

What does it mean to live as part of a Jewish community sustained by the humanistic values of secular Judaism? Can secular Judaism transmit values, identity, and history for a Jewish future?

The Roots of Secular Humanistic Judaism

Sherwin T. Wine

Over the last two hundred years, many Jews have been alienated from the traditional religious establishment. Many of them created religious alternatives to Orthodoxy. The Reform, the Conservative, and the Reconstructionist movements are the result of their work. But there were also many alienated Jews who were not comfortable with any religious alternative. They felt intensely Jewish but found no meaning in prayer or in theistic philosophies of life. Even redefining theistic vocabulary did not engage their interest.

Like Reform and Conservative Jews, these secular Jews were the products of both the Enlightenment and the Emancipation. They valued reason, despised superstition, and were attracted to the idea of forging a "new" Jewish identity, one that was rooted in the experience and the culture of the past and one that reflected the beliefs and lifestyles of the present.

Many of these Jews were attracted to the message and passions of Jewish nationalism. Being Jewish by nationality and not by religion gave them a sense of authenticity and integrity. Both the Yiddishist and Zionist varieties provided a Jewish home for these

lovers of Jewish identity. Out of their commitments came language, literature, music, art, dance, theater, and ethical idealism that were both Jewish and secular. Both the revival of Hebrew as a spoken popular language and the establishment of the State of Israel were their creations. In fact, the most successful Jewish movement of the 20th century was Zionism. The culture of that State became the staple of much of Jewish Diaspora education.

Attached to Jewish nationalism are hosts of great intellectuals and writers who are the fathers and mothers of Secular Humanistic Judaism. They include Simon Dubnow, Haim Zhitlovsky, Theodor Herzl, Ahad Ha'am, Max Nordau, Micah Berdichevsky, and Joseph Brenner. They also include

poets and storytellers like Shaul Tchernikowsky, Rachel Bluwstein, Avraham Shlonsky, and Y.L. Peretz.

In the last two centuries the major Jewish figures in the world of universal culture have been unable to find a home in any religious Jewish movement. From Albert Einstein to Sigmund Freud,

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from Emile Durkheim to Erich Fromm, the Jewish “giants” of intellectual power have been openly secular in their beliefs and commitments. Secular Humanistic Judaism uses the legacy of their achievements and their discoveries. They have radically altered the way that those who are and are not Jewish see the universe and the human condition. Perhaps some of them would have found a happy connection with a Jewish movement that celebrated their beliefs.

From these movements and teachers, many communities and institutions have emerged that seek to serve a large population of cultural Jews. Both the Society for Humanistic Judaism and the Congress of Secular Jewish Organizations on the North American scene and the International Federation of Secular Humanistic Jews on the world scene provide a home for this distinctive “fifth” alternative in Jewish life. While the Society features congregations and rabbis, the Congress prefers the more “traditional” secular format of schools and cultural associations. In each of our communities, the celebration of Jewish holidays, the teaching of Jewish

languages, the study of Jewish history and literature, the presentation of a humanistic philosophy of life derived from the Jewish experience, and the mobilization for social action are ongoing activities.

Our movement is *secular* because its focus is on the pleasures and pains of this world. It is *humanistic* because it finds the source of power for solving problems in human beings and because it sees the meaning of Jewish history in the Jewish defiance of an unjust world. It is *cultural* because it views Judaism as the culture of the Jewish people. Our movement is part of the struggle for Jewish continuity and Jewish integrity.

Rabbi Sherwin T. Wine is the founder of Humanistic Judaism and its flagship congregation, The Birmingham Temple, which he established in 1963. He also established the Society for Humanistic Judaism, which serves as a national outreach of the humanistic movement, and he helped to create the International Federation of Secular Humanistic Jews. Rabbi Wine is author of Humanistic Judaism, Judaism Beyond God, Celebration, and Staying Sane in a Crazy World.

A Rabbi's Journey to Humanistic Judaism

Peter H. Schweitzer

I have often speculated that had I learned Hebrew as a child and then become bar mitzvah, I probably would not have undertaken an exploration of my Jewish roots in college (majoring in Judaic studies and becoming a student leader at Hillel), visited Israel to work on an archeological dig, or finally gone on to become a rabbi. Instead, like most of my peers, I would have checked out at age thirteen, or sixteen after confirmation. And, like most of my peers today, I would probably check in only a few times a year or, perhaps, give up affiliation altogether with organized Judaism.

As a child, I learned the *Sh'ma* and the *Borchu*, *Hiney Mah Tov* and *Ayn Kehloheynu*. But I never paid attention to the words. In fact, even after I entered the rabbinate I was concerned more with the choreography of the service than with the content. Only later did I wonder who this God was to whom I was praying, only later did I question the core

beliefs of traditional Judaism that I had simply accepted on the authority of inherited doctrine.

