

The Wild Awe
of Nature

Exploring
Mussar

Healing Through
Jewish Culture

HUMANISTIC JUDAISM

SUMMER 2023

Secular Spirituality

OUR CAPACITY FOR AWE



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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BRUCE HILLENBERG, PH.D.

FROM THE EDITOR



Many Roads to Spirituality

Humanistic Jews have too often been stereotyped as being cold, lifeless, and without spirituality. This of course is not true, but I think the stereotype persists because many theistic Jews can't imagine spirituality without theism, but also because many are ignorant of the powerful ways that Humanistic Jews engage with spiritual practices that are intellectually consistent, but also saturated with intention, joy, and wonder.

I hope that this issue of *Humanistic Judaism* can help to dispel this stereotype.

Our debunking begins with Rabbi Jeffrey L. Falick's essay "Capacity for Awe: A very human superpower," in which he explains:

To talk about awe is to marvel at the wonders of existence, every moment that makes life worth living. Sometimes awe takes hold of us when we consider the grandeur of the universe. Sometimes awe grips us when we

behold some earthly glory: a sunset, the changing of colors at the onset of autumn, or the bloom of spring.

The theme of nature as a source of Humanistic awe is also explored in more detail by Rev. Marti Keller, who shares about finding meaning and delight through reveling in the natural world, especially in birdwatching.

Many Humanistic Jews also find meaning in exploring ethics, especially through Jewish ideas and texts. This is why Dr. Bruce Hillenberg's exploration of Mussar practice is so helpful because he provides a picture of what doing Mussar humanistically actually looks like.

Another important article in this issue is a personal account by Hannah Fontilus about finding meaning through connecting to her biological father's Jewish identity, while also remaining a Catholic. Hannah's story is important because many people, for many reasons, are embracing bi-religious identity. Much of the broader Jewish world isn't ready for this, but this isn't the case for Humanistic Judaism, which has long embraced diverse household configurations and complex personal identities. We are very proud to share Hannah's story.

Speaking of our movement, we also are sharing Rabbi Eva Goldfinger's acceptance speech from being awarded the Sherwin T. Wine Lifetime Achievement Award. And we have community news items from six of our congregations and communities in formation.

As you can see, this is a very full issue. We hope you enjoy it!

Speaking of our magazine, we are always looking for new voices, including those of our youth. If you are interested in writing for us, please do not hesitate to be in touch. And as always, we welcome your comments and questions. Please send them to humanisticjudaismmagazine@gmail.com.

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "James M. Branum".

J.M.B.
Editor

Use the QR code to find citations, notes, and other resources that accompany this issue.



HUMANISTIC JUDAISM

SUMMER 2023

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Bruce Hillenberg, Ph. D. is a semi-retired clinical psychologist. His first interest is loving his wife Cindy, their daughters Lindsay and Jamie, and their partners Sam and Chris.

Competing for second is friendship with family and friends, cooking, gardening, and expanding his life as a Humanistic Jew.

Sandi Horwitz is a long-time member of Oraynu Congregation and the editor of their newsletter, *Shofar*.

Lee Jacobi is a long-time board member of both PCCJ and SHJ.

Rev. Marti Keller is a Unitarian Universalist minister, past president of Unitarian Universalists for Jewish Awareness, and member of the Society for Humanistic Judaism. She is a published poet and was poet in residence for the 50th anniversary of the National Wilderness Act.

Arthur Liebhaber serves on the Executive Committee of SHJ's Board. He is also creator and an Administrator of the Humanistic Judaism Discussion Facebook group, as well as Administrator on several other Humanistic Judaism pages and groups. He is a retired librarian/branch manager, husband to Rabbi Jeffrey L. Falick of CHJ-Detroit and a proud stepdad and grandfather.

Kyla Reisberg, 12, is a Mitzvah Class student at CHJ of Fairfield County, CT.

TRIBUTES

To Emily Cohen

In honor of Emily Cohen for her tremendous contributions to our social media presence

—James Branum

To Helen Forman

In honor of my Bubby, Helen Forman

—Katherine Voigt

To Ira Parsons

In honor of your B' Mitzvah

—SHJ Board and Staff

Society for Humanistic Judaism

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COMMUNITY NEWS

FAIRFIELD COUNTY, CT | CONGREGATION FOR HUMANISTIC JUDAISM

Mitzvah Class Visits the Tenement Museum

The purpose of the visit was to investigate what Jewish immigrant life was like from 1880 through the early 1920's, a time when many Jews were fleeing to escape discrimination and pogroms in Europe.

We visited the restored Tenement Museum in NYC to find out how they initially survived with just some clothes and a few dollars.

Despite hardship, NYC was the largest Yiddish-speaking city in the world and the area was nicknamed the Jewish East Side. Jews were free to practice their religion, take jobs and save money. Life was not perfect, but it was better and safer than in their home countries.

Families of up to nine crowded into a three-room apartment that lacked plumbing, heat and electricity. It must have been really hard to live like this in what was, at the time, the densest square mile in the world. With more than 100 people sharing one bathroom, laws improving living conditions were not yet passed until the 1920's. This makes us feel grateful for all we have now and think about how much things have changed.

We visited the apartment of the Levine family, who labored at a foot-powered sewing



PHOTO BY RACHEL DREYFUS

Inside the restored Levine Family apartment, Tenement House Museum, with (unnamed) tour guide, Drew, Kyla, Steven Reisberg and Dave Shafer, CHJ members.

machine for 12-hour days for just \$.15 a dress. However, they made enough to pay their rent, raise five children, and keep a Jewish home.

Our families both immigrated to America in the early 1900's. Drew's family came from Eastern Europe and his Great-Grandmother spoke only Russian and Yiddish. His Great-Grandfather immigrated from Poland and worked on Eldridge Street. Kyla's Great-Grandmother, speaking only Spanish, came over as a teenager by herself and lived 50 years in the Lower East Side. *L'dor V'dor* we now feel more connected to our history.

– Drew Garfinkle and Kyla Reisberg

LOS ANGELES, CA

ADAT CHAVERIM CONGREGATION FOR HUMANISTIC JUDAISM

Amusing Jews

Cantor Jonathan Friedmann and Rabbi Joey Angel-Field of Adat Chaverim – Congregation for Humanistic Judaism, Los Angeles, recently launched a podcast/



YouTube interview show, *Amusing Jews*, celebrating Jewish contributors and contributions to American popular culture. A project of Atheists United Studios, the show is an outreach platform for Adat Chaverim. It aims to attract Jews (and non-Jews) who are interested in Jewish cultural achievements. The show's tagline is: "No religion. No politics. Just informative and entertaining conversations with people behind the things we love." Highlights so far include interviews with Melanie Chartoff, the voice of Didi Pickles on *Rugrats*, Michael Elias, screenwriter of *The Frisco Kid*, and Lorna Lembeck (née Patterson), who played flight attendant Randy in *Airplane!*

The podcast can be found at: [spreaker.com/show/amusing-jews](https://www.spreaker.com/show/amusing-jews).

