

**Being
Poor & Jewish**

**Constitutional
Defender Award**

**National Gathering
Rabbinic Ordination**

HUMANISTIC JUDAISM

SPRING 2022



**Yaakov
Malkin**

**Society for Humanistic Judaism's
2021–22 Role Model of the Year**

Why Humanistic Judaism?

Humanistic Judaism provides community for people of all backgrounds to explore and shape the evolving meaning of Jewish traditions through a nontheistic, inclusive worldview. It incorporates a humanistic philosophy of life into Jewish liturgy, holiday celebrations, and lifecycle events in place of traditional worship of the supernatural. Founded in the 1960s by a community led by Rabbi Sherwin T. Wine, it gives voice to the way most Jews already believe: that ethics and values are human-made, not divinely revealed, and are continually progressing based on reason, knowledge, empathy, and justice.

Today, our faith rests in one another, in the power of people to understand our world and influence it for the better to achieve universal human dignity and steward the future of our planet. For justice to exist in our world, we must create it together. And to gain new knowledge we trust academic and scientific methods over religious dogma. Because our approach is cultural rather than religious, we welcome all to participate without boundaries and we celebrate the diversity of our multiracial, multicultural, and LGBTQ+ households.



PHOTO BY BORIS CARMI

Yaakov Malkin (1961)

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FROM THE EDITOR



Coming together, again

Over the last two years, I've been very grateful that we have had zoom, social media, and other ways to connect with each other as a movement. Technology has been the thread that has tied us together and made it possible to be united in Humanistic Jewish community, but it is also a joy when we get to be together in person, unmediated by the flow of electrons through the internet.

A few weeks ago, I took the train to Chicago to participate in the SHJ's annual gathering (the first in-person gathering in two years) and I am so glad I made the trip. Getting to talk to so many of you in person was a delight. As a sometimes-lonely Humanistic Jew in Oklahoma, it was a relief to be in a space with other Jews who relish our tradition and culture, but who also want to be authentic and not feel obliged to affirm beliefs that we ourselves do not believe in. I came away from the gathering with a deepened enthusiasm for what it means to be a Humanistic Jew, but also a growing awareness of why our humanistic vision of Judaism is so critically needed right now.

This vision of Humanistic Judaism has been

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Technology has been the thread that has tied us together and made it possible to be united in Humanistic Jewish community, but it is also a joy when we get to be together in person, unmediated by the flow of electrons through the internet.

brought to life by many, but second to only Sherwin Wine, the prolific writing of Yaakov Malkin has played an incomparable role. In this issue, we have an excerpt from Malkin's writing on the topic of “God” as a literary character, but also we have three pieces that look back at Malkin's legacy: Rabbi Dr. Avi Rose recalls Malkin's influence on his path toward becoming a rabbi; Rabbi Jeffrey Schesno's essay that discusses Malkin, “the renaissance man,” and Del Atwood's piece that expounds on Malkin's perspective on democracy, a perspective that is critically needed now more than ever.

Speaking of democracy, we are also sharing Paul Golin's remarks that were given at the presentation of the “Constitutional Defender” award to Congressman Jamie Raskin.

We also have a very important piece by Samantha Grabelle that speaks frankly about the experience of poverty and the obstacles that many Jewish communities thoughtlessly place in front of people who are struggling to make ends meet, but who want to be part of Jewish community. Samantha's essay is not an easy read, and it may make some readers uncomfortable, but I hope that we will hear her voice because there is still work to be done in ensuring that there is a place for all in our movement.

As always, your comments, suggestions, and critiques are welcomed and can be sent to humanisticjudaismmagazine@gmail.com.

A handwritten signature of James M. Branum in black ink.

J.M.B.
Editor

HUMANISTIC JUDAISM

SPRING 2022

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SPEECH



Presentation of the Jews for a Secular Democracy “Constitutional Defender Award” to Congressman Jamie Raskin

On December 5, 2021, in Silver Spring, Maryland, within Representative Jamie Raskin’s Congressional district, I delivered the below presentation in front of a gathering of nearly 100 people during a community-wide Hanukkah celebration, jointly sponsored by the Society for Humanistic Judaism and our local affiliate, Machar: The Washington Congregation for Secular Humanistic Judaism.

Attendees were all masked and vaxxed, and the scheduling turned out to be a Hanukkah “miracle” by falling in the lull between the Delta and Omicron spikes of the COVID-19 pandemic.

Congressman Raskin was gracious enough to give a rousing speech after accepting the award, and then celebrated the holiday with us as eight youth from the congregation lit candles and each shared a Humanistic Jewish value. You can watch a video of the program at: <https://bit.ly/raskinaward>

These were my remarks explaining why we awarded him with this recognition:

Today, it is my great honor to present Congressman Jamie Raskin with our Jews for a Secular Democracy Constitutional Defender Award.

Jews for a Secular Democracy is Humanistic Judaism’s pluralistic social justice initiative, which seeks to bring Jewish perspectives to the separation of church and state, and activate the Jewish community to defend First Amendment religious freedoms.

And for those of you who are unfamiliar with Humanistic Judaism, welcome! We are one of the congregational denominations of American Jewry, we’ve been around over 50 years,



PAUL GOLIN
SHJ EXECUTIVE
DIRECTOR

and have local communities throughout the US and Canada including here in the “DMV” (as I’m told cool people call it?) with Machar: The Washington Congregation for Secular Humanistic Judaism, our gracious co-sponsor of this event.

Humanistic Judaism is a cultural and secular expression of Jewish life. We find great value in Jewish holiday celebrations, lifecycle events, Jewish learning for youth and adults, and we do it all using a language and liturgy that focus on the human

Award continued on page 26

Society for Humanistic Judaism

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Sam Grabelle is a new member of SHJ and Kahal B'raira in Cambridge, MA. She has been an educator and social worker and wrote the national award-winning book *The Big Picture: Education is Everyone's Business*. Sam lives in Warwick, RI with her 10-year-old son Julius.

Jon Levine is a long-time member of Kahal B'raira and serves on the SHJ Board.

Rabbi Dr. Avi Rose is an artist, researcher, writer and veteran Jewish Educator. Growing up in Canada he completed a PDD in educational and clinical psychology. He teaches in both North America and Israel. He and his husband Binyamin live in Jerusalem and are proud parents to 10-year-old twins.

Susan Ryan is on the Executive Committee of the SHJ Board of Directors and is the Secretary at The City Congregation for Humanistic Judaism in New York. She recently co-edited *The Beatles: Fab Four Cities Liverpool – Hamburg – London – New York*.

Rabbi Jeffrey Schesnol is a newly ordained rabbi and a graduate of the International Institute for Secular Humanistic Judaism (IISHJ). He is the spiritual leader of Or Adam Congregation for Humanistic Judaism in Phoenix and the Associate Director of the Arizona Jewish Historical Society.

Janna Walsh is a member of Or Adam Congregation for Humanistic Judaism in Phoenix, AZ.

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COMMUNITY NEWS



Bonobo cub on mother's back in the Democratic Republic of Congo, Africa.

AZ, PHOENIX | OR ADAM CONGREGATION FOR HUMANISTIC JUDAISM

Rabbis, Bonobos, and Anniversaries, Oh My!

It's been a busy winter at Or Adam Congregation. Despite the lingering coronavirus, we have not curtailed our activities. Indeed, our congregation has expanded to a global presence—as we continue to conduct our Shabbat, Havdalah, and holiday celebrations via Zoom. Our membership now comprises multiple states, countries, and even continents!

Our monthly current controversies discussions, movie conversations, and book club carry on, although dinner club has unfortunately been on hold since the pandemic began. Youth Education students presented our annual Tu B'Shevat seder in January, and the congregation was pleased to plant 70 additional trees in Israel this year. We recently celebrated Repro[ductive] Shabbat with guest rabbinic candidate Eva Cohen, about Jewish views on abortion. Ms. Cohen cited texts from both Mishnah and Torah to start the discussion.

Our current controversies presenter this month was Ira Parsons (with just a little help from his dad Bill, President of Or Adam). Ira, age 12, gave a fascinating and professional talk on bonobos, not only teaching us about these peaceful endangered primates, but showing how they help explain the evolution of kindness, empathy, and reciprocity.

We have also kept up our quarterly Speaker's Bureau; in March, our speaker will be Dr. Eric L. Weiner, discussing ethical wills. Our biggest news events are later in the spring when we mark the 35th anniversary of Or Adam, in conjunction with our Passover seder. And in June, we will also celebrate the April 22nd ordination of our long-time ceremonial leader, Jeffrey Schesnol, as Rabbi. Jeffrey completed his studies at the IISHJ Rabbinic Seminary this year at age 79! Ira taught us that bonobos love to play and learn, and so does Or Adam.

— Janna Walsh

Due to the covid pandemic many upcoming events in the next few months are being held online. Information on how to register for online events can normally be found on the congregational websites, which can all be found at: shj.org/find.

AZ, TUCSON | Secular Humanist Jewish Circle held a discussion about the often-banned graphic novel *Maus* by Art Spiegelman.

