

Humanistic Judaism

Magazine

Jews and Cannabis

**Interview:
Emily Eizen**

**The Real
Reefer Madness**

**Community News
and much more**

Winter 2021



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- **Melinda Rothstein** has been a member of KB since 2012. Her family has celebrated three B Mitzvahs through KB. Melinda serves on KB's Board and many of its committees.
- **Prof. Michael Whitty** taught at the University of Detroit Mercy. Post retirement, he taught Drug Policy at the University of Michigan-Dearborn. He has campaigned since the 1970s for cannabis decriminalization/legalization because of harsh and over-regulated prohibition. Mike is a member of the Birmingham Temple, NORML, Drug Policy Alliance, and ACLU. He campaigned for successful voter-approved cannabis legalization in Michigan and California.

This past year was tragic, filled with grief and anxiety over a pandemic run amok; horror over the abuse of police power and the deaths of black men and women; and dismay over the increasing divide between political points of view in the U.S., culminating in the riots at the Capitol. These issues led us to seek important societal challenges that have clear and obvious fixes—at least to us—and paramount among them was to examine how cannabis and its increasing legalization influences our lives.

A brief review of the state of cannabis in the United States shows us how widespread its reach is in the health and welfare of lives on multiple levels. What I thought would be an easy question to answer, “In how many states is cannabis legal?” further pointed to the complicated ways cannabis and its use affect our society. To answer that simple question, we need to examine whether cannabis is legal, if it is legal for both medical and recreational use, and if it has been decriminalized. Cannabis is fully legal in twelve states and the District of Columbia, which includes decriminalization. It is fully illegal in eight states. There are thirteen states in which cannabis is legal for medical use only. The rest consist of a mix of legality, either medical, recreational, or both and whether or not it has been decriminalized in the state (<https://disa.com/map-of-marijuana-legality-by-state>).

We are privileged to include Emily Eizen’s stunning art work on our cover and in accompaniment of her interview with Paul Golin. They explore the deep relationship between cannabis and her art. James Branum has written an historical overview of the use of cannabis in Judaism. Rabbi Jeffrey Falick, in his article “The



Real Reefer Madness,” explores the hysteria of the madness so skillfully reflected in the movie, *Reefer Madness*, and how science informs us today about the reality of the effects of marijuana. He also delves into the cruel reality of how the punishment for black and brown people tends to be more severe than punishment meted out for white people for similar or lesser offences. Professor Michael Whitty, as a long-time Humanist, in his article, “Cannabis Can Heal the Heart and Mind— A Humanist Approach,” shares his experience in both teaching about the legalization of cannabis and advocating for it in the state of Michigan. The Association for Humanistic Rabbis joined The Society for Humanistic Judaism in issuing a statement on the full legalization of cannabis in the United States, which we share in this publication. Executive Director, Paul Golin articulates some of his concerns in an honest description of cannabis use in this article, “It’s Not for Everyone: Addressing Valid Concerns About Legalized Cannabis.”

You cannot be unmoved as you read Rabbi Jodi Kornfeld’s reflection on her father’s death from COVID-19 in her piece entitled, “The Unwritten Eulogy.” Rabbi Kornfeld originally created this liturgy for the movement-wide memorial during the last week of 2020. In our last issue we were introduced to poet Herb Levine. In this issue, Rabbi Adam Chalom reviews Levine’s poetry asking the question, “Can Poetry Replace Prayer for Humanistic Jews?”

A special thank you to our local congregations who continue to share their enormously creative programming during the pandemic. Let their offerings nourish your hearts and minds. 🔥

M.S.J.

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Jews and Cannabis

A Relationship History

by J. M. Branum

The relationship between cannabis and Judaism is very old, older than most of our cherished cultural practices, so it seems appropriate to look at this history and bring it into our ongoing Jewish conversation, particularly as it relates to the experience of Jewish Humanists.

Cannabis and the Ancient Israelites

It is believed that the ancestors of the ancient Israelites first encountered cannabis as it was being dispersed (alongside grapes and horses) throughout the region by the Assyrians, from the plant's origins in Central Asia. Like many of their neighbors in the region, they used the plant for its fiber and as medicine.¹

Until recently, scholars debated whether cannabis was used in religious settings in ancient Israel, with most of the debate centering on whether *Kaneh Bosum*, one of the original prescribed ingredients of the Jerusalem Temple's incense formula, was in fact cannabis. A recent discovery at Tel Arad² may have answered this question. Remnants of burnt cannabis resin were found on the incense altars of a Judean satellite worship shrine from circa 760–715 BCE.

This discovery gives new possible layers of meaning to the biblical narrative, such as when Judean King Uzziah³ was allegedly punished by God for taking it upon himself to burn incense, rather than waiting for a priest to do the task. While the traditional interpretation of the text centers on Uzziah's pridefulness in usurping a traditional task assigned to the Levitical priesthood, could it be possible that instead, Uzziah was condemned for getting into the priestly stash?

Cannabis in Rabbinic Judaism

The destruction of the Second Temple might have ended the use of cannabis in the temple rituals but it did not end the use of Jewish cannabis use, with the Talmud discussing cannabis as a mundane part of Jewish life.⁴

Cannabis was also used medically, including by Maimonides who prescribed cannabis oil to treat ear and respiratory infections.⁵ The use of cannabis as a recreational intoxicant was favorably mentioned by Rabbi ben Solomon ibn Abi Zimra, Chief Rabbi of Cairo for much of the 1500s CE, who has been quoted as saying “the leaves of cannabis bring *simcha*.” Finally, as the use of hashish spread from the Middle East to North Africa,⁶ Jews (in partnership with Berbers) were actively involved in the hashish trade and consumed it themselves.⁷

Evolving Understandings of the Use of Cannabis in Modern Judaism

During the modern era,⁸ Jewish practices began to focus less on local custom (*minhag*) and more on denominational/movement affiliation as well as individual conscience and preference. These trends which would shape the relationship of Jews and cannabis.

