



# HUMANISTIC JUDAISM

Volume XXXII Number 1-2  
Winter/Spring 2014

## CELEBRATING HUMANISTIC JUDAISM'S FIRST FIFTY YEARS

Rabbi Adam Chalom  
Mark H. Cousens  
Rabbi Jeffrey L. Falick  
Ruth Duskin Feldman  
Leora Cookie Hatchwell  
Rabbi Miriam Jerris

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Wisdom from Wine:  
The Reason for Our Existence

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American Jewry: Three Studies

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a review of a biography of Sholem Aleichem

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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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# FOCUS

This issue of *Humanistic Judaism* celebrates a very special milestone: the first fifty years of the movement. Half a century after its founding by Rabbi Sherwin T. Wine, this fifth branch of Judaism is alive and well and thriving, across North America and abroad.

This issue includes highlights of the celebratory events that took place November 15 and 16, 2013, at the Birmingham Temple in suburban Detroit. Also among the contents of this issue are a synopsis of how the movement grew and spread; predictions as to its future; an analysis of three studies of the secularization of American Jewry; and a review of the life of Sholem Aleichem.

– R.D.F.

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# BRIEFLY SPEAKING

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## SHJ Joins Amicus Brief Supporting Contraception Coverage for Female Employees

The Society for Humanistic Judaism (SHJ) has joined a broad spectrum of secular and religious organizations in an amicus brief in the cases of *Sebelius v. Hobby Lobby* and *Sebelius v. Conestoga Wood Specialties*, in support of women's right to contraceptive care under the Affordable Care Act. The U.S. Supreme Court heard the case on March 25. A decision is expected in June.

The plaintiffs (*Hobby Lobby et al.*) argue that the Religious Freedom Restoration Act (RFRA) exempts them from the requirement that for-profit employers who choose to offer health insurance include coverage for contraception. The amicus brief argues that such an interpretation would allow employers to impose their own religious beliefs on employees, thereby undermining the employees' free exercise of religion. A ruling for the plaintiffs would limit an employee's right to make many personal decisions with which their employer disagrees, such as the decision to have an abortion, to use in-vitro fertilization, to marry a person of the same sex, to have a child as a single woman, to have a blood transfusion, or to donate to stem-cell research.

The SHJ also joined more than forty fellow member organizations of the Coalition for Liberty & Justice (CLJ) in a statement denouncing discrimination and supporting religious liberty for all. "We represent a diverse cross-section of communities, including faith-based and secular groups as well as those dedicated to LGBT rights, women's rights, separation of church and state, civil rights, and sexual and reproductive health, rights and justice," the statement reads in part. "We are united in our belief that public policies should both respect religious liberty and protect against the use of religious beliefs to discriminate or undermine equality. . . . We therefore strongly support the rights of female workers and their dependents to follow their consciences, moral codes and beliefs when making a decision about contraception and oppose the plaintiffs' attempts to interfere in this personal decision-making."

Humanistic Jews affirm that all people have the fundamental right to determine the course of their own lives. Contraceptive choice is one of the many components of this personal freedom. "A woman's ability to access contraception shouldn't depend on where she works or on the beliefs of her boss or of the company's owners," said the Society's Executive Director, Bonnie Cousens. "We ask the Supreme Court to recognize the danger inherent in bowing to particular religious beliefs as the basis for legislation or for public policies regarding reproductive health care. No individual or company should be able to use their personal religious views or beliefs as justification for curtailing others' access to necessary and legal health care."

## SHJ Joins Amicus Brief Defending Hate Crimes Prevention Act

The Society for Humanistic Judaism (SHJ) joined the Anti-Defamation League, the Leadership Conference on Civil and Human Rights, and thirty-seven other civil rights, religious, law enforcement, LGBT, educational, and professional organizations in filing an amicus brief in *U.S. v. Miller*. The brief urges the Sixth Circuit Court of Appeals to uphold the Hate Crimes Prevention Act (HCPA) and to affirm that the act applies to cases in which religiously motivated violence involves victims and perpetrators who share the same faith. The defendants in the case were convicted of targeting their victims, members of the Old Order Amish faith, because they had "strayed from the true path and needed to be chastened or corrected."

At sentencing, Judge Dan Aaron Polster stated: "Anyone who says this is just a hair and beard cutting case wasn't paying attention. These victims were terrorized and traumatized. Some of them were ambushed in their own homes. Others were lured out through lies and deceptions. . . . [H]air and beards have special religious and emotional significance for Amish men and women. . . . [T]hat is why these attacks were perpetrated. They were calculated to inflict the maximum emotional trauma and distress on victims, and that's what they did. . . . [The victims] are bearing the emotional scars and probably will for the rest of their lives."

**Briefly Speaking continued on page 46**

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# HJ FORUM: Celebrating Humanistic Judaism's First Fifty Years

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## Humanistic Judaism and the Birmingham Temple: In the Beginning by Mark H. Cousens

The parking lot was the last straw. The Birmingham Temple might not have been founded if the Board of Directors of Temple Beth El had not decided to pave Beth El's parking lot. The repaved parking lot meant that Beth El was not going to move to the suburbs. As a result, several disaffected members, tired of the trek from Southfield or Oak Park or West Bloomfield to Woodward and Gladstone, decided to explore alternatives. The alternative for some of them was a new temple. The organization was not to be a radical departure from the status quo. But the group did want an institution where members could ask questions and get answers; a place where there would be no sacred cows. What the group got became much more than that. It became Humanistic Judaism.

Fifty years later, the Birmingham Temple and Humanistic Judaism offer thousands of Jews the opportunity to celebrate their attachment to a cultural and historic Judaism; the chance to maintain a Jewish identity in which the existence of a supreme being is an irrelevancy. With the support of the Society for Humanistic Judaism, which was formed to link the Birmingham Temple with other Hu-

manistic Jews, congregations and communities throughout North America and abroad connect their members with a Judaism that they might otherwise abandon.

None of that could be foreseen fifty years ago. The Birmingham Temple was founded by people who were simply seeking a suburban alternative to Temple Beth El. They were not radicals, not planning to abandon Reform Judaism. They were initially motivated by geography. Later, they were attracted by the small size of the new temple. Most of the original families wanted a smaller, more personal institution, one less committed to status. No one expected the new temple to experiment with ritual or philosophy.

Yet, less than a year after its founding, the Birmingham Temple had evolved from a mainstream Reform congregation into something

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**Mark H. Cousens**, a union-side labor attorney and amateur historian, was a member of the executive committee and president of the Birmingham Temple. This article is excerpted from the forthcoming *The Birmingham Temple and the Creation of Humanistic Judaism* by Mark H. Cousens, to be published by the Society for Humanistic Judaism. All rights are reserved.

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no one had ever seen before: a secular Jewish society within the structure of a traditional Jewish congregation. This change was not without consequences. There were many who could not tolerate so dramatic a departure from the norm. They left. But they were replaced by others who liked what they saw. Those who stayed endured controversy, crisis, and, in many cases, the criticism of family, friends, and, indeed, total strangers. But they remained loyal to an ideal when remaining loyal was most difficult.

These early members were pioneers in the best sense of the word. They were not afraid to try new ideas and to subject those ideas to criticism and controversy. The founders of the Birmingham Temple taught us that we could consider, modify, and revise without fear. They taught us that we could – indeed, must – continue to learn, that there are no absolutes.

Those of us who are active in the Humanistic Jewish movement today must remain grateful for these lessons. And it is important that present members of the Birmingham Temple remember those who endured that stress and built what is now a worldwide movement.

\* \* \*

The origins of the Birmingham Temple date to the late summer of 1963. Sometime in early August – the date is uncertain – Suzanne Velick, a former member of Temple Beth El, received a call from Dick Laurie. Laurie, a Beth El member, discussed his displeasure with Beth El and its rabbi, Richard Hertz. Laurie explained that he was considering forming a new temple. Velick remembered Rabbi Sherwin Wine from his service as advisor to the Beth El Young Married group. She suggested calling him – he was now rabbi at Temple Beth El of Windsor, Ontario – for advice. Velick called Wine and asked whether he thought there was room for another Reform temple in the Detroit area. He said he was certain that there was. She then asked Wine whether he would attend a meeting to discuss the potential for creating a new temple. Rabbi Wine agreed.

On August 21, 1963, about fifteen couples attended a meeting at the Oak Park home of Lois and Dick Laurie. Little was accomplished; the meeting was dominated by complaints about Rabbi Hertz and the location of Beth El, ranging from the lack of adequate parking to the temple's refusal to move its Sunday school to the suburbs. Most people at that meeting wanted to frighten the Beth El leadership. Few were actively interested in forming a new temple.

But eight couples were not satisfied to leave the discussion there. They had no interest in simply improving Beth El. They were committed to establishing a new temple. On August 28, 1963, a week after the first meeting, these eight couples – Sue and Harry Velick, Stuart and Doreen Velick, Bunny and Merrill Miller, Steve and Elaine Fish, Gil and Baily Franklin, Joel and Lisa Hepner, Marge and Bill Sandy, and Ted and Mary Ann Simon – met with Rabbi Wine at the Velick home in Oak Park to discuss forming a new congregation. All wanted something fresh. By contrast to Beth El, where there were certain questions that were not asked (and were not answered), everything would be subject to inquiry.

Still, despite its unconventional beginning, the new organization was to be a standard suburban Reform temple. Ideology was not discussed at this meeting (or for some time to come). No one proposed anything radical. The organization was to be different primarily in location and size. It was to serve the needs of those living north of Eight Mile Road. And the eight families wanted a small congregation in which all members would participate. Everyone would be responsible for something.

Rabbi Wine suggested that a geographic name would best identify the organization, and because the group anticipated that it would some day wind up in the Birmingham area, the new congregation became “The Birmingham Temple.”

The first service took place on Sunday, September 15, 1963. About eighty people attended – a very good turnout. The service was



fairly short. The Union prayer book was used, with standard Reform prayers including theistic language. Lisa Hepner, the temple's first music director, rehearsed a choir.

The service was a success and was followed by a regular service each Sunday with Rabbi Wine as leader. Sunday services were necessary because Wine remained committed to his congregation in Windsor and conducted services there on Friday. But Rabbi Wine saw more than a little potential in the Birmingham Temple. He soon notified the Windsor congregation that he would leave at the end of June, 1964, to lead the new Birmingham Temple.

The structure of the temple was evolving. The group had exceeded its initial goal of thirty-five members. It was time to formalize the organization. The leadership decided to hold an official congregational meeting to elect officers and begin the process of adopting a constitution.

The meeting would also declare that the temple was permanent. The meeting was held at Eagle School on Sunday, November 17, 1963, after the regular service. A constitution was proposed (but not formally adopted until spring). Harry Velick was elected president along with four other officers and sixteen trustees. The election signaled the formal beginning of the Birmingham Temple, and, ultimately, the Humanistic Jewish movement.

The Birmingham Temple finished 1963 with a rabbi, about forty members, \$1,134 in the bank, and a commitment to a future. Although no one could foresee what that future would bring, this pioneering group knew that it would be exciting and challenging, and that the temple would make a significant contribution to the Jewish community. Ahead was a year of controversy and testing – of members who could not tolerate criticism from the wider community and members who could. But that was to come. For now, these pioneers had a temple.



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# The Birmingham Temple: Our *Shammes* by Rabbi Adam Chalom

Why would a congregation devoted to reason, science, learning, wisdom, and the best of Jewish and human experience construct a building in Michigan with a flat roof?

I have a long history with the Birmingham Temple. My baby naming occurred in what is now Rabbi Jeffrey Falick's office; my Bar Mitzvah, Confirmation, and wedding took place on the temple's *bima*, and I was ordained as a rabbi in its family room. I served the temple as a rabbinic intern, then assistant rabbi, and then rabbi. But I never understood the flat roof until I began to give the building tour.

Why a flat roof? It has to do with the philosophy of the community. The rabbis of the Talmud condemned anyone who would call a *beit kneset*, or synagogue, a *beit am* – a house of people.<sup>1</sup> But that's exactly what the Birmingham Temple was designed to be – a house for people.

Look at the architecture of the meeting room. The *bima* is not far removed the audience; it is not on a higher plane. The sight lines are not designed to draw our eyes up, above and beyond, but to focus attention on the human realm, on each other and on this world. The central image is not a Torah in an ark with an "eternal" light (which has to be changed when it burns out) but on the word *adam* ("humanity"), with light shining from within. The Torah scroll is in the library along with the other books, though you cannot check it out.

A congregation is more than a building. It is people and place and time and leadership and ideas and events. It is the sum total of human activity and emotion that has made up the past fifty years. There has been terrible

sadness, there has been great excitement: the entire gamut of the human experience. If we look back to know from where we came, it is to see better where we may go tomorrow.

The place? Metropolitan Detroit. The suburbs were growing and Jewish residents were on the move. The time? The early 1960s, when provocative ideas were beginning to spread. (You may recall a *Time* magazine cover in 1966 that asked, "Is God Dead?") The people? A few young Jewish couples who wanted a suburban Reform temple for themselves and their children. When Temple Beth El paving its parking lot – a sign that it was not going to move to the suburbs – these families held a meeting. And they probably would have wound up with a nice little suburban Reform temple, had it not been for a leader and his ideas.

The story of the Birmingham Temple is inseparable from the story of Sherwin Wine; it is the house that Sherwin built.<sup>2</sup> Born and raised in an intensely Jewish section of Detroit, he remembered vibrant Yiddish conversations, political arguments on the street, a profound experience of Jewish peoplehood. A brilliant thinker, he majored in philosophy at the University of Michigan and then went on to rabbinical school at the Reform seminary, Hebrew Union College. After serving as an army chaplain in Korea, he returned to Detroit and became an assistant rabbi at Temple Beth El, where he outshone the senior rabbi, who had not been consulted about Sherwin's being hired

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– a fact that did not improve their relationship. Sherwin never spoke truer words when he said, “I soon discovered that I was not disposed to be anybody’s assistant.”<sup>3</sup>

After leaving Beth El, where he officiated at the confirmation of my future mother, Susan Chalom (née Levitt), Sherwin founded a temple by the same name in Windsor, Ontario, where he officiated at the Bat Mitzvah of my future mother-in-law, Miriam Jerris (née Muroff). When the call came from some families in the Detroit suburbs who remembered him from his time at Beth El in that city, he was contemplating finishing his Ph.D. in philosophy and possibly leaving the active rabbinate entirely. As we now know, that turned out to be the road not traveled.<sup>4</sup>

\* \* \*

The first months of the Birmingham Temple’s formation were fascinating. There were long debates and discussions to explore new questions – not “What should Jews believe?” (as if there were one book that would tell you) but “What do I *really* believe? By what values and truths do I live my life?”

One belief Humanistic Jews share is a belief in evolution: biological evolution for all of life, and cultural evolution for Jewish life, even including our own movement. Sherwin did not create Humanistic Judaism from the dust of the ground and breathe life into it all by himself. The Birmingham Temple and Humanistic Judaism have evolved through various phases. Initially the services included elements of the traditional liturgy, and Bar and Bat Mitzvah students performed Torah readings. The term *God* was explained as representing the highest human aspirations. But even in that early phase, Sherwin may have had other plans. I once talked with a temple member who, after attending one of those services, told Sherwin, “I like where you’re going with this, but there’s still too much God involved.” Sherwin’s reply? “Give me six months.” When the congregation and its Ritual Committee decided to cut out that three letter word *G-O-D*, they made the full transition from “tradition because it’s tradi-

tion,” past Reconstructionism and its redefinitions, to a clear and consistent celebration of Jewish culture through the human experience.