CA, BERKELEY | Kol Hadash, Northern California Congregation for Humanistic Judaism has been mourning the passing of beloved member Bill Nemoyten (1928-2022).

CA, ENCINO | Adat Chaverim, Congregation for Humanistic Judaism held a festive Purim celebration that explored connections between the story of Purim and the current war in Ukraine.

CA, ORANGE COUNTY | Pacific Community of Cultural Jews held a Hamantaschen bake-off at their Purim celebration.

CO, BOULDER | Beth Ami, Colorado Congregation for Humanistic Judaism is active in the work of welcoming and supporting a newly arrived Afghan family living in their area.

CT, FAIRFIELD COUNTY | Congregation for Humanistic Judaism, Fairfield County is fundraising for Ukrainian relief efforts.

DC, WASHINGTON | Machar, The Washington Congregation for Secular Humanistic Judaism is working with partner organizations to help provide housing and support for an Afghan refugee family during their first six months in the USA.

FL, BOCA RATON | Congregation Beth Adam, South Florida Center for Humanistic Judaism has an active children's education program which lately has been learning about the state of Israel, Hebrew reading, and the differences between Secular and Orthodox forms of Judaism.

FL, GAINESVILLE | Gainesville Humanistic Judaism Meetup * recently held a discussion on some of the books being banned in parts of the USA.

FL, SARASOTA | Congregation for Humanistic Judaism observed Yom HaShoah at a special event on April 23.

COMMUNITY NEWS

IL, DEERFIELD | Kol Hadash Humanistic Congregation hosted the SHJ annual gathering in late April.

MD, BALTIMORE | Baltimore Jewish Cultural Chavurah Rabbi Judith Seid gave a presentation on “Jews of the Land,” a discussion of the diverse contexts places where Jews have farmed over the centuries.

MI, DETROIT | Congregation for Humanistic Judaism of Metro Detroit held their annual Purim spring fundraiser which featured “The Real Drag Queens of Bingo,” as well as the big-screen premiere of “The Shushan Files.”

MN, TWIN CITIES | Or Emet, Minnesota Congregation for Humanistic Judaism celebrated its first in-person Purim Carnival since the start of the pandemic.

NC, ASHEVILLE | Jewish Secular Community of Asheville heard SHJ executive director Paul Golin speak about “Judaism without God - How does that work?”

NY, WESTCHESTER COUNTY | Westchester Community for Humanistic Judaism held a virtual Humanistic Purim celebration.

OR, PORTLAND | Kol Shalom, Community for Humanistic Judaism heard Roberta Hellman speak about two pioneers of women’s productive rights: Emma Goldman and Rose Pastor Stokes.

WA, SEATTLE | Secular Jewish Circle of Puget Sound was excited to host an in-person Passover seder.

CANADA, TORONTO | Oraynu Congregation is celebrating the news that a Syrian refugee family the congregation sponsored in 2016 has recently gained Canadian citizenship!

ONLINE (EST-BASED) | The Spinoza Havurah * explored Humanistic approaches to Passover in a discussion session in April.

** Congregations in formation. Compiled by James M. Branum. Please forward your congregation’s news to humanisticjudaismgazine@gmail.com*

MA, BOSTON | KAHAL B’RAIRA, CONGREGATION FOR HUMANISTIC JUDAISM

Kahal B’raira Members Explore the Contributions of SHJ Role Model Yaakov Malkin

In honor of this year’s Humanistic Jewish Role Model Yaakov Malkin, we created a special informative program for one of our recent community gatherings. Since a celebration of Professor Malkin by his daughter Rabbi Sivan Malkin Maas was already scheduled for the following week, we refrained from an in-depth introduction to his work, and instead followed Rabbi Adam Chalom’s suggestion that engaging in a discussion of Biblical texts through a humanistic lens would be very much in the spirit of Malkin’s writing and teaching.

To make the most of our limited discussion time, we posted links on the KB website to both Malkin’s video Genesis as Origin Myth Praising Eve (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=wOV5vNNABDE>)



and Genesis 3 from Sefaria and encouraged members to view in advance of our meeting.

Following a brief introduction, we screened the Malkin video from the IISHJ Colloquim in 1997, in which he compared the Jewish myth of “The Woman” tasting the beautiful fruit from the tree of knowledge to the Greek myth

of Prometheus stealing fire from the gods.

Members then met in small discussions groups (in person and on Zoom) to consider several questions, including whether they found Malkin’s interpretation of the Genesis story to be useful and, if we believe Torah stories to be fictional, what is their value? The small groups then reported back to the entire group about their lively conversations. Members said they were grateful for the opportunity to engage in this kind of thoughtful discussion—one new member even told us that this was the first time she had ever been asked her opinion of anything in a synagogue setting! We think Professor Malkin would have been pleased with the event.

– Jon Levine

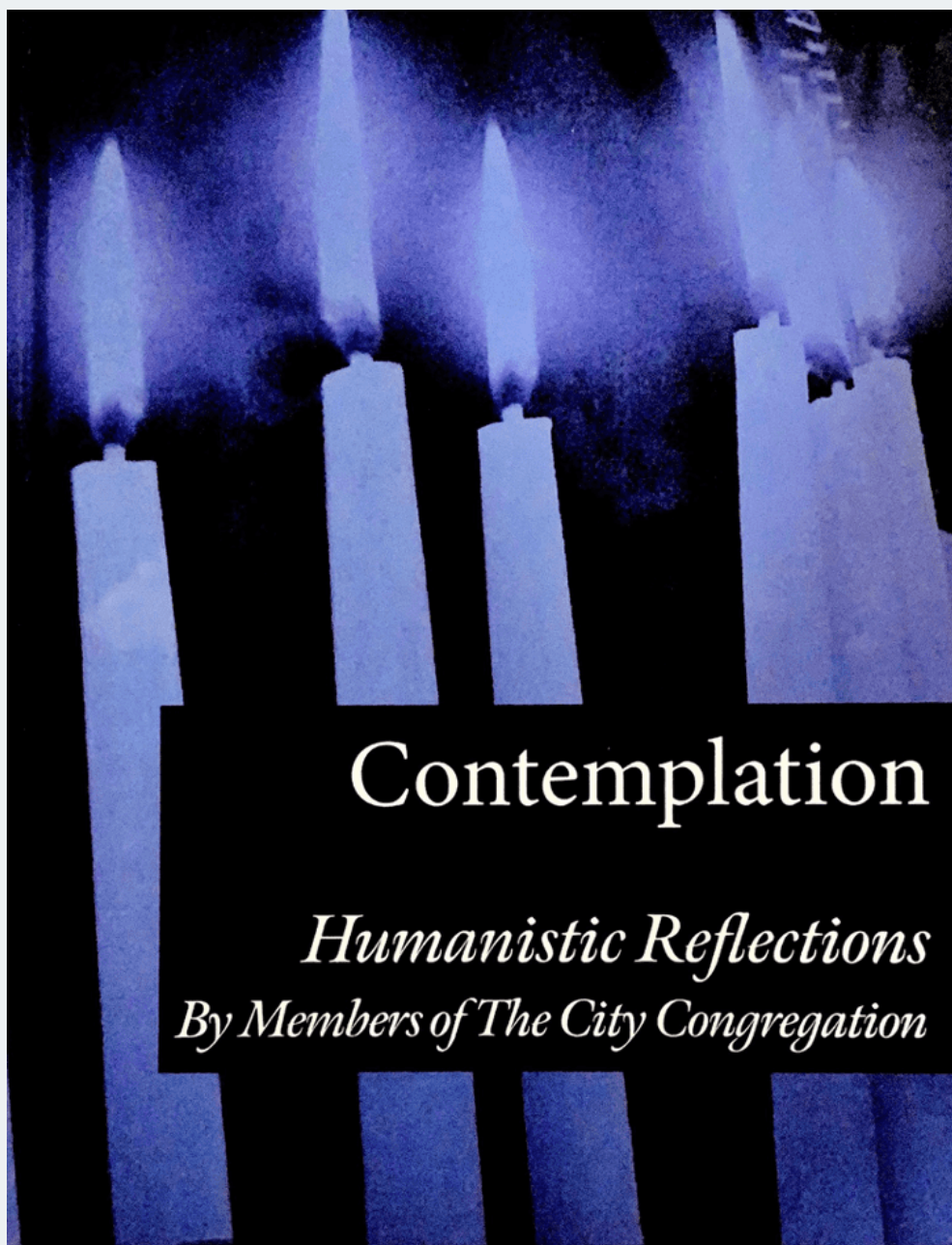
Virtual Book Launch

On Friday, March 4, 2022, The City Congregation in New York gathered virtually to celebrate the release of a marvelous new book, *Contemplation: Humanistic Reflections by Members of The City Congregation*, a compilation of over 25 years of members' writings presented at various High Holiday services and Shabbat/Adult Perspectives programs.

