

# Does Jewish Secularism Have a Future?

## Our Discussion Continues

**T**he May-June issue of our magazine focused almost exclusively on analyses of the decline of Jewish secularism to its struggling status today. Three articles, as well as eighteen responses from people from various corners of the secular Jewish world, described the varieties of Jewish secularism and the processes of assimilation, anti-Semitism, political and cultural repression, and internal factors that led to that decline. Representatives of thriving secular Jewish communities also offered some “best practices” advice and thereby turned the conversation towards the future.

We now continue the discussion, with more short essays that respond to these questions:

- *Why do you think secular Jewish identity has been so marginalized in Jewish life today? To what do you attribute the decline of the vibrant secular Jewish culture of one or two generations ago?*

- *What steps/models/actions do you think would help revive secular Jewish identity as an alternative way of being an affirmative Jew in today's world? What's getting in the way?*

- *To what extent do you see possibilities of turning the secular-religious “wall” into something permeable? To what extent is your own identity fluid in this way?*

**Eric Caplan**

## Preparing for a Cultural Shift

**O**bserving contemporary American Judaism as a whole, secular Jews can find enough in it to encourage them or to depress them. On the one hand, there is great interest in Jewish films, music and other non-religious, cultural expressions of Jewish identity. Growing numbers of Jews engage in social justice — a commitment dear to secular Judaism since its inception — doing so as a response to Jewish history rather than to please a commanding God. Religion itself has been secularized, focusing above all on improving the lives of its adherents in the “now.” The afterlife is a minor, if not vanishing, concern. As Lawrence Bush and Mitchell Silver have shown in their latest books, much of contemporary Jewish theology presents God in naturalist terms, avoiding statements that make

atheists uncomfortable.

On the other hand, Orthodox Jews constitute a growing percentage of America's affiliated Jews, continue to hold right-leaning positions on most political and social issues, and are likely to wield increasing influence on the positions of the official Jewish community. Of the growing number of Jews who do not affiliate with synagogues, the majority still define themselves as religious. Studies also indicate that American Jews are more individualistic than their predecessors. This is especially challenging for secular Jewish organizations because they see Jews as a people with a priori attachments and responsibilities to each other.

All of these developments mirror trends in American life that are unlikely to change in the very near future. But the present cultural moment

— for good and for bad — will pass. It is not hard to imagine a change in cultural winds that would reposition Jewish secular organizations. After all, it was only twenty-three years ago that Jonathan Woocher was able to describe American Jews as embracing a “civil Judaism” built on the very national ties that have become so elusive in contemporary American Jewish life.

What should secular Jews do while awaiting this possible cultural shift? One thing that they should *not* do is tone down their atheism or their commitment to Jewish peoplehood in the hope of attracting more Jews. The most successful groups in America put forth a clear position that differentiates them from the general culture and from other groups. They offer a distinct approach to life that justifies the investment (financial and otherwise) demanded by group membership.

On the proactive side, established secular Jew-

ish organizations should reach out to the many new Jewish groups organizing cultural events and social activism. There they will encounter strong numbers of Jews who are engaged with the same cultural aspects of Jewish peoplehood that secular Judaism promotes. But while these new groups can organize a successful event or series of events, they are not built to offer a full range of permanent community ties. Ultimately, people need a comprehensive community within which to celebrate their *simkhes* and find support in hard times. The established secular Jewish organizations can fill this vacuum, and their ability to do so may be key to their survival.

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**Paul C. Mishler**

## The Zionist Stumbling Block

**T**he “Jewish secular progressive tradition” is a euphemism and we cannot move into our future without going to the heart of the euphemism. What we really mean is that we are part of a tradition that rejected all supernatural notions of divinity and looked to a radical restructuring of the social order to bring about social justice for Jews and everyone else. Traditionally this meant we were atheists of the left. Those of us who continue to identify as progressive, secular Jews are radicals and not religious.

With this as an introduction there are a number of critical questions raised — and omitted — in JEWISH CURRENTS that we need to unpack and critique in order to address where we as a community, and as individuals within a number of communities, can go.

First, the definition of Jewish secular identity

has to go beyond the relationship between ourselves and religious Jews. The “secular-religious divide” may have been important a hundred years ago when Jewish activists in the labor and radical movements broke with their own religious upbringing and fashioned a different way of being a Jew. They argued that the Jewish community was an ethnic/cultural community defined by common experiences and, very importantly, a common language, Yiddish. (Of course they were thinking about their own community in Eastern Europe and did not incorporate the Sephardim or other Jewish religious communities with different cultural traditions.)

