

Liturgy  
Innovation

The Tools of  
Practice

Reinventing  
Ritual

# HUMANISTIC JUDAISM

FALL 2022



## Reclaiming Our Traditions

Adopting Jewish rituals  
for Humanistic practice

## 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.

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# FROM THE EDITOR



## Rebooting the Rituals

Judaism is a tradition that includes elements of ritual and ceremony, but also one that continually reconceives and adapts these elements. Often this happens by way of an initial innovation in one locale or in one movement of Judaism, but that then spreads and further morphs through a kind of cultural evolutionary process.

For almost 60 years, Humanistic Judaism has played a critical role in this process, through our development of non-theistic liturgy and our work in reinventing rituals that are both intellectually consistent but also emotionally satisfying, and connected to our heritage. In this issue, we will be exploring and celebrating what we have brought to the table.

Our development of Humanistic liturgy and the reinvention of old rituals immediately comes to mind, which is why I'm so glad to have a variety of voices exploring this issue, including an essay by William Thompson on how and why he wrote his Humanistic siddur, a discussion by Risa Morris on the ways that her congregation (Oranyu in Toronto) has reinvented the ritual of

B'nai Mitzvah, a personal account by myself on why and how I decided to engage with mikvah as a Humanistic convert, and an account by George Rockmore (from CHJ-Fairfield County, CT) on the practical and creative ways that his congregation has adapted rituals in the context of the pandemic.

Jewish rituals, of course, involve more than the gathering of people and the saying of words, but also the use of material ritual objects. Unfortunately, the broader Jewish discourse around ritual objects has focused on the perspectives of the most traditional parts of the Jewish spectrum, operating under the problematic assumption that the cerebral focus of progressive forms of Judaism would be averse to the use of ritual objects. I am happy to report that this is not an accurate assessment of Humanistic Judaism, as can be seen through the accounts of James Ryn McDevitt-Phelps (who provided us with his intentional 3-step approach to the creation of Jewish ritual objects), Jerid Morisco (who shared about why he decided to create a Humanistic tallit), Shelia Malcom (who shared about a cultural B'Mitzvah session where students created their own mezuzot), and Rabbi Miriam Jerris who discussed the ways that Humanistic Jews have honored the legacy of the mezuzah as a marker of cultural identity through the use of mezuzah scrolls with words that reflect OUR deepest values.

Also in this issue is an account by Stu Dolnick of the efforts by Congregation Beth Ami (Boulder, Colorado) in providing support for an Afghan refugee family in their community. It is a powerful story of what is possible when people unite to support fellow human beings. It is also not the only story of refugee support efforts in our movement, so we will be highlighting the refugee resettlement work of other SHJ-affiliated congregations in the coming months on the SHJ blog.

Speaking of our blog, since our last issue of this magazine we have several new posts worth checking out, including an essay by Marlene Cohen on the relevance of our SHJ mission statement and our ongoing series of posts called "This Month in Humanistic Judaism." These posts can be found at [www.shj.org/blog](http://www.shj.org/blog). We welcome your comments and suggestions. Please send them to James Branum at [humanisticjudaismmagazine@gmail.com](mailto:humanisticjudaismmagazine@gmail.com).

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "James M. Branum". The signature is written in a cursive, flowing style.

**J.M.B.**  
**Editor**

## HUMANISTIC JUDAISM

FALL 2022

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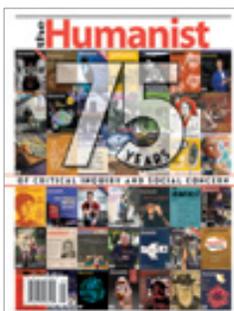
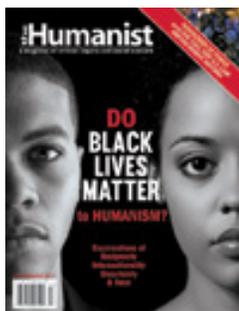
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# COMMUNITY NEWS

DEERFIELD, IL | BETH CHAVERIM HUMANISTIC JEWISH COMMUNITY

## The Story of Beth Chaverim Humanistic Jewish Community's Torah



Beth Chaverim Humanistic Jewish Community owns its own Torah scroll that has an interesting provenance. It is the most significant community ritual object we have. We use it for our b'nai mitzvah when our students read the Torah portion of their choice in Hebrew directly from the scroll; our High Holiday services when Rabbi Jodi Kornfeld reads a relevant portion which is the basis of the message she delivers; and as an educational tool on Simchat Torah when it is unrolled and the students can see and touch the scroll themselves. We bought it on

eBay from a congregation in New York, and the only concern the seller had was that it go to a "Jewish home." It was not a kosher scroll, which did



not matter to us. Many years later, we accidentally came upon the scribal error (wrong word written) that rendered it unkosher.

Of great importance to us is the mantle we commissioned to be made by an Israeli artist, Miriam Aranne. Because far too many women in the Bible are not named, indeed, only approximately 8% of all named characters are female, we asked her to add her name to her textile artwork. She had never been asked to do that before. As we explained our rationale, she gladly embroidered her name in Hebrew on the velvet mantle. At Simchat Torah, we not only show the scroll to the students, but also expressly explain the story of the woman who made the mantle.

– Rabbi Jodi Kornfeld

FAIRFIELD COUNTY, CT | CONGREGATION FOR HUMANISTIC JUDAISM OF FAIRFIELD COUNTY, CT

## Evolving Rituals During the Pandemic

CHJ of Fairfield County, Connecticut, continues to craft services that update familiar rituals by addressing modern-day concerns, whether they are conducted in person, on zoom, or hybrid. We do this because we believe it's important to address relevant social issues in our services such as the environmental crisis, gun safety, and food insecurity.

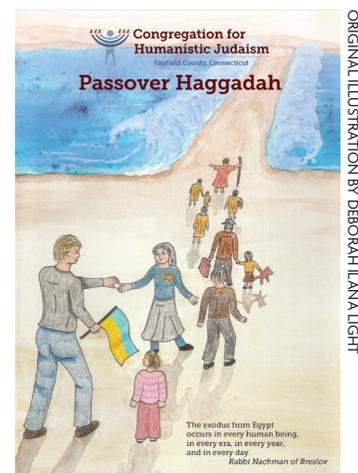
Our Passover Seder last year focused on the ongoing conflict in Ukraine and highlighted the connections between the Passover story and the plight of Ukrainians as they struggle

for freedom and safety. It's a struggle well-known by Jews throughout history, who have often been refugees in search of freedom, dignity, and justice. The illustration that appeared on the Haggadah cover and shown here, was created by CHJ's president Ruth Light's daughter, Deborah, and it shows our solidarity with the people of Ukraine.

At Tu B' Shevat we acknowledge our responsibility as caretakers and stewards of the Earth to ensure a safe, clean, and healthy planet for future generations. Although this was

a Zoom event, we delivered "goody bags" so people could participate in the service which includes eating seasonal foods. We asked members to talk about their favorite season and why it was their favorite. People spoke of carefree summer days at the beach and other fond memories. One member also spoke about the recent death of her father and the creation of a pollinator's garden in his honor. It was quite moving and led many other participants to share their own losses during the ongoing pandemic.

