

**LGBTQ+
& Pride**

**Identity: A Queer
Love Story**

**Authentically Queer,
Authentically Jewish**

HUMANISTIC JUDAISM

SPRING 2023



Harvey Milk

**HUMANISTIC JEWISH
ROLE MODEL 2022-2023**

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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Harvey Milk photo by George Olson, from
the collection of San Francisco History
Center, San Francisco Public Library

FROM THE EDITOR



Honoring a History of Pride

In this issue, we are celebrating Harvey Milk as our Humanistic Jewish Role Model of the year, telling Harvey's story through several lenses.

We start with Rick Gold and Rabbi Miriam Jerris who tell the story of Harvey's life (including his childhood in New York, his time in the Navy, his political career in San Francisco as a pioneering openly gay elected official, and his tragic assassination), but also discuss why Milk's legacy is deeply relevant to us as Humanistic Jews.

Rabbi Frank Tamburello's essay focuses on the personal, relating Harvey Milk and the theme of pride with his first-hand experiences as an 18-year-old in Greenwich Village at the time of the Stonewall uprising when LGBTQ+ people rose up to resist police and societal oppression, becoming

the inspiration for modern Pride celebrations.

In 1978, Harvey Milk said, "we will not win (our) rights by staying quietly in our closets," and he was right. Increased visibility and pride have led to tremendous gains in the civil rights of LGBTQ+ people, yet the struggle is not over, which is why this issue also contains articles that reflect more recent history and experiences. These include Rabbi Miriam Jerris' reflections on "When Same-Sex Marriage Became the Law of the Land" as well as two very personal accounts of LGBTQ+ identity in Jewish and Interfaith contexts: "Authentically Queer, Authentically Jewish" by Emily Cohen, and "Identity: A Queer Love Story" by Max Lark and Stacy Wolf-Lark.

My hope is that these stories will inspire you to take action in your community for LGBTQ+ rights. Many of us live in places where these rights are threatened. Our presence as Humanistic Jews can play an important role in the struggle for justice and equality, but we must follow Harvey's example and be willing to be public about where we stand and about who we are.

Outside of our central theme, we have a few other important articles in this issue including an essay by Arthur Shostak about a very different and empowering perspective on the subject of Holocaust education, a short essay by Herb Silverman on why Judaism needs Humanism to be comprehensible, and community news items including news about the 3rd annual challah making class by Kol Hadash Humanistic Congregation in the Chicago suburbs, as well as news on the transition of CHJ-Sarasota to becoming (in late May) the Humanistic Havurah of Sarasota, Florida and the Baltimore Jewish Cultural Chavurah's Harvey Milk program.

As always, we welcome your comments, critiques, and suggestions. Please send them to us at humanisticjudaismmagazine@gmail.com.

The full-text of the speech by Harvey Milk (quoted above and on page 7), as well as other resources about Milk's life and legacy, can be found on the resources page for this issue at: <https://bit.ly/HJ-Spring2023>.

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

J.M.B.
Editor

HUMANISTIC JUDAISM

SPRING 2023

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CONTRIBUTORS

Emily Cohen is a mom, wife, business owner, and proud queer Jew living in Central Florida! She has recently found Humanistic Judaism and is excited to continue implementing cultural Judaism into her life. Emily serves as the Social Media and Communications Associate for the Society for Humanistic Judaism.

Rick Gold is the leader of the Gainesville Humanistic Jewish Meetup, the organizer of the Jews for a Secular Democracy chapter in Florida, and a member of the Board of the Society for Humanistic Judaism.

Rabbi Miriam Jerris is the rabbi of the Society for Humanistic Judaism and the Associate Professor for Professional Development of the International Institute for Secular and Humanistic Judaism. She holds a PhD in Jewish Studies and a MA in Humanistic and Clinical Psychology.

Max Lark (he/they) is a lifelong Humanistic Jew. He loves traveling and drinking tea. He is currently finishing a master's degree in public administration which specializes in LGBTQ studies and care for older Americans.

Arlene Ogurick is a member of Baltimore Jewish Cultural Chavurah.

Victoria Ratnaswamy is the Steering Committee Chair of Kol Hadash Humanistic Congregation in Deerfield, IL and Vice President of the Society for Humanistic Judaism.

Ilana Shaffer is the Director of Youth Education at Kol Hadash Humanistic Congregation in Deerfield, IL.

Arthur B. Shostak is an emeritus professor of Sociology at Drexel University. He is the author of 33 books, including *Stealth Altruism: Forbidden Care as Jewish Resistance in the Holocaust*. His website is: www.stealthaltruism.com.

Sandra Siegel is the Vice President of CHJ of Sarasota, Florida.

Herb Silverman is the founder of the Secular Coalition for America and a supporter of the Society for Humanistic Judaism.

Rabbi Frank Tamburello lives in Manhattan with his husband, Michael. He has served as rabbi of the Westchester Community for Humanistic Judaism, in White Plains, New York since 2012.

Stacy Wolf-Lark (she/her) has served in the U.S. Army for over four years including a tour in Iraq. She has a master's degree in English, is a Christian, and a serious dog-lover.

TRIBUTES

Eric Herschman and Family

In loving memory of beloved father and grandfather

– Rabbi Miriam Jerris

Susan and Eric Herschman and Family

In loving memory of Eric's father

– SHJ Staff and Board

Rabbi Jeremy Kridel

For a complete recovery, Refuah Shleimah

– Rabbi Miriam Jerris

Society for Humanistic Judaism

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COMMUNITY NEWS

CHICAGO, IL | KOL HADASH HUMANISTIC CONGREGATION

Kol Hadash Humanistic Congregation holds 3rd annual Challah making class

Chicago-metro area Kol Hadash Humanistic Congregation (KH), held its 3rd annual [interrupted by covid!] Challah Making Class for adults on February 12th.

Always a fun, satisfying event (led by KH member and Director of Youth Education, Ilana Shaffer), this class is held during Sunday School hours in an extra classroom, to allow parents of students and other members of the congregation the opportunity to enjoy an interesting, community-building activity together.

The event uses a “take & bake” structure which allows us to make it work in our school time frame and with limited facilities. Ilana leads the dough making, we socialize during its first rise, then braid or otherwise “style” it. (Also, this year various toppings were included for a more international flair.) Loaves are then taken home,

where we savor the aromatherapeutic effects of challah baking in the oven.

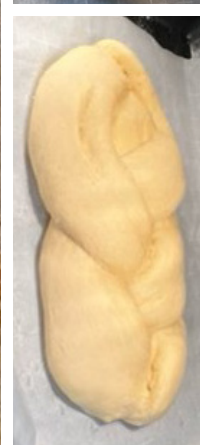
Based on feedback, it never ceases to amaze participants that “it actually works!” Most also said it was something they have wanted to do yet were hesitant to try it on their own; they liked the idea of learning in person with a group, rather than learning from a book or the internet.

