

SHJ Mission Statement

The Society for Humanistic Judaism mobilizes people to celebrate Jewish identity and culture consistent with a humanistic philosophy of life. As the central body for the Humanistic Jewish Movement in North America, the Society assists in organizing and supporting congregations and in providing a worldwide voice for its members.

Core Principles

As members of the Society for Humanistic Judaism:

- We affirm our identity as members of the Jewish People. We draw strength from the history, culture, and achievements of our people. We see Jewish history as testimony to the continuing struggle for human dignity and, like the history of other peoples, as a product of human decisions and actions.
- We demonstrate our bond to the Jewish people through humanistic celebrations of Jewish holidays and life-cycle events. We create and use non-theistic Jewish rituals, services, and celebrations that invoke the ethical core of Jewish history, literature, and culture. Our aim is to foster a positive Jewish identity, intellectual integrity, and ethical behavior among celebrants.
- We affirm the value of study and discussion of Jewish and universal human issues. We rely on such sources as reason, observation, experimentation, creativity, and artistic expression to address questions about the world and in seeking to understand our experiences.
- We seek solutions to human conflicts that respect the freedom, dignity, and self-esteem of every human being. We make ethical decisions based on our assessment of the consequences of our actions.
- We believe that it is human beings who have the responsibility for solving human problems. We are committed, in the enduring Jewish tradition of support for social action and social progress, to community service and actions for social justice. We each take responsibility for our own behavior, and all of us take collective responsibility for the state of our world.

We are committed to passing these values on to present and future generations through education and by our example.

Humanistic Jews Affirm That...

...A Jew is someone who identifies with the history, culture and future of the Jewish people.

...Jewish identity is best preserved in a free, pluralistic environment

...Jewish history is a human saga, a testament to the significance of human power and human responsibility.

..Judaism is the historic culture of the Jewish people.

...We possess the power and responsibility to shape our own lives independent of supernatural authority.

...Ethics and morality should serve human needs.

...The freedom and dignity of the Jewish people must go hand in hand with the freedom and dignity of every human being.

SHJ Philosophy

Humanistic Jews believe:

- Each Jew has the right to create a meaningful Jewish lifestyle free from supernatural authority and imposed tradition.
- The goal of life is personal dignity and self-esteem.
- The secular roots of Jewish life are as important as the religious ones.
- The survival of the Jewish people needs a reconciliation between science, personal autonomy, and Jewish loyalty.

● Freedom from supernatural authority

Theistic religions assert that the ultimate source of wisdom and of the power of the solution to human problems is found outside of people - in a supernatural realm. Humanistic philosophy affirms that knowledge and power come from people and from the nature in which they live.

● Dignity and self-esteem

Life is worthwhile when each person sees themselves as worthwhile. Self-respect is distinct from happiness. Happiness is less the goal of life than the consequence of having attained it. Self-respect is dependent upon autonomy. The autonomous person feels that s/he is responsible for the basic direction of his/her own life and that no one else has the right to usurp that responsibility. Autonomy does not mean that each person is individually self-sufficient. Healthy dependence is horizontal rather than vertical.

● Secular Jewish Roots

Judaism is an ethnic culture. It did not fall from heaven. It was not invented by a divine spokesperson. It was created by the Jewish people. It was molded by Jewish experience. Holidays are responses to human events. Ceremonies are celebrations of human development. Music and literature are the expressions of human needs.

What Do Humanistic Jews Do?

● Communities

Humanistic Jewish communities are an expression of the need for cultural solidarity and

mutual support. A Humanistic Jewish congregation provides group identity, adult education, youth education, a setting for public celebrations of holidays and life-cycle ceremonies, and a community voice for the Humanistic Jewish point of view.

● **Holidays and Ceremonies**

The Jewish people is an extended family whose shared history, memories, and destiny are commemorated in beautiful holiday celebrations. Humanistic Jews find meaning in the celebration of life through the historic Hebrew calendar and seek to interpret this calendar in a naturalistic way.

The birth of a child, coming of age (Bar/Bat Mitsva and Confirmation), marriage and even death allow the family and community to reinforce their unity and to articulate the values that make life worthwhile.