The relationship between these secular Jews and the religious communities in which they had grown up was central to their analysis and sense of identity. Yet so was the relationship they conceived

with the non-Jewish world. Instead of believing in the ineradicability of anti-Semitism, they looked to the solidarity possible between Jewish and non-Jewish oppressed peoples. Jewish (especially Yiddish-speaking) activists participated in the broader radical movements in the countries in which they lived, and argued not only for the recognition of Jewish ethnicity in international radical contexts, but also for the recognition of the non-Jewish movement within the Jewish communities.

This has been crucial in the United States, where the movement for social justice has been, and will be, largely non-Jewish. Jews have distinguished themselves in making solidarity against racism — and against all other forms of discrimination and oppression — central to who we are. The important question for us now is: What is required in our relationship to the multiple communities engaged in struggle?

**This leads me to something most important that** was absent in Lawrence Bush's cartoon-essay: the profoundly negative role of Zionism. Here I am not addressing the particular issues of Israeli policy, but the Zionist ideological position, which has positioned itself in opposition to the progressive tradition in the Jewish community. While we are skeptical of state power and — following in the footsteps of the best of our biblical prophets — judge our leaders on the basis of where they stand in relation to justice, Zionism, like all nationalisms, claims our allegiance regardless of the justice or injustice of Israeli state policies. While our tradition is internationalist and anti-racist and sees the future of our people as tied to justice for all peoples, Zionism holds that what happens to others matters less than what happens to Jews, and that other peoples, especially colonized people of the Mideast, are less than we are. The Zionist argument is that the Holocaust justifies a narrow self-preservationist perspective, when in fact the history of the Holocaust is full of examples of non-Jews acting in solidarity with us (not least among the nations that united to defeat Nazi Germany militarily).

For those radical Jews committed to working

within the Jewish community, it is obvious that a direct confrontation with the Zionist sentimentality pervasive in the U.S. Jewish community would be a mistake. But if we are interested in defining ourselves, we should be clear that our worldview is not their worldview.

Finally, Bush's discussion of the debates within the secular Jewish world between the "left" and the "right" reduces this to a kind of camp color war between Kinderland and Kinder Ring. I know that at this point in history these battles may seem arcane. But they were important. It seems that everyone from the "left" part of this tradition is supposed to apologize for the policies of the Soviet government, but somehow the role of the "right" is left alone. If the Jewish communist left saw the Soviet Union with idealistic rose-colored glasses, the "right" have more direct positions to answer for. It was Jewish social democracy that defended the Vietnam War. It was Jewish social democracy that split the long alliance between Jewish labor and the African-American community during the 1968 teachers strike in New York. It was Jewish social democracy that ended up supporting the role of the Central Intelligence Agency in the AFL-CIO based on the belief that the anti-colonial movements in the developing world were fundamentally anti-Semitic because they saw in the struggle of the Palestinians a sister struggle. These were, and remain, positions that damaged the struggles for justice here, and contributed to deadly policies in Latin America. When do they have to apologize for that?

I had hoped to write about my tradition in an elegiac and celebratory fashion. Instead I have ended up with the other Jewish trope: being argumentative and critical. Still, I do think there is a future for us. Our history and tradition calls upon us to bring our Jewish sensibility into the broader movements for social justice here and around the world. Ours is not better than other traditions, and we need to be in respectful dialogue with the other social justice traditions — those of the African American community, Christian traditions, and the frameworks brought by more recent immigrants. We know how difficult solidarity is,

and how desperately it is needed. There are many young Jews who are distinguishing themselves in the current struggles in the labor movement, in the global justice movements, in gender justice struggles and many more. If we cannot offer them a real tradition to be part of, we will lose them. We will not lose them from the struggle for social justice, but from the Jewish people. And that would be a great loss.

**Adam Chalom**

## The Advantages of a Congregation

**M**y maternal grandparents were in a Jewish secularist intermarriage: one from Workmen's Circle, the other from the Sholem Aleichem *shules*. My mother attended a Sholem Aleichem *shule* and a *Farband* (Yiddish-speaking Labor Zionist summer camp) and loves her Yiddish. There were other factors, however, that prompted her and others like her to move away from a secular Jewish community and towards a Jewish congregation besides the fear of anti-Semitism and the desire for social acceptance described by April Rosenblum.