– Cantor Jonathan Friedmann

ORANGE COUNTY, CA | PACIFIC COMMUNITY OF CULTURAL JEWS

PCCJ's Israel Program: The Right-Wing Attempt to Reform the Supreme Court in 2023

In a program timed around Israel's 75th anniversary, the Pacific Community of Cultural Jews (PCCJ) discussed the recently proposed reforms to Israel's Supreme Court. The program on 4/30/23 was well-attended. The program consisted of PowerPoint slides followed by a discussion.

The information presented included:

- Israel has "checks and balances" between its legislative branch "the Knesset," its executive branch "the Government" headed by a Prime Minister (PM), and its "Supreme Court."

- As a result of Israel's Nov. 2022 election,

a government was formed led by the center/right Likud party and including far-right parties and 2 Ultra-Orthodox parties.

- Israel's right wing has been frustrated by Israel's Supreme Court, particularly concerning Jewish settlements in the West Bank.

- The Ultra-Orthodox parties want to continue "welfare" payments to the families of men who don't work because they choose to study religion full-time.

- The right-wing's proposed reforms would: give the Knesset the ability to override the Supreme Court; put the Government in

charge of the committee that selects new judges; and strip the Supreme Court of power to remove an official convicted of malfeasance.

- The left wing of Israel, recognizing that the proposed reforms would hobble the Supreme Court, made massive street demonstrations. The protesters succeeded: PM Netanyahu agreed to (temporarily) shelve these proposed reforms.

Our discussion was prefaced with a house rule: to keep our remarks calm and civil! Our mostly liberal group was mostly against the proposed reforms. Perhaps this opinion summed things up best: "Israel does perhaps need reforms of its Supreme Court – just not these reforms!"

Over snacks and coffee, we gave ourselves pats on the back for good behavior.

– Lee Jacobi

Busy Spring for the Spinoza Havurah

During the spring of 2023, the Spinoza Havurah has been very busy. We are holding zoom Shabbat morning services about every two weeks, with most of the services focused on holidays and other seasonal themes. Celebrations included were Tu Bishvat, Purim, the March Equinox, Pesach, Mimouna, Yom HaShoah (featuring guest speaker Professor Arthur Shostak), Lag B'Omer, Shavuot, Juneteenth and Pride month!

These services are led by Martyn Di Maggio and James M. Branum on a rotating basis with contributions by many others.

We are attracting a broad range of Humanistic Jews and fellow travelers from around the world to our gatherings. In our recent services, there were participants from North America, Panama, Brazil, Chile, Japan, Australia, Kuwait, the UK, The Netherlands, Portugal, Spain, Norway... and I'm probably missing some! We really appreciate the chance to learn from each other and our unique cultural contexts, especially as we normally reserve time in all of our gatherings for community discussion.

For the summer months, we are experimenting with a later service time. We also will be doing a special service on July 22 that will ask a question for Tisha B'Av--- as Humanistic Jews, shouldn't we be celebrating, instead of mourning, the destruction of the Temple and its cult of animal sacrifice?

We welcome all to our services but especially encourage those who live in areas without compatible Jewish services to check us out. All announcements of our upcoming programs are on our website at spinozahavurah.org.

— James M. Branum

METRO DETROIT, MI | CONGREGATION FOR HUMANISTIC JUDAISM OF METRO DETROIT

The Spinoza Program at CHJ Detroit

The Spinoza Program, CHJ-Detroit's youth education, has lately been transformed into family education with family time and separate follow-ups for the children and adults. Annual favorites like the model seder continued, too, as Spinoza celebrated the yearly event...



Spinoza Family Seder, April 2, 2023

with a new twist. As Rabbi Falick talked about each item on the Seder Plate, participating families rushed to various stations around the room to collect or make the items, including devising their own recipes for Ashkenazic or Sephardic style charoset or any combination thereof!

In May, the program closed out its year of Jewish culture and humanistic values, kids and parents

enjoyed a visit from the "Mad Science" program. Also in May, CHJ-Detroit's Music Director Joseph Palazzolo held a special concert program called "Struck, Bowed and Plucked—A Piano Trio," which took on the spirit of Birmingham Temple Vivace programs of times past. It

was just one part of a ramped-up series of special and ongoing classes and programs for adults that included CHJ at the Detroit Jewish Film Festival, Café Mussar (a deep dive into Jewish ethics with humanistic interpretations), expansion of our yoga classes, mah-jongg, and weekly Judaism classes, a new "Daytimers" of lunches and outings, and much more!

— Arthur Liebhaber

TORONTO, ONTARIO | ORAYNU CONGREGATION FOR HUMANISTIC JUDAISM

What's New at Oraynu

Our new website (oraynu.org) was finally launched! We had a fun Purim party, a well-attended Passover Seder, Shabbat programs with Rabbi Jonathan Cohen plus his monthly Saturday morning Torah study, the final sessions of Rabbi Eva Goldfinger's adult education series, and a powerful Yom HaShoah observance entitled: "The Meaning and Purpose of Remembering Through Verse, Voices, Music and Art," which was developed by Rabbi Eva three years ago and engages more than 30 participants who read, play, sing and share.

Also worth mentioning was a meaningful and lively book discussion on "Caste: The Origins of our Discontent" by Isabel Wilkerson. The writer's premise is that the treatment of Blacks in America and the Jews in Nazi Germany are comparable to the caste system in India. Needless to say,



Rabbi Jonathan Cohen, Pamela Roy, Larry Kline, Carol Elman, Carina Newton and Karen Elkin.

there were varying opinions on her hypothesis.

In Canada, we could add Indigenous experiences to that list. At Oraynu we have committed to offering some programs that focus on reconciliation with our Indigenous sisters and brothers. Each of our programs begin with a land acknowledgement. Our Anti-Racism Committee takes the lead on these events with the goal of educating our

members on current issues. In June, our Committee Against Antisemitism is presenting an important talk on "Social Media and Antisemitism."

In recognition of the SHJ's 2022-2023 Humanistic Jewish Role Model and Pride Month in June, we are showing the 2008 film "Milk" starring Sean Penn, for which he won the Best Actor Oscar.

— Sandi Horwitz

A person is sitting on a grassy hill, looking up at a vast, starry night sky. The sky is filled with numerous stars and a bright, glowing nebula or galaxy on the right side. The foreground shows the silhouette of a tree on the left and the person's silhouette on the right, sitting on the grass. The overall scene is peaceful and contemplative.

Capacity for

Awe

A Very Human Superpower

BY RABBI JEFFREY L. FALICK

On Yom Kippur Day 2022 / 5783, I delivered a presentation to my congregation as part of a series about “Our Very Human Superpowers.” The final entry in that series was called “Uncovering Our Capacity for Awe.” It was introduced by our Music Director with the famous song, “To Life – L’Chaim!” I’m happy to share a lightly adapted version of that presentation for this issue.

“To Life – L’Chaim!”

