stressing above all the need for collective action to meet collective needs. By citing "Seneca Falls, Selma, and Stonewall" Obama paid tribute to past struggles, and then he ended by looking to a future where women and men will be paid equally, African Americans guaranteed the right to vote, gays recognised as equal, schoolchildren are protected from gun violence, and where immigrants will be received warmly. What could be further from the Christian Coalition's narrowly conceived nostalgia than Obama's vision of a hopeful future and his welcoming of collective struggle and government action?

The changing demography



Before the 2016 election Trump told his supporters: "This is our last chance to save our country and reclaim it for we the people. This is it. You don't have another chance." It should be obvious what he meant and how his audience heard him. Trump struck a nerve among white evangelical Christians in the wake of the Obama presidency. These people were angry about cultural and social changes that had been making most of them troubled about the present and fearful of the future. Jones's book, anchored demographically, focuses on the slow, steady experience of their displacement from being the essential people in a Christian country, the awareness that "America's religious and cultural landscape is being fundamentally altered" (*Ibid.*, 234).

According to research conducted by political scientist Diana Mutz, the 2016 election did not turn on the economic troubles of those who had lost jobs or who were unhappy with their wages. This supposed motivation is directly contradicted by the results of her post-election study:

Evidence points overwhelmingly to perceived status threat among high-status groups as the key motivation underlying Trump support. White Americans' declining numerical dominance in the United States together with the rising status of African Americans and

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The Founding Myth

by Andrew Seidel

A review by William Thompson

Andrew Seidel, *The Founding Myth: Why Christian Nationalism is Unamerican* (New York: Sterling, 2019)

(Note: an earlier version of this review was posted at the blog for *Jews for a Secular Democracy*.)

It is difficult to write a review of a book with which you mostly agree. *The Founding Myth* is one of those books for most secular non-Christians and those literate in American history and civics. While the conclusions that Andrew Seidel reaches in the book are common wisdom for those of us who value a secular government, its importance lies in the evidence he produces to demonstrate that the Christian nationalist position is founded on myth, erroneous assumptions, emotion, and flagrant lies. In the introduction, Seidel characterizes Christian nationalism as an “unholy alliance, an incestuous marriage of conservative politics and conservative Christianity” (p. 8). Christian nationalism is the idea that America was founded as and should be a Christian theocracy, not a secular democracy. Under the Trump regime, Christian nationalists have achieved more influence and power than at any other time in recent history.

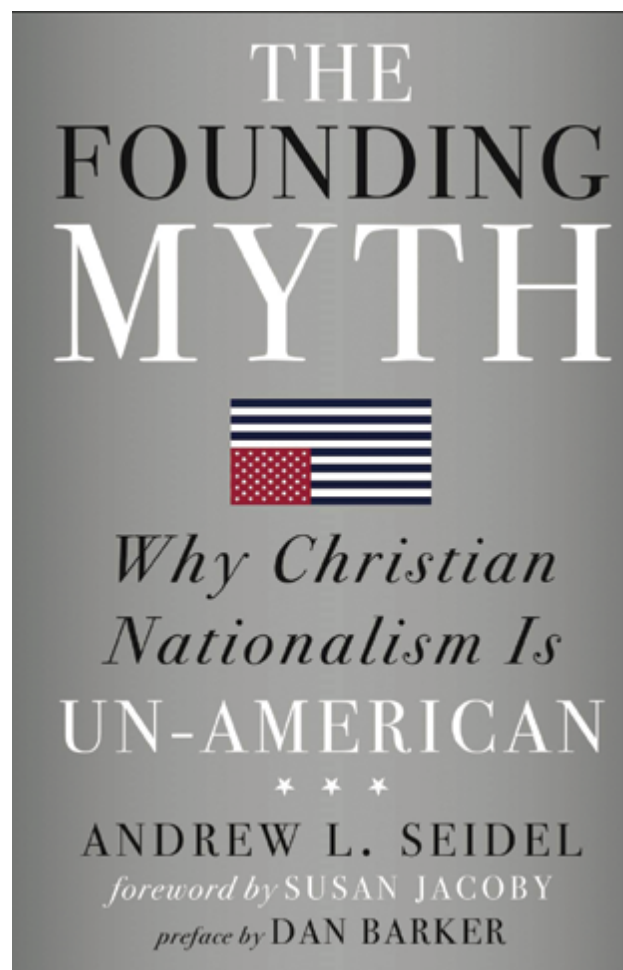
The Founding Myth was written as an assault on Christian nationalism and as a handbook for advocates of secular government. It is an intelligent and passionate call to arms for secularists, inverting the chant of Trump's cult to "make America great again" into a plea to make America secular again. Or perhaps more accurately, a plea to make America secular for once. Seidel particularly focuses on a defense of the Constitution, especially the First Amendment, which separates religion from the government. There are two fundamental myths that Seidel identifies as purported justifications for the entire Christian nationalist view. The first is that America was explicitly founded to be a Christian nation, which Seidel points out is obviously untrue and easily disproven by merely looking at the Constitution.