It was while conducting funeral services as a rabbi that I first began to find inconsistencies between my own beliefs and the prayers. The liturgy of these occasions struck me as naive and dishonest. It offered little comfort with its stiff-upper-lip denial of suffering. In the face of death and tragedy, and certainly after the Holocaust and nuclear devastation, I could not accept God as a shepherd whose rod and staff were supposed to comfort me.

In fact, I came to discover that the biblical deity is not always so charitable and comforting. Portrayed as a kind despot (“Our Father, Our King”), God is often bossy, arrogant, and vindictive — not exactly my idea of a beneficent caretaker. Postmodernists redefine God as a Force or Spirit of the Universe, but this attempt at theological fiction cannot hide the truth: Yahweh, the Jewish God, is no metaphorical abstraction. Rather, *He* is a very

male and oftentimes macho God. While this God is perfectly appropriate to a patriarchal society invested in mythology, He is less suited to an egalitarian culture like our own that is committed to reason, scientific knowledge, and human ingenuity.

Our contemporary lives also teach us that life is often unfair, and it takes human courage, rather than divine blessings, to endure pain. If comfort is to be found, it comes from within oneself — from self-reliance — or from the support of family and friends. It also comes from the members of a community who support one another, share each other's joys, and accept the diversity of cultural backgrounds.

Comfort also comes from intellectual integrity. I need to use words that I can recite unequivocally. I cannot use language for which I must apologize. My liturgical language must be clear and honest while also evocative and uplifting.

When I develop new liturgy for my congregation, I borrow and modify forms and notions from the past that speak to our modern sensibilities. For example, traditional melodies, kept as tributes to our memories, are laid over with new lyrics that are true to our beliefs. New meditations and songs reflect our creativity. We affirm our identification with the Jewish people and the Jewish experience while we also affirm our right and responsibility to question, reject, modify, adapt, and create celebrations and liturgy anew. As it has throughout history, Judaism continues to evolve.

I was raised to believe that the Torah was sacrosanct and unsurpassed in its wisdom. I have since learned that the Torah does not contain all truth but is a fallible human document written over a vast period by many authors whose views do not

necessarily agree. The Torah addresses the needs and realities of a particular epoch and place far different and remote from our own. We live in an Internet world and our horizons encompass an entire universe far beyond the ancient desert.

While Humanistic Jews preserve time-honored lessons of Torah and Talmud, we also obtain equally important and compelling teachings from modern literature and science that address contemporary situations and challenges. We draw lessons from the collective experiences of the Jewish people and of people universally. We also draw lessons from the experiences of our own families and personal lives.

My own journey has been one of exploration and growth. As a child, I lovingly embraced the songs and stories of my people. As an adolescent, I discovered philosophy and rational inquiry. As an adult, I reclaimed my Jewish roots but also discovered that I could do so with integrity and authenticity as a Secular Humanistic Jew. My participation in the Jewish people is no less strong and passionate than it was in my youth. But now it is an affiliation I embrace not just with my heart but with my head as well. And also, as before, with all my might.

Peter H. Schweitzer is a Clinical Social Worker for the Jewish Board of Family and Children's Services in Brooklyn, NY, and Rabbinic Advisor to the International Federation of Secular Humanistic Jews. He was ordained a Reform rabbi from Hebrew Union College-Jewish Institute of Religion and is a recognized collector of Jewish Americana. As a leader of The City Congregation for Humanistic Judaism in New York City, he has developed liturgy, including a secular humanistic haggadah, and a guide for a humanistic bar/bat mitzvah.

Molly's Unforgettable Bat Mitzvah

Linda Arking

Here was the challenge: How would we affirm the Jewish identity of our daughter who had grown up in a home with no Yiddish-speaking *zayde*, who took pride in Israel but did not identify personally with the country, and to whom the Holocaust, while horrific, seemed as remote as the Crusades? In other words, how could our assimilated American child prepare for her bat

mitzvah — a rite of passage and a celebration of Jewishness that our family had eagerly looked forward to — in a way that would be personal, authentic, profound, and consistent with our secular beliefs?

Molly had begun classes at our Reform Temple in Connecticut at age four. But as the years passed, we saw problems on the horizon. She watched



skeptically as older friends prepared for their upcoming ceremonies amid grumbling and anxiety; mainly, kids complained about the memorization of a portion that was less than meaningful, and adults complained about the emphasis on the party. As parents, we privately wondered how Molly's special day would manage to commemorate some deeply felt connection between her adolescent self and her magnificent heritage.

When Molly was eleven years old we found our answer. With our move to Manhattan, we learned about The City Congregation for Humanistic Judaism. They offered a bar/bat mitzvah program that was creative, relevant, provocative, and deeply Jewish.

