



# HUMANISTIC JUDAISM

Volume XXXXI Number 3-4  
Summer/Autumn 2013

## JEWISH FOOD AND JEWISH CULTURE

Rabbi Adam Chalom  
Leora Cookie Hatchwell  
Rabbi Jodi Kornfeld  
Kaela Walker  
Ed Chalom  
Barry Swan

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Wisdom from Wine:  
Our Dietary Laws

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Intermarriage: From *Oy Vey* to *Mazel Tov*  
Humanistic Rabbis: Yesterday, Today & Tomorrow  
Rabbi Falick Leads Birmingham Temple into 50<sup>th</sup> Year

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*and more*

*Humanistic Judaism is a voice for Jews who value their Jewish identity and who seek an alternative to conventional Judaism.*

*Humanistic Judaism affirms the right of individuals to shape their own lives independent of supernatural authority.*

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# Humanistic Jewish Congregations, Communities & Havurot

## UNITED STATES

### ARIZONA

**Or Adam, Congregation for Humanistic Judaism**, contact: Miki Safadi, 7904 E Chaparral Rd, Unit A110-278, Scottsdale, AZ 85250, (480) 663-7788, [www.oradam.org](http://www.oradam.org), [info@oradam.org](mailto:info@oradam.org).  
**Secular Humanist Jewish Circle**, contact: Cathleen Becskehazy, 930 S Goldenweed Way, Tucson, AZ 85748, (520) 293-3919, [www.secularhumanistjewishcircle.org](http://www.secularhumanistjewishcircle.org), [cathbaz@gmail.com](mailto:cathbaz@gmail.com).

### CALIFORNIA

**Adat Chaverim, Congregation for Humanistic Judaism**, president: David Borden, PO Box 261204, Encino, CA 91426, (888) 552-4552, [www.HumanisticJudaismLA.org](http://www.HumanisticJudaismLA.org), [info@HumanisticJudaismLA.org](mailto:info@HumanisticJudaismLA.org).  
**Kahal Am**, president: Gary Zarnow, PO Box 927751, San Diego, CA 92192, (858) 549-3088, [www.kahalam.org](http://www.kahalam.org), [president@kahalam.org](mailto:president@kahalam.org).

**Kol Hadash, (Northern California)**, contact: Kimberly Read, PO Box 2777, Berkeley, CA 94702, (510) 428-1492, [www.KolHadash.org](http://www.KolHadash.org), [info@KolHadash.org](mailto:info@KolHadash.org).

**Orange County SHJ (OC Secular Congregation for Humanistic Judaism)**, contact: Rosalie Gottfried, 3155C Alta Vista, Laguna Woods, CA 92637, (949) 422-3895, [ROSART1@aol.com](mailto:ROSART1@aol.com).

**Pacific Community of Cultural Jews**, president: Karen Knecht, 7238 El Viento Way, Buena Park, CA 90620, (949) 760-9006, <http://pccjews.org>, [PacifComm@aol.com](mailto:PacifComm@aol.com).

### COLORADO

**Beth Ami – Colorado Congregation for Humanistic Judaism**, (720) 466-0101, [www.bethami.com](http://www.bethami.com), [info@bethami.com](mailto:info@bethami.com).

### CONNECTICUT

**Congregation for Humanistic Judaism, Fairfield County**, (203) 293-8867, 606 Post Rd E, #542, Westport, CT 06880, president: Jane Campbell, [www.humanisticjews.org](http://www.humanisticjews.org), [info@humanisticjews.org](mailto:info@humanisticjews.org).

### DISTRICT OF COLUMBIA

**Machar, The Washington Congregation for Secular Humanistic Judaism**, president: Darlene Basch, contact: PO Box 42014, Washington, DC 20015, (202) 686-1881, [www.machar.org](http://www.machar.org), [info@machar.org](mailto:info@machar.org).

### FLORIDA

**Congregation Beth Adam**, contact: Bob Fishman, PO Box 2579, Boca Raton, FL 33427, (561) 443-1769, [www.bethadam.com](http://www.bethadam.com), [info@bethadam.com](mailto:info@bethadam.com).

**Congregation for Humanistic Judaism**, president: Susan Friedman, 3023 Proctor Rd, Sarasota, FL 34231, (941) 929-7771, [www.CHJ-sarasota.org](http://www.CHJ-sarasota.org), [chjsarasota@hotmail.com](mailto:chjsarasota@hotmail.com).

**Humanistic Jewish Havurah of Southwest Florida**, contact: Cynthia Cook, 25051 Bainbridge Ct, #202, Bonita Springs, FL 34134, (239) 495-8197, <http://humanisticjewishhavurahswfl.org>, [CynthiaCook@humanisticjewishhavurahswfl.org](mailto:CynthiaCook@humanisticjewishhavurahswfl.org).

### ILLINOIS

**Beth Chaverim Humanistic Jewish Community**, Rabbi Jodi Kornfeld, Deerfield, IL 60015, (847) 945-6512, [www.bethchaverim.net](http://www.bethchaverim.net), [info@bethchaverim.net](mailto:info@bethchaverim.net).

**Kol Hadash Humanistic Congregation**, Rabbi Adam Chalom, chair: William Brook, 175 Olde Half Day Rd, Ste 123, Lincolnshire, IL 60069, (847) 347-3003, [www.kolhadash.com](http://www.kolhadash.com), [info@kolhadash.com](mailto:info@kolhadash.com).

### MARYLAND

**Baltimore Jewish Cultural Chavurah**, contact: Bob Jacobson, 2 Stitchberry Ct, Reisterstown MD 21136, (410) 403-2473, [www.baltimoresecularjews.org](http://www.baltimoresecularjews.org), [baltimoresecularjews@gmail.com](mailto:baltimoresecularjews@gmail.com).

## MASSACHUSETTS

**Kahal B'raira, Greater Boston Congregation for Humanistic Judaism**, contact: Shari Gelber, 765 Concord Ave, Cambridge, MA 02138, (617) 969-4596, [www.kahalbraira.org](http://www.kahalbraira.org), [info@kahalbraira.org](mailto:info@kahalbraira.org).

## MICHIGAN

**The Birmingham Temple**, Rabbi Jeffrey Falick, president: Larry Ellenbogen, 28611 W 12 Mile Rd, Farmington Hills, MI 48334; (248) 477-1410, [www.birminghamtemple.org](http://www.birminghamtemple.org), [info@birminghamtemple.org](mailto:info@birminghamtemple.org).

## MINNESOTA

**Or Emet, Minnesota Congregation for Humanistic Judaism**, president: Richard Logan, 3140 Chowen Ave, S, Apt 303, Minneapolis, MN 55416, (612) 275-7081, [www.oremet.org](http://www.oremet.org), [presidentoremet@hotmail.com](mailto:presidentoremet@hotmail.com).

## NEW JERSEY

**The Congregation for Humanistic Judaism of Morris County**, contacts: Craig Schlusberg, Susan Herschman, or Rob Agree, P.O. Box 217, Chester, NJ 07930, (973) 927-0078, [www.chjmc.org](http://www.chjmc.org), [info@chjmc.org](mailto:info@chjmc.org).

## NEW YORK

**Beth Haskalah, Rochester Society for Humanistic Judaism**, contact: Barry Swan, PO Box 18343, Rochester, NY 14618-0343, (585) 234-1644, [BASWAN@aol.com](mailto:BASWAN@aol.com).

**The City Congregation for Humanistic Judaism**, Rabbi Peter Schweitzer, contact: Amy Stein, 15 West 28th Street, 3rd Floor, New York, NY 10001, (212) 213-1002, [www.citycongregation.org](http://www.citycongregation.org), [info@citycongregation.org](mailto:info@citycongregation.org).

**Kol Haverim, The Finger Lakes Community for Humanistic Judaism**, P.O. Box 4972, Ithaca, N.Y. 14852-4972, <http://kolhaverim.net>, [vicechair@kolhaverim.net](mailto:vicechair@kolhaverim.net).

**Mid-Hudson Havura**, contact: Howard Garrett, 177 Union St, Montgomery, NY 12549, [hwrdd.garrett@gmail.com](mailto:hwrdd.garrett@gmail.com).

**Westchester Community for Humanistic Judaism**, contact: Dimitry Turovsky, 84 Sprague Rd, Scarsdale, NY 10583, (914) 713-8828, [www.wchj.org](http://www.wchj.org), [info@wchj.org](mailto:info@wchj.org).

## NORTH CAROLINA

**Kol Haskalah, A Humanistic Jewish Congregation**, contact: 134 Hunter's Ridge Rd, Chapel Hill, NC 27517, (919) 929-5233, [www.kolhaskalah.org](http://www.kolhaskalah.org), [info@kolhaskalah.org](mailto:info@kolhaskalah.org).

## OHIO

**Humanist Jewish Chavurah of Columbus**, contact: Ellen Rapkin, 231 Orchard Lane, Columbus, OH 43214, (614) 285-4522, [www.hjccohio.org](http://www.hjccohio.org), [cbushumjudaism@gmail.com](mailto:cbushumjudaism@gmail.com) or [cbushumjudaism@yahoo.com](mailto:cbushumjudaism@yahoo.com).

## OREGON

**Kol Shalom, Community for Humanistic Judaism**, 1509 SW Sunset Blvd, Ste 1E, Portland, OR, 97239, (503) 459-4210, [www.kolshalom.org](http://www.kolshalom.org), [info@kolshalom.org](mailto:info@kolshalom.org).

## WASHINGTON

**Secular Jewish Circle of Puget Sound**, PMB 367 / 117 E Louisa St, Seattle, WA 98102, (206) 528-1944, [www.secularjewishcircle.org](http://www.secularjewishcircle.org), [info@secularjewishcircle.org](mailto:info@secularjewishcircle.org).

## CANADA

### ONTARIO

**Oraynu Congregation**, Rabbi Karen Levy, president: Louise Sherman, contact: Roby Sadler, 156 Duncan Mill Rd, Ste 14, Toronto, Ontario, M3B 3N2, Canada, (416) 385-3910, [www.oraynu.org](http://www.oraynu.org), [info@oraynu.org](mailto:info@oraynu.org).

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# FOCUS

No question about it: Jews love to eat. Many of our holidays focus on food: *halla* on Shabbat, *latkes* on Hanukka, the Passover seder, outdoor dining on Sukkot. Among followers of *halakha*, the rules of *kashrut* (keeping kosher) may well be the ones most scrupulously observed. Jewish food is central to Jewish life.

What makes a food Jewish? How do Jewish dietary practices vary from one place to another? How does Jewish gastronomy reflect and affect the culture of which it is an integral part? Our HJ Forum explores these and other such questions.

Also in this issue are reflections on a winning approach to intermarriage; the prophetic tradition; the state of the Humanist rabbinate; remarks by newly ordained Rabbi Denise Handlarski of Toronto and by Rabbi Jeffrey Falick on his installation as rabbi of the Birmingham Temple; and more.

– R.D.F.

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# BRIEFLY SPEAKING

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## SHJ Joins Amicus Brief in Supreme Court Prayer Case

The Society for Humanistic Judaism joined the American Humanist Association and other secular organizations in a friend-of-the-court (amicus) brief in a U.S. Supreme Court case dealing with the constitutionality of official prayers in local government settings.

The 1983 Supreme Court decision in *Marsh v. Chambers*, which upheld the practice of invocational prayer in the Nebraska legislature, stopped short of an unqualified approval of legislative prayers by pointing out that it was not deciding whether prayers that were used to proselytize or advance a particular faith were constitutional. In the present case, *Town of Greece v. Galloway*, an appeals court struck down such a practice in a town in upstate New York, where only Christian clergy were invited and most of the prayers were unmistakably sectarian. A decision is expected in June.

## SHJ Adopts Resolutions on Gender Equality, Chaplaincy, Physician-assisted Death

The Society for Humanistic Judaism recently adopted resolutions on gender equality, chaplains in the military, and physician-assisted death.

The resolution on gender equality reads in part:

- The Society condemns gender discrimination in all its forms, including restriction of rights, limited access to education, violence, and subjugation; and
- The Society commits itself to maintain vigilance and speak out in the fight to bring gender equality to our generation and to the generations to follow.

The resolution on chaplaincy reads in part:

- . . . the Society for Humanistic Judaism supports the inclusion of humanist services and humanist chaplains in all institutional chaplaincy settings;
- . . . the Society encourages the US military and other institutional employers . . . to ensure that chaplains of all beliefs provide informed and equal support to those professing humanist beliefs.

The resolution on physician-assisted death (PAD) “affirms that mentally competent adults with irreversible, terminal medical conditions accompanied by intense suffering should have the right to physician assistance in dying.” The resolution urges the adoption of PAD legislation with “reasonable safeguards to prevent abuse and to ensure that a decision to request PAD is informed, voluntary, and free of undue influence, and that physicians who are conscientiously opposed to PAD are free not to participate in it.”

## SHJ Joins Amicus Briefs in Same-Sex Marriage Cases

The Society for Humanistic Judaism joined the Anti-Defamation League and a coalition of twenty-nine religious and secular organizations in an amicus brief in the 9<sup>th</sup> Circuit Court defending same-sex marriage in Hawaii (*Jackson v. Abercrombie*) and Nevada (*Sevcik v. Sandoval*). The brief contends that the states’ marriage bans violate not only the Fourteenth Amendment’s Equal Protection Clause, but also the First Amendment’s Establishment Clause. A decision overturning the marriage bans would assure full state recognition of civil marriages, while allowing religious groups the freedom to define marriage for themselves. Following signing of the Hawaii same-sex marriage bill on December 13, that appeal has been dismissed as moot. The Nevada case is pending.

## Gov. Deval Patrick Declares “Humanist Community Day”

Governor Deval Patrick issued an official proclamation declaring Sunday, December 8, “Humanist Community Day” in Massachusetts. The proclamation was issued in conjunction with the opening of a Humanist Hub, or meeting place, by the Humanist Community at Harvard, headed by Humanist rabbi Greg Epstein, a graduate of the International Institute for Secular Humanistic Judaism.

“We are thrilled that the governor has made such a historic public recognition of the humanist, atheist, and nonreligious community,” said Epstein. “This is not only a victory for the nonreligious – it is a victory for all who value reason, diversity, and pluralism.”

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# HJ FORUM: Jewish Food and Jewish Culture

## Food Is as Jewish as Fasting by Rabbi Adam Chalom

What is the stereotypical theme of every Jewish holiday?

“They tried to kill us, they failed, let’s eat.”

Why should the eating be any less important than the first two elements?

Food is a core element of Jewish identity, culture, and civilization. People who have lost almost every other connection with Judaism remember family recipes, communal meals, special tastes and smells of their childhood. They may even call themselves “bagels and lox Jews.” Never mind that neither food is uniquely Jewish! Bagels today are eaten by anyone, and in a wide variety of flavors. (Blueberry? Asiago cheese?) Bread made in loops, or with a hole for easy storage and sale on a stick or string, dates back at least to Roman times; and dough that is boiled before baking, sometimes in a loop, is common in Eastern Europe, and not only among Jews. Lox did not become a Jewish food until the early twentieth century among immigrants in New York.

So, what makes a Jewish food Jewish? It can’t be a function of who eats it; borscht and brisket, like bagels, are not eaten only by Jews and can be prepared and served in many ways other than those typically handed down by Jewish mothers. (Barbecued brisket, anyone?) Maybe a food’s Jewishness depends on who

makes it – though I have experienced plenty of “Jewish” delis whose food preparation staff discuss orders in perfect Spanish (until they get to the word *biale*). Is a Jewish food one invented by Jews, or simply a food like bagels or borscht, commonly eaten in a country where Jews have lived, that comes to be identified with them as they migrate?