The second is more insidious: the idea that America was founded on "Judeo-Christian principles." Disproving the second myth is the main focus of the book.

In order to demonstrate the falsehood of the myth that America was founded on Judeo-Christian principles, Seidel divides his argument into four broad topics. First is an examination of the religious beliefs of the Founders, the references to a god in the Declaration of Independence, and the original theocratic colonies and colonies with established churches. In each instance, the Christian nationalist arguments are demolished by showing that they are irrelevant and fallacious. Seidel correctly points out that the personal religious beliefs of the Founders are irrelevant to the government they created with the Constitution, and in any case, the most influential Founders such as Washington, Jefferson, and Franklin were demonstrably not Christians in any orthodox sense. The invocation of colonial theocracies and established churches by Christian nationalists are also summarily discarded as irrelevant to the founding of the constitutional government. Indeed, the Founders explicitly used those colonial governments as cautionary lessons.

While the references to a god in the Declaration are indisputable, Seidel argues that this does little for the Christian nationalist position. First, they are references to the god of the deists or a general, non-sectarian deity, not the Christian god. Second, the references are little more than window dressing, which neither add to nor subtract from the main argument of the Declaration which is thoroughly secular and based in contemporary political philosophy; in fact, the revolutionary philosophy of the Declaration is antithetical to the Christian principles of obedience and submission to a god's supposedly-chosen monarchs. Third, the Declaration did not create the government of the United States and thus cannot be cited as evidence that America was founded on Judeo-Christian principles.

The second and third topics Seidel examines are the biblical influence on American government and a more in-depth analysis of the Ten Commandments. To analyze biblical influence on American government, Seidel analyzes seven principles, which he argues are indisputably biblical and central to "Judeo-Christianity": 1) the Golden Rule, 2) obedience, 3) biblical crime and punishment, 4) original sin, 5) vicarious redemption, 6) religious faith, and 7) monarchy. He reveals how each of these biblical principles are fundamentally opposed to the political philosophy underlying the Constitution and American jurisprudence. The Ten Commandments receive similar treatment. After identifying *which* Ten Commandments the Christian nationalists are idolizing, Seidel argues that they would not hold up as valid laws under the Constitution because they are a tribal religious code predicated on religious rationale and thus invalid as American law. With regard to the two commandments that might hold up under constitutional review, against murder and theft, they are universal and unoriginal to either Judaism or Christianity. No commanding god on Mount Sinai is needed.



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Get Out the **VOTE** by Victoria Ratnaswamy

If, to take a well-known phrase from *Star Trek*, living our values is the Prime Directive of Humanistic Judaism, then finding meaningful opportunities to pursue those values is most welcome. There are many ways we can work to pursue justice, equality, and human dignity—and one method or issue does not fit all. We can also take comfort that, while our individual role may be small, we can count on the ripple effects of our collective actions for a wider impact.

The right to vote is mentioned five times in the amendments to the United States Constitution, more than any other right. I cannot single-handedly preserve, protect, and defend that right. But, I can be part of a larger effort—working to register voters, lowering barriers to voting, helping facilitate free and fair elections, and, in the process, clearing up confusion and debunking myths.

I was serving regularly as an Illinois election judge when I received an email from a local organization seeking volunteers to be trained as Deputy Voter Registrars. Initially drifting into my superhero fantasy world, I envisioned myself in a *Schoolhouse Rock*-esque cape, humbly, yet valiantly serving democracy.