While always free and open to the public, this year’s record attendance from non-members came from the event being included in the JUF Newsprint calendar. We had to close registration more than a week beforehand while still receiving requests, as the room was at capacity. We were amazed at the excitement for this type of event and hope it’s a sign of moving back to more in-person community engagement.

– Victoria Ratnaswamy and Ilana Shaffer



The event uses a “take & bake” structure which allows us to make it work in our school time frame and with limited facilities.



Harvey Milk: Humanistic Jewish Role Model 2022-2023

Milk and the Gay Experience was a reading and discussion of Lesléa Newman's "A Letter to Harvey Milk," the story of an older man's creative writing class experience that takes him back to his own homosexual experience of comfort and tragedy during the second World War II.

Our recent program — *Harvey Milk: Humanistic Jewish Role Model 2022-23* — was based on information primarily from The Harvey Milk Foundation, Lillian Faderman's 2018 biography *Harvey Milk: His Lives and Deaths*, and the 1984 video, *The Times of Harvey Milk*. These sources helped us get to know Harvey as a temperamental, passionate, dedicated, dynamic, coalition-building individual who fought for racial and ethnic minorities, the elderly, outsiders and the LGBT community. In a poem he had written a few months before his death, he wrote "...I cannot fall back into my closet. I have grown. I am not myself. I am too many. I am all of us."

These experiences have significantly enriched our understanding and appreciation of Harvey Milk — a recipient of the U.S. Medal of Freedom and one of *Time Magazine's* most important people of the 20th century.

— Arlene Ogurick, Member of BJCC



SPEECH

Harvey Milk: In His Own Words

An excerpt from a speech delivered at the San Francisco Gay Freedom Day parade in 1978

Gay people, we will not win (our) rights by staying quietly in our closets... We are coming out! We are coming out to fight the lies, the myths, the distortions! We are coming out to tell the truth about gays!

For I'm tired of the conspiracy of silence. I'm tired of listening to (those who) twist the language and the meaning of the Bible to fit their own distorted outlook. But I'm even more tired of the silence in the religious leaders of this nation who know that she is playing fast and loose with the true meaning of the Bible. I'm tired of their silence more than her biblical gymnastics!

... Gay brothers and sisters, what are you going to do about it? You must come out. Come out to your parents. I know that it is hard and will hurt them. But think how they will hurt you in the voting booth! Come out to your relatives. I know that is hard and will upset them but think of how they will upset you in the voting booth. Come out to your friends, if indeed they are your friends. Come out to your neighbors, to your fellow workers, to the people who work where you work, where you eat, and shop. . . But once and for all, break down the myths, destroy the lies and distortions!

CHJ Sarasota to become Humanistic Havurah of Sarasota

Congregation for Humanistic Judaism of Sarasota will be transitioning to becoming a Havurah at the end of May. Our new name will be Humanistic Havurah of Sarasota. We are developing a new web site to keep our community informed and connected.

We plan to meet monthly and have services on Jewish Holidays, but also will be going together to local Jewish oriented events.

We have been a dynamic Congregation in the past. We opened our doors in 1996 and grew to over 300 members with a 40-member choir. Our numbers dwindled due to age and COVID. We decided to open a new chapter and become a Havurah. We will continue to be associated with SHJ.

For further information please contact Sandra Siegel at sandrasiegel3600@gmail.com.

— Sandra Siegel, Vice President of CHJ



PHOTO COURTESY OF MARTIN HOLLANDER

PROFILE

Harvey Milk





Homosexual, Political Activist, and Jew

RICK GOLD AND RABBI MIRIAM JERRIS

Harvey Bernard Milk is the 2022-2023 Humanistic Jewish Role Model. In 2004, the Society for Humanistic Judaism established the Role Model Program. The purpose was to create a sense of excitement about outstanding people who demonstrate the organization and movement's values and philosophy. The committee seeks a candidate to honor the person's vision and accomplishments. To date, there have been eighteen role models. Although our guidelines allow for the role model to be living or deceased, thus far, all of our role models are deceased. We seek people who identify as culturally Jewish, rather than those who would identify as deeply religious or traditional in their practice. In choosing, we are not suggesting that the individual we honor is a Humanistic Jew, unless they were part of the movement such as Rabbi Sherwin Wine, founder of Humanistic Judaism, or Yaakov Malkin, who was the provost of the International Institute for Secular Humanistic Judaism.

The role model program offers opportunities for our communities. Rick Gold from the Gainesville Humanistic Jewish Meetup created a program for his group. Here are pieces of Milk's biography and selections from Gold's research and notes on the nature of Milk's Jewishness in his life as a gay man and a politician.

 HARVEY continued on page 10

PROFILE

HARVEY continued from page 9

Harvey Bernard Milk was an American politician and the first openly gay elected official in the history of California, where he was elected to the San Francisco Board of Supervisors. Milk was born on May 22, 1930, in the New York City suburb of Woodmere, to William Milk and Minerva (Minnie) Karns. He was the younger son of Lithuanian Jewish parents and the grandson of Morris Milk, a department store owner, who helped to organize the first synagogue in the area.

Upon graduating from New York State College for Teachers (now State University of New York) in Albany in 1951, he joined the Navy. He attended Officer Candidate School and ultimately was stationed in San Diego. Four years later, he left the Navy with the rank of lieutenant after he was questioned about his sexual orientation. He returned home to teach public school on Long Island and worked as a stock analyst in New York City.

Harvey Milk moved to San Francisco in 1972 and opened a camera store on Castro Street, the heart of a growing gay community. He first ran for public office unsuccessfully. In 1977, as a well-known political figure, he was elected to the San Francisco Board of Supervisors.

During the peak of his political career, Harvey Milk supported anti-discrimination bills, free public transportation, and the development of a board of civilians to oversee the police. He supported the establishment of daycare centers for working mothers and the conversion of former-military facilities into low-cost housing. In addition, he spoke out on state and national issues for LGBT peoples, women, racial and ethnic minorities, and other marginalized communities.

Tragically, Milk was assassinated, along with the mayor of San Francisco, George Moscone, on November 27, 1978, by a former member of the Board of Supervisors.

