

# Humanistic Judaism

*Magazine*

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2020–2021 Humanistic  
Jewish Role Model

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*by Rabbi Jeffrey Falick*

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**Spring 2021**



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# From the Editor

Happy Spring to our readers around the nation and the world. I'm Robyn Raymer, the new editor of *Humanistic Judaism*. Born to vaguely agnostic, faintly Protestant, strongly freethinking parents from British Columbia, Canada, I'm an adopted Humanistic Jew and a board member of Kol Hadash (West) in Berkeley, California. To learn more about me, I hope you'll read my adoption speech<sup>1</sup> on page 14.

We're full of hope about the millions of vaccine shots in arms; we're exhausted-but-thankful to be past last year's brutal election cycle, which spilled so horrifyingly into January of this year. We're cautiously optimistic. And yet most of us, I suspect, are still feeling shaky. So, it seems like an appropriate time to pause, shore up our courage, reassert our principles on social justice, and honor South African anti-apartheid activist Helen Suzman, a resilient, relentless (and secular) Jewish freedom fighter. Suzman is our 2020–21 Humanistic Jewish Role Model.

Political activist Professor Mike Whitty, a self-described "futurist" and longtime member of The Birmingham Temple, opens this issue with a rousing "Yes, We Can!" battle cry. He gives heartening step-by-step instructions for going forward in a world that yes, still includes "an unholy alliance among those wishing for fundamentalist religious governance and control over society with our country's long-standing nativism," people who fear and hate "fashionable scapegoat groups" such as ourselves.

Next we honor Helen Suzman (1917–2009). Marilyn Boxer, a retired women's studies and history professor from San Francisco State, chronicles Suzman's political life, clarifying why Suzman so deeply deserves our respect and appreciation. Journalist Dan Pine provides a more intimate look at Suzman through interviews with her daughter and nephew. Toward the end of this issue, Richard Logan's piece in the Community News section details his March 2021 Zoom presentation on Suzman, echoing our cover-story tribute.

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Spring 2021

Continuing our social justice theme, we present two explications of the term "Judeo-Christian values," a phrase that may sound reasonable, but has actually been weaponized by the religious right—as well as former U.S. presidents—against secularists and others. K. Healan Gaston, a Lecturer on American Religious History and Ethics at Harvard Divinity School, recently published *Imagining Judeo-Christian America: Religion, Secularism, and the Redefinition of Democracy*, and we have an intriguing excerpt from her book's introduction. Next we offer Lincoln Dow's concise, pointed editorial on SHJ's stance on "Judeo-Christian values." Dow is the Community Organizer of Jews for a Secular Democracy, a pluralistic initiative of the Society for Humanistic Judaism.

Shifting gears to social justice for African Americans, Rabbi Jeffrey Falick unpacks for us *Caste: The Origins of Our Discontents* by Pulitzer Prize-winning journalist Isabel Wilkerson. Like Lincoln Dow's article, Rabbi Falick's review expresses succinct, admirable opinions on fairness and injustice in the United States (as does Wilkerson).

With Marilyn Rowens's children's story we switch genres and tones, but we don't depart from our social-justice theme, since the tale has a strong young female protagonist who stands up for her right to creatively represent her people during an important Jewish holiday. We honor Rowens, a Humanistic Jewish lay leader and *madrikha*, who died this year. She was the first recipient of the Sherwin T. Wine Lifetime Achievement Award, in 2004.

It was my privilege to serve as editor for this issue of the SHJ quarterly magazine, and I hope you enjoy reading it. Let me know what you think at [shjjournaleditors@gmail.com](mailto:shjjournaleditors@gmail.com). 🔥

R.R.

<sup>1</sup>*Humanistic Jews in SHJ "adopt" rather than "convert" previously-unaffiliated people who choose to join us.*

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by Professor Mike Whitty

Secular Humanistic Judaism has a key role in the global coalitions seeking a just and better future for humanity and the planet.

A wide range of noble causes and values currently face a common foe: religious extremism often rooted in ultra-fundamentalism.

The 2016 and 2020 elections were a breakthrough point for U.S. fundamentalists and religious extremists.

Many recent articles in the *New York Times*, *Wall Street Journal*, and *Washington Post* have documented the ideological role of theocracy in providing a religious framework to nationalism/ patriotism and even a fusion with militias and the other far-right groups. Imagine this as an unholy alliance among those wishing for fundamentalist religious governance and control over society with our country's long-standing nativism, the fear/hatred of fashionable scapegoat groups (such as blacks, Jews, and Democrats), and various shadow trends reflected worldwide—not just in the U.S. context.



#### **A Call for a Truce in the Culture Wars—Both at Home and Abroad**

Global humanism is an antidote to human alienation and fear; thus, the importance of outreach organizing to rebalance evolution toward a future of tolerance and acceptance of our unity in diversity.

Visualize this as part of a global battle for the future—often framed as “the culture wars”—fought universally on all fronts.

Our basic short-run argument calls for a truce in the culture wars. This is a strategy to do mega-networking and coalition building during the decade to come (the 2020s).

Tolerance, civility, and non-violence are the first steps toward a truce in the culture wars. This truce buys time and allows freedom and liberty to grow in the hearts and minds of youth who will be our leaders in the 2030s and 2040s.

Most thought leaders—especially young people who will lead us in the decades to come—will see the necessity of a live-and-let-live future.

Until humanity evolves to a new paradigm of global humanism, we must accept our current anxiety-provoking circumstances, which peaked and erupted on January 6, 2021.

#### **A Global Strategy for 2021 and Beyond**

First we must declare a political ceasefire—or at least tone things down. If we practice restraint and respect for one another as human beings, we can perhaps restore civility.

Basically, we can begin to treat one another as politely as we try to treat our family members, neighbors, and work colleagues who do not share our religious and political views.

We can also reject religious extremism and scapegoating, at home and abroad. We as progressives and liberals can express our desire for “compassionate conservative” leaders to step forward and restore loving kindness to conservatism!!

In order to initiate this proposed truce, we can:

1. Start with our own inner peace, our own humanistic approach to religion and politics.
2. Extend our civility to our family members, neighbors, co-workers, and fellow citizens.
3. And finally, once we establish a *much* more civil conversation regarding the upcoming 2022 election cycle in the United States, we can begin to work toward a global strategy that restores a live-and-let-live world model for tolerance of diversity (diversity of thought as well as cultural diversity).

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We need to presuppose and visualize that:

- Most people everywhere are striving to be good and generous toward one another—or at least decent.
- Right-wing political and religious extremists form a minority—even if they are a minority that tragically wags the dog at this point in U.S. and world history.

**...continued on page 20**

# Helen Suzman

## A Woman of Valor for the Ages

by Marilyn Boxer



Jewish history is studded with women of valor, from biblical heroes like Deborah and Esther to the anarchist and socialist leaders “Red Emma” Goldman and “Red Rosa” Luxemburg, along with many others associated with labor and women’s movements of recent history. But for changing the course of a nation and recreating its constitution of government, who can match Helen Suzman, the Jewish South African anti-apartheid activist?

Suzman served in her nation’s Parliament for 36 years, thirteen of them—from 1961 to 1974—as a party of one to oppose every law and regulation that created and supported its apartheid system of government. In the face of powerful enemies united against her, she stood firmly and outspokenly, “as a thorn in their sides,” as Nobel Peace Prize winner Nelson Mandela put it, never letting up in a half century of protest. And yet today she remains relatively little known, even among professional historians of women (such as myself and colleagues).

I am grateful to SHJ for selecting Suzman as our 2020–2021 Humanistic Jewish Role Model. The daughter of Jewish immigrants to South Africa from Lithuania at the turn of the twentieth century, Helen Suzman (née Gavronsky) was born in a gold-mining town near Johannesburg in 1917. Young Helen encountered difficulty from the beginning: her mother died two weeks after her birth. One biographer speculates that this early loss contributed to Helen’s resolute independence as a girl and young woman. Otherwise, she grew up privileged—as did most white children—in a society that since British and Dutch colonial times had sought to maintain regimes strictly segregated along racial lines.

Wishing to exploit Black laborers while denying basic human rights, including citizenship, to nonwhite persons, the South African government’s Nationalist Party followed its election to power in 1948 by trying to undo the urbanizing and integrating effects of wartime production. The Nationalists met this goal by establishing racial barriers to travel within the country. First registering the entire population in four racial categories, the party established “pass laws” that required internal passports meant to confine nonwhite people to rural communities and unskilled occupations. Within a few years, millions had been arrested for violating the pass laws. Huge protests elicited frequent police violence, including mass shootings. The reach of segregation extended to Parliament itself, which became tricameral, with one House each for “coloured” (people of mixed-race parentage), Indian, and white constituents—and no representation at all for Black persons.