The reality was that I had to get creative to carry out my mission.

Our election structure is complicated, which can lead to disenfranchisement. Each state has different requirements for registration and different voting procedures. There are always a slew of posts on social media about how to register and vote, providing information that often applies to residents of one state only. When combined with the old-fashioned rumor mill, incorrect information often takes hold, and this too often results in people not voting.

I started with some basic goals that I pursued through social media and spreading the word in person. I decided to focus on groups at high risk of missing an election, and who thereby don't get into the voting habit or fall out of it: 1) students who are seventeen years old but don't realize they may be able to register and vote (depending on the timing of their birthday relative to the next general election—clear as mud!) and teens soon leaving home for the first time; 2) those we in the north refer to as “snowbirds”; 3) people in transition—moving,

changing names, etc.; and 4) new citizens.

I join others in setting up registration tables at local high schools. I have a registration table at a local summer market. I attend rallies and marches, carrying my registration sign and supplies. I provide election information and links, offer my services, and answer questions on social media. I meet young people at coffee shops and in homes to register and inform them.

There are other ways for people to register, but I try to offer assistance in person. We may discuss what to expect of the voting process, how to learn more about issues and candidates, voting by mail, how to ensure voting when one is out of town or at college, printing sample ballots that match what will be seen on election day, required identification (if any), and what is not appropriate for voters to be

asked (i.e., helping people know their rights), why it is so important to make yourself heard through informed voting, and some common rumors. The most common tale I've encountered is that an entire ballot must be voted or it will be voided. Not true. In fact, a voter can cast a blank ballot, and they will count as having voted.

I also still work as an election judge during Illinois' two weeks of early voting, including a day of nursing home voting. I've completed additional training to serve as “voter services judge” on election day, which in many ways is the customer service department of the polls. That means complex situations and upset people are sent my way. While this role challenges my conflict-avoidant nature, it's an additional opportunity to solve problems and ensure maximum enfranchisement.

Of course, some of this process is specific to my state. And, I realize I haven't addressed some of the major systemic impediments to the democratic process—e.g., gerrymandering, systematic voter suppression, disenfranchisement laws, and the intentional spread of misinformation. Those critical areas need action.

Change, however, is complicated and piecemeal and messy. As an individual, it is important that I'm “part of the solution” and not waiting for perfection to be achieved before I play a part. So, we find meaningful ways to live our values, even on a small stage. And, I love this work. 🔥



Ira's "Humanukkah"

A Father-Son Hanukkah Story

by Bill Parsons

The Postman of Doom

When my wife and I received the invitation to our nephew's bar mitzvah celebration, we knew the jig was up. For too long, we'd changed the subject whenever our little boy had asked why his cousins and classmates went to temple, but he didn't.

We'd spoken about the religious traditions of our families whenever he'd asked: my secular childhood, with happy memories of time spent with an extended Jewish family; my wife's unhappy (and, mercifully, brief) memories of a little girl stuffed into a dress and dragged to services by her then-hopeful parents.

As children, we both had tried to believe—really tried—but just couldn't bring ourselves to accept anything supernatural or "revealed." As adults, we'd never looked back, and when we became parents, we resolved not to teach our child anything that we, ourselves, did not believe.

We also knew that supporting his cousins when they become *b'nei mitzvah* was the right thing to do, but our son had never set foot in temple. He had no idea what to expect, or what would be expected of him. Context was critical to avoid misinterpretations that could conflict with values we had taught him.

Recalling my own limited experience in the Reform tradition, I knew the ceremony and participants would affirm belief in a supernatural reality, through both word and action—a worldview in which my wife and I put no such stock.

Society for Humanistic What?

Somewhat panicked, we struggled to find some elusive way of introducing our child to a deeper understanding of Judaism than we, as his parents, could provide on our own, but which would not proselytize him to accept a mythical prehistory as literal fact. In desperation, I turned to the Internet.

After a few unrequited, online flirtations with articles on the Reconstructionist movement, I stumbled across something called, "The Society for Humanistic Judaism."

The more I read, the more it seemed I was approaching Nirvana (er, so to speak).