These are just a few of the



ORIGINAL ILLUSTRATION BY DEBORAH LANA LIGHT

On the cover: "The Answer" –

ways we work to stay connected during these difficult times. The work goes on.

– George Rockmore

BOULDER, CO | BETH AMI COLORADO CONGREGATION FOR HUMANISTIC JUDAISM

## Ritual and Ritual Items – Mezuzah-Making

Leora is a passionate reader and loves to question and analyze, but her favorite learning style is hands-on and experiential. A recent Cultural B Mitzvah session at the home of Madrikha Sheila Malcolm began by researching the source of the mezuzah in Jewish ritual and the traditional content of the paper scroll secured inside. An internet search of mezuzah images and a few YouTube videos provided inspiration as we prepared to use Fimo and Sculpey clay to make our own. We brainstormed a list of words in Hebrew and English that might be represented by the letter shin added to the mezuzah front. We combined color, clay and creativity, inserted two

nail holes, propped up the center of each mezuzah with a bit of foil to keep its shape, and baked for about 30 minutes.

Choosing from a variety of meaningful scroll messages, including scripture, song lyrics and modern poetry, we cut out and rolled our “prayers,” which were then inserted into the back of the mezuzah. To add to the cultural richness of the session, a Jewish music playlist entertained us, and we noshed on Israeli/Mediterranean snacks. Each participant left with a personalized, ready-to-hang mezuzah, a few clay beads, and an enjoyable, hands-on experience.

– Shelia Malcom

Mezuzot and more,  
ready to bake.

PHOTO BY MARTI HIRSCH



## Events in Our Movement

After a very busy high holiday season, member congregations of the Society for Humanistic Judaism are settling into the rhythm of fall with Shabbat services and educational offerings, with of course, Hanukkah being just around the corner.

A full listing of upcoming activities can be found in *This Month in Humanistic Judaism*, a monthly feature on our SHJ blog online at [www.shj.org/blog](http://www.shj.org/blog), but here are a select few events coming from some of our communities:

- **Kol Hadash (Deerfield, IL)** will be looking at the “Evolution of Hanukkah” at its Shabbat service on December 16th at 7:30 pm CDT.
- **Oraynu (Toronto)** will be welcoming acclaimed indigenous filmmaker Alanis Obomsawin for a showing of her documentary *Trick or Treaty?* on November 7th at 7:00 pm EDT. The showing will be followed by a Q&A.
- **Congregation for Humanistic Judaism (Fairfield, CT)** will be hosting speaker Elissa Kaplan who will discuss Jewish themes that relate to the American tradition of Halloween on October 28th at 7:30 pm EDT.
- **Attention Sci-fi fans!** Humanistic Judaism is publishing a Sci-fi themed issue in early 2023, so if you are a fan with thoughts on how the genre connects with Humanism and/or Judaism, we want to hear from you. Email us at [humanisticjudaismmagazine@gmail.com](mailto:humanisticjudaismmagazine@gmail.com)

Society for  
**Humanistic  
Judaism**

# COMMUNITY NEWS

BOULDER, CO | BETH AMI COLORADO CONGREGATION FOR HUMANISTIC JUDAISM

## Colorado Congregation Helps to Resettle an Afghan Family

As the resettlement of Afghan immigrants continues across the country, organizations are rallying to help families get established in their new country. Their needs are numerous and critical: housing, clothing, transportation, employment, education, language, and culture.

Our tradition reminds us that we were “strangers in a strange land (Egypt)” and that we should therefore remember to attend to the needs of strangers in our land. With this ethic as a driving force, Beth Ami Colorado Congregation for Humanistic Judaism has stepped in to help a recently arrived family get settled in the Denver/Boulder metropolitan area.

The family (whose identity is being protected by using aliases and omitting specific details) consists of a widowed mother and her three children. The family fled their home in Afghanistan when the children were still very young. They traveled through the mountains on foot to reach Iran, sleeping on the sides of roads along the way. A year later, they journeyed to Turkey, where they lived for the next several years.

They arrived in Colorado last fall, seeking safety and unsure of what their future would hold. They lost everything and started from scratch.

The two younger children are now attending school. The oldest child works part-time for a food delivery service. We are helping them learn English to open up new job opportunities and perhaps the chance to attend college. The middle child, who is still in high school, is able to work part-time at a nearby grocery store. Unfortunately, several serious health issues prevent the mother from working. Their only other sources of income are from two government programs, Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF) and SNAP (food stamps).

One of our members learned that

volunteers from local faith communities and service organizations were being matched with families and were helping them get settled and on their feet. She considered the possibility that Beth Ami would want to become involved and brought the idea

experience and skills necessary to tackle the family’s needs, including school enrollment, English language tutoring, identifying and responding to employment opportunities, connecting with government benefit programs, becoming established with medical providers, and orienting them to their new neighborhood. We also help them adhere to the sometimes-challenging reporting regulations that apply to immigrants.

It helps that most of us are retired because this work can be extremely time-consuming and must often be done during the office hours of schools and agencies.

Our team hoped to develop personal connections with the family and that is certainly happening. The family understands how lucky they are to have us working for them, but as is often the case when involved in volunteer activities, the volunteers are receiving as much as they are giving. We are confident that as time moves on and their critical needs have been met, our friendships will continue.

Postscript: Since completing this article, I’ve gotten feedback from team members suggesting that I emphasize

our major “discovery,” just in case this piece encourages other groups to consider doing what we’ve done. We have found that due to issues of language, culture, government red tape and lack of coordination, understaffed social service agencies, and sometimes fragile relationships between volunteers and family members, that there is far more to do than you’d expect, that every goal is much more difficult to accomplish than you’d anticipate, and that set-backs and the need to “pivot” never seem to stop. This is not a project for casual participants, but we hope that if you have the resources that you need that you’ll consider taking on a similar project in your community.

– Stu Dolnick



**Team member Kate Leslie introduces the mother (masked) to American culture. Halloween fun with new friends!**

to the attention of our Board of Directors, which decided to form a team and see how we might be of service. I should point out that we’re a very small congregation and so this was a challenge not to be taken lightly.

We worked with Lutheran Family Services, the government-assigned organization responsible for settling Afghan immigrants. Volunteers needed to go through background checks and receive training to understand some basic cultural differences (such as removing one’s shoes when entering a home) and the role of volunteers. Our team now consists of five Beth Ami members, two non-members, and a team leader from the Boulder [Resettlement] Task Force. Working together, we have the

# RITUAL



## A Humanistic Mikvah Experience?

BY JAMES M BRANUM

The practice of visiting a mikvah is not a common Humanistic Jewish experience. In fact, I think it would be fair to say that many Humanistic Jews would see the practice as being contrary to our values. It is for this reason that I want to share my story as an example of how this ritual might be reimagined in a Humanistic context.