1) Affluence: Some Jews stopped being socialists because the labor movement was successful. Children of sweatshop laborers became professionals, and children of professionals became academics and intellectuals. Once you are more successful and have more "stuff," an economic revolution is both more abstract and too radical. You may well keep voting Democratic, but socialism or communism just aren't who you are any more.

2) Priorities: In the secular Jewish world, politics could be more important than Jewishness. Yiddish was the *mameloshn*, but for some it turned out to be a means to the end of socialism. The leftism was transmitted, but not always the secular *yidishkayt*. Which was the greater "sin": marrying a religious

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person, marrying a non-Jew, or marrying a political conservative (i.e. "fascist")? In other words, was it just a Jewish flavor of socialism being practiced, or was it a socialism-inflected Jewishness?

3) Losing your horses: Even among those for whom Yiddish was an end in itself, America is where languages come to fade — as has happened in many ethnic groups — and not just because pernicious German Jews try stamping it out. If you hitch your wagon to socialism (though "bourgeois" liberalism becomes more attractive as you rise economically) and to Yiddish (in which the third generation can swear but not read, write or converse), you end up needing a new driving force to keep a secular Jewish identity moving.

4) Attraction: There are strengths to the religious model of the *beyt kneset* (synagogue) as a house of meeting that have attracted formerly secular Jews, even beyond their desire for social acceptance. Here they could celebrate more Jewish holidays, define their connection to Jewish tradition positively rather than in opposition, and have an expert guide to Jewish life and personal philosophy "on staff" to help in special and difficult moments.

A Humanistic Jewish congregation, in particular, enabled my *veltlikhe yidishe mame* to have her secular beliefs and her cultural Judaism, and eat some

Jewish tradition (as appropriate), too.

Rather than castigating those who joined congregations as submitting to “circumstances of oppression and fear,” we should also explore the positive reasons they made their choice, and then reach out to them with new alternatives that speak to them where they are, not where their parents were or where we want them to be. This is what Humanistic Judaism strives to do — to reach secular Jews from many backgrounds: raised secular, raised Conservative or Reform or even Orthodox and evolved out of those origins; Americanized Israeli and Russian Jews; “just Jews” who feel culturally and ethnically Jews. A big-tent secular Jewishness or Hu-

manistic Judaism (or whatever you call it) should try to bring them all together by what they share — a cultural Jewish identity driven by a human-focused philosophy of life — which is greater than what divides them.

Demanding that secular Jewish circles believe in all 95 Theses means a small future, not the serious presence we both need and deserve.

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**Alice Rothchild**

## Secularism Is Endangered without Progressivism

**T**he vigorous secular Jewish culture of the early 20<sup>th</sup> century was grounded in a potent mix of *yidishkayt* and progressive politics. Yiddish, the language of the worker as well as the poet, was a fertile vehicle for American populism and activism, melded to a Jewish identity stretching back to the shtetls of Eastern Europe. As Jews lost their underdog/outsider status, many assimilated or joined suburban temples, and the old-world cohesion and the political pull of union struggles, civil rights, and women’s liberation lost their potency.

On another front, with the founding of the State of Israel in 1948, Jewish identity increasingly became synonymous with Zionism. Immediately after the Holocaust, this presented few issues for Jews, secular or religious, and was a point of group cohesion. But the Israeli-Palestinian conflict ground on for decades, with the emergence of painful insights from Israeli historians and increasing awareness of a coexisting Palestinian narrative. With the destructive persistence of the Israeli

occupation, politically progressive Jews found themselves forced to choose between an uncritical love of Israel or a complex, multi-dimensional understanding of the Middle East. Many secular Jews, uninvolved with any form of religious Judaism and weighted with a sense of alienation from the basic tribal instincts of the group, began to ask: Why be Jewish, if it means bearing responsibility for a country that is building walls and ghettos and treating Palestinians with a mixture of hubris and racism?

The policies of the Israeli government — despite the country’s vibrant educational, cultural, and religious contributions — have thus tainted many Jews’ pride in their history and their sense that Jews are on the side of justice. Without that sense, secular Jews are an increasingly endangered species. Besides self-deprecating humor, *klezmer* music, and comforting food, there is less and less to draw upon in secular Jewish culture that is both particularly engaging and particularly Jewish. The rise of the Jewish right, their links to

Christian evangelicals, and the muzzling of Jewish dissent on the topic of Israel, push many secular Jews over the edge.