What counts as Jewish food may be subjective and arbitrary, as Lenny Bruce’s famous observation suggests:

Kool-Aid is goyish. All Drake’s cakes are goyish. Pumpnickel is Jewish, and, as you know, white bread is very goyish. Instant potatoes – goyish. Black cherry soda’s very Jewish. Macaroons are very Jewish – very Jewish cake. Fruit salad is Jewish. Lime jello is goyish. Lime soda is very goyish.<sup>1</sup>

Perhaps what really makes Jewish food Jewish is not who eats it or who makes it or who invented it; rather, Jewish food may be Jewish by virtue of who *values* it for its memories, associations, and connections. How else did

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**Rabbi Adam Chalom**, Ph.D., dean of the International Institute for Secular Humanistic Judaism for North America, is rabbi of Kol Hadash Humanistic Congregation in Lincolnshire, IL. He holds a doctorate from the University of Michigan and sits on the editorial board of this journal.

<sup>1</sup>[http://www.myjewishlearning.com/culture/2/Humor/History/In\\_America/WizardsofWit/A\\_Humor\\_Perspective/jewishandgoyish.shtml](http://www.myjewishlearning.com/culture/2/Humor/History/In_America/WizardsofWit/A_Humor_Perspective/jewishandgoyish.shtml). Accessed September 24, 2013.

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chop suey and egg foo yong become Jewish, if not for the twentieth-century Jewish “tradition” of eating out at a Chinese restaurant on Christmas?

For Humanistic Jews, food is a positive way to celebrate Jewish identity. To consume Jewish food is to enjoy life beyond language and intellect. (The term *epicure*, from the Greek humanist philosopher Epicurus, from whose name the Jewish term *apikoros*, or heretic, is derived, today refers to someone who savors the this-worldly pleasures of food and wine.) A true appreciation of Jewish food takes a combination of senses and skills beyond those needed for the close study of Jewish texts. It’s an opportunity to “do Jewish,” not merely to talk about what it means to be Jewish. If we believe that Judaism is deeper and wider than Talmudic study and debate, then Jewish food has to be part of the picture. Jewish food stays with a person who partakes of it, not only as love handles but in the form of sensory experiences and memories. Jewish food is accessible to people of all ages and persuasions (so long as food allergies and dietary restrictions are taken into account) and enables us to sample and celebrate diverse Jewish cultures in digestible “bites.” For many nonreligious Jews, family meals at Rosh Hashana or to “break the fast” (even if they weren’t fasting) at the conclusion of Yom Kippur are more meaningful than synagogue services.

Most important, Jewish food is a repository for Jewish culture and a way to connect with Jewish history and the wider Jewish community. Consider just a small sampling of cultural food connections:

1. **Special holiday foods:** *halla* (braided egg bread) for Shabbat; apples and honey for Rosh Hashana; *latkes* (potato pancakes) or *sufganiyot* (jelly donuts) on Hanukka; *hamentaschen* (pocket pastries) on Purim; matza, *karpas* (greens), *beytsa* (egg), and *maror* (bitter herbs) on Passover; dairy dishes on Shavuot – each of these foods has its own history, evolution, and ritual connections. Some Sephardic Jews put matza on their shoulders during the seder

as a symbolic way to relive the exodus from Egypt. The Purim *hamentash* likely began as a *mohntasch* (poppy-seed pocket) whose name was changed to connect it with Haman. (Thus arose the assumption that this three-cornered pastry was modeled after his hat.) And this listing doesn’t even touch on family rituals related to the serving and eating of brisket, *kugel*, and the like.

2. **Days of not eating:** In addition to Yom Kippur, the traditional Jewish calendar includes several fast days connected with Jewish history and culture. The Fast of Gedalia, which falls between the High Holidays, commemorates a failed Jewish revolt. The Fast of Esther immediately before Purim, originally called Nicanor’s Day, celebrates a Jewish victory over a Greek general named Nicanor. The fast of mourning on Tisha B’Av is a reminder of the destruction of the Jerusalem Temple on that date.
3. **Multicultural varieties of Jewish cuisine:** Jewish food is not limited to Ashkenazi dishes from Eastern Europe. My father’s family from Syria has an entirely different sense of *haimishe* (homey) cooking.<sup>2</sup> Such Israeli foods as hummus and falafel are adopted from Middle Eastern cuisine. Today Jewish foodies are experimenting with Jewish food traditions borrowed from Turkish, Moroccan, Indian, and other cultures.<sup>3</sup>
4. **Expressions of Jewish values:** Biblical legislation (e.g., Leviticus 19) requires that farmers leave the corners of the fields and the gleanings of the wheat harvest for the poor, the widow, the orphan, and the stranger. At Passover, in the opening *Ha Lakhma* (“This is the bread of affliction . . .”), we read, “All who are hungry, come and eat,” and rabbinic rules in the *Mishnah* prescribe that even a poor person should

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<sup>2</sup>See “A Sephardic Perspective on Jewish Cooking” by Ed Chalom, elsewhere in this issue.

<sup>3</sup>See, for example, “Turkish Rosh Hashana Delights” by Ruth Abusch-Magder in *The Forward*, Sept. 26, 2011. Available at <http://blogs.forward.com/the-jew-and-the-carrot/tags/jewish-turkish-food/>.



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be provided with four cups of wine for the seder (*Pesachim* 10:1). Although the belief that food equals love is not unique to Jews, it is certainly an important part of Jewish cultural life. And is it any wonder that the earliest Jewish story about rules and disobedience of them had to do with forbidden fruit?

Jewish food is a particularly important ingredient of both folk and women's culture. Before modern times, Jewish women were often limited to hearth and home (when they weren't earning a living to pay for their husbands' Torah study). Jewish food was a daily lived experience of Jewishness that was women's primary responsibility and an important part of their domain.

Imagine, then, how limited a celebration of Jewish culture would be without exploring the many facets of Jewish food!

All of the foregoing does not touch on the kosher laws, which the rabbis of the Talmudic period admitted were "mountains hanging by a hair." To take one example, the commandment "Thou shalt not boil a kid goat in its mother's milk" (Exodus 23:19) became the basis for not consuming any meat from any animal along with any dairy product from any other animal, having to wait hours between consuming one of these two types of food before consuming the other, and requiring separate sets of dishes for each.

But just what foods count as milk? What meats are kosher, and how must they be prepared and cooked? What foods, such as vegetables, are *pareve* – in neither category, and thus edible with either? What particular rules apply to Passover? How these rules evolved, and why, are certainly questions of historical interest, and awareness of them is a part of Jewish cultural literacy. Familiarity with the rules of *kashrut* (koshering) and with their origins

and meanings can help us understand contemporary Jewish lifestyle choices: for example, why some Jews and Jewish establishments strictly observe those laws, while others follow them less rigorously or settle for "kosher style" or keep kosher at home but not when dining out. But these rules are largely irrelevant to the current food choices of secular, cultural, and Humanistic Jews.

An index of how far the laws of *kashrut* have fallen from their one-time preeminence in Jewish life is that today only about one in five American Jews follows those rules (National Jewish Population Study, 2001). At certain Israeli McDonald's restaurants, one can purchase a cheeseburger on matza during Passover. Most "Jewish delis" sell Reuben sandwiches (corned beef and Swiss cheese) with side orders of coleslaw, a combination that is blatantly *trayfe* (not kosher). Some contemporary Jews are exploring the concept of "eco-kosher," the idea that even traditionally kosher food should be avoided if raised, prepared, or served in an ecologically or ethically unsustainable way.<sup>4</sup>

Is it okay to serve pea soup with ham at a Yom Kippur "break the fast"? My congregation has even debated whether to have a reception after Yom Kippur services, since our Rosh Hashana oneigs are very successful in fostering a sense of community. Or we might organize a social event without food following the service and call it a "no-neg."

Jewish food, as part of Jewish life, is serious business. One can imagine an alternative ending to the famous story of Rabbi Hillel teaching a convert the essence of Judaism while standing on one foot. After explaining that one should not do to another what is hateful to oneself, and all the rest is commentary, he could have ended with, "Now, come and eat!"

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<sup>4</sup>See Barry Swan, "Why I Keep Kosher. *Humanistic Judaism*, Spring-Summer 2005, pp. 47-48.

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# Jewish Cuisine: Diversity, Community, and Culture

## by Leora Cookie Hatchwell

Defining Jewish cuisine is not a simple task. It is easy to say that Jewish food is anything Jews eat, but if this were true, American-Chinese food would be considered Jewish. Jewish foods are not limited to those mentioned in the *Tanakh* (the Hebrew Bible): wheat, barley, olives, dates, honey, grapes, raisins, wine, etrog, apple, walnuts, almonds, carob, and pomegranates, among others. Those are certainly some of our most ancient foodstuffs, but they were common among many ancient peoples, not just the Jews. Furthermore, much of what Jews eat today bears little or no relationship to the foods prepared in ancient Israel, for it was in the Diaspora that modern Jewish cooking developed.

One look at my mother's bookshelf of more than thirty Jewish cookbooks from around the world makes clear that Jewish cuisine is not monolithic. Jewish gastronomy may be the world's oldest fusion cuisine, diverse and evolving over many centuries. The Jewish world is generally divided into its two largest and most widespread cultural communities: Ashkenazim, who originated in France and Germany, and Sephardim, who originated in Iberia. (Yemenites, the third-largest Jewish ethnic group, are frequently subsumed under the label Sephardim, while Italians are often tagged as Ashkenazim, though both of these Jewish communities predate those of Sephard and Ashkenaz, and both produced distinct cultures of their own.) In addition to these major groupings, a mosaic of Jewish cultural communities of varying sizes and antiquity developed across the globe in Syria, Lebanon, Iran (Persia), Georgia, Uzbekistan/Bukhara, Azerbaijan, Afghanistan, Kurdistan, India (Bombay, Cochin, and Calcutta), Pakistan, and Ethiopia. There were even smaller communities of Chinese Jews in Kaifeng and Canton. None of these communities were Ashkenazic or Sephardic, and each possessed its own unique history, customs, and cuisine.

Jewish dishes must therefore be hyphenated as Russian-Jewish, Bukharan-Jewish, German-Jewish, Hungarian-Jewish, Italian-Jewish, Syrian-Jewish, and so forth.

Even within Ashkenazi or Sephardic cooking, great diversity has existed. Jews of southwestern Poland, a sugar beet growing region, used much more sugar in their gefilte fish, *kugels*, and *halla* than the Jews of Galicia, where sugar was very expensive. Sausages and wursts were plentiful in German Jewish cooking. Romanian Jews, influenced by their Balkan neighbors, were famous for dishes with a sour flavor; Hungarian Jews were fond of fruit soups. Jews from the Maghreb might have had trouble recognizing many of the dishes of the Jews of Lebanon or Syria. Lamb dominated in North Africa, with heavy use of saffron, cinnamon, ginger, and turmeric, whereas the Levant style of cooking is largely vegetarian and dairy and uses a great deal of coriander, sumac, garlic, and lemon juice, always with sharp contrast of flavors. Fried artichokes are as synonymous with Jewish cuisine in Italy as chopped liver is in Eastern Europe and the English-speaking world. It has been said that the only truly universal Jewish food is matza. Yet, *haroset* may be more indicative of a universal Jewish food, reflecting the differences in spicing and ingredients to which Jews were exposed in various cultures.

Because Jews migrated from place to place, the central characteristic of Jewish cooking in

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**Leora Cookie Hatchwell**, a past president of Kol Hadash Humanistic Congregation in Lincolnshire, IL, teaches in its Sunday school and is a member of its steering committee and chair of its bylaws and social events committees. She has served on the Board of Directors of the Society for Humanistic Judaism. She holds a master's degree in Jewish Professional Studies from Spertus Institute of Jewish Learning and Leadership in Chicago, as well as another master's in food science and nutrition from the University of Illinois in Urbana-Champaign. Her bachelor's degree is from Hebrew University in Rehovot with a major in nutrition.

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the Diaspora is *adaptation*: a process of adopting native recipes, improving, refining, and altering them to fit ritual and dietetic rules. As Jews moved to new locations, the recipes they brought with them were modified by the availability of local ingredients and indigenous foods and spices. The history, economics, geography, agriculture, climate, and culinary traditions of each country in which the Jews settled determined what produce was available and what resources were at their disposal. Local fare was incorporated into the Jewish culinary repertoire, and many traditional recipes were refashioned or forgotten.

Active in commerce and trade, Jews were instrumental in the movement of food components from place to place and thus influenced local cuisines. From the ninth century throughout the medieval period, Jewish traders dominated trade routes from the Iberian Peninsula to central Asia. In the twelfth century, sugar and pasta traveled from Sicily to Venice, Genoa, and Turkey courtesy of the Jews. The arrival of Baghdadi Jews in India in the late nineteenth century resulted in the development of an interesting combination of Iraqi recipes with Indian spices and ingredients – turmeric, cumin, cardamom, ginger, parsley, oregano, paprika, mint, cinnamon, rose water, onion, lemon, and garlic – combinations not previously seen in India.

The food of Israel is the ultimate hybrid of Jewish cooking, adopting and adapting elements of all the aforementioned Jewish styles as well as incorporating other Middle Eastern dishes. The Zionist pioneers who came from Russia and Poland at the beginning of the twentieth century and started the first *kibbutzim* had a sense of mission: to work the land, to eat simply. Bread, olives, cheese, and raw vegetables were the basic kibbutz diet. As new agricultural products were introduced and as Jews moved to Israel from more than 120 countries, a new fusion cuisine developed – an innovative multicultural fare. Israel's cuisine is as diverse as its people and reflects a combination of influences from all over the world.

What, then, is distinctive about Jewish food? How does this multicultural cuisine

strengthen Jewish identity? How have the foods that Jews eat helped them to express and define themselves as a community?

Because food is a part of life that most closely touches people's day-to-day existence, we can get a taste of a once-vital Jewish community – its nature, history, and customs – through its traditional dishes. For Jews, food has been a means of exclusion, persecution, influence, and assimilation into the larger society. Equally important, food has been an instrument of community and identity renewal. Foods shape memories of home and childhood. It is food that evokes the spirit of a Jewish community as it celebrates its festivals and life-cycle events, keeping Jewish culture alive. Foods served week after week at Shabbat, or annually at holidays, forge a bond that ties the generations to their collective Jewish history, their family, their traditions and culture.

Food has its own rules and rhythm. Within an individual community, those rules guided and continue to guide how foods are prepared and served. For those who follow *kashrut*, constant attention must be paid to dietary laws. In Iraq as well as in Poland, dairy meals traditionally were not for Friday night because the Shabbat meal must be “fit for a king.” A cholent in Russia and a hamin in Morocco, cooked slowly overnight, were served on Shabbat after morning services, sparing the cook from working in the kitchen. Within each community, food was prepared in a traditional manner; the same type of chicken, the same type of gefilte fish, the same type of *kugel*. The resulting gastronomy was an identifying sign as clear as an accent in any language. When individuals moved away, their method of cooking and their recipes identified them as coming from a particular region.

For Jews in the United States, assimilation into mainstream society often meant loosening the restraints of *kashrut* observance. Yet, although the immigrants tasted new foods and experienced American culture, their traditional foods and the way they prepared those foods attached them to their Jewish roots. Then and now, Jewish food continues to be the tie that binds.

Contemporary Jewish cuisine represents a blend of old and new. The future of Jewish food around the world continues to be fusion, especially in the United States and Israel. New recipes for *latkes*, for example, upgrade this once-humble food to a gourmet genre, incorporating or substituting a variety of ingredients for potatoes. In the United States, paralleling the general society, a new Jewish food movement has emerged, emphasizing organic, locally grown produce, sustainable agricultural practices, and a return to the pleasures of preparing one's own food. In addition, social and economic justice issues have become important, including workers' rights, food access in low-income neighborhoods, fair trade operations, and community gardens

as a tool for empowerment. As an article in a 2009 edition of *The Forward* points out, "this philosophy is gaining in influence as seen by the Conservative movement's efforts to create a *Magen Tzedek*, a seal for food products that would certify conformity not only to the ritual particulars of *kashrut*, but to the deeper and more profound requirements of Jewish social justice law"\* – in other words, *tikkun olam*.