### *My Story*

I was adopted into Judaism through the Society for Humanistic Judaism in 2014. The process was simple — a series of self-study

(guided by Rabbi Miriam Jerris), writing an essay and then choosing a Hebrew name — after which I got my certification of Jewish adoption/convention. This process was perfect for me (as I wasn't yet part of an in-person Jewish community), so I jumped into it with enthusiasm.

I remember the day that I got my certificate in the mail — I was excited about it and told some of my family and friends and of course, posted on social media about it, but at the same time, it also felt anticlimactic.

Several years later, my family and I joined a Reform temple in our city. I was concerned at the time about whether my Jewish conversion would be accepted, but thankfully the rabbi said that according to a responsa from the Reform movement, those who convert through the movement of Humanistic Judaism were Jews in the eyes of the Reform movement. She also encouraged me to join the congregation's "Introduction to Judaism" class, as they intended the class

*MIKVAH continued on page 26*

RITUAL

# Mazel tov!



# Oraynu B'nai Mitzvah Helps Students Discover their Jewish Identity

BY RISA MORRIS



# RITUAL



Like in most other B'nai Mitzvah programs, our students study about Jewish history and culture, as well as participate in and initiate tzedakah projects, but also study humanistic ethics and values. Our students do this so that they can find their place within the Humanistic movement and find meaning in what their Judaism means to them.

What may be different about our program is how the B'nai Mitzvah students share their journey in our ceremony, which is as a group and presented as a live theater production. Initially conceived by Rabbi Karen Levy and enriched by others, especially Oraynu's long-time school principal Steve Shabes, of blessed memory, the play serves as the culmination of Oraynu's grade 7 year. The learning leading up to it emerges from the values and history-based curriculum for Secular Humanistic Jewish Supplementary Schools, JK-7, by Rabbis Eva Goldfinger and Karen Levy. Sandi Horowitz provided the music.

Our beautiful script includes poetry, song, and dramatic narratives that reflect the experiences and humanistic values of

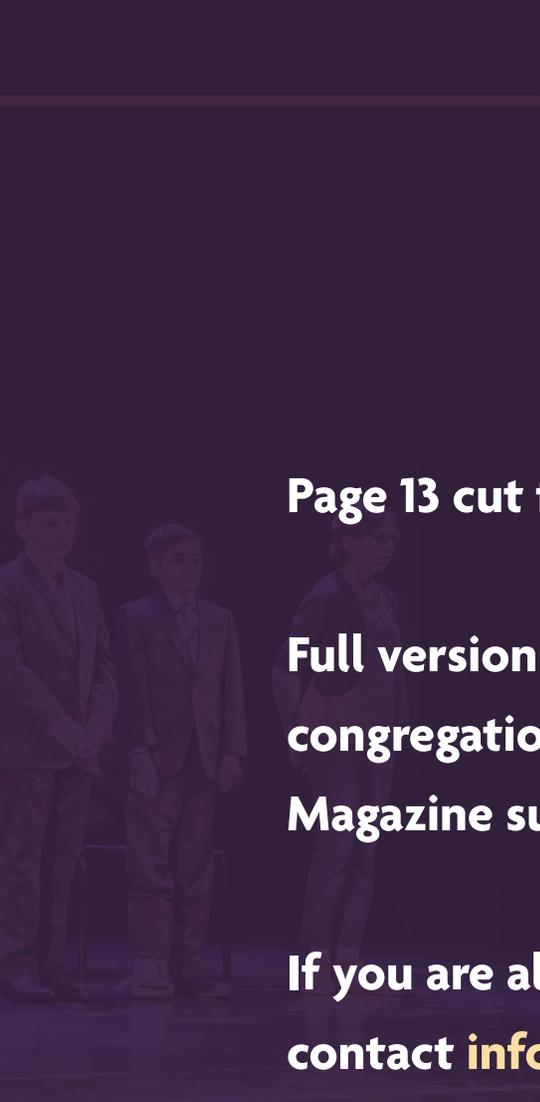
the Jewish people. Through this script, the children teach their guests highlights of their lessons learned. Each student is responsible for learning their lines and songs for the program, but most importantly the students each research, write, and deliver a speech about a strong Jewish role model, living or historic, who embodies the humanistic values that they would like to imbue. The students also reflect upon and prepare a speech about what it means to become a B'nai Mitzvah. These research projects and speeches are at the heart of our ceremony.

In choosing their role model, they send in their top three choices to the B'nai Mitzvah coordinator, so that we can help balance the ceremony with the role models chosen. This process ensures that the requirements are met, but also that no two students are choosing and discussing the same role model. Students typically get their first choice.

Our ceremony is amended each year to smoothly incorporate the role model speeches into the narrative of the script. We also revise the script to balance the information that

our guests learn, particularly to ensure that influential people of all genders, different time periods, and different segments of the population are included. The basic tenets of Secular Humanistic Judaism are included in the script, as well as their origins in modern and secularizing Jewish life, such as Yiddish culture, Jewish socialism and activism, and Zionism. This means that the experiences of Doña Gracia Nasi, Alfred Dreyfus, and Jews from around the world, along with the story "Kaporos" by Sholem Aleichem, are acted out.

Through the script, a student asks questions that some of their guests might be wondering that then get answered by another student. Each interaction takes the guests through the thought process that our students used in their studies. The students tell the journey of Humanistic Judaism and sing the songs that naturally meld into the narrative such as "Im Ayn Ani Li Me Li," "Die Gedanken Zind Frei," "Im Tirtzu," and of course, "Ayfo Ori." The messages of Rabbi Sherwin Wine are spoken with meaning and conviction.



**Page 13 cut from this preview edition.**

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**Thank you for your interest in Humanistic Judaism!**

lasting friendships.

The program is designed to be flexible, which was a major bonus when the pandemic struck. Because of COVID, we needed to create a way to continue our B'nai Mitzvah ceremony while distancing. As principal of the program, I had to write a script and identify portions that could be filmed outside. Each portion had different combinations of students so that they all got to collaborate safely with one another. Each student had a role to play, and they all uploaded clips of themselves singing the songs. And then the magic happened. David and I edited the clips together into a video for each song balancing the voices of the students. The speeches and congratulatory speeches were pre-recorded in a studio setting, and then all of these parts were combined into the final form. On the day of the ceremony, all the B'nai Mitzvah students

gathered on the stage and all of their family and friends to watch and participate in the ceremony. In the middle of the ceremony, a live candlelight ceremony was held.

“My B'nai Mitzvah experience changed me into who I am today. Fighting for justice and Tikkun Olam is essential in how I live my life.” – JM

“My B'nai Mitzvah has given me some of my closest friends. We still keep in touch and it's been years.” – JB

“Going to my B'nai Mitzvah made my judgy “religious” relatives respect and understand Humanistic Judaism. That has made celebrating other holidays so much more meaningful!” – KB  
“It was so much work – but I'm so glad I did it. If I can stand up in front of that crowd and read a script – I can do anything!” – LR

After their B'nai Mitzvah experience, many of these students come back and volunteer at our school on Sunday mornings. They get to see each other and those who graduated in other years. They participate in tzedakah projects and help others learn how much Humanistic Judaism is a part of who they are and whom they will continue to become. Oraynu's B'nai Mitzvah ceremony is a life-changing experience, and can be life-

“A B'nai Mitzvah ceremony is the celebration of a group of children of their passage from childhood to adolescence. This means accepting increased responsibility for oneself and for the world. Becoming B'nai Mitzvah is a first step in meeting these ethical obligations.”