Today, when I explain Humanistic Judaism, it seems very reasonable to most people. In a recent Pew study,<sup>5</sup> 62 percent of American Jews agreed that being Jewish is “mainly a matter of ancestry and culture” – not “religion,” not “both religion and culture,” but culture alone! And 68 percent said you don’t have to believe in God to be Jewish, so maybe that perennial question will finally go away. How can you be Jewish if you don’t believe in God? A quarter of us don’t!

In 1964, though, when the news came out that the Birmingham Temple had eliminated God from its liturgy, there was an explosion. Uproar in the community, huge attendance at services, strife at family dinners. Sherwin was called to the Michigan Board of Rabbis to be held to account. There was a newspaper reporter in attendance – perhaps the only time a meeting of the Michigan Board of Rabbis ever was attended by a reporter. When Sherwin was asked, “Are you an atheist?” he gave a nuanced answer to the effect that: “I don’t see positive evidence for or against a god. But if what you mean by ‘atheist’ is what is conventionally understood to be ‘atheist,’ then yes, I am an atheist.” The *Detroit Free Press* ran this non-nuanced headline: “Suburban Rabbi: ‘I am an Atheist.’”

There was tremendous controversy in the early years, but also explosive growth. Along with the tidal wave of rejection came messages of positive support – from *kibbutzim* in Israel, which already had been doing the kind of B’nai Mitzvah celebrations that the Birmingham Temple began to adopt, and from secular Jews, often Yiddishists, who found being honest with one’s “nonbelief” appealing. But they had a question for Sherwin: If you are not religious, why are you still calling yourself a rabbi? Of course, Sherwin got a similar complaint from the religious side: If you’re so secular, why are you calling yourself a rabbi? They accused him of “false advertising.” Actually, we have found the creative tension of being both secular and a

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religion, Humanist and Jewish, cultural and a congregation to be emblematic of the multiple identities we all have, though we may choose to emphasize one label or another at different moments in our lives.

Another often-asked question: why is the Birmingham Temple in Farmington Hills? The answer is, we could not foresee our future. When an opportunity arose to obtain a great piece of land in the unexplored wilderness of Farmington Township, we took it. The problem, we soon realized, was that we were known as “The Birmingham Temple,” and people found us under that name. Ten years ago, on the temple’s fortieth anniversary, I made a modest proposal. Perhaps we could resolve this ambiguity of the Birmingham Temple being in Farmington Hills. Maybe we could take the name *Beitenu* – “our home.” It has the “BT” sound of “the Birmingham Temple,” and maybe – no, no, no. You may remember the *tsuris* of a new melody for “Ayfo Oree”; just imagine trying to change the sign in front of the building.

\* \* \*

Many of the temple’s members, like its founders, came from conventional Reform or Conservative Jewish backgrounds, and a few from Orthodoxy, but those identities did not speak to the persons they had become. They went to college, they opened their eyes, they didn’t believe what they had been taught. Some, mainly Yiddishists and socialists, came from the secular Jewish world; others were unaffiliated or “just Jewish.” Some were Israelis or former Soviet Jews, like the indefatigable former temple custodian, Anton Opengym, whose response to every request was, “No problem.”

An increasing number were intermarried couples. For decades Sherwin was one of the few rabbis willing to officiate or coofficiate at mixed marriages; he conducted thousands of these weddings, making possible a Jewish connection for families that were being turned away from the Jewish community right and left.

At this time there was an organization called the Rabbinic Center for Research and Counseling,<sup>6</sup> which had a secret list of rabbis who were willing to perform intermarriages, and there were something like seventeen conditions as to whether they would or would not do it: could it be advertised, would they do it only in their office, would they do it on a Saturday, would they do it with another clergyman, and so on. I’ve seen a copy of that list from the 1970s, and Sherwin Wine and Daniel Friedman (the Humanistic rabbi in the Chicago area) were practically the only rabbis who had essentially no conditions: if you wanted a Jewish presence at your ceremony, they were happy to be there to celebrate with you. That was their message. And so such families, when looking for a Jewish home in the Detroit area, found the Birmingham Temple.

What all of these people shared was a celebration of human power and responsibility, their roots in the Jewish family – their own or one they married into – and their desire for a community of meaning and inspiration.

This desire was not unique to metropolitan Detroit. The message was spread by families who relocated; a Detroit family moved to Connecticut and started a franchise there. It spread by inspiration; Rabbi Friedman was grappling with his congregation’s identification with the Reform movement and creating what he called “Rational Judaism” when he learned it had already been done under a different brand name. His visit to the Birmingham Temple led to a long connection and collaboration between Sherwin and Dan, between Chicago and Detroit, and ultimately to the creation of the Society for Humanistic Judaism in 1969, the Leadership Conference of Secular and Humanistic Jews in 1982, the International Institute for Secular Humanistic Judaism in 1985, and the International Federation of Secular Humanistic Jews in 1986. Today the Society for Humanistic Judaism represents thirty affiliated communities across North America, and the International Institute has ordained nearly a dozen rabbis in North America and more than two dozen in Israel.

I am proud to claim a home at the Birmingham Temple, as are Secular Humanistic Jews everywhere. The Birmingham Temple has been the *shammes*, the candle that spread the light of Humanistic Judaism from within me and within you across the Jewish world, on the Internet, and beyond. More importantly, the Birmingham Temple and Humanistic Judaism are the living realization of the best insights our people have offered for what the Jewish world needs. In September 2013, *The New York Times* reported on a Reform initiative called “B’nai Mitzvah Revolution,” in which students will not just do a Torah or Haftarah reading but will choose a project that reflects their interests and desires.<sup>7</sup> We in Humanistic Judaism have been doing that for forty years. Also in 2013, a new website called “Project TABS – Torah and Biblical Scholarship” was launched, emphasizing the importance of facing the realities of academic and archaeological knowledge about the real origins of the Bible.<sup>8</sup> We’ve done that for fifty years, and we do it everywhere, from Sunday School to Shabbat services to the architecture we choose.

Our celebration of meaningful weddings for love, no matter the ancestry of either partner, is the future of American Judaism. We were there decades ago when everyone else was in rejection and denial. And we have always welcomed the children of intercultural families and *both* of their parents to be part of our communities – again, an imperative that the rest of the Jewish world is now beginning to recognize. Our past is the Jewish future for thousands, if only they knew.

Over the decades our movement has been important not just for its answers, but also for its questions. We have asked the questions that needed to be asked. One can choose to find a way to believe that the Jewish people wrote the Torah and still pay lip service to the traditional belief that Moses took God’s dictation. But no longer can one ignore the questions “Is it true? Do you believe it?”

Some years ago, when my congregation was profiled in the *Chicago Tribune*,<sup>9</sup> friends of my family who read the article asked each other, “What do you believe about God?” It was a question they had never discussed. Their answer did not land them as members of Kol Hadash Humanistic Congregation, but we had made them ask the question of themselves by saying clearly who we were and why.

Today, as in the past, the Birmingham Temple remains a home of dignity and integrity for Jews who think deeply about their heritage and their personal beliefs. No one joins a Humanistic Jewish congregation for social approval or to show off or for easy car pools. I was once at a dinner at the Birmingham Temple, and I asked those at the table with me, “Why do you think we draw such interesting people to this congregation?” One member answered, “The people who come here care about ideas, they care about living out their values, they care about things like dignity and integrity and honesty. Those are the kind of people you want to be with.”

We celebrated the Birmingham Temple’s fiftieth birthday in 2013, in the season of the Maccabees, coming up on Hanukka. The menorah the Maccabees relit did not have eight lights; it had seven. It was the menorah that stood in the Temple in Jerusalem, and its deeply carved image still stands on the Arch of Titus in Rome.

The Maccabees lit a menorah that was no miracle. The “miracle” of candles is that when you light a second candle from the first, the first light is no dimmer. In fact, together they burn more brightly than before. The Birmingham Temple is the non-miraculous *shammes* of Humanistic Judaism, the kindler of a brighter Jewish future.

To the members and friends of the Birmingham Temple, for keeping the home fire burning all these fifty years – as Sherwin would have said – thank you very much.

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup>Babylonian Talmud, *Shabbat* 32a.

<sup>2</sup>For more on Sherwin Wine and the early history of the Birmingham Temple, see Cohn-Sherbok, Rowens, & Cook (eds.), *A Life of Courage: Sherwin Wine and Humanistic Judaism* (Farmington Hills, MI: IISHJ/Milan Press, 2003), available at <http://www.shj.org/store/books/rabbi-sherwin-t-wine/>.

<sup>3</sup>Cited in Cook, "Courage Is as Courage Does" in *Life of Courage*, p. 23.

<sup>4</sup>Mirsky, Norman, "The Vision of Man Triumphant." In *Unorthodox Judaism* (Columbus, OH: Ohio State University Press, 1978).

<sup>5</sup><http://www.pewforum.org/2013/10/01/jewish-american-beliefs-attitudes-culture-survey/>. Last viewed December 23, 2013.

<sup>6</sup><http://www.rcrconline.org/>, founded in 1970. Last viewed December 23, 2013.

<sup>7</sup>[http://www.nytimes.com/2013/09/04/us/bar-mitzvahs-get-new-look-to-build-faith.html?\\_r=0](http://www.nytimes.com/2013/09/04/us/bar-mitzvahs-get-new-look-to-build-faith.html?_r=0). Last viewed December 23, 2013.

<sup>8</sup><http://thetorah.com/about/>. Last viewed December 23, 2013.

<sup>9</sup>[http://www.chicagotribune.com/news/local/chi-rabbi\\_bd13jan13,0,7703341.story](http://www.chicagotribune.com/news/local/chi-rabbi_bd13jan13,0,7703341.story). Last viewed December 23, 2013.

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# Our Revolution

## by Rabbi Jeffrey L. Falick

In twenty-five years of Jewish communal service, I wrote many articles celebrating milestone anniversaries. I would usually say something about what a wonderful time it is to show how grateful we are to be part of the particular community. Or perhaps I would write about the great opportunity we have to reflect upon our past and to think about our future.

The fiftieth anniversary of the Birmingham Temple merits more than such clichés. It is important to remember just how special we are. Of course, at a glance we do look like other congregations. We have all the usual trappings and many similar programs. One might be lulled into thinking that we are simply one choice among many.

That would be a serious mistake. Rabbi Sherwin Wine and the congregation's founders may have intended to start just another suburban temple, but they soon realized that they wanted something quite different. That realization paved the way for them to stage a revolution in Jewish life, and not a minor one.

Daringly, they declared their independence from useless and illusory sources of authority. In place of what was customary but irrelevant, they adopted a powerful and pertinent humanistic value system.

Simultaneously, they challenged the veracity of every myth that the Jewish establishment held (and continues to hold) dear. Their honest assessment of the Jewish historical experience testified to the folly and futility of surrendering our power to supernaturalism and superstition. It signaled the uselessness of subordinating our will and agency, our control over our lives, to obsolete or imagined forces. This irrefutable lesson of our history strengthened our resolve to take responsibility for ourselves.

Humanism can do for Jews and the world what traditional beliefs could never do. It can restore hope. It can give us back our power. These are ambitions that merited a revolution!

Revolutions have a way of settling down with time. Sooner or later, the institutions that they create begin to look more and more like the establishments that they were fashioned to replace. This is natural. At some point people need to get down to the business of living, or in our case, running a congregation. Who can stay excited about a new idea for fifty years?

But our revolution has just begun. Moreover, it has never been more essential. There are excellent signs that nontheistic humanism is spreading at unprecedented rates. And while it's true that there has been growth in nonrational and even mystical forms of Judaism, all of the latest research tells us that a tremendous number of Jews share our humanistic values. They are exhausted from hollow rituals and bankrupt assertions that salvation will come from beyond.

As we celebrate this great anniversary, I invite you to join me in bringing back the revolutionary fervor that characterized our inception. This is a promising moment in Jewish and human history. Everywhere people are anxious to free themselves and their societies from the chains of bondage to the platitudes and philosophies of the past. They are ready for our revolution. Our time is not past. It is just beginning. Our congregation and our movement must shine a beacon of humanistic values, showing the way to a better future for Jews and the entire world.

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**Rabbi Jeffrey L. Falick** is rabbi of the Birmingham Temple, the first congregation for Humanistic Judaism. He sits on the editorial board of this journal. This article is adapted from his remarks at his installation on November 5, 2013.

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# How Rabbi Sherwin Wine Built the Fifth Branch of Judaism

by Ruth Duskin Feldman

A new religious movement starts with a person who has an idea. Reform Judaism started with Moses Mendelssohn, who translated the Bible into German so it would be accessible to the Jews who were coming out of the ghettos and learning the local vernacular. Others, notably Rabbi Isaac Mayer Wise in the United States, organized a movement, drew up platforms, started a rabbinic seminary, Hebrew Union College, and founded the Central Conference of American Rabbis and a lay umbrella organization, the Union of American Hebrew Congregations.

Our counterpart to Mendelssohn, Wise, and the other Reformers was Rabbi Sherwin T. Wine, who set out, audaciously, to create a new way to be Jewish. Wine had ambition, boundless energy, and *hutzpa*; he was a tireless worker and a charismatic speaker. In addition to his imagination and intellect, he was an organizational genius, who knew how to put other people's talents to work. But first and foremost, he had a Big Idea.

Wine's Big Idea was to create a congregational movement relevant to the modern age, with intellectual integrity and teachings consistent with the findings of modern science, history, and archaeology. A Judaism that thinking people could live out every day of the week, not just on Friday nights or the High Holidays. A Judaism as relevant – or more – to adults than to children. A Judaism that puts people first. A Judaism based, not on belief in God, but on what human beings can do to give meaning and purpose to their lives. He called it Humanistic Judaism.

## Beginnings

Given the tumult and intellectual ferment of the '60s, it should hardly have been a shock

that a radical Jewish movement would arise. Yet the Jewish establishment and the nation were stunned when, in 1964, the first headlines appeared about a young Reform rabbi who had started a nontheistic congregation, the Birmingham Temple, with eight Detroit area families. Rabbis from coast to coast denounced this heresy.

Humanistic Judaism, although initially an outgrowth of Reform Judaism, soon proved to be incompatible with Reform, especially as the Reform movement grew more and more conservative in its liturgy and embrace of traditionalism. Wine set about the ambitious task of creating a new movement, a fifth branch of Judaism. What has happened since then has been a historic journey – and a life-changing experience for those of us privileged enough to have gone along on the ride.

Sherwin Wine has been called “a founder.” Here are some of the organizations he founded: SHJ, IFSHJ, IISHJ, LCSHJ, AHR – and the list goes on. What we Humanistic Jews call “the movement” today consists of this alphabet soup of organizations with members, subscribers, and supporters estimated at thirty thousand or more on six continents.