The book was conceived and funded by our Rabbi Emeritus, Peter Schweitzer, and edited by members Carol Sternhell and Ernie Rubinstein. It contains talks and presentations grouped in two categories, Themes and Conversations. The Themes section contains talks on subjects such as Jewish Journeys, Inclusion, Social Justice, Integrity, Purpose, Coping, Skepticism, Money, Loss, Remembering 9/11, Regrets, Change, Forgiveness and Legacy, whereas the Conversations section includes presentations given by members on subjects like Searching for Wisdom, Loss of Faith, Celebrating Imperfection, Israel, "Getting Unstuck", Dreamtime, Finding a Partner – or Not, Empowering Our Daughters, Places, Humor, Ashes, Culture, Here and Now, Wondrous Strange, and How Things Happen.

The book itself is a beautiful coffee table-sized volume, ready to be picked up and savored or to read excerpts at random, with food for thought and wisdom to be found on every page.

The Shabbat program that included the book launch featured Rabbi Schweitzer talking about the realization of his dream to have the writings of our members compiled at last in one place, and several members reading their pieces that were included in the book. There was additional discussion about how many of these presentations have touched people in myriad ways over the years, and how fortunate we are to have so many interesting and introspective



people as part of our community.

Every person who contributed a piece to the book received a copy, and all members of The City Congregation did as well. Additional copies are available

through donations to the congregation and can be ordered through our website, www.citycongregation.org.

– Susan Ryan, Secretary,
The City Congregation, New York City

Poor and Jewish

Even I think it's a contradiction in terms

BY SAMANTHA GRABELLE

I know what you'd like to know first. Both of my parents are Jewish, each with an Eastern European immigrant parent. Mom grew up poor in Brooklyn and dropped out of high school. Dad's dad did well in Newark and sent him to medical school in Switzerland. Dad supported Mom in her slow but steady pursuit of further education and was beyond proud when she became a successful attorney.

You also want to know that I got my BA with Honors from Brown University and have a master's degree. My mom told me not to apply for scholarships and we didn't need financial aid. All three of my siblings also went to college and one to law school. We had a large sailboat and orthodontia, saw some Broadway plays, and had Chinese food on Christmas. Except for designer jeans and my own color TV, I wanted for nothing.

People have always told me I don't look Jewish. I also know that in the same nonsensical way, you would also think I don't look poor. But I am and have been for nearly a decade. The reasons are not unusual but unique to me as is my experience of poverty. I am not here to speak for all poor people and certainly not all poor Jews. But I do think what I have to say about the ways I've experienced being poor within Jewish communities, organizations, and congregations point to ways these entities and the

individuals within them could rethink the way they welcome, interact with, and serve poor Jews; or, if you prefer, Jews who happen to be poor.

If you google "poor Jews" or "Jewish poverty" you will find two recent articles titled "Why We Don't Talk About Jewish Poverty – And Why We Should" and "22 Rabbis Agree: It's Time to Stop Ignoring Jewish Poverty." There's even one with a title I almost unintentionally plagiarized for this piece – "I'm a Poor Jew. Yes, We Exist."¹

One of the 22 rabbis says, "Many believe the myth that there is no such thing as a poor Jew, but there is." Another asserts, "Systematically, within our own communities, we can recognize, and teach, that it is just a myth that no one suffers financial hardship in Jewish communities."

An essay in a 1974 book titled *Poor Jews: An American Awakening* shows this goes way back. The author states: "to many people the phrase 'the Jewish poor' is a contradiction in terms. Jews are simply not regarded as poor." And in 2007, the CEO of a NY-based Council on Jewish Poverty used the exact same phrase – "Usually the words 'Jewish poverty' are seen as a contradiction in terms."

Chapter One of a fascinating and undoubtedly controversial 2011 master's thesis from a Smith College student begins:

"The notion of American Jews living in poverty or low-income households has been studied so infrequently in recent years... and conjures up an image so contrary to the prevailing stereotype of Jewish wealth and power, that one might think poor or low-income Jewish households simply do not exist."

I wouldn't be surprised if you are not surprised that this belief in this myth or "contradiction in terms" is still widespread among Jews. Every Jewish person I have spoken to about this topic has at least been aware of it, if not willing to admit they believe it, too. Rabbi Miriam of the SHJ asked me to write this article because of her own awareness of its prevalence. And I felt compelled to write it, in part, because I wanted to free myself of the shame I feel because I believe it, too. Jewish people aren't poor. Or at least they wouldn't be if they lived by Jewish values, were raised Jewish – even secularly as I was – and worked hard.

But I do and I was and I did. I worked *really* hard. At one point, when I was pregnant with my son, I had four jobs. In my job searching since then, I have been able to find a variety of part-time, temporary, short-term, per diem, and similar positions but nothing full-time.

For three years, I was an adjunct professor at a local university. If you aren't familiar with "academia's permanent underclass" just google "adjunct poverty" and you'll soon become an expert. You'll also find out that despite widespread awareness, no one is doing anything about it. Like 25% of adjuncts, I survived with food stamps (called SNAP since 2008), Medicaid, and support from my family. When the college offered me an additional course one trimester, my income locked me out of Medicaid and I immediately had to start paying for private insurance. The next trimester they reduced my course load to one and I was able to get back on public assistance. But in the meantime, I had a cancer scare (the same one that my mother survived but killed her mother) and the tradeoff of a high deductible for a lower premium meant I was stuck with the bills.

Poor and Jewish continued on page 12



Samantha
Grabelle with
her son



Page 12 cut from this preview edition.

Poor and Jewish continued from page 10

That is just one of the many challenges I've faced and that have caused me to be both Jewish and intelligent and resourceful and I do not give up. And I am not afraid to ask for help, especially, importantly, I have my mother and my sister who are always

I also have a Master's in Social Work, advanced technology skills, excess time on my hands, and a surprising amount of patience. All are invaluable as I tackle the relentless forms on hold, navigate the maze of systems and resources, and calculate whether I can afford to work. Being of course, I still have to keep looking for a job – searching, writing cover letters, tailoring my CV, robot-proofing my submissions, and following up. My inbox overflows with interview requests. I interview well, but rarely get the opportunity.

Thanks to great references within the community and despite being overqualified, I once got an interview with a small local Jewish organization. Working full-time without benefits, I spent hours figuring out the math of how much I could earn before I would lose the ones I had. This has online calculators for this, but it is a very inexact science. At my first interview, I awkwardly raised the idea that if they paid me less, I would have health insurance. I did get a second interview with the board, but what transpired is painful to recall. Aside from some very uncomfortable and, honestly, unlawful questions about my ability to provide care for my child if I worked full-time, they wanted to know if I was “the right amount of Jewish” to be the type of person they were looking for, but “not so Jewish” that I wouldn't be able to work on Shabbat and the High Holidays. They found it hard to believe I would be able to stay on Medicaid even at a lower salary

and questioned my research methods. One board member asked if I understood that if I stayed employed there as long as they'd hoped, I would not be able to afford college

I know this might be an extreme example, but I believe that what was their inability to relate to a poor Jew... I encountered one, or at least knew they had. They didn't realize how demeaning their behavior was and I'm sure believed that they were “good Jews” – all *tzedakah* and *tikkun olam* and *gemilut*

The SHJ program is whose benefits far visits to a Food Bank.

But good Jewish values are clearly, you will ensure that we feel invisible and that we are “a contradiction in terms,” you will not know how to include us or help us. And if you are helping us but don't really understand the diversity of poverty, you will of the one sitting next to you.

Just as I have not always been poor, I have not always been an active member of the Jewish community. In fact, I attended my first formal Jewish event as an adult just a few years ago, when my aunt's death meant the end of Passover, which, as with many secular families, was our only Jewish tradition. My son and I attended a second night Seder that I couldn't afford, but no financial assistance was advertised. At five-years-old, he fell in love with everything

Jewish that night. In the five years since then, I have joined three different congregations – including a year as a K-3 Sunday school teacher – before finally finding a home in Humanistic Judaism congregation in Cambridge, MA. It's a 3-hour round trip for us. But his first day of Sunday school and adult service convinced us both that it was worth it.

During this time, I have sought help from the Keshet social worker assigned to my first temple, Jewish Collaborative Services and its Kosher Food Bank, as well as one rabbi's discretionary fund. But I have also sought help from the Jewish community, by teaching Sunday school, facilitating a “parenting during the pandemic” workshop, joining the gardening committee, representing my congregation in a 3-part workshop on signing up to be a B Mitzvah mentor, and being an active participant in an Introduction to Judaism course.

I have never shied away from asking for full financial aid for membership and school and have been granted it from every congregation. But none of them had a formal, advertised process so it has always involved an awkward admission to being extremely low-income, followed by a long-winded, emailed explanation of our situation that always comes out sounding to me a lot like – “I know I'm Jewish and I'm not supposed to be poor, but I am and I can prove it.” I greatly appreciate the other ways that they, too, have involved uncomfortable interactions.

Based on these experiences, I'd like to suggest some changes in attitude, approach, and policy that would greatly improve the Jewish community's ability to welcome and serve poor Jews.