The highlights of Molly's bat mitzvah preparation would be twofold: she would work closely with an adult mentor, and she would take responsibility for choosing and researching a major topic of inquiry, which she would then present at her ceremony. There would be b'nai mitzvah classes, but in addition, she would be expected to choose and write essays about Jewish values, heroes, social action projects, and what this entire bat mitzvah education had meant to her.

Molly's response was electric; she saw she was committing to a lot of work and a lot of responsibility, but she loved the fact that she'd be making choices. And she would have to explain why she had made them. I saw an immediate effect: she had more respect for herself and more energy for the project.

That year, she visited throughout New York — the Jewish Museum, the Tenement Museum, Ellis Island — and wrote extensively about each visit. She found books appropriate to each site. She interviewed 92-year-old Pearl about growing up on New York's Lower East Side. After each visit, she e-mailed her journal reports to Myrna Baron, the Congregation's president and Molly's bat mitzvah mentor. Predictably, Myrna responded with interest and more questions.

Our entire family became involved in Molly's continuing Jewish education. Each visit, book read,

and essay became a catalyst for lively discussion: What aspects of Jewish heritage and memory yield messages today? What makes a Jewish hero? (Molly's choice was Israeli activist and feminist Shulamit Aloni, whom we were thrilled to meet briefly when she passed through New York.)

The responsibility of choosing and defending her choices gave Molly (and her parents) tremendous pride. At the same time, the mentor relationship nurtured trust and self-confidence, as Myrna treated Molly's opinions with respect while prodding her to keep reading, writing, and thinking. It was easy to see how this mentor connection could become a lasting relationship with a lasting impact.

Further, the mentors became role models as the children saw these adult members demonstrating commitment, generosity, and excellence.

Molly's major research project, "The Streets Were Paved with Cement," investigated Jewish immigration to the Lower East Side, as well as the immigration of her father's non-Jewish ancestors to California. Her study of Jewish history was infused

with personal meaning.

Like other Humanistic b'nai mitzvah celebrations, Molly's ceremony was rich with music, readings, and spoken presentations. Before the ceremony, relatives asked if Molly would chant the Torah; I explained that Humanistic Jews view the Torah as one source of our cherished, inherited literature, but not the only source. Molly had learned to read Torah critically, to treat it as any important literature. Her bat mitzvah, however, would focus on responsibility, values, heroes, social action, and the personal impact of this rite of passage.

As Molly's mother, I was touched to see that Molly's speech moved some of her listeners to tears. It is truly joyous when children open their hearts and share their ideas, hopes, and enthusiasm directly with a congregation. It's hard not to *kvell*.

Since her bat mitzvah, Molly has become an

How would Molly's bat mitzvah — a celebration of her Jewishness — be authentic and consistent with our secular beliefs?

assistant teacher to younger children at the City Congregation school and continues to attend Shabbat services. We have no doubt her connection to Jewish peoplehood is a lasting one. By assuming so much responsibility for her own bat mitzvah, she has become an active part of the Jewish community.

Linda Arking's fiction and feature articles have appeared in The Atlantic, The New Yorker, Family Life, and Family Circle. Concerned with Jewish continuity, the Arking-Avila family chose Humanistic Judaism as a way to actively participate in Jewish life, to celebrate their heritage, to educate their daughter, and to help her build a lasting connection to the Jewish world.

Living Words

Living Words, a book of High Holiday Sermons from 5759, is still available: \$17.95 from the Sh'ma office, 56 Kearney Rd., Suite B, Needham, MA 02494. Eighteen of the "best sermons" collected from 5760 will be published online mid-June. Unfortunately, printing costs did not allow for a print publication. Check out the special section of www.shma.com.

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Being a Secular/Humanistic Jew in Israel

Yehuda Bauer

It requires quite a lot of courage to be or to pronounce oneself a secular Jew. We represent a silent minority. Most people in our society who do not follow religious commandments or do not live an active religious life are not secular: they are just vacuum voids in their day-to-day life. We, however, want to combine a respect for Jewish traditions of the past with a secular outlook on today's world. That is something quite different from what the so-called non-religious majority really wants, observes, or lives.

The problem that secular Jews face is vast because we are living amidst a tremendous revolution in which religious fanaticism in the world is growing rather than declining. Because we want the continuation of the Jewish tradition in a nonreligious way, we clash not only with the fundamentalists but also with the Reform and Conservative Movements. It is a friendly clash, because we have a lot in common, and strive for coalition-building with these movements. But one has to recognize the clear difference: both the Conservative and Reform movements are deeply committed religiously. And just as much as a Reform rabbi will be committed to his or her religious beliefs, so am I deeply committed to my nonreligious beliefs. Surely the acceptance of a transcendental being that either gave the first push — the Aristotelian push — or has, in one way or another, an involvement with the history of the world is a basic question. If you accept that, then there are certain logical consequences. If you don't accept that, there are other logical consequences.