First, in 1969, Wine and Rabbi Daniel Friedman of Congregation Beth Or in Deerfield, Illinois, who had been inspired by a visit to the Birmingham Temple to switch from Reform to Humanistic, as well as the rabbi

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**Ruth Duskin Feldman**, a madrikha, is creative editor of this journal. She is a member of Kol Hadash Humanistic Congregation in Lincolnshire, IL. An earlier version of this article was published in Dan Cohn-Sherbok, Harry T. Cook, & Marilyn Rowens, *A Life of Courage: Sherwin Wine and Humanistic Judaism* (Farmington Hills, MI: International Institute for Secular Humanistic Judaism, 2003), available at <http://www.shj.org/store/books/rabbi-sherwin-t-wine/>.



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of the Congregation for Humanistic Judaism in Westport Connecticut, founded by former Detroiters, created the Society for Humanistic Judaism (SHJ). The Society, which today is the umbrella organization for the movement in North America, grew slowly at first. By 1979, ten years after its founding, there were only a handful of communities in such places as Boston, Los Angeles, Washington, D.C., and Toronto. To develop solidarity, the Society held annual meetings, which enabled us to meet Humanistic Jews from other parts of the country, hear educational speakers, and compare notes on strategies for growth.

Like an aspiring professor, an aspiring movement must publish or perish. We began publishing curricular and promotional materials, a member newsletter, later called *Humanorah*, and a quarterly journal, *Humanistic Judaism*, of which I became creative editor in 1983 with Bonnie Cousens, now the Society's executive director, continuing as managing editor. In 1978 Wine's first book, *Humanistic Judaism*, was published, followed in 1985 by the first edition of Wine's *Judaism Beyond God*, sometimes called the "bible" of our movement.

### **The Problem of Low Growth**

Still, the movement wasn't growing. Small, incipient communities would emerge, struggle, and die. Ad campaigns drew only modest results. Wine had hoped for more. We had built it; why didn't they come?

In order to become viable as a movement, we had to be visible. But after the initial flurry of sensationalized press coverage, we were virtually ignored. We needed a PR campaign, and we began to put one in place. We needed more publications, and we began to produce them; a basic A-to-Z *Guide to Humanistic Judaism* came out in 1993. We needed to get on the web, and we did. We needed more professional leaders, both nationally and on the local level, and a plan for developing future rabbinic leadership. We needed money – lots of it. And we needed allies. We began to move in all those directions.

### **The Society Redesigns Itself**

Originally a voluntary association of individuals, with no paid staff, the Society had to professionalize. As new groups emerged, needing help, nurturing, and support, we transformed the SHJ from a society of individuals into a society of affiliated communities. Miriam Jerris, the Society's first (and originally unpaid) executive director, became Community Development Director and eventually the Society's rabbi. The Board of Directors expanded so each community could have representation, and board members took lessons in fundraising. We developed a long-range plan and established working committees. Today the Society has about thirty affiliates across the continent, ranging from ten families (a Humanistic *minyan*) to one hundred or more, and new communities emerge each year.

### **Sherwin Wine Seeks Allies**

To take the next step toward becoming a fifth branch of Judaism, Wine knew we had to expand our base.

First he reached out to such organizations as the Unitarian-Universalist church and Ethical Culture. Sherwin co-founded the North American Committee for Humanism (NACH), which established the Humanist Institute to train leaders.

But although these organizations contain large numbers of Jews, they are not explicitly Jewish. If Wine was to build a Jewish movement, he had to find Jewish allies. For many years there had existed in U.S. and Canadian cities small secular schools, or *shule*, run mostly by Yiddishist, socialist, Bundist, or otherwise left-leaning Jews, many of East European extraction, and steeped in Yiddish language and culture. Around the time the SHJ was formed, some of these secularists joined in their own umbrella organization, the Congress of Secular Jewish Organizations (CSJO).

SHJ and CSJO representatives came together for a series of cautious meetings, groping to see whether they could make common cause. Both groups were nontheistic and were engaged in building communities focused on

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Jewish celebrations and studies. But there were serious differences as well. While SHJ was becoming increasingly professionalized, CSJO was committed to grass-roots, volunteer leadership and was highly averse to rabbis and SHJ's congregational model. Even though most SHJ affiliates did not yet have their own rabbis, several were moving in that direction. Finally, the two organizations made, not a *shiddukh*, but a loose alliance in the form of the Leadership Conference of Secular and Humanistic Jews (LCSHJ).

### The Movement Goes International

Even with CSJO in the picture, the movement was still a barely noticeable blip on the screen of Jewish life. That began to change as Wine turned his sights abroad. Israel, and particularly the kibbutz movement, had been founded by secular Jews, so Wine saw it as fertile ground. In May, 1980, Shulamit Aloni, who served as Minister of Education in the Rabin government, spoke at the SHJ's conference. The following year, Wine led a tour of Israel, visiting *kibbutzim*, exploring their records for celebratory materials, and forging connections. The climax of the trip was a conference organized by Aloni and Prof. Gershon Weiler with secular Israeli leaders and scholars at Kibbutz Shefayim, on the coast near Tel Aviv.

Following the Shefayim conference, the Society undertook an advertising blitz, with the support of the Milan Foundation. The ads produced significant growth. Six new SHJ communities were founded in the 1980s. Ads placed in *The Jerusalem Post* led Professor Zev Katz to travel from Israel to attend the Society's 1983 conference in Miami. Having experienced what the SHJ offered, Katz returned to Israel desirous of creating an organization that would connect secular Israelis to each other and to SHJ.

The outcome of these Israeli connections was the creation in 1983 of the Israel Association for Secular Humanistic Judaism (IASHJ), with leaders of such stature as Aloni; Katz; Yehuda Bauer, director of the Center for the Study of Antisemitism at Hebrew University

and later Director of Research at Yad Vashem; and Haim Cohn, retired justice of the Israel Supreme Court.

With the Israeli connection in place, and as we attracted support from such notables as the writer Amos Oz and the late philosopher Isaiah Berlin, Wine could begin to think in terms of the giant step to an international movement. In 1985, the International Institute for Secular Humanistic Judaism (IISHJ) was born. ("Secular" had to be in the title, not only because of our North American association with CSJO, but also because our Israeli and European allies called themselves secular Jews.) With Wine and later Israeli educator Yaakov Malkin as co-deans, the Institute would publish educational materials in both Hebrew and English and would be the vehicle for training rabbis and nonrabbinic clergy (leaders/*madrikhim/vegwayzer*).

Meanwhile, Wine, Bauer, Katz, and others had been making contacts in Europe. A community center for secular Jews in Brussels published a French-language magazine, *Régards*, with a reputed 15,000 European subscribers. Smaller groups developed in France, London, Italy, Australia, and Mexico. To link these groups, the International Federation of Secular Humanistic Jews (IFSHJ) was established in 1986 at the Birmingham Temple, with those in attendance mentally comparing ourselves to attendees at the historic First World Zionist Conference in Basel nearly one hundred years earlier.

At its second biennial meeting in Brussels in 1988, the Federation adopted a "Who is a Jew" declaration. In a radical departure from tradition, it declared that a Jew is "a person of Jewish descent or any person who declares himself or herself to be a Jew and identifies with the history, ethical values, culture, civilization, community, and fate of the Jewish people."

Wine, reasoning that there were millions of Soviet Jews who had been raised on atheism and knew nothing of the Jewish religion, made a trip to the Soviet Union. In 1991, with

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the USSR in turmoil and Jews coming out of the woodwork, the Secular Humanistic Association of the Soviet Union was formed. After the Soviet breakup, the organization was renamed the Eurasian Association. In 1994, the International Federation held its biennial meeting in Moscow. There we met Jews, old and young, from such exotic-sounding, faraway places as Khazakhstan and Uzbekistan, many of whom had traveled as long as eighteen hours by slow train to attend the conference, so great was their hunger for Jewish identification.

### **The Movement Plans for Future Leadership**

Throughout the 1980s, the issue of future leadership had been debated. At first, some assumed that our rabbis would continue to come from the Reform seminary, as in the past. The two earliest prospects, Robert Barr and Rami Shapiro, both ordained there in 1981, had gone through their rabbinic training with the Society's financial support and had worked with emerging local SHJ communities. But both Barr and Shapiro moved in other directions. It became clear that we would need to train our own rabbis. The Institute's rabbinic program was established in 1990.

To meet immediate leadership needs, the Institute designated a new level of clergy – the *madrikh(a)* (*vegvayzer* in Yiddish) – with a shorter training period. The Institute put in place a program for training these leaders, and the Leadership Conference (LCSHJ) adopted procedures for certifying them. In 1993 the Institute graduated its first class of *madrikhim*, certified to lead communities and perform ceremonies. Six years later, the first Institute-trained rabbi, Tamara Kolton, was ordained. Less than fifteen years after the founding of the international movement, it had passed a significant milestone.

To date the movement has ordained eleven graduates of the North American branch of the Institute, and twenty-seven rabbis have been ordained by T'mura, the Israeli branch. In addition, several rabbis, notably Rabbi Peter Schweitzer of the City Congregation

in Manhattan and Rabbi Jeffrey Falick, who now leads the Birmingham Temple, have come over from other branches of Judaism. More than thirty-five certified leaders/*madrikhim/vegvayzer* serve North American communities.

### **The Pivnick Center, the Colloquia, and the Quest for Legitimacy**

Humanistic Judaism today is recognized as a legitimate, though still relatively small, branch of Judaism, as evidenced by major articles in *Sh'ma*, *Moment*, the *New York Times*, *ORT Reporter*, and others and by our participation in the annual General Assembly of the Jewish Federation of North America.

The international connections Wine established, especially in Israel, contributed greatly to that achievement. So did the construction of the Pivnick Center for Humanistic Judaism, which opened in 1993 as a wing of the Birmingham Temple and a central headquarters for the movement. In that same year, the Birmingham Temple celebrated its thirtieth anniversary, with major laudatory articles in the Detroit press – a far cry from the negative reception that had greeted the temple's founding.

The Pivnick Center and the Birmingham Temple became the setting for a series of biennial colloquia featuring world-class professors, writers, and thinkers in dialogue with Institute faculty. These colloquia have greatly increased the movement's visibility and influence. At the 1995 colloquium, keynote speaker Shoshana Cardin, past president of the Council of Jewish Federations, called upon her coreligionists to embrace Secular Humanistic Judaism as one of multiple valid forms of Jewishness. "Unless we begin to redefine who we are, we will lose those who don't see any reason to affiliate with us," she said. "Can we learn to give up turf and give people options?"

With greater visibility and acceptance, we can now convincingly claim to be a fifth branch of Judaism. In fact, in a 2000 Jewish population study, the same percentage of Jews identified themselves as Secular Humanists as they did as Reconstructionists (about 5 percent). Ex-

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cept among diehard traditionalists, Humanistic Jews are no longer pariahs.

### **Standing on the Mountaintop**

Few of us are able to see the completion of our life's work in our own time. At best, we can stand, like the legendary Moses on the metaphoric mountaintop, and glimpse its fruition.

That is where Sherwin Wine stood at the time of his fatal automobile accident in 2007.

Humanistic Judaism probably never will be a mass movement. But it can become a significant voice and choice in the Jewish community. That will be the legacy of Sherwin T. Wine.

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# After Fifty Years: What Have I Learned?

by Rabbi Miriam Jerris

I have been involved in Humanistic Judaism for more than four decades. When I reflect on my involvement – the friendships I have made, the opportunity, growth, and satisfaction I’ve experienced as a professional, the places I’ve gone and the ideas I have been exposed to – all of them have enhanced my life. However, more than anything else, the philosophy has taught me things that changed the way I view and experience the world and has had a significant and profound effect on me and the way I relate to those around me.

## **We Are Our Behavior**

When I was a child, I often felt confused about the behavior of some of the people in my life. They would say they believed or felt a particular way, yet somehow what they said didn’t match up with what they did. I was often deeply disappointed and hurt. I began to doubt my own judgment. Maybe I was missing something obvious. What was wrong with my ability to understand people?

One of the very first things Rabbi Sherwin Wine taught that I was able to integrate into my psyche and that changed how I responded was, “We are our behavior. Watch what people do,” he said. “You will get a much clearer window into their belief system.” And he was correct. This has become my measure for evaluating who people truly are. And I am much less confused, disappointed, and hurt.

## **Truth Matters**

Children learn to trust because the people around them can be counted on. Telling children things are true when they are not true erodes their trust. Children need to learn the difference between fantasy, legend, fairy tales, and fact.

I have always been fascinated that when it comes to religion, some parents are willing to choose an educational experience for their children when they know that their children will be taught things that are completely at odds with what science, archaeology, and biblical criticism have proven true. And these ideas are often at odds with the parent’s own belief system. There are times when the choices for a Jewish education may be limited. However, exposing children to a belief system that contradicts what science has discovered to be true and even what a parent believes to be true cannot possibly result in a positive outcome. Exposing children to lies is, at best, confusing. I know that my obsession with truth is one of the reasons I am a Humanistic Jew. I simply will not accept that truth is unimportant. My life experience has taught me that truth matters, and Humanistic Judaism has strengthened that belief.

## **Judaism as Culture**

When your definition of Judaism changes from “the religion of the Jewish people” to “the cultural and historical experience of the Jewish people,” the floodgates of possibility open. Often this approach leads us back to the origins of the Jewish holidays or the practices associated with them. It enables us to focus on the values associated with a holiday, thus bringing the celebration into our own time. Defining Judaism as culture also widens the tent, making the holiday or other event more accessible to all those who choose to join us, and that in turn allows us to provide programming of great depth and meaning.

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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.

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## Integrity

For Humanistic Jews, integrity is consistency of belief, word, and action. We say what we believe and believe what we say, and we act in accordance with our beliefs and words. This idea is liberating, but more importantly, it enables us to deepen our connection to Judaism. When we choose integrity, our beliefs about the world are not at odds with our Judaism. We do not need to leave them at the congregational door. We bring all of our selves into our Jewish experience. We get to be Jewish all the time – not just on Rosh Hashana or Yom Kippur, but each and every day. I cannot imagine a better way to safeguard Jewish continuity.

## Human Dignity

A religion or philosophy of life must address such big questions as, “What is the purpose of life?” It took me a long time to understand how Rabbi Wine conceptualized human dignity as the chief purpose of life. It might be more accurate to say that human dignity is the goal of appropriate ethical decisions and that those ethical choices lead to purpose and meaning.

What flows from the pursuit of human dignity is the centrality of human needs. Religion, Jewish law, or custom does not trump love, equality, or any number of values that place human needs at the forefront. Therefore, the recent controversy aired in the *Detroit Jewish News* regarding the Birmingham Temple’s holding memorial services on Shabbat is not a controversy in our world. It is a way of meeting the very human needs of the family. So too was my husband’s and my decision to marry on Saturday morning. When my father told me that Jews don’t get married on Shabbat, I reminded him that Jews don’t work on Yom Kippur either, but apparently the prohibition against working on Yom Kippur wasn’t as important a rule to him as the prohibition against weddings on Shabbat.

A philosophy that elevates human dignity as one of its highest values and leads to ethical choices based on human needs has led to the Humanistic Jewish position on serving the needs of intermarried families – from officiat-

ing and co-officiating marriage ceremonies, to welcoming persons who wish to identify as Jews to do so by declaring their intentions, to embracing all those who wish to be part of our communities regardless of religious, ethnic, or cultural background. I am grateful to be a Humanistic Jew, proud to articulate its principles, and honored to serve the needs of so many Jews today who wish to remain connected to their Jewish identity and community when so many others turn them away.