The paucity of vibrant and growing progressive Jewish secular movements and cultural institutions combined with the troubling consequences of Zionism, make secular Judaism a hard sell to

the next generation in search of their unique place, identity, and community.

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**Jerald Bain**

## An Unorthodox View of Survival

**D**espite the cover title — “Does Jewish Secularism Have a Future?” — the May-June issue of JEWISH CURRENTS was mainly a nostalgic review of what was. Secular Jewish history of any merit seemed to end with the demise of *yidishkayt* in the 1960s. This was clearly enunciated by April Rosenblum in her article, which gave a very coherent and interesting version of events that, in her view, caused the disintegration and ultimate loss of the vibrant, secular, Yiddish/ideologically-based Judaism so near and dear to many of us raised in that tradition. But she ended her overview with this: “The loss of a proud, actively secular Jewish identity was a casualty of a larger push to subdue Jewish ethnicity as a whole . . . What has been lost is the range of possibilities in which actively secular Jewish identity is one of the legitimate ways to be a proud Jew.”

Has she not heard of the Congress of Secular Jewish Organizations (CSJO), the Society for Humanistic Judaism (SHJ), the Workmen’s Circle and many, many more Secular Jewish individuals, congregations and organizations in active pursuit of secular Jewish identity both old and new?

Lawrence Bush’s “Dinosaur Days” gave an entertaining, personalized romp through his Secular Jewish experience. But what did his last page say? “Guess it’s time to go looking for dinosaurs! Anybody else out there?” For those of us born and raised in a classical Secular Jewish milieu,

it is warm and fuzzy and heartwrenching to recall the past fondly — but yes, there is somebody else out there and they’re not hard to find (at least in larger cities).

Rabbi Adam Chalom’s eloquent tribute to Rabbi Sherwin Wine held out hope for a glimpse of the present and perhaps the future. It described Rabbi Wine’s transformation from a Reform rabbi into a Humanistic rabbi and the creation of the world’s first Humanistic congregation; the article did not, however, address the future or the achievements of the present. How many JEWISH CURRENTS readers know, for example, of the successful growth and development of SHJ congregations in Canada and United States?

Many of the ideas expressed by the respondents have been grist for the discussion mills of the conferences of both the CSJO and the SHJ. The concept of spirituality, for example, has been well-worked over. Is spirituality possible only in the context of divine inspiration? Of course not. Why do you need a god to experience awe at the grandeur and beauty of the natural world? Why do you need a god to feel inspiration and excitement, sometimes to the point of tears, upon seeing a beautiful work of art or hearing an incredible piece of music? Theists have no corner on the spiritual market.

**Another jarring sentiment arose from the pages** of the May-June issue: the desire of some to have

Jewish strands all rolled into one neat little package made up of traditional secular *yidishkayt* in combination with a touch of religious trappings — perhaps a few prayers or selected blessings. No problem. We're autonomous individuals who have the capacity to do whatever we can or wish to (within the boundaries of respect for others and their wishes). But to create this particular religious/secular blend belies the essence of what it means to be a Secular Humanistic Jew operating within a Secular Humanistic Jewish organization. Let individuals who want this type of communal environment create organizations that reflect that philosophy, but don't come to a Secular Humanistic Jewish organization looking for adulation of the divine through the occasional interjection of theistic interludes. Secular Humanistic Jewish organizations eschew the divine and focus on the earthly essence of their existence.

The art of being Jewish takes many forms, none of which have existed forever, all of which have been created through human endeavor, sometimes as a slow process of transformation with slow evolutionary changes of history, sometimes through more abrupt change as human creativity burst forth from a mentality of conservatism and tradition. Secular Humanistic Judaism is one of these Judaisms, as authentic and grounded as, say, the Lubavitch khasidic movement. Why do some of us become defensive, nervous, shifting from one foot to another when confronted with the accusation that our version of Jewish existence does not carry the same weight as the Judaism that emanates from an Orthodox synagogue? Overcoming this inferiority complex would help us pursue our agenda with renewed vigor and optimism.