Jewish eating is a timeline of history. It is an inheritance, a legacy, an experiment in cooking, in ethics, in family, and in tradition. Jewish eating is Jewish life.

\*Michaelson, Jay. "Magen Tzedek: Model of the Jewish Future or Show without an Audience?" *The Jewish Daily Forward*. November 18, 2009. Retrieved from [www.forward.com/articles/119143/](http://www.forward.com/articles/119143/)

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# Symbolic Holiday Foods

by Rabbi Jodi Kornfeld

Judaism is rich in symbolism: the use of items of clothing or ritual acts and objects as reminders of how to behave or conduct one's life. Food in a Jewish holiday setting often serves this symbolic function.

Certain foods are thought to have intrinsic meanings. For example, apples are symbols of the sweet new year and are eaten with honey at Rosh Hashana. Associated with Tu B'Shevat, the New Year of the Trees, is the almond tree, the first to bloom in Israel, as a symbol of spring; its Hebrew name, *shaked*, means "early rising." The carob is the food of the poor and therefore represents humility. Grapes are thought to be like the Jewish people because they grow in clusters, never alone, representing the community of *k'lal yisrael*. Dates symbolize immortality or fertility. The pomegranate with its many seeds also is a symbol of fertility, as well as of peace and prosperity.

Different customs regarding symbolic foods, or *simanim*, developed in different communities, most notably among the Ashkenazim, the Jews of Eastern Europe; the Sephardim of Mediterranean and Spanish descent (including those from countries to which such Jews were dispersed following the expulsion from Spain in 1492); and the Mizrahim, Jews of Middle Eastern descent. These variations developed because of the availability of different foods, the weather conditions that affected their availability, and the social/cultural climate of the countries in which Jews lived. For example, the Sephardim placed greater emphasis on the symbolism of food as they developed the custom of a Rosh Hashana seder.

## Symbolic Foods for Rosh Hashana

In comparison with Passover, in which foods eaten at a seder are ordered and highly symbolic, there are no ritual requirements concerning the foods used at the Jewish new year. All the symbolism associated with

Rosh Hashana foods comes from custom, or *minhagim*.

In the Babylonian Talmud (Keritot 6a and Horayot 12a), Rabbi Abaye is quoted as suggesting that at the beginning of each year, people should eat the following foods that grow in profusion and are therefore symbolic of prosperity: pumpkin, rubia [a bean-like vegetable], leeks, beets, and dates. The underlying notion is that what you eat influences your year – a variation on "you are what you eat." Generally, at the new year, people avoid sour, bitter, or salty foods, and favor sweet, flavorful ones.

Foods eaten at Rosh Hashana, then, can be a form of wish fulfillment. Think about what you wish for, and the food symbol follows. (See the table on the next page for examples.)

## Symbolic Foods for Hanukka

Hanukka celebrates the victory of the Maccabees over the Syrian Greeks in 165 B.C. E. According to the story, after their triumph the Maccabees returned to the Temple in Jerusalem on the 25<sup>th</sup> day of the month of Kislev and relit the oil lamps to rededicate the Temple, which their oppressors had defiled by worshipping Greek gods. Although there apparently was only enough oil for one day, legend has it that the oil lasted for eight days, and thus the holiday is celebrated for that length of time.

In actuality, according to the Book of Maccabees, the reason the holiday lasts for eight days is that Sukkot, the eight-day harvest festival normally observed immediately after the High Holidays, had not been celebrated at the normal time because of the battle over the Temple and instead was celebrated months later, after the Maccabean victory, making Hanukka the "Sukkot of Kislev." However, the legend of the oil has

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Rabbi Jodi Kornfeld is rabbi of Beth Chaverim Humanistic Jewish Community in Highland Park, IL.

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**FOODS EATEN ON ROSH HASHANA AS WISH FULFILLMENT**

<b>WISH</b>	<b>FOOD</b>
A year <i>filled</i> with blessings and prosperity; <i>stuffed</i> with good omens	Stuffed squash; stuffed tomatoes (Italy); dates stuffed with walnuts; gefilte fish ( <i>gefilte</i> is Yiddish for stuffed)
Be a leader, the <i>head</i> of what you do, just as Rosh Hashana is the head of the year; be an example to others and lead them to good behavior	Head of a fish or sheep; head of lettuce
Prosperity and abundance, <i>increase</i> in good things	Carrots sliced like coins; green beans (in Hebrew, <i>rubia</i> – similar to <i>irbu</i> , or “increase”)
Blessings; good deeds ( <i>mitzvot</i> ) to increase	Pomegranates (613 seeds to correspond to the number of traditional <i>mitzvot</i> ); carrots (in Yiddish, <i>meren</i> means both “increase” and “carrots”)
Wisdom	Brains
<i>Cycle</i> of life and another year	Round <i>halla</i>
<i>Protection</i> , strength (as in a thick skin)	Pumpkin; squash ( <i>kra</i> or <i>k'irah</i> , meaning “rip” or “tear”; tear up the sentence against you)
Play on Hebrew words: <i>Cut off</i> your enemies, luck, defeat of those who would harm you	Scallions/leeks ( <i>kari</i> or <i>y'kartu</i> , “to cut off”; <i>yirkatu</i> , “to banish”); beetroot/spinach ( <i>selek</i> or <i>salukim</i> , “take away”)
Fortunes <i>go up and down</i>	<i>Halla</i> shaped like a ladder. In Italy, <i>sfratti</i> , a traditional pastry whose name means “eviction,” a reminder of the pitfalls life has in store
<i>Sweet</i> new year	Apples with honey; in Australia, apples with sugar; raisins in <i>halla</i> ; honey cake; <i>tayglach</i> , a crunchy dough boiled in honey, with almonds/walnuts; sweet dates ( <i>tamar</i> , a play on words with <i>t'amah</i> , meaning “cause a sense of wonder”); in Morocco, dates or apples dipped in a mixture of ground sesame seeds, anise seeds, and powdered sugar; <i>tzimmes</i> , honey baked carrots; in Ethiopia, sheep roasted on a spit and eaten with honey

such a strong hold on the Jewish imagination that customs have developed in communities around the world incorporating oil or fried foods into the Hanukka celebration. In Israel, fried *sufganiot*, or jelly doughnuts, are eaten; in Italy, fried chicken; and in Eastern European or Ashkenazic communities, *latkes*,\* or potato pancakes.

Another Hanukka tradition, which may be more prevalent in Sephardic communities, is the serving of cheese or dairy meals. According to the Book of Judith, an apocryphal book that is not part of the Bible, Judith, a Jewish woman, single-handedly saved her people by killing an enemy general named Holofernes after feeding him salty cheese so he would drink enough wine to pass out. Jewish tradition (without much historical basis but rather because of

similarities in the two stories) associates this victory with the Maccabean revolt. The tradition of eating dairy foods also may account for sour cream being served with latkes, combining the two stories and customs.

### **Symbolic Foods for Tu B'shevat**

Tu B'Shevat, the New Year of the Trees, falls on the fifteenth day of the Jewish month of Shevat. Its name comes from the *gematria* or numerical value assigned to the Hebrew letters of which it is composed; the *tet* is 9 and the *vav* is 6.

Tu B'Shevat is not a biblical holiday; rather, it is rabbinic in origin. In Israel, where

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\**Latke* is Yiddish for pancake; in Hebrew, they are called *levivot*.

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the holiday originated, the winter is coming to an end, and the almond trees are beginning to blossom. It is thought to be the time of the year when the sap begins to move through the trees and new life is beginning.

The Hebrew word for “tree” is *aitz*. Trees have played an important part in Jewish tradition. We call the Torah the *aitz chayim* or “tree of life.” In the story of Noah, a dove brings back a branch from an olive tree to signal the end of the flood and destruction. The Torah teaches that even in war times we are not to destroy the trees, because they have no grudge against us. An old custom is for parents to plant a new tree on the fifteenth of Shevat when a child has been born.

Tu B'Shevat today is celebrated as a kind of Jewish Earth Day. It gives us reason to consider the importance of trees in our lives and the importance of conservation and ecology. Environmental themes are examined and underscored as we celebrate the holiday.

Although no foods are mentioned in the Bible or the Talmud as being specific to Tu B'Shevat, fruits and nuts mentioned in those sources, including dates, figs, and almonds found in Israel, are appropriate for the holiday. In the Middle Ages, the kabbalists created a mystical tradition that associated certain rituals with teachings about the spirit and the body, and they held a seder in connection with the holiday.

Echoing the date of the holiday, it has become customary to eat fifteen different fruits and/or nuts. These are often divided into three groups of five with appropriate symbolism attached to each group. The first fruits – oranges, bananas, walnuts, lemons, and pistachios – have hard, inedible shells but a soft inside that we can eat. These correspond to some kinds of people: they have a tough outside and are difficult to get to know, but once you get to the person inside, they are well worth knowing. The second fruits – dates, plums, peaches, olives, and apples – have soft, edible outsides, but deep inside is a pit or seed that we cannot eat. These fruits also are like a group of people.

Some people you meet very quickly and become friendly with, but you may never know them completely. There may be parts of them that are hidden away, but you can nonetheless enjoy the parts they share with you. The third fruits – raisins, figs, strawberries, grapes, and cranberries – have both insides and outsides that can be eaten. Again these are like people. They can be known inside and out and can become lasting friends.

To symbolize the changing of the seasons, a Tu B'Shevat seder will include four cups of wine or grape juice. The first cup is made entirely from white grapes to represent the white of winter. The second cup is made by adding a little wine or juice made from red grapes to the white, making it a shade of pink. This symbolizes the spring as trees begin to blossom. The third cup is made by adding a small amount of white wine to the red, making it a deeper shade of pink. This is symbolic of summer when trees are in full bloom. Finally, the fourth cup is made entirely of red grapes and symbolizes the autumn when leaves change to their beautiful colors.

### **Symbolic Foods for Purim**

Purim takes place on the fourteenth day of the month of Adar. The story recounted in the Book of Esther tells of the triumph of good over evil as Haman's plot to destroy all the Jews of Shushan is foiled by the courage of Queen Esther.

Purim reminds us to take whatever steps are necessary to overcome the evil of our day. We must find the courage to take action in the face of evil, even if such action imperils us. Many times in our history, we have been faced with a Haman who needed to be confronted and defeated. And many times we have succeeded in doing so.

At the conclusion of all this drama, the Book of Esther states four positive *mitzvot*, or good deeds, associated with Purim. We are reminded to retell the story of Purim each year, to celebrate the holiday in a festive way, to share portions with friends, and to give charity to the poor.

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The overriding goal of modern Purim celebrations, however, is to obliterate the name of Haman. This is done by making noise when the story is read and his name is mentioned; by stamping out his name wherever it is written; and by eating foods that bear his name, such as the following:

- In Israel, *oznay Haman* (meaning “ears of Haman”). They resemble the hamantashen from the Ashkenazic tradition.
- In Italy, *orecchi di Aman* (also meaning “ears of Haman”): bits of fried dough, twisted into odd shapes and dusted with confectioner’s sugar.
- In the United States, following the Ashkenazic tradition, *hamantashen* (meaning “Haman’s pockets”).\*

An important feature of Purim is the hidden identities of the characters, especially Esther, who was not known to be Jewish when she married the king. Therefore, foods with fillings hidden within dough, such as hamantashen, kreplach, and ravioli are apropos of the holiday.

In keeping with the mitzvah of a festive celebration, it has become customary to have a Purim feast. This may include an especially long, braided *halla* reminiscent of the rope used to hang Haman. Because it is written that King Ahasuerus reigned from India to Ethiopia, and the Hebrew word *hodu* means both India and turkey, some people eat turkey on Purim. Others eat Ethiopian dishes, such as Ethiopian lentils. Because Esther is thought to have become a vegetarian in order to keep kosher in the King’s palace, many people serve a vegetarian Purim meal.

### Symbolic Foods for Passover

The seder held at Passover is filled with foods used specifically for their symbolic value. In retelling the story of how the Israelites moved from slavery to freedom, we each

are to experience that journey. We personalize the story by literally tasting the bitterness of slavery through salt water representing the tears shed by our ancestors and by savoring the sweetness of freedom with *haroset*, generally made of apples, cinnamon, and sweet wine. The *haroset* also symbolizes the mortar used in the bricks that the Israelite slaves were said to have made.\*\* We use parsley (*karpas*) as a symbol of spring; a roasted egg and a bone on the seder plate as a symbol of sacrifices once made at the Temple; and horseradish (*maror*) to remind us of the bitter life lived by slaves. We eat a hard-boiled egg as the symbol of spring, a time of rebirth in nature’s cycle for plants and animals. And of course the *matza* or unleavened bread comes from the story of the Israelites having to leave in such haste that they did not have time to let their dough rise before embarking on their journey.

Sephardim find rice and other legumes (*kitniyot*) acceptable, whereas Ashkenazim avoid these foods for the duration of the holiday. A Sephardic custom is the use of scallions as a symbolic whip during the seder, to represent the treatment the slaves received.

### Conclusion

Jews and food, a delicious combination! Through specific foods, we celebrate our holidays symbolically, giving the food and the holiday meaning as well as joy. These foods express the sense of the holidays; they reflect the cultural heritage of different Jewish communities throughout the world; and they inform us of the variety of ways Jews have used to interpret our collective past.

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\*Although *hamantashen* is often translated as “Haman’s hat” because of its triangular shape, it comes from a Yiddish phrase: *mon*, meaning “poppy,” and *tashen*, meaning “pocket.” Originally it was a “poppy pocket,” which became a play-on-words as a *hamantashen* to reflect the story’s villain, Haman.

\*\*There are numerous recipes for *haroset*, which vary according to their country of origin. The variations reflect different understandings of the *haroset* as mortar, as well as the ingredients that would be available.



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# Iconic Jewish Deli Foods

by Kaela Walker

I used to be a very picky eater when I was younger. At least two years ago I started experimenting with my taste buds. I wanted to eat everything. I loved trying foods, and most foods I tried I loved. When I started to think about my big project for my Bat Mitzvah I knew exactly what I wanted to do. FOOD! I picked five of my favorite Jewish foods to research: the knish, matza balls, pastrami, the bagel, and cheesecake. But first I am going to tell a little about the history of the Jewish deli.

The first Jewish delis in the United States started on the Lower East Side of Manhattan. In the beginning, they were strictly takeout. In the 1900s, they changed into restaurants where people could sit, eat, and talk. Delis offered a sense of identity to recent immigrants and a feeling of belonging in their new country. A deli was a gathering place where Jews could find a community and spend time in each other's company. They would come together to talk about religion and politics and to get news about their homelands.

In the delis, foods of Eastern European Jews were combined with dishes from Lithuania, Russia, and Hungary. At that time, most deli food was peasant food. Now the treats we associate with the Jewish deli (for example, chopped liver, matza ball soup, and gigantic meat-filled sandwiches) are more American than Eastern European. The Jewish newcomers from Eastern Europe could not afford to eat like that.

The importance of the deli began to decline by the 1950s and 1960s because the food was seen as too ethnic. Also, some of the more popular Jewish foods, such as deli meats and hot dogs, could be found at the supermarket. Today, the traditional Jewish deli is struggling. The rent is high, people are more health conscious (Jewish food is not very healthy), and Jewish food is not trendy. In 1936, there were

five thousand delis in New York City; now there are just a few. Many famous delis in the city have closed.

I have been to Katz's Deli, the 2<sup>nd</sup> Avenue Deli, Yonah Schimmel's, Barney Greengrass, Russ and Daughters, Pastrami Queen, and Junior's. I still want to go to a lot more. What I like is that the people are nice, they give you a lot of samples, there is always food on the table when you sit down (pickles and coleslaw), and they give you a good amount of food. The only thing I dislike is that it is always crowded.