## Asking Questions and Developing Critical Thinking Skills

One day it occurred to me that I had heard a similar story from many of my friends. They had been “kicked out” of Sunday school, Hebrew school, Bar Mitzvah class, and other venues of that nature because they were asking “too many” questions. Humanistic Judaism demands that we ask questions. We happily embrace the rabbinic tradition in which asking questions and discussing issues endlessly is applauded and supported. When I was younger and thought about what skills I most wanted to teach my children, I always settled on raising self-reliant children who thought for themselves. Youth education in Humanistic Judaism holds the development of critical thinking skills as one of its primary goals. Asking and answering questions is how discoveries are made.

## Generosity

Early in my involvement in Humanistic Judaism, I developed a passion to share my appreciation for finding the philosophy and the community. I felt a deep gratitude toward Rabbi Wine and the early pioneers. They enabled me to continue my identity as a Jew with integrity and to immerse my children in Jewish community while teaching them what was true and what I believed. I wanted others to have the same opportunities, and the only way I could imagine fulfilling that desire was to dedicate myself to spreading the “good news.” This motivation led to my involvement in the Society for Humanistic Judaism and the International Institute for Secular Humanistic Judaism, providing resources for creating communities and supporting the training of

knowledgeable rabbis and leaders. Although I certainly receive much personal satisfaction from my work, underlying it all is a desire to share what has formed the foundation of my psycho-spiritual life for more than forty years.

To say that what I have learned from my involvement in Humanistic Judaism has made a difference in my life is an understatement. I

can imagine no other experience in which what I learned could contribute as much to my living a life of such ethical integrity and dignity, such complete satisfaction and fulfillment. May my children, their children, and their children after them gain as much meaning during the next fifty years of Humanistic Judaism as I have from the people, ideas, institutions, and programs of the first half-century.

## Humanistic Judaism

strengthening our connection to our Jewish heritage,  
celebrating Jewish holidays with meaning and relevance in our time,  
providing a community for us, continuity for our children,  
enhancing pluralism in the Jewish community

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# Humanistic Judaism: The Next Fifty Years

## by Leora Cookie Hatchwell

As the generation of the founders passes and the mantle is taken up by the third generation of Humanistic Jews, will the movement survive and thrive as a viable alternative in the American Jewish community? On the basis of my interviews with its leaders, my answer is “yes.”

As Shakespeare wrote, “What’s past is prologue.” History influences and sets the context for the present; the future unfolds from what has gone before. There will continue to be secular Jews who feel the need for an intellectual and spiritual community of like-minded people with whom to gather and share ideas, and Humanistic Judaism will continue to fill that niche.

The movement probably will remain relatively small due to the independent nature of secular Jews. Neither a common liturgy, nor “increased spirituality” in services will change that reality. Declining birthrates will continue to have an impact on all Jewish movements, including Humanistic Judaism. However, some growth, driven by a unique ideology and an inspiring vision, may be possible.

### What Lies Ahead? Three Scenarios

The future holds many variables, and no one has a crystal ball. At worst, the movement may die out with the current generation or dwindle as their children fail to join and no new membership growth occurs. In that event, the Society for Humanistic Judaism (SHJ) will crumble. Young secular Jews or half-Jews will not find homes in the organized Jewish community. They may find ways to identify as Jewish, but not in a secular congregational setting.

In the best case scenario, Humanistic Judaism will grow to well exceed the size of

the Reconstructionist movement. The movement will attract young adults as they exit the odyssey years, start families, and choose to educate their children in secular Jewish culture, values, and ethics in a congregational setting. Thriving Humanistic Jewish communities led by rabbis will exist in all major U.S. cities and in all states. The rabbinic training program will be healthy and busy. Day care centers and senior housing facilities will be available. Jewish philanthropists will support and fund the Society’s programs and outreach because they will see value in the congregational format of Humanistic Judaism as a way to build and maintain Jewish communities in the twenty-first century. There will be strong cooperation with the international secular community and a better relationship with other secular Jewish organizations on the North American continent. When other branches of Judaism discuss Judaism, they will automatically include Humanistic Judaism in the conversation. When universities and colleges teach about Judaism, they will automatically teach about Humanistic Judaism. When colloquia, panel discussions, or workshops about Jewish issues are planned, the organizers (without thinking twice) will include representatives of Humanistic Judaism. When articles, radio, or television interviews, and commentaries are written about the future of Judaism, a representative of Humanistic Judaism will be contacted. Successful books about Humanistic Judaism will be written both by members and nonmember scholars, and a few of these will make *The New York Times* bestseller list.

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**Leora Cookie Hatchwell**, a past president of Kol Hadash Humanistic Congregation in Lincolnshire, IL, is a member of its steering committee. 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.



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A more realistically optimistic scenario is that the Humanistic Judaism movement will triple or quadruple in size. Communities around the continent will grow considerably. They will include intermarried couples, “half-Jews” and their families, same-sex couples and their families, singles, Jews by choice, non-Jews, converts, and people of all political persuasions. Some colleges and universities that offer Jewish studies programs will include Humanistic Judaism in their curricula, panel discussions, and workshops. After much research and protracted negotiations, at least one Jewish philanthropist will take the movement under his or her wing. Its name recognition, promotion, marketing, and visibility will be such that it will be recognized inside and outside the wider Jewish world as a part of Judaism. Curricula published on the Society’s website will help small communities establish schools easily. Some successful popular books will be written about Humanistic Judaism, and it will be accorded more than just a sentence in textbooks and trade books about Judaism in America.

Which of these three scenarios becomes reality will depend on several factors. For Humanistic Judaism to grow significantly, it will need courageous leaders and spokespersons to disseminate its message. Leaders are developed locally and move into national leadership as they mature. This must continue to happen. It is important to nurture young leaders so that the movement will appeal to younger generations. In addition, there is a need for ordinary members to do the “heavy lifting” to invigorate their communities and the movement. Local leaders and members need to be committed to more than a congregation or a rabbi. Any institution built on and dependent upon the charisma of a single individual generally begins to fizzle out after that person’s retirement or passing.

Another key to future growth is the infusion of a positive Humanistic Jewish identity in the movement’s children. Children are our investment in the future. They can choose to expand upon the foundations built by their parents, or not. Children raised in Humanistic

Jewish communities need to acquire not only humanist values, but also a strong sense of Jewish ethics and of belonging to the wider Jewish community. Ideally, the educational program should begin with pre-kindergarten and continue beyond B’nai Mitzvah to Confirmation and high school to inculcate a strong sense of Jewish culture, history, values, and ethics, and to impart the Jewish idea that learning never stops. Preferably, Sunday school should take place every week, but its frequency will be dependent upon the size, choices, and demographic composition of the community. Commitment to Sunday school is difficult in a world that offers constant competition for students’ and families’ time. Still, the goal must be for children raised in the movement to emerge with resolute self-esteem and pride in being Humanistic Jews. The hope is that they will then return as adults and raise their own children the same way.

As in the broader Jewish community, Humanistic Judaism will continue to struggle with the increasingly prevalent demand for a “fee for service” type of Jewish congregational life. In its present form, Humanistic Judaism cannot be this type of service provider. Even if some of its members do not utilize all the services of a full-service congregation, they need to know that the community exists and that it is providing a meaningful connection to Jewish identity and Humanistic thought. Eventually, however, Humanistic Judaism, like other branches of Judaism, may have to develop alternative ways to meet people’s needs, whether in a virtual world, through *havurot*, or otherwise.

### **The Role of the Society for Humanistic Judaism: Issues and Challenges**

The Society for Humanistic Judaism is the main vehicle for the spread of Humanistic Judaism and its congregational model. Until the rise of the Internet, the SHJ acted as a centralized clearinghouse that collected and disseminated ideas and resources to its local affiliates and acted as a conduit to connect them with each other. Now, the ease of communication through the Internet makes the advantages of belonging to the SHJ less readily apparent. Humanistic Jews anywhere can readily find,

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e-mail, “friend,” Skype, and “tweet” each other. They can *schmooze* and *kvetch* on list-serves and blogs and post movies about anything on YouTube until the cows come home. And it’s all free! The Society regularly takes positions on issues of concern and issues press releases, and its staff attend conferences and work continually to develop new communities. However, most local members are unaware of these activities. It is only natural, then, for members to question the value of continuing to pay dues to the umbrella organization.

Institutionally, Humanistic Judaism stands for something, and members need to understand that. Practically speaking, the Society needs to enhance its perceived value to members and to increase its visibility, both to its members and to the wider Jewish world. Two monthly e-newsletters sent to SHJ’s entire mailing list are now published, and SHJ participation in a Google ad-words campaign has succeeded in driving more traffic to affiliates’ websites. The search for ways to improve SHJ’s self-promotion to its members must continue so that they know what they are paying for and how it benefits them.

The future of any movement depends on its grass roots – in this case, on strong, numerous congregations and communities. It is important for the SHJ to develop and nurture new communities in additional geographic areas and to build bridges between existing communities. Meaningful communities cannot be virtual. Connections need to be established at both the local and regional levels, with dedicated people within reasonable geographical proximity meeting face-to-face to plan and then following through. Regional groupings should continue to be formed with the help of the SHJ.

Effective membership drives should enable prospects to learn about Humanistic Judaism in a wider variety of ways. This year, SHJ launched a new, professionally designed website. In addition, the SHJ must better utilize social media. Increased use of Facebook and Twitter could attract a younger audience. As part of revitalizing itself, the SHJ must persuade young adults to serve on the Board of Directors

and in the leadership of local communities in order to gain fresh perspectives on programming and membership recruitment.

One of the hardest challenges is to find philanthropists willing to help fund a secular congregational movement. This task will require, not only the identification of such philanthropists, but a rearticulation of the movement’s vision. What is needed is not necessarily a new vision, but a new and updated way of presenting it – possibly even the shedding of such lingo as “movement” and “society,” and the adoption of language not yet crafted.

Most important, it is essential that the Society for Humanistic Judaism continue to demand a seat at the table of the wider Jewish community. Participation in Federation or educational conferences, rabbinic organizations, workshops, and think tanks helps to raise Humanistic Judaism’s profile and lends it legitimacy in the eyes of the wider community. With that exposure may come increased membership.

In particular, the SHJ must be a leading voice in the public square as to “who is a Jew” and what constitutes Judaism in the modern world. The Society cannot afford to let the Reform movement lead this conversation, with the likely end result that Humanistic Judaism is considered “not Jewish enough.” One size does not fit all. Judaism is what Jews do, in all its variations. Judaism has been evolving for millennia in response to changing circumstances: from a temple-centered ceremonial religion with animal sacrifice as a core component, governed by an oral tradition passed along from generation to generation, to rabbinic Judaism with the oral law codified in the Mishnah and interpreted in the G’mara and latter commentaries, to challenges and reinterpretations brought on by the Enlightenment and emancipation. If Judaism is to survive, it must continue to evolve, and in many different directions, both theistic and secular.

The SHJ and other movement organizations must play advocate for silent Jews who have been turned off of Judaism and will not speak

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## A VIEW FROM THE MILLENNIAL GENERATION

by Libby Otto

Having grown up in the Secular Jewish Circle of Puget Sound, I have great hopes and expectations for the future of Secular Humanistic Judaism. One of the many things I foresee in the next fifty years is a greater connection between congregations as well as a broader use of social media such as seminars and classes online. I believe that as the movement grows and develops, it will unfortunately remain relatively unknown and misunderstood by the other branches of Judaism as well as the overall population due to the fact that prescribers to a theistic faith often have a hard time understanding faiths that do not necessarily involve a god.

That being said, I believe Humanistic Judaism will reach a much larger audience than it currently has and the concept will become much more global.

Along with the outreach and greater connection, I predict that the younger generation will step up and become a greater part of the leadership within the Society for Humanistic Judaism (SHJ) and the movement as a whole.

I am currently involved in my community's youth group. I had my Bat Mitzvah in the movement and attended the HuJews conclave twice and the west coast J-West conference three times. I am interested in joining my community's leadership as well as SHJ's in the future. I can't wait to see how we grow as a movement and as a community.

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**Libby Otto** lives in Edmonds, WA, and is a tenth grader at the Bush School, a private school in Seattle. She has been a competitive Irish dancer and a Girl Scout for eight years. She hopes to be a writer when she grows up.

for themselves. Although Humanistic Jews respect others' right to their theistic beliefs, they do not share those beliefs. What unites many unaffiliated American Jews is a secular approach to life. A secular application of Jewish wisdom to today's ethical and moral questions could lead to greater acceptance of differences and embracing of the "other."

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The current crisis of Jewish identity presents an opportunity for Humanistic Judaism. Alan Dershowitz has observed that most American Jews get their history from Fiddler on the Roof, their traditions from canned gefilte fish, their Bible stories from television, their culture from Jackie Mason, and their Jewish morality from once-a-year sermons that most of them sleep through. If this observation is true, then the Jewish community may drastically shrink or virtually disappear within fifty years – a fear frequently voiced by community leaders. However, this is a prediction that has been repeated over and over for centuries, and history has proven it wrong. Judaism has sur-

vived for more than three thousand years and most likely will continue to do so.

The metric for failure or success will not be the number of Jews or the percentage of intermarried families, but the preponderance of positive and meaningful Jewish experiences for individuals and families. This is where Humanistic Judaism can play an important role. Many secular Jews will want to positively identify as Jews through their connection to the Jewish people and its historic experience. And many of these will find a congenial way to affirm their cultural Jewish identity, share fellowship, and celebrate Jewish holidays and life-cycle events under the auspices of Humanistic Judaism.

The extent to which they do so will depend in part on the development of astute, innovative strategies. The devising of such strategies is a pressing task, of whose urgency movement leaders are well aware. What remains is for them to follow through on the insights and ideas they have expressed. As our sages taught, "You are not obliged to finish the task, neither are you free to neglect it."

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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 Wine that has meaning in our lives today. This selection was first published in the Birmingham Temple member publication The Jewish Humanist, on the occasion of the temple's twenty-fifth anniversary.*

## The Reason for Our Existence

by Rabbi Sherwin T. Wine

Our Temple is no ordinary temple. From the very beginning we chose to publicly embrace an ideology different from that of the Jewish establishment. From the very beginning we were embroiled in a controversy that most budding congregations do not have to confront.

The reason for our existence and growth was never that we were a convenient suburban temple, nor that we were socially chic, nor that we provided physical amenities second to none. People came to us because they believed, despite all the difficulties of public exposure, in what we taught.

In other congregations the initial traumas have to do with finding a place for services, recruiting people to teach children, developing a sense of belonging and commitment. We had those problems too. But they were always less important than translating our stated convictions into a viable congregational format. Was it possible to abolish prayer and worship and still create an institution with a clear Jewish identity?

Out of the challenge to find an answer to this question came the Birmingham Temple. And the answer that emerged still defines the reason for our existence.

We succeeded because we said certain things that had never been said clearly in the North American Jewish community.

We said that there was no need for Jews to pretend to believe what they did not believe. There was no need to recite prayers that were meaningless simply because they were Jewish. There was no need to subscribe to convictions that were incredible simply because they were traditional. Our Jewish identity was not a function of any belief system. It was independent of any creeds. It arose out of family roots and family connection.