What about the future? The future unfolds from the inspiration of the present. Do we have to prepare for the future? Of course. But our preparation is in the present, and when we do what we do in our communities, we do it largely to satisfy our personal needs, which might include: spiritual fulfillment, Jewish education for our children and ourselves, community life and a personal sense of Jewish identity, participation as creators or observers of art that expresses our Jewish and human

consciousness, social action that emanates from a heritage of caring for our own rights and dignity and that of others. The list could go on. Human creativity continues to make the list longer.

Don't look for dinosaurs, Larry Bush. Look for new life, new forms, new adventures, many of which have arisen since the 1960s to replace the dinosaurs. Leftwing, socialist, Yiddishist life as we knew and loved it is either gone or significantly transformed. Yet if we commune with others of like mind, we can find ways to satisfy, to some extent, whatever craving we have to express our Jewishness. We have plenty of rich and fertile soil with which to work. Let's go dig it up to find the roots and seeds with which to enlarge upon and embellish our garden.

The evidence that we are already doing this now abounds. New life has arisen from the demise of secular *yidishkayt* in the 1950s described by April Rosenblum. In the early 1960s there were no CSJO and SHJ, no Secular Humanistic rabbis, no *vegvayzers*, no International Institute of Secular Humanistic Jews. Since the 1950s, thousands of Jews across North America and elsewhere have become engaged in an organized secular expression of their Jewishness. And if one cares to look, there is a brand new literature arising since the 1960s, literature that speaks specifically to Secular Humanistic Jewish existence, its meaning and its maturation. Secular Humanistic Judaism is not a new invention but there are creative new ways of expressing it.

The core curriculum may be different from what we experienced in the 1930s, '40s and '50s, but it is still Secular Judaism, with bright and energetic leaders forging a new Secular Humanistic Jewish consciousness. What's more, the core curriculum can be completely innovative. For some, the core curriculum of organizational existence must contain Yiddish, Sholem Aleichem and particular ideological constituents. But Secular Humanistic Judaism is not composed of a rigid dogma of practice and ideology. We Secular Jews have diverse backgrounds and diverse ways of extracting the meaning of existence from our literature, from our history from our collective experience.

There's more than one way of doing this. Despite the multiplicity of ways of acting out our secular Jewish consciousness, we are united, I hope, in the belief that human beings are in charge of human affairs without the need to seek divine intervention as inspiration or as the object of our supplication.

**Patricia Cousens Becker**

## **Secular, Humanistic, and Jewish**

I grew up in a Workmen's Circle family in Detroit, which provided me with a strong cultural Jewish identification. At 17 I carried this identification forward into college in Ann Arbor, and found that I had no home. I certainly didn't fit in at Hillel; being in a roomful of Jewish students during orientation scared me to death. And I had no belief in any god; my father's death from pancreatic cancer, when I was 15, had settled the issue for me.

I gravitated toward student coöps. I was active in supporting the sit-ins in the South. I was on the fringes of the nascent SDS. I was active in causes that fit my philosophy, but I had no place to express and enjoy my Jewish identity.

After graduation, I moved on to the University of Wisconsin in Madison and spent a short time in Berkeley during the Free Speech movement of 1964. Returning to Detroit, I became active in a new WC branch of "young people," but did not really enjoy the social interactions.

All this time, I was "looking" for Mr. Right, and I did want him to be Jewish. In 1971, I found him. He had grown up Conservative but was no longer interested in God-oriented Judaism. Our marriage ceremony was performed by Rabbi Sherwin Wine, who represented our compromise between a judge and a more traditional rabbi.

When our daughter became 8, she needed a Jewish education outside the home. There were four viable options: the WC *shule*, the down-

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town Reconstructionist congregation, the Jewish Parents Institute (affiliated with the Congress of Jewish Secular Organizations), and Rabbi Wine's Humanistic Birmingham Temple. Poring over the literature from each, I was swayed by the Temple's Sunday school curriculum. I had been leery of a formal congregation and its suburban character, but my husband liked the idea. The upshot: we joined.

We decided to attend the *erev* Yom Kippur service. That was the day of the 1982 Israeli invasion of Lebanon. Rabbi Wine (whom I always called "Sherwin") put aside his formal talk and said, "Today I am ashamed to be a Jew." I was hooked.

Over the next several years, as our involvement and participation in the Temple increased, I kept saying, "Sherwin gives words to what I feel." I had never before understood Humanism as a philosophical concept, yet I was clearly a humanist and had been raised as one. At last, I had a structure in which to combine my fundamental philosophy of life and my Jewish cultural identity.