Though Harvey rejected Judaism as a religion, he made it a point throughout his life to proclaim his Jewishness. He called

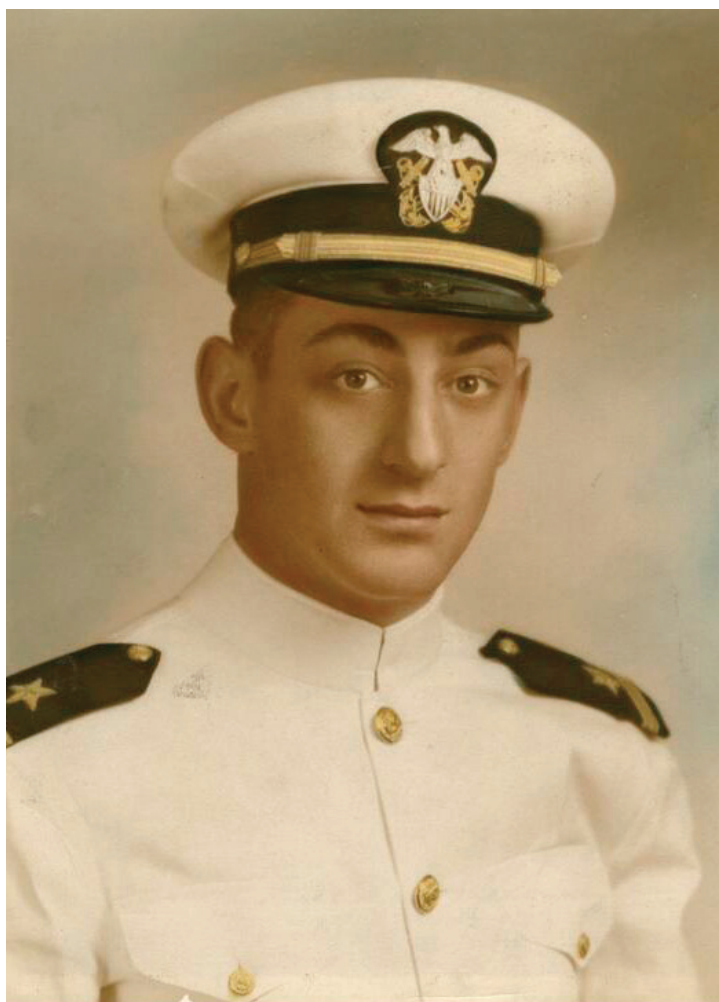
as a young man he announced that he was a Jew lightly, often humorously, and in every situation possible.

The first person to whom he told he was gay was a rabbi. The rabbi responded, “You shouldn’t be concerned about how you live your life, as long as you feel you’re living it right. People spend more time legislating about morality and telling others how to spend their lives than about how to make life more enjoyable. Most legislators think they’re godlike. That’s wrong. But you should have pity and compassion for them.” Years later, when Harvey told the story, he declared that that very enlightened rabbi “almost brought me back into religion, but” he added, “I found out he was a rare bird.”

As he entered public life, Harvey had to figure out how to attract a constituency that was broader than the gay community. He would court the elderly, the poor, the young, the worker, and all of the racial and ethnic minorities. They were outsiders too, and as a double outsider—a homosexual and a Jew—his deepest sentiments were always with outsiders.

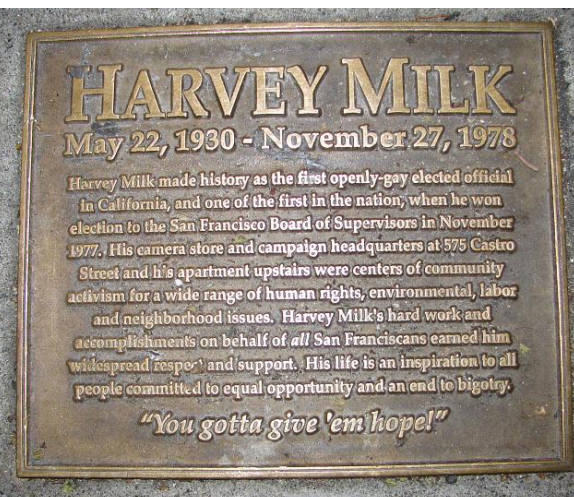
Harvey brought to politics a perspective that had its genesis in what he had learned of *tikkun olam*—the obligation to repair the world—from his mother, Minnie, and his grandfather Morris.

One of his first acts as supervisor was to propose a resolution urging the State Department to banish the South African consulate from San Francisco because of the country’s policy of apartheid. “Nearly half of San Francisco’s population is composed of minorities,” Harvey responded. “If any of these persons were to visit South Africa they would be treated as second-class citizens.” He shepherded the resolution



Harvey Milk in Navy uniform

himself not Jewish but a Jew. Being a Jew was as central to his sense of who he was as being gay. The intersections of his identities as a Jew and a gay man reinforced his awareness of the injustices suffered by all who were other. For many years, he believed he must not talk about being gay to nongays—but he always talked about being a Jew, to anyone and everyone. Even



Right: Harvey Milk in his office.

**Above: Sidewalk plaque at
575 Castro St, San Francisco, CA**

until he got the six votes to pass it.

Sharyn Saslafsky, who met Milk through politics and then became a close friend, remembers sitting with him on an old maroon sofa in the camera store he ran in San Francisco, having conversations peppered with Yiddish while opera blared in the background. Like others, she recalls him as “very much a cultural Jew.” “I think Harvey was very proud of being both Jewish and gay. He loved what Judaism and *tikkun olam* was about,” Saslafsky said. “I think the basis of who Harvey was personally and politically was really very Jewish in the sense of being active and making a difference, taking responsibility, empowering people. I look at that as very Jewish-like.”

Milk was very critical of organized religion and did not attend religious services. Randy Shilts wrote in *The Mayor of Castro Street* (2008) that “Harvey never had any use for organized religion.” In one of his recorded wills, Milk said of his funeral: “I hope there are no religious services. I would hope that there are no services of any kind, but I know some people are into that and you can’t prevent it from happening, but my god, nothing religious . . . I would turn over in my grave.”

Despite Harvey’s opposition to a religious service, several were held for him. One was at the Gay Community Center. Rabbi Martin Weiner of the Reform Temple Sherith Israel officiated. Another service



SAN FRANCISCO HISTORY CENTER, SAN FRANCISCO PUBLIC LIBRARY

was organized by the gay Congregation Sha’ar Zahav; the gay rabbinical student Allen Bennett officiated. The official service was held at the largest reform congregation, Temple Emanuel. Allen Bennet officiated, under pressure from City Hall.

Harvey was posthumously awarded the Presidential Medal of Freedom for his iconic, influential and albeit short career. That same year Harvey was inducted into the California Hall of Fame, with May 22 designated as “Harvey Milk Day.” 🌈

REMEMBRANCE

A Pride Reflection

BY RABBI FRANK TAMBURELLO

"If a gay person makes it, the doors are open to everyone." – Harvey Milk

When I learned that the Society for Humanistic Judaism (SHJ) chose Harvey Milk humanist role model for this year, I was transported back in time to 1969, the year I graduated high school. I was a questioning New York City / Long Island suburban kid who turned eighteen the weekend of the Stonewall Inn riots.

My friends decided to take me bar-hopping in Greenwich Village to celebrate my birthday that Saturday night in June. Judy Garland, that huge gay icon, died of a drug overdose that weekend, and the West Village was crowded and agitated. All the gay clubs were packed. The mob-controlled bar owners paid the police to look the other way and not interfere in their business. If their payments fell short, the clubs were raided and patrons arrested. Raids were our reality.

There was no political correctness in those days, no consciousness-raising alphabet soup of letters. Drag was drag, and drag shows were popular, especially at the Stonewall Inn on Christopher Street. Drag queens serve as a type of modern-day court jester. They dress in costume, they entertain, and they can be self-deprecating, brutally honest, and insulting. We were drawn to them the way people are drawn to celebrity roasts. They really serve the same function. What we enjoyed the most about being there was experiencing our own culture without being "the other."