By the late 1800s, many Americans made use of cannabis as medicine, most often as liquid extracts. Starting in the early 1900s, smoking cannabis became popular, first among poor immigrant communities in the US American Southwest. Predictably, racism and classism led to cannabis prohibition in the United States and many other countries in the 1930s. This ended most medical use of cannabis, while it forced recreational use underground, where its use continued to spread.

By the 1950s, the prohibitions against cannabis made it a marker of outsider culture, so it should not surprise us that more and more Jews, who felt like outsiders, embraced cannabis. One example was Lenny Bruce, whose standup routines often talked about both Jewish culture and cannabis in the same shows. In his 1965 autobiography, *How to Talk Dirty and Influence People*, Bruce wrote, “Marijuana will be legal someday, because there are so many law students that smoke pot, who will someday become Senators and they will legalize it to protect themselves... And yet at this very moment there are American citizens in jail for smoking flowers.”

Bruce was not alone, as there were other prominent Jews becoming well known for their love of cannabis, most notably Mezz Mezzrow,⁹ Bob Dylan,¹⁰ and Allen Ginsburg.¹¹ By the 1970s the growing popularity of cannabis among Jewish people even sparked one of President Richard Nixon's most notorious anti-Semitic rants caught on the White House tapes:

“There's a funny thing, every one of the bastards who is out there to legalize marijuana is Jewish. What the Christ is the matter with the Jews, Bob? What is the matter with them? I suppose because most of them are psychiatrists, (unintelligible) . . . so many of the psychiatrists are Jewish.”¹²



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Thank you for your interest in Humanistic Judaism!

*Creeping like a communist, it's knocking at our doors
Turning all our children into hooligans and whores
Voraciously devouring the way things are today
Savagely deflowering the good ol' U.S.A.
It's Reefer Madness ... Oh so mad!*

*See the kids! Precious kids!
Yes, their heads are on the chopping block
and someone's got to dare to take a stand
Can't ignore any more, it could be your son or daughter
With a deadly stick of reefer in their hand!
They're heading straight for ... Reefer Madness!
Save our kids!†*

Thus begins one of my favorite musicals of all time that never made it to Broadway, the musical parody *Reefer Madness*.

The 1998 L.A. and off-Broadway stage show and 2005 Showtime productions are profound and profoundly funny satires of the 1936 propaganda film, *Tell Your Children*. That film, a melodramatic mess funded by a church group, told a story of rape, psychosis, murder, and other mayhem brought on by just a few puffs of the demon weed.

A small cog in the vast anti-marijuana machine assembled by America's first narcotics agency commissioner, it would have faded into history had it not been renamed *Reefer Madness* and re-emerged as a 1970s stoner cult hit. And with good reason. Whether you're sober as a judge or high as a kite, its utter absurdity is inescapable. Today, anyone who believes that marijuana leads to nearly instant lawlessness and psychopathic brutality has been imbibing something far stronger than ganja. Or they have another agenda.

As we've been reminded in the Trump era, that agenda is usually fear-mongering. Dishonest and lazy media exploit it to attract audiences. Cynical religious leaders employ it to build their followings. And unscrupulous politicians use it to accumulate power. It usually features unsubstantiated and exaggerated claims of imminent dangers of lawlessness and depravity. It frequently points the spotlight at minorities. It always comes at the expense of evidence and good reasoning. Sound familiar?

Marijuana prohibition was built on just this kind of fear-mongering. It grew in the wake of the failure of alcohol prohibition which also employed scare tactics about foreigners, Black people, crime, and sin. Yet alcohol, despite being the much more dangerous drug, benefited from widespread cultural acceptance, something that made its prohibition particularly prone to inevitable failure. Marijuana, despite millennia of use, was not well known in America. This would help to ingrain its prohibition in our culture.

In his book, *How to Smoke Pot (Properly): A Highbrow Guide to Getting High*,² former *High Times* Magazine editor David Bienenstock calls *Cannabis sativa*—the official name for the version of hemp used to get high—"the world's oldest crop."²

This is debatable, but there's little doubt that people have used it throughout history. From China to India to Kazakhstan, archeologists have uncovered evidence of cannabis use for religious ritual, healing, and recreation. Recently even our Jewish ancestors were added to the list when evidence of cannabis use was revealed by analyzing the altars of a Judean high place in Israel's Beersheba Valley at Tel Arad.

In America, on the other hand, most people were barely aware of it. This meant that—entirely without context—most Americans would first encounter it right alongside warnings of its purported dangers to public health and safety. This is portrayed for laughs in the film version of *Reefer Madness: The Musical* when a mother, arriving to watch the propaganda film, seeks help deciphering the very topic:

*"Mah-ree-Jew-Ee-Nah. Mah-ree-Jew - Jew? Mah-ree - Oh! Mah-ree-Jew-A....
Excuse me, do you know how to say this word? I don't speak Mexican. Mary-Jew"*³

The foreignness of the word marijuana was no coincidence. Like most fear-mongering, an "Other" was required to really push the message out. Thus the entire

The Real Reefer MADNESS

by Rabbi Jeffrey L. Falick



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Cannabis Can Heal the Heart and Mind

by Michael Whitty, PhD

A Humanist Approach

The 2020 election was remarkable for cannabis (botanical name for marijuana) in America. Voters approved legalization of medical cannabis in Mississippi and South Dakota, bringing the total to 36 states (California was the first to do so, in 1996). Voters also legalized adult use (sometimes called “recreational marijuana”) in Arizona, Montana, New Jersey, and South Dakota; bringing the total to 15 states and the District of Columbia.