Born in 1940, I was right on the cusp of a generational shift. My generation (and those older) grew up with Yiddish-speaking grandparents. We knew of the Holocaust as a contemporary event and we experienced the joy of the creation of the State of Israel. We were Jewish at our core.

The world is different for younger people, who are moving in a pluralistic world in which being

Jewish is just one of their many characteristics. Even if they went to Sunday school or were bar or bat mitzvah, Jewish identity is often not a priority for them.

What can we do for the future?

- We need not only to teach our children our values but to help them feel Jewish. Even the children who grow up in the Birmingham Temple receive a good humanistic education but not enough of a Jewish one. My daughter has said, “The Temple doesn’t make me feel Jewish!”

- We need to teach humanism as a value system wherever we are. I call humanism my religion, and Jewish identity my culture. We need to value humanism as a religion, an integrated set of

ideas that shapes who we are and the decisions we make.

- What’s getting in the way? Life! People have precious little time for intellectual pursuits, and let’s face it, humanistic learning is an intellectual pursuit. I think we need to identify it as such and attract people who want it. Combine it with Jewish identity and culture, and the Jewish calendar and life-cycle, and market it!

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**Bennett Muraskin**

## Without the Religion and the Nationalism

Assuming that one does not believe in God or in a God that answers prayers, it is impossible for a secular person to attend a synagogue service without squirming. True, half the congregation in many synagogues may share the same beliefs, but a secular Jew with principles cannot in good conscience play “let’s pretend.” Worse yet is the treatment of the Torah that is at the heart of Sabbath services. The ark, the breast plates, the parading, the kissing and, of course, the required reading resemble nothing less than idol worship. If the Torah were in a different cover and the names of the major personalities were changed, most Jews would reject it as a fundamentalist document, because that is what it substantially is. How do the Israelites take possession of the Promised Land? What is the fate of the Canaanites? Anyone who cares to answer this question truthfully can only shudder in horror, considering our own experiences with expulsions and genocide.

Zionism is another obstacle to Jewish partici-

pation for secular, progressive Jews. Standing up to face the Israeli flag for the singing of *Hatikvah*, listening to endless plugs for Israel trips and appeals to “support Israel” (meaning “the Israeli government”), is unappealing for most of us.

I know why many Jews attend synagogue, and if it gives them comfort and a sense of community, more power to them. But for me, the secular-religious wall is a real barrier. If breaking down that wall means that secular Jews are asked to pray to a God they don’t believe exists, to read from a book that offends their sense of human decency, and to listen to speeches that sound like press releases from AIPAC, then count me out.

Unfortunately, secular Jews seem to think that they don’t think they need to express their Jewishness outside their daily routine. So there are huge numbers out there, but few joiners. What we need is \$10 million for a huge publicity campaign. But it won’t be Yiddish or social justice that will attract them, like in the old days. Yiddish and social justice are part of our package, but in addition to

childhood and adult education, we need to provide more in the way of quasi-congregational services — lifecycle ceremonies, book clubs, social action committees, entertainment — and vibrant programs for all major Jewish holidays, including

the Sabbath. Yes, like the best synagogues, but without the religion and the nationalism.

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**BENNETT MURASKIN** is the author of *Let Justice Well Up Like Water*

**Irv and Sim Lesser**

## Marketing Our Movement

**W**e are the immediate past presidents of the Congregation for Humanistic Judaism (CHJ) in Sarasota, Florida, which has a membership of more than three hundred. One reason for our move to this area in 2002 was the presence of this congregation. We had previously lived in the Miami area and had been very active members of a very large Reform temple. We dropped our membership when Reform moved too far toward traditional practices for us to remain comfortable. We remained unaffiliated for a few years because we didn't even know of the existence of Humanistic Judaism. Then we attended a High Holiday service at CHJ and immediately felt we had found a home.

What has always puzzled us is why more Jews don't join similar congregations or other secular Jewish organizations. We put this question once to Rabbi Sherwin Wine and his reply was that there was a lack of money that prevented getting the word out. While this may well be a major part of the reason for limited memberships, it doesn't fully answer the question. We think there has been too limited a drive for memberships.