This song celebrating life and the joys it can bring has been on my brain’s playlist quite a bit in recent weeks and months, undoubtedly owing to some upcoming family celebrations. This iconic tune written for “Fiddler on the Roof” by Sheldon Harnick and Jerry Bock is a reminder of the wonders of life, celebrated by a group of people whose everyday experiences were something less than wonderful. As the typically hapless Tevye sings: “Life has a way of confusing us, blessing and bruising us. Drink, l’chaim, to life!” Why drink with such joy? As the pious milkman puts it: “God would like us to be joyful, even when our hearts lie panting on the floor. But how much more can we be joyful when there’s really something to be joyful for?” And so we drink, “to life, to life, l’chaim!” After all, as he notes, it gives us both something to drink about and something to think about! *AWE continued on page 10* ►

FEATURE

“ To talk about awe is to marvel at the wonders of existence, every moment that makes life worth living. Sometimes awe takes hold of us when we consider the grandeur of the universe. Sometimes awe grips us when we behold some earthly glory: a sunset, the changing of colors at the onset of autumn, or the bloom of spring. ” – Rabbi Jeffrey L. Falick

Of course, in the show and subsequent movie, any of the thinking is pretty much obscured by the drinking. But since we're not drinking today – at least not officially, since drinking is not a Yom Kippur tradition – this day let us focus on what joyous moments like these holidays or our own *simchas* (happy occasions) or, indeed, whatever moves us to experience gratitude for the gifts of life, can give us to think about.

Personally, what I think about is awe.

To talk about awe is to marvel at the wonders of existence, every moment that makes life worth living. Sometimes awe takes hold of us when we consider the grandeur of the universe. Sometimes awe grips us when we behold some earthly glory: a sunset, the changing of colors at the onset of autumn, or the bloom of spring.

Sometimes awe seizes us at moments when we feel the intensity of our connections: to dear and supportive friends, to loving and committed life partners, or to the children whom we cradle one day and accompany to the chuppah in a blink of an eye.

Even in our increasingly secular world, few are ready to abandon the quest for awe, for the sense of radical amazement that we often call “spirituality.”

Spirituality is one of those difficult-to-define concepts that seem to defy what we've learned from science. If there is a “hot topic” that arises among humanists, it is frequently about spirituality.

A religious man like Tevye, of course,

would have seen God in moments of gratitude, rejoicing, or awe. In their wooden *shtetl* (small Eastern European village) synagogues, they would have expressed spirituality through gratitude to “the master of the universe.” The traditional Jewish *siddur* (prayer book) provides blessings upon seeing a rainbow or beautiful trees or fragrant herbs and flowers or interesting animals and even when encountering beautiful or wise people.

Gratitude for joyous moments and for the universe and all that it contains fill Jewish prayerbooks, both modern and traditional. But we Humanistic Jews neither worship gods nor reach out beyond ourselves to some higher intelligence. As a result, we've acquired a bit of a reputation for lacking spirituality; for a deficiency in feeling gratitude for life and its wonders.

One of the first things I'm often asked when introducing Humanistic Judaism to newcomers is, “How can you be spiritual if you don't believe in God?” Sometimes I reply, “You are correct that I do not believe in God. And so by extension, I also do not believe in the spirit world or supernatural creation.” “However,” I add, “a belief in other-worldly sources of amazement is unnecessary to spirituality because awe is entirely human, the product of the human *spirit*.”

This spirit of love, of attachment, of connectedness, of wonder lives – we say metaphorically – in our hearts. But in reality? It really lives in our brains!

As I was in the middle of preparing this message, I came across a wonderful piece in *The Washington Post* entitled “Why It Is Awesome That Your Brain Can Experience Awe.” The writer, Dr. Richard Sima, a neuroscientist turned science journalist, began his piece by recalling the experience of holding in his hands a human brain. He was struck by the feelings he experienced, giddiness, a slight lightheadedness, the catching of his breath. Here, he thought, “was a person ... their thoughts, feelings, hopes, fears and dreams – a whole life – embodied in its folds and creases.” He ultimately named what it was he was feeling. It was awe.

Back in 2008, we humanists received a great gift in the form of a book by Ron Aronson, my friend, our teacher, and our fellow congregant here at CHJ. It is called *Living Without God: New Directions for Atheists, Agnostics, Secularists, and the Undecided*. It was the very first book I read that thoroughly addressed my own questions about spirituality for those who live without God. Within a year of reading it, I became a Humanistic rabbi.

In this marvelous and far-ranging book, one of the topics that Ron tackles is how humanists express gratitude. He identifies the obstacles presented to us by both language and tradition; the near-monopoly – in some cultures of God-centric expressions of gratitude. And the virtual absence of such expressions in secular culture. “Hundreds of years after the beginning of modern

[Consider] that dot. That's here. That's home. That's us. On it earth, every creature that lives, now, everyone you ever heard of, every human being who ever was, lived out their lives.

Page 12 cut from this preview edition.

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► *AWE continued from page 11*
But this is only because the world that we experience seems to have been created especially for us. It is not, because it is true that our species is the result of countless accidents. We express our awe, we must admit, through prayer. The prayer is not, though, for the world and not the other way around.

And by "made for us" I mean that every life form on the planet emerged through the mindless course of biological evolution. Completely unguided, the kinds of living organisms developed and diversified from earlier forms, very, very slowly, in geologically long periods of time only if and only when small random mutations, their genetic make-up, conferred a small but sufficient survival advantage.

We can easily see how people who preceded us, who embraced the illusions that "in wisdom" life was formed and the whole world filled with intentionally formed creatures. But believing in a thing does not make it true.

Personally, I find the original closing words of the book that changed everything we know about how life developed, *On the Origins of Species* by Charles Darwin,

Summing up his earth-shattering opus, Darwin wrote:

There is grandeur in this view of life, with its several powers, having been

originally breathed into a few forms or into one; and that, whilst this planet has gone cycling on according to the

same laws, the great future of the world is laid out. We are here, breathing the same atmosphere, drinking the same water, eating the same food, and yet each of us is unique. The world is a beautiful and most wonderful, however we may choose to see it, the result of mere chance. Dawkins's sense of awe is scientifically true, and his sense of wonder is not at all. It springs from his amazement that despite the most extraordinary odds we are here in all of "our ordinariness." One of the ideas implicit in Dawkins' writing here is that of contingency, the accidental nature of the reality we experience.

Contingency has been a topic of many a time-traveling science fiction story, those of the "let's go back in time and kill Hitler in his crib" variety. But it's also a reality of our existence. A famous biologist once noted that if we were to play the tape of history over again we would absolutely get a different result.

As historians, Thomas Andrews and I have argued, "The core insight of contingency is that the world is a magnificently interconnected place. Change a single prior condition, and any historical outcome could have been different." *Never going to die because they are never going to be born. The potential people who could have been here in the set of possible people allowed by our DNA so massively exceeds the set of actual people. In the teeth of these stupefying odds, it is you and I, in our ordinariness, that are here.*

His words are as far from praise for God

as possible. The process he is describing is unguided, even chaotic! And yet somehow Dawkins manages to express heartfelt awe at the possibility of—perhaps even the reality of—our species' existence in the face of mindless evolution and our individual existence as the result of mere chance.

Dawkins's sense of awe is scientifically true, and his sense of wonder is not at all. It springs from his amazement that despite the most extraordinary odds we are here in all of "our ordinariness." One of the ideas implicit in Dawkins' writing here is that of contingency, the accidental nature of the reality we experience.

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As historians, Thomas Andrews and I have argued, "The core insight of contingency is that the world is a magnificently interconnected place. Change a single prior condition, and any historical outcome could have been different." *To argue that history is contingent is to claim that every historical outcome depends upon a number of prior conditions; that each of these prior conditions depends, in turn, upon still other conditions; and so on.*

The core insight of contingency is that the world is a magnificently interconnected place.