It was late that night when we heard the rioters at the Stonewall. My friends and I were nearby and got to experience some of the chaos in the street. Apparently, the management was down a payment, and a raid ensued. What was incredible to us was that the patrons and drag queens actually

resisted arrest and fought back. Their elegant wigs and gowns were a ripped and bloody mess, while the street was littered with cans, bottles, bricks, and even the remnants of high-heeled shoes.

This resistance lasted for days. Who would have ever thought that this incident would become the defining moment in LGBTQ+ history?

We high-tailed it out of there, having learned an important lesson: we knew being arrested there could ruin our entire lives, so avoiding the police raids of gay bars would have to become an important skill set. Later on in our adulthood, we found that skill useful on several occasions.

On Sunday, June 28, 1970, the first anniversary of the Stonewall Riots, the first LGBTQ+ march was sponsored by the Christopher Street Liberation Day Committee. The march ran from Washington Place to Central Park, and was attended by thousands. Eventually, these protest marches spread all over the country, and in typical LGBTQ+ style, took on the flavor of joyful celebrations.

Harvey Milk came on the scene during these turbulent times. He was a typical closeted Jewish boy as were many of us back then from my neighborhood on Long Island. He had served in the Navy during the Korean War, but was forced to resign when authorities learned of his sexuality. He then moved into Manhattan and became involved in the counter-culture movements of the sixties. Initially, he held conservative views on personal freedoms, but eventually shed them as he became more involved in social justice issues.

In 1972, Milk moved to San Francisco, opened a camera shop, and became a civil rights worker. San Francisco at the time was a gay mecca that drew in thousands of gay and lesbian people. A number of my own

friends moved there, including my best friend Bill, who was pursuing a career in art. Bill was part of Milk's circle of friends and kept me up on what was going on on the West Coast.

Milk's vision of social justice led him to local politics. He used his camera shop as his campaign headquarters and was elected to the San Francisco Board of Supervisors in 1977. As one of the first openly LGBTQ+ people to hold public office, he was instrumental in bringing advocacy and empowerment to marginalized groups that had little voice.

By coincidence, my friend Bill happened to be at the City Hall in San Francisco that day in November when Milk's body was taken out of the building on a stretcher. He, along with the city mayor George Moscone, was assassinated by a disgruntled and homophobic co-worker, Dan White. Their bodies were discovered by the president of the board of supervisors, Diane Feinstein. Harvey Milk was forty-eight.

White, using mental stress as a defense, was convicted of voluntary manslaughter and received a seven-year prison sentence. The light sentence set off a riot similar to Stonewall in 1969, called the White Night Riots. White was paroled after serving only five years and committed suicide two years later.

I was shocked, of course, when Bill called me on the day of the murders. We knew something like this was bound to happen. It's always bound to happen. Milk was considered the Rosa Parks of the LGBTQ+ community. Who knows how far he could have taken his vision had he lived?

Harvey Milk was proud of his Jewish heritage and identity. His Lithuanian grandfather Morris co-founded the Sons of Israel synagogue in Woodmere, Long Island. Milk was not religious, in fact, he hated organized religion because he found it



Harvey Milk speaking at a LGBTQ+ rally.

incompatible with homosexuality. However, he loved and had fun with his *Yiddishkeit*. Milk told his friends that San Francisco needed a New York-style kosher deli, while he explained to them the reason why he hung his bar-mitzvah photo on the camera shop wall.

Milk's body was cremated. Funeral services for him were held at the recently organized LGBTQ+ synagogue, Sha'ar Zahav and at Congregation Emanu-El. Most of his ashes were scattered in San Francisco Bay by his friends in a whimsical ceremony. Another portion of his ashes was placed under the sidewalk in front of the camera shop.

A close friend of Milk's, Sharyn Saslafsky said of him: "I think the basis of who Harvey was personally and politically was really very Jewish in the sense of being active, and making a difference, taking responsibility, empowering people. I look at that as very Jewish-like."

In 1985, I was working as a high school teacher, when I was contacted by the Hetrick-Martin Institute in New York. This was an organization that provided social support to at-risk LGBTQ+ youth. They had wanted my input as a teacher regarding a new project - creating a safe high school for LGBTQ+ kids in the city. They called it

The Harvey Milk School, and were seeking funding from various sources. I was invited to visit the school and I recommended one of its first students, a gay student of mine who had attempted suicide. In 2002/03, the Harvey Milk School became a fully accredited public high school administered by the New York Department of Education, and today has about sixty students.

Today, Harvey Milk's legacy is now being passed on to LGBTQ+ youth. In July, 2022, the LGBTQ Network of Long Island sponsored an island-wide prom for gay students. It was held in honor of the 75th anniversary of Harvey Milk's graduation from Bay Shore High School. Hundreds of gay students from 58 different neighborhoods had the opportunity to have a safe place where they could be free and safely enjoy themselves.

Looking back on my life, I can attest that indeed miracles can happen. However, there is nothing supernatural about the miracles I have seen. They came about through tears, blood, and persistence. I would have never believed on that wild night at the Stonewall Inn, that I had personally witnessed the catalyst for LGBTQ+ acceptance in all areas of life.

As a Humanist Rabbi, I am in a unique position to serve the communities that I am

involved with in meaningful ways. I legally officiated Bill's wedding to his long-time partner on the rooftop of his apartment building on the Lower East Side on a glorious fall day as soon as the marriage equality law was passed. What a joy to be able to assist the LGBTQ+ community, indeed, all communities, free from the stress of having to conform to any denominational beliefs and restrictions that are not life-affirming.

Unfortunately, however, as we read in the Book of Job, many gifts that we have been given, are also easily taken away. The evil inclination, the world's *yetzer hara* is flying high and comfortably in our country these days. The progressive strides we have made all these years - women's rights, civil rights, marriage rights - are all being assaulted. Pride month in June will undoubtedly be a powerful challenge for many of us. But we do have hope. People like Harvey Milk, Larry Kramer, Pete Buttigieg, Rachel Maddow, Billie Jean King, and of course, our own Rabbi Sherwin Wine, tell us that our people are not going anywhere but up and that our future is in good hands.

According to the Talmud, the world is sustained by thirty-six righteous people. Who knows how many of them are wearing high heels and wigs? 🕊️

Authentically Queer, Authentically Jewish

I was born to Jewish parents. My mother was raised Conservadox and my father grew up in a traditional but not necessarily observant family. As a child, we did the big holidays together and Shabbat a couple times a month. It was just a part of my existence without much explanation. I was given the Hebrew name Esther when I was born, and my *Zeyde* (Yiddish for grandfather) was Mordechai. He was and always will be my biggest connection to my Jewish roots. An observant Orthodox man, he co-founded a prominent *shul* (synagogue) in South Florida when I was young. When my parents divorced when I was 5, we moved to be closer to him. I LOVED going to *shul* with my *Zeyde*. I loved Shabbat dinners at his home and his hand on my head when he'd come over to say blessings during the High Holy Days. He told me stories about our ancestors, and how resilient our people were. He made me feel proud to be Jewish. And while he believed in God, it was never really part of the conversation when we'd speak about Judaism. It was sort of a byproduct of the stories.