Remember that there are poor Jews who are not affiliated with a congregation, school or community center. Find them and offer help anyway.

When presenting a *tzedakah* box or defining *tzedakah* as a central Jewish

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value, acknowledge those who are unable to give at this time. Also, consider whether the money collected could go directly or indirectly to them.

Recognize the teachings that Jews have an obligation to avoid poverty AND that the poor must be respected and protected.

Advertise and provide a simple and formal process for people to apply for membership or religious school. The New York Times recently reported on rabbis who have promoted getting rid of the entrenched dues model altogether, condemning the "shame route" poor people face. We need the need to stop equating the bonding of Jews as a financial arrangement.

When choosing a rabbi or community champion, remember the poor Jews. Consult with us on the need for a Jewish lobby for policy changes that will directly help us, fundraise to provide us with the support we actually need. Show us your earnestness to fulfill the commandment to help others recognize that while we need help, we are not the other.

Raise your Jewish children to understand the needs of poor people including socioeconomics. Rather than the canned response of "volunteering" and "used clothing" and toy donations, encourage them to ask questions about what poor people really need and teach them how they can use their time and energy to help and support systemic change. Give a Jewish kid a box of cans and you feed a few people with processed food for a day; teach a Jewish child how to make a real difference and you create an activist for a lifetime.

Consider other ways to provide direct funds to poor people than gift cards to the stores where you shop. More than a shopping spree, poor people need car insurance, prescriptions, and heat, among many other things they don't sell at Target. I shop almost exclusively at thrift stores and retailers who

sell in bulk or offer valuable coupons and cash back promotions. If you don't know where we shop, don't assume; ask us.

Poor parents are often very good at budgeting and presents next to the menorah or under the tree. Don't assume your children are getting what they need. Consider the food you eat (or the generic stuff you buy at the grocery store). A long-term solution whose benefits far outweigh twice monthly visits to a Food Bank. Rather than toys, consider gifting zoo or YMCA memberships, or asking the parents if they need help with their children. I would love for my son to be able to take piano lessons, and our soccer coach is a single mom who needs help.

Consider that we cannot wait for a rabbi to determine need and providing support in order to pay a radical or a repair bill. Too much time and resources from us when we can least afford it.

In addition to providing members with opportunities to volunteer at a shelter or use computers, encourage them to use their skills to help others in need. An accountant could offer pro bono tax services, a teacher could offer tutoring, an orthodontist could arrange for a free exam, a college professor could provide pro bono legal services to help with a divorce or disability determination.

Finally, provide a list of local and government resources on your website and, if possible, help to access them. It is an arduous and often lonely task to apply for Medicaid, heating assistance, SNAP, and free/reduced school lunches. Plus there are a myriad of resources that too few know about. SNAP recipients can get free or reduced museum admissions through Museums4All, 50% off Amazon Prime, and free phone

and broadband service through the federal Lifeline program. The MusicLink Foundation recruits music teachers to offer free or reduced lessons to low-income children. Lowering poor people, providing a clearinghouse for these types of resources would be a great start.

For people who are embarrassed or unsure how to ask for help from a company, organization, or government entity, offer to do it for them.

Once I started talking about my experience with poverty, the response was so positive, I decided that I need to keep talking. Even if the economy changes and I can pay my own rent and bills and send my kids to college, being poor will always affect me. My life expectancy is shorter, my mental health is worse, and my choices will always be limited. Savings, gaps in my employment history, outdated credentials, disappearing references, a long-ago cashed out 401k, a meager Social Security fund, and all the rest of the barriers to economic stability and upward mobility.

Poor Jews exist. We are not the other. Our needs are not simple or obvious. Let us reveal ourselves in ways that preserve our dignity and enable us to be welcomed without judgment or red tape. Include us in your philanthropy and do it in ways that help us today and tomorrow. Fight for us at every level without the fear of admitting we exist. Remember that while our bank accounts may be very full. Do not feel sorry for us. Feel empathy. Humanistic Judaism relies on empathy "to address Jewish and universal human questions and to help improve the world and ourselves." And last of all, consider adding us to your list of the diversities you celebrate. We may not be happy about being poor, but our poverty is part of our identity and deserves recognition. 🌟

1. Links to these articles and all other resources referenced in this article can be found at: <https://bit.ly/HJzine-Spring2022>

REMEMBRANCE

Remembering Yaakov Malkin

The non-believer who helped me believe

BY RABBI DR. AVI ROSE

In December of 2021, I was ordained as a Secular-Humanist Rabbi in a ceremony that was laden with emotion. With me on that day were family, friends and colleagues, all of whom supported and nurtured me throughout the five year journey toward this seminal moment. Conspicuously absent from the ceremony was the physical presence of the late Professor Yaakov Malkin, the one human who more than anyone else was responsible for my decision to undertake and complete rabbinic studies. His spirit, his ideas and his legacy were very much present, surrounding and guiding the community to which I had pledged my support and leadership.

In order to understand the impact that Professor Malkin had on my thinking and direction as a Jew and leader, I need to explain two very important things: my Jewish journey prior to encountering his writing and the ways in which Professor Malkin's ideas allowed me to believe—in Humanism, in Secular Judaism and in the power of Israeli culture as a spiritual force.

One Jew, Two Jewish Journeys

I am the product of two parallel (but occasionally intersecting) Jewish lives, one

offered to me by my parents and the other which I chose as a result of encounters with Jewish and Israeli culture. I was born into a world that my parents had chosen to inhabit, a world of deep religious commitment, of a spirituality nurtured by tradition and given depth by mysticism. My parents were innovators, melding the religious precepts of Judaism with New Age spirituality and a political consciousness that sought to liberate women, ethnic minorities, persons living with disabilities, and LGBTQ+ persons. Theirs was a fierce commitment to community, as much to artists, activists, and those on the fringes of Jewish life, as it was to more mainstream sectors. Our home was open, welcoming, and accepting. Yet, despite its liberal nature, the Judaism I was given was religious, predicted on a strict adherence to halacha, a pseudo-legal code of Jewish practice. It was aimed at deepening and strengthening connection to a personal, loving, and responsive God.

While I cherish the sincerity behind this form of Judaism and do my best to live up to its real commitment to justice and community, its religiosity became both alienating and threatening to me. For one thing, I never understood the need for

many of the customs and restrictions that this Judaism imposed; they diminished rather than enhanced my sense of Jewish wellbeing. Despite my parents' version of a religious life that was liberal and liberating, I could not get past the deeply rooted judgmentalism, xenophobia, gender hierarchy, and homophobia that emanated from its core texts and traditions. I was out of step with the social constructs that such a model promoted and felt a deep sense of shame and failure at the fact that I was neither inspired by nor inclined toward the kind of Jewish spiritual connection that my family seemed to epitomize.

To make matters worse, adolescence brought a slow and complicated understanding that my sexual and romantic desires ran in direct opposition with traditional religious precepts, as did my inclination toward more fluid forms of gender identification. This deepened my frustration with Judaism as I had come to know it and left me feeling transgressive, a failure to myself, my creed, and my community.

Yet somehow, despite all of the confusion and pain it caused, there remained something very important to



From left: Rabbi Oren Yehi Shalom, Rabbi Sivan Maas, Rabbi Dr. Avi Rose and an ordination event attendee.

me about being Jewish, about the ways in which it understood and promoted justice, community, and culture. It was within the cultural facet that I ultimately found my Jewish home. Early on, I was drawn to the myriad of ways in which Jews have expressed their intersectional selves through art, music, clothing, and food. In these acts of creativity was imbedded a deep sense of connection to Jewish ideas, which were then blended with constructs and customs emanating from the surrounding world. As a person who was on a path of merging narratives and values, these art forms were beacons of light, telling me that there was a place for my personal story within the weave of Jewish narrative.

Having descended from a heritage of Yiddish-speaking secular socialists, I felt particularly drawn to this culture and was proud of how it fought for social and economic justice. Its artistic output was rich and bold, reflecting a broad range of emotions and experiences. Yiddish music can be comic or tragic, hopeful or despondent, lamenting and celebrating the complexities of life. Writers such as I.L. Peretz and Shalom Aleichem painted vivid word pictures of life in shtetls and ghettos, of

how humans developed a capacity to thrive under the harshest of circumstances. Brave voices such as I.B. Singer and S. Asch spoke to aspects of my personal struggle in stories that told of brave souls who broke gender barriers and expressed same-sex love. These narratives anticipated and long pre-dated contemporary attempts at addressing the full spectrum of Jewish passion, love, and personality.

It was not just the Ashkenazi culture that captivated me, but also art that came from the encounter between Judaism with Islam, Persian, Moroccan, and Yemenite foods, clothing, music, and dance showed me Jewish elegance and complexity in new and exciting ways. The poetry, illuminations, and music of the Spanish Ladino culture were especially spellbinding; their level of passion and color remains unmatched and still relevant more than five hundred years after their community of origin was decimated. This Diaspora within a Diaspora still has resonance and gains new life with each successive generation.