In this era of political repression, Suzman, a young mother of two daughters, decided to run for election to Parliament. Beginning with the support of a small women’s action group, she won a seat with the opposition United Party in 1953. When that party failed to oppose apartheid, she started a new one, the Progressive Party, and in 1961 she was the only one among its candidates elected. She remained a party of one for thirteen years. Soon known for her diligence in attending to the interests of her constituents, Suzman came to be called “the ombudsman of the voiceless,” representing those without representation. In her first session of Parliament, she gave 66 speeches, offered 26 amendments, and asked 137 formal parliamentary questions—and she never slackened this pace.

Suzman also insisted on investigating conditions for herself, personally visiting Black townships. Hearing complaints about the treatment of prisoners, she chose to visit prisons, as well. In 1967 on Robben Island, the maximum-security prison where Mandela was held for many of his 27 years of confinement as a political prisoner, she met the future winner of the Nobel Peace Prize. Mandela later remembered: “It was an odd and wonderful sight to see this courageous woman peering into our cells and strolling around our courtyard. She was the first and only woman ever to grace our cells.” “Let him go,” Suzman demanded, repeatedly, year after year. Only Mandela, she believed, had the authority and will to handle the volatile political situation in South Africa.

Having studied and taught economics and economic history, Suzman predicted that, ultimately, economic forces would bring down the apartheid system. With this in mind, as well as because she wanted to avoid violent confrontation, she took a position that brought her condemnation from some of the anti-apartheid forces: she opposed the international movement to levy economic sanctions on South Africa. Her primary reason for this, she said, was that the penalties would weigh most heavily on the poorest—largely Black—



South Africans. Sports sanctions, on the other hand (refusing the nation's athletes admission to international competitions such as the Olympics) she did not dispute.

As an English-speaking Jewish woman in a Parliament dominated by Afrikaner men of the Nationalist Party, Suzman drew on her sharp wit to counter the hostility she often faced. When Nationalist leader P. W. Botha complained of her “chattering,” and observed that she did not like him, she retorted: “I cannot stand you.” When admonished that her formal questions in Parliament about racial issues embarrassed the country, she countered that it was the ruling party's *answers* that shamed South Africa. When asked what the government should do about problems in the Black school system, she said that the segregated system should be abolished and replaced with good public education for *all* children.

Suzman was often the butt of anti-Semitic jeers both in and out of Parliament. Her political foes often sneeringly referred to her as “the lady from Lithuania”—and this was among the mildest of epithets calling attention to her Jewishness. Yet Suzman faced down every challenge. Whenever the legislature considered an act supportive of apartheid, she walked out in protest.

In 1963 Nobel Peace Prize winner A. J. Luthuli, a Zulu chief, wrote to Helen with congratulations on her “heroic and lone stand against a reactionary Parliament.” Luthuli called Suzman a “bright star in a dark chamber” and praised her uncompromising stand against “the rape of democracy.” He assured her that posterity would hold her in high regard. This tribute was echoed in 1986, when the unenforceable pass laws were repealed, and one of her opponents, a Nationalist Party member, declared of Suzman: “I hardly think there will ever again be anyone in the history of this

country who could do as much for human rights as she has done.” When Suzman retired in 1989, Mandela—still in prison—wrote to congratulate her: “The consistency with which you defended the basic values of freedom and the rule of law over the last three decades has earned you the admiration of many South Africans.”

In 1989 the Nationalist Party elected as their leader a less-intransigent supporter of apartheid, F. W. De Klerk. De Klerk's election opened a path for peaceful change. Negotiations began between the government and the African National Congress (the ANC).

In 1990 the government finally released Mandela and unbanned the long-banned ANC. Parliament repealed many apartheid laws, including the Population Registration Act that underlay the entire racist regime. Leaders of all racial groups wrote a new constitution, and Suzman sat on the commission that oversaw the non-racially-divided election of 1994; a remarkable 88 percent of voters turned out that year to select Nelson Mandela as South Africa's first democratically-elected president. Helen Suzman stood by his side as Mandela signed the new constitution. Years later, on Suzman's 85<sup>th</sup> birthday, her longtime friend Mandela wrote: “Your courage, integrity and principled commitment to justice have marked you as one of the outstanding figures in the history of public life in South Africa.”

Among the numerous tributes Suzman earned were 27 honorary doctorates, two nominations for the Nobel Peace Prize, and human-rights awards from many nations. When Helen Suzman died in 2009, at age 91, South Africa's flags flew at half-mast.

May SHJ's recognition of Helen Suzman add to the luster of her star. 

Helen Suzman never thought of herself as courageous. That's because the renowned South African politician and anti-apartheid activist said she never felt afraid.

That's what she told her daughter, Frances Suzman Jowell, who sees her late mother's legacy as one of determination to do what is right, even in the face of hatred and harassment.

"She always said 'I was just doing my job,'" noted Jowell, 81, of her mother's decades-long fight for racial equality. "She wasn't interested in personal political power; she was interested in issues and righting injustices."

Despite her modesty, Suzman was a model of courage. For decades, she faced relentless derision and antisemitic invective from adversaries in South Africa's Parliament, where she served for more than three decades. During many of those years, she was the all-white legislature's sole voice demanding justice for the country's black majority.

Years before Nelson Mandela became a household name, she befriended the revolutionary leader, first meeting with him in Robben Island prison in 1967. Suzman advocated for his release and for dismantling the apartheid system. Vindication came when apartheid finally crumbled, Mandela went on to become the country's leader, and South Africa ratified a new constitution in 1996.

Because of Suzman's progressive values, as well as a proudly humanist take on her Jewish heritage, the Society for Humanistic Judaism has named her the 2020–2021 Humanistic Jewish Role Model.

As a student of history, Suzman drew parallels between the plight of South Africa's oppressed black majority and the suffering of Jewish communities in eras past. "She used to argue with her father," Jowell says, "'Don't you see the conditions people suffer here are not different from conditions for Jews in the Pale of Settlement?' But [her convictions] didn't come from rabbis."

Like many South African Jews, Suzman descended from Lithuanian immigrants, who flocked to the country in the wake of deadly nineteenth-century pogroms during the reign of the czars. Born in a Johannesburg suburb in 1917, she benefited from the privilege afforded people with white skin in the former colony.

Her mother died in childbirth, but when her father remarried, Suzman's stepmother brought Jewish ritual and tradition into the home. Suzman never took to religion, even though, as her daughter notes, her mother maintained a strong Jewish identity. "She knew a smattering of Yiddish," says Jowell, a London-based art historian. "But she was a secular Jew. My mother was not interested in religion. In fact she was skeptical of all religion; she thought of it as superstition."

Suzman studied economics at Witwatersrand University. At nineteen she married Moses Suzman, who went on to become a physician at Johannesburg General Hospital. The couple had two daughters, Frances and Patricia. Helen Suzman might have lived out her life as a mother and an unobtrusive university lecturer, benefiting from the twisted system that infected her country. But her deep sense of justice would not allow her to take that route.

Jowell says her mother's political awakening came in 1946 when she joined the Fagan Commission, a group that examined possible progressive changes that might improve



## "I Was Just Doing My Job"

*Interviews with Paul Suzman and Frances Suzman Jowell*

**by Dan Pine**



conditions for the black majority.

“A lot of blacks had come into urban areas,” Jowell notes of the immediate post-World-War-Two era, “so there was a huge change in the demography. My mother started doing research and later said that that was what made her realize how terrible the conditions were, the suffering of the blacks in the townships.”

Rather than follow the recommendations of the Fagan Commission, the government in 1948 instead codified apartheid, a system of laws and codes so odiously racist, it inspired the young Jewish mom in 1953 to run for a seat in the House of Assembly. After she won, Suzman fought for her beliefs with the best weapons at her disposal: her wit, her knowledge of the facts, and her certainty that apartheid was morally wrong.

Standing up to the pro-apartheid Nationalist Party (for 13 years she was the sole anti-apartheid voice in the legislature), Suzman faced withering insults. She once was told to lower her “screeching Jewish voice” and to “go back to Israel.” When one pro-apartheid advocate bragged about her Boer forebears introducing the black “heathens” to the Bible and then demanded what *her* people—the Jews—ever did, Suzman replied, “They wrote it, my dear.”

“She gave as good as she got,” says Jowell. “She was very witty, and she could be great fun, but during those years when she was alone in Parliament, it was really tough.”