At some point my parents both remarried people who were not Jewish. My stepmother was actively involved in a



EMILY COHEN

Christian denomination that my father connected to strongly as well, and my mother and stepfather become heavily involved in Messianic Judaism (a Christian movement that incorporates Jewish ritual and liturgy). So from about 8 years old, I experienced religious indoctrination from a Christian lens. For me, being Jewish in that environment felt extremely convoluted, so I went in the direction I thought I was

supposed to go and followed my parents' rules and structure of faith. Judaism was still very much a part of my life, but it was just kind of "there."

There were two particularly loud tenets of faith that religious leaders around us went out of their way to make sure was drilled into our heads; the clear and deep rejection of homosexuality, and the expectation that my job as a woman was to find a good and faithful husband and have as many babies as my body would produce. My only understanding of relationships was a product of purity culture. Now to be fair, I recognize that I may have heard this just as loudly if I was steeped in Orthodox Judaism as a faith structure. But my everyday cultural Judaism had been stripped away from me and all I knew was what I experienced.

By 14 years old, I knew I was attracted to girls (although I was aware of "feelings" around the age of 8). I remember my first crush like it was yesterday. She was 17 and a fellow actor in an ongoing production I was a part of. I remember the butterflies in my stomach and the stupid smile I couldn't wipe off my face when she was around. I also remember that the next year when I was 15, my best friend from church came out and her parents sent her away to "get right with God." And so the crush I had was tucked away in the back of my gut and ignored, much like my connection to being Jewish.

This was when I started questioning everything I had been taught about God and religion. Over the next few years, I began to abandon my beliefs, and when I turned 18 I walked away from religiosity entirely. I spent my freshman year at a private Baptist college in the deep south where being Jewish, and gay, was definitely not supposed to be a part of my story. That same year, my *Zeyde* died and everything I knew about Judaism died with him. I felt completely lost, as if my identity had been erased, and all that was left was a shell of disoriented dogma and sexual confusion. Authenticity made no sense to me because I had no idea who I was or where I belonged. I wore many masks and I learned to mold my identity to whomever I was dating at that moment. When I tell my story, I liken it to the movie *Runaway Bride*



From left: Ketubah (Jewish Marriage Contract), Hanukkah, Shabbat, and Mezzuzah

where Julia Roberts plays a character who is being followed around by a newspaper reporter documenting the three weddings she has run out on, as she plans her fourth wedding to yet another beau. The reporter asks each of her previous fiancés how she liked her eggs, and each one replies “[Insert egg cooking style here], just like me!” That was me. Whatever eggs you liked, whatever religion you followed, whatever movie genre was your favorite, whatever values you had... they were all mine because I had no identity of my own to connect to. I had a few intimate interactions with women through the years, but ultimately the fear of dealing with the fallout I knew would come from being openly queer was too much. So, I stayed in the closet.

In 2013, I was beginning to really struggle in my second hetero marriage. I had just turned 30, I had a toddler, and I was working on my MSW. Probably not ironically, I was also running the LGBTQ department at the local state university because I was a “champion ally” (insert laugh track). Every day, I was asking myself more and more who I was and what I was looking for in life. Then one Wednesday morning, at a Dunkin’ Donuts on campus, a brief flirtatious interaction with a woman working there hit me like a ton of bricks. The reality of ME was so intensely unavoidable that everything in my life practically screeched to a halt. The time had come to face my fears. I came out to my husband right before the winter holidays, and by summer, I was moving into my own apartment and exploring the world of being a lesbian and a single mom. It was scary and intense and there were a ton of hurdles with family and friends that I had to jump over. But for the first time in my life, I felt like I was actually navigating my own identity and it felt so good!

Despite this huge step, something continued to feel like it was missing. There was a part of me that I could feel begging to come out. I found out quickly that it was my Judaism. At this point in my life, I knew that I did not believe in God, but I felt a spiritual connection to universal energy and the responsibility I had to exist mutually with my fellow humans. Religion and dogma were not an option for me again, but I knew that I could not be authentically me if I did



Wedding day

not explore my Jewish heritage. It started with simple things: spending more time with my grandmother and uncles for holidays, lighting Hanukkah candles, etc. I joined a few queer Jewish groups on Facebook where folks identified from Observant Orthodox to Renewal and Reconstructionist. I had no idea what the latter meant at the time.

A few years and a very toxic relationship later, I decided I needed to find a Jewish community I could connect with in person. Ironically, I met the person who would become my wife (they/she) right around the same time I started attending services at a Reconstructionist LGBTQ+ synagogue in Wilton Manors, FL. Even more ironically, their mother had attended the synagogue a few times with a close family friend. The word *bashert* (“meant to be” or “destiny” in Yiddish) takes on a completely new meaning when I think about the circumstances that surrounded our early days as a couple. They are not Jewish, but Jewish culture was such a huge part of the first few years we were together. Our Friday night date nights started with services and *Oneg*, and ended at a local gay bar for drinks and live music. The more I connected with my Jewish culture, the more I felt connected to queer culture,

and the woman I was keeping locked away inside for so many years began to flourish.

In 2018, I had the incredible opportunity to travel to Israel on a mission with a queer Jewish organization. This experience could be written in an entire book, so I’ll just say here that I found myself there in the Negev Desert, watching the sun set behind the mountains and knowing that my ancestors had traversed this land. I was deeply moved, and, in that moment, everything made sense to me. I came home renewed and excited to incorporate cultural Judaism into my world. Thankfully, my partner was 100% on board. When we got engaged a couple years later, the Jewish traditions we wanted to be a part of our wedding day was one of the first things we discussed! The truth is, I never thought I’d have a wife. And I equally never considered I could just be Jewish in a way that felt authentic and true to who I was. As it turns out, I could not have been authentically queer without being Jewish, and I could not have connected to my Judaism without embracing the fact that I was queer. When all is said and done, THAT is *bashert* (meant to be). I am a proud queer Jew, and that intersection has been the most important and fulfilling of my life. 🌸

Identity: A Queer Love Story

BY MAX LARK AND STACY WOLF-LARK

I remember where I was when my therapist told me “Transitioning should be joyous.” I was taking this telehealth appointment outside, watching the sun sink below the trees and feeling the grass between my toes. It was 2021, the second summer of the pandemic. Shortly afterward, my therapist recommended I get involved with other queer groups. From there I tried Affirmations in Ferndale, Michigan, which is where I met the woman who would one day become my wife, Stacy.

Identity is a multifaceted issue. I am a student, a gardener, a painter, a much-beloved grandchild, and a transgender man. My wife is similarly complex. She is a government worker, veteran, seamstress, and a Star Trek enthusiast. She is also a transgender woman. During our wedding, we were surrounded by family and friends, many of whom are also transgender and non-binary, not to mention various sexual orientations. We are living in a time of great exploration of the self.

