

Elul: The Month of Jewish Secular Humanism

By David J. Steiner, IISHJ Rabbinic Student

If there could be one consensus among Jews, it might be that we wouldn't be around had Rabban Yochanan ben Zakkai not sued for peace and requested Yavne as the home of his new academy. (BT Gittin 56-57a) Without his vision for the future and his steadfast will to bring Judaism into a world without a temple for sacrifices, we might not be here today. This is not to say that Rabban Yochanan created consensus in his day, just that he was the victor in his moment on the historical stage. One detractor, Rabbi Joshua, said: "Who will remove the dirt from your eyes Rabban Yochanan ben Zakkai? You used to expound all your life that *Iyov* (Job) only served God through fear, as it says, 'A perfect and straight man, God-fearing, and turning from evil (Job 1:8).' (Sotah 6)"

Yochanan believed that we perform mitzvot out of fear of God, not love. This could be understood as self-service. He believed that humans act as they do for their own benefit. This may explain why, in *Avot d'Rabbi Natan*, Yochanan is quoted as saying "If you have a sapling in your hand and people tell you that the Messiah has come, plant the sapling and then go and greet him." Tend to your own world before you tend to God's because this is the world you inhabit.

I am a secular humanist and a Jew who takes inspiration from Yochanan. Unlike some in the International Institute for Secular Humanistic Judaism, I am not an atheist. I really don't concern myself with God's existence. Even if I were a believer, at best, God would be that transcendent entity that resides in a palace far from the rest of us, as Rambam suggests. He would mind his business, and I would mind mine. Ramban is more eloquent. "True worship of God is only possible when correct notions of Him have previously been conceived. (The Guide to the Perplexed, 3:51)"

One example of Yochanan's humanism is his distinction between the robber (Gazlan) and the thief (Ganav). For Yochanan, a thief was akin to the men of Shechem who would hide out on the hilltops and steal from people in the daylight. Robbers wouldn't hide. "He could argue that the reason they were hiding themselves was so that people should not notice them and run away from them."

"The students asked Rabbi Yochanan ben Zakai, 'Why was the Torah stricter with a Ganav/Thief than with a Gazlan/Robber?' His reply is brilliant: "This one (the Gazlan, who stole in the open,) equalized the honor of the slave with the honor of his master, whereas this one (the Ganav, who hid from his fellow humans,) did not equalize the honor of the slave with the honor of his master." Neither of them cared about God's seeing or hearing of his crime, but the Ganav/thief also didn't care about humans. Later on the same page, Yochanan also expresses concern for human dignity: "Observe how great is the importance attached to the dignity of Man."

We just entered the month of Elul, the last month before Rosh Hashana and the beginning of the Days of Awe. While I appreciate that the Jewish calendar has a ten-day period set aside for personal accounting, I prefer the 29 days set aside for peace

between hu/man and her fellow hu/man. This is the month of secular humanism, when we assign ourselves the task of making peace with the people in our lives. One might even say that since Elul precedes Tishrei, and 29 days are greater than 10, that Judaism puts greater significance on peace among people. In fact, even traditional Judaism accepts that one cannot make peace with God without first making peace *bein adam l'chevero*, between man and man, and it names these 29 days Elul because of the acronym, *Ani l'dodi v'dodi li*, I am to my beloved and my beloved is to me. In other words, these are the days that Judaism has set aside for secular humanism, and our efforts -- whether we believe in an immanent god or not -- should be focused on humanity. This, one could understand, is why some chant *slichot* all month, with the assumption that the listener is in heaven, while all the rest of us hear the sound of the shofar down here on Earth.