Change a single prior condition, and any historical outcome could have

Page 13 cut from this preview edition.

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turned out differently. Lee could have won at Gettysburg, Gore might have won in Florida, China might have inaugurated the world's first

What I love about this is how it underscores one way in which our world is an interconnected place.

Together with the idea of awe, it provides us with a sense of awe in the absence of intelligent design or of transcendent enchantment.

As Dr. Dawkins said in this very room in which we're gathered: "The truth is more magical - in the best and most exciting sense of the word, than any myth or made-up mystery or miracle. It's not magic, the magic of reality."

For those who are not "religious" I cannot imagine

of naturalistic spirituality than these ideas of Interconnectedness. On their own, as an explanation of human history they are already powerful.

when we add to them the idea that every single life form on earth is the product of a single molecule, DNA, the reality of our interconnectedness generates an even more powerful experience of awe. And it doesn't stop there. Our interconnectedness is a feature of the entire known universe. The raw atoms that make up every single observable phenomenon are also interconnected. They share a single source, not God, but an event we know as the Big Bang, which produced the first two elements, hydrogen and helium.

Consider this quote by a prominent astronomer explaining what came next:

...hydrogen and helium, every atom in the universe, were available for subsequent generations.

...hydrogen and helium, every atom in the universe, were synthesized in other stars. The silicon in the rocks, the oxygen in the air, the carbon in our DNA, the gold in our banks, the uranium in our pensils, were all made, though years ago. Our planet, our society,

These, of course, are the words of the late Dr. Carl Sagan, named in 2015 as a Humanistic Jewish Role Model by the Society for Humanistic Judaism. Sagan was a secular and humanistic Jew like himself and secular and humanistically-minded people from every walk of life—learn how to put our amazement into words. He himself was a gift to humanists in search of awe. When I speak to people about Humanistic Judaism, the first thing that I share with them is his stunning elocution about yet another source of our disenchantment, the vast coldness of the universe. Somehow, he managed to describe this reality in a way that transformed it into one of the most outstanding

expressions of humanism ever uttered. I never grow tired of one specific passage in his book, *Pale Blue Dot: A Vision of the Human Future* by an image taken by the first deep space earth probe launched by NASA in 1977.

as the spacecraft was departing our planetary neighborhood for the fringes of the solar system, Dr. Sagan suggested that we take one last picture of us, of the Pale Blue Dot we call earth. And so, from almost six and a half billion kilometers, Voyager captured a small, yet still enormous, sliver of our little far-flung neighborhood of stars and planets. From there, the earth was practically lost, appearing as a tiny point of light, only 12/100ths of a pixel in size, so small that NASA needed to enhance it for those who did not know where to look.

In that book, Dr. Sagan wrote:

[Consider] that dot. That's here. That's home. That's us.

Everyone you ever heard of, every human being who ever was, lived out their lives.

The aggregate of our joy and suffering, thousands of confident religions, ideologies, and economic doctrines, every hunter and forager, every hero and coward, every creator and destroyer of civilization, every king and peasant, every young couple in love,

AWE continued on page 22 ►

Wild Awe

BY REV. MARTI KELLER

In my more than two decades as a traveling speaker, housed in made-over basements and tiny guest rooms and pool houses, it has always been critical for me to find ways and places to walk — and not just in city blocks, but in wilder locations. For example, such as the extended time I spent in Blacksburg, Virginia and was taken to nearby Brown’s Farm: its rolling pasture, its gliding hawks, permanently protected from subdivisions and soccer field. And there was the New River, with passable bass fishing and Friday night undergrad beer parties, but also secluded banks from which you can just watch this long stream meander or rush, depending on the rapids.

This is to be — for a little while each day — a spiritual naturalist, an eco-feminist, participating, at least spiritually, in reweaving the world.

And here and there, identifying a common bird.

To be a Jewish person in nature defies some old stereotypes and self-concepts among those of us who are just one or two generations away from cobbled ghettos and crowded tenements or from great grandfathers who spent hours *davening* (praying) in cramped *schuls* (houses of worship) — or huddled over their Hebrew bibles and their Talmuds, engrossed in scripture from morning til night.

My father’s father came from a small town in Ukraine, adjacent to the great swaths of Tsvetukha Forest. It was always a

resort area, then and now, but rarely visited, I was told, by his family or other Jews. This was also the site of slaughter by Nazi soldiers and locals in the middle of World War 11.

It took my father’s restlessness and curiosity to break into the natural world, when as a teenager he would take the MTA in Boston from Dorchester to Boston Commons, in search of urban wildlife, not just the ducks and shorebirds, but the neighborhood permanent avian residents and the migratory flocks.

He spent the rest of his life “hunting without guns,” as he would tell his hundreds of birding students, rising at dawn and out the door, the best time to capture the sights and sounds, collecting a world-class life list of spotted species, attracting novices to his Intro to Ornithology or bird study classes at Emory University.

He knew his bird facts and figures, but it was his mystical connection with birds that kept people flocking to him. He was like a Pied Piper. When he sounded a bird call, they would come, and he would fill a tree with birds. He could often tell a bird by a single chip, just as he was known to hear a single bar of classical music and tell the piece it came from.

My father’s religion of origin was the kind of Judaism where his mother kept a kosher kitchen, and there were barebones observance of Shabbat and the holy days. He was also a nearly lifelong atheist, a

cultural Jew who could break out into basic Yiddish to tell a joke or a story, and who loved borscht and chicken feet.

He dropped out of attending first Unitarian services and later Ethical Culture, to free up his Sunday mornings for bird-watching excursions. If there is a descriptor of my father’s spirituality -- which for me as well means being concerned about and connected to the essence of life -- what Socrates called “an examined life,” it would be spiritual naturalism. Spiritual naturalism is described as a worldview, value system, and personal life practice that sees the universe as one natural and sacred whole, as is the rationality and science through which nature is revealed. It is the awe and mystery we experience when we observe or have other direct experiences in nature. Even experiences that on the surface make no sense can be meaningful, like the majestic, but also frightening Barred or Hooting Owl that followed my husband and me a few days after my father died through a patch of urban woods ... or the unexplainable accuracy with which I spotted and identified birds only once in my life, on an *in memoriam* bird walk I took.

For those among us who either grew up within Judaism and have moved away entirely, or like most of us, still retain and observe some of the usual practices and holy days, the High Holy Days may be filled with memories of being (confined) within a synagogue, indoors, for many hours.

Rabbi Mike Comins, founder of Torah

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PHOTO BY RICHARD COHEN

Trek, promoting the connection between Judaism and nature, tells a very different story about the celebration of the Jubilee Year. He described a day in September 1996 when he was camping in a canyon in the desert mountains above the Israeli city of Eilat, wrapped in the early morning cold in his tallit, his prayer shawl, he listens to the birds exposed. Far from his heart sheds its burdens, his prayers of atonement and *teshuvah* — turning towards the good, turning his life around — flow.

He must overcome a stereotype that even secular Jews are wilderness rejects, as he writes, that Jewish things are done in a city and under a roof. The assumption is that wisdom comes from books and insights from a mind need not be exposed to fresh air, to wondrous natural places, or to other living things.