These victories made it increasingly likely that federal legalization will happen soon, especially now that Congress is in Democratic control and the Biden administration promised its support. Expected majority leader Senator Chuck Schumer recently announced he would work to remove criminal penalties. “But even more important—some state and localities have legalized and/or decriminalized, and all the horror stories people told about what’s going to happen—crime would go up, kids would graduate to the worst kinds of drugs—none of that happened,” said Schumer.

Concurrent with the march to legalization is a fast-growing effort to expunge the records of people arrested and/or incarcerated for marijuana before legalization. For example, Illinois Gov. J.B. Pritzker announced the forgiveness and expungement of about 500,000 criminal cannabis cases. Pritzker issued pardons for 9,210 low-level cannabis convictions, while Illinois State Police eliminated nearly a half million non-felony cannabis-related arrest records. “We will never be able to fully remedy the depth of the damage” [done to brown and Black people] Pritzker said. “But we can govern with the courage to admit the mistakes of our past and the decency to set a better path forward.”



Why should humanists care about cannabis?

Humanism offers a philosophy of acceptance and tolerance and individual responsibility that respects other people’s needs. Humanists value personal autonomy and liberty which includes the right of every human being to the greatest possible freedom compatible with the rights of others. Supporting legalization is one of the ways humanists can contribute to a more heartfelt worldview—a live and let live vision for the future.

Cannabis can offer vital assistance psychologically to coping with COVID, political stress, and for many people a way to relax, sleep better, and take our minds off aches and pains. Research shows that it is an effective aide to reduce post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD).

The punishment for cannabis use is too harsh and does not fit the crime. It is futile, costly, and is counter-productive. Police enforcement has been race- and class-based. As humanists we should reframe racist and moralist assumptions with models for responsible use.

One of the textbooks for my Drug Policy class is *The New Jim Crow* by attorney and law professor Michelle Alexander. This book links drug reform policy to social justice, focusing on the racist aspects of the drug war. She presented reams of data showing that for decades Black and brown people have been incarcerated at significantly higher rates than white people, even though their use is proportionate to their share of the population. White people are five times as likely to use drugs, but African Americans are incarcerated for drug offenses at ten times the rate of whites.

“War on Drugs” laws and policies targeting minorities have created a racial caste system, with arrests and incarceration making life as an ex-felon extremely difficult. More than 40% of arrests for drug possession in the U.S. are for cannabis. Mandatory minimums force federal courts to send and keep perpetrators in prison. Civil forfeiture practices take away possessions even before adjudication and may never be returned. “The war on drugs and the war on crime are the most recent manifestation of an impulse to punish, control, and exploit poor people of color,” writes Prof. Alexander. The first drug laws, the anti-opium laws of the 1870s, were directed at Chinese immigrants. When the first federal drug czar wanted to criminalize marijuana in 1930 he appealed to people’s fear of Mexican immigrants.

Let us start with the wisdom that moderation is a positive goal when applied to cannabis just as it is to alcohol, which has the potential to be more problematic and addictive to the user and society. Cannabis use for adults is generally considered a relaxant, a minor vice when the set and setting are appropriate and no one but the user is affected. Overuse might be worthy of counseling in some cases, but wasteful, futile, and overly harsh policing is not productive.

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Emily Eizen An Interview with Paul Golin

Emily Eizen is a multifaceted artist working in the mediums of painting, sculpture, photography (including the above and following pages), modeling, home decor, and set design. Her '60s psychedelic inspired works showcase the beauty, freedom and diversity Eizen considers essential to establishing equity in the cannabis space and beyond. Emily's portfolio and commissions highlight her ability to adapt to different styles and aesthetic across spectrums of gender and femininity, defying convention. Welcome to the world of Emily Eizen, where the in-demand artist reflects the colorful and vibrant feelings she experiences while merging the cultures of cannabis and art.

Paul Golin: I've enjoyed following your work from afar, via Instagram, and admire how you address important issues through your art and advocacy. Can you describe the ways your various intersecting identities inform your work? And does that also include your Jewish identity?

Emily Eizen: I believe that my pieces are all extensions of me in some way, some way for me to leave a mark, so all of me is poured out into my artwork. This includes my queer identity, using bright colors, and eye-catching themes. I always want to give credit and homage to queer culture. Also, growing up by the beach is something that I think has also influenced my taste for retro skating culture, roller skating, and the sun. I believe in my Jewish culture and identity and I think Judaism has taught me a lot about what I value most in life, family, community, light, knowledge, and justice. These are all Jewish themes, which all inform my artwork.

PG: What are the social justice issues and ethical concerns around the cannabis industry that you'd most like to see addressed? How should they be addressed?

EE: Mass incarceration and elitism in the legal cannabis industry are both issues that need repair. The thought of people sitting in jail for something that is now making the rich even richer, and is even considered "essential," infuriates me. What needs to be immediately addressed is the release and expungement of over 40,000 cannabis prisoners in the U.S. This also means federal legalization and meaningful social equity programs which

help repair and rebuild communities most impacted by the War on Drugs. There are many ways to get involved, including uplifting and supporting groups doing the actual on-the-ground work towards restorative justice in the cannabis industry and beyond. See <https://www.lastprisonerproject.org/> and <https://nationalexpungementweek.org/> and <https://www.cannaclusive.com/>

PG: Cannabis has long been associated with creative endeavors like art and music. Do you find using it is always helpful, or can it hinder at times too?