Several mouse clicks and a telephone call led me to Or Adam, the SHJ affiliate in Phoenix, and its indefatigable *madrikh* (and soon-to-be rabbi), Jeffrey Schesnol, who invited us to a humanist test-drive of the upcoming High Holidays with his congregation.

Humanistic Judaism, it transpired, was the acceptable compromise for which we were looking: a way to share the rich history, traditions, values, culture, holidays, music, food, art, literature, and humor of the Jewish community, without any requirement to believe (or pretend to believe) in the supernatural.

Since then, our little boy has taken to Humanistic Judaism like pastrami to rye, including Or Adam's youth education, private Hebrew tutoring, Friday night candle lighting (with him reciting a humanistic *Kiddush* and *Hamotzi*), Shabbat services, and, especially, child-centric Hanukkah and Purim celebrations.

Guilt as a Deliverable

Long before we discovered Humanistic Judaism, it had been impossible for him to escape the omnipresence of Christmas in America—even in public pre-kindergarten—and as this growing inculcation fed his desire to celebrate a winter holiday, we gently guided his natural curiosity toward the Maccabees.

Consequently, we had celebrated Hanukkah with him from an early age, while still a happily-unaffiliated household. In first grade, he even built a bulb-lit *hanukkiah* (Hanukkah menorah) with *Zayde*, an electrical engineer. (No open flames for our little one!)

By the time we made our decision to join a temple, he was ready for the real thing, and with only a few weeks to go before his first Or Adam Hanukkah party, he asked me to build him a hanukkiah based on the SHJ "humanorah." I assured him it would be...no problem.

I made some rough sketches, bought a router and some birch wood, and got to work in what little spare



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Our Pacific Community in Action

Pacific Community of Cultural Jews—Orange County, CA

The Pacific Community of Cultural Jews (PCCJ) is a small secular/humanistic Jewish community located in Orange County, California. Orange County is the home of the radical right John Birch Society; its airport is named for John Wayne, who helped to “blacklist” movie industry leftists, and strongly supported the Vietnam War. For decades, right-wingers held all the Congressional and county supervisor seats.

However, liberal social “resistance” is also found in Orange County. Mexican-Americans won a landmark case (*Mendez v. Westminster* in 1946) against public school segregation. There is local LGBTQ activity. There is concern for the environment: for conserving wilderness areas, for treating injured marine mammals, and for prevalent use of solar panels. PCCJ’s social activists join with others to protest gender bias, racial discrimination, loss of reproductive rights, LGBTQ bashing, and gun violence. We raise our voices with others against climate change and environmental pollution.

On January 20, 2018, PCCJ joined the Women’s March in Santa Ana, CA. Later in 2018, the rallying cry was #MeToo, meaning “I, too, was a victim of sexual abuse.” Waving signs, PCCJ was with the 20,000 marchers in Santa Ana swaying to songs by Cyndi Lauper and Beyonce, and chanting “When we fight, we win!”

On March 24, 2018, PCCJ social activists attended a gun control rally at Centennial Park in Santa Ana, CA. Nation-wide “March for Our Lives” rallies reacted to a mass shooting (17 dead, 17 injured) at Douglas High School in Parkland, Florida. An estimated 5,000 people heard speakers, including Tom Steyer, call for stricter gun control laws. 🔥

Lee Jacobi



Photo captions, top to bottom: PCCJ social activists, from left: Cheryl Cohen, Suzy Baron, and Zena Jacobi, posed with “M. Liberty”. Lee Jacobi declared where he thinks women belong. PCCJ social activists: from left Cheryl Cohen, Lee Jacobi, and Suzy Baron.

We’re Small But We Make Ourselves Heard

Baltimore Jewish Cultural Chavurah—Baltimore, MD

Issues of immigration and detention are not new to our Baltimore Jewish Cultural Chavurah, but we persist. Last year we channeled our *tzedakah* funds to HIAS, which is deeply engaged in this work. However, a rally on August 11, Tisha B’Av, organized by Jews United for Justice (another of our past *tzedakah* designees), gave us an opportunity for a more active role. Seven of our members joined with a very broad coalition of mostly Jewish congregations, clergy, and organizations to demonstrate outside the Howard County Detention Center, with which ICE subcontracts to imprison immigrant detainees. Seven people may not sound like much, but that represents one-third of our membership and included our newest member, who had joined just one week earlier. 🔥

Bob Jacobson



Photo captions: Elise Saltzberg and Bob Jacobson with the BCJC banner; Bill Marker at the Jews United for Justice rally. Photos by Elise Saltzberg and Bob Jacobson.