My brilliant, voraciously reading, world-

recognized microbiologist father would have loved the recently published book *Awe: The Can Transform Your Life* by Dasher Kiltner. calls regular healthy doses of awe-inspiring nature have proven huge health benefits, physical and emotional.

now entirely on the Merlin App on my phone to tell me, mostly from the calls and songs of birds, who they are and how amazingly rare a sighting. But I have still, over my seven decades plus of life — part of the time — composed a kind of Wilderness Jewish, Thoreau-leaning spiritual life. This, in some ways, has taken me full circle back to my childhood, where I escaped the storms in our cramped home and the dark corners of our neighborhood by spending some part of

most days in the woods behind the houses across the street. It was a small remnant of Eastern forest (or even Southern Piedmont forest), with a grove of white birch and beech and red oak and maple trees. For me, it was a haven — sometimes slippery, with patches of poison ivy, with biting insects, with burrs and nettles. But despite these slight and even delicious dangers, it made me feel safe and Pulpits that I could find my strength — feel totally myself and totally at one with the life that fills and surrounds me.

What I have gained is inspiration.

What I have gained is the experience of the interconnected web of all existence.

What I have gained is the awe I can find right in front of me. ✨

Citations and additional resources to accompany this article can be found at: bit.ly/HJ-Summer2023

ESSAY

Healing Through Adopting Humanistic Judaism

BY HANNAH FONTILUS

It surprises some that I'm a practicing Catholic who identifies as culturally Jewish. My Jewish heritage and ancestry are from my biological father's mother's side. My birth mother grew up practicing Catholicism. My birth parents met in 1987 in a mental health unit. They befriended one another because they had a way of making one another feel better. They kindled a romance, fell deeply in love, and then decided they wanted a child. They discovered they were pregnant with me a month later.

I reconnected with my birth parents in my early twenties. They lost contact once I was adopted. My mother gave me my father's full name, and I found a birth date after searching the internet. The adoption agency gave me information on where he attended high school. I visited his high school, and they still had his yearbook with a Junior picture. The receptionist made me a copy of the page. Before this point, I always wondered which parent I looked like the most, and on that day, I discovered I'm a spitting image of him.

My adoptive parents always had a positive outlook on the sacrifice my birth parents made. They always told me that I was placed for adoption out of love. I just accepted their word although I didn't understand what sacrificial love is. In retrospect, I believe that I held on to anger toward my birth parents for placing me because I had a terrible temper for most of my childhood. My mom even put me in counseling for it at school. My anger was explosive, and I didn't understand why I could get angry over nothing. I believe now that perhaps I internalized that I was a mistake because I was "given away."

I think part of my anger was due to feeling different from the rest of my peers because I was adopted. I

attended a very small school where there was only one other classmate who was also adopted at birth. Our adoptive parents could not have biological children, and it was her adoptive mother who reached out to my mom about a new private agency in Indiana that allowed for semi-open adoptions to occur, which means there could be some communication between my birth family and my adoptive family. My adoptive parents put their names on a waiting list around September of 1988, and I was adopted in March of the following year.

It was difficult for me to make friends during elementary and middle school. I had a few friends in high school but I wasn't popular. In 2005, I befriended a young man a few years older than me who moved from another small town. He told me once that some people asked him why he occasionally speaks to me and informed him he shouldn't since I am not cool. I'm unsure why many people held this view of me, but it certainly didn't help my anger problem.

When I went to college, men noticed me in a much more positive way. I received so much attention from men that I didn't know how to deal with them. Since I understand what it feels like to be rejected, I always tried to turn down a date without hurting a man's feelings. Sometimes out of pressure, I would just accept a date with a man I



Hannah and her husband celebrating their anniversary.

didn't want to go out with. I certainly didn't want to be seen as uncool in college, like I was in high school. I accepted an offer to go bowling with another nineteen-year-old one evening, which is a decision I still regret. He asked me for a ride home afterward, which I agreed to. He took me to the bathroom. He led me to the bathroom. When I was finished using it, I asked him to show me my way out, but he tricked me. He took me to the living room and raped me.

I never felt like I was my own person. I felt completely debilitated after being raped. I also quickly learned who my true friends were. While I was somewhat more popular in high school, most people I partied with truly didn't care about me. I knew shame, but I didn't know what I had at nineteen. I was a toxic chemical—a coronavirus that everyone evacuated from as soon as I entered a room. I quickly went from being somewhat popular to damaged goods. Along with being diagnosed with Post Traumatic Stress Disorder, I was also diagnosed with an emotional disorder that I believe had always been present before this turning point.

It's taken me more than a decade to process the and betrayals. About a year later, I reconnected with my birth parents. I was able to reconnect with my birth family. My birth mother passed away in 2013. She had a Catholic funeral service. My birth father and I were able to attend. It was just a few months after we met. I didn't realize how angry I was at them for placing me up for adoption, until after I met them. I was extremely disappointed in myself for being so angry. When I fantasized about meeting them, I would fantasize about being overjoyed. Meeting them was more difficult than I anticipated. Both my birth parents had let themselves decay. Being raised in a Catholic home where a strong emphasis is put on work, knowing that my birth parents were living on disability embarrassed me. It also made me realize what my life would have been like if I had stayed with my birth family. My husband and I temporarily moved to New York City in 2018, where I befriended a Conservative Jewish family and began to discover what being Jewish means. Before our move, the Jewish people were an enigma to me. A few family members mentioned to me that we have Jewish heritage in our family, and I was made aware that some of my family held close to some Jewish values but lacked religious observance. My new friends taught me about the Biblical holidays, and my husband and I celebrated Hanukkah in New York City. Judaism and Jewish

culture became more important to me over time, and it has been a tradition to observe Rosh Hashanah, Hanukkah, and Passover since our adventures in New York City.

After seven years of no contact, I started thinking about my birth family again in the spring of 2019, and we stayed in contact until the time he passed away from a combination of pneumonia and Covid. During one of our conversations, he finally confessed that he and my biological parents had been in contact with me so they could raise me. Somewhere throughout the pregnancy, they both knew that I would be better off with them. My biological father encouraged my biological parents to place me for adoption. My maternal grandmother encouraged my birth mother to choose my adoptive family because they are Catholic. Every time my birth father and I spoke, he told me he loved me and how proud he was of me. I always did my best to reassure him that he was not a burden. After he passed away, I hosted a celebration of life for his father over Facebook. My biological father encouraged me to think critically about the world and myself. I feel that I belong as a Jew. What I want others to know is that embracing my Jewish roots fulfills my obligation as a Catholic as well. The Torah says to honor thy father and mother.

Yom Kippur is one of my favorite holidays. It is a reminder that I have a right to be angry over what has happened to me, but by giving in to anger, I am cheating myself out of enjoying life. My non-Jewish friends and I celebrate Jewish Sabbath by lighting candles and using the SHJ blessing. The blessing of how radiant humanity is helping both of us to cope with the stresses of the week, but personally, observing also reminds me to look for the good in others. My husband and I have been trying to conceive for three years. We have not been successful. I was diagnosed with an endocrine disorder that is the cause. I have read that many women who have experienced sexual violence develop this disorder. It hurts me every day knowing that I will never be able to have biological children, but we have put our names in to (hopefully) adopt a child one day. We also recently adopted a puppy, Max. What makes Max the best Jewish dog is that he chose us to be his parents. Now Max participates by sitting with us when we observe the holidays. ❧

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Thank you for your interest in Humanistic Judaism!