Despite her political opponents’ virulent hostility, Suzman took things in stride. The family’s phone number was listed, and Suzman’s daughter remembers her mother responding to anonymous threatening calls by blowing an earsplitting police whistle “down the phone.” In fact, Jowell recalls only one instance when her mother admitted to being afraid. It occurred on a lonely country road in the dead of night.

“She was coming back from visiting Winnie Mandela,” Jowell recalled, “driving along a long straight road across the veldt, and she realized she was being followed. She realized it would be so easy to be run off the road.”

Suzman’s nephew, Paul Suzman, remembers his aunt’s passion, and has his own theory about her motivation.

“She hated bullies,” says the Seattle resident. “And she did not tolerate them. She saw not only was apartheid grossly unfair, but

she saw those in the government as bullies, lacking in empathy, lacking in humanity.”

In the early 1970s, anti-apartheid activism and economic boycotts of South Africa began to spread worldwide. Suzman founded her own Progressive Party and was finally joined in the House by anti-apartheid allies. When South African President F.W. DeKlerk freed Mandela and sanctioned open elections in 1994, change finally came to the beleaguered nation.

By then, Suzman had retired from politics, but she was not forgotten. On the day the new Constitution was set to be signed in a public ceremony, a car pulled up in front of Suzman’s home. It was Mandela himself, there to pick up his friend and champion, and escort her to the grand event.

“Later he dropped her off at home,” says Paul Suzman, “and he said, ‘You had to be there, Helen.’”

In her retirement years, Suzman remained active, advocating for human rights and meeting with world leaders. She headed the South African Institute for Race Relations and also served on the commission overseeing the country’s first democratic elections in 1994. Around that time, she gave permission for admirers to launch the Helen Suzman Foundation, which promotes the liberal democratic values she cherished.

Always supportive of a Jewish homeland, Suzman visited Israel several times, including attending a women’s empowerment convention in Jerusalem in 1988, standing shoulder to shoulder with the late women’s rights pioneer Bella Abzug.

And though her family was far flung, she kept in touch.

“After I left South Africa, she was very assiduous about writing,” says her daughter. “I have a huge stash of [letters]. A wonderful mixture of maternal admonition, hilarious anecdotes and a lot of politics.”

Helen Suzman died in 2009 at the age of 91. Reflecting on her legacy, her nephew views Suzman’s Jewish background as informing everything she did in her storied career.

“I think she felt there was a code of conduct expected of Jews that they would treat people humanely and fairly,” he says. “As a politician, she never told people what they wanted to hear, but she told them what they needed to understand.” 

Excerpt from  
*Imagining Judeo-Christian America:*  
*Religion, Secularism, and the Redefinition of Democracy*

by K. Healan Gaston

One person's dream typically turns out to be another person's nightmare. To the extent that democratic visions take concrete form, they almost always produce winners and losers. This has certainly been true of Judeo-Christian constructions. For that reason, the idea of America as a Judeo-Christian nation has been deeply contested since its inception during the interwar years. There have always been influential dissenters from this iconic political discourse, and powerful countervailing dynamics within it.

The conventional understandings of Judeo-Christian formulations omit such conflicts. In popular culture, a common narrative holds that Americans (and Europeans before them) hewed to a stable, unbroken "Judeo-Christian tradition" until the 1960s, when a band of cultural rebels uprooted two millennia of history—and the deepest convictions of a devout majority. Scholarly interpreters, on the other hand, recognize that the "Judeo-Christian tradition" made its entry into popular discourse during the World War II era. They have argued that Judeo-Christian rhetoric served as a powerful tool of liberal inclusion from the late 1930s until the 1970s, when religious conservatives began to appropriate it for their own purposes. In this view, the concept of a Judeo-Christian tradition integrated Jewish and Catholic Americans into the mainstream by creating a tri-faith, liberal-democratic front against fascism. Most recently, critical theorists have reasoned backward from the conservative, religiously exclusive Judeo-Christian formulations in circulation today by arguing that such rhetoric has always encoded whiteness and blunted challenges by African Americans and other racialized groups. In their view, the term "Judeo-Christian" enforces a racially bounded conception of pluralism and a Western civilizational framework that work together to authorize marginalization and even violence against racialized minorities.

This book challenges all three narratives—each of which ascribes a single, clear meaning to Judeo-Christian discourse—by showing that the discourse's meanings have been fundamentally contested since the 1930s, when the term first captured America's political imagination. That era's numerous assertions of Judeo-Christian harmony did in part describe burgeoning new realities on the ground. But they also represented fervent, even wishful, attempts to create such unity. Thus, invocations of the term "Judeo-Christian" must be read as descriptive and aspirational at one and the same time. This double-sidedness characterizes Judeo-Christian discourse as a whole, helping to explain the is/ought slippage it frequently displays as well as some of the most curious aspects of its subsequent development. For instance, many of the mid-twentieth-century figures most strongly identified as champions of Judeo-Christian democracy—Reinhold Niebuhr and Will Herberg foremost among them—largely avoided using the term "Judeo-Christian" itself. Others used it in surprising ways, and for purposes that have been lost to historians.

In addition to those liberal pluralists who employed "Judeo-Christian" to bring Jewish and Catholic Americans into the democratic fold, there were many critics of "secularism" for whom Judeo-Christian formulations placed nonbelievers, and often theological liberals as well, beyond the democratic pale. Scholars have too often missed the World War II era's sharp conflicts within and between religious groups over the meaning of democracy. The usual story of religious pluralism in America, featuring an inexorably widening circle of tolerance and inclusion, foregrounds those liberal Protestants for whom Judeo-Christian language represented an olive branch to groups previously marginalized by the Protestant establishment. But it ignores the numerous other commentators who used that newly minted rhetoric to attack an increasingly secular American liberalism, calling it too long on tolerance and too short on genuine religious commitment. Overall, Judeo-Christian discourse in the mid-twentieth-century United States was neither as liberal and inclusive nor as productive of social harmony as scholars have often assumed. At most, it represented a linguistic *détente*, not a cultural consensus.

Likewise, the assertion that America became a "tri-faith nation" during and after World War II does not mean that cultural and political power was simply carved up into three equal pieces of a national pie, nor that Jewish and Catholic Americans faced common obstacles and confronted Protestant domination arm in arm. Such accounts drastically overemphasize the similarities between the Jewish and Catholic minorities, not to mention the homogeneity of those groups themselves. In truth, various subsets of the Jewish and Catholic populations encountered highly particular forms of suspicion and marginalization. They also differed markedly in the degrees and kinds of cultural and political power they could mobilize. The dynamics between Protestant, Catholics, Jews, nonbelievers, and groups such as Buddhists and Muslims were highly complex.

In fact, what we now call the "culture wars" were already raging in the 1950s, beneath the apparent consensus implied by the ascendance of "Judeo-Christian" as a descriptor of American democracy and national identity. Today, conservatives are far more likely than liberals to call their country "Judeo-Christian." Most



[...continued on page 18](#)



If you find yourself listening to a far-right news source or political pundit, you're likely to hear the phrase “Judeo-Christian values,” perhaps invoked in criticizing social progressivism. Today, this phrase is widely misused, employed almost exclusively by political leaders on the religious right to falsely imply that support for a Christian-nationalist agenda extends more broadly than it actually does, including among Jews.

The phrase is problematic for many reasons and its usage has shifted. In the 1930s, “Judeo-Christian” was first coined by liberals as an inclusive term to challenge anti-Catholic and anti-Jewish sentiment. Through the 1950s, however, as fear of “Godless Communism” spread throughout the U.S., “Judeo-Christian values” came to represent an anti-secular, anti-communist rallying cry. Over time, progressive Christians and Jews have largely abandoned the terminology.

“Judeo-Christian” has never been a truly inclusive term, as America has never been comprised of only Jews and Christians, rendering the phrase *exclusionary*. Though some political leaders, including Presidents Dwight Eisenhower and Ronald Reagan, have referred to the U.S. as being founded in “Judeo-Christian tradition,” this is a patently false claim. Our constitutional framers deliberately created a secular government with strong protections for and from religion, tenets that Christian nationalists today challenge under the guise of “Judeo-Christian values.”

Make no mistake, the Christian-nationalist agenda is socially regressive and harmful. In recent years, policies promoted by Christian nationalists have allowed publicly-funded child welfare organizations to prohibit families from adopting based on differing religious beliefs or for being a part of the LGBTQ community; have authorized religiously-affiliated hospitals to withhold medical care from patients based on the organization's religious views; and have required public schools to teach the Bible and display the motto “In God We Trust.” During the same time period, Christian nationalists have been laying the groundwork for future state-level attacks on the separation of religion and government.