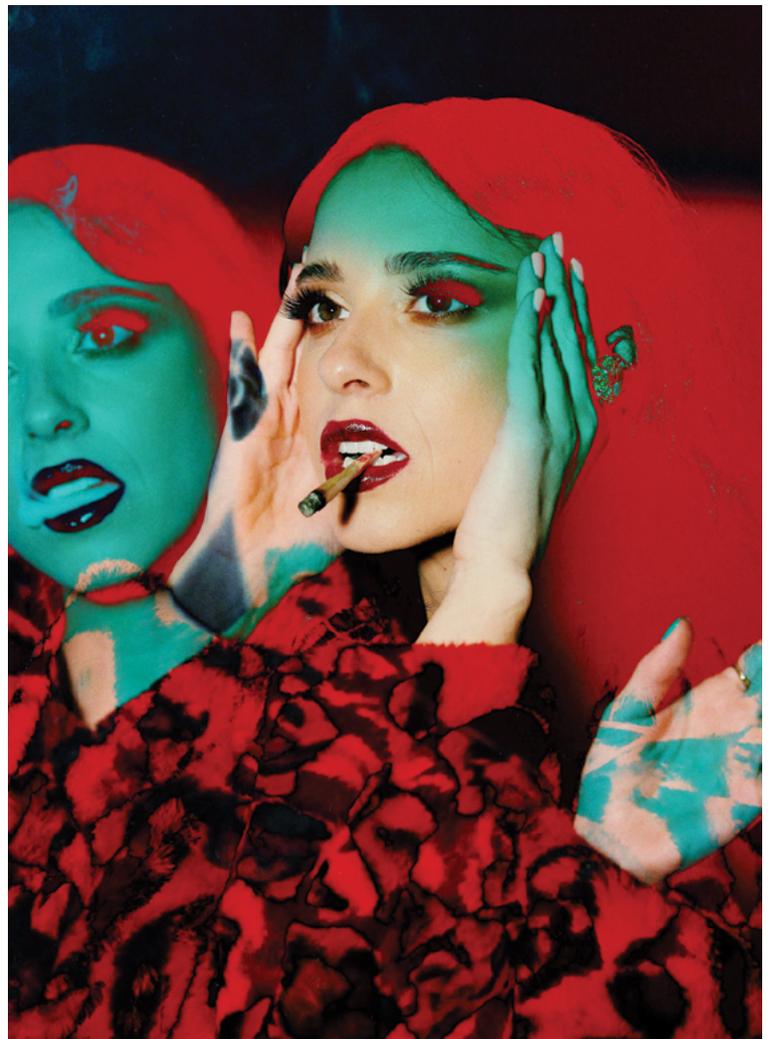
EE: Cannabis for me is always helpful for my creative process. My paintings don't usually follow a plan. Sometimes I have no idea what I'm doing until it's done. It is a stream of consciousness, and cannabis is the spark that gets me into that flow state. But cannabis isn't one-size fits all, what works for me may not work for everyone, so it's a personal journey I encourage for anyone open to using it, for creative or medicinal purposes.

PG: How would you advise those of us in less overtly creative endeavors as to how cannabis use might be beneficial and/or how to find the right strain for individual personalities, as it becomes available legally around the country?

EE: The possibilities of cannabis and hemp are endless. This plant has so many uses, not just getting high, but it has the ability to heal, to build, to shelter, to clothe, and so much more. Everyone should find what's right for them. Using CBD as a starting place is a good idea for people who are interested in cannabis, or even a ratio of CBD:THC. I started my career working in cannabis dispensaries and learning about the vast array of options, which are always growing. I suggest consulting your local budtender with any questions or specific situations.

PG: What else would you like to let folks know?

EE: Tzedek, tzedek tirdof (תְּצַדֵּק תְּצַדֵּק תִּרְדּוֹף), "justice, justice, you shall pursue," one of the most central declarations of the Torah in my opinion, calls on us to seek righteousness and justice. I will continue to pursue justice in the cannabis industry and beyond. 🔥



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Resolution in Support of the Full Legalization of Cannabis in the U.S.

Humanistic Judaism values science and the scientific method to better understand our world, and stands for human dignity, equality, and fair treatment under the law for all people. In our nation's legal approach to regulating cannabis, these values have not been evenly employed, and too often have been disregarded.

Federal laws in the United States regarding the growing, sale, trade, possession, and consumption of cannabis have been informed more by myth and demagoguery than on established scientific data.

Cannabis laws are not uniform nor uniformly enforced, disproportionately affect communities of color, and make criminals of and cause undue and unjust punishment to many persons for a victimless crime. Our tradition values equal treatment under the law and teaches “do not do unto others as you would not have done to you.” Laws criminalizing cannabis encourage its use in ways both dangerous to the public and the individual user as did the laws on alcohol prohibition in the United States in the 1920s–30s. Legalizing cannabis advances safety and health by supporting a medical response to health issues, scientific research, and personal rights. It reduces police abuse and government waste. Growing American support for full or partial legalization is currently seen in all but six states.

The Society for Humanistic Judaism and the Association of Humanistic Rabbis therefore call for the following changes in our legal and societal approach to cannabis:

1. All laws making the production, sale, trade, possession, and use of cannabis a criminal offense—for any reason, including recreational use—should be immediately repealed.
2. Regulations concerning the safe production, sale, trade, possession, and use of cannabis should be informed by science and take into account psychological, physiological, and other health concerns when determining rules such as prohibiting sales to minors and driving under the influence.
3. Any injurious effects resulting from the consumption of

cannabis should be treated with appropriate psychological and medical care and should no longer be addressed by criminal law except in those cases where they result in otherwise criminal behavior.