Focusing on Partnerships to Broaden Visibility

Congregation of Humanistic Judaism—Fairfield County, CT

Partnering with other, mostly Jewish, organizations to increase awareness of the Congregation for Humanistic Judaism of Fairfield County CT (CHJ) and of Humanistic Judaism has become a major focus for CHJ.

In 2019, CHJ worked with the Norwalk Historical Society to co-sponsor a lecture in honor of Veterans Day entitled “Jewish Participation in the American Revolution—Red, White and Jewish.”

“Our strategy is really quite simple,” said Steven Getz, President of CHJ.

“We focus on organizations that can help us reach prospective members. In exchange, CHJ provides programming, or in some cases, limited underwriting. By working together, both organizations have an opportunity to increase membership.”

“The bottom line,” says Getz, “is to pay attention to how we can help each other reach our goal of increasing membership.”

In 2018 and 2019, CHJ sponsored films as part of the annual Jewish Film Festival presented by the Stamford JCC.

On May 23, 2019, CHJ’s Saul Haffner Jewish Enrichment Fund underwrote an evening of Yiddish Cabaret for the greater community. The Haffner Fund, supported by donations, was established in memory of a beloved and long-time CHJ member. Recently, CHJ co-sponsored a Sukkot celebration with the Stamford JCC, where CHJ conducted a Humanistic Jewish Sukkot service.



On November 3, 2019, the Haffner Fund, CHJ, and the local Jewish Federation presented a major symposium, “A

Flood of Ideas; A Symposium on Noah, the Great Flood and Climate Change.” Hosted by a local university, the Noah story was discussed by an interfaith panel of local clergy members and climate scientists, with a focus on climate change.

CHJ is proud that the symposium reflected Humanistic Judaism’s philosophy that climate change is a human problem requiring a human response. Tikkun Olam, repairing the world, was the common theme of the event. 🔥

George Rockmore



Enriching Community with a Movable Havdalah

Machar, The Washington Congregation for Secular Humanistic Judaism—Washington, D.C.

Machar members—like SHJ communities everywhere—enjoy getting acquainted and reacquainted. Recently, we’ve gathered at a series of *havdalah* celebrations hosted by members to mark the end of Shabbat.

Our congregation has long wanted to observe Shabbat together, but our dispersed membership—which spans Washington D.C., metro Maryland, and Virginia—makes gathering on Friday evenings very difficult for members having to brave the traffic.

In 2018, Paul Golin visited Machar and led a thoughtful discussion about meaningful engagement with members. We decided that sharing traditions by celebrating *havdalah* together was one way we could do this more easily.

Our goal is to have *havdalah* gatherings as frequently as possible at members’ homes throughout the Washington, D.C. metro area. We’ve had six gatherings since mid-2018, including two at small public venues. Rabbi Jeremy Kridel leads a secular *havdalah* service with candles, music, and reflections on the meaning of *havdalah*, providing inspiration to everyone there. The service is followed by a tasty potluck dinner and an opportunity for members to mingle, socialize, and schmooze. 🔥

Darlene Basch



Community News

Activism Coming from a Good Place

The City Congregation for Humanistic Judaism—New York, NY

On Tisha B'Av, about 20 members of The City Congregation for Humanistic Judaism (TCC), along with Rabbi Tzemah Yoreh, participated in a protest against the harsh immigration policies of the Trump administration. Part of a national protest happening in many cities, the NYC group occupied an Amazon store, expressing anger over the company's collaboration with ICE to track the locations of refugees.

The protest was organized by [Jews for Racial and Economic Justice \(JFREJ\)](#). Names of refugees who had died in custody were read aloud by approximately 40 clergy members. Many of these clergy were arrested, including Rabbi Tzemah. He was handcuffed and taken to a bus with other protestors.