Former President Donald Trump claimed in his 2017 speech at the Values Voter Summit that he was “stopping the attacks on Judeo-Christian values” by allowing religious business owners to deny their employees access to birth control, and the same phrase was used by Congress as far back as 1996 to justify passage of the Defense of Marriage Act, federally prohibiting same-sex marriage.



“Judeo-Christian” co-opts the Jewish community's voice while misrepresenting the values that most of us stand for. An overwhelming majority of American Jews (80% or more) support women's rights, racial justice, environmental policies, LGBTQ equality, science-based reproductive freedom, and secular educational standards in our public schools. These social imperatives are founded in our Jewish tradition as well as an understanding that the First Amendment guarantees a secular government that does not privilege one religion over others,

or religion over no religion.

As Jewish Americans, we have a history of overcoming religious discrimination and must not stand idly by as others are discriminated against, which is why Jews for a Secular Democracy is seeking to educate our community about the term “Judeo-Christian,” challenge its usage, and stand up for the separation of religion and government.

Jewish leaders across the country are signing onto our open letter expressing concerns over “Judeo-Christian” terminology, and we invite you to do the same at [jfasd.org/judeochristian](https://jfasd.org/judeochristian). The full text of our statement follows:

As American Jews, we are deeply concerned by the misleading use of the phrase “Judeo-Christian values” to falsely claim Jewish support for harmful Christian-nationalist policies, such as allowing state-funded child welfare agencies to discriminate on the basis of religion, permitting healthcare providers to impose their religious beliefs on patients, or promoting Christianity in public schools.

We reject the inappropriate portrayal of these discriminatory policies as Jewish values. American Jews stand for progress and against discrimination toward women, the LGBTQ community, religious minorities (including Jews), and any others.

Today, the phrase “Judeo-Christian” is deeply embedded in the language of Christian nationalists who seek to establish Christianity as the dominant political, cultural, and social force in society. Elected officials and all citizens must understand how the phrase has been weaponized in the hands of religious fundamentalists.

We are committed to upholding the constitutional separation of religion and government and building an America where people of all or no faith traditions are equal under law. **We therefore call for an end to the use of the phrase “Judeo-Christian” in all political contexts.** 🔥

# Diagnosis: Casteism

Book Review

by Rabbi Jeffrey Falick

*Caste: The Origins of Our Discontents*

By Isabel Wilkerson

Random House, 2020

I have long struggled with the use and abuse of the word race as the basis of anti-Black prejudice and discrimination. On the one hand, as a humanist who believes in science, I know that race is a social construct lacking any biological significance. On the other hand, as an American I was raised with a deep awareness of race. From an age too early for me to remember, I have clearly understood who is Black and who is not, biological reality be damned. Even as I speak out and work against the evils of racism, I am acutely mindful of my own unconscious biases. They were not with me at birth, but they were introduced into my system very early on in ways that demand significant efforts to overpower. How and why this happened to me and to American society at large is the topic of Isabel Wilkerson's new book, *Caste: The Origins of Our Discontents*.

Her goals are clear and important. She wishes to push America to reconsider race by adopting a paradigm that might be more constructive for understanding our society's systemic mistreatment and crimes against Black humanity. That paradigm is caste, understood in part as the mindset "that sees people as existing on a scale based on the toxins they have absorbed from the polluted and inescapable air of social instruction we receive from childhood." Its venom works its way through our society's veins through "the granting or withholding of respect, status, honor, attention, privileges, resources, benefit of the doubt, and human kindness to someone on the basis of their perceived rank or standing in the hierarchy" (pp. 69–70).

The use of caste as a way of understanding America's systemic anti-Black attitudes and behaviors is not new. Wilkerson acknowledges this, providing a review of earlier scholarship and addressing controversies that have erupted about whether the idea of caste suits the American situation. In the end, she makes a strong case for seeing American racism through the lens of casteism, analogizing it to the tools used by building inspectors to examine and diagnose what needs repair.

In doing so, Wilkerson draws upon two non-American caste systems, the one in India with its roots going back millennia, and the other established by the Nazis in 1930s Germany. As a Jew, the author's comparisons to what the Nazis did were the most powerful for me. For anyone familiar with the debasement and dehumanization of Germany's Jews set in motion by the Nuremberg Race Laws of 1935, it is impossible to ignore the parallels to anti-Black legislation and degradation in America. But Wilkerson takes the comparison further, providing a detailed look at how Nazi jurists actually consulted American laws as they crafted their new caste system. Some of the "moderates" among them even "argued for less onerous methods than the Americans were using." The chair of the group "had a hard time believing that Americans actually enforced the laws the Nazis had uncovered" (p. 84). As we know, those American laws

absolutely were enforced, and they were but one way in which Black Americans were dishonored and dehumanized.

Among the important contributions of Wilkerson's book—possibly transcending her effective deployment of caste as an organizing principle for understanding American white supremacy—is its copious accounts of anti-Black hatred and mistreatment. With the same narrative talent she displayed in *The Warmth of Other Suns*, her 2011 book about the northern migration, Wilkerson presents us with story after story of Black American suffering. She includes personal anecdotes—like the store manager who could not wrap his mind around someone like her (i.e., a Black woman) working for the *New York Times*—alongside reports of humiliation, torture, and lynching at the hands of white Americans.

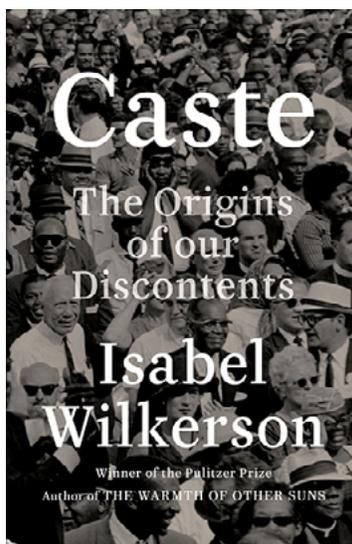
As I write this review, Americans are talking about the disgraceful treatment of Army Lt. Caron Nazario by two Virginia police officers. When I saw the video of that encounter, my mind turned to two of Wilkerson's reports of earlier mistreatment of Black American soldiers. One of these occurred in 1918 France when, over the objections of the American military, French officers demonstrated equal respect for Black soldiers as they did for whites. This didn't last long after "American military command ... clarified for them that these men were 'inferior beings'" (p. 225) not deserving of dignity or honors. The other story happened nearly three decades later in 1946 when honorably-discharged World War II veteran Sgt. Isaac Woodard, Jr.'s request to a Greyhound bus driver to use the restroom devolved into a nightmare of abuse that ended

with Woodard being violently beaten and blinded by a South Carolina police chief—who was later acquitted of wrongdoing in federal court, amid raucous cheers from spectators.

All Americans, whether newly arrived or here from birth, are infected with our society's casteism. There is none who is immune. And though it is undeniable that our lowest caste suffers the most, Wilkerson offers many examples of how the "middle castes" (Asians, Latinos, indigenous people, and so on) and those perceived as white are also negatively affected in so many ways.

Without a thorough analysis of the disease, or to extend Wilkerson's building-inspector analogy, what I would call the rot, our casteism will continue and perhaps grow worse. These years of Trumpism—a time of radical backlash against changing demographics—are pointing in that dismal direction. But Wilkerson also reminds us that, given the case of Nazi Germany, where a caste system was deliberately built up and ultimately dismantled, we know that it is possible for humans to reverse course.

I don't think I need to remind anyone what it took for casteism to end in twentieth-century Germany. Perhaps if we finally get to work demolishing the crippling inequities of caste, we will be among the fortunate who discover that there's a better way. 🔥





# The Day of the HORN BLOWING

## *A Rosh Hashanah Children's Story*

by Marilyn Rowens

Teki-a, she-varim, teru-a!

Jael was 11 years old, and she was looking forward to the great Festival of the Kings in Jerusalem, the great day of the horn-blowing. She heard the sounds in her head over and over again: Teki-a, she-varim, teru-a! She wanted to blow the horn. She wanted to make those beautiful sounds. Maybe at the marketplace at the festival her father would buy her the horn of a male sheep. The ram's horn made the clearest and loudest sound.

The whole family had been working hard harvesting a beautiful crop of dates and olives and the aromatic yellow etrog. Jael's uncle Yoakim, her brother Noam, and her mother, Adira, had tended the graceful trees all year. Many years ago, Jael's father, Lavi, had cleared much of the original land on which the trees flourished. His family had traveled from lands far south of Jerusalem and had settled down to raise dates and olives. Every other year they were able to raise barley and wheat as well. It was the barley that they would take to market this year and sell to shepherds who would use it to make wine. If they sold it all, Jael could have a ram's horn.