4. Amnesty and the withdrawal of pending criminal charges should be provided to all persons convicted or charged under present laws relating to the production, sale, trade, possession, and use of cannabis.
5. Research should be funded to investigate any and all legal, social, and medical questions arising from the production, sale, trade, possession, and use of cannabis. Additionally, a portion of any taxes generated by the legalized production and sale of cannabis should be devoted to research on its medical uses.
6. State and federal laws introducing legal production, sale, trade, possession, and use of cannabis should include social equity programs that prioritize communities of color and individuals who have been most adversely affected by criminalization, including through business ownership opportunities of newly emerging cannabis production and sales industries. 🔥

This statement draws inspiration from the 1970 General Resolution “Legalization of Marijuana” by the Unitarian Universalist Association (<https://www.uua.org/action/statements/legalization-marijuana>).

Further Reading:

ACLU Reports: “The War on Marijuana in Black and White” (2013), and “A Tale of Two Countries: Racially Targeted Arrests in the Era of Marijuana Reform” (2020). <https://www.aclu.org/report/report-war-marijuana-black-and-white>

“Racism and Its Effect on Cannabis Research” by Robert Solomon, National Institute of Health (2020). <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC7173675/>

“Marijuana Legalization,” by the Marijuana Policy Project. <https://www.mpp.org/issues/legalization/>

It's Not for Everyone

Addressing Valid Concerns About Legalized Cannabis

by Paul Golin

Even if it “goes without saying,” it still needs to be said. Cannabis contains a psychoactive drug that affects different users differently, and for some, that will include negative effects and even addiction. I write from personal experience, having struggled with my relationship to marijuana for much of my young adulthood.

I'm not talking about someone trying it a few times, not liking how it feels, then never trying it again. If anything, cannabis is a significantly safer experiment than “harder” drugs more likely to trigger psychotic breaks or other unpredictable reactions, or alcohol that kills thousands through drunk driving every year.

My concern is about heavy use, what motivates it, and the psychological and societal risks involved. As with alcohol consumption, the majority of which is done by the heaviest drinkers,¹ most cannabis is consumed by daily or near-daily users. And it appears that the rate and total numbers of daily or near-daily users is increasing in parallel with the state-by-state rollout of legalization.²

Because it does affect different people differently, every individual must determine for themselves whether using cannabis is to their own benefit or detriment. While I am specifically addressing recreational use—the benefits of medical marijuana are well documented and do not necessarily include the same high—even recreational users can acknowledge there are psychological components to “self-medicating” through regular use.

Understanding the impact of cannabis requires exploring the human mind. Mental health issues are still stigmatized in American society, though that has declined somewhat in recent decades. One of the many things I value about Humanistic Judaism and Jews in general is our embrace and willingness to discuss such issues openly in comparison to the larger society. Jews have been at the forefront of psychoanalysis since its invention. (The Nazis derided it as “the Jewish science.”)

Marijuana fosters a deeper dive into our own consciousness and the pondering of big questions, to sometimes profound/sometimes humorous results. The classic scene in *Animal House*³ shows a college professor turning some students on to cannabis, and after one student realizes that “our whole solar system could be like one tiny atom in the fingernail of some other giant being,” he is suddenly struck by the brilliant idea: “Could I buy some pot from you?”

An increased inner vision might be of great benefit to creative endeavors. Other desired effects include a stress-reducing mind/body buzz. Well-known downsides include confusion and paranoia. Again, not everyone experiences all of it—and even for the same individual, different strains produce different results.

By what measure, then, can we know when it becomes a problem?

The American Psychiatric Association identifies people with substance use disorder (SUD) as those who continue using despite knowing “it is causing or will cause problems,” and using “to the point where the person's ability to function in day-to-day life becomes impaired.” It lists marijuana among the substances to which people can become addicted.⁴

I fell into this category for many years, beginning in my late teens. And even though that period is now decades in my past, I still haven't discussed it with some close family. This is the first time I'm writing about it.

Even sharing it now makes me fear that I'm providing fodder for those who oppose legalization, or that I will come off as judgmental. Revealing my negative experiences with cannabis is not intended to cast aspersions on anyone else's use. I've seen firsthand how people can use it near-daily and not just function but thrive, personally and professionally. In many ways I was envious of them. I still like the culture around it. But it just didn't work for me.

Along with the social aspects, the allure to using cannabis was that it provided a different perspective on life and did make me feel better at times. Too often, though, it kept me in a depressive funk. And it fueled a negative internal narrative, about me and about the world, which was unhelpful and untrue. I knew it wasn't working at the time, and yet I felt that I couldn't stop.



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Thank you for your interest in Humanistic Judaism!

The Unwritten Eulogy

by Rabbi Jodi Kornfeld

I traffic in ritual; words are my currency.

My aims are both lofty and personal,

Give meaning to those intersectional moments where the present confronts its past and navigates its way into the future.

Let the generations join together even as they necessarily and inevitably move apart.

Yes, I traffic in ritual; words are my currency.

But now I stutter and stammer because my stockpiles have dwindled.

The silos have emptied and the vats have drained.

Unlike Joseph, I Yosepha did not prepare for this.

So swap the first two letters in ritual, then add a “V” and here we are.

A Brady Bunch screen with someone I’ve never met next to my father in his ICU bed.

Did he give a thumbs up acknowledging our voices one last time, hearing our expressions of love and gratitude; or did she make that happen?

This is the unwritten eulogy, the failed ritualization of loss and memory.

When words are unspoken, they never reach their audience.

They remain vague unformed thoughts seeking the release of articulation.

The raw materials remain without the opportunity to become something.