Of all the Jewish cultures that I encountered though, it is the modern Israeli version that speaks to me most deeply. From the moment I first arrived in Israel at the age

of five, I was drawn to its language and style. There is something in the meeting between ancient and modern, east and west, past and present that is exciting, that draws me in and makes me feel at home. I love the ways in which the Israeli arts help me to clarify and hone in on aspects of my Jewish self that seem essential, allowing me to move away from those that serve little purpose, or which are burdensome, even hurtful.

In my adolescent and early adult years, I moved back and forth between Israel and Canada. During this time, I developed my passion for the Hebrew language and for the various art forms that had developed in Israel. Modern Israeli music was for me the sincerest and most potent form of prayer. The colorful vision of possibility embodied in Zionist graphic and fine arts, the energy and honesty of contemporary Israeli dance, the narratives and emotions expressed by the country's poets, writers, actors, singers and filmmakers—all of these made me want to be part of Israeli society, to take part in the great experiment that is Zionism.

The more I learned, the more I wanted to be in Israel and share with others the truth and beauty I had discovered. In 2002, I moved to Jerusalem and switched



**Rabi Dr. Avi Rose
with his children and
husband, Binyamin.**

my professional focus to the teaching of Israeli arts and culture to young people who came from the Diaspora on journeys of self-discovery and connection with Jewish peoplehood. For the past twenty years, I have had the great privilege of teaching and talking about Judaism from a cultural perspective, broadening my sphere of interest to include other Jewish cultural outputs, most especially in the area of visual arts. I am passionately interested in how Jewish identity has been formed and expressed by the paintings, sculptures, text-illuminations, and objects we create.

A World-View Discovered...

As I was engaging in the teaching of Jewish

and Israeli culture, I was never far removed from the idea that being Jewish also involved the creation of community and the joint commemoration of seasonal cycles and important milestones. I longed for ritual and shared Jewish experience that was open to all of who I was, that would give voice and meaning to my Jewish story and connection. Although Jerusalem is full of creative and unique prayer spaces, none seemed to echo with my Jewish spirit. This, I knew from my parent's experience, meant that it was time to consider creating a space where folks like me could find a Judaism that loved and nurtured all of who we were and were trying to become.

The need for such a community intensified after I met and married the love of my life and with him, started a family. I wanted to offer our children a rich Jewish home and a collective space in which to celebrate, mourn and mark seminal moments in our lives. I knew that if we were looking for such a Jewish space, that others would be as well and would need leadership and guidance as they navigated their Jewish lives. It, therefore, seemed prudent to join the family business and become a rabbi. And so it was, that for the third time in my adult life, I applied for and was accepted to an ordination program.

On the day of the interview, however, I reached a sadly familiar point of crisis. As with the other times that I had abandoned the chance to become a rabbi, something deep within me told me to run. My instinctive response to this overwhelming feeling was to seek refuge in a place of safety and comfort—a library. I hoped that in this sacred space, I might find some thread of insight, some clue as to why I both wanted to serve my community and at the same time, felt threatened by the idea of becoming a rabbi. My instincts proved to be correct and shortly, I stumbled across an explanation and a powerful solution to this piece of my existential conundrum.

I had a gut feeling that the problem lay in the fact that for me, being Jewish was a cultural, rather than a religious experience. I had lost tolerance for forms of Judaism that were theistic, legalistic, or even remotely proscriptive. This led me to seek out an old literary friend, the work of the late Rabbi Sherwin Wine. I had often used Rabbi Wine's wisdom in classes I taught on modern streams of Judaism, but now, I needed it for myself. I spent time re-reading and resonating with his words and understood where my theology—or lack thereof—was taking me. Rabbi Wine allowed me to understand the value of culture in the crafting of Jewish identity and meaningful experiences.

As I put Rabbi Wine's book back on the shelf (don't tell the librarian, it's a big no-no!) I found another set of books nearby written by the late Professor Yaakov Malkin.

ESSAY

Malkin on Democracy

This essay is written at a moment of escalating tension and conflict.

The Russian invasion of Ukraine revives traumatic memories of earlier wars in Europe and the indelible atrocities that defined them.

The second anniversary of the COVID-19 pandemic has ruptured community solidarity in many countries. Antisemitic and racist violence abounds. Attacks on democratic institutions and the dilution of the rule of law are omnipresent and escalating.

It is not simply that things seem to be deteriorating. There are reliable metrics that prove it. In the World Justice Project *Rule of Law Index® 2021*, the United States, the UK and Canada all saw their global rankings decline. In the *Economist Intelligence Unit Democracy Index 2022*, the United States preserved its status as a “flawed democracy” for a fifth year, with decreasing scores in the functioning-of-government and electoral-process-and-pluralism categories.

And some nations—such as Orbán’s Hungary and Duda’s Poland—seem to have abandoned altogether any pretence of democratic aspiration.

What is the role of Humanistic Jews in the struggle to preserve democratic values which might lead to a better future for humanity?

I have found the writing of Yaakov Malkin (1926-2019) very influential in developing a better-world view with a humanist perspective.

As is well known, Malkin was one of the founders of the Secular Humanistic movement in Israel. He was a literary critic, academic lecturer, diplomat, and broadcaster. He believed in the accessibility of education and was one of the first directors of the *Mateh Yehuda* community college system.



DEL ATWOOD

And he was a prolific writer.

In the books *Secular Judaism: Faith, Values and Spirituality*, *Judaism Without God: Judaism as Culture and Bible as Literature*, and *Secular Jewish Culture* (editor and contributor) he brought his great intellect to bear on a number of enduring questions about the intersection between Judaism, humanism, politics, nationality.

And democracy.

Although he did not live to witness the present upheaval, I think he would have had a lot to offer to help us through it, particularly in the way we respond to challenges to democracy.

The ideal of democracy in government has evolved over the centuries into the form of representative democracy observed most widely in the modern era.

Unfortunately, the term can be distorted and abused opportunistically.

While all but six current national constitutions—Afghanistan, Brunei, Oman, Qatar, Saudi Arabia and the UAE being the exceptions—lay claim to some form of democratic government, the in-name-only phenomenon is alive and well in many.

Yaakov Malkin wrote a lot about authentic democracy.

He believed that it was an integral part of modern humanism:

Humanistic values thus include equality between the sexes and between peoples, freedom of expression and personal autonomy, the duties of the individual toward society and the rights of every individual within society, the obligations of society toward the individual, and democracy as the best possible form of government (emphasis added).

– *Judaism Without God? Judaism as Culture and Bible as Literature*

In setting out an open-ended charter of Secular Jewish culture, he included as a core tenet:

[b]elief in the principles of democracy, including decision by majority, and safeguarding minorities and their views. (Ibid.)

Significantly, Malkin found a source for support of the majority-rule aspect of democracy in *Bava Metzia* 59a-b and the Talmudic account of the Oven of Akhnai. This text—situated perhaps in folklore, but solid in its ethic—stands for the proposition that the laws must be developed by debating the merits of a question and voting on the outcome, rather than seeking guidance from a supernatural divinity.

Accordingly, Malkin recognized democracy as the best form of government—but that it would work only when government operated separately from any appeal to religion.

Belief in Judaism as culture affects one’s attitude to democracy and the separation of religion and state, and is a determinant factor in policy, humanistic education and choice of Jewish texts. (Ibid.)

There is one more key precept in Malkin’s science of politics: respect for and preservation of minority opinions. Again, he sourced this back to antiquity, in *Mishnah Eduyot* 1:6 and Rabbi Judah: don’t discard minority beliefs, because they might one day be shown to have been right.

Furthermore:

A majority ruling is . . . not the terminus of any dispute, but only a station on the way. The introduction of the temporal criterion legitimizes the reopening of controversies after some time. It also legitimizes a constant review of the body of Halakha, and permits sweeping changes in it from time to time.

– Yaakov Malkin, *Secular Judaism: Faith, Values and Spirituality*

Professor Yaakov Malkin
in his office

Page 19 cut from this preview edition.

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Thank you for your interest in Humanistic Judaism!

Since then, much has changed, and for the better.

SHJ has continued its growth in North America and Israel. SHJ leaders such as Rabbis Denise Handlarski, Adam Chalom, Jonathan Ben, Miriam Jerris, Eva Goldfinger, Jeremy Kridel, Tzemah Yoreh and many others have overcome the hurdles posed by the pandemic to engage inquiring minds through virtual learning. The significance of this reform was formalized by the Oravnu Congregation in Toronto on 27 February 2021, during the David Glazer Memorial Program, "Humanistic Judaism After COVID: Impact, Challenges and Opportunities."

Humanistic and humanist-sympathetic organizations and organizers have advanced apace. Jews for a Secular Democracy, *Jewish Currents*, the Workers Circle, and *The Forward* have expanded their online outreach. The *Unbound* podcast has just inaugurated a new virtual-learning project, *Unbound Yeshiva*, which includes a track, *Being a Secular Jew with Tova Birnbaum*.