Jael's father didn't spend all his time as a farmer. He was a traveling Levite priest. Many tribes of Hebrews had settled all over the area surrounding Jerusalem. Lavi went from village to village to help families do ceremonies in honor of their home or hearth god. Lavi knew all about the Hebrew ancient traditions and spent hours after dark telling Jael stories and repeating the oral law. Jael was a wonderful student. She could repeat everything her father had taught her—and why not? The stories were wonderful, all about ancient ancestors and their adventures. When Jael was eight years old, her father had taught her how to write down the words on parchment. He had told her to keep it a secret because the other members of the tribe of Levi believed that only priests should know how to write because they were the only ones who knew the law. For the past three years Jael had spent every free moment writing down her father's stories. And she kept the secret!

But today Jael was getting ready to go to the Jerusalem marketplace. It was two days before the new moon of the seventh month. Jael's family had two days to travel to Jerusalem before the big celebration of Yom Terua, the day of the blowing of the horn. They loaded their wagon with the fruit and grain and etrog. They covered it with palm leaves and strong branches with which to build a sukka in the town square. In the sukka they would store and sell their fruits and grains and live and eat for eight days. Jael carried a special pack she did not put on the wagon. Carefully wrapped in palm leaves were her parchment and the quill with which she wrote her secret stories.

The sun was hot and the road was dry, but after the festival it would rain. The waving of the lulav during the celebration would remind the rain god that the good work of the families gathering in the square should be rewarded with rain for next year's harvest. And to make sure that this reward was granted, Jael's family had a special gift to give to the high priest who collected taxes at the gates of the king's palace. It was said that he had a special connection to the rain god, and he promised that if he were given gifts it would rain after the day of the horn blowing. Jael knew that this was just another one of the many stories her father had told her. But Lavi along with other members of his village paid the tax in order to get permission to build a sukka in the town square.

Finally the family was settled in the village square, and the sukka's roof of palm leaves shaded them from the hot sun. In a few hours it would be sundown—the eve of the horn-blowing.

Jael had followed her father to the palace gates; after he had given his gift, she remained behind. She heard

something unusual coming from behind the palace gates. She slipped through the gates, hid behind a pillar, and waited for the sound to come nearer. She turned her head quickly as the sound got louder. There in front of her stood a tall boy dressed in a purple and gold cloak. In his hands he was holding a shining spiral ram's horn. He was holding it to his lips and creating the most beautiful sound she had ever heard. She gasped, and their eyes met. The boy stopped blowing the horn and spoke to her. "You are in my garden," he said.

"Yes," she said, "I was following the sound of your horn. My father is buying me a ram's horn in the marketplace. Where did you learn to play so well? Will you teach me how to play? Who are you? What is your name?" The boy was surprised by her boldness.

"You are in my garden. I should be asking you questions. But I think I know why you are here in Jerusalem. You are here for the Festival of the Kings—you are here for Yom Terua. You gave your gift to the high priest and then you sneaked into my garden. But I will not expel you because I admire your bold spirit. To answer your questions, I am a prince, and I play the horn well because my father is an accomplished musician as well as a king. It is good that you are here for the festival for eight days. I will be happy to teach you how to play the ram's horn if you come to visit me here in the garden each afternoon. All of the fun of the festival will be out in the marketplace and in the village square. The lulav parade and the torch parade and the dancing in the streets will be outside the palace gates. And I am forbidden to leave this garden. I am tall for my age, but I am only ten years old. Will you be my friend?"

The sun was beginning to go down, and Jael knew that she must return to her family's sukka. The blowing of the horn would announce the new moon. It was dangerous to be out after sundown, not only because of ghosts or evil spirits that might be hiding in the dark, but because bandits waited until dark to steal from honest farmers and shepherds. It was important to remain safe inside her sukka. She promised the prince she would return the next day.

The next day there were crowds in the marketplace. Not only was this the time of the ingathering of the harvest, but this was the seventh year, the year of the reading of the law! It was easy for Jael to leave her family and go unnoticed into the garden of the prince. Jael brought her new ram's horn with her, and she also brought her secret stories. If the prince was going to teach her how to play the horn, she would teach the prince how to write on parchment.

The following days were filled with laughter and sunshine. It was not easy learning to blow the ram's horn, but Jael was such a good student that in three days her teki-a, she-varim, and teru-a were terrific! And the prince loved her stories. Of course, some of them he had heard before. The high priests often held meetings in the palace. The king and attendants gathered in the throne room for evenings of entertainment. The prince's father played the lyre, and the priests and scribes droned on and on and on telling stories and recalling the battles and victories of distant ancestors. But no one could tell a story like the ones Jael told. She had a musical way with words, and the prince could listen to her for hours. Each day she left the garden before dark, and he would count the hours until the next midday when Jael was finished selling the harvest fruits from her sukka.

They spent eight wonderful afternoons together. And they talked about so many things. What if the rain did not come? Then how would the crops grow? Would she come back next year? What if bandits attacked her family on the way back to her village? What made the etrog so yellow? Both the prince and Jael had so many questions. Jael's father had told her that asking questions was part of growing up.

The sun was going down on the last day of the festival, and Jael and her family had to load the wagon for their long journey home. They would be leaving as soon as the sun rose in the sky. Jael was still helping to load the baskets of dried meats and fish that they had bartered for in the marketplace. There were supplies from Jerusalem that they needed to take home.

It was getting dark, and there was a windstorm blowing in from the east. The new moon was eight days old but did not light up the path to the prince's garden. It was frightening and dangerous for Jael to run to say goodbye to her friend. But it was wonderful to have a friend. Jael felt strong and unafraid as she ran toward the garden. Her friendship with the prince was something she would remember always. She would think about him when she wrote her stories on parchment. The sound of the horn came from the garden. Teki-a, she-varim, teru-a! The prince was waiting for her. She took his hand, and in it she placed her precious stories wrapped in a palm leaf. "Let my stories be a remembrance of our friendship. I will always remember the day of the horn-blowing." The prince held the stories close to him. He took her hand. "When the rainy season begins I will think of the sunshine we had together. Goodbye, my friend, Jael."

Jael released his hand and started running down the dark path from the garden. As she ran toward the marketplace she turned back and waved once again, "Goodbye, my friend. Goodbye, Solomon." 🔥



*Pictured to the left of Rabbi Miriam Jerris, Marilyn Rowens was a Madrikha and Leader in the Secular Humanistic Jewish movement. She died March 24, 2021. We honor her memory as we share her work.*

by Robyn Raymer, new editor of *Humanistic Judaism*

# Joy

*Robyn was adopted by Kol Hadash, Northern California Congregation for Humanistic Judaism and by SHJ in August of 2018 (in Humanistic Judaism, we “adopt” rather than “convert” members who wish to become Jewish).*

*This is the speech she gave on that occasion. It is followed by her husband’s speech.*

Thank you so much for being here tonight. I’m so honored by your presence, every one of you, my family, my oldest friends, and my newest friends, Jewish, and otherwise.

I am a Humanistic Jew, and in particular a member of *this* community, Kol Hadash,<sup>1</sup> because of the joy it brings me. This past year, as most of you know, has been maybe the saddest year of my life, because my mom, Liz Raymer,<sup>2</sup> died. But it’s been a joyful year, too. I learned from Torah study with Rabbi Bridget<sup>3</sup> that deep joy and deep sadness can coexist. For example, this past June my whole family was up in British Columbia, Canada (my homeland) to scatter my mom’s ashes in Shawnigan Lake, a place that was dear to her. As we motored back from the ceremony on my cousin’s speedboat, I felt pure joy and pure sorrow at the exact same time.

So, why do I want to be Jewish? I have been a fan of Jews and Judaism since I first moved to West Los Angeles at age three in 1958.<sup>4</sup> At that time my dad, Rex Raymer—not a Jew—was designing a beautiful synagogue at the corner of Beverly Glen and Wilshire Boulevards. (Sinai Temple<sup>5</sup> was—and still is—a conservative congregation.) I love its spacious, soaring, mid-century-modern sanctuary. My dad, an architect, got to design it because his boss, Sidney Eisenshtat<sup>6</sup>, was Jewish; Sid’s family was probably the first Jewish family I knew. We called them Uncle Sid and Aunt Allie and their glamorous teenage daughters were sweet to us little Raymer sisters.