The inability to weave together the strand of memory with that of loss; the one of hurt with the one of forgiveness; and the thread of joy with that of sorrow, means that no new fabric emerges; no textile of reconciliation.

Instead there is a pain and profound isolation that is even deeper because

I traffic in ritual and words are my currency.

This is the shiva never held.

“For the greater good; for the safety of all; due to the pandemic” are recurring phrases in obituary after obituary after obituary.

But those words give way to the realization that no stories will be shared, no ameliorative laughter will be brought forth.

There are no hugs possible.

We are back to swapping those first two letters and adding a “V”.

So indulge me this, let me untangle a difficult and complicated relationship.

Let me honor the dead in the pandemic, “covid ha-met,” and honor my father, “Kavod avi.”

In the days immediately after his birth, he was on display in the 1933 World’s Fair in Chicago to showcase the then newest technology, a neonatal incubator, because he weighed only two and a half pounds.

He was fond of saying “I was very young when I was born,” an aphorism that elicited laughs but which my sister and I only just recently fully appreciated.

He grew up in poverty in the Depression, the son of a fruit peddler on the West Side.

Later he’d say, “Did you have enough to eat?” as he offered everyone second portions from the excess food he bought.

He was a one strike person in a three strike world.

He could and did hold a grudge with the best of them, oblivious to the pain it caused; but paradoxically was also generous to a fault.

Whatever missteps he took as a father, he corrected as a grandfather.

He died alone in a hospital room in the pandemic of 2020 with someone I never met next to him.

This then is the unwritten eulogy because I traffic in ritual and words are my currency. 

Blessed Are You, World

Can Poetry Replace Prayer for Humanistic Jews?

by Rabbi Adam Chalom

In the never-ending linguistic battles of Humanistic Judaism, prayer is a particularly challenging term. Is our gathering a service or a celebration? Is our local group a congregation or a community? Is what we do holy, or rather special or meaningful? And how do we describe the words we share together—are they liturgy or meditations or blessings, or even prayers? Or just moving poetry or prose?

I first came across the creative poetry of Herbert Levine in *Jewish Currents*, a self-described “secular, progressive” magazine with roots back to the 1940s Jewish Communist world. It was the opening poem “Blessed Are You, World” of Levine’s first collection of Hebrew and English poetry, *Words for Blessing the World* (Ben Yehuda Press, 2017). In his beautiful journey from the scientific beginnings of the universe through the contemporary moment, Levine articulates connections to the natural world, and gratitude for the scientists who help us understand it and to the world itself for making life both possible and wonderful. I included it in my community’s High Holiday services because of its striking imagery and emotional resonance, though I did not consider it a “prayer.” The poem concludes:

*O blessed world, you give us each day
Visions and problems to solve and to praise*

As Levine made clear in our recent public conversation about his poetry, viewable at <https://iishj.org/jewishpoetry/> (including him reading “Blessed Are You, World” starting at 5:00), the “you” in the poem is what makes the work, for him, prayer. If he were simply praising the phenomenon of the world existing, that would be “only” poetry. A common Humanistic blessing formula is “Blessed is the light in the world, blessed is the light in humanity.” If instead we wrote it, “blessed are you, light in the world,” would we be more or less comfortable with the phrasing? On one hand, the light in the world is not listening to us talk and does not consciously intervene in the world. At the same time, poetry does not have to be entirely literal—we can talk to the past or a deceased loved one or a child yet to be born.

And some in very liberal religious circles do not see their traditional prayers as talking to a listening active being either. For them, “God” works as a metaphor, or as a target to express human emotions and hopes and fears. As Levine puts it in another poem:

*Don't think there is no prayer
in a world without a master;
in Hebrew, to pray is a reflexive verb.
You need only yourself –
the 'I' that fears, makes people made, and complains.
and the 'I' that includes
all the 'I's in the world,
and asks that you have compassion on yourself
and on them all.*

What makes Levine’s poetry intriguing and particularly meaningful to Humanistic Jews is the fact that addressing a god in any fashion, even as metaphor, no longer works for him. And so even if he wants a “you” to address, it is paradoxically explicitly metaphorical—the world, his hopes, and more. This shift was one of the sparks to create his first poetry collection in 2017, and now *An Added Soul: Poems for a New Old Religion* (Ben Yehuda Press, 2020). The conclusion of “Don’t Think There is no Prayer” articulates his values and beliefs, which resonate with ours:

*This is my prayer and my path in life:
to betroth the world in its fullness,
to serve others in joy,
to act towards them in love and truth,
to trust that right living and peace will bloom.*

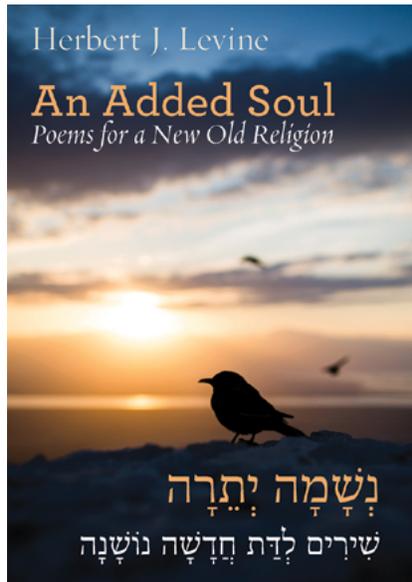
Levine’s clarity and honesty in his secularism, his commitment to his truth, comes through when he grapples with his Jewish inheritance. This poem, for instance, takes the traditional Torah blessing “This is the Torah that Moses placed before the children of Israel, from the mouth of God by the hand of Moses” and updates it with modern knowledge:

*This is the Torah
that was written by human beings
over many generations
that Ezra put before the people of Israel
in the name of Moses....*