And now to my five favorite Jewish foods!

## The Knish

The *knish* is a Jewish food that Russian immigrants brought to America in the early 1900s. Its name is the Yiddish word meaning "pastry" or "turnover." In France, knishes are known by their Russian name, *piroshky*, and also as *belglach*.

A knish is made from dough that can be shaped to be round, rectangular, or square with a filling in the middle of it and then can be baked, grilled, or deep-fried. There are a variety of fillings that could be inside a knish: potato, ground meat, sauerkraut, onions, *kasha* (buckwheat groats), or cheese. More modern varieties are filled with sweet potatoes, black beans, fruit, broccoli, tofu, or spinach.

The dough of a knish is made differently depending on where the knish is being made. In New York City, knish dough is made with egg and potato. In Europe, the pastry is made from yeast dough.

In Russia, knishes were legendary and were usually served at feasts. When Jews from Russia

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**Kaela Walker** and her family are members of The City Congregation in Manhattan. This article is adapted from her Bat Mitzvah presentation on April 30, 2011.

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migrated to the United States at the beginning of the twentieth century, they brought their cooking and foods with them, and knishes were sold from pushcarts on the streets of New York City. Today in Russia and Eastern Europe, the knish is no longer as popular as it is in New York.

In 1910, Yonah Schimmel opened a knishery on Manhattan's Lower East Side. It is the only knishery left in the city. At Yonah Schimmel's, they make the knish dough very thin. They believe a "real" knish is round, baked, and made with potato filling.

When we went to Yonah Schimmel's, my mom and I bought a bunch of knishes – potato, vegetable, sweet potato, and spinach. We first ate the potato knish. *It was huge!* It weighed at least a full pound! When we each took our first bite, we were in love. It was all potato – you couldn't taste the dough at all. It was so soft inside, it was amazing. The store looked exactly like it did in the old days and was still being run by the Schimmel family.

### Matza Balls

A second iconic Jewish food – maybe first on some people's lists – is the matza ball. A matza ball is a traditional Ashkenazi dumpling made from matza meal. The Yiddish word for matza ball or dumpling is *kneydlekh*. It is the food of hardship – the poor man's food. This is because it's made of simple ingredients: matza flour and water. Matza balls are one of the best known Jewish foods and one of the most powerful symbols of Jewish cuisine.

Matza balls became a part of the Jewish diet in the early Middle Ages. They were especially popular in German, Czech, and Austrian cooking. Matza balls are traditionally served at Passover, but they are so well liked that they are served every day and everywhere. Jews have intense arguments about the right way to cook a matza ball. Should they be light (floaters)? Or should they be dense (sinkers)? Dense matza balls are heavier and doughier. Light matza balls are softer and less doughy; they melt in your mouth.

When I went to the 2<sup>nd</sup> Avenue Deli, I fell in love with their matza balls. They are big, but

when you put them into your mouth, they melt with flavor. But when I went to Pastrami Queen and tasted their matza ball, I wasn't pleased. It was big and heavy with no flavor. It was dense and hard to swallow. Judging from that experience, I vote for the lighter kind of matza ball.

### The Bagel

Now, who doesn't know what a bagel is? A bagel is round bread with a hole in it. Although bagels are considered a Jewish food, their origins are actually more varied. Bread and crackers similar to the bagel were eaten centuries ago in China, Italy, and ancient Egypt. You can see rolls with holes in Egyptian hieroglyphics.

There is a well-known story about the origin of the modern bagel, but no one knows whether it is true. According to the story, the bagel came out of the Battle of Vienna in 1683. King Sobieski of Poland was the first king who did not limit the production of bread. This meant that Jews could bake bread in the city of Krakow. When King Sobieski saved Austria from Turkish invaders, a Jewish baker made a roll in the shape of the king's stirrup and called it a *beugel*.

Bagels also became popular in Germany. (*Bagel* means "bracelet" in German.) In Eastern Europe, bagels represented good luck because they were the perfect shape, round with no end or beginning. The shape symbolizes the eternal cycle of life. This is why they were given to women in labor and are often eaten after funerals.

When Jews immigrated to America, they brought the bagel to Manhattan's Lower East Side. In 1907, a union was created that monopolized bagel production in New York City. Jews made bagels by hand with five ingredients: flour, yeast, water, salt, and malt flavoring. In the 1950s, Jews started moving to other parts of the city, expanding the reach of the bagel. Today some of the best known bagel stores in New York City are not run by Jews. For instance, H & H Bagels is run by a Puerto Rican family.

In America, bagels are boiled. Rings of risen dough are thrown into boiling water for a few

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seconds, then drained, cooled, and baked until they are golden, shiny, and crisp. The boiling helps the bagels last longer. Bagels made in New York City are supposed to taste the best because of the mineral content of the water.

Murray Lender was the first person to create frozen bagels. In 1956, when he returned from the Korean War, he bought a freezer. He and his father figured out that they could sell and deliver frozen bagels in batches of six. Freezing enabled the bagels to last much longer. In the 1960s, the automated bagel machine was invented. The machine allowed bagels to be made faster and more easily and enabled the Lenders to make a lot more bagels, which they shipped across the country.

Modern bagels are much bigger than before and come in many more flavors, including poppy seed, raisin, garlic, onion, sourdough, sesame, pumpernickel, whole wheat, and blueberry. I have tasted bagels from Tal Bagels, which is Israeli, Bagel Bob's, Ess-a-Bagel, and H & H. The bagels at Tal are big and doughy and have a lot of flavor. The bagels at Bagel Bob's are smaller and softer with less taste, unless there is cream cheese or butter or lox on them. The bagels at H & H are my least favorite because you never know whether you are going to get a soft bagel or a hard one. The Ess-a-Bagel are my favorite; the bagel is fluffy and doughy, and the taste is delicious and flavorful. I love the mouth-watering smell of fresh bagels baking when you walk into the Ess-a-Bagel store!

### **Pastrami**

And then there is the king of Jewish foods, pastrami. In the late 1800s to early 1900s, a large population of Jews immigrated to the Lower East Side. These immigrants crowded into tenements. One to ten families would live in these tenements and there was just no room to hang out inside. So they spent time outdoors, and that is how pushcarts and delis started. The pushcarts served knishes, pickles, and bagels, and people would hang out and talk.

One of the greatest inventions of the deli was pastrami. The delis served pastrami on rye bread with mustard. Pastrami has Romanian

origins, although what was called *pastram* in Romania is very different from what we call *pastrami*, which was actually invented in New York City. In 1888, Katz's Deli opened and claimed to have invented pastrami. But actually it was Sussman Volk (a butcher) who first got the recipe from a Romanian friend in exchange for storing his friend's luggage. The sandwich became so popular that he converted his butcher shop into a restaurant. (Katz's Deli still disputes this and says it was the first.)

Pastrami was originally created as a way to preserve meat before modern refrigeration. Pastrami is made with brisket. The raw meat is brined, partly dried, seasoned with various herbs and spices, then smoked, then steamed (which is a lot of work). Modern pastrami is entirely different from the cured meats with similar names you would find in Turkey, Romania, and the Balkans today.

Pastrami has become very trendy in New York – so much so that in October 2010 there was a pastrami sculpture in a Brooklyn park! One restaurant serves a pastrami eggroll, and Russ and Daughters created pastrami-cured salmon. Another place makes a pastrami croissant! Every year, New York City delis compete to see which one has the best pastrami. The 2<sup>nd</sup> Avenue Deli, Katz's, Carnegie Deli, Pastrami Queen, and even a deli in Brooklyn all compete.

I have eaten pastrami from Pastrami Queen, the 2<sup>nd</sup> Avenue Deli, and Katz's Deli, which is reputed to have the best pastrami in New York City. The pastrami sandwich I liked best is Katz's. What I love about Katz's pastrami is that it is cut thick and is juicy and full of flavor. Plus it melts in your mouth. The pastrami from 2<sup>nd</sup> Avenue Deli does not have a great taste and is not as juicy. Pastrami Queen is also delicious, but I still say Katz's is the best.

### **Cheesecake**

Of course, we all need a nice dessert after dinner, and cheesecake is probably one of the best known. What you might not know is that cheesecake has a Jewish origin. Jews are known for their fondness for desserts, which probably

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comes from their involvement in the sugar trade. Jews were engaged in sugar refining in Poland and Russia and also ran sugar plantations in the West Indies. Sweets have symbolic significance for Jews. They represent joy and happiness, which is why they play an important role on many Jewish holidays, particularly Shavuot.

Long ago, the ancient Greeks made the first cheesecake. But more recently cheesecake originated from Poland and Russia. In the old days, Eastern European women made soft cheese, which was used as the basis for cheesecake, among other things. When Jews immigrated to the United States, they brought their cheesecake recipes with them.

In upstate New York in 1872, dairymen were trying to make cheese that tasted like the cheese from France. The cheese that resulted turned out to be much creamier than the French cheese, so they called it “cream cheese.” But the cream cheese spoiled quickly, so it was not practical to eat. It was not until after 1920, when two Jewish immigrants from Lithuania began to mass market cream cheese, that it became a staple and began to appear in cheesecake fillings. Because cream cheese was invented in New York, cheesecake is often referred to as “New York cheesecake,” no matter where it is made.

Just as bagels were originally made to be plain, cheesecake was also made without fla-

vorings or toppings. Now people make strawberry cheesecake, blueberry cheesecake, chocolate cheesecake, and even carrot cheesecake.

Today, the most famous cheesecake is made by Lindy’s. Its recipe calls for heavy cream, lots of eggs, lots of sugar, vanilla extract, and no less than two and a half pounds of cream cheese. (This is at least two times more cream cheese than is used in most recipes!) Lindy’s is said to have the best cheesecake in the city, but I disagree. The flavor of the filling is very good, but the crust is too cakey, and there is not enough filling. And the slices are just too big! Junior’s cheesecake is fluffy, and the filling has lots of flavor, but the crust is not very good, and there is so much filling that it is hard to swallow. My favorite cheesecake is from Katz’s Deli. There is a lot of crust, the texture of the filling is nice and creamy, and the flavor is delicious.

\* \* \*

Jewish food is an amazing cuisine. Before I did this research, I never knew about these different foods. I had no interest in trying them or going to delis. I didn’t even know that the origin of the deli was Jewish! Doing this project and going to various delis helped me experience my culture. Just as food is central to the Jewish culture, trying different cuisines has become one of my most favorite hobbies. I recommend it highly!

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# A Sephardic Perspective on Jewish Cooking

## by Ed Chalom

To demonstrate the divide that exists between Sephardic and Ashkenazic Jews, consider this scenario. My Orthodox great-grandfather, who worked on Hester Street in lower Manhattan, arrived early to say his morning prayers. Wrapped and strapped in *tallit* and *tefillin*, he was rocking back and forth deep in prayer when he was approached by a man who addressed him in Yiddish. My great-grandfather, who had been born and raised in Aleppo, Syria, and spoke only Arabic, turned to him with an uncomprehending look. The other man tried some more Yiddish. When he received no response, he asked incredulously, “*Du bist a Yid?*” (“Are you a Jew?”)

This divide is amply demonstrated in the culinary complex of custom, cooking, and consumption. The Sephardic Syrian Jews from Aleppo (SYs) came to America in the early part of the twentieth century and pitched their tents in the Bensonhurst section of Brooklyn. Although called Sephardic (from *Sepharad*, Hebrew for “Spain”) these Aleppian Jews, whether descendants of Jews expelled from Spain or descendants of Jews who had never left the Middle East since biblical days, had been completely Arabized over the centuries. Although there were a few vestiges of Spanish in their lexicon, they spoke Arabic and practiced Arabic customs. An insular group, they countenanced but did not encourage “intermarriage” with Ashkenazi Jews, and any SY in such a union dropped a couple of rungs on the social ladder.

I was brought up on SY dishes, such as bazergan (bulgar/tamarind appetizer), ad-des (lentil/garlic soup), kibbeh (stuffed meat torpedoes), and ajweh (date-filled crescents). The rules of *kashruth* were followed at home. All meat was kosher, and meat and dairy were

strictly separated. Aside from Saturday night visits to the kosher deli for a knish and a hot dog, we never ate out. In those days there were no kosher SY restaurants; now there are quite a few in New York and New Jersey. (I must mention, as an aside, that I was shocked once to see my mother walk into a Chinese restaurant. When I confronted her with my eyewitness accusation, she calmly replied, “It wasn’t me, you must have seen someone else.”)

Mealtime was an important time. Extended family gatherings were frequent, and elaborate meals were prepared. Two or three generations of women would work together in the bustling, aromatic kitchen. In the privileged male SY society it was woman’s role to cook and serve the meals. At the dinner table my mother would shout, “Look who’s coming in!” When I turned to look, she would shovel food into my plate. This is the heavy handed Sephardic counterpart to the Ashkenazi mother’s “eat, eat, eat” admonition.

Food formed an essential part of the Arabic hospitality culture. At that time, before e-mail and cell phones, people often made impromptu visits to the homes of friends or relatives, and a visitor was always immediately offered food and drink. If one were adroit, one might arrive at mealtime. A certain ritual known as the “rule of 3” then ensued. The visitor, of course, would be invited to join in the meal. “Oh, no thanks,” the visitor would say, “I just ate.” The invitation would be graciously repeated and as graciously refused a second time. It was

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**Ed Chalom** is a longtime member of the Birmingham Temple in Farmington Hills, MI. He has authored two books, *The Heart Is a Funny Reservoir – A Romantic Memoir of Iceland* and *The Heart Is a Funny Reservoir and Other Human Mysteries*. Although retired, he is active in various book discussion groups, teaches French and Spanish, and is a tennis addict.

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absolutely necessary, at this point, to make a third offer. The recipient, who may have been ravenous the whole time, was now allowed to accept. The rule of 3 was inviolable.

Frankly, I detested certain SY dishes, such as banjan (eggplant, whether stuffed or not), bameh (stewed okra), and cousah (squash). But on the whole, I thrived on the diet. There was an emphasis on fresh fruits and vegetables; every meal ended with lettuce and fruit. Sweet pastries, for which SY cuisine is known, were served mainly on holidays and as snacks.

My eventual exposure to Ashkenazi cooking left me unimpressed. For the most part it was a passage from the exotic to the banal, from rosewater to seltzer water. Schmaltz on rye and gribbenes were foreign to me (and still are). Potato latkes paled next to spanech b'jibn (cheese/spinach/onion frittata). Chopped apple haroset was insipid compared to date/walnut haroset. Beef brisket was okay, but it didn't have the

tang of tamarind-flavored kiftes (meatballs). I recognize that unfamiliarity breeds contempt, and I admit that I have not tried to be fair. But as a wise Frenchman once said, "*à chacun son gout*" (to each his own taste). Although I have lived apart from the SY community for many years, I continue to cook dishes based on a well-worn stack of index cards containing my mother's recipes.

SY cooking is no longer third world. Middle Eastern restaurants are ubiquitous, though they do not serve the wide variety of dishes available in SY cuisine.\* Traditional Ashkenazi food is still the staple in delicatessens in Jewish neighborhoods. But the day of enlightenment may be around the corner. I imagine that when an underexposed Ashkenaz takes his first bite of SY mujudrah (lentils and rice) or mamounia (oatmeal with cinnamon), he may well ask, "Is this Jewish?"

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\*Suggested reference: Poopa Dweck, *Aromas of Aleppo* (NY: Harper Collins, 2007).

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# Why Is This Seder Different from All Other Seders?

by Barry Swan

For many years, Beth Haskalah, the Rochester Society for Humanistic Judaism, has had a joint Passover seder with the Rochester Area Vegetarian Society. At first we set up two tables: one “kosher” (vegan) and one “treif,” with chopped liver, gefilte fish, chicken soup, hard boiled eggs, and turkey with gravy.