– From *Humanistic Judaism: A Guide to Living* by Rabbi David Ellenson

On the day of our ceremony, the students arrive at the theatre (a necessary venue to hold between 800 – 1000 people who be attending). The students stand on stage when the opening notes of Hiney Ma Tov are played on the piano. For the next hour and a half, these 12- and 13-year-olds mesmerize their guests with their poise, knowledge, comfortable mistakes, and simple staging. Each student has his/her/their time to shine through their moments in the script, their speech, and their personal statement of growth and gratitude. They bond as a group. The time that they spend together in study and rehearsals and the trust they develop in each other create

Our B'nai Mitzvah program is strong and empowering. Year after year, guests are amazed at the things our students have done and the things that they themselves learned by being at the ceremony. People who have come into the ceremony with skepticism about whether this is a “real” B'nai Mitzvah remark about what a beautiful and meaningful ceremony it was. More than one family has joined our school because of their experience attending our B'nai Mitzvah ceremony. But most importantly, our students love it. Here are some of their reflections on the experience:

changing. Our students feel comfortable enough through the process to question, learn about themselves and how they can live Humanistic Jewish values. These values allow our students to be who they want to be, without judgment, and with compassion. Often the parents will thank us for the safe space that Oraynu has created for their child to become whom he/she/they want to be. Years later, we are lucky enough to teach and work with the children of our B'nai Mitzvah kids – and they reminisce with us about their speeches, role models, and friends.

May the cycle continue. ✨



## The Humanist Mezuzah

BY RABBI MIRIAM JERRIS

Like many other customs and rituals, Humanistic Judaism has developed ways to continue this tradition. A mezuzah is typically a two-step purchase.

The first is the mezuzah itself. Many mezuzahs are adorned with the Hebrew letter Shin (ש), which can represent the word shalom, in addition to the more traditional representation of the word shaddai, which is one of the names given to God in the Bible. The second is the traditional contents of the mezuzah, which are not humanistic.

There are humanistic alternatives to the traditional mezuzah insert, which is sold separately.

A few years ago, the Society for Humanistic Judaism created a mezuzah insert for Humanistic Jews.

This enabled us to continue to celebrate this tradition derived from Deuteronomy 6:4-9. After stating the Shema, “Hear, O Israel: the Lord our God, the Lord is One (*Shema Yisrael, Yahveh eloheinu, Yahveh echad*),” the verses continue with the traditional prayer called the V’ahavta and ultimately state in 6:9 – “And thou shalt write them upon the doorposts of thy house, and upon thy gates.” This Biblical reference led to this custom of placing a mezuzah on the doorpost of a Jewish home. The traditional Shema prayer includes a second statement from the Talmud, “Blessed is the name of God’s glorious kingdom forever and ever (*Baruch shem k’vod malchuto l’olam va’ed*).”

The Society’s two-sided mezuzah insert is printed on a parchment design and offers a Humanistic version of the entire Shema prayer (as stated above). It was written by Rabbi Jeffrey Falick of Congregation for Humanistic Judaism of Metro-Detroit:

*Hear O Israel, let us take up our  
share in repairing the world.*

*Blessed is the dignity of humanity  
forever and ever.*

It is followed by a selection adapted from Kol Shalom Community for Humanistic Judaism and based on the words from the V’ahavta:



*Therefore, we shall strive to love all of life with all our heart, with all our wisdom, and with all our strength. These words we inscribe in our innermost heart. We shall aspire to practice them day and night. We shall teach the diligently to our children through our words and deeds. To connect them to our history, we shall tell them of ancient days, of doorpost signs, phylacteries: our forebearers’ ways for remembering, treasuring Torah’s words.*

Many years ago, Rabbi Sherwin Wine wrote a humanist version of the Shema that could be used in a mezuzah: “Hear, Israel, our people is one, humanity is one (*Shema Yisrael ehkhad amaynoo adam ekhad*).”

Rabbi Eva Goldfinger, from Oraynu Congregation in Toronto, wrote a beautiful reinterpretation of the V’ahavta called the *Torchbearers*:

*As one with our forebears, we affirm that  
righteousness and enlightenment  
shall be our torch.  
We shall teach these values diligently to our  
children  
All the days of our lives.  
We shall endeavor to live by these values  
In the comfort of our homes  
Or on cold and wind-swept roads.  
Whether adversity bows our heads  
Or fulfillment makes our spirits soar.  
Our hands shall mete out justice to all  
And our eyes shall be open to the light of truth.  
We shall emblazon our paths through life  
With this light as a beacon for all humanity.*

As in many cases with reclaiming and rewriting liturgy and adjusting our Jewish rituals, there are lovely choices for participating in this tradition that are completely consistent with the philosophy of Humanistic Judaism.

Although every member received the mezuzah insert, we circulated it in 2018. If you would like the artwork, please contact Kathy at [info@shj.org](mailto:info@shj.org). 🕎

# Humanistic Mezuzah Scroll

## Why Might Secular Jews Hang a Mezuzah?

Placing a Jewish symbol on your doorpost need not be considered only a religious ritual. Secular and Humanistic Jews may see it as a statement of faith, perhaps even a statement of minority identity.

## Why These Words?

While some may not believe the actual words, Secular Humanistic Jews "say what we mean and mean what we say," thus the humanistic liturgy offered here is not for something different from or separate from you, but to write your own!

Jewish meaning is achievable through rituals like this one, even for those of us free from religious doctrine.

The text on the scroll is as follows:

שמע ישראל נטל את חלקנו בתקון עולם

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Thank you for your interest in Humanistic Judaism!

With all our heart, with all our wisdom,  
These words we inscribe in our innermost hearts.  
We shall aspire to practice them day and night.  
We shall teach them diligently to our children  
Through our words and deeds.  
We shall tell them of ancient days,  
Of doorpost signs, phylacteries:  
Our forbearers' ways for remembering, treasuring  
Torah's words.

*Adapted from Kol Shalom Community for Humanistic Judaism (Portland, OR)*

שמע ישראל נטל את חלקנו בתקון עולם

ברוך כבוד האדם לעולם ועד

With all our heart, with all our wisdom,  
These words we inscribe in our innermost hearts.  
We shall aspire to practice them day and night. We shall teach them diligently to our children through our words and deeds. To connect them to our history, we shall tell them of ancient days, of doorpost signs, phylacteries; our forbearers' ways for remembering, treasuring Torah's words.

We shall strive to love all of life with all our heart, with all our wisdom, and with all our strength. We shall tell them of ancient days, of doorpost signs, phylacteries; our forbearers' ways for remembering, treasuring Torah's words.

ש

Shalom – Peace – שלום

Learn more about Secular Humanistic Judaism at [www.SHJ.org](http://www.SHJ.org)

Words translated by Rabbi Jeffrey Falk of the Birmingham Temple Congregation for Humanistic Judaism (Farmington Hills, MI). Values based on a version by Kol Shalom Community for Humanistic Judaism (Portland, OR).