A major reason for joining a congregation is the spirit of community that is engendered. Secular Jews are often hungry for such community, but have no idea of how or where to find it. When we joined CHJ, we immediately bonded with other bright and thoughtful Jews, and in a short time we developed many close friendships than we had during our decades in Miami. Secular Jews, we

believe, are those who are bright enough to question the ideas handed down to them, and tend to be more liberal in their political outlook.

Humanistic Judaism has been defined by Rabbi Wine as a cultural religion, as opposed to the more common theistic religions. It retains many of the traditions of Judaism, but without any reliance on a supernatural being. While the initial reaction of many Jews on first contact is uncertainty about our identity, they soon see that we fully celebrate the culture, history and ethics of Judaism, but without reference to a deity. Many of our members, in fact, have spoken of feeling far more Jewish in CHJ than they felt when they were members of more traditional congregations.

Since research has shown that perhaps half of all Jews in the U.S. are secular, it would seem that we should be just on the edge of a major growth spurt. Alas, that does not seem to be the case. We believe that some kind of major marketing program is needed. We are not experts in marketing, but it seems quite likely that there are many competent marketing professionals who are secular Jews and who would be interested in leading or helping in such an effort.

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**Irv Lesser** is a retired clinical psychologist. **Sim Lesser** is a retired Reform day school principal and college professor. They just celebrated their 54th anniversary and are still best friends.

## Why Be Jewish?

**H**ave I been an alarmist in inaugurating this symposium about the future of Jewish secularism? Judging from some of the responses, the secular movement is zipping right along, creating new literature and new formats — and I am, in essence, Chicken Little.

*Nu*, is the secular Jewish sky falling or not?

Given the decline of the secular Jewish *shule* movement, from *hundreds* of schools in the 1930s to less than a few dozen across the U.S. and Canada today, I would say *yes*, *the sky is falling*.

Given the very advanced age of the bulk of Workmen’s Circle membership, I would say there is a crisis of secular Jewish continuity.

Given the lack of dynamic growth even within the congregationally-based (therefore decently funded) Society for Humanistic Judaism, I would say we’re missing an opportunity.

Given the nearly complete invisibility of the secular Jewish legacy among Jewish young people today, I would say that even secular Jewish history is in danger of obliteration.

**The challenge of building a future is especially** daunting because secularists seem to ignore or even oppose so much of the Jewish tradition — leaving themselves with relatively slim pickings from the Jewish civilizational package to call their own. Observant Jews of every stripe, by contrast, have not only the sea of religious texts to wade in and a religious ideology that shapes their worldview, but a menu of daily *mitsves* upon which to construct a strong sense of Jewish identification. Secular Jews, for the most part, ignore these texts and *mitsves* in the name of rejecting “religion.” They mostly fail to inform their kids about these Jewish resources and even foster in them a *discomfort* with Jewish religious rituals. To illustrate: When I was a kid, despite spending several years in a secular *shule*, I was never once exposed to synagogue until a friend of mine became a *bar*

*mitsve*. I was so ignorant of the customs and procedures of Jewish services that I found the experience mortifying — and I have never since been able to shake that feeling. But surely a high amount of discomfort with Jewish ritual cannot be conducive to developing a passionate, unambivalent Jewish identity!

**A significant plurality of progressive, secular** Jews also consider the theory and/or practice of Zionism to be antithetical to their sense of Jewishness — as essays in this round of the symposium by Paul Mishler, Alice Rothchild and Bennett Muraskin make uncomfortably clear. This, too, narrows the Jewish horizon for secularists.

As for the socialism of the classical secular Jew, it is associated by most people with political repression, economic failure, anti-Semitism, and very little that is positive. The secular Jewish movement has yet to redefine their socialist outlook in contemporary terms — in connection with human interconnection and with environmental sustainability, for example — or to root it in Jewish philosophy.

As a result, if Jews know about Jewish secularism at all, they know it by what it has historically rejected: religion, Zionist “normalization,” and capitalism. But what is it that Jewish secularists today affirm? And what is Jewish about our affirmations?

For me, over the course of my work for thirty years as a “professional Jew,” politics has certainly been a key motivator: I have seen Jewish liberalism as an important “natural resource” for America, and I’ve wanted to play a useful role in its cultivation. I was thrilled, therefore, when 78 percent of American Jewish voters selected Barack Obama for the White House last November. Despite an outrageous smear campaign that portrayed him as a Muslim, a radical, and hostile to Israel, my people said “Feh!” and cast a vote in favor of their history and their conscience. That

vote represented a vindication for the secular Jewish movement, which has helped shape the American Jewish conscience for over a century.