We are all adaptable and respectful of others’ needs, so this transition was made rather easily. Individuals shared hints as to how to substitute for specific ingredients that were not acceptable to vegans: soy products, applesauce instead of eggs as a binder, and agave instead of honey. Cooks provided lists of ingredients, placing the lists next to their prepared dishes,

But there was a contradiction between the meal and the message of the seder plate. How could you have a shank bone and an egg on a seder plate at a vegan seder? The sight of the shank bone and egg on the seder plate would be as welcome as a ham bone and shrimp at a traditional kosher meal. I conferred with rabbis and other madrikhim, asking for their input and opinions. I received many specific suggestions and some more general philosophic perspectives.

## The Seder Plate

The traditional seder plate consists of:

- *karpas*: a green vegetable, typically parsley, that symbolizes the freshness of spring and rebirth. It is dipped in salt water.
- *haroset*: chopped apples, nuts, wine, and spices. It symbolizes the mortar the Hebrew slaves used between bricks.
- *maror*: bitter herbs, usually horseradish. They symbolize the bitterness of slavery, which brings tears to one’s eyes.
- *chazeret*: a bitter vegetable. It is sometimes replaced with a bowl of salt.

- *baytsa*: egg that was symbolic of mourning and meat offerings as a sacrifice; also used as a symbol of springtime and renewal.
- *zeroa*: shankbone, symbolizing the pascal lamb sacrifice. Tradition has it that its blood marked the doorposts of Jewish houses for their safekeeping.

Of these items, there is no need to alter the *karpas*, *haroset*, *maror*, or *chazeret*. The only items that need to be replaced are the shank bone and the egg.

## Replacing the Shankbone with the *Sehlek* (Beet)

The lamb is a significant part of the Passover story. The pascal lamb was sacrificed. Its blood was smeared over the door. But the reminder of this animal sacrifice is not welcome at a vegan seder.

The redness of the beet and its juice represent the blood of the Passover sacrifice. Our tradition tells us that Moses was chosen because he showed compassion to a lamb. We can demonstrate our compassion by substituting the beet for the lamb. Our compassion extends to our care and devotion to all people and creatures. Another suggestion is to shape a bar of halvah like a shank bone.

## Replacing the Egg (*Baytsa*) with Any Food with Seeds

*Baytsa* is the egg of life. Each of us begins as a seed and grows into adulthood. The egg is our potential. It is the power of our evolutionary past and the gift of our human inheritance.

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**Barry Swan**, a madrikh, is leader of Beth Haskalah, Rochester, NY. He is a student in the International Institute for Secular Humanistic Judaism Rabbinic Program. A member of the Board of Directors of the Society for Humanistic Judaism, he co-chairs the Ethical Concerns Committee.

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An egg made of tofu would keep the shape consistent. There are many other foods that also may be used. An avocado pit, eggplants, and sprouts are common substitutions. The olive, so vital in the Middle East, is another popular choice. The olive branch is a symbol of peace. On the seder plate, a variety of olives would represent the variety found within our human family.

### **The Addition of *Tapooz* (Orange)**

An orange is another item we can add to our seder plate.

Change is a part of the human experience, which we embrace. An introduction of a new Passover tradition signals our ability to change.

The origin of the orange on the seder plate goes back to Susannah Heschel, daughter of Abraham Joshua Heschel, a rabbi and philosopher who inspired social activism. One

story about the inclusion of an orange centers around her perception of the marginalized roles of women and gays and lesbians in Jewish life and her understanding of how the inclusion of these people makes our lives better. A second story relates to an interchange she had after a public lecture. In denouncing feminism," a man said that a woman belongs on the *bima* (pulpit) like an orange belongs on a seder plate. Either explanation emphasizes the ideal liberation, which Pesakh champions.

As we make room on the seder plate for an orange, we make room at our seder table (and in our lives) for all people, regardless of gender or sexual identity. Everyone deserves the gift of freedom and to be included in the human family.

Humanistic Jews can celebrate Pesakh in a manner consistent with our humanistic values. Making our own choices about how we celebrate is a value we treasure.

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# WISDOM from WINE

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*In each issue of Humanistic Judaism, we are reprinting a selection from the writings of Rabbi Sherwin T. Wine that has meaning in our lives today. In this selection, reprinted with minor adaptation from Humanistic Judaism (Summer 1990), he explores Jewish dietary laws and our relationship to food.*

## Our Dietary Laws by Rabbi Sherwin T. Wine

Most Jewish holidays, are about food. The celebration of the fall harvest is marked by Sukkot, as the celebration of the spring harvest is marked by Pesakh and Shavuot. The fertility of the earth and of animals is where it all began.

Food is not trivial (despite the fact that highbrows deplore gastronomic Judaism). Food is even more important than sex; without nutrition, reproduction fails. Food means survival. All religions began with rituals to regulate the eating of food, whether the food was given to humans or to gods.

It is by no mere coincidence that our deepest and most profound religious attachments are to celebrations that center on eating. The seder remains the most popular Jewish event in North America. Sharing food goes back to the earliest memories of family and community.

All cultures regulate eating. Some, like the Anglo-Saxon, do so informally, without explicit legislation; Anglo-Saxons simply do not eat dogs, cats, or horses. Others, like Jews, do it formally with much fanfare and with very specific laws in sacred documents.

But why these prohibitions?

All cultures view certain foods as dangerous. The dangers may come from a variety of circumstances. The food may belong to the gods and not to humans. It may be prepared in the wrong

way. It may be eaten at the wrong time. It may be restricted to social groups other than your own.

In Jewish culture, which was a meat eating culture, the danger lay in blood. Blood was a food that belonged to Yahveh alone. To drink blood was to steal the food of God and to risk the punishment that would almost certainly ensue. Blood-eating carnivorous animals were not considered proper (kosher) for eating. Kosher vegetarian animals, like cows, sheep, and goats, had to be killed in a kosher way allowing for the maximum bleeding of the slain animal. And, as an extra precaution, the meat had to be salted to draw out the last vestiges of the blood. (Ironically, humans could eat meat or fowl, but the beasts or birds they chose to eat could not. Even pigs, which are on the edge of vegetarianism, were excluded because of their piggish habit of eating any blood-soaked refuse in sight.)

In time these dietary restrictions became an intimate part of Jewish identity. Long after

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**Rabbi Sherwin T. Wine** (1928-2007) was the intellectual framer of Humanistic Judaism, founding rabbi of the Society for Humanistic Judaism, and founder of the International Institute for Secular Humanistic Judaism, as well as a prolific writer, speaker, and public figure. He served as rabbi of The Birmingham Temple in Farmington Hills, Michigan, for more than forty years. In addition to innumerable periodical articles, including the lead article in almost every issue of this journal, he was the author of *Judaism Beyond God*, *Celebration: A Ceremonial Guide for Humanists and Humanistic Jews*, *A Provocative People*, and *Staying Sane in a Crazy World* (all available from the Society for Humanistic Judaism, [www.shj.org](http://www.shj.org)). This article is reprinted from *Humanistic Judaism* (Vol. XV, No. IV, Autumn 1987).

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most Jews had ceased to believe that blood was the food of God, long after they had stopped believing that eating blood was dangerous, they continued to obey the laws and observe the prohibitions. Eating habits begin in childhood and are reinforced by community approval and disapproval. As long as Jews lived in closed, tight-knit communities, the dietary laws retained their power. Jews obeyed them because they were Jews, and because there was some vague unconscious fear that if they failed to obey something terrible would happen.

Modern times have subverted this obedience. Political emancipation and an open society, combined with individualism and secular education, have weakened the hold of the dietary prohibitions. Most Conservative Jews and virtually all Reform and secular Jews no longer observe the traditional food laws, regarding them as alienating, inconvenient, or meaningless. Some Jews feel guilty about discarding them. Others create their own personal revisions: kosher food in the home but not outside, shrimp but not pork. Still others go on kosher binges once or twice a year, especially around Pesakh or Rosh Hashana. But, on the whole, the old discipline is confined to a small minority.

“I don’t keep kosher” is the refrain of most secular Jews. The tone implies that the speaker is now liberated from dietary laws. But is that true, or even desirable?

My observation is that many liberal Jews have substituted one set of dietary restrictions for another. And, in many cases, the new laws are more demanding than the ones they have replaced.

For many of my secular Jewish friends, dangerous foods dominate their conscious thought. Cholesterol has replaced blood as the enemy, and fat is a foe as vicious as pork. Calories are like bacon, insidious intruders into the health of the community.

In this age of scientific nutrition, *laissez-faire* food consumption has become about as rational as diving from an airplane without a parachute. Every day modern medicine warns

us of more and more dangers to our bodies and to our survival. The most delicious pleasures of life are diminished as we surrender to the discipline of health and fitness. Giving up hot fudge for celery may be far more traumatic than giving up pork for mutton.

Recently, I was on a panel with an Orthodox rabbi who was overweight and a chain smoker. He spent most of his time praising the dietary laws and how they instill a sense of discipline into the daily life of the Jew. Each statement about discipline was punctuated by a long puff of his cigarette, leading up to the finale: a racking cough.

I told him that, from my point of view, tobacco was more dangerous than shrimp, and fried schmaltz was more devastating than lean pork. I also pointed out to him that, when it comes to dietary discipline, no generation of Jews since the Exodus has been more disciplined than the health-craving, weight-watching, pleasure-curtailling secular Jews of modern America.

But we refuse to give ourselves credit for what we do. We are always falling into the Orthodox trap of complaining how discipline has fallen out of Jewish life, of how hedonism with its short-run pleasures and absence of long-run goals has subverted the solid values of traditional Judaism. We fail to see our own stern regimen simply because nobody has bothered to turn it into a divine decree.

Of course Humanistic Jews have dietary laws. They are not the same as the Orthodox. They are not absolute; new evidence constantly forces us to review them. They are not universal; there are different formulas for different physiques. They are not cruel; excommunication or execution seems a harsh penalty for refusing to take care of one’s own health. They are not relentless; lapses are only human and moderation makes sense. But they are more than suggestions. They flow from the collective wisdom of the scientific community.

When I teach young children, I have no reluctance to tell them not to smoke tobacco.

I believe the evidence is pretty overwhelming that smoking can give them cancer. I do not threaten communal punishment or advocate that their right to smoke in private be taken away. But my responsibility is to encourage them to exercise the discipline that is necessary to their health.

Health is a Jewish value (though not an exclusively Jewish one). It is as important a value as Jewish identity. It needs both information and discipline to make it real.

We Humanistic Jews have a new and very different set of dietary laws that are an important part of our lives. As I munch on lettuce and dream of brownies, I recognize that the fates are sometimes cruel. We are designed to love what may not be good for us.

The harvest gave us blueberries and potatoes. Human ingenuity gave us blueberry pie and potato latkes. Fighting human ingenuity is not always easy.

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# Intermarriage: From *Oy Vey* to *Mazel Tov* by Rabbi Adam Chalom

Have you heard? More than 60 percent of children of intermarried families are being raised with a Jewish identity.

Intermarriage offers a huge opportunity for the Jewish community, but only if we stop shooting ourselves in the foot. The recent lamentation over American Jewish intermarriage, coupled with the Pew survey finding that 20 percent of children of intermarriage are being raised “Jewish by religion,” misses two key points. First, if we include being raised “partly Jewish by religion” (25 percent) and “Jewish not by religion or mixed,” (16 percent), *three-fifths* of all children of intermarriage are being raised with some Jewish identity; only 37 percent are being raised with none. Second, and more important, organized Judaism has created its own “intermarriage problem.”

After ten years of hysteria in response to the 1990 National Jewish Population Study’s reports of an intermarriage rate of 52 percent, the American Jewish Committee in 2000 asked several questions about intermarriage in its annual survey of American Jewish opinion. Evidently the results were shocking, for it appears those questions were never asked again. So shocking that the presentation of those results on the AJC website is garbled (the only survey results for which that is so). Deciphered, we find that:

- 80 percent of those surveyed agreed that intermarriage is inevitable in an open society.
- 68 percent disagreed with pushing conversion as the best response to intermarriage.
- When half of the respondents were asked whether rabbis should officiate at intermarriage ceremonies, 57 percent said they should, *even if “a gentile clergyman is involved,”* and another 16% said they should

if there is no co-officiant. Only 22 percent said rabbis should refuse to officiate.

These numbers have probably become even more favorable in the intervening thirteen years.

Consider the disconnect between these accepting attitudes and the establishment Jewish strategy of 1) prevention, 2) conversion, and 3) outreach as last resort. Even though studies estimate that about 50 percent of Reform rabbis will perform intermarriages, the Central Conference of American Rabbis is still officially opposed to officiation at such weddings and strongly opposed to coofficiation. Conservative rabbis can be expelled from the Rabbinical Assembly for any participation in an intermarriage ceremony; for Orthodox rabbis, participation is practically unheard-of.

A Jewish world in deep denial about the reality of intermarriage has little chance of encouraging those who *do* intermarry to make Jewish choices. What would American Judaism look like if we really faced reality: intermarriage *is* inevitable, conversion is *not* the best response, and Jews want rabbis to meet the needs of Jews in love with anyone? A rabbi’s refusal to marry a couple from different religious backgrounds will not prevent them from marrying; it will just push them further away from any future Jewish connections.

Imagine if the response to any Jew who finds love beyond Judaism were “*mazel tov!*” instead of “*oy vey!*” or “Will the outsider change who he/she is?” If we can welcome and

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**Rabbi Adam Chalom**, Ph.D., dean of the International Institute for Secular Humanistic Judaism for North America, is rabbi of Kol Hadash Humanistic Congregation in Lincolnshire, IL. He holds a doctorate from the University of Michigan and sits on the editorial board of this journal.

celebrate those new families, intermarriage is a real opportunity to grow the Jewish people and the circle of people sympathetic to and connected with it. If we stop trying vainly to diminish the number of intermarrying Jews, we could increase the number that make being Jewish part of their family life.

Fifty Jews marrying each other create twenty-five Jewish households. Fifty Jews marrying non-Jews create fifty households with at least one Jewish member. This is why on college campuses today there are more students with one Jewish parent than with two. If more of these intermarried households produced children who identified with and were welcomed by the Jewish community, we could stop worrying about the Jewish future. Imagine doubling the size of Hillels, of Jewish volunteers, of audiences for Jewish art and music.

What must we do? Jews marrying non-Jews need to know that their Judaism and the Jewishness of their family does not have to be all or nothing. Children raised in homes with one Jewish parent need to know that they do not have to choose one set of grandparents over the other to be part of the Jewish family. If we want a non-Jewish partner to respect Jewish

culture and ethnicity, we must be open to the other culture's being part of the mix. Pew's 62 percent of American Jews who believe Jewishness is primarily ethnicity and culture may not see their Jewishness as either/or. A person can participate in multiple cultures simultaneously – American, *and* Jewish, *and* gendered, *and* part of their community, and any other labels the individual may choose.

To make intermarriage a win, we must adapt. Coofficiation with a priest might appease the devout mother of an ex-Catholic who himself is happy to raise Jewish-identified children. A Christmas tree can be as much a cultural symbol as a menorah for a secular Jew who denies the existence of miracles. A cultural Jewish identity might well be a successful route to connect both “Jews of no religion” and intermarried families to their Jewish heritage.

Refusing to marry more than half of American Jews to the people they love is a losing strategy. Rejecting the choice of many of these couples to celebrate both family cultures has turned away the better part of a generation. It is time, and crucially so, for American Judaism to say “*mazel tov!*” to love to ensure a brighter future for all of us.