# RITUAL

## Judaism, It's All Ours

### Why I Wear a Humanistic Tallit

BY JERID MORISCO

Judaism has a rich and powerfully meaningful tradition spanning millennia. As Humanistic Jews, we understand that Judaism has and continues to evolve and adapt to historical events, culture, and the needs of people. The way individuals and communities live and express their Judaism continues to change. Our human-centered philosophy reminds us to embrace the traditions of our people while adapting those traditions, so they are truly meaningful. Humanistic Jews continue to identify and connect with many traditions and practices adapting them to reflect our human-centered approach.

Ritual and ritual objects have played a significant role in helping us to express our human condition, experience life cycle events, and mark the passing of time and seasons. The ritual of celebrating Hanukkah and the ritual object of a *hanukkiyah* served as the entrance point for me to adopt Judaism. When my neighbor Roberta died, I needed a way to celebrate her life and mourn her death. Roberta was a bigger-than-life character who would yell from a distance, “Come give your Jewish grandmother a hug.” She was an ever-present part of our lives for over ten years, and her loss left an empty place in my heart. Every year during Hanukkah, she had a 1970s-era yellowed plastic electric *hanukkiyah* in her window, and each night she would screw in another orange bulb to mark the eight days of Hanukkah.

The window was empty the December after Roberta’s death, symbolizing the empty place in my heart. I broke down and cried. Realizing how that old plastic object connected me to Roberta, I formally honored her the following year by celebrating Hanukkah in her memory. I discovered



Passover with Jerid Morisco

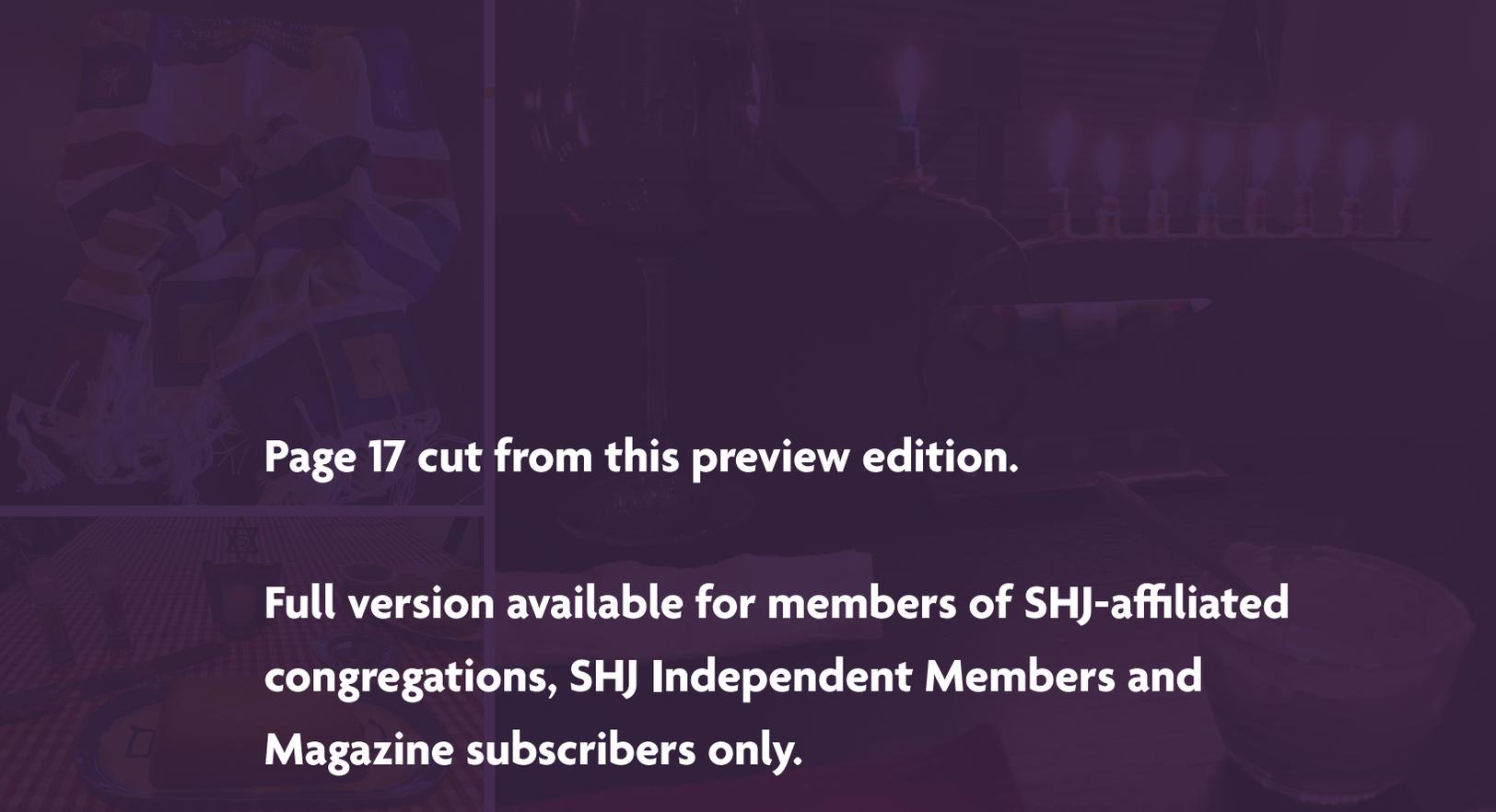
Rabbi Adam Chalom’s *A Home Hanukkah Celebration* and purchased a beautiful Gary Rosenthal *hanukkiyah* – my first ritual and ritual item. The eight-day celebration was a transformative life event as the lights had shined “through our love and our tears.” On the last night of Hanukkah, I didn’t want to “let the light go out.” Did I have to wait another year to light a candle? What else does Judaism have to offer? Would I find meaning through other rituals?

Instead of going out to party on Friday evenings, my spouse and I have always stayed home to celebrate the end of a hard week and have a time of rest and rejuvenation – you know where this is going. While exploring Judaism, I discovered a label for what we had already been doing for years – Shabbat. We found a meaningful ritual to encapsulate our end-of-week celebration as we enter a day of rest. We also discovered a love for challah, though we sometimes bake cornbread in a black iron skillet to honor my grandmother. When my dear friend singer/songwriter Shelley Segal was traveling through Atlanta, she gifted us our first Kiddish cup, another ritual object filled with meaning and connection.

As I continued to explore and connect

with Judaism, Humanistic Judaism specifically, I found its rich tradition resonated with my being. Jewish holidays, rituals, and ritual items transformed otherwise ordinary seasonal life events into extraordinary expressive experiences. I felt myself becoming Jewish and wanted to formalize it. Rabbi Miriam Jerris helped guide my adoption into Judaism, culminating in a formal Adoption/Havdalah ceremony at the SHJ 50th Anniversary conference at the Birmingham Temple, now known as the Congregation for Humanistic Judaism of Metro Detroit. Rabbi Denise Handlarski helped me to write a mikvah ritual affirming my Jewish identity, which I experienced at the Metro Atlanta Community Mikvah shortly after my adoption ceremony. The adoption ceremony emotionally formalized my becoming a member of the Jewish family, and the mikvah experience was so meaningful that my happy tears added to the pool of living waters.