There is one other encouraging sign that, given Yaakov Malkin's hope for the future of human progress and the democratic project. That would be the continuing progress of scientific knowledge. Malkin saw productivity in the arts, scholarship, and especially science, as representing a secular response to Judaism and human life in general. The freedom implicit in the scientific method to inquire, doubt, challenge, observe, explore and debate is as much a social activity as a technical one (see Marc Swetlitz's excellent essay "Science as a Value Within Humanistic Judaism" *Humanistic Judaism Magazine* (Fall 2019)). Scientific progress—of the kind that promotes human development, a good measure of democratic health. In the past year, science has brought about the rapid development of pandemic-curtailling vaccines, led to the discovery of amazing renewable energy sources, and brought us to the brink of observing the first moments of the physical universe, to mention a few.

I am convinced that Yaakov Malkin would write with guarded optimism about humanity today. And I find encouragement in that. ✡

And so how would we deal with the state of affairs? With some degree of alarm, I would imagine.

In the United States, the majority of the highest court in the land has taken an unabashed theocratic turn, turning into political issues ordinarily left to the executive and the legislative branches. . . . so much for the separation of church and state and the separation of powers.

Ominously, a significant minority of the US electorate hold the unwavering belief, in spite of the obvious contrary, that the last national election for head of state was illegitimate. How can we accommodate that kind of a minority judgment or achieve peaceful coexistence with hardened belief?

Further afield, national governments in Hungary and Poland have deployed religious, anti-immigrant, and racist tropes to erode democratic institutions. Even secure and stable Nordic democracies have seen a rise in ultra-right-wing nationalism.

Can authoritarian and autocratic leaders be counted on to reopen themselves to ideals of pluralism, equality and liberty?

I believe that Yaakov Malkin would have continued seeing education as a

His vision for universal education, which cannot be summarized in a single sentence, is a vision of a single

However, one might surmise succinctly that he would have been hopeful about the future, given the positive changes that have taken place in the world. . . . opportunities have expanded

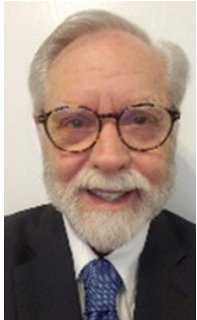
concern about the future of SHJ because of an educational deficit:

The secular stream lacks institutions . . . capable of creating and sustaining Jewish cultural communities. Consequently, the secular stream lacks the professional secular leadership such cultural and educational communities require – like the religious streams' numerous rabbis, or the handful of secular educators and rabbis at work in the secular stream.

– *Judaism Without God? Judaism as Culture and Bible as Literature*

APPRECIATION

Yaakov Malkin: A True Renaissance Man



RABBI JEFFREY
SCHESNOL

Yaakov Malkin was the consummate Secular Humanistic Jew. An Israeli educator, author, literary critic, and former professor in the faculty of arts at Tel Aviv University, Malkin was a prolific writer, playwright, and popular speaker. His writings concern art, cinema, and theater and he is the Laureate of the Life Achievement Award of Jerusalem International Film Festival. He wrote primarily on Jewish secular culture since the early 1990s and is published extensively on the subject in Hebrew, French, Russian, and English. He was co-founder and editor of *Free Judaism* (1995), an Israeli journal of Secular Judaism. Yaakov Malkin was Provost of the International Institute of Secular Humanistic Judaism since the death of Rabbi Sherwin Wine in July 2007 and of the IISHJ Jerusalem-based *Tmura* since its inception and until his death in 2019. Malkin's support of Secular Humanistic Judaism was exceptional.

Malkin was born into a secular Jewish family in Warsaw, Poland on August 3, 1926. His father, Dov Ber Malkin, was a professor, lecturer, and theatre critic, and his mother was Felia Flexer Malkin, an accountant at the Histadrut and a clerk at Bank Hapoalim. Yaakov attended the General Jewish Labour Bund, a secular Jewish socialist party school and moved to Mandatory Palestine, a geopolitical entity established between 1920 and 1948 with his family at the age of seven, where he continued his education in the school system of the Histadrut Labor Federation, one of the most powerful institutions in Israel, a mainstay of the Labor Zionist movement. Following in his family's footsteps he was a resolute secular unionist, outgoing speaker, with a deep-seated appreciation for aesthetics.

Over the course of much of his life, one might say he had done it all. For fifty years he was a founder, author, publisher, broadcaster, lecturer, teacher, film critic, and an ardent public speaking advocate for his firm Secular Humanistic beliefs. Yaakov Malkin was a true renaissance man.

Yaakov Malkin was named the Society for Humanistic Judaism's 2021–22 Role Model of the Year, a program intended to create a sense of excitement about outstanding people who demonstrate the organization's values and philosophy.

The SHJ cited that Yaakov Malkin was a real *mensh* (one who always does the right thing):

Malkin was an original and powerful spokesperson

for the Secular Humanistic Jewish movement. Malkin dedicated his writings to the humanistic beliefs shared by the non-religious community in the West, and among the Jewish people in particular. Malkin claimed that there are no nonbelievers, but rather people who express a variety of beliefs in their day-to-day lives. These can include religious beliefs, characterized by a commitment to follow religious leaders who claim to speak in the name of a god, or nonreligious beliefs, which include the belief in humans as creators of their own paths and behaviors, whether as individuals or in society, with the goal of attaining the purpose of human life: happiness.

Malkin's Views on God and the Bible

In a February 3, 2010, essay in *Readings* Malkin wrote:

The plot begins with God's desire for a self-image. It thickens when God's self-image becomes a maker of self-images, and God resents it. From this initial conflict, others emerge. The plot reaches its crisis when God tries and fails to conceal his originating motive from a single physically ravaged but morally aroused exemplar of himself.

Malkin continues this theme, in an essay found in his book *Secular Jewish Culture*:

*Man is his own master, even if all is foreseen. All is foreseen because freedom is granted. The fact that we are free to choose in no way contradicts the fact that 'all is foreseen.' Man is an individual in a world of laws (foreseen). It is man's right and duty to choose, discovering the secrets of life not only in the laws of nature but also in the ethical principles without which there can be no good life. Hillel said 'that which is hateful to you, do not unto your fellow (man). That is the entire Torah; the rest is never-ending study.' In his first novella in 1912, *Description of a Struggle*, Franz Kafka tells the story of a man who struggled in the darkness on an unfamiliar street with an unknown figure. When dawn broke, he saw that he had been alone all night and that he had in fact struggled with himself. Our encounter with God is an encounter with ourselves.*

Malkin's "God" was not just a fictional character but a metaphor for how we see ourselves. Malkin's approach to the Bible is illustrated in his book, *Judaism Without God*:

Knowledge, in other words, is not a force that liberates man from evil, is essential to man's humanity, since only knowledge affords man the freedom to choose between existing alternatives or create new ones. In the garden of Eden, knowledge cannot be withheld from man, for he will rebel against any who would deny them the freedom to choose. The biblical evil period according to the author (God) not only does knowledge significantly reduce the difference between good and evil, but it releases man from dependence upon the natural environment provided by God.

This can be viewed as man's ability to create his own environment.

Belief in values, the power of inference, the ability to foresee the consequences of one's actions or failure to act, just as belief in the difference between good and evil are conditional upon the knowledge that the consequences of the two, the ability to prefer the better action to reject the worse depends upon knowledge of the consequences of our actions. Without belief and values there would be no standards by which to judge and choose. Without knowledge, it would be impossible to apply moral values to their choices.

But, according to Deuteronomy 30:15-16:

See, I set before you this day life and prosperity, death, and adversity. For I command you this day, to love the Lord your God, to walk in His ways, and to keep His commandments, His laws, and His rules, that you may thrive and increase, and that the Lord your God may bless you in the land that you are about to enter and possess.

Therefore, according to scripture, good comes from God, who is uniquely qualified to tell us what is good; God is holy, omnipotent, and omniscient, not to mention unknowable. The Bible presents numerous stories of God doing good things, which

he does, but the Biblical God also does many immoral things.

Malkin recognized the Biblical God was very much knowable and indeed fallible as a literary figure, complete with positive and negative traits. He was not created by God, but that instead God was created by man.

Malkin on Judaism

Malkin perceived Judaism as a pluralistic culture, one that has been pluralistic since the biblical era. He characterized Judaism as a pluralistic culture characterized by belief in many gods, religions, rituals, beliefs, and opinions. During the Second Temple period and in Hellenistic times, Judaism developed a large variety of sects, cultures, beliefs, and opinions with the most significant outcomes being Rabbinic Judaism and Christianity.

Malkin claimed that there are no nonbelievers in Judaism. He believed that Jews lived their day-to-day lives, unlike atheist writers such as Sam Harris, who see atheism as the lack of belief.

We begin our Shabbat celebrations with:

We gather together virtually on this Shabbat with our community of believers. We believe that Judaism is the entire experience of the Jewish people. We believe in the value of celebrating Jewish culture, music, art, humor, food, and identity. We believe that the Jewish people from all over the world. We believe that being together strengthens and enhances us.