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# Humanistic Rabbis: Yesterday, Today, and Tomorrow

## by Rabbi Miriam Jerris

In 1969 I requested an application to the rabbinic program at Hebrew Union College (HUC), the Reform rabbinic seminary in Cincinnati. Shortly thereafter, I received a form letter stating that women were not eligible to become rabbis and inviting me to apply to HUC's doctoral program instead. I can still experience the disbelief. What did they mean, women couldn't be rabbis? And then, when I stopped and reflected, it dawned on me that I had never met a woman rabbi. How could I be so naïve? I later realized that this blindness had to do with my belief that people were more inclusive than they really were. A similar sense of disbelief occurred when I learned that in order for students to be admitted or remain in rabbinic school, their partners (girlfriends, boyfriends, wives, or husbands) must either be born Jewish or converted to Judaism. When I first became involved in Humanistic Judaism, these were the experiences and values I brought with me that formed the basis of my involvement in the Humanist rabbinate.

In 1969, members of three Humanistic congregations came together to form the Society for Humanistic Judaism (SHJ). All three of these communities had rabbinic leaders, all of whom came out of the Reform movement. Sherwin Wine was the first, at the Birmingham Temple in suburban Detroit. Shortly after the publication of a 1965 *Time Magazine* article about the furor aroused by this "atheist rabbi," John and Jeanne Franklin organized the Congregation for Humanistic Judaism (CHJ) in Connecticut with Bill Gailmor as their rabbi. In the meantime, Rabbi Daniel Friedman was introducing his concept of Humanistic Judaism, which he called "Rational Judaism," to his Chicago North Shore congregation.

At first, Wine and Friedman assumed that our future rabbinic leadership would emerge

from the Reform rabbinate, as they had done. In the early 1970s, they convened a group of liberal Reform rabbis to discuss the issues of intermarriage, coofficiation, and conversion. The resulting statement on intermarriage, released in 1974, was signed by six rabbis, later joined by thirty-six others. Ultimately, however, only one of those rabbis, other than Wine and Friedman, ever identified officially with Humanistic Judaism, when Jay Heyman became the rabbi of Kol Hadash in northern California.

A handful of other Reform rabbis have associated with Humanistic Judaism over the years. Philip Schechter served the Congregation for Humanistic Judaism in Connecticut for several years. Leslie Freund joined us in the late 1990s and sadly died shortly thereafter. Kahal B'raira in Boston hired a series of rabbinic consultants, including Jeffrey Silberman and Devon Lerner, who stayed on the periphery, although Don Pollack remained a life member of the Society for Humanistic Judaism until his death a few years ago. Robert Barr and Rami Shapiro completed requirements at Hebrew Union College through service to Humanistic communities, but both left the movement in the mid-1980s. Only two Reform rabbis besides Jay Heyman became formally identified with Humanistic Judaism in a significant way: Peter Schweitzer joined the City Congregation in New York and eventually became its rabbi, and Jeffrey Falick in 2009 joined the Society for Humanistic Judaism and the Association

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**Rabbi Miriam Jerris**, Ph.D., is rabbi of the Society for Humanistic Judaism and formerly served as its first executive director. She is ordained as a humanist minister by the Humanist Society of Friends. She holds master's degrees in Near Eastern Studies and clinical and humanistic psychology and a doctorate in Jewish Studies. She sits on the editorial board of this journal. This article is based on a presentation first given at the Birmingham Temple, April 26, 2013, during a meeting of the Board of Directors of the Society for Humanistic Judaism.

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of Humanistic Rabbis (AHR), accepting leadership roles in both organizations. Falick recently was named rabbi of the Birmingham Temple. Additionally, Frank Tamburello, ordained by a nondenominational rabbinic seminary, is associated with the Community for Humanistic Judaism in Westchester County, New York, and is a member of the AHR.

With this history, it became obvious that Humanistic Judaism needed its own rabbinic seminary – first and foremost, to give us credibility in the Jewish community, but also to allow us to control the philosophy and curriculum of the institution that gave us our rabbis. The International Institute for Secular Humanistic Judaism (IISHJ) was established in 1985. The first ordination of a graduate of the Institute, Tamara Kolton, took place in 1999, thirty-six years after the founding of Humanistic Judaism. By comparison, the first graduating class of Reconstructionist rabbis did not occur until fifty-four years after Mordecai Kaplan founded Reconstructionist Judaism.

To date, our movement has ordained eleven graduates of the North American branch of the IISHJ: Kolton, Ben Biber, Adam Chalom, Miriam Jerris, Judith Seid, Sivan Maas, Eva Goldfinger, Greg Epstein, Karen Levy, Jodi Kornfeld, and Denise Handlarski. Twenty-seven rabbis have been ordained by T'mura, the Israeli branch of the Institute.

Eight North American students are currently enrolled in the rabbinic program: Barry Swan, leader of Beth Haskalah in Rochester, New York; Susan Averbach of San Francisco; Ed Klein, leader of the Queens Community for Cultural Judaism; Natan Fuchs of the Birmingham Temple; Tzemah Yoreh, a published poet and scholar who holds a Ph.D. in biblical studies; Tammy Kaiser of New Mexico; Mary Raskin of Kol Shalom in Oregon, who will finish IISHJ course work this year and has enrolled in an accredited master's program; and Jeremy Kridel of Indianapolis, a former doctoral student in ancient Jewish history and a judicial law clerk for the Indiana Court of Appeals. Three other persons are engaged in the application process. Whereas, up to now,

we have primarily attracted leaders already serving an existing Humanistic congregation or community, most of the prospective students who now contact us are from outside the movement, including a student from the Reconstructionist seminary who is transferring to ours. Inquiries are coming predominantly, although not exclusively, from those seeking second career opportunities.

Our challenge for the future is twofold: to attract students interested in working with Humanistic communities while at the same time nurturing congregations that desire and can support rabbinic leadership. Young people will be willing to dedicate their lives to the Humanistic rabbinate only if they see opportunities that excite them and offer enough financial security so that they can support themselves and their families. The Society for Humanistic Judaism has created a program called *Shidukh* (“match”) that has been partially funded to bring a rabbinic student together with a community seeking permanent rabbinic leadership. When we find an appropriate match, assistance will be available. In the meantime, we continue to grow our communities while responding to the interest we receive from prospective rabbinic candidates.

In several important ways, the Humanistic rabbinate is very different from the rabbinates in other traditions. First, our rabbis are egalitarian. In most seminaries, future rabbis are still being told that they are the supreme authority in the congregation and Jewish community. As humanists, we understand that authority resides in each individual, and our rabbis are trained to know that as well. Understanding that authority is horizontal rather than vertical is fundamental to being a Humanistic rabbi. No one individual makes the decisions for our communities.

All rabbinic seminaries teach historical truth based on evidence, archaeological and literary. All the modern progressive seminaries teach that the Bible is a human document, many separate documents, written at different times and blended – sometimes not seamlessly – into a continuous narrative. The rabbinic

students in Conservative and Reform seminaries learn the historical truth, for example, that there is no evidence for the Exodus as described in the Torah – and then they are told to withhold that information from their congregants because lay people cannot either bear or fathom the truth. Not so in our seminary. We teach the truth as we know it today and expect our rabbis to speak it publicly and in the classroom.

The Secular Humanistic rabbinic seminary admits students solely on the basis of their qualifications. It is not required that their partners be Jewish, either by birth or conversion. Although the Renewal movement also follows this policy, the IISHJ may be the only established seminary that does not require a rabbinic candidate's partner or spouse to be Jewish. At least three Humanistic rabbis are married to individuals not born or converted to Judaism. A significant hue and cry has arisen

in the wider Jewish community with regard to a parallel development among some rabbis in other branches of Judaism. People ask, "What kind of role models are they?" With more than 50 percent of Jews marrying someone not born Jewish, isn't it time for the Jewish community to see the value of rabbinic leaders who are not married to Jews but are strong in their commitment to Judaism so that there is someone in Jewish leadership echelons with whom intermarried laity can identify?

Secular Humanistic Judaism is the movement in the best position to respond to the issues of modernity in the Jewish community. Our commitments to gender equality, to speaking the truth, and to the right of all people to marry the ones they love, which leads to multicultural inclusiveness, are the foundations of our rabbinic training, and more and more candidates are seeking us out for just those reasons.

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enhancing pluralism in the Jewish community

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# NEWS of the MOVEMENT

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## Rabbi Jeffrey Falick Leads Birmingham Temple into Its 50<sup>th</sup> Year

Jeffrey L. Falick of Miami, Florida, has begun serving as rabbi for the Birmingham Temple for Humanistic Judaism, in time to cel-

brate the congregation's 50-year anniversary season with its members. His installation took place on Friday, November 15.

### RABBI JEFFREY FALICK'S VISION

*The following is an excerpt from Rabbi Jeffrey L. Falick's remarks upon his installation as rabbi of the Birmingham Temple on Friday, November 15, 2013.*

I am honored by the trust you have demonstrated in me by allowing me the great privilege of serving as rabbi of The Birmingham Temple. As I formally accept my role as a leader of this congregation, I realize that a good part of your hopes and desires for the success of this community have been placed in me.

When I was under consideration for this position, I presented a very specific vision of the rabbinate for your consideration. I told you that my primary goal would be to create connections on your behalf and as your representative. I invoked a traditional Jewish role known as the *shaliach tzibur*. This title typically denotes the person who prays on behalf of the community. I put a Humanistic twist on that idea. I do not represent you to a higher power. I represent you to each other and to the community. I am your servant.

At the time, I expressed it this way:

A healthy community of Humanistic Jews must view its rabbi as an extension of its members' own obligations to each other. Any "authority" that the rabbi possesses derives from the trust and confidence of the members and volunteer leadership. They, not a higher power, authorize the rabbi to serve the community.

As a humanist, I do not represent the imperatives of Jewish law or tradition. I have the training and

experience that enables me to teach, perform ceremonies and provide pastoral care. But I do so on your authority. Whether in my capacity as educator, advisor, pastor, or anything else with which you task me, I will strive to communicate the collective interests and concerns of our community, convening and gathering all of you to do so as my partners.

I would like to thank you all for your warm and gracious welcome and support. I have received valuable advice and guidance from many of you and I hope that you all know that I am always open to more – even if it involves a critique. I've always labored under the assumption that professional growth is based upon solid self-assessment and the ability to accept constructive criticism.

With this in mind, I pledge to work hard at furthering the goals of this congregation. I may not always do so perfectly, but I do hope that I will never give you cause to question my sincerity or my efforts. Even as our honeymoon period fades and we begin to become accustomed to each other, I promise to always do my best to earn your trust in me each day. I believe in the absolute necessity of Humanistic Judaism. I believe in the crucial place of this congregation in our movement. And I believe in each and every one of you as I hope that you will believe in me.

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While living and working in Florida, Rabbi Falick was rabbinic advisor to Congregation Beth Adam, the Boca Raton Congregation for Humanistic Judaism. In explaining his decision to come to Michigan, Rabbi Falick said, “In every movement in organized Jewish life, there are some institutions that represent the highest expression of its ideals. For Humanistic Jews, that place is the Birmingham Temple.”

Ordained as a Reform rabbi at the Hebrew Union College in Cincinnati, Rabbi Falick turned to Humanistic Judaism about ten years ago. He has served on the Board of Directors of the Society for Humanistic Judaism (SHJ) for several years and currently serves on the SHJ Executive Committee as Secretary. He also is president of the Association of Humanistic Rabbis. SHJ Rabbi Miriam Jerris, who has worked closely with Rabbi Falick, notes, “He brings his commitment to Humanistic Judaism, his passion for the Humanistic Jewish movement, and his love for Jewish history and culture to the Birmingham Temple and Metro Detroit. His deep caring and compassion, coupled with his insatiable intellectual curiosity, will make a significant and powerful contribution to and impact on the temple and the community.”

Last year Rabbi Falick led a group of friends, all Humanistic Jews, on a tour of Israel. “Zionism and Israel activism have played an

important and consistent role in my own Jewish life,” said the rabbi, who studied in Israel and has made more than 30 trips there.

Rabbi Falick says that his recent 13-year, full-time engagement as the assistant executive director and Jewish educator in the pluralistic environment of the Alper Jewish Community Center in Miami has confirmed his passion for Humanistic Judaism: “The Humanistic Jewish approach is the broadest, most encompassing embrace of our Jewish identities. It brings to us a heightened awareness of the richness and variety of Jewish histories and practices across time and place. It helps us to locate our own place in the Jewish experience.

“This approach yields wonderful bursts of creativity in our celebrations and ceremonies. We have learned how to freely and sometimes radically adapt and reposition Jewish customs because we understand that their value does not lie in their mere preservation. It lies in the benefits they provide to our lives and the strengthening of our ties to each other. Rabbi Sherwin Wine and the Birmingham Temple created this. Any rabbi who serves the congregation must understand this.”

According to Birmingham Temple President Lawrence Ellenbogen, Rabbi Falick’s talents are identical to the temple’s needs. “He is the perfect rabbi for the temple.”

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# Don't Stop Questioning!

## by Rabbi Denise Handlarski

When I was a child and lost my first tooth, my parents told me that the tooth fairy would come, take it from under my pillow, and turn it into a star. I found this idea charming but didn't really believe them. I felt that they were humoring me, but I was also humoring them – they wanted me to believe in their story, and so I pretended to. When I was a bit older, though, I decided it was time to end the ruse. I told my parents I had lost the tooth and was upset that the tooth fairy wouldn't be able to find it. They assured me that she could find it no matter where it was and turn it into a star. I hid the tooth and, in the morning after the tooth fairy's supposed visit, produced the tooth, declaring that I had disproved their story. My parents, of course, laughed.

This is a parable and a parallel for how I came to find Humanistic Judaism and, ultimately, to become a rabbi in this movement. I felt for a while that I was humoring rabbis who spoke of God. I felt, too, that there was a greater truth that I could access. I wonder how much my subterfuge about the tooth fairy came from my Jewish upbringing – I was raised to be a critical thinker, and a bit *chutzpahdik*. I think of Pesakh – I, being the youngest, had to ask the four questions. And I really wanted to be the “wise child.” It seems to me that the four questions and the four children of the Passover Haggadah are connected: the kinds of questions we ask are indicative of the people we are being and becoming.

Questioning is part of the intellectual heritage of Jewish culture, but especially so for Humanistic Jews. We are not content to hear stories of the tooth fairy or of other mythical figures and simply do what we are told to please others. We have asked big questions about what kinds of persons, what kinds of Jews, we want to be.

Albert Einstein, a secular Jew, said: “Learn from yesterday, live for today, hope for to-

morrow. The important thing is not to stop questioning.” This quote encapsulates much of Humanistic Judaism. We encourage critical thinking and questioning – as individuals, as a community, as Humanistic Jews. In the complex journey we all take Jewishly, that winding road of longing and belonging, it is the questions we ask, driven by our interests and passions, that ultimately land us where we want to be. That has certainly been true for me on my journey to the rabbinate.

Einstein notes that we learn from yesterday – and, indeed, the questions we ask of our past inform our becoming. Such questions might include, what of our past do we keep and what do we reject? The texts, practices, philosophies, and approaches to life of our ancestors can sometimes provide us with guidance and inspiration. Sometimes we must break from the past when it no longer carries meaning. We respect tradition but do not enslave ourselves to it. How we question the past guides how we make sense of our ancestry, our family histories, and our place in the great chain of humanity.

Me at 7 years old: I announce to my mother that I am going to become Orthodox when I am older (a decision influenced by an experience at a Lubavitch day camp, where we got to braid challah!). A few weeks later I change my mind, having realized that as an Orthodox Jew I couldn't ask all of the questions about religion that I wanted to without being treated with disdain. It makes me uncomfortable that a religion with such deep roots could be made nervous by my questions. *What are they hiding?* I wonder. I want my religion/culture and critical inquiry too. So I abandon Orthodoxy but stick with questioning.

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**Rabbi Denise Handlarski** is assistant rabbi of Oraynu Congregation for Humanistic Judaism in Toronto. This address, delivered at her ordination on November 16, 2013, at the Birmingham Temple in Farmington Hills, Michigan, has been adapted for publication.