The Tree of Life synagogue mass shooting on October 27, 2018, was a landmark moment in my Jewish identification. In preparation for my adoption, I knew I would be asked, “Do you affirm with an open and joyful heart that you identify with the history, culture, struggles, triumphs, and future of the Jewish people?” I interpreted this as not only identifying with Humanistic Jews but also identifying with the entirety of the Jewish people. I seriously contemplated the question. The Pittsburgh synagogue shooting was the first time I fully grasped the meaning of what I would affirm. MY people were attacked. Their struggle was my struggle. Their future was my future. That was the moment I knew how I would answer the question. As an openly Secular Humanistic Jew, I do not typically wear a



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Clockwise from top left: Tallit; corn bread for Shabbat; Hanukkah.

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kippah but understood I was not obligated to do so. I can choose whether to identify as Jewish publicly; they cannot. Knowing that the tallit and kippah are the most recognizable signs of Jewish identity, I pulled my Star of David from inside my shirt and wore it out, and I wore a kippah in public for several years as a defiant solidarity with my Jewish family. When Rabbi Miriam formally asked me the question during my adoption ceremony the following April, “From the depth of my being, I was able to do what you does,” I continue to wear my Star of David outside my shirt and wear a kippah sometimes proudly, sometimes with the history, culture, triumphs, and future of the Jewish people – MY PEOPLE.

My Jewish journey included visiting synagogues representing different branches of Judaism. Regularly, I saw the rabbi in theistic congregations wearing a tallit from the bimah. When attending a Yom Kippur Yizkor service at a Reconstructionist synagogue in Atlanta, I saw families gathered under a tallit together, connecting with the memory of a loved one. Humanistic Jews use the term “Nizkor” – “We will remember,” instead of the theistic “Yizkor” – “May God remember,” which is yet another way we have adapted a ritual to meet our needs meaningfully. I wanted to explore why this

ritual had been passed down from generation to generation. Some families I visited wore a tallit that was worn by the person they were remembering, and a tradition of meaning. The great significance of the tallit was lost to me, but I wanted to find meaning through a tallit?

The first three words on the *atara* (neckband) of many tallitot are “*Baruch* which I did not connect. However, Rabbi Shalom Harshav’s *Atara* story, which are very meaningful to me. For the Shabbat blessing, we can replace “*Baruch atah Adonai*” with “*Baruch haor baolam*” – “Radiant is the *atara* meaningful with Shalom Harshav’s poem, “Where is my light? My light is in me. Where is my hope? My hope is in me. Where is my strength? My strength is in me. And in you.” I then learned that the *tzitzit* strings and knots equal 613 to represent the number of commandments, which was meaningful to me. As a Humanistic Jew, I understand the Torah as a foundational document that has heavily influenced culture around the world. I continue to read, explore, and understand it through a Humanistic lens.

its teachings while being in total opposition to others. While some may view the *tzitzit* as a constant reminder to obey God’s laws, I view them as a reminder that the my Judaism requires that I not blindly follow a set of rules but intellectually discern the validity of each one knowing that I am ultimately responsible for my behavior and the choices I make. Yes, the tallit has become meaningful and another way of embracing my Jewish identity.

Through discussions with others, I’ve learned that some rituals and ritual items can trigger memories of bad experiences, and some still connect various items with their theistic meaning. As an adoptee, I see Jewish rituals and ritual items from a different and hopefully fresh perspective. I continue to ask what else Judaism has to offer. What history find the particular significance of ritual item that caused them to pass it from generation to generation? As Humanistic Jews, we understand there must have been some deep human meaning. May we together embrace a Judaism that continues to evolve and adapt to historical events, culture, and the needs of people. May we continue to explore meaning making through Jewish rituals and ritual items and adapt them to be deeply meaningful to us as we continue to explore all that Judaism has to offer. It’s all ours! ✨

# EXPRESSIONS

## Making Meaning (While Making Stuff)

BY JAMES RYN MCDEVITT-PHELPS

like making things.

I have since I was a small child—the worst punishment I ever received was when I was six years old and a refusal to clean up my crafting messes led to a multi-day ban on arts and crafts.

So it's no surprise that I frequently make my own Judaica. After all, making things is something I enjoy.

But there's more to it than just that. For me, the act of crafting Judaica is also an act of crafting meaning.

I have made a lot of Jewish objects: Mezuzah cases. Wall art. A tallit. Challah covers. Chanukah candles. A honey dish. A dreidel.

I have many projects in progress: Elijah's and Miriam's cups. Groggers. A blown eggshell painted with a dancing Miriam for use as a *beitzah* (egg on the seder plate). Another challah cover.

Some of these were fairly quick projects. Some took over a year to finish (although a degree of procrastination was usually involved in those). All were meaningful.

And all of these projects received their meaning over the course of three basic steps.

### The first step is a desire.

I'm moving and want to put up mezuzot, but I want control over the design.

I see a beautiful tallit and want one for myself (don't ask why—sometimes we just desire things), but I want it to be both Humanistic and inexpensive.

I discover whitework embroidery and want a challah cover made with the technique.

And so on.

The desire comes from myself and my experiences, and so it itself holds meaning—

and any object that comes out of it is inextricably connected to me, to that little part of myself that said “this is something worth doing.” The object becomes a physical manifestation of my desires. It becomes a little extension of me. That itself is meaningful.

### The second step is design.

There are practical considerations that come into play here. What materials can I afford? What limits do my own skills impose? But the main elements of this step are deciding what I want to consciously imbue the object with—what meanings, what feelings—and how best to achieve that.

This is when I choose words and images for my mezuzah cases and decide what texts I want to include inside. (Some quotes from Pirkei Avot, pomegranates, a *hamsa*; a selection of Humanistic blessings and quotes.)

This is when I decide to embroider a quote on my tallit, which quote it will be, and what color thread to use. (Part of Pirkei Avot 4:1; gold.)

This is when I create a design for my challah cover, choosing symbols and design elements that embody both my personal aesthetic preferences and my desired meaning. (The seven species in a papercut style.)

Each choice I make stems from the effect I want the finished product to have on me when I interact with it in the future—on what thoughts and feelings I want to evoke, which values I want to be reminded of.

Each choice reflects who I am at the moment of decision—in years prior I may have chosen differently, and in the future, I might do the same, but the choices I make now represent myself at this moment.

That little sliver of my current self will



be ever present in the object I make. It becomes a type of time capsule, recording my preferences and values at a particular moment in time. And it gives me the opportunity to discover what they are.

### The third step is making the object.

Now, the initial design almost always ends up altered as the practicalities of implementation rear their head, as new ideas manifest, and as mistakes are made and must be worked around. This means that step two bleeds into step three, and its way of meaning-making affects this step as well. But it's not the primary way.