—Miriam Ferris

Malkin expresses his views of the humanistic belief in people that leads to national awareness and belief in the rights of all people and all nations. He believed that the Jewish people are obligated to the Jewish people, to keep the rules of their leaders, especially those that stand in contrast to the values of humanism and universal justice.

These Secular Humanistic principles stand in contrast to postmodern relativism, in that its adherents see themselves as bound by universal moral-ethical values, as articulated by philosophers such as Confucius and Hillel. These values of justice lead to the moral values of egalitarianism, political freedom, and human and national rights, tenets with which we can live. 🕊

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Malkin perceived Judaism as a pluralistic culture, both in its secular and religious forms. He claimed that Judaism has been pluralistic since the biblical era when the culture of the Jewish people was characterized by belief in many gods, religions, rituals, beliefs, and opinions.

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Thank you for your interest in Humanistic Judaism!

In his own words

**An excerpt from the essay “God as literary figure” from the book
Judaism Without God? Judaism as Culture and Bible as Literature (2007)**

Editor's Note: I originally planned to provide a variety of short excerpts from the extensive literary productions of Malkin, but in the end chose a single excerpt that gets at the heart of a core concept of our movement — that the “God of the Bible” is a literary character, created by humans. I'm hopeful that this excerpt can also serve as a bit of a teaser for our next issue of HJ magazine that will be focusing on theme of Humanistic ways of engaging with the Hebrew scriptures.

In secular Jewish culture, the prevailing belief is that God – a character in biblical literature – was created by man. In Genesis, God was made in the image of man (male and female), in other works he is depicted as an incorporeal figure, omnipotent like nature and human in character, speech and temperament. Yahweh, god of Israel, created in the Israelite literature of the Bible, differs from the gods of other peoples, also created by man in the ancient myths of the Fertile Crescent and Greece. Contrary to the many gods created in the myths and literature of polytheistic peoples, Yahweh is alone in the world, without family and without a specific abode (like Olympus). Yahweh is portrayed in the Bible as a god who preceded the universe and nature, which he created out of the void and with which he continues to struggle.

In their belief that God created the world and man, the authors of the Bible ascribe to God all of the laws that govern individual and social human behaviour, thereby eliminating the difference between religious precepts (man's duties to God – e.g. cult and ritual) and civil laws (man's duty to his fellow man and to the society within which he lives). This kind of theistic belief makes it incumbent upon the individual to obey

religious leaders, their laws and precepts, since they are perceived as representatives of God, creator of the universe and human society, king and overseer of all they do, who metes out rewards and punishments as he sees fit.

The belief of secular Jews that God and moral values are human constructs frees man from the authority of religious establishment leaders, the Halakhah they have created, the commandments they have spoken in God's name, and the system of rules called religion, which they impose upon those who believe in them and in the ability of human beings to speak on God's behalf. Such belief is essentially a-theistic, since it rejects the authority of religion and religious leaders to impose a specific set of beliefs or rules of conduct.

A-theism takes many different forms, e.g. various pantheistic approaches, which identify nature with the divinity, inasmuch as they (like Spinoza) view nature as divine; or conversely, identify the divinity with nature (God has no specific abode, because he is all-encompassing).

Agnostics reject the authority of religion, because they believe that it is impossible to know whether God exists independently of the literature that shaped him; and that consequently, religious leaders claiming to speak in God's name should not be believed, since he cannot be known, encountered or heard.

Deists (like Voltaire) have postulated that a supreme force one might call God could exist, but that such a force is far-removed from humanity and from individual human beings, so that those who purport to speak in its name should not be believed or obeyed.

An analogous approach is that of the religious philosophers (such as the author of

the *Guide for the Perplexed*), who assert that the human mind is incapable of grasping God, to whom no characteristic – including existence – should be ascribed. Advocates of this approach believe God to be the supreme wisdom manifest in creation, accessible only to a select few scholars and scientists; or (as Einstein believed), “God” is what we call the enigma of the orderly harmony of all existence – microcosm and macrocosm – order that can be studied, but the source of which can never be known.

What all adherents of the aforementioned beliefs, pantheists, deists, agnostics and declared atheists, have in common are the following:

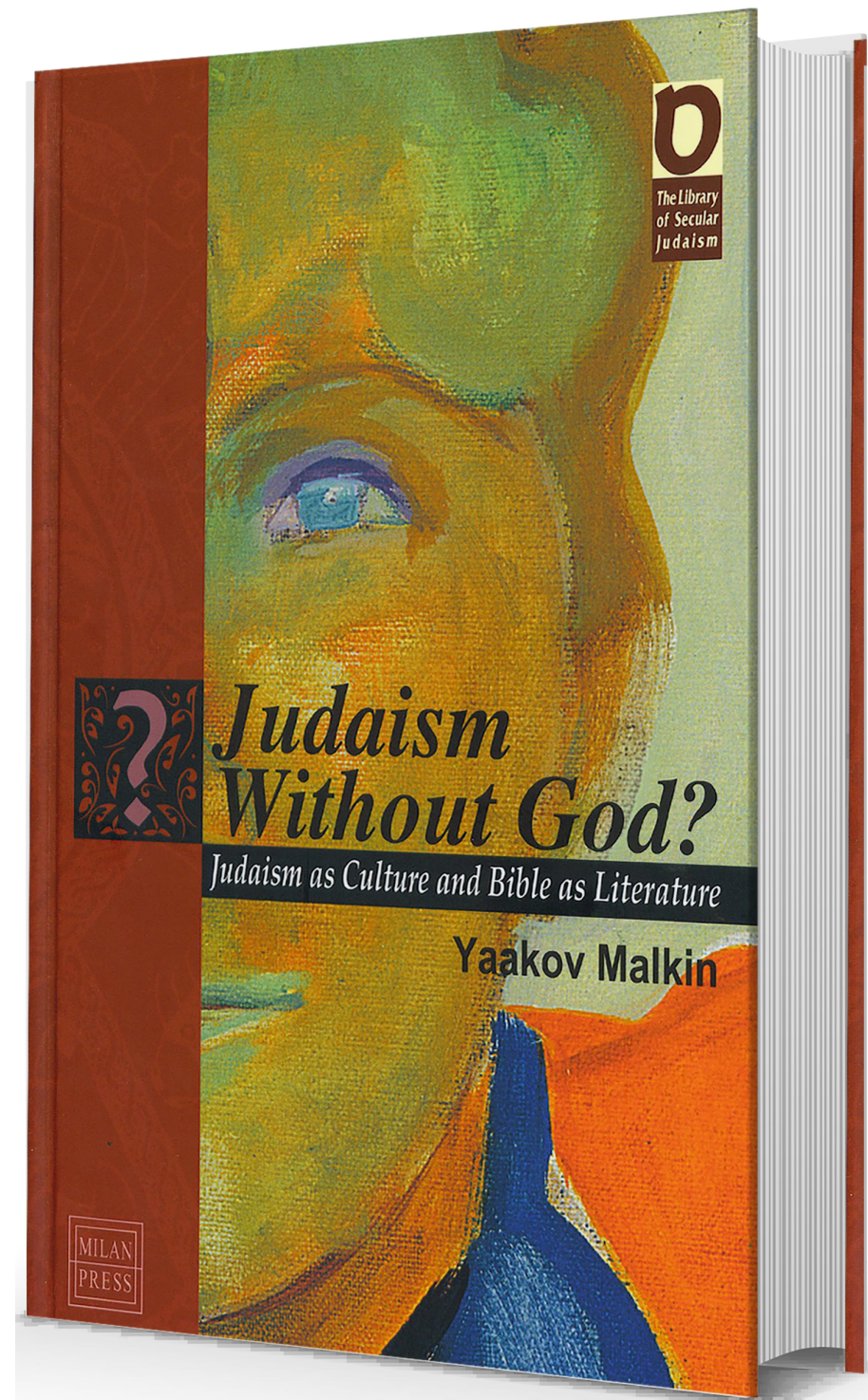
- A perception of the biblical God as a literary figure created by the authors of the various biblical works; given human form (mouth, arms, etc.) and human characteristics (speaking, commanding, striking) in order to provide unsophisticated readers with an allegory (as Maimonides claimed in *Guide for the Perplexed*), to which they could relate and in which they could believe. The literary figure God, fashioned by the works of the Bible, is anthropomorphic, and can therefore be said to speak words with a mouth, perform actions with an outstretched arm, express rage or disappointment when the Israelites are ungrateful and complain about the conditions of their liberation from slavery, etc.

- An “a-theistic” approach to established religion, in the sense of a belief that one who is free of theism, religion, religious leaders and their precepts, is committed to the man-made moral values upon which life in human society – the only structure within which one can be fully human – depends. When religious precepts and customs violate human moral values (like the binding and

sacrificing of a child upon an altar, or any precept/custom that discriminates against the female half of society), they must not be obeyed and should be outlawed. Rather than integrating Halakhah and civil constitutional law, a clear distinction must be made between the two. Both are man-made, and both should be judged in accordance with the principles of human justice. When Halakhah and religious precepts clash with the constitution and democratic law, democratic civil law must take precedence, as long as the latter complies with the principles of justice, safeguarded by the supreme courts.