There are many influences on Levine’s poetry—traditional Biblical Psalms and liturgy, the examples of Yehuda Amichai and Marcia Falk’s poetry, his parents’ emphasis on Hebrew literacy in his youth that led to a lifetime of connection with both English and Hebrew, modern Israeli Hebrew songs, and his experiences with creative Jewish reinterpretations of traditional liturgy and theology from the Jewish Renewal and Modern Mussar movements. The new poems in *An Added Soul* are at once scientific and existential, and beautifully Humanistic and Jewish—for example, from “For the New Year”:

*From evening til morning til evening,
the world revolves. Nature self-corrects, but will I?
There's much to atone for in how I manage my world.
The absence of a god is no excuse.*

....
*Difficult to be a sheep without a shepherd,
David said in his heart, so prayed to a god to guide his walk.
To forge a soul is lonely work,
suitable for a shepherd;
I am the only sheep that I can guide.*



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CommunityNews

Comfort Food in the Year of Pandemic

Beth Ami—Boulder, CO

Before the pandemic, frequently dining out in Boulder's fine restaurants was one of my favorite pastimes. It's no longer an option. I hunkered down indoors per the Colorado Stay-at-Home order. To counter my boredom and all those Zoom meetings, I started preparing many of my long-forgotten recipes. When one of my friends posted a photo of his No Knead Bread, I was inspired. I googled the recipe and started baking bread. Trading recipes with friends sparked an idea, why not gather these recipes into a cookbook. And the idea for the Beth Ami Comfort Cookbook was born.

In our Beth Ami monthly newsletter, I asked for recipes from our members and friends. It was as easy as pie (pun intended) for them to email me their comfort food recipes. Additionally, I requested photos of the recipe or even a photo of their Bubbe whom they watched make that challah when they were children.

Many of the submittals included personal comments and reminisces. Papu's Byzantine Coffee recipe is from Marti's grandfather who was born in the Ottoman Empire and emigrated to the U.S. in 1911. The Kotlety Russian Meat Patties recipe was submitted by Julia who grew up in Moscow and came to the U.S. in 1992. And Sylvia's Chocolate Marshmallow Treats is from Norma's 97-year-old mother who was always a fabulous cook, especially when it came to decadent desserts.

To date, I have collected 25 recipes including soups, stews, side dishes, main courses and desserts. The Beth Ami Comfort Cookbook is a true labor of love. 

Arlene Gerwin



No-Knead Artisan Whole Wheat Bread from Arlene Gerwin

Ingredients

- 3 cups whole wheat flour
- 2 tsp salt
- 1 pkg active dry yeast
- 1 ½ cups water (room temp)

Preparation

1. Mix together flour, salt & yeast.
2. Using a wooden spoon, stir in water until mixture forms a cohesive dough.
3. Cover bowl tightly with plastic wrap. Let sit 12–18 hours at room temp.
4. Heat oven to 450 degrees. Put a 6-8 quart heavy covered pot (cast iron, enamel, pyrex or ceramic) in the oven for 30 minutes as the oven heats.
5. Shape dough into a ball with floured hands on a floured surface.
6. Carefully remove pot from the oven. Sprinkle flour into the bottom of the pot or line with parchment paper.
7. Place dough ball into the pot and cover.
8. Bake 30 minutes covered. Then 15–20 minutes uncovered until the crust is nicely browned.
9. ENJOY!

Tips

Add honey and cinnamon to taste for a sweeter loaf. For a savory loaf, add basil, dill, rosemary or Italian seasoning.

Adapted from several online no-knead bread recipes. I started baking bread again during our "stay at home" pandemic time. The smell of baking bread is a wonderful way to start the day. This is a no-fail recipe that is now the most popular *New York Times* recipe. I vary the type of flour now, preferring to substitute 1/2 cup rye flour to the basic recipe.

Sylvia's Chocolate Marshmallow Treats from Norma Portnoy

Ingredients

- 12 oz. chocolate chips
- 1/2 C creamy or nutty peanut butter
- 1/2 pkg. small marshmallows
- Chopped walnuts (optional)

Preparation

1. Melt chips & peanut butter together in a glass bowl for 1 min, then at 20 second intervals until peanut butter is absorbed into the melted chocolate.
2. Pour mixture over marshmallows in an 8-inch square pan. Schmeare mixture to cover the entire top of the marshmallows. Allow the chocolate mixture to settle on the top. (Don't mix into the marshmallows.)
3. Top with chopped walnuts, if desired.
4. Chill in refrigerator.
5. Cut into squares.

Tips

This recipe freezes very well.

My 97-year old mother, Sylvia, was always a fabulous cook, especially when it came to decadent chocolate desserts. When my mother completed making a recipe when we were young, my sister and I would alternate who got to lick the mixing spoon and who got to enjoy what was left in the mixing bowl.

BT's Free Little Food Pantry Opens for All

The Birmingham Temple—Farmington Hills, MI



For many years in Farmington Hills, Michigan, the Birmingham Temple's Social Justice Committee has held Winter Mitzvah Day to benefit the bag lunch program of Detroit's Project NOAH (Networking, Organizing and Advocating for the Homeless). In the days without COVID dozens of volunteers gather everything necessary to make over 1,000 lunches and then the entire congregation gathers for an all-hands-on-deck lunch making marathon. It's all funded by our annual "Souper Supper," a Hanukkah dinner featuring dozens of homemade soups and breads. This year BT reinvented Souper Supper as a drive-by curbside delivered event. Not quite as much fun as the Souper Supper, but we still raised \$1500! We can't gather to make the lunches, but we have contingency plans for that, too.