We said that there was no need to be kosherized by the past. Old Jewish statements were no more valuable than new ones simply because they were old. Ancestors were no more authoritative than contemporaries simply because they were ancestors. The test of truth was not antiquity; it was reasonableness. The test of morality was not prophetic utterances; it was the promotion of human dignity. The test of Jewishness was not the Bible and the Talmud; it was a sense of identification with the culture and the fate of the Jewish people.

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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 of which are available from the Society for Humanistic Judaism, [www.shj.org/store](http://www.shj.org/store)).

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We said that there was no need to separate the secular and the religious. Congregations, Shabbat meetings, and holiday celebrations were not the sole possession of theistic people. B'nai Mitzvah and Confirmations were not, of necessity, attached to prayers and Torah readings. Religion was more than the worship of a god. It was in the broadest sense, a philosophy of life turned into the morality and celebrations of an organized community. *Secular* meant nontheistic, not nonreligious.

We said that there was no need to assume that nostalgia was the only warm emotion. Loyalty to the past may be just as cold as any set of prayers that are mumbled without emotion. And creativity for the future may be just as “hot” as the dancing of Hasidic devotees. The warmth of belonging and solidarity is more likely to exist in a community where shared ideas and values bind people together than in a congregation that is a neighborhood convenience or a family inheritance.

We said that there was no need to lie to children. There was no need to assume that children required beliefs that we as adults no longer required. There was no need to teach children to believe what we knew they would ultimately reject when they grew up. The hypocrisy of well-intentioned parents was unnecessary. The greatest gift that we can give our children is our honesty and integrity. When mouth and action come together, healthy religion begins.

We said that there was no need to be timid about necessary change. Cautious, piecemeal reform does not serve consistency well. Life is too short to be the prisoner of foolish contradictions. We do not exist to fit the forms of the past. The forms of the past exist to serve our needs and the needs of future generations. Sometimes only bold action will enable us to make things right.

All these things we said we are still saying. They define the reason for our existence.

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# American Jewry: Three Studies

by Rabbi Jeffrey L. Falick

Last autumn the Pew Research Center published the results of its survey of American Jewry.<sup>1</sup> Since that time you would be hard-pressed to attend a meeting of Jewish community leaders that failed to address its findings. Even if you were not swimming (drowning?) in these data, you probably heard about the report's central revelations: More and more Jews are without any particular religious attachments. A rising number consider themselves agnostics or atheists. The majority perceive their Jewish identity as a matter of culture or ancestry.

Many American Jewish leaders were dumb-founded. Some of my mainstream rabbinical colleagues entered into a kind of reverie of denial. How could this possibly be happening? It seemed like just yesterday that Jews had occupied a place of honor in the American religious triumvirate. In 1955, Will Herberg's *Protestant, Catholic, Jew* announced the death of Jewish ethnicity. Now it would seem that like those famously premature reports of Mark Twain's demise, Herberg's proclamation was greatly exaggerated.

Before the Pew study quite a few of us were mindful of these trends in American Jewish identity. We are not endowed with some kind of special insight or intuition, but simply familiar with the research of Drs. Barry Kosmin and Ariela Keysar. They are the academics responsible for the wide-ranging American Religious Identification Survey (ARIS) that they conduct periodically from their base at Connecticut's Trinity College. And they had already trained their spotlight on the Jews.

When they last conducted their survey in 2008, the national media pounced upon the finding that more and more Americans of all backgrounds (with millennials in the lead) have disaffiliated from organized religion. To

the question, "What is your religion?" many replied, "None," generating attention-grabbing headlines about "The Rise of the Nones." After Kosmin and Keysar extended their research to the Jewish community, Kosmin presented their findings at Jerusalem's Fifteenth World Congress of Jewish Studies in 2009.<sup>2</sup> Later, in a fitting follow-up, the two researchers published their fascinating essay, "American Jewish Secularism: Jewish Life Beyond the Synagogue," in the *American Jewish Yearbook 2012*.<sup>3</sup>

Kosmin and Keysar begin their *Yearbook* piece with the goal of going "beyond asking whether a Jewish identity can exist independently of religion in the contemporary United States." That question has been demonstratively and affirmatively answered by American Jews themselves. Kosmin's and Keysar's own research confirms that answer, and the Pew study makes the information widely available.

The *Yearbook* essay – which should be mandatory reading for every Jewish communal leader – presents convincing evidence that when American Jews participate in Jewish life, they tend toward secular Jewish activities. Fewer Jews attend synagogue services or light

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<sup>1</sup>Pew Research Center. "A Portrait of Jewish Americans: Findings from a Pew Research Center Survey of U.S. Jews." Washington, DC: 2013.

<sup>2</sup>Kosmin, Barry A. "The Changing Population Profile of American Jews 1990-2008." *Proceedings of the Fifteenth World Congress of Jewish Studies*. Jerusalem: 2009.

<sup>3</sup>Kosmin, Barry A., and Ariela Keysars. "American Jewish Secularism: Jewish Life Beyond the Synagogue." *American Jewish Yearbook 2012*, vol. 109-112, XIII: 2013).

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Shabbat candles than patronize Jewish arts and culture or Jewish Community Centers. They remain attached to their Jewish identity, less so to Jewish religion.

Contrary to Herberg, Kosmin and Keysar make the crucial point that the secularization of American Jews and of Judaism itself has been in process for more than one hundred years. Consider the two largest gatherings of Jews in U.S. history:

The first occurred in 1916 and was the funeral procession of the great Yiddish writer Sholem Aleichem through the streets of the Jewish immigrant ghetto of New York City. This was reported by the New York Police Department of the time to be the largest public event it had ever policed. The second event was the solidarity rally by 250,000 Jews from dozens of states on the National Mall in Washington, DC, on a cold December day in 1987, coinciding with the Reagan-Gorbachev summit. It was organized by secular national Jewish community organizations – the National Conference for Soviet Jewry and the Council of Jewish Federations – in support of freedom of emigration and glasnost for Soviet Jews.

According to Kosmin and Keysar, American Jews are not merely following the American drift toward secularism, they are leading it. This is not to say that the majority of Jews have completely abandoned their belief in God. Like other Americans, a majority of American Jews continue to express such a belief. Yet this majority shows signs of decline overall and is diminishing more rapidly for American Jews than for others. Even those American Jews who claim to believe in God demonstrate a far weaker faith than their fellow Americans. While the majority of Americans continue to believe in a personal, intercessory God, many American Jews do not:

[O]nly 30% of Jews strongly agree that God helps them, compared to 71% of all Americans. And whereas 74% of Jews thought God exists only 54% imagine an active personal divinity. Those skeptical about a personal God amount to 34% of all Jews but only 9% of all Americans. It

is interesting to note that twice as many Jews were uncertain or unable to provide an answer than were Americans in general (12% vs. 6%). One can perhaps conclude from these results of these two questions that around one-third of Jews are confirmed theists, 17% are deists, 17% are atheists, and another one-third are very uncertain or uncomfortable about theological and belief questions and so possibly agnostics.

This is an extraordinary finding, one not completely revealed by Pew. More than one-third of American Jews are deists or atheists, and another third may be agnostic. This finding has important implications for Humanistic Judaism. Although it is hard to believe that 50 or 60 percent of American Jews could be moved in our explicit direction, there is no doubt that we are not reaching anything close to our potential.

What is it about the American Jewish community that makes it so secular? The authors offer some ideas.

As a small minority with a history of persecution, Jews have a felt need and desire for solidarity and cohesion, but this is not easy to achieve given their ideological diversity. Because religion is and has long been a divisive rather than unifying factor among American Jews, the trend has been to establish nonreligious or “soft secular” nondenominational organizations at the local and national levels. In order to attract a wide membership, social welfare and community relations organizations eschew religious attachments while simultaneously trying not to give offense to any synagogue grouping. The philanthropic Jewish federation system, with its plethora of welfare and social services, is the prime example of this secularized form of organization.

Thus American Jews, desiring to retain the sense of group identity that we often call “peoplehood,” have created a community that, in its own way, replicates and honors the American ideal of separating “church” and “state,” with the result that Jewish communal leadership has been lay and not rabbinic. At

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## THE PEW STUDY: WHAT DID IT FIND?

by Rabbi Miriam Jerris

On October 1, 2013, when the Pew Research Center published its study, “A Portrait of Jewish Americans,” the Society for Humanistic Judaism responded positively. The key findings – that six in ten Jews in the United States see being Jewish as mainly a matter of culture or ancestry, more than nine out of ten say they are proud to be Jewish and feel a sense of belonging to the Jewish people, and one in five describe themselves as having no religion – were no surprise to Humanistic Jews.

Secular Humanistic Jews see Judaism as the historical and cultural experience of the Jewish people. The results of the Pew Study show that more and more U.S. Jews share that view, and cultural rather than religious identification increases among younger cohorts. Nearly seven in ten respondents (68 percent) said a person does not need to believe in God to be Jewish. Working on the Sabbath (94 percent) and being strongly critical of Israel (89 percent) do not negate Jewish identity. Nor, according to one-third of the sample (34%), does believing in Jesus as the messiah.

The top five responses to the question of what is essential to being Jewish were historical, emotional, or ethical, and did not relate specifically to Jewish religious practice or involvement in Jewish life. They were: remembering the Holocaust

(73 percent), leading an ethical and moral life (69 percent), working for justice and equality in society (56 percent), being intellectually curious (49 percent), and having a good sense of humor (42 percent). Again, this finding supports a secular approach to Jewish identity.

Although it is tempting for Humanistic Jews to claim those Jews falling into the category of “Jews of no religion,” it is not statistically appropriate to do so. One in five Jews of no religion (20 percent) describe themselves as Reform Jews, 6 percent identify with Conservative Judaism, and 1 percent say they are Orthodox Jews. Only 1 percent of Jews of no religion specifically say that they are culturally Jewish, atheist, or agnostic, and only 28 percent of all respondents consider being part of the Jewish community important.

The findings of the Pew Study must be carefully assessed, and the desire to make claims must be tempered. The results are complex. However, as secular, cultural, and Humanistic Jews, we can be confident of one very significant outcome: the claim that Judaism is primarily a religion or being Jewish is primarily religious is no longer accurate. The majority of American Jews identify being Jewish as ancestral or cultural rather than religious. From this perspective Secular Humanistic Judaism is in the mainstream of Jewish life.

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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.

almost every pluralistic Jewish gathering, while there may be a perfunctory blessing over the bread by the head of the local board of rabbis, the overwhelmingly secular content makes it possible for Jews of every denomination – or none – to participate as Jews. I experienced this phenomenon repeatedly during twenty-four years of work in Hillel student centers and at a large Jewish Community Center. The Judaism of those communities was secular and civic, even when a theistic ritual made a brief cameo appearance.

From our perspective as Humanistic Jews, the best part of the *Yearbook* essay is the

authors' discussion of secular Jewish organizations. Kosmin and Keysar showcase our movement and its founder in a way that our leadership typically only fantasizes about. Although they acknowledge that our approach has yet to “catch on,” they take pains to describe our unique combination of secular Humanism and secular Judaism. Both the City Congregation of New York and our own Rabbi Greg Epstein, Humanist chaplain at Harvard, merit mention.

The Pew report raised dozens of red flags for many American Jewish communal leaders. Their collective “gevalting” has not



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ceased. Many Humanistic Jews had the opposite reaction. We saw a confirmation of our secular outlook in the rising number of Jews “without religion.” Still, a secular world view is miles away from a real commitment to the principles of Humanistic Judaism. Most Jews expect religious-flavored customs to conform to a certain model. They may not be big believers and they may rarely attend synagogue, but when they do they expect to see an ark with a

Torah and a cantor chanting the *Shema*. This remains a large challenge for Humanistic Judaism. We have changed a lot of practices to suit our beliefs. Do most Jews really care whether these practices suit their beliefs?

Perhaps not yet, but the results from Pew and, more critically, from Kosmin and Keysar should remind Humanistic Jews about our remarkable potential to convince them to care.

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# Winning by Losing

## by Herb Silverman

Then there was the guy who interviewed at a radio station for a job as a broadcaster. They hired someone else. A friend asked, “Why didn’t you get the job?” The guy answered, “B-b-b because I-I’m a J-J-J Jew.”

Discrimination does exist against blacks, gays, women, Jews, atheists, and many other groups. But, to quote Sigmund Freud, “Sometimes a cigar is just a cigar.” Crying “wolf” when there is none is the quickest way to lose credibility and damage a cause. For atheists, a more interesting option is whether to cry “wolf” when there really is a wolf. We can’t fight every battle. We haven’t the good will, the resources, or the political capital to respond to all possible slights. So, how to choose?

We all choose according to circumstances and personal comfort levels, but I want to suggest a strategy that has worked for me: Prepare to take advantage of the Law of Unintended Consequences, where an action results in an outcome other than what was intended. To plan for the unplanned sounds paradoxical, but adversaries may find that their squashing of our Plan A can make a Plan B more effective than the intended Plan A. There are numerous opportunities for us to take the “moral” high ground on wedge issues, which can create a win-win situation. For instance, we can ask respectfully for our rightful place at the table and either get it or get others to share our outrage at our being denied.

Here is a classic example. Of the many heroes in the civil rights movement of the 1960s, my surprise choice for the top ten is none other than the police chief of Birmingham, Alabama, Eugene “Bull” Connor. His use of fire hoses and police attack dogs against unarmed, non-violent protest marchers in 1963 was broadcast on national TV. This incident shocked and moved the entire nation and led to the most far-reaching civil rights legislation in history,

the Civil Rights Act of 1964. So, Bull Connor’s tactics hastened the very change he had been opposing.

As atheists, I don’t think we should whine about past injustices or an unhappy religious upbringing. We won’t win friends and influence people on the basis of victimhood. On the other hand, I think we should look for serendipitous opportunities to expose the religious “Bull Connors” of the world. I know this will force many Christians to support the moral position of an atheist over that of some of their fellow Christians. Movements are most successful when they appeal to folks outside the group.

Here is a personal example. When the South Carolina Progressive Network held a Meet the Candidates forum prior to a Charleston City Council election, each sponsoring organization was allowed to ask one question of the candidates on the panel. Our local group, the Secular Humanists of the Lowcountry, asked this: “As you know, the Council starts meetings with a prayer. Since you will represent all your constituents, not just those who are religious believers, will you consider periodically allowing nonbelievers to give the invocation?” One candidate agreed, and when he won the election he invited me to give the invocation before the Council meeting.

As the Mayor introduced me, half the Council members walked out, returning just in time to recite the Pledge of Allegiance. They also turned toward me as they bellowed the words “under God.” I didn’t expect such open

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defiance, but it offered a unique opportunity. I saw the walkout as a “Law of Unintended Consequences” moment. I called a reporter from the *Charleston Post and Courier*, told him which Council members had walked out, and suggested that his readers would like to know why. In his article, he quoted some interesting justifications.

Councilman Gallant: “The fool says in his heart, there is no God.”

Councilman Gilliard: “An atheist giving an invocation is an affront to our troops, who are fighting for our principles, based on God.”

Councilman George: “He can worship a chicken if he wants to, but I’m not going to be around when he does it.”