The distinction between God as creator of man, and God as literary figure created by man, is thus a decisive factor in determining one's approach to life within society, and to society's creations – the Bible included. Those who believe that man is sovereign, free to create laws, abolish or change them in keeping with moral values, adopt a critical approach to the biblical laws and precepts, as well as to the actions and statements of all the characters depicted in the Bible. Such a critical approach – whereby one may accept or reject any biblical precept, statement or action of God, Abraham or Moses – is part of the moral education served by acquaintance with the works of the Bible.

Even the biblical authors who truly believed in God as creator of the universe and supreme judicial authority, were extremely critical of Yahweh's morality. Abram asks whether it is right for the judge of all the earth to mete out collective punishment; readers of Job know that God and not Job was responsible for the latter's woes; the authors of Ecclesiastes and Jeremiah know that there is no justice in Yahweh's world, in which the wicked prosper and the righteous suffer. Like all literary figures in classical literature the world over, God sins in terms of the readers' moral values. That is also how the characters behave in the Iliad, the Odyssey, the dramas of Aeschylus, Sophocles and Euripides, Shakespeare, Molière and Goethe. Plato was wrong about authors who depict sinful protagonists, when he suggested that they be garlanded with praise and expelled from



the city. Characters in literary masterpieces – Yahweh included – are not paragons of virtue. They represent human, emotional, social, religious and moral reality.

Relating to sinful protagonists in a lenient fashion because of their “sacredness” in religious tradition is detrimental to moral education and the development of critical ability. In terms of the values of a humanist reader, there is no moral justification for Abraham's blind obedience, deceiving his son, leading him to the place of the sacrifice, laying upon Isaac the wood with which he intends to immolate him, binding him on

the altar, bringing the knife to his throat in order to slaughter him, because that is what he believed his god had commanded him to do. God's commandment to Abraham that he sacrifice his son is blatantly immoral, as is Abraham's obedience, and the intrigues he employs in order to carry out the order.

Perceiving the God of the Bible as a literary figure allows one to read the works of the Bible and develop an affinity for the characters they present, including Yahweh. Such an affinity is part of the poetic and intellectual experience afforded by literature. 🌸

EVENT

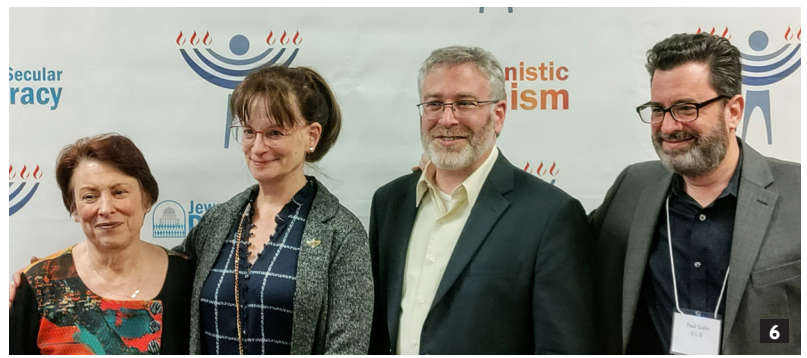


National Gathering and IISHJ Ordination 2022

The National Gathering of Secular and Humanistic Jews co-sponsored by the Society for Humanistic Judaism and the International Institute for Secular Humanistic Judaism took place April 22-23 in Deerfield, Illinois. The stimulating and inspiring weekend included the ordination of two rabbis: Rabbi Mary Raskin from Portland, OR, and Rabbi Jeffrey Schesnol from Phoenix, AZ, and the graduation of three officiants from the IISHJ Officiant Program. Also included were provocative presentations and discussions including Rabbi Sivan Maas from Israel, and Rabbis Adam Chalom, Jodi Kornfeld, and Miriam Jerris from North America; a tour of the exhibit “Rise up: Stonewall and the LGBTQ Rights Movement” at the Illinois Holocaust Museum in Skokie; powerful and entertaining storytelling by “You’re Being Ridiculous”; and of course lots of good food and fellowship. 🕊️

This photo spread is a small taste of the weekend, but to experience more (including videos, photos, and written excerpts from some of the presentations), please visit <https://shj.org/2022annualgathering/>





1. Members of SHJ; 2. Jerid Morisco, Rabbi Jonathan Cohen, Rabbi Miriam Jerris, Rabbi Jeffrey Schesno, Rabbi Mary Raskin, Claire Bergen, Jeanne Snodgrass, Rabbi Adam Chalom; 3. Jerid Morisco, Rabbi Jeffrey Schesno, Jeanne Snodgrass, Claire Bergen; 4. SHJ Staff: Kathy Tschirhart, Jennifer Grodsky, Rabbi Miriam Jerris, Paul Golin; 5. SHJ Literature Table; 6. Rabbi Miriam Jerris, Rabbi Sivan Maas, Rabbi Adam Chalom, Paul Golin; 7. Rabbi Jeffrey Falick, Rabbi Jodi Kornfeld; 8. Rabbi Mary Raskin; 9. Bus Tour to Illinois Holocaust Museum. Paul Golin, Rabbi Miriam Jerris, Marlene Cohen, Allen Gorrelick (other SHJ members); 10. Shabbat with Kol Hadash Humanistic Congregation at North Shore Unitarian Church in Deerfield, Illinois

SPEECH

Award continued from page 5

experience and values like reason and empathy and hope and courage, without reference to the supernatural.

When I say Jews for a Secular Democracy is that means it or those includes secular non-theistic Jews like us but also includes Jews from the religious denominations like Conservative, Reform, Orthodox, and Jews of many other faiths, friends, family, and allies. The diversity of approaches just within Judaism—let alone among all the world's religions—is exactly why we are all better protected when our government is not based on one religion's approach over others, or religion over non-religion. And this is true for so many of the issues we care about, including LGBTQ equality and, as we're seeing even this week, racial justice.

Nobody in this room—and I'd argue nobody in our entire federal government—understands the Constitution better than Congressman Raskin. An author, a lawyer, a constitutional scholar, a professor for more than 25 years, and of course an elected representative, you who are here today, you know his biography well, so let me just share what it was that prompted us to contact him about this award, which we actually discovered three years ago but for logistical reasons were unable to present until today.

In April of 2018, Congressman Raskin co-founded the Congressional Freethought Caucus and currently serves as its co-chair. The Congressional Freethought Caucus was created in part to “oppose discrimination against atheists, agnostics, humanists, seekers, religious and nonreligious persons, and to champion the value of freedom of thought and conscience worldwide.

Page 26 cut from this preview edition.

Full version available for members of SHJ-affiliated congregations, SHJ Independent Members and Magazine subscribers only.

If you are already eligible for full access, please contact info@shj.org for the correct link; otherwise find membership information here: <https://shj.org/membership>

Or subscription information here: <https://shj.org/product/subscribe>

Thank you for your interest in Humanistic Judaism!

Congressman Jamie Raskin (MD-08) accepts the Jews for a Secular Democracy Constitutional Defender Award, December 5, 2021.

Promote public policy founded on the basic values of reason, science, and moral values. And protect the secular values of our government by adhering to the strict Constitutional principle of the separation of church and state.”

You can see why this is so profoundly important to an initiative called Jews for a Secular Democracy! But on a more personal note, as someone who

identifies as Jewish and also as atheist/agnostic/humanist, to be seen, and heard, and represented in Congress fills me with hope for a better future. And hope is much needed these days.

Three years ago, when we first named it the “Congressional Defender Award,” we had no idea that Congressman Representative Raskin would be defending our Constitution, as lead impeachment manager for the second impeachment trial of our previous president. The whole nation watched Congressman Raskin overcome incredible adversity to stand for reason and moral values.

Thank you for accepting this Jews for a Secular Democracy Constitutional Defender Award and thank you, Congressman Raskin, for all that you do on behalf of all Americans. 🌟



TRIBUTES

IN MEMORY OF

Gilbert Feldman

– Shareen Edelson & Arnold Menchel

– Stacy Lieberman

– Steven & Lori Mesirow

IN HONOR OF

Paul Golin

who met with the board of directors of the
Jewish Secular Community of Asheville

– Doris Potash

TO

**Rabbi Mary
Raskin**

In honor of your
Rabbinic Ordination

– SHJ Board and Staff

– Sue Greenspan

– Miriam Jerris &
Steve Stawicki

– Rabbi Jeffrey Schesnol

TO

**Rabbi Jeffrey
Schesnol**

In honor of your
Rabbinic Ordination

Mazel tov on your
rabbinic ordination

– Rabbi Miriam Jerris &
Steve Stawicki

– Rabbi Mary Raskin

TO

**Barbara
Sugerman**

In memory of your
brother Marvin Littky

– Miriam Jerris &
Steve Stawicki

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