The act of crafting something physical

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*A sampling of the author's creations.*

involves a coordination of the mind and body that often leads to a kind of flow state. Even during techniques that require less from the brain, such as embroidery (such as embroidering a pattern on the TV), there's an almost meditative kind of attention that is always on the actions of making. Sometimes the mind wanders a bit, sometimes it's focused on the meaning of a particular detail being worked on, sometimes it's focused mostly on the murder mystery playing on the iPad. But whatever it's doing, there's something of that that seems to get locked into the final object.

Later on, when the object is interacted with, little bits of all those moments spent

making it come back to the surface of the mind. The feelings felt. The thoughts thought. The locations where the work was done. And the object becomes a part of every interaction with the object in the future. The object ends up with little bits of life sewn into it.

Finally, the object is finished. Ready to be used. Each use filled with the weight of all the choices, and challenges, and experiences that went into making the object.

Not only is the object made so that it explicitly evokes the values and meanings I wish while eschewing those I do not (my tallit having a Humanistic quote

embroidered while lacking the traditional blessing that is often on commercial tallit, for example), but it is already imbued with meaning and choices

Even when I rarely use an object after it's been made, the very act of creating it—from having the desire to do so, to making choices about design and materials and process, to physically creating the object—provides its own meaning, its own insight into who I am at the time of creation, its own way of calming my mind and focusing my whole self as I engage in the act of creation.

The act of making is itself meaningful. But it also leads to really cool stuff. ✨

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# BOOKS

## Why Make a Non-Theistic Siddur?

### An Excerpt from *The New Jewish Humanist Siddur*

BY WILLIAM THOMPSON

*This excerpt is from the introductory essay of **The Jewish Humanist Siddur: Spiritual Reflections and Meditations for Secular, Atheist, Agnostic, and Humanistic Jews** by William D. Thompson. Footnotes and citations from the original essay can be found on the resources page for this issue online at: [bit.ly/HJ-Fall2022](http://bit.ly/HJ-Fall2022)*

Most liberal Jews do not pray on a regular basis, if ever. But prayer has historically been one of the most important aspects of Jewish practice. The liberal aversion to prayer is due to two things: the words themselves and a basic misunderstanding of the role of prayer. We will begin with the purpose of prayer, then move to the actual words and structures of prayer.

As David Ariel notes in his book *What Do Jews Believe* the Hebrew term for prayer is tefillah, which comes from a root word meaning “to judge,” “to intercede [on behalf of someone],” or “to hope.” Ariel goes on to say, “Tefillah therefore implies an act of self-judgment or intercession on one’s own behalf before God, or the expression of hopeful sentiments.” Obviously, God is irrelevant to Humanistic Jews who are atheists or agnostics, but there is a lot of value that can still be drawn from this definition of prayer. Of particular interest are the parts regarding self-judgment and the expression of hope. Humanistic Jewish tefillah would need to focus and expand on these two functions of prayer

and tweak them for use so that Humanistic Jews can engage in regular self-reflection and the expression of hope, wonder, and thanksgiving.

Sherwin Wine, the founder of Humanistic Judaism, published a Humanist siddur of sorts entitled *Celebration*. The Society for Humanistic Judaism recently published a collection of liturgy (but decidedly not a siddur) entitled *Here Is Our Light*, and Humanist congregations usually create their own liturgies for their Shabbat and holiday observances. This siddur is another attempt at providing appropriate words for Jewish Humanist reflection, whether private or communal.

Ariel goes on to state, “For the rabbis of the Talmudic era, the primary purpose of prayer was to educate us in the sacred beliefs of Judaism through regular repetition and reinforcement.” The word siddur comes from the root word meaning order, i.e., the recitation of particular prayers in a particular order. Through the repetition of regular prayers and the recital of blessings over every aspect of life, from eating to waking up and going to sleep, the pious Jew becomes educated in the most important teachings and moral values of his religion and can evoke a sense of awe and connection to something beyond himself, at least in theory.

Intention (kavanah) is an important element of Jewish prayer. Concentrating on and understanding the meaning of the words that are being said is vital for the very purpose of prayer, which is why I support

having the majority of the service in the vernacular unless it can be guaranteed in some way that people understand the Hebrew. While Hebrew has its place, insisting on Hebrew just for the sake of Hebrew is counterproductive.

As Humanistic Jews, this understanding of tefillah as self-reflection or meditation can be a valuable tool. Rather than an exercise in sycophantic praise and adulation to God, tefillah is a meditative practice that Humanistic Jews can use to reflect on their own behavior, hopes, and beliefs as well as to express their wonder and gratitude for the many blessings of life. It is highly unlikely and unnecessary that Humanistic Jews will begin to “pray” three times a day, even with this understanding of prayer, but they may find it valuable to begin and/or end their day with brief reflections or to say blessings over meals with their families.

While this understanding of tefillah will seem disingenuous to some, it is not terribly out of line with Jewish tradition. The Rabbis established the prayer service to act as a substitute for the Temple sacrifices, thus fundamentally changing the mode of Jewish worship for the next 2,000 years. This tweaking of the function of tefillah is nowhere near as radical as the changes they introduced. Furthermore, Maimonides understood the prayer service to be a compromise between God and Israel which allowed the Jewish people to worship God although the depiction of God in the prayer service was inaccurate (at best) and the prayers themselves inferior to true worship. Maimonides’ understanding of God was one in which God was essentially unknowable, and the prayer service was a creation entirely for the benefit of the Jewish people’s moral and spiritual well-being. We can therefore look at Humanistic tefillah as simply the next step in the evolution of Jewish prayer, one in which we do away with the God language which was inaccurate (at best) anyway and focus more explicitly on the moral and “spiritual” development of the people “praying.”

This leaves the words and structures of the prayers. There is a lot of debate among Humanistic Jews and Jews who have problems with traditional God language. Most

Humanist Jews have eschewed the traditional prayer service structure as too formal and rigid. Marcia Falk takes a different position in her siddur *The Book of Blessings*, which is a wonderful example of a feminist, nearly-Humanist siddur.

“Let us bless the source of life which...” This formula is broad enough to include theists and atheists while also avoiding anthropomorphism. It has the added benefit of being poetic and close to the form of traditional blessings. It is important to note that the author of this service carefully found a way to preserve some of the traditional Shacharit service. By doing this and providing humanist alternatives to the traditional prayers, she was able to fulfill the purpose of tefillah (laid out above) without compromising the intellectual integrity of the person “praying.” In my opinion that this method of following the themes and general structure of the siddur while creating new humanist reflections is the best method because it connects us to the tradition of prayer without requiring us to say words we do not believe.

While Humanistic Jews reject the worship of God and most of us are naturalists, the character of YHVH (God) remains important and unavoidable in the Jewish tradition. Zeus and the other Greco-Roman gods remain important literary and cultural figures in Western culture. Almost no one believes in or worships these gods any longer. It is for this reason that some of the poems contained in this siddur make reference to God under various names. This should be recognized as a literary device, not an expression of belief or worship. Relatedly, words like spirit, soul, divine, or sacred are used throughout this siddur in a poetic fashion and are not meant to imply literal beliefs in anything supernatural.