I am thankful for the visibility transgender people and other members of the LGBTQ+ communities are experiencing. I regret that this comes at the cost of increased pushback. There has been an increase in hateful laws that aim to drive queer people out of society. Every single one of my queer friends has faced discrimination on both micro and macro levels. We exist as political figures, constantly being asked to justify our own validity.

The questioning of our sexual and gender identity is similar to the questioning I encounter as a Humanistic Jew. While Humanistic Jews may not experience the levels of hatred and discrimination faced by LGBTQ+ people in US society, we often are pushed to the outskirts of Jewish circles due to our lack of theism. Many times, I

have had people incredulously ask, “How can you be Jewish without god?” I view this question in the same vein as “Why are you transgender?” Even people who ask out of concern or desire to understand “how long have you felt this way” are missing the point. I do not “feel” transgender any more than I “feel Jewish,” I simply am.

Humanistic Judaism encourages a strong sense of self. It is difficult to assert

identity has been twisted so that society views you as a threat you become incredibly cautious about your own behavior. Laws that proclaim to “protect children” by banning drag performances can actually be used to persecute gender nonconforming and genderqueer people. Since there is no visible distinction between drag and being a transgender woman, these laws have made it illegal for my wife to go out in public.

Stacy and I also avoid interacting with children because we are worried that someone will accuse us of behaving inappropriately simply by being near children. There are places in my home state where it is not safe to show affection to my wife for fear of violent discrimination. The areas where we can exist without fear of persecution grow smaller every day.

As humanists, one of our core beliefs is the pursuit of social justice. Queer people need legal protections, an end to discriminatory practices, and an end to medical gatekeeping. We need to end book bans regarding LGBTQ themes. We demand to be visible, and you can help. Some things you can do include donating to the Trevor Project, a charity that helps LGBT youths. Or you can pressure your

representatives to pass more inclusive laws.

Stacy and I face many challenges ahead. Despite those challenges, I and many others choose to seek joy, to carve out a life of our own in a world that insists we should not exist. I am so thankful to my friends and community that have shown me overwhelming amounts of support. And I am thankful to my wife, whose kindness and tenacity are the sparks that illuminate my future, whatever that may be, and whomever we may be when we arrive at it.

I of course cannot fully encapsulate the experience of what it is to be transgendered,



Max and Stacy

an identity that challenges the existing worldview on gender’s immutableness. One needs to possess inner strength, and it is much easier to do with understanding and supportive loved ones. I am grateful for my upbringing in the Congregation for Humanistic Judaism of Metro-Detroit. The support I am privileged to experience has allowed me to live as my most authentic self, in defiance against claustrophobic social norms and detrimental institutions.

Although institutions can seem abstract, the threat these institutions pose to myself and others like me is very real. When your

especially what it is like being a trans woman, so I have asked my wife to tell her story...

Coming out as a transgender woman was one of the craziest experiences of my life. My gender identity was something that I had struggled with for as long as I could remember. I had not been raised in a home that would have supported a transition of any kind, but to be clear, back then I didn't know what "transgender" was or that transition was even a thing that people could do. I just thought that I was weird to be interested in so many stereotypically feminine things. It wasn't until my early 30s that I put all the pieces together and realized that there was a label to describe who I was and that there were a lot of other people like me.

The act of coming out was exhilarating. I could feel a flood of emotions overwhelm me and a burdensome weight lift off my shoulders. I was so excited to explore who I was and have my outward appearance match who I knew I was inside. Unfortunately, the rest of society was not as excited about me as I was. I had been living my life as a cisgender, heterosexual white man in the United States, which meant that I was about as privileged as a person could be without wealth. Life as a transgender woman would be much different.

Shortly after coming out, same-sex marriage was legalized in the United States. With this issue decided, Republicans needed someone else to get their base foaming at the mouth over, so they chose us. As the "bathroom bills" began rolling out, I could feel the looks from people around me becoming more hostile. What were once double-takes of curiosity turned into glares of mistrust and hatred. I was a predator pretending to be a woman to gain access to women's bathrooms and to take showers with children. After the bathroom bills came the military ban. Despite being an Iraq War veteran, I was told that I and others like me were unworthy of military service, this coming from a president who had more bone spurs than brain cells. Then came the sports debate. Imagine being both unfit for military service and a threat to dominate the Olympics. Now some states



Cake cutting at the wedding.

are making it illegal for teachers to mention the existence of transgender people and are trying to establish a database of people who identify as transgender.

On top of what was happening in my country, I was having trouble at home. My family, whom I had tried to keep in the dark about my identity as much as possible, finally learned who I was and no longer wanted me around.

With this going on, I was motivated to change the community around me. I was a short drive away from a small town that was known for its acceptance of queer identities, so I started there. It wasn't long before this town was like every other town: it was made more for cisgender, heterosexual people. The difference was that they hung up pride flags and employed a few queer people to put in the back of restaurants to make food for cis-het customers. People like me were welcomed as far as I was great for the town's aesthetics. I was there to be watched by people-watchers. I simply would not accept this. I started by petitioning the local government and businesses to promote trans visibility. I wanted to see trans people being accepted, not just being told that I'm being accepted in

a caption of a picture of a cisgender couple with a blurry pride flag in the background. I was polite in my suggestions. At first. Some businesses and organizations were slow to embrace what I was selling; some never did.

I made a lot of people unhappy by rocking the boat, but I also found a community of other transgender people. One of them was Max, who was my polar opposite. We would walk around town together, Max pointing out the beauty of the community and me being hyper-aware of the prejudice we were facing with every step. Somehow these differences only made us draw closer to each other. I started to see things the way Max did, and Max started to understand and see what I was saying about the need to change our community.

In December of 2022, Max and I were married. We still struggle with a world that is determined to debate our humanity. We still check the news every day, wondering what the next crazy attempt to eliminate us from public will come next. The difference is that now we're looking together. Between Max, myself, and our growing community of transgender people (and supporters), I believe we're going to win in the end. 🙌

When Same-Sex Marriage Became the Law of the Land

BY RABBI MIRIAM JERRIS

In the late 80's, Rabbi Sherwin Wine and I were discussing gay marriage. He was advocating for the legalization of domestic partnerships, while I supported the legalization of same-sex marriage. Wine was a pragmatist and felt that the legalization of domestic partnerships was an achievable goal. I maintained that any social revolution required some people to express the radical position. I was willing to be one of those people in this cause.

From the moment I was certified to officiate wedding ceremonies in 1985, my position on whom I would celebrate was "love is love!" Since my husband and I owned a wedding planning, officiating, and counseling business called The Wedding Connection, and we were involved in all the networking organizations, it soon became common knowledge that I was available to officiate alternative ceremonies. The first legal weddings I officiated were multicultural or interfaith. Celebrating same-sex couples was an obvious extension of my values. Many of our associates in the wedding business were in same-sex relationships and wanted to celebrate their love. I was thrilled to preside.