To this last, I responded: “Perhaps Councilman George does not realize that many of us who stand politely for religious invocations believe that praying to a god makes no more sense than praying to a chicken. At least you can see a chicken.”

Several days later, six favorable letters to my side appeared in the *Post and Courier*. When Christians side with atheists against other Christians, it likely means we have won by losing. Here is one of the letters from Dot Scott, President of the Charleston branch of the NAACP:

I read with disbelief the actions of our councilmen who walked out of an official meeting during the invocation by Herb Silverman simply because of his religious views. It is most difficult for me, a Christian African-American female, who has probably experienced every kind of prejudice and intolerance imaginable, to understand an act that was not only disrespectful, but unquestionably rude by folks elected to represent all of the citizens, regardless of race, creed, color, religion or sexual orientation.

It is most regrettable that during a time when the fight is so fierce to have all citizens’ rights protected and respected, some of us would neglect to do the same for others. When any elected official demonstrates

such lack of tolerance, especially while performing his official duties, those of us of conscience must speak out and voice our outrage.

Incidentally, Dot Scott recently was a guest at a dinner party at my house. We exchanged stories about how the religious right treats our respective constituencies, though clearly African-Americans have it much worse than atheists in South Carolina. She told a shocking story about the fund for the families of the nine Charleston firefighters who died in a furniture store fire, the most such firefighter deaths since 9-11. Some potential contributors wanted to give only if they could earmark their donations to the white firefighters. Dot said that when bad things used to happen in South Carolina, the consoling comment would be “Thank you, Mississippi.” She opined that “Thank you, Mississippi” is no longer operative, as South Carolina is now worse than Mississippi. I looked at her and responded, “Dot, I’ve lived here long enough to know the real expression, so please feel free to say it correctly.” She thanked me for not being offended by the phrase “Thank God for Mississippi,” and I thanked her for recognizing that not all people are religious.

I was even offered an opportunity by the *Post and Courier* to write an op-ed about the walkout. Here is one of my paragraphs:

In recent years, Charleston has taken steps to become a progressive city that celebrates, rather than fears, its diversity. The walkout, however, vividly shows that we are still engaged in one of the last civil rights struggles in which blatant discrimination is viewed as acceptable behavior. Of course, bigotry exists everywhere, but it is especially lamentable when public acts of intolerance at government functions are later defended in the media by government officials.

I have been in a number of public debates with fundamentalist Christians, but one of the more interesting was with Dr. Richard Johnson, religion professor at Baptist-sponsored Charleston Southern University. The main benefits came several weeks later, not just from win-

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ning debate points. After the debate, Johnson asked if he could come to speak to the Atheist-Humanist Alliance, a student group at the College of Charleston where I am faculty advisor. I, of course, agreed. He tried, unsuccessfully, to bring some of those students to Jesus. In the Q&A after his talk, one of the students asked Johnson if he would be willing to invite me to speak to his religion class. He agreed, and the date was set. The day before I was scheduled to speak, I received an email from Johnson saying he had to rescind the invitation because of “complications,” and that his administration did not want him to devote class time to my appearance. I immediately recognized this as an opportunity to win by losing.

I called the religion editor at the *Post and Courier* and described how a Christian professor at this Baptist institution had broken his promise of allowing me to speak at his university, after I had kept my promise of allowing him to speak at mine. The reporter’s article quoted me as saying: “I think it reflects poorly on an academic institution that appears to allow only one point of view. Had the administration at the College of Charleston objected to Dr. Johnson speaking at my institution, I would have fought it and engaged others on campus to help keep academic freedom alive.”

The chair of the religion department told the reporter that the invitation was rescinded because their “students had heard quite enough from Dr. Silverman recently.” I asked what that meant, as I had never been allowed to speak on campus. Dr. Johnson originally had wanted to hold the debate on his campus, but the president of the institution had vetoed it. The debate took place, instead, at a large nearby church.

The religion reporter wrote that the provost of Charleston Southern University declined to explain “how not allowing Silverman to speak in Johnson’s classroom fits in with CSU’s vision of academic freedom.” Johnson also declined to

comment on the situation. I felt sorry that his university had put him in such an untenable and embarrassing position. This incident is another example in which Christians couldn’t help but acknowledge that atheists acted more reasonably and more “Christian” than did their Christian counterparts.

Assuming one of our goals is to increase the visibility and respectability of atheist viewpoints, there are a variety of approaches. Best selling authors Richard Dawkins (*The God Delusion*), Daniel Dennett (*Breaking the Spell*), Sam Harris (*The End of Faith* and *Letter to a Christian Nation*), and Christopher Hitchens (*God Is Not Great: How Religion Poisons Everything*) have given us more visibility than we ever had before. It is up to the rest of us to make the most of this opportunity.

Other minorities have had significantly more problems than atheists. As a class, we are well educated, productive, and prosperous. But atheists are not as influential as many interest groups with fewer adherents. I think the primary reason is that the majority of atheists are in the closet, and it is relatively easy for atheists to remain there. Blacks and women can’t, and gays can do so only with great sacrifice. Atheists are not necessarily afraid to come out. Most are apathetic about religion. They have full lives and can’t understand why some of us waste so much time focusing on nonexistent deities.

Atheists are also an independent lot, not easy to organize. Many view their “despised minority” status as a badge of honor. I must admit to having this tendency myself. I enjoy reading letters from ignorant people who try to convince me that my beliefs are wrong. But in the end, I would rather engage in the culture war than maintain an elitist pride that we can simply rise above it. I think it is far more important for us to work toward change than to accept the status quo and hope things won’t get worse.

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# Humanistic Jews Plant a Tree

## by Rob Agree

Humanistic Judaism is a comprehensive response to the needs of contemporary Jews to create personal and communal experiences that celebrate identity, values, and connection. In my experience as the lay ceremonial leader of a congregation of Humanistic Jews, the pursuit of these experiences can lead to great rewards in unexpected places, places never visited by the other branches of the modern Jewish tree.

Our congregation includes the Levy family: mother, father and seven year-old (adopted) daughter, Ruth. Last year, the parents asked me to help them prepare a celebration of Ruth's conversion to Judaism (her birth parents were not Jewish). We discussed Humanistic Judaism's philosophy that adoption is a better term than conversion, and that it requires no ritual to accomplish, merely an affirmative identification and association with Jews, their historical and cultural experiences, and the values of Humanistic Judaism. The parents still wanted to do something special to welcome Ruth – an active member of our Sunday School – into the Jewish family, and, consistent with our philosophy, to allow Ruth to declare her adoption of Humanistic Judaism.

We considered a naming ceremony, but Ruth already had a significant Jewish name, and the existing liturgy for such a celebration dealt with infants, not a curious, thoughtful, social second-grader. We considered the Bat Mitzvah, but Ruth is far from entering young adulthood and will celebrate her Bat Mitzvah at an appropriate time in several years. We were stuck. None of the branches of Judaism seemed to offer an example. There was no analog in tradition to adapt.

As Humanistic Jews do so often, we created something new; something that met the needs of our community and reflected our cherished traditions.

We started with the name. Ruth, you see, was not born in the United States. She was born in China. And when she came to this country to become part of the Levy family, she brought a name with her, a name given to her by her birth parents in their language. The Levys have taught Ruth that Qing Miao Huai is the name she was born with and that it will always be hers. I wondered what Qing Miao Huai meant and was given the answer: Ruth's Chinese name means "Celebrate seedlings."

Now, we were getting somewhere. Celebrate seedlings! What a noble concept. Jews even have an annual holiday dedicated to celebrating seedlings, and Jews love planting trees in Israel to commemorate special people and events.

I suggested to the Levys that we could achieve our purpose by giving Ruth a new Hebrew name to compliment her Chinese name; one that also means celebrate seedlings. The suggestion was approved and on we went.

Not being a scholar – not even literate in Hebrew – I sought the advice of a rabbi friend to provide a translation for "Celebrate seedlings." Simple! *Simcha* means "celebrate" and *zera* means "seedlings." *Simcha Zera* would be the name. The Levys and I were pleased; *Simcha Zera* even seemed to have a touch of poetry. Creating the ceremony was easy from here on.

Everything was set for Ruth's naming/adoption ceremony to be held in the presence of her Sunday School friends, their parents, most of the rest of our congregation, and guests during circle time before Sunday School one day last fall. The ceremony would be imme-

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**Rob Agree** is the ceremonial leader of Kahal Chaverim, NJ Congregation for Humanistic Judaism. This article was originally published in the *Tikkun Daily Blog*, ([tikkun.org/daily](http://tikkun.org/daily)), on March 8, 2013. It is reprinted with *Tikkun's* permission.

diately followed by our annual “Introduction to Humanistic Judaism” symposium for new and continuing members. What better way to demonstrate how Humanistic Judaism meets our needs than to share this unique celebration?

Two weeks before the big day, I attended a congregational Bat Mitzvah. At the reception, I was seated with a local Israeli family who, I’d been told, were curious about Humanistic Judaism and our congregation. I didn’t need any encouragement, of course, and gave them my spiel, including the story of Simcha Zera.

No sooner had the name passed my lips than the woman with whom I was talking burst into laughter. Loud, uninterrupted, tear-inducing laughter. What? What had I said? What was so funny? When she had composed herself (minimally), she repeated the story and name to her husband and they both started laughing. I was really worried that I’d done something terribly wrong, something that might embarrass the Levys and Ruth, especially. What was it?

When the couple finally caught their breath they told me. My friend’s translation, they said, was technically 100% accurate. The problem was that our word for seedlings – *zera* – is a common slang term among Israeli youth for sperm. Oy! Ouch! The woman said she had pictured an eager young woman of 18 or so, visiting Israel for the first time and introducing herself to an Israeli young man as Simcha Zera, Celebrate Sperm. I thought we were sunk. We couldn’t go forward with this.

But the day was saved. My new Israeli friends informed me that the word *neta* had the same meaning as *zera* – “seedlings” – without any of the sexual connotation. Simcha Neta. Not quite as poetic, I thought, but a good name nonetheless.

Two weeks later, the Levys’ naming/adoption ceremony for Ruth/Qing Miao Huai/Simcha Neta went off without a hitch and brought tears of joy and wonder to many eyes. Humanistic Judaism adapting (while adopting) once again. Planting trees. Celebrating seedlings.

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# ARTS/LITERATURE

## Identity by Rabbi Jodi Kornfeld

When I look in my Jewish mirror, what do I see?  
My reflection has lines and shadows created by the Haskalah and not *olam habah*.  
It refracts the light of celebration, not victimhood.  
Looking back at me is a reinterpretation of our collective stories  
and a tradition that teaches but does not demand sanctification.

My eyes twinkle with the cultural touchstones and feast on the richness of diversity.  
I smile from the resilience of all those with whom I share the noun *Jew*;  
and yet I also cry at their displacement.  
My humanity is theirs; their legacy, mine.

How do I keep the growing length of years and distance of miles from  
eroding my reflection?  
What pieces of the tradition do I see in me?  
Those I've learned, those I've experienced, those I've escaped?  
I more easily recognize Kohelet than Ezra; Miriam than Bathsheva;  
the apikoros than the chasid.  
This mirror holds them all but it is not shattered into fragments,  
nor split with cracks of age.

Looking in your Jewish mirror, what images appear to you?  
My mirror can create so many reflections, yet it is not a funhouse mirror.  
It melds and molds the image I see,  
so different from what you may see, from what my own sister may see.  
My reflection, my Jewish self, stares back at me so clearly, just as yours does.  
It is what I create, and it is good.

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# IN REVIEW

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## Ethical Behavior: A Torah-Based View *A Short History of Jewish Ethics* by Alan Mittleman reviewed by Jeremy Kridel

In 1966, Alasdair MacIntyre published *A Short History of Ethics*. Later, he repented of his rather colorful past and became a Catholic proselyte. He also repented of his history of ethics, concluding that Western ethical philosophers were talking past one another.

Because MacIntyre's book was the inspiration for Alan Mittleman's *A Short History of Jewish Ethics* (Wiley-Blackwell, 2011), it is not surprising to find in Mittleman's work shortcomings somewhat similar to MacIntyre's. But whereas Mittleman avoids MacIntyre's despair over the diversity of Western ethics, Mittleman seems content simply to disregard dissenting voices in Jewish ethics.

Mittleman acknowledges at the outset that the very notion of Jewish ethics is fraught. Rabbinic Judaism focuses on *halakha* (law), which purports to be a system of rules promulgated by a superior being. It encompasses relationships between individuals and relationships between human beings and the supposed author of the law. Furthermore, *halakha* claims to be *revealed* law. According to the rabbinic account, all of the written Torah and at least some of its interpretation are the actual word of God.

For that reason, as Mittleman notes, talking about ethics as we know it in the Western world is difficult in biblical and rabbinic Judaism, which have no such concept as "legal but unethical" or of ethical rules at which one

may arrive entirely through reason. Even the Noachide laws (the commandments that, as the story goes, God gave Noah and his children as they left the ark) are said to have been revealed. Superficially, there are only "thou shalt" and "thou shalt not."

Thus, the rabbinic tradition denies ethicists the ability to discuss whether ethics is a matter of duties to one another. In the rabbinic view, divine revelation sets forth our duties toward others. Discussion of what is ethical is often limited to parsing out the content of revealed principles. The ethical propriety of the results – for example, the general rules for charging interest to non-Jews but not to Jews – often seems dubious. In that context, the only wedge into developing an independent ethics is to discuss attitudes that will lead to greater compliance with the Torah's dictates – an essentially virtue-based approach.

Mittleman (correctly, I think) settles upon precisely this sort of account of Jewish ethics. His book gives the impression that if Western-style ethical reasoning had a place in pre-modern Jewish ethics, it was in helping to identify and develop personal traits that would make Torah observance more likely, or in infusing observance with additional levels of meaning.

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**Jeremy Kridel**, an attorney, holds a master's degree in religion, with a focus on early Judaism and biblical interpretation. He is a student in the International Institute for Secular Humanistic Judaism rabbinic program, a member of the Society for Humanistic Judaism, and lives in Indianapolis.



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This was the case, according to Mittleman, even among the most forward-looking of the medieval philosophers. Moses Maimonides wanted to show that *halakha* was compatible with reason, but he stopped short of saying that *halakha* was based in something beyond its revealed roots. The medieval spiritualists – mostly Sephardic kabbalists, but also German *hasidim* who long predated the modern Hasidic movement – focused on explaining the virtues and habits associated with obedience to the rabbinic view of Torah, rather than on identifying what might make up ethical conduct.

Thus, Mittleman's account of ethical speculation in pre-modern Jewish tradition tells us less about ethical *content* than it does about ethical *attitudes*. Pre-modern Jewish ethical literature explores which dispositions might enhance one's ability to follow Torah and which dispositions are enhanced by observing Torah precepts. Each work Mittleman samples favors one or the other side of a chicken-egg speculation about whether Torah study and observance create virtue or whether developing virtue sets one on the path of greater observance and Torah knowledge. The point of all this, Mittleman observes, is to accelerate the process of perfecting one's soul or of drawing divine redemption into the world, or both.

Unfortunately, Mittleman's discussion of Jewish ethical literature is oddly shallow in all the eras he examines. For example, Maimonides garners only about thirteen pages of discussion – despite his place as the medieval Jewish philosopher *par excellence*, the relatively large and specialized field of study that centers on his thought and work, and his place as a model for later Jewish philosophers. And Mittleman concludes his examination of medieval Jewish philosophy with Maimonides, ignoring three subsequent centuries of material.