The Shema, in particular, offered a challenge in the production of this siddur. There have been attempts by others, including Sherwin Wine, to replace the Shema with a Humanist alternative, but frankly, most of them simply fall flat.

In theistic forms of Judaism, the Shema operates as an expression of the central tenet of the Jewish faith, i.e., that our god is the only god. In thinking of how to approach the issue of the Shema, I was reminded of a friend who was sent to Catholic school and learned about the trinity. When he told his father what he learned, the father replies, “Listen carefully. We’re Jewish. There’s only one god.” In my mind, I decided to write a poem that plays

That being said, I understand that some people may not care to recite a poem about God in place of the traditional Shema. To that end, this new edition contains an alternative affirmation adapted from “Humanism and Its Aspirations: Humanist Manifesto III,” that expresses the central tenet of Humanism: We have the ability and responsibility to lead meaningful and ethical lives in service to the greater good of humanity.

Humanistic Jews do not have a conversion ceremony. It is the only life-cycle ceremony included in this siddur. Baby namings, b’ mitzvahs, weddings, and funerals are usually highly individualized, as they should be, which places them beyond the scope of this book. However, the process for becoming Jewish is something that the Jewish Movement has been reluctant to ritualize or formalize, although they also could be highly individualized ceremonies. While I agree that entry into the Jewish Movement should be made easier than the conversion requirements of other Movements, it is still important to at least offer some kind of public ceremony to those who want or need it in order to give a sense of legitimacy and finality. The adoption ceremony seeks to address this need in a way that can be adapted as needed by the adoptee, or simply be used as a jumping off point in the creation of their own ceremony.

Although there is no metaphysical urgency, no mitzvah, for Humanistic “prayer,” it is nonetheless useful as a tool for self-improvement, reminding ourselves of the Jewish tradition, expressing awe and hope, and gratefully acknowledging the many blessings of life. That has been my goal with *The Jewish Humanist Siddur*, and I hope that it will be a valuable resource for other secular and Humanistic Jews who want spiritual, yet Humanist, reflections based on the traditional siddur’s order and themes. ✨

*Editor’s Note: This article maintained the author’s literary style.*

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MIKVAH continued from page 9

for not only prospective converts but also anyone who was looking for a new understanding and identity.

The class was lively and engaging, with my family gaining several close friends from that cohort. We especially were thrilled to see and hear the people we were getting ready to appear before the bet din and then visit a mikvah for a ritual bath. At some point I was a bit envious and realized that I was longing to participate in a ritual bath as part of my ongoing transformation of myself as a Jew.

After a lot of thought and conversation, I decided that the right ritual for me was visiting a mikvah. Such a visit would not be strictly a mikvah, but rather would be a kind of combination of the commitments I had already made. And so, I started making plans. Then the COVID-19 pandemic hit. I thought at first that it might be a year or months until a local mikvah would reopen, but it ended up being a much longer wait.

Meanwhile, I was living a different kind of life but I also reconnected with the SHJ because I was seeing more clearly that my Judaism only worked when it was done humanistically, and that I needed a humanistic community.

In the fall of 2021, I started making plans to visit a mikvah. I wanted to do it at an indoor facility, but I also wanted to do it outdoors.

Over the Thanksgiving break, my immediate family decided to make a road trip to Santa Fe. I was so excited that I would have an opportunity to visit an outdoor warm-water spring-fed pool for my DIY-mikvah experience.

Of course, the circumstances required that I be flexible about the experience. Arguably the pool was a “kosher” mikvah (since it was a body of water that was fed through nature), but I would have to wear swimming trunks (nudity wasn’t allowed), and I wouldn’t be alone. Still, the natural environment of the place was beautiful, located about eight miles or so in the

country from downtown Santa Fe (within range of my e-bike from our hotel). Also being outside somehow seemed appropriate for a Jewish ritual. Nothing else was happening outside — we normally attend Shabbat services by watching on a big screen on the temple patio, rather than going inside.

Unfortunately, I did not give a lot of thought to the appropriate blessing to say while reciting the traditional theistic blessing. But when I started saying the blessing, I realized I needed more than just saying traditional words in Hebrew. And so, I dipped under the water a fourth time and when I came up, I made a solemn promise to myself, that I would be a humanistic Jew, one who values that should unite us all, and that I would be from a place of free-thought and individual choice. I committed myself to being a humanistic Jew (re)interning a phrase from the agrarian

Since my mikvah experience in Santa Fe, I have experienced a lot more confidence in Jewish spaces, as I’m no longer afraid to talk about my conversion. But I also feel that I have been integrating some of the elements of Jewish ritual practice in ways that are meaningful to me. Some of the elements of Jewish ritual practice that are not

### How mikvah can be reinvented in Humanistic Jewish contexts

should be a required element for adoption in Judaism in our movement, but I would suggest that it should be offered as an option. Some of the reasons I think that it works well as a reinvented ritual include:

- Water is necessary for human life, hence rituals involving water are present in almost every religious tradition. Engaging in a water ritual helps to connect us with all of humankind and is a good reminder of the importance of caring for our water resources.
- Water is available almost everywhere —

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— Miriam Jerris  
for making me smile when I didn't think I thought anything was funny.

— Risa Morris

— in honor of Elaine Dancis,  
the president of Machar.

— Myrna L Frank PhD

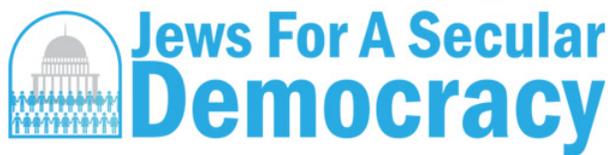
besides in pools, we also have oceans, lakes, and rivers. This is a relatively low-barrier ritual for people in most parts of the world.

• The experience of bathing in a mikvah is a full-body experience, very unlike most of our other more cerebrally-oriented rituals and practices.

• There is a long tradition of reinventing the mikvah for new contexts and purposes, including by organizations such as Mayyim Nefeshim and the Queer Mikvah Project.

• Reinventing rituals can breathe new life into them — as we can see in recent years by the growth of B Mitzvah as a secular and non-gendered alternative to traditional B'nei Mitzvah.

• We have a wealth of gifted liturgists in our movement who can craft new blessings for the ritual, but we also have the stories and accounts of other Humanistic Jews who have found ways to do mikvah in their own way. ✨



# PODCAST

On June 2, 2022—in front of a live audience at Temple Kol Ami in West Bloomfield, Michigan—rabbis from three denominations discussed what the Jewish tradition tells us on key church-state separation issues, including reproductive rights and public funding of private religious schools. The panelists were Rabbi Brent Gutmann (Reform) of Temple Kol Ami, Rabbi Asher Lopatin (Modern Orthodox) of Kehillat Etz Chayim and AJC of Detroit, and Rabbi Blair Nosanwisch (Conservative) of Adat Shalom Synagogue. Moderated by Nomi Joyrich, Michigan Coordinator of the Jews for a Secular Democracy initiative.



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