My experience celebrating unions between two men and two women taught me many things. My ideas about gender were reinforced; there were not universal male qualities or female qualities. Like in heterosexual marriages, where stereotypical views of gender roles were not the rule, those stereotypes did not typically manifest in same-sex marriages either. I also learned about language. Some couples talked about partnerships; some individuals used the term spouse. In those early days, when same-sex marriage was almost non-existent, referring to one another as husband or wife, was left to the realm of legal marriage.

There were some families that did not support the same-sex relationships of their family members and refused to attend the commitment ceremony. I developed language to acknowledge those situations. When I knew that family support was not unanimous, I offered the couple the opportunity to use language such as:

We hope that this ceremony and the love shared by name and name cast the light of love upon all their family members. May their love be a source of healing, of greater understanding and acceptance that reaches out to embrace those who were unable to attend this afternoon. Today, name and name thank you all for the caring that your presence indicates.

But there were also families that supported the couple fully, so we developed language to acknowledge that:

The fact that so many of your friends and family are here to support you is a testament that the world is becoming a more ethical and loving place. Name and name are grateful for the love and support from those family members who have chosen to be with them today. They have become the loving caring people they are because of their upbringing and the values and traditions they learned from their families throughout their lives. This ceremony is a ritual with themes of hope, openness, honoring differences, trust, acceptance, and the power of true love.

There were some couples who wanted me to make a statement about my involvement in their ceremony. I wrote this paragraph to affirm my choice in presiding and hope for the future:

Name and name see this ceremony and their marriage as gay (wo)men as a powerful example and model for all relationships in this time and for the future. My intention in presiding here today as a member of clergy is to give public acknowledgment of their choice and to provide them with my loving support and friendship. I hope that this ceremony validates what is possible and real today, and what will be acknowledged and legal someday in the near future.

On Friday, June 26, 2015, the Supreme Court in a

“

Sherwin Wine did not live to see marriage equality, but he did create a movement that supported me to articulate my support for legal marriage for same-sex couples and work toward the goal that is now a reality.



Wedding of Jason & Stephen

landmark 5-4 decision, marriage equality became the law of the land and granted same-sex couples in all 50 states the right to full, equal recognition under the law. At the very moment I heard the announcement, I walked into my beauty salon to get my hair cut. Some years prior I had officiated a commitment ceremony for my stylist and his partner. So, I walked into the shop, saying, “We are getting married!”

I received a call from another couple that day who had already picked up their marriage license. I was at their home on Sunday morning, officiating a legal marriage and signing paperwork. As I was starting the ceremony, I took one look at my friends, turned and walked back into their kitchen. I was unable to

speak. They were tears of joy and celebration.

When I officiate at a wedding, I often use a less formal way to acknowledge my legal standing, but that June I wrote the following: “Therefore, by the powers vested in me by the law of the land and the State of Michigan, it is with great pleasure and delight that I announce that your marriage is binding.”

Sherwin Wine did not live to see marriage equality, but he did create a movement that supported me to articulate my support for legal marriage for same-sex couples and work toward the goal that is now a reality. Wine created an environment of openness, inclusion, and compassion that makes me proud of Humanistic Judaism and our approach every single day. 🙏



One Couple Remembers

As an interracial LGBTQ couple, it was challenging to find a rabbi willing to marry and acknowledge our union. Shayna was born into a Jewish conservative family and although Ginger openly appreciated the culture and considered herself “Jew-ish” many ordained rabbis refused to marry us and with the additional layer of being LGBTQ, it was nearly impossible. As a couple interested and welcoming of the Jewish culture it was shocking that in this day and age our love was not seen as equal. However, when we found Miriam and were introduced to Humanistic Judaism, we were welcomed with open arms. Our love was accepted as equal, and our cultural differences were celebrated as those unique qualities had brought us together.

– Shayna & Ginger

ESSAY

What Humanistic Judaism Can Add to the Holocaust Narrative

BY ARTHUR B. SHOSTAK

What do you think primarily defines Jewishness? I agree with Art Spiegelman, creator of *Maus*, the first Holocaust graphic novel, who maintained that it is “unfortunately not defined by Groucho Marx, but by the Holocaust.”

Accordingly, I urge Humanistic Judaism to take the lead in clarifying just what is it we are to “Never Forget!” about what was arguably the worst crime against humanity committed in the 20th century ... one that took the lives of almost two-thirds of European Jewry and one-third of world Jewry, but that also incidentally bolstered the case for Israel’s development and the later ongoing development of global legal safeguards against genocides.

Specifically, what should modern Judaism commemorate on *Yom HaShoah* (Day of Remembrance of the Holocaust and Heroism), the 32nd enactment of which occurred on April 18th, 2023. And, does Humanistic Judaism have a distinctive contribution to make in the matter?

To date Jewry’s eight-decade emphasis has understandably been placed primarily on the holocaust as “Horror Story.” Survivor Haim Ginott will never forget having seen:

...what no man should witness: Gas Chambers built by learned engineers. Children poisoned by educated physicians. Infants killed by trained nurses. Women and Children shot and burned by high school and college graduates.

Similarly, each of the 46 Holocaust Museums around the globe I have visited detail the barbaric manufacture of atrocities, dehumanization, and murder. A visitor (who must be over 13) can see mounds of



Art Spiegelman's graphic novel *Maus*

eyeglasses, human hair, shoes, suitcases, and Nazi-taken photos of naked unburied corpses and emaciated prisoners close to death.

Regrettably, “Horror Story” centrism leaves out much worth knowing and undermines confidence in human nature and humanity. Rabbi Harold M. Schulweis worries that it can “unintentionally transmit a corrosive pessimism that has children remember only the curse of ‘killers of the dream.’”

The truth is far more complex. To be sure, in her 1997 memoir Livia Bitton-Jackson, a survivor of several years in Auschwitz-Birkenau, tells many horror stories of “gas chambers, shootings, electrified fences, torture, scorching sun, mental abuse, and constant threat of death.” However, Livia also

tells Help Stories “of faith, hope, triumph. And love. They are stories of perseverance, loyalty, courage, in the face of overwhelming odds, and of never giving up.”

Humanistic Judaism has good reason to now promote a major reset in the mainstream Holocaust narrative and related commemorative and educational activities. The project could focus on the content of the annual *Yom HaShoah* which since 1981 has been Israel’s national Memorial Day. Israel pauses for the day to both mourn the six million, but also to honor heroic resistance in camp revolts, forest partisan struggles, and in the Warsaw Ghetto uprising. --- Unfortunately, in 1981 only militant resistance was deemed worthy of salute, as



Hall of Names at the Yad Vashem – The World Holocaust Remembrance Center in Jerusalem.

far less was known about numerous other types of nonmilitant resistance.

Manya Frydman Perel who survived six years in eight camps, remembers:

We resisted in every way we could. Our weapons were our bare hands, our minds, our courage, and our faith. I resisted by stealing bread and potatoes to share with my friends. I resisted by risking my lifetime and again. The Nazis could not crush our spirit, our faith, or our love for life and humanity.