Asked if it was worth it, Rabbi Tzemah said, "What I do know is that I have never seen such activism by people who care in my lifetime, I have never been prouder of being a member of the mobilized Jewish community. It is coming from such a good place, from a sense of shared experience: we too were refugees, we must treat refugees with empathy."

TCC members participating included Rabbi Tzemah

Yoreh and his sons Boaz and Itamar, Lisa Botwinick, Melanie and Gabriel Brazil, Paula Grand, Felicia and Morgan Greenfield, Tara Herlocher, Beth Lord, Benita Oberlander, Shirley Ranz, Jim Ryan, Marty Shore, Middy Streeter, Judy Watson, and Dan Wyman, along with their family and friends.

On Friday Sept 20, TCC members were back on the streets as part in the Climate Strike and March, including our Rabbi Emeritus Peter Schweitzer; Bob Avila; Judy Capel; Trudy Elins; Aaron, Asher, and Eva Glass; Helen Polson; Judy Watson; and Dan Wyman.

Another TCC member, Rebecca Faulkner, has joined [Extinction Rebellion \(XR\)](#), a global group of nonviolent climate activists, who protest and raise awareness through peaceful civil disobedience.

On October 7, the rebels staged several actions in the NYC Financial District to mark the first day of Rebellion Week (occurring globally). Rebecca is a Red Brigade performer. XR portrays funeral processions and die-ins, among other actions, to demonstrate the effects of climate change and compel government action. To learn more, go to: www.rebellion.earth.

Isabel Kaplan



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Becoming Social Activists

Congregation Beth Adam—Boca Raton, FL

Members of Congregation Beth Adam (CBA) take social action seriously with a strong Social Action Committee. A Social Action section in our monthly newsletter promotes events and provides information and conservation ideas for the home. In addition, we sign many on-line petitions that reflect discontent with fracking, offshore oil drilling in protected areas, ending gun violence, and water and animal conservation. Congregation Beth Adam also created a resolution with Stand With Us, a pro-Israel organization, that unites behind Israel against an anti-Israel-Boycott Proposal.

This year CBA is participating in a new program called Comfort Cases. This program provides a case/backpack to replace the plastic trash bag that foster children often have. It is provided to a foster child in need, filled with new items that they can keep during their journey. It also provides these children with dignity and the notion that someone cares about what they are going through.



Members have also taken to the streets. In 2019 we have participated in many events that included joining thousands of Americans wearing orange to recognize National Gun Violence Awareness Day and then wearing blue to support March for our Oceans. CBA members marched at a Families Belong Together rally supporting the importance of keeping immigrant families together and attended the Washed Ashore Exhibit, a display of artwork using trash from the ocean. Showing solidarity for the Worldwide Climate Strike, CBA members and guests walked out at their Friday night Shabbat celebration before the Shabbat service.

Each year members attend the annual Kristallnacht Film Forum. This program supports grants for high school students attending the March of the Living. CBA also collects food for the needy at each shabbat and donates it to a local food bank.

CBA is proud to participate in all these important programs. 🔥

BJ Saul, Madrikha

Creating Safe and Welcoming Gatherings

Kahal B'raira—Boston, MA

As Kahal B'raira prepared for the High Holidays, we considered the challenge of creating safe and welcoming gathering places in the wake of local and national antisemitic acts. We require no tickets or fees for our Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur services (donations gratefully accepted!). As many as 270 people—members, former members, and visitors—attend. Greeters are at a table at the main entrance to welcome visitors and request contact information.

This year, our holiday preparation included attending security training sponsored by our local Jewish Federation. Following their recommendations, we developed a team of members who served as ushers. They stood at each of the entrances to engage with people as they arrived. Ushers welcomed current and past members and made a special effort to greet and observe all newcomers. Ushers created a text messaging group to communicate with each other quickly, if they felt it was necessary.

We worked with the Arlington Police, the city in which we hold our services, to find the right mix of

“not alarming anyone while still maintaining a certain amount of security.” Officers on patrol were aware of our services and periodically “stopped by.” We made good contact with each police officer. One officer was interested enough to take a copy of a service home.