Speaking of Jewish families from West L.A., one of my very oldest friends is here, Miriam Grayer Liberatore—she drove here all the way from Southern Oregon *today!* I used to babysit for Mimi and her two sisters in Los Angeles, where we all grew up, and then she and I went to college together at UC Santa Barbara, where we became roommates and close friends. Mimi’s family, the Grayers, was one of the first—and most loving and interesting—Jewish families I knew growing up. They definitely helped set me on my meandering path to becoming Jewish.

Another longtime Jewish friend from L.A., Stanley Goldstein, asked me on the phone yesterday, “What took you so long?” It *has* taken me a long time to become Jewish (I’m 63; the first time I got married, in 1990, I had a Jewish wedding, and my second Jewish wedding was almost eight years ago).

One reason it took me so long was that for a long time I wasn’t sure other Jews wanted me. As big a fan of Judaism as I’ve always been, I have had a few negative experiences among Jews. The first was when a Jewish girl I knew in high school told me she didn’t think she could ever completely trust someone who wasn’t Jewish. That really hurt my feelings because, at the time, I didn’t see a way I could change myself from who I was, a definite WASP by birth. Other times I’ve tried to “pass” as Jewish among religious Jews—and that always felt bad to me, too.

So it was a surprise and a relief to me to learn, late in life, that some Jews *did* want me. In fact, Rabbi Bridget was the first Jewish person who asked me, when Danny and I were in pre-wedding counseling with her, why didn’t I convert? When I first visited Kol Hadash when Danny spoke here at a bagel brunch, I was emboldened to ask if Humanist Jews took converts. Sure they did, they said! Even then it took me a couple more years to mull the whole thing over. It was renewed antisemitism in the world—and even in the U.S.—that convinced me to take the plunge about three years ago.<sup>7</sup>

To each and every individual at Kol Hadash, thank you for welcoming me into your community of smart, wise, funny, loving, quirky, sometimes argumentative people. Thank you for the joy you have brought me, and I hope I bring you joy, too.



I must thank individually our hardworking president Alana Shindler for writing and organizing this beautiful service (and also for driving me to the hospital on the day my mom died, and assuring me that I *could* handle it) and Shirley Jowell for knowing and loving my mom and me, and discreetly keeping watch over me to make sure I don't drift into depression.

Thank you to my husband, Danny Pine, a talented writer<sup>8</sup> who makes me laugh every day. I love you. And Rabbi Bridget, thanks for being the first Jewish person to suggest that I convert to Judaism, and for marrying Danny and me, and for teaching me about joy and prayer, and for the many classes I've taken with you (and will continue to take) at Jewish Gateways.

I'm really relieved that this talk is almost over, because now I can enjoy the rest of the evening and the rest of the weekend. But before I stop, I want to tell you what I most admire (and aspire to) about the Jews I know and Judaism in general: I like how open and honest most Jews are—and I even like how blunt some Jews can be. I also like how shy and polite and courtly some Jews can be. I like how Jews are usually curious and open-minded and diligent about education. I like how most Jews (the ones I've known and loved) are not dogmatic or inflexible about their values and beliefs—except when it matters most.

I like how Jews stand up for other minority groups. I like how Jews love fairness and justice. I like how knowledgeable and philosophical and witty and argumentative a lot of Jews are—most, in my experience. I like Jewish women (and men) who are therapists and teachers and in other helping professions. I'm a big fan.

I worry that in some ways, I can't be as Jewish as you “real” Jews are—my people come from the British Isles, and we Brits are not all that Jewish (with some exceptions). But maybe becoming Jewish is going to be a lifelong process for me. I hope so. I love you all. Thanks for taking me in. Sorry it took me so long to ask. 🍂

### Notes:

<sup>1</sup>Kol Hadash, Northern California Community for Humanistic Judaism: <https://www.kolhadash.org>

<sup>2</sup>Elizabeth Raymer: <https://www.berkeleyside.com/2017/12/06/elizabeth-raymer-intellect-lust-life-never-wore>

<sup>3</sup>Rabbi Bridget Wynne of Jewish Gateways in Berkeley, California: <https://www.jewishgateways.org/>

<sup>4</sup>I grew up in Beverly Glen Canyon, which was—during the 1950s, 60s, and 70s—a bohemian middle-class neighborhood situated between Bel Air, Beverly Hills, West L.A., and the San Fernando Valley. I left home at 17 for Colorado Springs, where I attended The Colorado College for a year and a half. After a brief sojourn in Denver and a short-term return to Beverly Glen, I earned a BA in Literature from the College of Creative Studies at UC Santa Barbara. Next I moved to Berkeley and received an MA in English from UCB. I've lived here (in Albany, which is just north of Berkeley) ever since.

<sup>5</sup>Sinai Temple: <https://www.sinaitemple.org/>

<sup>6</sup>Architect Sidney Eisenshtat: [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Sidney\\_Eisenshtat](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Sidney_Eisenshtat)

<sup>7</sup>I joined Kol Hadash in 2015. All too soon I found myself on the board of directors, serving as secretary. Now I'm the president. However, my favorite role there is serving on the Hospitality Committee. I love the women who used to serve with me (back in the days before Zoom when we used to meet in person). There is something very satisfying about slicing tomatoes, cucumbers, and onions for our bagel brunches while one woman makes coffee, another lays out lox slices, another slices chocolate babka, and some just hang around and chat.

<sup>8</sup>Danny's article on Helen Suzman appears in this issue<sup>9</sup>. Here's a poem we wrote together for his former employer, *J.*, *the Jewish Newsweekly of Northern California* (it's meant to be a review of a Yiddish translation of a Dr. Seuss book): <https://www.jweekly.com/2003/12/26/the-cat-in-the-hat-in-yiddish-a-book-review/>

<sup>9</sup>“I Was Just Doing My Job” by Dan Pine, [pages 7–8](#).



A few years ago, I was talking to a friend about the concept of *beshairt*, a Hebrew term meaning "destined beloved." My friend, who is not Jewish, started using the term herself, but she pronounced it be-SHIRT. She wondered aloud about her be-SHIRT, whether she would ever find her be-SHIRT. So I told her she'd find her be-SHIRT in the be-laundry.

As for my *beshairt*: Robyn is my destined beloved. I met her when I was 16, and I've had a crush on her ever since. Looking back, I can clearly see she was also destined to become part of Am Yisrael.

For starters, as she told you, she grew up on the West Side of Los Angeles, which is a rich, trendy, spray-tanned version of the Lower East Side. No one who lived there could help absorbing a distinctly Jewish vibe. And now you know that her architect father designed several synagogues and Jewish buildings, which surely made an impression on her.

Making more of an impression, as she came of age, most of her serious boyfriends and all of her serious husbands were Jewish. I am in fact her second spouse to have worked for the Bay Area's Jewish newspaper. Make of that what you will. Early in our dating life I could tell something was up, because when anything went amiss, anything at all, Robyn would often throw up her hands and blurt out, "Oy, oy!"

And as our relationship blossomed, her connection to Jewishness deepened. If there's such a thing as a Jewish to-do list, Robyn has been checking off the items one by one:

She started making a wicked-good matzoh ball soup at our annual bluegrass seder in Albuquerque with my brother, his family and all their guitar-banjo-fiddle-playing friends.

She then became an expert latke-fryer and started throwing an annual Hanukkah party at our house, including the infamous one 2 years ago when nearly 100 people, including the entire membership of Kol Hadash, crammed into our tiny 1,200-square-foot house, which, I might add, nearly collapsed under the weight of Jews and potatoes.

She started taking Intro to Judaism and Torah study classes with Rabbi Bridget, and it's a fact that Robyn has read more Torah in 18 months than I've read in my entire life.

But the biggest step she took was falling in with Kol Hadash. It started innocently enough. As Robyn mentioned, I was asked to speak at a bagel brunch here about four or five years ago. Robyn tagged along and she kinda sorta fell in love with all of you. She said at the time you reminded her of her parents' friends: super lefty, super-Jewy, super nice. She certainly subscribed to Humanistic Judaism's approach to ritual and tradition; that's where she felt at home philosophically. Little by little you guys sunk your hooks into her and she sunk hers into you. And now look at her: a power-mad synagogue lay leader on the executive committee.

Seriously, here at Kol Hadash, Robyn learned what I think is the most important lesson of Jewish tradition and culture: You can't do Jewish alone. You must do Jewish in community.

Which leads us to tonight's adoption.

Now, I admit I was puzzled at first by Humanistic Judaism's use of the term "adoption." What's wrong with conversion, I thought? We've used that word forever. Then it dawned on me. You can't convert to something you've always been. The Kabballah says that converts to Judaism are reincarnated souls of Jews of previous generations who were cut off from the Jewish people. Through conversion to Judaism they are coming home.