Holocaust non-violent resistance, which I call the “Help Story,” took many forms; e.g., behind barrack walls at high risk of life, Jewish prisoners secretly taught new arrivals savvy “boot camp” aids to survival, celebrated birthdays, provided prohibited classes for children, observed the High Holidays, arranged for covert abortions, etc. Out in the open old-timers propped up weaker others or even traded jobs to boost the odds of survival. On death marches, some weak prisoners dared to try to hold up weaker others. All such “carers” were guided by an ancient tenet, *Kol Yisrael Arevim Zeh Bazeh* - “We are all responsible for one another as a community.”

Yom HaShoah - and *all* education related to the Holocaust/Shoah - needs *both* the stories of horror *and* the help stories - as together they provide an *accurate* history. These stories, together, bolster appreciation of our potential for doing good and make it clear that “one of the great contributions of Judaism to the world ... is the notion that doing for others is the reward of our lives.” And help raise the self-esteem of world Jewry, especially that of the young.

Pierre Sauvage, a survivor and now a filmmaker, would have us understand that:

If we remember solely the horror of the Holocaust, we will pass on no perspective from which meaningfully to confront and learn from that horror. If the hard and fast evidence of the possibility of good on Earth is allowed to slip through our fingers and turn to dust, then future generations will have only dust to build on.

There are many ways to artfully bring the Help Story out of the shadows; e.g. congregation members can search for examples in survivor memoirs for reading aloud or even enactment at Friday Night Services, and/or in Hebrew and Sunday School. Likewise, B-Mitzvah

candidates could be asked to uncover a new help story in accessible video and audio interviews with survivors.

Opposition can be expected from *landsmen* who fear diluting the power of the horror story to discourage genocide. Others may fear making changes in the horror-centric narrative is too arduous to achieve. But the values of the Help story can help to ensure that the horrors of genocide will not return, and Jewry as a whole continues to improve revered commemorations (e.g., our continued reinvention of the narratives of Hanukkah, Passover, Purim, etc.).

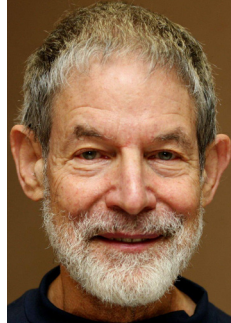
Elie Wiesel contends the “only thing that can save mankind would be a real awareness of the Holocaust. I don’t believe anything else has the moral power.” However, not until we have an inspiring Horror/Help reset in its *Yom HaShoah* commemoration is any such awareness likely. Humanistic Judaism can show the way. 🕯️

The quoted material in this article is drawn from the book Stealth Altruism: Forbidden Care as Jewish Resistance in the Holocaust (2017: Routledge: New York). Full citations can be found on this issue’s page of citations/resources online at: bit.ly/HJ-Spring2023

POINTS OF VIEW

Shema

Growing up Jewish, I recognized at an early age that I was different from the gentiles without knowing quite why. Jewish kinship seemed to come from a mutual fear of anti-Semitism. In Hebrew school, I learned that the “Shema,” which literally means “Hear,” was the major contribution Jews had given the world—the philosophy to live by. I was taught that the statement, “Hear O Israel, the Lord our God, the Lord is one,”



HERB SILVERMAN

transformed the world from polytheism to monotheism—from worshipping many false gods to worshipping the one true God. There are three paragraphs in the full Shema. Jews are biblically commanded to recite the “Shema” twice daily (morning and evening) and to inscribe it on the doorposts of their homes. I felt proud of the gift we Jews gave to humanity. I unquestioningly accepted that there was exactly one God and that any other belief was both false and immoral.

As a Humanistic Jew who believes in no gods, I guess you can say that I’m closer to monotheism than to polytheism (one is closer to zero than to many). However, were I to make the unwarranted assumption that the world actually was created, I expect it would have been by a committee of creators rather than a single creator. After all, most great scientific discoveries require some kind of teamwork. Even more important, I can no longer make a case that reducing from many to one the number of acceptable gods has improved human behavior. On the contrary, paganism is a more tolerant faith. As long as people are free to worship and follow their favorite gods, room can always be made for a new deity, but a belief in one jealous and vindictive god can easily lead to barbarous acts.

In Chapter 7 of Deuteronomy, God tells Moses what he wants the Hebrews to do to

the current inhabitants of the so-called Promised Land: “Tear down their altars, smash their standing stones, cut down their sacred poles, and set fire to their idols.” Even worse, the Hebrews were ordered to “smite them and utterly destroy them; thou shalt make no covenant with them nor show any mercy to them.” The Hebrews were also told to kill all boys and women who had slept with a man, but they could save for themselves every girl who was a virgin.

Conquering the Promised Land for the Hebrews seemed to be this god’s highest priority, and we have had religious wars there ever since. Were I to actually hear a deity suggest such outrageous behavior, I would hope for a second opinion from another deity.

Unfortunately, in the Hebrew Bible, the most beloved biblical characters are praised for following God’s will, even when God’s will turns out to be barbaric. Abraham, revered as the first Jew and venerated in all monotheistic religions, obeyed the voice of God when God allegedly told him to prepare his son for sacrifice. Had Abraham been more thoughtful of human beings, he might have responded incredulously, “You want me to do *what* to my son?” He then might have gone about his normal business until he heard from a kinder and gentler god. Abraham was a very moral person by religious standards, but certainly immoral by humanist standards. But the story does end happily for Abraham and his son Isaac. God intervenes at the last minute and tells the dutiful (I was just following orders!) Abraham that God’s thirst for blood would be appeased with a menu substitution of ram’s blood for human blood.

There is no historical or archaeological evidence that Abraham or Moses ever



existed, that Israelites were slaves in Egypt, or that they wandered in the desert for 40 years. But that’s good news because the Exodus story is inhumane: God brought 10 plagues to Egypt, the last of which was the death of innocent, first-born Egyptian sons. God also told the Israelites to kill a lamb and put its blood on their doors so God would know not to kill first-born Israeli sons. (You’d think an all-knowing God wouldn’t need blood markers to show where the Israelites lived.) The traditional God of both Judaism and Christianity thrives on and even requires blood sacrifices of innocent animals or humans. God provided a getaway route from Egypt for the Israelites by parting a sea and then drowning all the Egyptians in pursuit. These Israelites escaped, only to die in the desert, but their descendants reached the Promised Land after killing inhabitants along the way.

I would like to hope that the author of the Abraham story was somewhat humanistic, and really wanted to end ancient practices of sacrificing children to deities by substituting non-human animals instead. And I wish more people would read and learn from the wisdom of the ancients and the moderns without following, unquestioningly, one particular book, deity, or guru. As a Jewish Humanist, I don’t have the answers to all questions, like the origin of the universe or why there is something rather than nothing. But I still have a “Shema.” Only now it’s a *question mark*. 🙏



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VIA ZOOM

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