We might hope upon entering the modern period, when Jewish ethics begins to separate from Torah observance, for some insight into what makes Jewish ethics distinctively Jewish. Yet in Mittleman's book, what makes ethics Jewish is no more distinct than what we might get from any other discussion of markers of

Jewish identity: interaction with and analysis of Jewish texts. Even Baruch Spinoza, whom Mittleman claims as Jewish with one hand but pushes away with the other, is primarily described as struggling with the rabbinic tradition in asking what it means to live in the world and pursue the good. (Spinoza's conclusion that ceremonial laws of the Torah pertained only to Israelite polity and thus are obsolete is not unlike that of another Jew, the early Christian missionary Paul; Mittleman, of course, never mentions this point.)

As we move into Mittleman's account of the beginning of the modern era of Jewish ethics, we do see more of the diversity that marks contemporary Jewish life. Some of the thinkers he highlights include the Baal Shem Tov, founder of modern *Hasidism*, and the *musar* luminary Rabbi Yisrael Salanter. But these two ethical traditions remain nearly entirely within the context of traditional Torah observance, either making accessible to ordinary Jews knowledge of the Torah's supposed mystical underpinnings or attempting to infuse yeshiva-style Judaism with the virtues and ethical sensitivities that Talmud study fails to impart. Yet as Mittleman notes, this virtue-based approach holds true even as more rationalist approaches to Judaism emerge, like that of Moses Mendelssohn. After these thinkers, we are faced with another gap in Mittleman's work.

Differences even among nineteenth and twentieth century ethicists become more pronounced, in his view, when they grapple with the continued relevance or irrelevance of the Torah's ritual laws. Some of these ethicists, such as the German Jewish Neo-Kantian Hermann Cohen, equated the divine with nothing more than a universal moral imperative to action. From that perspective, Torah observance seems somehow irrelevant, even though Cohen tried to prove it to be rational. Martin Buber and Franz Rosenzweig took a less systematic view of ethics, seeing it as emerging in the personal encounter between individuals. Because they placed less emphasis on the rational underpinnings of *halakha*, Buber and Rosenzweig had less difficulty in finding continued relevance for the ritual dictates of Torah. Beyond these

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two thinkers and the French Jewish philosopher Emmanuel Levinas (whose work seeks to upend aspects of traditional philosophical discourse), Mittleman does little more than to name-check many contemporary Jewish ethicists.

From our secular humanistic Jewish perspective, what should we make of Mittleman's book? Mittleman initially frames his problem as distinguishing *halakha* from an independent body of ethics, but the works he reviews largely address how the two serve one another. He hardly addresses contemporary Jewish thought that grapples with ethical principles that do not center on enhancing Torah observance. And it is only toward the end of the book that Mittleman takes a (rather conservative) position on what makes Jewish ethics distinctly Jewish. Even there, he says little about this salient question except that it centers on "a covenantal partnership between what is ultimate and what is fleeting" (p. 193).

As frequent dissenters within the Jewish tradition, we might hope to see more discussion of thinkers we consider predecessors and fellow travelers. Mittleman largely disregards Ecclesiastes, Job, and even Proverbs in favor of more classically *halakhic* biblical material. We might also hope to see some of the

ethical thinkers that were shunted aside in the development of rabbinic Judaism, such as Philo of Alexandria; but Mittleman mentions Philo only in relation to the works of Saadia Gaon, a medieval thinker, and Mendelssohn. Mittleman's survey of late-modern thinkers bizarrely omits Abraham Joshua Heschel and Mordecai Kaplan. Those he does choose to mention are, with only a few exceptions, quite conservative.

Moreover, except for an occasional discussion of Kant, Plato, or Aristotle, Mittleman rarely addresses the interactions between Jewish ethics and philosophy and the work of non-Jewish thinkers. There is very little in formal Jewish philosophical inquiry that does not fundamentally depend upon the work of non-Jewish philosophers. Yet Mittleman treats Jewish ethics in a near-vacuum.

Thus, although Mittleman's descriptions of his subject texts are fair, his book is weak as a work of history. *A Short History of Jewish Ethics* suffers from the winners-write-history syndrome that such historians as Howard Zinn have tried to correct. The book focuses on a few works of Jewish ethics that have mattered to Jewish history's winners without revealing much of the diversity that has always marked Jewish discourse on ultimate matters.

## **Our UU Connection**

### ***Jewish Voices in Unitarian Universalism***

**Edited by Leah Hart-Landsberg and Marti Keller**  
**Reviewed by Louis Altman**

There is an extensive intersection between Unitarian-Universalism (UU) and liberal Judaism that is dramatized in this slim volume. The editors have collected twenty brief personal vignettes, written by people who have connections to both of these religious communities. Each vignette reads like a warm letter from a friend, describing a happy adjustment in their philosophical life

There are a great many Jewish UU's (this reviewer is one of them), and the stories of the individuals who contributed their reflections to

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**Louis Altman**, a patent and trademark attorney, is a past president of the Society for Humanistic Judaism and the 2012 recipient of the Rabbi Sherwin T. Wine Lifetime Achievement Award. He is a member of Kol Hadash Humanistic Congregation, Lincolnshire, IL, and the Congregation for Humanistic Judaism, Sarasota, FL.

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this book vary considerably. Some of the writers are the children of marriages between one parent who was at least culturally Jewish and one parent who was at least nominally Christian. Some of them were born to two Jewish parents, but when they visited a UU congregation they liked it so well (the choir, the camaraderie, the philosophy) that they stayed for life.

Some of them were Jewish nonbelievers who found a relatively nontheistic alternative in UU-ism. (Today they might have gravitated to Humanistic Judaism instead.) Some were the children of two Jewish parents who had themselves made the leap to a UU alternative but kept a sense of cultural Jewishness, and then passed on both aspects of their identity to their children. Some were born as UUs but married a Jewish partner and then the two of them folded those identities together to form a double-barreled united front. Some were gay or lesbian or transgendered and found more acceptance of their sexuality in the UU community than in their more traditional communities of origin.

The message gleaned from these disparate personal histories is that the writers refuse to

regard the UU-Jewish frontier as a dichotomy. Without exception, they love both their Jewish and UU identities, whether either one is inborn or acquired. The reader must consider the reasons for the compatibility between these two religious traditions, so divergent in their origins, yet so parallel in their appeal. Once the reader gets below the surface, it will not be difficult to understand these reasons. Open-mindedness, generosity, acceptance of differences, and reliance on reason and evidence are contagious values that can lead people to transcend boundaries of origin and background.

In one respect this particular group of writers may be atypical of Jewish Unitarians: the great majority of them became UU ministers, or student ministers, or teachers or functionaries in a UU seminary, or officials in the UU lay hierarchy. This of course is a testament to the powerful attraction that the UU community exerts upon liberal thinkers. But it would have been interesting to hear the stories of some ordinary UU members as well. Perhaps in the next volume?

# The History and Future of Secular Government

*How to Be Secular: A Call to Arms for Religious Freedom*

by Jacques Berlinerblau

reviewed by Rabbi Adam Chalom

During the past several years, advocates of public vouchers to fund private religious schools have been stymied by state constitutions that prohibit public money to pay for sectarian schools. It turns out that these provisions were not enacted for secular philosophical reasons; in fact, these “Blaine Amendments” (named after the nineteenth century politician James G. Blaine) were generally passed to undermine Catholic schools. And why had separate Catholic schools emerged a genera-

tion earlier? Because the routine Bible readings in public schools invariably mandated that a Protestant version of the Bible be used, since “Protestant officials concluded that the Protestant King James Bible was ‘nonsectarian’ and ‘nondenominational.’ As a ‘neutral’ text, it

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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.

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was deemed appropriate for all public school pupils. . . . Through it all, many Protestants cast themselves as defenders of the idea of separation” (*How to Be Secular*, p. 96).

We modern secularists like to think that there was a golden age of the separation of church and state: the Founding Fathers were essentially deists, who didn’t believe in the personal or active God of traditional religion. Even though the Declaration of Independence says men were “endowed [with rights] by their Creator,” that was not the same as God the lawgiver or God the Judge at the end of days. The U.S. Constitution contains no reference to God at all, and explicitly prohibits any religious test for federal office. The First Amendment prevents Congress from designating an established national religion, and the 1797 Treaty with Tripoli, ratified unanimously by the Senate and signed by President John Adams, put it even more clearly: “As the Government of the United States of America is not, in any sense, founded on the Christian religion, . . . .” Mail was even delivered on Sundays from 1775 onward!

Into this paradise of separation between church and state, between religion and government, goes our narrative, religious institutions have been sinisterly insinuating themselves ever since: fighting for prayer in public schools, voucher funding for religious education, public affirmations of Christianity, and on and on.

But real history is more complicated, and more interesting. And Jacques Berlinerblau’s newest book, *How to Be Secular: A Call to Arms for Religious Freedom* (Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2012), explores this complicated history with a clear purpose: to inspire today’s defenders of the secular public square to be more effective by basing their claims on real history, by forming coalitions with appropriate partners, and by learning the virtue of moderation in the pursuit of secular liberty. By exploring the extremes of absolute secularism in the Soviet Union with its official League of Militant Atheists and contemporary France with its ban of all religious clothing (head scarf, *kippa* or cross) in public schools, as

well as the odd bedfellows that created the basis for today’s church-state separationists, Berlinerblau offers lessons both in how to be secular and in how *not* to be secular. And he does so with his trademark wit and sardonic humor, which make for an entertaining, almost conversational, read.

Berlinerblau is the director of the Program for Jewish Civilization at Georgetown University and holds two Ph.D.s, one in ancient Near Eastern languages and literatures and one in theoretical sociology. His books include *The Secular Bible: Why Nonbelievers Must Take Religion Seriously* and *Thumpin’ It: The Use and Abuse of the Bible in Today’s Presidential Politics*. Those who attended Colloquium 2009 of the International Institute for Secular Humanistic Judaism remember his enthusiasm for both Humanistic Judaism and the concept of secularism; his keynote address was, “A Manifesto for a New Secular Judaism.” In his current book, *Secular Humanistic Judaism* makes an appearance (p. 187), though Berlinerblau distinguishes between Secular Jews and “secularish” Jews – secularized, but not self-consciously or philosophically secular à la Humanistic Judaism.

One of the hallmarks of *How to Be Secular* is Berlinerblau’s conscientious commitment to accuracy and clarity, even if it complicates the story we want to tell ourselves about America’s “secular” past. Berlinerblau points out, for example, that Bible readings and school prayer were the norm until the early 1960s, when a series of court cases in “blue” states such as Illinois and New York began the change. (When Southern Christians insist that stopping prayer is “removing God from the classroom,” they are historically if not constitutionally correct.) In *Engel v. Vitale* (1962), the New York Board of Regents’ official prayer was struck down; it ecumenically read “Almighty God, we acknowledge our dependence upon Thee, and we beg Thy blessings upon us, our parents, our teachers and our country. Amen.” And in 1963, *Abington School District v. Schempp* struck down the practice of reading prescribed Bible verses and the Lord’s Prayer (Matthew 6:9-13). According to Berlinerblau, fully 70 percent

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or more of Americans disapproved of these decisions, a statistic from which he draws the following lesson:

Pursuing a judicial strategy unattached to any legislative plan or grass-roots organization is a tactic that has served minorities well ...[yet] there are risks. Namely, that times change, opinions change, and, most important, the ideological drift of the Court changes.

Secularism prevailed in the judiciary but not in the legislative branch. Secularism won in the courts, but it never won hearts and minds. Many Americans felt that Washington, D.C., had imposed secularism upon them (p. 109).

Berlinerblau also demonstrates that the common assumption (by the religious and secular alike) that only nontheists would support a secular government is historically false. In the 1830s, during a debate over Sunday mail delivery (which did not end until 1912 as a result of a collaboration of labor unions and religious leaders), Baptist minister John Leland defended continued Sunday delivery:

The powers given to Congress are specific – guarded by a ‘hitherto shalt thou come and no further.’ Among all the enumerated powers given to Congress, is there one that authorizes them to declare which day of the week, month, or year, is more holy than the rest, too holy to travel upon? If there is none, Congress must overleap their bounds, by an unpardonable construction, to establish the prohibition prayed for.

A Baptist minister defending separation of church and state? Given the insistent push for public religiosity emblematic of southern Baptists today, we tend to forget that the original use of that phrase appears in a letter from Thomas Jefferson to Baptists in Danbury, Connecticut!

On the other hand, that same president and Founding Father, John Adams, who signed the Treaty of Tripoli denying that the United States was a Christian nation, also drafted the 1779 Massachusetts state constitution with

the inclusion of these words: “It is the right as well as the duty of all men in society, publicly, and at stated seasons to worship the SUPREME BEING, the great Creator and Preserver of the Universe . . . [citizens should] make suitable provision, at their own expense, for the institution of public worship of GOD.” Indeed, as Berlinerblau points out, “Jefferson framed legislation punishing Sabbath breakers, as did Madison” (p. 38).

What this history shows is that even those who have separationist impulses are not always consistent, and, conversely, even the very religious might be recruited to the cause of a secular public square. Berlinerblau observes that “more than a few forms of Christianity lie on the secular spectrum” (p. 157) and that many of the origins of the founders’ American secularism derived from their experiences with Christian sectarian strife. Mainstream liberal religions could also be allies: “members of the liberal faiths sometimes perceive secularism as militantly antireligious (the equation they have in mind is *secularist* = *extreme atheist*). In fact, liberal religious groups have historically found themselves occupying an uncomfortable ‘third way,’ or ‘mediationist,’ position, stuck somewhere between orthodoxy and infidelity. Secular activism will need to rectify that problem by finding ways to let the liberal faiths comfortably situate themselves on the spectrum” (p. 161). Likewise for other religious minorities like Hindus, Muslims, and religious Jews, and political fellow travelers like libertarians (whose slogan, in the libertarian *Reason* magazine, is “free minds and free markets”).

Berlinerblau’s last chapter, “Tough Love for American Secularism,” may not have won him friends among the activists at American Atheists or the Freedom From Religion Foundation, who never met a public faith affirmation they wouldn’t fight, but it does provide some pragmatic advice, including to be pragmatic: “Secularists must recall that politics is the art of the possible. Total separation of church and state is a nonstarter in the White House and it matters little if its occupant is a Democrat or a Republican” (p. 201). There are times to use

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your opponents' radicalism against them, times to "Fight Anti-Atheist Prejudice," and times to "Grin and Bear It":

There is no constitutional sanction against [President Barack] Obama or [Texas Governor Rick] Perry, as private citizens, doing God talk. Interestingly, the Freedom From Religion Foundation tried to prevent Obama from authorizing a national day of prayer. The Federal Court of Appeals for the Seventh Circuit in Wisconsin snippily dismissed the foundation's case, arguing

that 'hurt feelings differ from legal injury.' . . . Secularists, for now, need to focus solely on the significant trespasses (pp. 205-206).

As humanists and Humanistic Jews, we know that there has never been a paradise, whether for Jews, or secularists, or anyone. And there never will be as long as humans are human. But we also know that if we work together to incrementally improve the world, we can make a difference. Berlinerblau's full-throated defense and exhortation to American secularism is to do just that.