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Me at 14 years old: I join the Lubavitchers on a trip to New York and also attend my first secular Jewish conference. First, New York, where we stay with ultra-Orthodox families in Crown Heights, Brooklyn. I admit that I find the whole thing rather charming. Their families are so close, their community so lovely. But I experience simultaneous outrage: Why are the boys off to study while the girls prepare dinner? Why do the men pray in a huge, airy space while the women are crammed into a tiny space without even a proper view of the rabbi? Never a wallflower, I speak up about it. The *rebbetzin* (rabbi's wife) tries to explain (she really believes!) that one can reconcile Orthodox Judaism and feminism. But I continue to have my doubts.

When I get to the secular Jewish conference, where women not only are able to participate fully but are espousing a decidedly feminist program, I think back to that *rebbetzin*. Although she really wanted to make her God-based Judaism and her feminism align, I have seen enough to know it is too much of a stretch. I just don't believe that God, if he exists, wants women to be subservient in the ways I witnessed. In fact, the very ways in which God is used to promote such power politics make me question his existence altogether. Although I think women who stay within religious, and especially Orthodox, Jewish communities and fight for a feminist agenda are heroic, it isn't my battle. I want to have my Judaism and my feminism too – and I discover that in Secular Humanistic Judaism I can. In this Jewish community, my intellectual questioning is valued – and it feels good. I want to believe that whatever iteration of Jewishness I practice, I do not have to lie to myself. I want my rational and intelligent self to be connected with my Jewish self.

Me at 26 years old: I am on a multicultural trip to Auschwitz and other camps in Poland. Because I am the granddaughter of Holocaust survivors, I am asked to lead the group in singing “We Shall Overcome” at the site of the blown-up crematorium that the resistance managed to destroy. I stand alongside Stephanie, granddaughter of Polish antisemites, and

Yves, survivor of the Rwandan genocide, and we hold hands singing together.

Me at 30 years old: I am struggling to finish a Ph.D. in English in a poor academic job market. For many years I have been focused on my academic career, but I have reached a point at which I realize I need a change. The academic world can be awfully cynical. And although I thrive in contexts of academic and intellectual rigor, I have found nothing for my spiritual/emotional side. We live in a time when people are very busy, manically so, yet so many feel empty. We live in a world in which people are searching for meaning and inspiration but also want to hold on to their secular and rational selves. I want to be in the business of inspiring people.

The rabbinic program has not only enabled me to become someone who is in a position to lend this type of inspiration – through the weddings I officiate and the congregants with whom I connect – but has opened me up to a world of insight and meaning. It has been a beautiful journey, one for which I'm very grateful. But, as Einstein suggests, our past is useful only if we use it to inform the present. Indeed, as Humanistic Jews, we by definition must focus on the present. Secular means “of this world” – and, if we are not waiting for the world to come, we have no choice but to focus on the here and now.

One of the key questions we might ask about the present is “How do we find and define meaning in our lives?” Someone recently said to me that, in her view, humanism is appealing for its rationality, but it's a hard road. She said that the world is just easier if you believe that someone is out there making decisions for you and taking care of you. I agreed with her – I do think it is easier to go through life that way – but that isn't a proof for the existence of God so much as proof that people are lazy. I have never had an interest in suspending my questioning, even tough questions like: Why is there so much suffering? Why do so many act so selfishly? How can we make change in the face of big challenges? These are the questions that drive my passion

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– be it for social justice, for the need to connect with others, or for purpose in my personal and professional life. To defer to a deity our responsibility to seek answers to these questions is to shortchange ourselves of the chance to find the meaning that comes from attempting to answer the questions and challenges of our day. We look around and see the work that must be done and we ask: *what can we do?* We look around and see the beauty, joy, and humor around us and ask: *what of this defines me, sustains me, and makes me fully who I am?*

My present is fueled and charged by this type of questioning. I have been inspired by researching and delivering a program on Maurice Sendak as a story of transformation on Yom Kippur. Our teens at Oraynu recently interviewed a Holocaust survivor named Brancha, who is a member of our congregation, and forged intergenerational links as they worked together to tell her story. I watched the teens at the SHJ youth conclave struggle and engage with the questions of our present moment – from politics to Jewish identity to finding a balance between popular and intellectual aspects of life. I celebrated Tu B'Shevat at my home with Oraynu's young adult members, discussing poetry, nature, environmental justice, and storytelling. My present is continually being renewed and redefined through such experiences.

Of our future, we ask questions of hope: What do we hope for ourselves, our community, our movement? What future moments can we imagine? How many will be in our community or congregation, and in what kind of space? How have we changed, and how have we changed the lives of others?

When I teach, I tell my students on the first day: This course, the texts in it, each film or speaker, are all designed to challenge and change you. If you are the same at the end of this course as you are right now, this will have been a waste of time and energy.

That is also my approach to every service, every holiday, every educational opportunity. Humanistic Jews believe in evolution – we evolve through challenges to and the engagement of our head, heart, and our hands. For the head, we look for that which stimulates our intellect; for the heart, we seek the meaning that comes from heightened emotion; for our hands, we hold to the belief that we have the capacity to build the institutions and communities that create the kind of world we want.

The questions we ask of our past, present, and future, and the answers we find to those questions – driven by our passion, our sense of purpose, and our perception of truth – lend meaning to life. These have been a few of my questions, my moments on my way to ordination. As a rabbi, it is a privilege and a pleasure to be on a journey with the broader community – Oraynu and our whole movement, including all of you. I am proud of our past, stimulated by where we are at the present, and very hopeful for our future. For me as a rabbi, and for all of us in the common community of Humanistic Jews, I believe, as Einstein says, that though we never know where we're going to end up or how we're going to get there, "the important thing is not to stop questioning."

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# The Prophetic Tradition: Is it Ours? by Bennett Muraskin

The American Jewish historian Morris Schappes, longtime editor of the magazine *Jewish Currents*, once wrote:

There are . . . two traditions in Jewish life and history. There is the tradition of the Hebrew prophets and the tradition of those who stoned the prophets. . . . We progressive Jewish secularists lay claim to the Prophetic tradition of challenging tyranny, poverty, oppression and war. Secularism without social action . . . is too thin for survival. We see this social action as based, in its broadest terms, on the social program of the Prophets, whom we abandon at our peril.<sup>1</sup>

Schappes' view was shared by a wide variety of Jewish liberals and leftists, including the leadership of the Reform and Reconstructionist movements, and to a large extent still is. Irving Howe, the Jewish socialist who wrote *World of Our Fathers* and edited *Dissent* magazine, was one of the few who struck a skeptical note:

During the 1960s, some Jewish leftists tried to ground their politics in the "prophetic tradition" with the hope of thereby staking out a claim to Jewish legitimacy. These efforts ignored the complex diversity of Jewish history since the Diaspora, as indeed before then. With enough wrenching one could find "ancestors" in the Jewish past for almost any opinion.<sup>2</sup>

Well, who was right?

The prophets were definitely not revolutionaries. They did not seek to overturn the monarchy or the priesthood. (The prophet Ezekiel was himself a priest.) The prophets exhorted kings and priests and others among the Jewish elite to be righteous, but they did not preach among the poor or call for social protest.

Were they then at least reformers? Not that either, because reformers appeal to the public for support to achieve their desired change. The prophets appealed only to the ruling and upper classes. As Michael Walzer, a liberal political philosopher, observes, "They are not agitators in the modern sense. They don't aim to create a political or social movement; they make no effort to organize their audience."<sup>3</sup>

Unlike revolutionaries and reformers, the prophets lacked a coherent program for a better society. To be sure, they condemned excessive concentration of wealth and the oppression of the poor, but they were utopians. In their mythical past every man lived "beneath his vine and fig tree," as a subsistence farmer or shepherd. Cities and the social and commercial activities that typically develop within urban centers are depicted as sources of corruption.

Prophetic thinking was not rational. Convinced that they were instruments of God's will, the prophets left no room for disagreement or debate, for how could anyone question God? Furthermore, the consequences attributed to not following their appeals were a host of harsh collective punishments, including war, famine, devastation, death, and ultimately the destruction of the Temple in Jerusalem, foreign conquest, and exile. Jeremiah, for example, prophesied against what he considered pagan religious practices within the Kingdom of Judah. He was hated by the priests for this and punished and nearly killed by kings for predicting and then welcoming the Babylo-

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**Bennett Muraskin**, a frequent contributor to this journal, is the adult education chair of the Jewish Cultural School and Society of North Jersey. He is the author of *Humanist Readings in Jewish Folklore* (which is available from the Society for Humanistic Judaism, [www.shj.org](http://www.shj.org)) and of *Let Justice Well Up Like Water*. He is a union representative for higher education faculty and other professionals in New Jersey.

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nian invasion that destroyed the Temple and resulted in the exile of thousands of Jews. After the conquest, he preached submission to Babylonian rule and actively collaborated with the occupying power.

The prophets were not practical men, and their diplomatic skills left much to be desired. With Jerusalem besieged by Assyria, Isaiah counseled against seeking help from Egypt on the grounds that only God could save the day. In fact most of the prophets were isolationists, fearing any foreign alliances or influences. As Avishai Margalit, an Israeli political philosopher, has written, “The prophets . . . condemned Israel’s defense treaties with Egypt and Assyria, both superpowers at the time, by which the Jews . . . bought defense in return for accepting political subjugation and paying taxes. For the prophets, such treaties sinfully violated the true exclusivity of God, who must be the sole source of providing protection to Israel.”<sup>4</sup>

Many on the Jewish left invoke the prophets as advocates for social justice. However, a careful analysis shows that they did not challenge the ruling elite. Their targets were those individuals within the elite who acted unjustly toward the poor. If only the rich and powerful would stop committing these evil deeds, all would be well. If not, the prophets did not foresee social unrest or civil war, but divine wrath that would indiscriminately strike the entire society, including the oppressed. Micah (3:12) declares in no uncertain terms that because of the sins of the high and mighty, “Zion shall be plowed as a field and Jerusalem shall become a heap of ruins.” As Michael Walzer asserts, “[The Prophets] seem to accept . . . that Zion being plowed under and Jerusalem in ruins represent a just response to oppression and corruption.”<sup>5</sup>

Only for the prophet Amos is social justice a top priority. It is in Amos 5:24 that we find the poetic phrase “Let justice well up like water, righteousness like a mighty stream,” which was adopted by Martin Luther King and other American civil rights leaders. Amos is also the only prophet to declare that Jews may not be any

better than any other people in God’s eyes and that God will punish Jews and non-Jews alike for their transgressions. However, Amos does not hold out any hope that the Israelites will repent. Rather he predicts that God will send a foreign nation to exact his judgment by destroying the kingdom of Israel.<sup>6</sup> For this reason (*not* his condemnation of social injustice), the Israelite High Priest orders him expelled back to Judah.

Isaiah (which may have had two or three authors) may well be the most appealing prophetic book. In the oft-quoted chapter 58, verses 5-8, Isaiah reaches poetic heights:

Is it such a fast that I have chosen? a day for a man to afflict his soul? is it to bow down his head as a bulrush, and to spread sackcloth and ashes under him? . . .

Is not this the fast that I have chosen? to loose the bands of wickedness, to undo the heavy burdens, and to let the oppressed go free, and that ye break every yoke?

Is it not to deal thy bread to the hungry, and that thou bring the poor that are cast out to thy house? when thou seest the naked, that thou cover him; and that thou hide not thyself from thine own flesh?

Then shall thy light break forth as the morning, and thine health shall spring forth speedily: and thy righteousness shall go before thee; the glory of the Lord shall be thy reward.

Only in Isaiah (11:6) do we read of the great day when the wolf will dwell with the lamb, the leopard will lie down with the kid, and the calf with the young lion. Isaiah (2:4) is also where swords are famously beat into plowshares so that “nation will not lift up sword against nation and never again will they learn war.” The same message of universal lasting peace is repeated in Micah (4:3). Micah (6:8) is the source of another lofty passage: “And what does the Lord require of you but to do justice, to love mercy and walk humbly with your God.” But occasionally one prophet contradicts another. In Joel 4:10, plowshares are beaten into swords and war is celebrated. Even Isaiah is capable of blood- curdling threats:

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The Lord has sent a message against Jacob; it will fall on Israel. . . . Therefore the Lord will take no pleasure in the young men, nor will he pity the fatherless and widows, for everyone is ungodly and wicked, every mouth speaks folly. . . . Surely wickedness burns like a fire. . . .

By the wrath of the Lord Almighty the land will be scorched and the people will be fuel for the fire; they will not spare one another. On the right they will devour, but still be hungry; on the left they will eat, but not be satisfied. Each will feed on the flesh of their own offspring. . . . Yet for all this, his anger is not turned away, his hand is still upraised (9:7-21).

The rhetoric is grand, but the message is gruesome.

At best, the prophets can be recognized for “speaking truth to power.” Their “truth,” however, was not primarily a message of social justice, but of religious conformity. The great majority of the prophetic writings are directed against the perceived threat of worshiping other gods and practicing idolatry. Essentially, the prophets railed against what today we would consider religious pluralism. Their call for social justice comes in a distant second. Yet, as Sherwin Wine said, progressive or liberal Jews “choose only to notice the . . . verses that denounce the exploitation of the poor and conveniently fail to notice the . . . verses that predict the cruel and inhuman destruction of opponents and enemies. To read the Prophets is to wade through blood, gore and supernatural visions, before finding the few nuggets of humanitarian sentiment.”<sup>7</sup>

Contrary to Schappes, there is not one case in the Hebrew Bible in which a prophet is stoned. That occurs in the New Testament, where Jews are depicted stoning Christian prophets. This leads me to believe that Schappes never read the prophets, relying rather on secondary sources that quote them out of context. I expect most progressive Jews who invoke the prophets do the same.

For all their posturing, there are not many cases where the prophets directly confront kings or priests over their abuse of power. The two

best known instances do not come from any of the prophetic books but involve prophets mentioned elsewhere in the Bible. In 2 Samuel 11, Nathan reprimands King David for sending Uriah the Hittite to be killed in battle so that he can take his wife Bathsheba. In 1 Kings 21, Elijah rebukes King Ahab for having a landowner killed so he can seize his property. These are indeed remarkable instances of speaking truth to power in a just cause. But Elijah has a much darker side. He is responsible for the massacre of 450 priests of the god Baal (1 Kings 18:22-40) and 102 Moabite soldiers (2 Kings 1:10-14).

There are superior examples of “speaking truth to power” in the Bible. It is Abraham at Sodom who challenges God not to “sweep away the innocent along with the guilty” (Gen. 18-23). It is Moses, after the Golden Calf incident, who convinces God not to wipe out the entire Jewish people (Ex. 32:10-14). The Book of Job is a searing indictment of God’s injustice. There is one prophetic book, Habakkuk, with the same message. Habakkuk is the only prophet who questions God’s conduct and demands that he act justly, yet he is never cited by progressive Jews. These figures ascend head and shoulders over the other prophets in “speaking truth to power” because they do so in defense of human dignity.

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup>Schappes, Morris. “Social Action for Survival.” In Judith Seid (Ed.), *Understanding Secular Humanistic Judaism* (1990), p. 43.

<sup>2</sup>Howe, Irving. *World of Our Fathers* (Harcourt Brace, 1976), p. 623.

<sup>3</sup>Michael Walzer in Michael Walzer, Menachem Lorberbaum, Noam J. Zohar, & Yair Loberbaum (Eds.), *The Jewish Political Tradition, Vol. 1: Authority* (Yale University Press, 2000), p. 217.

<sup>4</sup>Margalit, Avishai. “After Strange Gods.” *New York Review of Books*, October 9, 2003, p. 30.

<sup>5</sup>Michael Walzer, *op. cit.*, p. 219.

<sup>6</sup>See Amos 5:26-27, 7:10-15.

<sup>7</sup>Wine, Sherwin. *Judaism Beyond God* (Society for Humanistic Judaism, 1985), p. 204.