After the holidays, we held an Open House with a program about Humanistic Judaism created and presented by our Managing Director, Gladys Maged. She combined a portion of the [PowerPoint introduction to Humanistic Judaism](#) created by Rick Gold, of the Gainesville Humanistic Jewish Community, with a portion of the Young Rabbis Panel video filmed during the SHJ@50 celebration. We divided up into pairs to discuss:

- What do you believe/not believe?
- What do you seek in a community/a philosophy?
- What role can you play in creating and maintaining this?

For more experienced members, it was an opportunity to see old material presented in a new way. For new people, it was a chance to experience the richness of Humanistic Judaism. 🔥

Jon Levine

Tributes

To Thelma Davis

In loving memory of your husband, Marshall
From Rabbi Miriam Jerris

To Andrea Friedlander

In honor of your 60th Birthday
From Miriam Jerris & Steve Stawicki

To Andrea & Mark Friedlander

Mazel Tov on your daughter Jamie &
John Croll's wedding
From Miriam Jerris & Steve Stawicki

To Paul Golin

In honor of his extraordinary leadership!
From Jamie Allen Black

To Jennifer Grodsky

In loving memory of your husband, Jerry Grodsky
From Kenneth Bernard
From AJ & Adam Chalom
From Marlene Cohen & Michael Kidwell
From Suzie Friedman
From Andrea & Mark Friedlander
From Miriam Jerris & Steve Stawicki
From Rob Lasker
From Mary Raskin
From Susan & Jim Ryan
From Amy Schneider & Ed Sciore
From SHJ Board & Staff
From Rudy & Roseanne Simons
From Sarah & Charles Snyder

To Susan Herschman

In loving memory of your father, Leslie Kutinsky
From SHJ Board & Staff

To Richard Logan

In loving memory of your brother, Jim
From Miriam Jerris & Steve Stawicki

To Sheila & John Malcolm

Mazel Tov on your new granddaughter
From Miriam Jerris & Steve Stawicki

To Susan McLeod

In loving memory of your husband, Roderick
From Miriam Jerris & Steve Stawicki

To Edie & Glenn Mellow

Mazel Tov on the birth of your new grandson, Oliver
From Miriam Jerris & Steve Stawicki

To Dana Preis

In honor of the Mitzvah Hero Award
From Paul Golin, Rabbi Miriam Jerris & the SHJ Board

To Mary Raskin

Thinking of you, wishing you a full recovery
From Miriam Jerris & Steve Stawicki

To Hannah Voigt

Thinking of you for a full recovery
From Miriam Jerris & Steve Stawicki

[...continued from page 17](#)

and I found so problematic in our own childhoods. For that, I'm thankful to the SHJ—and for our little boy's initial curiosity and persistence, which led us to it.

Ultimately, the humanistic lesson of our shared Hanukkah project was one of determination, teamwork, struggle, and triumph over challenges and failures, to reach a common goal. Surely, that's a small, contemporary reflection of the larger, Maccabean achievement our holiday celebrates?

I suppose a scrupulous observer might question our placing the *shamash* ("helper" candle) at the base of the stylized figure, instead of above the eight lights, but—unsurprisingly—rabbis have disagreed even on that

point! ("Two Jews, three *shamash* elevations.")

Now, about that humanistic tallit he envisions for his bar mitzvah celebration... 

The author, Bill, and his wife, Audrey, both IT professionals, live in Scottsdale, Arizona, with their little boy, Ira, a future garbage-truck driver, police officer, FBI agent, pilot, theoretical physicist, neurologist, pediatrician, psychologist, linguist, cartographer, computer programmer, cryptographer, astronaut, author, inventor, restaurateur, and genetic engineer. They are members of Phoenix-area SHJ affiliate Or Adam.

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[...continued from page 14](#)

By debunking the myths and showing the ways in which the bible and conservative Christian theology are opposed to everything good about America, Seidel thoroughly demonstrates exactly why Christian nationalism is un-American and what we have to lose if they win the war for our government and culture. Seidel says it best in his conclusion:

“Christian nationalists have successfully persuaded too many Americans to abandon our heritage, to spurn our secular foundations in favor of their myth. It is time to reclaim that heritage and refute these myths” (p. 297). 🔥

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