Of course, that's religious nonsense, BUT like so much of our nonsense, there's a touch of the poetical to it. I like to think of Robyn as coming home today.

In fact, I'll do you one better. This adoption happening right now: I don't see it as the Jewish people adopting Robyn. I think what's happening is: Robyn is adopting us! We didn't realize we were lost in the woods all this time, in desperate need of her, but whaddaya know: we were, and she is doing us a great favor by adopting us.

So congratulations, Jews. This is your lucky day.

And to my dear wife, my Rivka, mazal tov, welcome to the tribe, and for God's sake, let's eat! 🍷



## What It Means to Be a

# ‘Jew of No Religion’

by Paul Golin

It’s Not What You Think

*This article was previously published on May 19, 2021 in J—The Jewish News of Northern California. It is reprinted here with their kind permission.*

I’m thrilled that atheist/agnostic, nonreligious Jews like me seem to be growing in numbers. I’m concerned, though, that our full set of values is not made apparent by the new Pew Research survey of American Jews.

Pew splits the community between “Jews by Religion” and “Jews of No Religion.” It suggests an increase among Jews of No Religion to 27 percent of all Jewish adults, up from 22 percent in their 2013 survey, with a whopping 40 percent among Jews ages 18–29.

I was not surveyed. But had I been, I would’ve had a tough choice with the screening question used to make that determination. Pew asked, “What is your present religion, if any?”

I’m strongly Jewishly identified and want to be counted as a Jew. But I’m equally vocal about my atheism and humanism, and in some ways, those are the more marginalized identities in American society and need greater representation. Had I checked “atheist,” I certainly would have answered affirmatively to the follow-up question, “Aside from religion, do you consider yourself Jewish in any way (ethnically, culturally, family background)?” A yes to that would’ve included me among Jews of No Religion.

Unfortunately, most of the questions posed by this survey will portray Jews of No Religion as “less than,” when compared with Jews by Religion. On average, Jews of No Religion are less Jewishly educated, less synagogue affiliated, less ritually practicing, less emotionally attached to Israel, place less emphasis on being Jewish or belonging to the Jewish people, care less about having Jewish grandchildren, and have fewer Jewish friends than Jews by Religion.

This narrative of “less than” emerges because Pew only measured activities and values cared about by the organized Jewish community and not necessarily by the broader Jewish population.

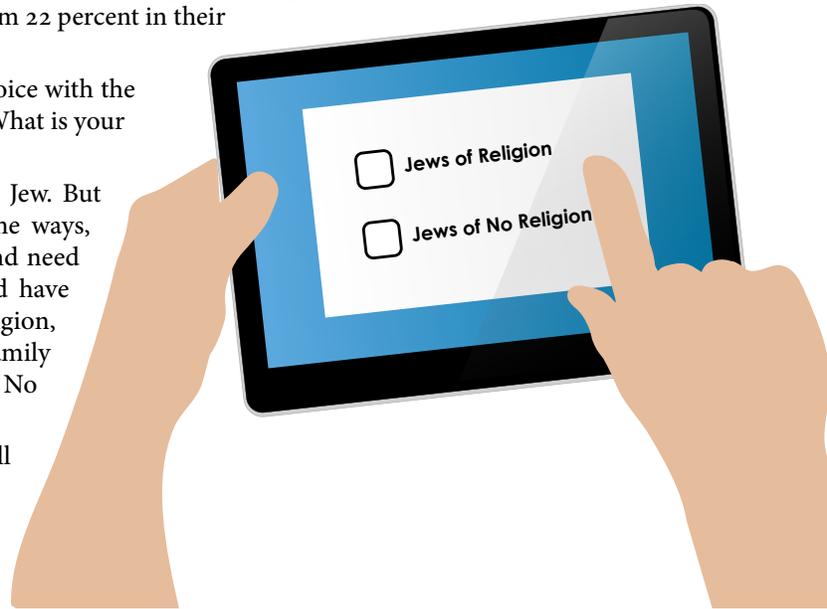
For example, one question not asked is how strongly Jews believe in the universal equality of all people. One indicator that Jews of No Religion would average “more than” Jews by Religion on universalism is the way we enact that value through our family configurations: Nearly 80 percent of married Jews of No Religion are intermarried (married to spouses who aren’t Jewish), and nearly 60 percent of Jews of No Religion were raised by intermarried parents.

As an intermarried Jew, I see universalism as a positive value. Most of the organized Jewish community is not universalist in approach, though, it is particularistic. And thus, the conflicting narrative.

Pew found the individual rate of Jewish intermarriage remaining at a sky-high 72 percent of non-Orthodox Jews over the past decade. While the report does not share the outcome of such a rate, the result is that today in America, among households with at least one married Jew, there are hundreds of thousands more intermarried than so-called “in-married” (two Jewish spouses) households. A case can therefore be made that universalism is a Jewish value! Which may be one reason why affiliation rates with synagogues and other Jewish organizations remain low. Can the organized Jewish community better appeal to Jewish universalists?

Diversity is another value I believe in. Along with being religiously intermarried, I’m interracial married; my wife is from Japan and our kids are mixed race. While the American Jewish community is still overwhelmingly white, Jews of No Religion are more than twice as likely as Jews by Religion to live in multiracial households. That’s something to celebrate! Jews of No Religion also have twice the rate of LGBTQ+ individuals than Jews by Religion.

While demographic studies can’t measure such things, I’m confident that Jews of No Religion are living their lives just as ethically as Jews by Religion. The great challenge to all religions in our increasingly secular world is the growing recognition that being religious doesn’t automatically make you a better person (and neither does being atheist).

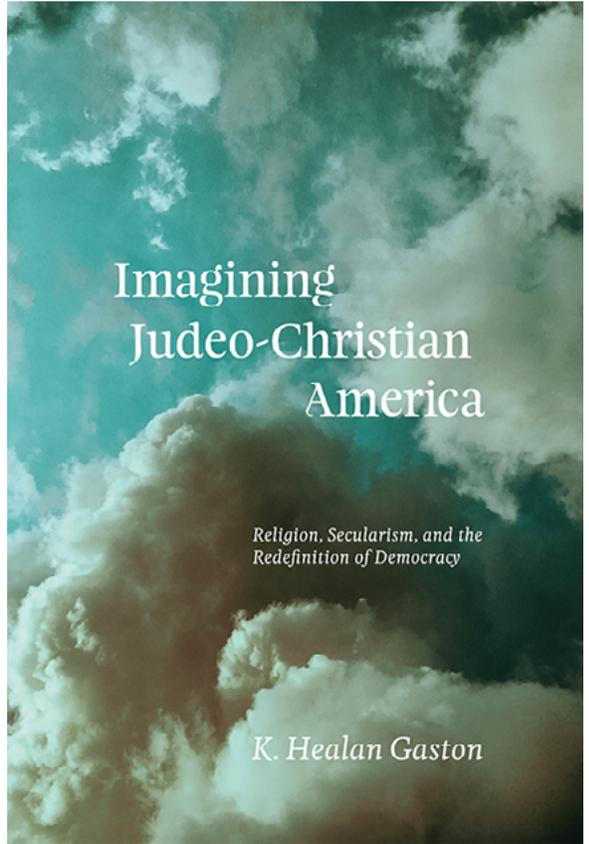


We know that Jews don't need religion to be good, because the Pew survey demonstrates that even among Jews by Religion, religious belief is significantly weaker than among Americans in general. Pew asked whether you believe "in God as described in the Bible," and only 33 percent of Jews by Religion said yes. While most Jews do believe in some "other higher power or spiritual force," if that force is not a God that makes specific commandments about how to behave, why are most Jews good? I'd argue it's their humanistic values, even if they've never heard the word humanist before.

It's humanism—the innate human ability to make decisions based on reason, knowledge, empathy and consideration for what's best for most people—that fosters the liberal political approach among most American Jews. For example, Jews overwhelmingly support gay marriage and LGBTQ equality. That was not dictated to us from on high, and it wasn't even the case a few decades ago. It is because of our growing humanism and despite our religious tradition that Jews have come to those conclusions.

So then why still be Jewish at all? That's the question that some Jews of No Religion already have clarity about, with our continued Jewish identity and participation. For me, it's about empathy fostered from being part of an at-times marginalized minority, even as I benefit from unsought white privilege. It's about knowing where I fit into the grand timeline of human history, and a fascination with the unique Jewish story. And it's about family and celebration.