Since the pandemic began, hunger has been an issue for many people in our area. To help answer the need, BT's Social Justice Committee has established a "Free Little Food Pantry" in front of the building filled with food and other supplies. It runs through a lot of stock every day, reminding us of the great need.

BT is online in a big way. No matter where you are in the world you can watch "Welcoming Shabbat," our weekly YouTube. With readings, music videos, and commentary by Rabbi Falick and his guests, it's a great introduction to our movement. It streams live on Fridays at 6pm and is available on-demand any time afterward. Rabbi Falick also opened up his eight-part Zoom class, "Being Jewish: An Introduction to Jews and their Judaisms," to participants everywhere. If you missed it, you can find it on YouTube. Check out both of these programs and more at:

<https://YouTube.com/BTCongregationforHumanisticJudaism> 🔥

Photos by: Birmingham Temple



Rabbi Jeffrey Falick

CHJ Celebrates Tu B'Shevat 2021

Congregation for Humanistic Judaism—Fairfield County, CT

During these times it's so important to gather and feed our spirits through connection, even if only virtually. Celebrating the joyful holiday of Tu B'Shevat or Jewish Earth Day with a seder is a winter tradition at the Congregation for Humanistic Judaism (CHJ), and we refused to let the pandemic stop us this year. Nurturing and caring for our Earth provides the opportunity for celebration of the seasons and serious evaluation of Earth's climate situation, a call to do better than in the past.

This year we added "new traditions." For the first time, we partnered with Stamford Jewish Community Center, using a fun promotional video created by our song-leader to invite them. Our mitzvah students decorated and delivered nearly 40 goodie bags packed with ceremonial foods of dried fruits, nuts and olives.

Also, this year we included readings from climate activist Greta Thunberg and a Marshall Island poet whose homeland is at risk of submersion by rising seas in the next decade. During the service our members shared personal reflections about nature's alignment with their values, including noticing early peepers (frogs hatching), planting gardens for a respite from the grief of losing loved ones, and harvesting our own food. In the chat we shared names of loved ones lost in the past 12 months.

More than 80 participants joined us from the tri-state area and as far away as Denver, Atlanta and London. The most well-attended seder in years, our event helped attract two new members. 🔥

Photo captions: Tree of life picture by mitzvah student J. Axen. Bag artwork by mitzvah students.



Community News

Kahal B'raira, Creating Meaning via Zoom

Kahal B'raira—Boston, MA

Since March 2020, Kahal B'raira in the Boston, MA, area has been meeting remotely. The benefits of Zoom have allowed us to gather and engage safely and consistently; for some, even more now than before, and others from distances otherwise too far to travel. Along with Sunday School and regular Sunday Morning Gatherings, we come together for occasional Shabbat and Havdalah services, anti-racism book group meetings, game nights, social events, life cycle celebrations, and, of course committee meetings.

We have relied on the extra effort of our graphics and technical team to create the community feel that we cherish. Significantly, KB members, have stepped forward to initiate programming. It is especially uplifting to see new faces in these leadership roles.

And always we ask ourselves: how do we ensure that our Zoom events are meaningful? Here are some of our best practices:

- **Accessibility:** Use closed captioning for the hearing impaired. Our automated CC service doesn't handle Hebrew well, so we have a live captioner for our Passover Seder.
- **Engagement:** Send invitations and reminders; send or have participants prepare ritual items such as candles, wine, and challah; provide printed "programs" with key elements, such as the text of blessings. For example, to enhance a virtual Mitzvah celebration, a family sent party boxes (see photo) in advance to the invited guests and these items added anticipation, delight, and a tangible feeling of participation to the celebration.
- **Enable socializing:** Use breakout rooms for discussions, games, ice-breaking and mixing age groups.
- **Structure:** Consider webinar vs meeting to manage who is seen and heard; introduce panelists for personalization and acknowledge all guests and participants.

While Kahal B'raira has only begun to consider our congregation post-pandemic, we already are considering how to retain those pandemic practices we like. 

Photo caption: Guest party box for family and close friends.



Jon Levine and Melinda Rothstein

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...

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 Lenth, and community organizer Livette Ben...

Jews For A Secular Democracy

Science, Government, and Religious Communities:
What Are Their Roles During a Pandemic?
A Virtual Conversation with:

Dr. Paul A. Offit
Bertha Vazquez
None Positioner
Jews For A Secular Democracy

Friday, April 17
8 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:

Separation of Church and State During a Time of Crisis
Friday, May 1
11 am Eastern Time
Please register bit.ly/JFASDsepstate

Jews For A Secular Democracy

Jews For A Secular Democracy
Friday, March 27, 2020 7:30 pm Eastern Time
Secular Education in America: An Increasing Urgency
Online Conversation With:

Natfali Mosler
Executive Director
SAFEED Young
Advocates for Fair
Education

Bertha Vazquez
Director of the
Teacher Institute
of Educational
Sciences (TES)

Brandon Haught
Author of
Young Age
Over's Journey
to Secularism

Tributes

To Kathy Tschirhart

Our heartfelt and deepest condolences on the death
of her mother, Eileen Brownson
From Mary Raskin

The Staff and Board of the Society for Humanistic Judaism

To Allan Becker

In loving memory of Patricia Becker
From Sybil Offen

To Marlene Cohen

In honor of her Birthday
With love from husband Michael

In honor of Machar's Rabbi Jeremy Kridel

From Myrna Frank

In honor of Michael Witkin

For his many years of generous support and hard work
on the board of The City Congregation for
Humanistic Judaism to keep us growing and thriving.
From The City Congregation

To SHJ

In loving memory of Doree Samuels
From Gary Samuels

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 Community in Formation*