Still, politics can go only so far in inspiring Jewish commitment. As a self-interested magazine editor, I often ask myself: What would prompt a young, radical Jew to read not only the *Nation* or *Huffington Post* but also JEWISH CURRENTS? Why would she bother making the effort to achieve Jewish literacy if the righteous transformation of the world were her single most consuming passion? Why would she be interested in the tribalism of Jewish identity when there's a wide world out there to save?

Why be Jewish?


Below are several of my own affirmations in response to that question. They make it obvious that my own "secularism" has fringes rather than walls as borders. I proclaim myself an atheist, but I see the so-called "religious" tradition of Judaism as a rich resource for contemporary Jews. I don't understand why most committed secular Jewish households don't adopt some version of *kashrut* that reflects their Jewish ethical and ecological values. I don't understand why most secular Jewish households don't observe some kind of *shabes*. I don't understand why secular Jewish children leave our *shules* and summer camps with no knowledge of the Talmud, no favorite stories from rabbinic folklore (not even about Aher, the heretic who doubts the existence of God). I don't understand why secularists narrow their Jewishness so.


Don't agree with me? Great! JEWISH CURRENTS would love to publish *your* answers to the question "Why be Jewish?" as a follow-up to this symposium. Send your thoughts to [lawrencebush@earthlink.net](mailto:lawrencebush@earthlink.net) or POB 111, Accord, NY 12404.


## Why Be Jewish? Six Affirmations

 Jewish people, in my experience, are characteristically interested in self-examination, self-expression, humor, tolerance of difference, and independence of thought. Sigmund

Freud spoke about how the "otherness" of being Jewish gave him the freedom to be a pioneer who challenged convention. Jewish religious folklore, too, places great value on the creative intellect, as in the story of Rabbi Akiva, who "brought out into the light . . . things that used to be hidden from people" (*Avot de Rabbi Natan*). I am interested in preserving this capacity among Jews, even as we seek to escape the oppressions of "otherness."

 I admire Judaism, the religion, because I find it conducive to the evolution of humanism, progressivism, and self-insight. Judaism is a worldly religion, more concerned with how we can live successfully in community than with how we can achieve salvation in some after-life. Judaism's messianic promises are vague and coy, designed mostly to inspire Jews to envision a better world. Judaism also privileges the community over the individual in matters of wealth, property, rights and decision-making. Some Jewish texts also emphasize compassion (*rakhmones*, or "womb-feeling") as a necessary complement to justice (or vengeance) if our world is to survive. My selective study of the Jewish religious tradition helps me root my political philosophy in a values system.

 Jewish tradition and Jewish history have produced a paradigm of non-violent masculinity — notwithstanding the military macho of both biblical and modern Israel — that we urgently need to cultivate in our modern world. Judaism, as exemplified by the Talmudic rabbis, assigns dignity to men based less on toughness than on character, compassion, and impulse control.

 The challenge to capitalism offered by Jewish radicals, and the democratizing role played by some Jewish capitalists within the system (Edward Filene, Ben Cohen and Jerry Greenfield, Sol Price, Muriel Siebert, Julius Rosenwald and other entrepreneurs who created mass-market access to consumer goods and often pursued progressive philanthropy), deserve to be studied and emulated.

¶ Jews have historically blended a tribal sensibility with an international sensibility that is uniquely *not* rooted in colonial or imperial power. For centuries we have had to juggle our particularism with our universalism, our “Ezra” tradition (gather the exiles, exclude non-Jews) with our “Ruth” tradition (embrace the stranger, enlarge the tribe). In a world that can survive only if human beings begin to identify as earthlings as much as citizens of particular nations, Jews have something important to teach.

¶ The most basic story of Judaism and Jewish peoplehood — the Passover myth of liberation from slavery in Egypt, which is referenced over and over in the Torah as a reason for Jews to “love the stranger” — bespeaks an essential Jewish concern with the transformation of systems of oppression. Jews, suggested I.B. Singer, (*Family Moskat*) are “a people who can’t sleep themselves and let nobody else sleep.” That resistance to complacency, and restlessness in the face of injustice, are invaluable resources that infuse Jewish history, Jewish secular thought, and Judaism. **JC**