Yom Kippur is one of my favorite holidays. It is a reminder that I have a right to be angry over what has happened to me, but by giving in to anger, I am cheating myself out of enjoying life.

PRACTICE

How a Humanistic Jew Found His Way to Mussar Practice

BY J. BRUCE HILLENBERG, PH.D.

My Introduction to Humanism

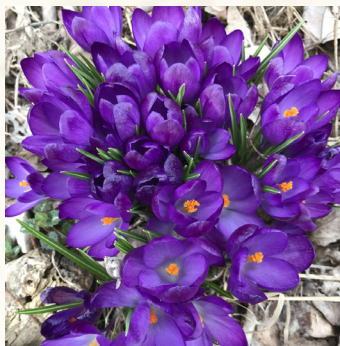
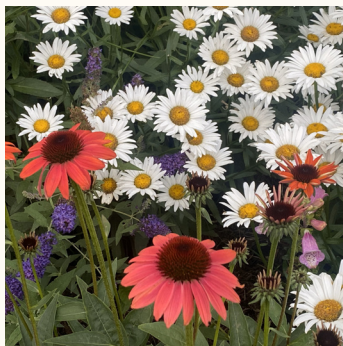
I completed my undergraduate education at Michigan State University (MSU) from 1968 through 1972. This was a time of rapid personal growth in which I learned about the value of personal self-reflection and the power that comes from authentic self-expression. I also grew in my understanding of how group emotional intimacy can facilitate personal growth and the ways that one's ethical actions can promote world peace and ensure that all of the planet's inhabitants are cared for. I also studied Eastern philosophy with its emphasis on the character traits of acceptance, nonjudgment, mindfulness, humility, and compassion. This facilitated my self-discovery, and I wrote poetry to express this interest.

Humanistic psychology helped me understand how to develop a sense of identity, values, and moral compass independent of religion, national identity, and a prevailing economic system. Humanistic psychologists were asking important questions like: what does it mean to be psychologically healthy, both internally and towards others? How can individuals find meaning and a sense of purpose? Where do we derive our values? These questions (and the community of those who were asking them) led me to embark on a life-long journey to express my humanistic values, and a desire to find wellness by expanding healthy character traits.

My Jewish Identity

My identity as part of the Jewish people was present during my undergraduate education, but I did not have a connection to a house of worship, and I was not engaged in the study

of Jewish literature. I was an atheist and more consumed with understanding myself as a secular person than in a relationship to a religious tradition. I had left the flock to search for a way to actualize my self-understanding and character. I had not found this type of guidance as a child or adolescent in the Jewish congregation that my parents and grandparents belonged to.



Scenes from the Hillenberg garden: Successful gardening involves a continuous process of “doing what is right” and focuses the mind on both, the moment and a larger purpose of being.

My Bar Mitzvah was something to persevere through; it did not assist my search for meaning or understanding as I grew up.

During my twenties through my sixties, I was invested in building a career as a clinical psychologist and raising two daughters with my wife. I also continued to expand my appreciation for humanistic values. I was committed to mindfulness,

gardening, walks in nature, working to improve my character to help me find more equanimity in my life, and enriching the authenticity and emotional intimacy of my relationships with others. Yet, I found it hard to re-create the community of individuals I had in undergraduate school who shared a mutual journey to expand humanistic roots and personal character in a safe and inspiring way.

My wife, daughter, and I had a brief relationship with a Reform Temple to facilitate our daughters' B'nai Mitzvah, but I didn't find an emphasis on character development as a Jew that could have facilitated a longer-term commitment. Thus, we left our Temple after our last daughter

completed her Bat Mitzvah in the late 1990s, becoming unaffiliated Jews. My exploration of character development as a Jew continued to be facilitated by my personal intentionality and desire to improve on traits such as humility, equanimity, silence, gratitude, loving kindness, and generosity.

An Awakening

I retired from full-time practice as a clinical psychologist in June 2019. A half-year after that the pandemic hit. Politics became more strident. Racism and antisemitism grew more explicit. To cope I dove into intense study of the history of antisemitism and my family ancestry. My poetry turned to the struggle between humanistic and autocratic/theocratic worlds. I wrote often about humanistic characteristics that would challenge the psychological personas embedded in the rise of an autocratic and theocratic culture in America. The pain of antisemitism and how my ancestors experienced it created a desire to find a Jewish community to study with and experience connection.

My wife and I joined the Birmingham Temple (founded by Rabbi Sherwin Wine) in Michigan, which is now called the Congregation for Humanistic Judaism. I knew my deceased intergenerational family

Mussar and Humanism on a Walk

There is splendor and gratitude everywhere.

There and there and every way I look.

I pay attention with silence and patience.

I walk softly to honor the earth below and the skies above.

A relaxing feeling ensues as I appreciate the generosity of nature.

This confirms that I must reciprocate the favor in small and meaningful ways.

I stroll and acknowledge with humility that nature and our community are one.

My pace picks up a bit—ah, that is what the masters mean by enthusiasm.

I walk with grace and poise, with calmness and equanimity.

And the forest around seems so, so organized—the softness of order.

Then a leaf presents itself—colors ablaze—the power of simplicity.

Finally, I rest for a moment by a tree, gently leaning on the trunk—ah, moderation!

My heart is at peace, my mind is clear, my soul feels like...

—J. Bruce Hillenberg, Ph.D.

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would be pleased that my wife and I had found a place to live a more explicit Humanistic Jewish life as I entered the 7th inning of the ballgame. Our daughters and their boyfriends approved. Family and friends were delighted for me. I was committed with the commitment to study, science, art, social activism, environmentalism, anti-racism, and inclusion at our congregation. But still, my journey into my inner world was something I did not expect. My commitment with my Humanistic congregation. My vehicle for exploring my inner world. My intense discussions with my family on long walks, authentic encounters with special friends, and my work with patients in my clinical practice.

Discovering Mussar

Then I discovered Mussar after a year of membership at our congregation. I discovered the writings of Alan Morinis and Greg Marcus in my Humanistic Jewish history. A spark ignited within me. My interest in humanistic Judaism and personal growth. I read further and traced the history of Mussar which has been practiced more than a thousand years. Research has shown that the study of traditional Jewish literature (e.g., Torah, Talmud, etc.) was no guarantee that the knowledgeable person's way of life would demonstrate character traits including loving kindness, order and simplicity, humility, moderation, truthfulness, generosity, and calmness. Scholars described the explicit struggle we all have between being a person of integrity and ethics, or straying off course due to unconscious forces that move us away from our innate goodness. Finding balance between the extremes of each trait was important. They agreed that the study of character traits should have a more important emphasis in the Jewish world.

Their writings reflect an early understanding of our personal psychology predating Sigmund Freud, B. F. Skinner, Aaron Beck, Abraham Maslow and other psychology and psychiatry scholars who explicated the positive and negative forces

of psychological existence. Mussar study was developed for members of the Jewish community prior to the 19th Century.