For me, the existence of God after the Holocaust is impossible from a moral point of view. It makes belief in God a vast problem, quantitatively and qualitatively. One and a half million children — of the Chosen People — under the age of thirteen were murdered! This is not a question of free choice because the children didn't have any free choice. It is the Nazis who had the free choice, not the children. So if there

is a God that in one way or another controls the destiny of the world — even if that God retires and does not wish to do it, He can and He knows; otherwise He's not a God. He's responsible for the murder — no way out. No answer, human or divine, is satisfactory for the murder of one and a half million children — and if there is an answer from high above, then it is the answer of Satan, and rather than believe in Satan, I will not believe.

However, the traditions of a people that went through the Holocaust and tried to revive themselves

are frightfully important, because it is their lives, their struggles, that we wish to continue, those of us who consider ourselves to be Zionists and humanists. We are in a very dangerous situation because the Jewish people are declining in numbers. Aside from Israel, there is not a single Jewish community in the world that is not declining in numbers, and this has nothing to do with biology and not terribly much

to do with assimilation or Auschwitz. It's simply that there is a cultural pessimism within the Jewish people, and that cultural pessimism expresses itself in the small number of children being born and in the way that many Jews look toward religion.

Where does that leave us? I think it leads to the realization that from the history of the Jewish people, from the traditions of the Jewish people, we must make choices. It requires a tremendous effort — a collective effort of many minds — to review the vast body of learning, literature, culture, and traditions that the Jewish people have produced. From this study, we might then choose what we need for our lives as humanists, as people who want to continue Jewish tradition in a nonreligious manner.

When I use texts written 2,000 years ago, I do not change them. Rather, I interpret the texts. In every generation the interpretation of *halachah* has been different. And if I suggest a secular interpretation of

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Jewish tradition, it is perfectly okay. In Jewish tradition — if you want to find precepts for genocide, they are available. If you are looking for antagonism toward non-Jews, violent hatred even, you will find it. If you want a humanistic approach to life, it is also in the text. Ideologies have changed, and we have changed with them. We are a people who have lived through a very long history, and therefore we have created teachings and practices good, bad, and indifferent. I am prepared to accept that as my tradition and choose from it what I want. That, to me, is essential for Jewish life in this country post-Holocaust, when I feel that the Jewish people are in danger of disappearance, and when I feel that there is an internal and external danger facing us. I

feel that there is a danger that the social fabric in Israel will dissolve.

Professor Yehudah Bauer is head of the Holocaust Studies Division of the Institute of Contemporary Jewry at Hebrew University, Chair of the International Institute for Holocaust Research at Yad Vashem, and Honorary Co-Chair of the International Federation of Secular Humanistic Jews. Yehudah Bauer received the Israel Prize in 1998. His most recent books include A History of the Holocaust and Out of the Ashes. This article is adapted from "Being a Secular/Humanistic Jew in Israel" and reprinted with permission from Humanistic Judaism, 12:1, Spring 1984.

A Response to Secular Judaism

Riv-Ellen Prell

One of the hallmarks of the postmodern world is an ever-growing spectrum of forms of religion and religious expression. While modernity produced the challenge to authority that, for example, created Judaism's progressive and pietistic "denominations," postmodernity has exploded and reconfigured the spectrum. Secular Judaism has been a product of both periods. The modern world gave rise to nationalism, ethnicity, and socialism, with Jews of this period creating movements that responded accordingly. These visions were committed to ideologies that in most cases dispensed with the God of Israel. More recently, secular Judaism in the United States has come to resemble a Jewish denomination with congregations that embrace aspects of Jewish religious tradition yet explicitly leave God out of their Judaism. In short, secular Judaism grew in the soil of the dominant culture and hence created a Judaism and Jewishness that was consonant with that world.

Israel, Europe, and the United States have defined this concept differently since the 19th century. From the period following World War II until the 1970s, American Judaism developed largely through suburban congregations representing three denominations with synagogues reflecting the values of the new Jewish suburban middle class. This synthesis was challenged by the 1960's cultural

revolution, which attacked social authority and institutions embraced most fully by the middle class. When the postwar synthesis crumbled, much greater variation in Jewish practice, identity, and religious organizational life followed.

By the mid-1970s, Jews increasingly wrote about and asked what have become quintessentially postmodern questions. "How do I create personal meaning as a Jew?" "What various traditions am I able to draw upon to synthesize an identity that works for me?" These questions had both "political" and "personal" consequences. The 1970s initiated an era when "identity" became central to progressive American politics.