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# A Celebration of Maurice Sendak

by Rabbi Jodi Kornfeld

Maurice Sendak, an American writer and illustrator of children's books, has been chosen as this year's Society for Humanistic Judaism Humanistic Jewish Role Model. Throughout the year, Humanistic communities across North America will celebrate his life and work.

Maurice Sendak was born June 10, 1928, in Brooklyn, and died May 8, 2012. The youngest of three children in an immigrant family, he was a sickly child, forced to remain alone indoors, and he developed the desire to be an illustrator. His personal hero was Mickey Mouse.

Sendak's childhood thoughts were dominated by the Holocaust in Europe. His mother constantly reminded him that he was lucky to be alive while so many others perished. He lost family in the Holocaust and strove in his art to pay respect to them. His illustrations for Isaac Bashevis Singer's *Zlateh the Goat and Other Stories* are based on the photographs of relatives who died; in this way Sendak was able to preserve their memory. Sendak said, "It seems to me that my entire life has been devoted to bringing back, to revivifying, those lost loved souls and to telling children the truth to the best of my ability." He also said, "I cry a lot because I miss people. They die, and I can't stop them. They leave me, and I love them more."

Sendak never had children of his own. He enjoyed a half-century relationship with his partner Eugene Glynn.

Sendak received the Caldecott Medal for *Wild Things* in 1964; the 1983 Laura Ingalls Wilder Award; the 1998 Jewish Cultural Achievement Award; and the 2003 Astrid Lindgren Memorial Award. He received the Medal of Arts from President Clinton in 1996. Yet, despite these accolades, Sendak's books are among those most often sought to be banned in public libraries, as many critics consider his works inappropriate for children because they are "disturbing"

or "dark." Sendak merely tried to treat children with dignity and respect. He firmly believed that children deserve to be told the truth, although in a language and medium they can understand. Sendak never shied away from controversial subjects, much to the delight of his young audiences. He created worlds in which the joyful is juxtaposed with the terrible, the celebratory with the tragic, the delightful with the frightful. As Rahel Musleah wrote, "The fantasy world that Sendak endlessly recreates brims with the wild and scary, with raw honesty and vulnerability and, ultimately, with a measure of peace and hope. It also overflows with a Jewish spirit, its core pierced by the horror of the Holocaust."\*

Whether in *Where the Wild Things Are*, *In the Night Kitchen*, or *Brundibar*, Sendak takes his child protagonists through frightening escapades only to have them land safely back home. Though the Jewish experience often has not had such happy endings, it is a very Jewish journey to overcome life's obstacles and persevere with resilience. In describing his purpose, Sendak said, "Art has always been my salvation. And my gods are Herman Melville, Emily Dickinson, Mozart. I believe in them with all my heart. And when Mozart is playing in my room, I am in conjunction with something I can't explain – I don't need to. I know that if there's a purpose for life, it was for me to hear Mozart. Or if I walk in the woods and I see an animal, the purpose of my life was to see that animal. I can recollect it, I can notice it. I'm here to take note of it. And that is beyond my ego, beyond anything that belongs to me, an observer."

Maurice Sendak reminds us to take notice of what's around us, to accept the darkness with the light, and to ride out whatever journey we are on. It is a very human message.

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**Rabbi Jodi Kornfeld** is rabbi of Beth Chaverim Humanistic Jewish Community in Highland Park, IL.

\*Musleah, R. "The Call of the Wild." *Hadassah Magazine*, February 2004.

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# Free Will: Illusion or Reality?

by Bertram H. Rothschild

The concept of free will has been with us perhaps from the beginning of human consciousness. We love the notion of a capacity to choose independently between this and that; our egos demand freedom, freedom of choice. It seems so obvious that we have free will, just as it once seemed obvious that the sun rotated around the earth. Yet, philosophers who have examined the question of the existence of free will have reached no satisfactory conclusion. There is *no* evidence for free will, but there can be no way of conclusively establishing that it does not exist; it is impossible to prove a negative. Thus, free will remains an assertion, a conjecture. We sense it but cannot demonstrate it.

More than one hundred years ago, a French philosopher stated that if there were no free will we would have to invent it. Although the concept of will, like that of the soul, has no standing in the scientific exploration of human behavior, it remains embedded in our legal system, in religion, and in everyday parlance. It is hard to imagine a society without it. It is the primary basis for assigning blame and justifying punishment. Western religions have pushed the notion as a way of sorting out the virtuous from the sinners. People are assumed to be independent choosers, and if they make the wrong choice, off to Hell (or its equivalent)!

What is this “will” that is modified by the adjective *free*? The will is a supposed mental trait that determines how we will direct efforts in our lives. “Which way will you go?” “How will you accomplish that?” “What will you do?” What people mean by *will* is purposive, directed thinking or behavior aimed toward a particular goal or solution. Our task in life is to choose, among the myriad opportunities and demands, the direction that best suits us. Remember the old Jack Benny joke? Confronted by a burglar who demanded his money or his

life, he pondered. The burglar insisted upon a response, whereupon the miserly Benny replied, “I’m thinking.”

What is the significance of *free* in the construction *free will*? Free of what? What is it that might bind or control our will? One kind of unfree will is thought to be controlled by coercion – a Hobson’s choice, which offers no real choice at all. Yet, people do choose death over dishonor or die in service of a higher cause, as martyrs have done. The other kind of unfree will is more subtle, a function of forgotten life events and unknowable genetic dispositions. When we choose, we do so in an aura of freedom, but we are essentially incapable of knowing the basis of our choice.

Notice that free will must always be conscious. It is hard to imagine how we could choose while unconscious or with diminished mental capacity. How can a will be free if it is influenced or controlled by unconscious forces? *Unconscious* has two meanings. One describes persons in a coma, who lack any ability to communicate and very likely any capacity to think or make decisions. The other meaning is lack of awareness of forces that influence our decisions. In one study, customers seeking to purchase a car were seated either on a hard chair or a soft one. The original price was purposely set too high, and they were asked to make a counter-offer. Those on the hard chair averaged about \$300 less than those on the soft chair. Both groups believed they had exercised free will and had no idea what determined the amount they offered.

Another example: Social scientists have found that college football games help decide

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**Bertram H. Rothschild, Ph.D.** (deceased), was a member of Beth Ami, Colorado Congregation for Humanistic Judaism in Denver, and a frequent contributor to this journal.

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the outcome of elections. If the home team triumphs, more people are likely to vote for the incumbent, enough so that in a close election the incumbent wins. Of course, the voters insist they exercised free will in choosing. Think of the voters who choose based upon how the candidate looks or sounds. These look like free choices, but what is it that leads up to the choice? How does a person choose one candidate or course of action over another?

Behavior has two sources: genetics and learning. Science has lately informed us that much of our behavior is a function of our physical inheritance; we do what our genes “tell” us to do, though we do not know it. From birth, we are genetically different from all others with the exception of identical twins. I like salty, oily foods, such as mayonnaise, potato chips, hot dogs, and salami; others avoid them. Yet I have learned from my doctors and from sad experience that eating such foods in copious amounts is very bad for me, so I choose to refrain from ingesting them. What is the basis of my choice? Is it free will? When I think about it, I realize that I do not want to be fat. I also recall that my mother was angry with my once-fat father. I grew up knowing that fat was a social disaster. But *why* don’t I want to be fat? Why do I care about social approval? Why do I care about my mother’s anger? The questions pile up; when I think about how my history determines my *now*, I have to accept my ignorance.

Much of our understanding of life depends upon learnings no longer in our consciousness. A woman complained that she could not be without a man even for a night. When her husband had to be away, she always found some male to share her bed. She hated herself for her infidelity and had no clue as to why she behaved that way. After much work, she and her therapist discovered that she was terrified of being lesbian because she believed she would wind up in Hell. A man’s presence was “proof” that she was straight. The hows, whys and whens of the development of such ideas were painfully teased out over hours of therapy. Such cases tell us that without knowledge of the forces impinging on “free will,” it has no meaning, and those forces – genetic

dispositions and hidden learnings – are always with us.

Scientists using very sensitive instruments can observe the brain making decisions. By their laboratory wizardry, they can tell when a decision is reached, sometimes as long as eight seconds before the person making the decision knows it. How can a person be responsible for what her brain decides before she knows it? And yet, our legal system relies on an assumption of free will. When people do socially wrong things, society feels the need to assign blame and provide appropriate punishment. We send offenders to jails and penitentiaries in the hope that they will change their ways, learn that they cannot get away with antisocial behavior. Sometimes we kill them if the crime is heinous and the defense can find no mitigation. (Interestingly, mitigation often focuses on unconscious motives leading to the crime.) Such punishments are pure retaliation. We want revenge for nefarious acts of imputed free will.

There is also moral blame, which is the province of religion. The sinner is tainted with evil, and unless the evil is eliminated, off to Hell! During the Middle Ages, there were two legal systems: the standard jurisprudence that sought to identify and reform criminals and the religious system, which sought to drive out evil.

If there is no free will – if blaming malefactors for their behavior is foolish – how shall we cope with them? We cannot let them run free and do harm; we must restrain them. But, considering the vast amount of resources devoted to punishment and retaliation, perhaps we might refocus on how to transform them. That raises an interesting dilemma. Suppose a murderer were rehabilitated so he is no more likely to murder than the average citizen. Should he be executed or jailed, or should he be set free?

Rehabilitation programs raise a more fundamental question: if free will is an illusion, is change possible? Are we nothing but robots predestined to act in specific ways? Of course

not. We are persistently engaged with reality, exposed to contrary ideas, challenged by opposing beliefs, and guided to “better” ways of life. Whole societies make profound shifts, for example, from slavery to freedom, based on a significant number of individuals changing their minds. The Garden of Eden story tells us that humans are not satisfied with the status quo, that by nature we are impelled to trade comfort for reality. Throughout the world and throughout history humans have tried to make things better, through clothing, adornment, body esthetics, or discovery and transformation of the environment. Homo sapiens left Africa and populated the earth, perhaps in search of more hospitable lands or perhaps just out of wanderlust. We seek the novel; the status quo is never good enough. With the earth heavily populated, we reach out to the heavens.

So, we can learn new ideas and perspectives – but only within the parameters of our historical and genetic capacity. Science is an

enterprise in which people aim to confirm their concepts of reality or discover new ones, and to do this as objectively as possible. Boyle’s law concerning the inverse relationship between the volume and pressure of a gas is inflexible; the earth travels around the sun, and not vice versa. Such findings collide with previously unexamined ideas, and the result is transformation. Yet, despite the scientific consensus about climate change, many people deny it. Our unfree will makes it hard to accept new ideas.

What would be the consequences of giving up belief in free will? Abandoning that delusion would mean that we could no longer assign moral blame. Blame, after all, is a way of expressing moral superiority over others. I do not mean that our legal system should stop identifying who did what and when and what the consequences should be, but self-congratulation would no longer inform our decisions. To rephrase an old saw, there but for chance go I.

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# A View from the Waiting Room

by Marla Davishoff

As the mother of two boys with special needs, I have spent many hours during the past twelve years in waiting rooms. It isn't unusual for our family's weekly therapy hours to clock in at double digits. Most days I am fortunate to wait in the lobby with other moms. Many of these women are my dearest friends, my "sisters," so to speak.

Emily Perl Kingsley's "Welcome to Holland" is part of our first year initiation ritual. The poem describes how parents of kids with special needs thought they were taking a trip to Italy, where families not affected by disabilities live, but instead ended up in Holland, where special needs families reside. The author promises that one day parents of disabled kids will find the tulips in Holland and appreciate being Dutch. In other words, in time we will realize that Holland is not worse, just different from Italy.

During the first few years following a diagnosis many of us need to cling to that hope. At some point, though, reality sets in. After years of literally waiting, we realize that often the reward for hard work is simply more hard work. As our kids get older, different issues arise. Driving, housing, and employment concerns replace talking, walking, and reading.

With each passing year, we are more honest with ourselves and with each other about what the future holds. Resigned to living in the reality of Holland, we develop a deep connection with each other. We commiserate about our fights with schools and insurance companies, our fights with our parents and spouses and, perhaps most importantly, our fights with ourselves. We fret over whether we are doing everything we can for everyone we care for. Could any of this possibly be our fault?

Besides our emotional connection to each other, there is a great deal of companionship. Since many of us spend our days case manag-

ing our kids, the waiting room is often our only respite from the crisis we now call life. We knit, read, plan dinners, do our nails, celebrate birthdays, and even write essays, all in each other's company.

Recently one of the moms wondered aloud whether we ever would have become friends had it not been for our kids. The honest answer is no. Our paths never would have crossed. Our group includes an accountant, a professional clown, a lawyer, a landscape artist, a university professor, a social worker, a dentist, and a recovering addict. Our various backgrounds remind us that disabilities don't discriminate. We are all vulnerable. But we also recognize that the common thread that connects us is much stronger than any other stitch in our individual tapestries.

Although spending a lifetime walking in wooden clogs is more uncomfortable than Italian leather will ever be, my body grew callouses to endure the pain. But make no mistake: a day doesn't go by when I wouldn't jump at the opportunity to move to Italy. Yes, even if it meant saying goodbye to my Dutch friends.

When I first heard the adage "There are friends for a reason, friends for a season, and friends for a lifetime," I didn't recognize the value of having friends for a reason. But it is not just a job raising children with special needs; it is an all-consuming lifestyle. And, as long as I continue to spend many of my waking hours in lobbies, I am fortunate beyond words to have other Dutch women sitting on the commercial grade couches and vinyl chairs with me so I don't have to wait out this permanent detour in my life's journey all alone.

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**Marla Davishoff**, a licensed clinical social worker who lives with her husband and two sons in the Chicago suburbs, is a member of Kol Hadash Humanistic Congregation in Lincolnshire, IL. She has written for *Chicago Parent*, *North Shore*, *Special Parent*, and three anthologies: *The Elephant in the Playroom* (2007), *Special Gifts* (2007), and *Overcoming* (forthcoming).

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# ARTS/LITERATURE

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## Jewishness, Food, and Starving for Attention

by Marti Keller

The subject of Jewishness and food includes the issue of eating disorders, with several recent studies indicating a rise in the problem for Jewish women and girls. These disorders – anorexia nervosa, bulimia nervosa, and binge eating – affect the entire Jewish community, from the irreligious to the ultra-Orthodox. Mental health professionals point out that food is a central part of Jewish culture and is prepared in abundance for Shabbat and holiday meals. This focus on, even preoccupation with, food is said to exacerbate eating disorders for those who struggle with these syndromes. The first poem below was written shortly after I recovered from this mental illness in 1970. It was originally published in *Chomo-Uri* (Fall/Winter 1976). The second poem was written last year.

### Anorexia

Sometimes I remember those days  
with a dry horror at the passing of  
hours I had no share in living.  
My hips thrust out brittle and sharp,  
the splintered wood floor,  
stiff legs in a skeleton's gymnasium.

The bloated stomach, sunken cheeks,  
the cache of sugar cookies at midnight,  
the hard-boiled egg I made last all day  
against a gnawing hunger  
that went away after four months.

And me, light and giddy above this body,  
a lilt in my voice and my steps  
swift along the lethargic street.

The constant turquoise afternoons of those days  
that were mine and not yet mine and yet are  
mine often now  
in the push and weight of adult years,  
the slack and fat of peach brandy and French  
vanilla ice cream.

I remember sometimes the keen objectivity of  
madness:  
the crumbs beneath the pillow,  
the half-finished yolk,  
the summer chill.

### Television Anorexic

There's a thin silver ring piercing  
Her navel.  
Other than that her belly could have been  
Mine  
with pale rolls of slack skin  
We both mistook for fat,  
for shame.

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**Marti Keller**, a Unitarian/Universalist minister, is a member of the Board of Directors of the Society for Humanistic Judaism. She co-edited *Jewish Voices in Unitarian Universalism* (2014).

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