Then, in the mid-1800's a group of rabbis and sages (led by Rabbi Salanter) developed a method of Mussar practice to be conducted in a structured manner. This method incorporated many of the self-management techniques used in modern evidence-based schools of psychological practice (e.g., cognitive-behavioral therapy, present-moment awareness, affirmations, statements and imagery, therapeutic journaling, and intentional practice of positive responses). These strategies help practitioners to develop a supportive process for personal change.

Over the years, Mussar Institutes were developed. They continue to facilitate in-person and virtual study and educational groups. Study groups are composed of members from across North America. The Mussar Institute has played a key role in spreading the study and practice of Mussar. These leaders emphasized that while Mussar study and practice is not therapy, it is therapeutic when done within a supportive community that emphasizes sharing and authenticity. What could be more humanistic than this?

Mussar addressed the same character traits that I had become so excited about from my awakening as an undergraduate student through the present. It also ad-

dressed the frustrations I had experienced in my earlier years with Jewish education and community membership: the lack of focus on the inner world and character traits of the individual Jew.

Still, I wanted to embrace Mussar as a way to help myself and others. This turned out to be easier than I thought. While traditional Mussar is embedded in strengthening one's relationship to the holiness of a higher power, I based my Mussar study and practice on my personal growth, my social behavior, and helping others — a simple humanistic mission. I expanded my study, worked to translate the guidelines into my daily life, and wrote poems about my experience. I also took an online self-directed course from the Mussar Institute and signed up for a virtual study group that will begin this summer.

Introducing Mussar to My Congregation

My study of Mussar lit a spark. I decided to introduce this critical component of Jewish study and practice to the members of my Humanistic congregation. I believed this was a key component to the wonderful portfolio of study, exploration, relational community, intellectual analysis, fun and enjoyment, and tikkun olam that the Congregation for Humanistic Judaism facilitated.

I received unconditional support from Rabbi Jeffrey Falick and other members of our program committee. My first step was to provide a presentation on Mussar at one of our Friday night services. The reception was good. After reviewing *MUSSAR continued on page 21* ▶

Sherwin T. Wine Lifetime Achievement Award Acceptance Speech

BY RABBI EVA GOLDFINGER

First of all, thank you so much for honouring me with this award granted in the name of a man whom I adored; a man who changed Judaism and who changed my life. Confirmation that my work makes a difference in the lives of others is very meaningful for me. Other than my counselling work, I have devoted almost four decades of my work life to the Movement of Secular Humanistic Judaism, and being chosen for this award means that my years of effort have not been in vain, that I have made a difference.

I'd like to share with you what kindled my passion and lead me here. I consider myself very fortunate to have been raised in a loving and supportive Chasidic home and community in Toronto. But in addition to following all the *halakhot* (or laws) rigidly, I was taught that central to Judaism was the commandment to be of use—to help the sick, the poor, and the needy and to take care of nature.

I was a profoundly (some might say irritatingly) curious child who wanted to learn and know everything—in fact I don't think I've lost that curiosity. The only “C” I ever got in my report cards was in behaviour, because my Jewish teacher thought “I asked altogether too many questions.”

I read voraciously, by a streetlight, when I was reading non-Jewish books to keep that hidden from my parents. I got tired of hearing my father tell my brothers how much I loved to learn and that they should be more like me. I got tired of hearing the message that God gave me a good brain and I had the moral obligation to use it, because, when I said that I wanted to go to a *yeshiva* (or college) to continue my studies and be of more use, I was told that advanced study was only for boys.

That's when I knew that despite my joyful and loving experiences, irrationality and prejudices were also part of Judaism. Yet



there were amazing elements in our culture and being Jewish was important to me, and I did want to pass it on to my kids. But what kind of Jew did I want to be, and what kind of Judaism was I willing to pass on?

One day in 1984, I bumped into a real estate client of mine, Karen Levy, and while conversing about Jewishness and Jewish education for my kids, Karen told me about a new kind of Jewish community – the Secular Jewish Association (SJA) and invited me to an event at Dr. Jerry Bain's home. I went, and that evening altered my whole life and Karen and I became best friends. I was inspired that night by people who came from so many different backgrounds yet were able to come together to celebrate their Jewish heritage in a way that had meaning and integrity for them, while being respectful of others, despite their conflicting beliefs and behaviours.

In a short while I realized that I was not interested in believing in a non-egalitarian and non-just god. Before long I didn't believe in any god and was thrilled to discover the ideals of humanism rooted in science, rationality, and ethics.

I joined the SJA and became active on the board and various committees. Because I had a strong Jewish education and spoke Hebrew and Yiddish, they sought my help in

creating meaningful celebratory materials that were rooted in all Jewish culture but were secular and humanistic. I did loads of research, and after drafting the materials, beginning with Rosh Hashana and Yom Kippur services, and creating suitable songs, I made sure to get input from other SJA and later Oraynu members. This collaboration resulted in wonderful materials which we happily shared with other Movement communities in North America.

The following spring, after I joined the SJA, I participated in my first Congress of Secular Jewish Organizations' (CSJO) National Conference and met so many of the movers and shakers not only of the CSJO but also of their sister organization, the SHJ. It was at this conference that I met and became life-long friends with Miriam Jerris. Interesting how Miriam, Karen, and I, all ultimately became Humanistic Rabbis.

Although the SJA was a member of the CSJO, I also chose to become an active member of the SHJ where I met our founder, Sherwin Wine, and over time we too became colleagues and friends. I also became active in the International Federation of Secular and Humanistic Jews (IFSHJ) and then its educational arm the International Institute for Secular Humanistic Judaism (IISHJ).

At the conferences, discussions began about the need to train leaders, and the Leadership Training Program was established. I joyfully participated in the very first class in Philadelphia and completed all the required courses, learning from Rabbi Wine and other amazing teachers and professors from all over the world. It was here that I created solid and cooperative friendships with the graduate leaders and became active on our Board, the Leadership Conference of Secular and Humanistic Jews (LCSHJ).

Before I even graduated as a Madrikha,

Sherwin came to Toronto in 1986 where we met with the Ontario Registrar and ensured that Secular Humanistic Judaism got on the list of legitimate Jewish Movements, and I was accepted as their first Clergy, licensed to perform weddings in Ontario. Later Sherwin asked me to represent the Movement as the IISHJ's Ontario Director. At Oraynu we frequently held adult education and leadership training programs for the IISHJ, and it was wonderful having Sherwin and Adam Chalom come to teach. During Sherwin's days I also enjoyed teaching classes at the IISHJ.

In 1996 I was happy to research and write the book, *Basic Ideas of Secular Humanistic Judaism*, which I later dramatically shortened so it would become the Educational Kit for all Movement Leaders and Teachers. To this day, many communities choose to send a copy to all their members to educate them about Secular Humanistic Judaism.

As a Madrikha and later a Rabbi, I created endless ceremonies for life cycle events. These too I happily shared with my colleagues. I was always happy to hear from my clients how meaningful these ceremonies were to them and their guests. Particularly in Toronto, because it tends to be conservative, I made it a mission in my life to be there for intercultural couples and families. I was the first Jewish clergy in Toronto who officiated at intercultural ceremonies as well as at weddings of the LGBTQ+ community. I also created a course for those who wished to convert to or be adopted into Secular Humanistic Judaism and shared this with the Movement.