In contrast to the secular Judaism of Israel that Yehuda Bauer describes (and to Europe earlier in this century), these essays are more concerned with personal meaning and the right of the individual to formulate a unique and intellectually viable relationship to broadly defined Jewish traditions. Like Judaism's progressive denominations, a secular humanist Judaism challenges traditional authority and asserts its right to create a practice of its own choosing. In contrast with other denominations, secular Judaism abandons God, even metaphorically, and not only rejects traditional authority but adds a broad range of other authorities to draw upon.



Secular Jews may be found in all realms of Jewish life. A great many affiliated Jews devote far more time and commitment to federation life, for example, than to observance. Indeed, surveys of American Jewish attitudes and practices suggest that most Jews are fundamentally secular in that they pick and choose among the commandments, and the ones that they observe are most likely to be compatible with secular American society. Nevertheless, these Jews have not necessarily taken upon themselves the formal identity of "humanistic" or "secular" Judaism.

The secular humanistic Judaism of these essays more assertively challenges the norms of American Judaism. Unlike other forms of "progressive Judaism," it requires a far more developed ideological commitment than what characterizes the "merely" unaffiliated or the Jew who belongs to a synagogue without really belonging. These essays suggest a highly principled ideology of Jewish life rather than a more typical, default membership in Judaism. The essays also reflect a growing pluralism within Jewish life encompassing a far wider range of worship styles and theologies than once imagined. Both Peter Schweitzer and Sherwin T. Wine look to their humanistic Judaism to underscore their commitment to the Jewish people, but they assert a fundamental right to reshape its practice in relationship to their own culture and without recourse to God.

Secular Judaism clearly seeks to create community

and to maintain crucial rites of passage like the bar or bat mitzvah. Linda Arking's description of her daughter's bat mitzvah, for example, underscores the power of shaping a ritual to one's own specifications and creating a very personal synthesis of Jewish practice.

I am sure that these communities are beset by many of the same challenges of liberal Judaism that are its great strengths. The more that Jews are empowered to search out their own meanings, to choose from the array of Jewish resources, the more complicated the task of negotiating the foundation of community and the transmission of a culture that informs those very resources. Nothing characterizes the postmodern moment more than the bedeviling problem of community. Though we live in a global community unfettered by boundaries or time zones, we must still confront the task of linking our histories and our lives to those who share them with us. The decision to make tradition an option and to fail to educate Jews to become cultural virtuosos inevitably creates the risk that each personal synthesis will isolate individuals rather than create Jewish peoplehood.

Anthropologist Riv-Ellen Prell is Professor of American Studies at the University of Minnesota. Her most recent book is Fighting to Become Americans: Jews, Gender and the Anxiety of Assimilation.

An Outside Look at Secular Judaism

Harvey Cox

First, some admissions. Although I am not Jewish, I do not write as an innocent bystander. Many years ago, I wrote a book called *The Secular City*, wherein I tried to rehabilitate the perfectly respectable term "secular." Second, for fifteen years I have participated in — as far as my conscience would allow — the religious life of my Jewish wife. We light candles and bless the wine and bread each Sabbath, attend synagogue on major Jewish holidays, and perform a yearly seder in our home at Passover. I have read a lot more about Judaism than I ever intended to do, and have sat *shiva* for my wife's relatives, prayed at the Wall (but then, so has the Pope) and helped prepare our son

Nicholas for his bar mitzvah (which the Pope has not done).

I was raised a Baptist and still am, although I have a yen for the "bells and smells" of a more liturgical worship. During the past fifteen years, I have found Judaism to be enormously attractive. I have come to love the tradition, most (but not all) of the prayers and rituals, and the profound depth of the spiritual literature. For all of these reasons and more, the question of whether there can be such a thing as "secular Judaism" interests me deeply.

The term "secular" comes from the Latin word "*saeculum*," meaning "this present age." It

was first used to refer to ecclesiastical properties such as hospitals and schools that had been turned over to state auspices and thus "secularized." Theologically, the word secular suggests a mentality directed more toward this present world, with all its seductions, opportunities, and pitfalls, than to a world above or beyond this one. In *The Secular City* I argued that such an attitude, far from being unChristian or nonbiblical, resonates deeply with the biblical God who creates *this* world, loves *this* world, and keeps trying (with the cooperation of human beings) to bring *this* world into its originally intended wholeness. In my view, then, "secular" is not a nasty word.

What about secular Judaism? Outside observers of the American religious scene are always amazed at two qualities of American religious life: its exuberant vitality and its dizzying variety. In contrast to most of Europe for example, interest and participation in religious life in America is astonishingly high. As well, the spectrum of religious possibilities is also unique. Most countries have a single, or at most two or three dominant religions with perhaps a few minorities. In America, the offerings on the religious menu resemble a Ben and Jerry's ice cream emporium – more flavors than anyone could sample with new options added on a regular basis.