# Remembering Sholem Aleichem

## *The Worlds of Sholem Aleichem*

by Jeremy Dauber

reviewed by Bennett Muraskin

Sholem Aleichem is most widely remembered as the author of the stories about Tevye the dairyman, the basis for the widely popular Broadway play and Hollywood movie *Fiddler on the Roof*. Some may recall that he was called the "Jewish Mark Twain," an endearing appellation, but not entirely accurate. He is generally depicted as a man of the people, whose writings captured the vanishing world of traditional Jewish life in the Russian *shtetl* with pathos and humor. Jeremy Dauber's mission in *The Worlds of Sholem Aleichem: The Remarkable Life and Afterlife of the Man Who Created Tevye* (Nextbook/Shocken, 2013) is to prove that nearly everything you think you know about Sholem Aleichem is wrong – and he succeeds.\*

Sholem Aleichem was born Sholem Rabinowitz in 1859 in Pereyaslav, a Ukrainian village within Czarist Russia, and grew up in the nearby village of Woronko. His father was well-to-do but lost his money, so the boy knew both wealth and poverty. His mother died when he was 13, and he was subject to the whims of an unpleasant stepmother. His Hasidic father gave his son both a traditional and a modern education; by his teens Sholem was fluent not

only in his native Yiddish but also in Russian and was literate in Hebrew. From an early age, he loved books. Along with the Bible and other traditional literature, he read the classic Russian writers – Gogol, Turgenev, Chekhov, and Gorky – in the original, as well as Charles Dickens in Russian translation. In other words, he was no mere story teller.

It was through his linguistic skill that the young man met his future wife, Olga Loyeff. He was hired to tutor her in Russian. When her father, a wealthy estate manager, found out about the budding romance, he fired Sholem. Within a few years, the couple reunited, and after their marriage Sholem went into the family business. When his father-in-law died in 1887, Sholem inherited his entire estate. Now

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**Bennett Muraskin**, a union representative for higher education faculty and other professionals in New Jersey, is adult education chair of the Jewish Cultural School and Society of North Jersey, an affiliate of the Congress of Secular Jewish Organizations. He is the author of *Humanist Readings in Jewish Folklore* and *Let Justice Well Up Like Water*.

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\*Another good source for the life and times of Sholem Aleichem is the film *Laughing in the Darkness* (2011), directed by Joseph Dorman.

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a wealthy man, he moved to Kiev with his wife and their first two children. He never visited a *shtetl* again.

As a budding writer, he adopted the pen name Sholem Aleichem (an expression that literally means “peace be with you” and is the Yiddish equivalent of “hello” or “how do you do”). Yiddish was then considered a disreputable jargon, and its literature pulp fiction. Determined to raise its reputation, Sholem Aleichem in 1889 used part of his inheritance to publish an anthology that included writings of the best Yiddish literary figures including Mendele Moykher Sforim (pen name, Sholem Abramowitz), the first Yiddish writer worthy of the name, and I. L. Peretz. He also included his own first novel, *Stempenyu*, a story about a Jewish musician who tries to seduce a married woman. With Mendele, he formed a lasting friendship. With Peretz, it was the beginning of a lifelong literary feud. Although the three names have been irrevocably joined in studies of Yiddish literature, two out of these three classic Yiddish writers were not on good terms.

Sholem Aleichem published a second anthology of Yiddish literature and was planning a third when disaster struck. In 1890, he lost his entire fortune in the Kiev stock market. For the next eight years he tried to get back into the market without success. He was, in fact, a failed capitalist, and his family became wandering Jews, moving to Odessa and then back to Kiev.

To help out financially, Olga went to school to become a dentist, by no means the only time she sacrificed to help the family and her husband’s career. They had a strong marriage, and Sholem Aleichem was a good father to their six children. Ironically, the children grew up more literate in Russian than in Yiddish.

Sholem Aleichem’s financial woes inspired the creation in 1891 of his first great literary character, Menachem Mendel, a *luftmentsh* who scrambles to make a living by wheeling and dealing, never letting failure get in the way of his next get-rich-quick scheme. Sholem

Aleichem constructed the novel through letters between Menachem Mendel, who is constantly running around, and his long-suffering wife, who constantly pleads with him to return home.

While on a summer vacation in 1894, Sholem Aleichem met a talkative dairyman named Tevye. During the next twenty years, he wrote a series of short stories loosely based on this personality, introducing a wife, an indeterminate number of daughters, and never-ending trials and tribulations. Tevye became the archetype of the poor but resilient *shtetl* Jew, coping with family crises, social transformation, and persecution.

Many chapters of the Tevye stories did not make it into the *Fiddler* movie. Tevye allows his wife’s cousin, Menachem Mendel, to invest a few rubles he has managed to save, with predictable results. His two youngest daughters, who barely appear in the Broadway play, lead unhappy lives. One commits suicide over a failed romance. The other suffers in poverty in America. Tevye’s wife, Golde, dies. He plans to leave for Palestine, but the death of his son-in-law Motl from tuberculosis forces him to remain in Russia. At the end, when all the Jews in the region are expelled by Czarist decree, it is not clear where Tevye and his diminished family will end up. This is a much darker story than is conveyed by *Fiddler*.

Apart from Yiddish literature, the cause that most attracted Sholem Aleichem was Zionism. He wrote pamphlets, gave speeches, raised money, and attended conferences. Herzl’s death in 1904 prompted him to write a memorial. When revolution erupted in Russia in 1904-05, Sholem Aleichem briefly lent his support to the socialist cause, but his enthusiasm faded in the teeth of czarist repression. He and his family were lucky to escape a pogrom. For their safety and for economic reasons, Sholem Aleichem decided it was time to get out of Russia and seek his fortune in America as a playwright.

After a successful speaking tour in European capitals, including Vienna, Paris, and

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London, Sholem Aleichem arrived in New York City to a hero's welcome in 1906. But from there it was all downhill. His plays were flops. Instead, he eked out a living writing stories for the Orthodox Jewish press. Abraham Cahan, the formidable editor of the socialist *Jewish Daily Forward*, declared Sholem Aleichem passé. Angry at his treatment by the *makhers* of the Yiddish theater and press, Sholem Aleichem in 1907 returned to Russia, having formed a negative impression of America as a land of boors and swindlers, an impression that would never change. (This is yet another revelation that shatters the popular image of Sholem Aleichem.) He much preferred the heavily Jewish cities in Poland, the Baltic provinces, and Ukraine, where he went on the lecture circuit. However, he became ill with tuberculosis and spent the next four years convalescing in northern Italy, Switzerland, and Germany.

Throughout this period, he continued to write, supported by royalties from his Yiddish stories as well as two volumes of Russian translations. A series of stories set in third class railroad cars peopled by loquacious Jewish travelers are among his best. One of them, "The Man from Buenos Aires," would have been understood as referring to the commerce in Jewish young women from Poland to Argentina, where they were forced to become prostitutes, a phenomenon known as "the white slave trade." In his most serious novel, *The Bloody Hoax* (1912), inspired by Mark Twain's *The Prince and the Pauper*, a Jewish and Gentile boy change places. It is a literary commentary on the famous "ritual murder" trial of Mendel Bellis, accused of having murdered a Christian child in Kiev to use his blood for the baking of Passover matzo. When Bellis was acquitted in 1913, Sholem Aleichem was so relieved that he sent Bellis a set of his collected works as a present.

Restored to health, Sholem Aleichem planned to remain in Europe, but World War I intervened. Because he and his family were Russian subjects living in Germany, they were in danger of being detained as enemy aliens. Rather than return to Russia, Sholem Aleichem had the foresight to escape to Copenhagen and

then book passage to America. It took some time for most of his family to join him. The death of a son left behind in Denmark was one of the most devastating events of his life and may have sped his own death from tuberculosis and diabetes in 1916.

During his two final years in the United States, Sholem Aleichem began his autobiography, *From the Fair*, and continued work on *Motl, the Cantor's Son*, a novel seen through the eyes of a mischievous nine-year-old boy about the experiences of a family and friends who emigrate from Russia to America. It is, in my opinion, his best work. Unfortunately, Sholem Aleichem did not live long enough to complete it. He did, however, live to see chapters from *Motl* and other stories translated and printed in the *New York World*, an English language mass circulation newspaper – his first appearance on the American literary scene.

Sholem Aleichem's funeral is legendary. The procession traveled from the Bronx to Manhattan and Brooklyn, attracting more than 150,000 mourners. Yosele Rosenblatt, the most famous cantor of his time, sang the traditional *El Male Rachamim*. Speakers at the funeral and, two weeks later, at a Carnegie Hall memorial included leaders of both the uptown German Jewish and downtown East European Jewish communities; among them were the philanthropist Jacob Schiff, Rabbi Judah Magnes, and Yiddish intellectuals and literary figures, such as Chaim Zhitlovsky, Sholem Asch, and Avrom Reisen. The New York Yiddish and English press sang Sholem Aleichem's praises and a gentile Congressman read his will into the Congressional Record. All of this acclaim conveniently overlooked Sholem Aleichem's negative attitude toward America – and the legend began.

Dauber relates the "afterlife" of Sholem Aleichem, including the genesis and production of the play and movie *Fiddler On The Roof*. But that story is better told in Alisa Solomon's *Wonder of Wonders: A Cultural History of Fiddler on the Roof*, which, coincidentally, was released exactly two weeks after the Dauber book in October 2013.



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*The Worlds of Sholem Aleichem* is the only biography of the man who is considered the greatest of all Yiddish writers. Why it took ninety-eight years for this to happen is a mystery. Dauber has clearly done us a great service. Yet in his determination to prove that Sholem Aleichem is a serious writer, Dauber forgets that he was also a master satirist and often downright funny. Dauber's summaries of Sholem Aleichem's works suck all the humor out of them. In addition, Dauber neglects some of Sholem Aleichem's finest stories, which are written for children, or gives them deep, dark meanings they do not deserve.

Dauber fails to distinguish between Sholem Aleichem's plays, which are mediocre, his novels, which are of mixed quality, and his short stories, which are superb. In this regard, it is no accident that *Tevey*, *the Dairyman*,

the book that made him immortal, was written in stages and reads more like a series of short stories than a novel. Surprisingly, for a literary critic, Dauber fails to situate Sholem Aleichem among his literary contemporaries in terms of style and content. How does he compare to Peretz, Reisin, Asch, Pinski, Opatochu, and another Yiddish writer known for his humor, Moshe Nadir? For that matter, what did Sholem Aleichem think of them? Other than his low opinion of Peretz, we are left in the dark.

Dauber, a professor of Yiddish literature at Columbia University, serves on the Board of Directors of the Yiddish Book Center, the most important institution in the United States dedicated to the preservation of Yiddish literature. Despite its faults, his work gives lovers of Yiddish hope that it still has a future.

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## Briefly Speaking *continued from page 2*

The defendants argue that the HCPA violates their First Amendment rights. SHJ Executive Director Bonnie Cousens responds: “This case is not about freedom of religion. HCPA protects victims from violent crimes when the perpetrator targets a victim based on their religion, including when all parties share a religious belief.”

### SHJ Joins Amicus Briefs in Support of Same-Sex Marriage

The Society for Humanistic Judaism (SHJ) has joined a coalition of twenty-six religious and cultural organizations in filing two amicus briefs in the Tenth Circuit Court defending same-sex marriage. In both Utah (*Kitchen v. Herbert*) and Oklahoma (*Bishop v. Smith*), district courts struck down amendments to the state constitutions. The Circuit Court briefs contend that the marriage bans in Utah and Oklahoma “violate not only the Fourteenth Amendment’s Equal Protection Clause, but also the First Amendment’s Establishment Clause. A decision overturning the Marriage Ban would assure full state recognition of civil marriages while allowing religious groups the freedom to choose how to define marriage for themselves.” Recognizing that religious views differ regarding what marriages qualify to be solemnized and that the Constitutional guarantee of religious freedom for all must be protected, the briefs argue that “selective religious understandings cannot define marriage recognition under civil law.” All states are subject to the First Amendment’s prohibition against denying individuals the right to marry simply because such marriages would offend the tenets of a particular religious group.

### SHJ Urges Reconsideration of J Street by Presidents’ Conference

In a 22-17 vote, the Conference of Presidents of Major Jewish Organizations rejected J Street’s bid for membership in the Conference. In a response, the Society for Humanistic Judaism (SHJ) called upon the Conference “to revise its procedures for approving new members to ensure that they promote pluralism within the Jewish community and urges the Conference to reconsider the application of J Street.” While many of the largest organizational members in the Conference voted for J Street’s admission, some organizations maintain that J Street’s positions on Israel and the Middle East place them beyond the pale.

“The strength of the Jewish community lies in its pluralistic nature,” said Bonnie Cousens, SHJ Executive Director. “Although not taking a position on J Street’s policies and activities, the Society recognizes that J Street represents a vibrant, active component of the Jewish community. To exclude so large a portion of the community from the Conference limits the voices that are heard and diminishes the Conference’s ability to represent the full American Jewish community on issues relating to Israel.”

### SHJ Disappointed by Supreme Court Prayer Decision

The Society for Humanistic Judaism (SHJ) expressed its deep disappointment in the 5-4 decision issued May 5 by the U.S. Supreme Court in favor of sectarian legislative prayer in *Town of Greece v. Galloway*. The Court upheld the town’s practice of inviting only Christian clergy to deliver the invocations. The prayers were unmistakably Christian in nature. Such sectarian prayer supports a specific set of religious beliefs, excluding both the beliefs of other faiths and of the nonreligious. For the Court to allow such a practice to continue upholds government-supported religious expression, a clear violation of the First Amendment Establishment Clause.

The SHJ had joined the Center for Inquiry, the American Humanist Association, Americans for Religious Liberty and other secular organizations in filing a friend-of-the-court brief in the case opposing the practice of the Town of Greece.

The American Humanist Association has announced an initiative to identify secular and atheist speakers willing to lead secular invocations. A secular invocation calls upon the audience’s shared human values for guidance and authority in their actions. Several SHJ rabbis and leaders have already registered (<http://humanist-society.org/invocations/>).

#### CORRECTION:

*In the Summer/Autumn 2013 issue, the location of Beth Chaverim Humanistic Jewish Community was incorrectly identified. Beth Chaverim Humanistic Jewish Community is located in Deerfield, IL. We apologize to Rabbi Jodi Kornfeld (info@bethchaverim.net) and the community for incorrectly identifying the community’s location.*



The Society for Humanistic Judaism was established in 1969 to provide a humanistic alternative in Jewish life. The Society for Humanistic Judaism mobilizes people to celebrate Jewish identity and culture consistent with a humanistic philosophy of life, independent of supernatural authority.

#### The Society for Humanistic Judaism:

- Helps to organize Humanistic Jewish communities — congregations and havurot.
- Enables Humanistic Jews throughout the world to communicate with one another.
- Serves the needs of individual Humanistic Jews who cannot find communities that espouse their beliefs.
- Creates celebrational, inspirational, and educational materials.
- Promotes the training of rabbis, leaders, and teachers for Humanistic Jewish communities.
- Provides a voice for Humanistic Jewish values.
- Belongs to an international community of Secular Humanistic Jews.

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