Once the IISHJ established a Rabbinic program it was thrilling for me to continue my advanced Jewish education and training both within the Movement and at Hebrew College in Boston, thus proving that advanced education clearly was for women too. I also helped to form and lead the Association of Humanistic Rabbis (AHR). I loved being involved in all the Movement Organizations.

For many years I organized conferences in the US and Canada for the CSJO and the SHJ. I travelled to Movement Communities all over the US to train leaders, lead festival and

Shabbat services and offer adult education courses. I also loved to travel to Israel and Europe to participate in conferences there. In 2005 and 2006 I was the Rabbi at one of our LA congregations. But although I continued to travel to various communities, ultimately Toronto was my 'home'.

All these years at the SJA and Oraynu I have been thrilled and fulfilled offering adult education classes, continuing to partner with other leaders in creating and updating our school curriculum, helping Oraynu grow and thrive through participation in the planning and execution of programming and running Intertalk a Support Group for inter-married couples and families. Intertalk was later adopted by some of our Movement communities. To this day I continue to support the leaders and Rabbis of Oraynu.

It has meant so much to me personally to have played an active part in developing and growing our movement and spreading our philosophy that our rational belief systems and our Jewish behaviours need to be consistent. I am so proud to have contributed to putting the word out there that Secular Humanistic Judaism has its doors wide open to Jews, their partners, and families, as well as all those who wish to join us.

Thank you to all the leaders and people in our Movement with whom I partnered to help build the Movement. I am so grateful to this Movement for enabling me to live most of my adult life with passion, integrity, and meaning and to pass that on to my children and to others around North America.

Thank you to all my friends, and most importantly my ex-husband Joe and my treasured daughters, Jodi and Corrie who partnered with me and supported me in building Oraynu and our Movement, and my precious grandchildren Keira and Hallie who are participating in our legacy by attending Oraynu's Sunday School. I love you all. While I can, may I and my work continue to have a positive impact and inspire others to join and grow this amazing form of contemporary Judaism. May our light continue to burn brightly and help illuminate the darker corners of our world. Todah Rabbah! Yasher Koach! 🌟



► *MUSSAR continued from page 19*

the impact of the presentation with our program committee members, we decided to start a small study and practice group every other week. The name: Mussar Café. Since I have not completed certification as a facilitator (as provided by the Mussar Institute) I will collaborate with the other members of our study group to establish our unique humanistic approach to Mussar study and practice. I believe my 39 years as a licensed clinical psychologist will give me the capacity to guide us on this journey. Our study group has met four times (at the time of this writing). The participants are committed to the process of reflecting on how to apply humanistic values to Mussar practice. I am finding that are members appreciate the opportunity to share their inner journey to expand their well-being and positive traits in a safe setting. To date, we have explored the traits of humility, patience, and gratitude. Members share their experiences of these traits in their lives—noting strengths and areas for improvement.

We follow several guidelines during our meetings. First, Mussar discussions are not therapy. Yet, our discussions can be therapeutic for each of us through the process of expanding self-awareness, improving our intention to improve one's character, and experiencing positive change. Second, all conversations are confidential, and information shared by other members is not to be discussed outside of our meetings. Third, our discussions are about each person's personal experience; we are not here to judge or debate ideas.

During our first four sessions, participants emphasized how pleased they are that Mussar had arrived at our front door, but also our collective commitment to find a Humanistic approach to Mussar. I am excited to see our commitment to Mussar unfold. I believe we will be a more positive and supportive community as a result. 🌟

Citations and additional resources to accompany this article can be found at: bit.ly/HJ-Summer2023

Page 22 cut from this preview edition.

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

► AWE continued from page 13
every mother and father, hopeful child,
inventor and explorer, every teacher of
morals, every “superstar,” every “supreme leader,”
every saint and prophet, every person whose
our species lives, suspended in a sunbeam.

The Earth is a vast cosmic arena. Think of the rivers of
blood spilled by emperors so
they could become the momentary
masters of a fraction of a dot.

Think of the endless cruelties visited
by the inhabitants of some other corner, how
pixel on the screen, how frequent their
inhabitants of some other corner, how
frequent their eager they are to kill one another, how
fervent their hatreds.

Our posturings, our imagined
self-importance, the delusion that we
have some privilege over the
Universe, are challenged by this point
of pale light.

Our planet is a lonely speck in the
great enveloping cosmic dark. In our
obscurity, in all this vastness, there
is no hint that help will come from
elsewhere to save us from ourselves.

... There is perhaps no better
demonstration of the folly of human
conceits than this distant image of
our tiny world. To me, it underscores
our responsibility to deal more kindly

with one another, and to preserve and
cherish the pale blue dot, the only
home we’ve ever known.

This is what radical awe and amazement
simultaneously reminding us how important
each other. And just as our ancestors did
of fancy, Dr. Sagan’s conclusions,
His conclusions are, I believe, much more
urgent because they are grounded in the
reality of our existence, of our universe and
of our fellow humans.

As he emphasizes elsewhere in the book:
The significance of our lives and our
fragile planet is ...determined only by
our own wisdom and courage. We are
the custodians of life’s meaning. We
forgive us our errors, to save us from
our childish mistakes. But knowledge
is preferable to ignorance. Better by
far to embrace the hard truth than
a reassuring fable. If we crave some
cosmic purpose, then let us find
ourselves a worthy goal.

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Awe is a small word that encompasses many
things. These include connections to family
and others through love and responsibility and
commitment; amazement at the wonders of life

and its transitions as we actively experience the
passing of the torches of our lives *l’dor va’dor*
(from generation to generation).

of our planet, from the
grandeur of its landscapes to the spectacles of
life to its diverse and spectacular life
and it is the vastness of the universe,
the incalculable distances, the ever-unfolding
it inspires for extra-terrestrial life.

I have spent a lifetime exploring the
literature and rituals of awe and I have
concluded that there are few modern
thinkers who have ever tied all of these
objects of awe together with both the skill of
the ancient poets and the commitment to the
realities uncovered by those who wield the
microscope and telescope like Dr. Carl Sagan.

My admiration for him is unabashed. He
told the truth about our cosmic insignificance
and made the case for a humanistic morality
by reminding us that it is not in spite of our
insignificance that, when measured against
we still matter. It is because of it.

So let us leave this Yom Kippur, this Day
of Awe, with one last thought from Dr. Sagan
who reminded us also that “for small creatures
such as we the vastness is bearable only
through love.” If awe can lead us to love, it is
perhaps our very most extraordinary human
superpower. ❧

Citations and additional resources to
accompany this article can be found at:
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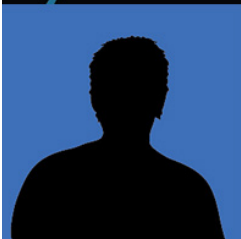
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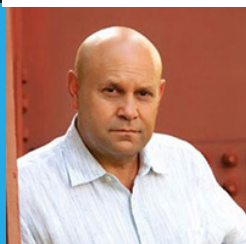
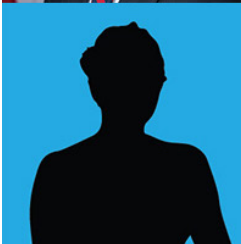
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