Liveliness and variety not only describe but also constitute the American religious scene. American religion is vigorous in part because it is so heterogeneous. It is variegated in part because the throbbing religious culture constantly invites new participants. There are, of course, dangers in this system: religious entrepreneurs holding out extravagant promises; religion becoming so "user friendly" it ceases to deliver much prophetic criticism or mystery; or competition so fierce that civil peace is threatened. But all in all, I think our wide-open system serves us well. In many other cultures, one is either a "believer" or an atheist. There are no other choices and no middle ground. But in

America, the flavors range from the different Christian, Jewish, and Muslim orthodoxies through the conservative, middle-of-the-road, "mainline," liberal options to post-Christian spirituality, religious humanism, New Ageisms, and — why not? — secular Judaism.

Can one be religious without believing in God? The answer is quite simple. Millions of people already are. Many of them are Buddhists, a spiritual tradition in which, at least in many of its branches, the belief in a deity is entirely optional. When I taught at the Naropa Institute several years ago, Chogyam Trungpa Rinpoche used to assure his students that whether they were theists or agnostics or atheists was a matter

of complete indifference to him. Buddhism was about something else. But the adepts of the Enlightened One are not alone in this camp: thousands of Unitarian Universalists would also consider themselves agnostics.

The question of a *Jewish* secular Judaism remains. Unlike Buddhism, loyalty to God has been central to virtually every expression of Judaism for millennia.

There are, however, large numbers of people today who consider themselves Jewish and are not theists of any recognizable variety. Many of them yearn for a spiritual home that would preserve their link to the Jewish people and the Jewish past but not require them to hold their breath and try to believe something they just do not believe. Surely such people deserve a place within what has traditionally been a faith based on practice, ethics, loyalty, and ethnic consanguinity, *not* on creeds. I hope a secular Judaism flourishes. I hope it nourishes a sense of mystery and depth, avoiding market values and the success ethic. The question, of course, is whether it will last. But I would prefer not to speculate about that. Only God, so to speak, knows.

*Harvey Cox is Professor of Divinity at Harvard University. His two most recent books are *Fire from Heaven*, and *Religion in the Secular City*.*

Many Jews who do
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The moment we feel God's presence never lasts very long, but the teaching that it vivifies can be embodied in action that becomes part of the living culture of a community. Jews call that teaching and action Torah. Torah not only generates justice, holiness, and wholeness; it also opens opportunities for us to reconnect to its Source.

The pain evident in the "abandonment" can be understood as analogous to that of parents sending grown children out on their life journeys. The partings are bittersweet, but the parent takes comfort in knowing that the parent's teaching is present in the children's values and actions. The parent's voice has been internalized.

The Divine-human partnership is manifest only in action. We only understand our experience of God through metaphor, language, culture. No one can be certain of God's essence, but Torah is the Jew's path of understanding and action for making God manifest. When we do not feel the presence of the Divine, living Torah keeps God present nonetheless.

Rabbi David A. Teutsch is President of the Reconstructionist Rabbinical College and Editor-in-chief of the Kol Haneshamah prayer-book series.

God is not offering a choice here. God is offering a process. The text of the Talmud continues, "the light that is in Torah will bring them close to Me." As Rabbi Wiener says, "closeness and connection" are the goals. God temporarily will allow a distancing, knowing that the inner light of Torah, found through study, will restore the closeness soon enough.

What about someone who abandons or shows no interest in Torah but passionately pursues God? There are many Jews today who engage in a spiritual quest but approach that search detached from the study and practice of Judaism and Torah. Can a spiritual search outside the framework of Torah be authentic? While our text sees Torah as a necessary requirement for authenticity, some streams of Jewish tradition may differ with this conclusion. Either way, our challenge today is teaching the lone spiritual seeker that his or her search is deepened and enriched by Torah.

Rabbi Phil Miller is the Director of the Helene Mirowitz Department of Jewish Life of the Jewish Community Center of St. Louis.

Kabbalah describes the universe as an exquisite paradox. On the one hand God must withdraw from the universe in order to make room for it. On the other hand, God must saturate all of existence in order to sustain it. "There is no place empty of God!" affirms the Tikkunei Zohar, yet the Presence of God is far from obvious. It is perhaps the ultimate testimony to the magnificence of the Divine love that God is willing to create and sustain a universe in which God's own Presence is hidden, in which God's own existence can be denied, in which God can be abandoned.

"But once a person knows God is hidden, God is not really hidden." Even when, in our frustration or blindness, we abandon our quest for God, the Living Presence offers us openings of discovery everywhere — in nature, in our fellow human beings, and for Jews, in the greatest gateway of all, Torah. Here, we are told, God's own light is stored, awaiting our discovery. "Better they abandon Me and remember my Torah," God says. As Rabbi Shohama Wiener reminds us, a life filled with Torah, with right action, with sacred deeds, with holy mitzvot, with love, justice, and deep caring, brings us back to God. And perhaps, for those times in life when we are too hurt, and God's hiddenness seems absolute, it is God's Torah alone that will heal us and see us through.