The organized Jewish community could be providing this and more to the Jews of No Religion it currently is not reaching, but first there must be a recognition and acceptance of the different—yet equally valid—set of values we hold. We're not "less than." Our differences can be celebrated equally, if only the communal umbrella were stretched wider. 🔥



cosmopolitans on the left now see "Judeo-Christian" as a hopelessly narrow and naïve label for American religious identity. But while linguistic patterns have shifted, the basic contours of today's conflicts over religion in American public life date back to the 1930s and continued largely unchanged through the supposed consensus period of the 1950s. The common tendency to trace contemporary religious and political divides back to the 1960s and 1970s misplaces by at least two decades the origin point of the religio-political realignments that still shape the political world of today. In the 1940s and 1950s, Americans increasingly found themselves at odds over the relationship between religion and democracy. As the United States assumed its new role as the defender of "Western civilization" abroad, the home front witnessed vigorous disputes over the proper relationship between religious and political commitments, set against the backdrop of an expanding welfare state. Exploring the intricacies of Judeo-Christian discourse from the 1930s to the 1970s reveals that the polarization of American political culture characteristic of today's "culture wars" owes much to interwar and post-World War II debates over religion and politics. Surprisingly little has changed in the terms of the controversy, even though the liberal forces have largely ceded the label "Judeo-Christian" to their conservative opponents since the 1970s. 🔥

# CommunityNews

## Passover 2021: the Same and Still different from Other Years

Congregation for Humanistic Judaism—Fairfield County, CT

Of all Jewish holidays, gathering around the Passover seder table makes the celebration complete—how else can Grandma’s matzah ball soup and the four cups of wine be properly enjoyed? Members of The Congregation for Humanistic Judaism (Fairfield County, CT) conducted our first ever (and hopefully last!) virtual Passover Seder on March 28. A major rewrite of our traditional Haggadah included art by our mitzvah student Juliette Axen (see image). We hired a beloved song leader and accompanist to perform familiar songs like “Go Down, Moses” along with new ones like “These are a few of our Passover Things,” a parody of the *Sound of Music* favorite. Volunteer members read descriptions and displayed the symbolic foods on their seder plates.

Acknowledging heartbreak and plight of modern-day refugees and stalled U.S. immigration reform, mass shootings and other hate crimes—our pain as Jews led us to add a fifth

question to the standard four: **How can we make this year different from all the other years?** And we read Marge Piercy’s powerful poem, “The Maggid,” an updated description of escaping bondage in modern times.

Not to end without levity, we raffled off a prize and gave all the children who attended an Amazon gift card in lieu of the Afikomen hunt. And we sang *Dayenu*, to share gratefulness for life and community in the time of the pandemic. Our event attracted over 50 members, and with their families and guests nearly 100 attendees—you just can’t fit that group around Grandma’s table. *Dayenu!* 🕯



## Rachel Dreyfus and George Rockmore

*Drawing by Juliette Axen*

## Helen Suzman Went and Saw for Herself

Or Emet—Boston, MA

On Sunday, March 21, Or Emet (Twin Cities, MN) presented on Helen Suzman, SHJ’s 2020–21 Humanistic Jewish Role Model. The theme was Suzman’s remarkable 36-year career in South Africa’s parliament. She took on parts of apartheid’s thoroughgoing system every year—and all alone for 13 years. Suzman also visited Black townships, resettlement areas, and imprisoned political detainees, including Nelson Mandela several times during his 27-year imprisonment.

Helen Suzman was an avowed secular Jew who proudly accepted the label “humanist” even though Afrikaner Nationalists used it as a pejorative against her. Her speeches were case studies in evidence and reason. Her life motto was “Go and see for yourself.” And she reasoned correctly that apartheid would prove economically and demographically unsustainable.

Helen Suzman’s nephew Paul Suzman—born, raised and educated in South Africa and now a civic-minded businessman in Seattle—graciously participated. Mr. Suzman knew his aunt well, even seeing her in action in parliament. Paul added so much that host Richard Logan set aside his PowerPoint to converse with him. Award-winning documentary filmmaker Justine Shapiro, online acquaintance of Richard’s, also participated. She, too, was born and raised in South Africa, and has done film work there. She volunteered that, as a young person, Helen Suzman “was my first role model.”

Shortly before she died in 2009, the anti-apartheid legend who had bravely visited political prisoners was asked if she still saw old friends. Helen Suzman paused before answering, “Well—Nelson still comes to see me.” Thus closed a circle.

Her memory blesses millions. 🕯



## Richard Logan

*Photo caption: The parliamentary caucus of the Progressive Party in 1960 on the steps of parliament. Front: Walter Stanford, Harry Lawrence, Boris Wilson, Jan Steytler, Helen Suzman, Colin Eglin, Owen Williams. Back: Ray Swart, Clive van Ryneveld, John Cope, Zach de Beer, Ronald Butcher.*

# Community News

## Kol Hadash's First (and Hopefully Last) Zoom Seder

Kol Hadash—Berkeley, CA

Last year (2020) our traditional seder usually held at the Albany Community Center was abruptly canceled due to Covid-19. So this year we wanted to connect as much as possible without making one another sick. Since some of us were already twice vaccinated, we decided it was safe to share some real, actual seder foods with one another.

Robyn Raymer made gallons of chicken matzah-ball soup and quarts of charoset. Since Safeway was out of sweet Manischewitz wine, she flavored the charoset with port wine and cherry jelly. She also bought out all of Safeway's supply of mini bottles of horseradish. Bill Brostoff generously bought everyone a whole box of crisp, tasty matzah. And Marilyn Boxer baked many, many delectable chocolate macaroons—oh, they were so amazingly good! Some of us ordered entrees and side dishes from Cardel Catering (who usually caters our seder); they provided brisket, salmon, roast chicken, farfel, and kugel. Somehow, all the food found its way to everyone's homes in time for the Sunday afternoon seder on Zoom.

Alana Shindler (who writes all of our beautiful, spiritual-yet-secular holiday rituals) wrote a special abbreviated Haggadah and led the Zoom. We welcomed back musician and song-leader Ben Brussell to play and lead songs such as *Shalom Aleichem*, *Let My People Go*, and *Mayim Mayim*.

Alana usually includes in our Haggadah family exodus stories from members of our community. This year, in view of the anti-immigrant policies of our former president, He-Who-Should-Not-Be-Named, she decided to substitute a Chinese immigrant's exodus story: The Modern Exodus of Pauline Tso. Pauline's story was obtained from a publicly-available audio file of a 2017 interview, part of the Cal State Los Angeles Chinese-American Oral History Project. At the time of the interview, she was 86 years old.

The background of Pauline's early life is the devastating war between China and Japan, brewing during the 1930s at the same time as Europe's racial and nationalist sentiments were growing. In China it is known as the War of Resistance to Japan. Full-out war raged from 1937 to 1945 when Japan was finally defeated. By then China had suffered the loss of roughly 15 million people.

You can hear her interview at <http://bit.ly/PaulineTsoOralHistory>. 🔥



## Robyn Raymer and Alana Shindler

### [...continued from page 4](#)

- We can change the hate-filled political conversation by focusing on shared values such as freedom and liberty.
- Cosmopolitanism is humanism!!!!

Let's bring this conversation to all secular allies and religious liberals. National and global wellbeing require that we do so by taking practical steps toward recreating our common ground for the common good.

### A Civil Society and the Dream of a Beloved Community

By reasserting the communal leadership of secularists, humanists, and religious moderates at home and abroad, we can marginalize religious fanatics and hate-filled political extremists.

By capturing the moral high ground, we can recreate the

commons with an inclusive agenda of positive tolerance and unity in diversity: accepting a live-and-let-live philosophy. Let us begin restoring the separation of church and state by mounting a multilevel educational, political, and media campaign to create the necessary tipping point of confidence in the future and a love-based calm in the present. Let's take a stand that love wins.

Let us work the interfaith justice network—religious liberals and the core institutions of secular society—to offer civility, tolerance, decency, and hope.

Let's focus on the idea that almost everybody wants peace of mind—and yes, also peace on earth: inner and outer peace.

Humanists, join the average human in calling for a ceasefire in the culture wars and both inner and outer peace on earth!

In the name of GOD, stop the killing and hating in the name of God. 🔥

# Tributes

In loving memory of Joseph Goodman  
From Marlene Cohen

In loving memory of Shirley Monson  
From Myra Boime  
From Joseph Kotzin  
From Judy Weisman

In loving memory of Marilyn Rowens  
From Penny & Harvey Brode  
From Judy & Arnie Goldman  
From Barry Swan

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