Rabbi Marcia Prager, author of The Path of Blessing, is Rabbi of the P'nai Or Religious Fellowships of Philadelphia and Princeton and is Director of Professional Development for ALEPH: Alliance for Jewish Renewal.

Better they abandon Me and remember My Torah.

Y. Hagiga 1:7

סאילו אותי עובו ותורתִי שמרו

תלמוד ירושלמי חגיגה א:ז

Why, God, would you pose such a difficult, painful set of choices? Perhaps it is because you want us, your people, to remain godly and Jewish, even if we cannot easily be in relationship directly with you. Then I agree. Better to love our fellow humans, do deeds of lovingkindness, give charity, support Israel, and be part of the Jewish cultural family. There are *shivim panim*, 70 faces, 70 ways of entry to Torah, and all of them should be honored.

Yet, I feel the pain of this assertion. In my view, God is the center and the ground of Torah. Torah without a connection to the Guide and Protector, Creator and Source of Wisdom, is an incomplete teaching. Rabbis and cantors must offer opportunities for exploring aspects of Jewish faith in a spiritual context. We need intimate forums for people to ask their deepest questions about life and learn about the diversity of Jewish approaches to ethics and theology, prayer and meditation. Torah can bring people back to God, but only if our teachers make spirit more palpable. Then the dilemma will be resolved; Jews will both remember Torah and their spiritual source.

Rabbi Shohama Harris Wiener is President and Mashgiach Ruchani (Spiritual Director) of the Academy for Jewish Religion (NYC and LA), a rabbinical and cantorial seminary dedicated to Jewish pluralism.

**Nish'ma is the Hebrew word for "let us hear."*

Jewish History and Jewish Memory: Essays in Honor of Yosef Hayim Yerushalmi

Edited by Elisheva Carlebach, John M. Efron, and David N. Myers
(Brandeis University Press, 1998, 462pp)

In Search of American Jewish Culture

Stephen J. Whitfield (Brandeis University Press, 1999, 307pp, \$26.00)

The task of bringing together in one essay two works, utterly different from one another, is a tough one. Yet there is, to use the rabbinic locution, a *tsad hashaveh*, a similar aspect, linking together Stephen Whitfield's *In Search of American Jewish Culture* and *Jewish History and Jewish Memory*, the Festschrift honoring Columbia University historian Yosef Hayim Yerushalmi. Each volume, in its unique manner, explores core issues in the Jewish experience, as refracted through the very different prisms of scholarship and popular culture.

The Festschrift as genre tends to be the ignored child in the world of scholarly literature. It is unfortunate that many a superb analysis remains unread, unknown, unappreciated in Festschriften that languish forever, unopened, on the shelves of the libraries that are the main consumers of these volumes. One hopes that *Jewish History and Jewish Memory* will escape this fate. For one, the volume is a superb collection of essays ably edited by a team of first-class historians. More important, however, is that this commemorative volume, unlike most others in the genre, has a theme — one related to the central explorations of the Festschrift's laureate, Yosef Hayim Yerushalmi. Inherent in the book's title, *Jewish History and Jewish Memory*, is the Yerushalmi notion that history and memory, often conflated, are very different activities, with different purposes, goals, and processes. Indeed, Yerushalmi, in his pathfinding 1982 volume *Zakhor*, made the case for the idea that history and memory are oppositional: memory interprets the past selectively; history seeks to be comprehensive in recovering, assessing, and analyzing data.

Yerushalmi and the Festschrift's contributors are from the "old school" of historians who believe "things actually happened in history!" But Yosef Hayim Yerushalmi is harking back in his analysis to a rabbinic past that asked not "What happened?" (who cared?) but rather "How can we set a context, a chronological order, for the events of the Hebrew Bible and for the *halachah*?" It is this context that may provide a link between history and memory. In this respect the Festschrift's contributors offer fascinating and highly nuanced discussions of a range of questions, from David Berger's opening essay on the quest for the historical Jesus through Talya Fishman's nonpareil exploration of the historiography of the responsa collection *Besamim Rosh*; from J. J. Schacter's parsing of history and memory in the writings of the controversial 18th-century Jewish leader Rabbi Jacob Emden to the lovely evocations by Todd Endelman of Jewish converts, "Memories of Jewishness." These

examples suggest the structure that the editors developed for the book: Tradition and the Construction of Jewish History, Time and History in Jewish Thought, The Rupture of Modernity, and Jewish Memory and Historical Writing in the Modern Age — an elegant structure for elegant explorations of an elegant theme.

Stephen Whitfield looks at a different kind of memory — cultural memory — in his provocative and entertaining book, *In Search of American Jewish Culture*. Entertaining because Whitfield, a professor of American Studies at Brandeis, is a storyteller in the best sense. He uses stories and anecdotes — and plain old yarns — as vehicles for charting the movement between "high" and "popular" culture, a free-and-easy trip that is the hallmark of American Jewish culture.

There are gaps in Stephen Whitfield's book; inevitably, a comprehensive survey will never, as a practical matter, be truly "comprehensive." For example, in the world of literature, neither fiction nor the arena of scholarship receives the attention it deserves. One would hope for a companion volume exploring the literary expression of the Jewish experience. Further, one could read *In Search of American Jewish Culture* and conclude that the visual arts played no role in the American Jewish cultural experience. Although the volume is top-heavy in the performing arts, it is difficult to quarrel with the author's selections; they superbly illustrate his theme of American Jewish culture as "polymorphic," the coming together of many forms of culture in creating and enriching an American Jewish social experience.

What Professor Whitfield does include illustrates what to the author is a central question: what is Jewish culture? To Whitfield, the boundaries are more elastic than those of this reviewer. His rubric of "Jewish" culture includes virtually every offering by Jews engaged in the cultural enterprise. This approach goes far beyond a characterization preferred by some that culture is "Jewish" if it explores, through some medium of expression, the Jewish experience. But Whitfield is nothing if not supremely nuanced. "Jewish" is not the issue for him; *In Search of American Jewish Culture* is about the interplay of Jewish culture and America, and the contributions each makes toward a cross-fertilization. Ultimately, it's a dialectic of "Jewish" and "American" rather than "Jewish" and "culture" — and Stephen Whitfield superbly, winningly, entertainingly, "gets it."

Jerome A. Chanes is Associate Executive Director of the National Foundation for Jewish Culture.

A Journey from Childhood to the Rabbinate

Tamara Kolton

I am a child of Humanistic Judaism. My roots, my Jewish identity, the blood and bones of my existence, are bound up with this modern alternative in Jewish life.

When I was eight years old, my parents chose to register me for Sunday School at The Birmingham Temple, the first congregation for Secular Humanistic Judaism. They wanted a temple where they could affirm their connection to their Jewish heritage, give their daughter a Hebrew education; and join a community in celebrating the Jewish holidays. But they insisted upon a temple where they would say only those things that they believed. They questioned the existence of a personal God who answered prayer and managed the universe. Yet, they felt strongly about their Jewish roots and wanted their daughter to grow up as a proud Jew. Humanistic Judaism was a natural fit.

My life began to unfold inside this community. I looked forward to temple. I reveled in class time, which was spent in pursuit of ethics, truth, and understanding Jewish history. I came to deeply love and respect my rabbi. I grew to appreciate the State of Israel as a symbol of Jewish dignity. Ultimately, after spending five years at the Hebrew University in Jerusalem, I came home to pursue the humanistic rabbinate.

Upon my return, I began an intensive five-year program in Jewish Studies. In addition, I was required to complete a doctorate. At the conclusion of the program, on October 8, 1999, I became the first rabbi to be ordained by the International Institute for Secular Humanistic Judaism. The journey that I had begun as a young child had developed into the driving force of my career and how I envisioned the Jewish future.

Today as a Humanistic rabbi, I hold several guiding principles. They are a product of my values, beliefs, and the way in which I perceive the Jewish world around me. First, if the Jewish future is to be as vital and dynamic as the Jewish past, Judaism must evolve

alongside the Jewish people. There is a growing number of Jews who will not be served by religious streams of Judaism. Humanistic Judaism provides a home to people who value their Jewish identity but also want to express it culturally. We provide a home for Jews who, regardless of their belief or nonbelief in God, affirm that the ultimate authority for what a person does rests with the individual.

Second, Judaism must be as hospitable as possible in order to ensure both the Jewish future and human dignity. This means that I welcome intermarried couples without hesitation. I see intermarriage as both a reality and opportunity in Jewish life. A Judaism that is insular and rejecting of the most important life choices of its members does neither a service to human life nor to the Jewish future.

Finally, Humanistic Judaism — as an international movement — provides an important voice in the Jewish world for a chorus of Jews who, without this movement, would live in silent unaffiliation. We provide a home for a growing number of Jews who do not find meaning in traditional forms of worship and prayer but who would find meaning in a celebration of Jewish heritage that centers on people and the natural world.

I am a child of Humanistic Judaism. My life is a tribute to those Secular Humanistic Jews who had the vision, the insight, and the necessary tenacity to clear a campsite in the woods. Upon this achievement I and my children's children can now pitch our tents: a tent different perhaps in frame and fabric from that of Sarah and Abraham, but a home and place of ingathering for the Jewish people.

Rabbi Tamara Kolton is the first humanistic rabbi ordained by the International Institute of Secular Humanistic Judaism.

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