● **Education**

Humanistic Jews want to understand the beliefs and behavior of their ancestors without feeling compelled to agree with the beliefs of the past. They want their children to develop their own convictions honestly - on the basis of knowledge, not indoctrination. They seek to explore the entire range of Jewish experience, past and present and to choose what is reasonable and useful.

● **Ethical Training**

Skills for survival and happiness are not instinctive. They are acquired. Self-reliance, cooperation, generosity and rationality are daily exercises. They are just as important as academic skills.

Humanistic Judaism is less well known than Orthodox, Conservative, and Reform. But, on a behavioral level, it claims to represent many more American Jews than any of these official ideologies. Rabbi Sherwin Wine, the founder of the movement, identifies three kinds of Jews who are neither honestly Orthodox, Conservative, or Reform. He calls these types the involuntary, the ethnic, and the humanistic. Rabbi Wine defines the involuntary Jew is the individual of Jewish descent who finds no meaning either in his past or in the unique practices of his ancestral religion. He defines the ethnic Jew is the person of Jewish descent who bears a strong attachment to the Hebrew and Yiddish cultures out of which he emerged.

Rabbi Wine feels that these affiliations are negative. He prefers the positive definition of Humanistic Jew:

The Humanistic Jew is an individual, of either Jewish or non-Jewish descent, who believes in the ultimate value of self-respect and in the principles of humanism, community, autonomy, and rationality. He also finds meaning in the celebration of life as expressed through the historic Jewish calendar and seeks to interpret this

calendar in a naturalistic way. He perceives that the power he possesses to determine and control his own life is the result of two billion years of evolutionary history. Therefore, his religious feeling re-enforces his sense of human dignity.

On the last page of his book, "Judaism Beyond God," Rabbi Sherwin T. Wine says:

Humanistic Jews want to bring their beliefs and their behavior together and to find their integrity. They are eager to affirm:

- * That they are disciples of the Secular Revolution.
- * That the Secular Revolution was good for the Jews.
- * That reason is the best method for the discovery of truth.
- * That morality derives from human needs and is the defense of human dignity.
- * That the universe is indifferent to the desires and aspirations of human beings.
- * That people must ultimately rely on people.
- * That Jewish history is a testimony to the absence of God and the necessity of human self-esteem.
- * That Jewish identity is valuable because it connects them to that history.
- * That Jewish personality flows from that history -- and not from official texts that seek to describe it.
- * That Jewish identity serves individual dignity -- and not the reverse.
- * That the Jewish people is an international family that has its center in Israel and its roots in the Diaspora.
- * That the humanistic Gentile has a positive role to play in the life of the Jewish people."

Humanistic Jews want to translate these affirmations and commitments into an effective life style -- for themselves and for those who share their convictions. They need a community of believers to work with and to share with in this pioneering venture. They also need a cadre of trained leaders and spokespeople to provide scholarship and guidance along the way.

Views

While [secular Jewish culture](#) thrived in the United States in the first half of the 20th century, its principal manifestations, [Yiddish](#)-based schools and [Zionism](#), were in decline by the beginning of the 1960's. Many nonreligious Jews were becoming unaffiliated with either religious or secular Jewish organizations. Recognizing that most Americans are

members of thriving religious congregations, Wine concluded that a congregational format, emphasizing Jewish culture and history rather than a theistic outlook, could attract nonreligious Jews who were not served by other Jewish organizations. The goal was to provide members with a sense of community and all of the services that are provided by congregational life, but in a manner consistent with the nontheistic outlook of Wine and the others in his movement.

Wine emphasized intellectual integrity – keeping words consistent with beliefs. For him and his congregants, this meant that references to a deity had to be excluded from the liturgy. As a result, Wine discarded virtually all previous Jewish liturgical writings. A typical passage developed by Wine for the Sabbath ([Shabbat](#)) is, in transliterated Hebrew and in English:

Na-eh ha-or ba-olam.
Na-eh ha-or ba-shalom.
Na-eh ha-or ba-shabbat.

How wonderful is the light of the world.
How radiant are the candles of peace.
How beautiful are the lights of Shabbat.

Wine composed a poem that is considered to be the central expression of the outlook of Humanistic Judaism:

Ayfo oree? Oree bee.
Ayfo tikvatee? Tikvatee bee.
Ayfo kokhee? Kokhee bee v'gam bakh.

Where is my light? My light is in me.
Where is my hope? My hope is in me.
Where is my strength? My strength is in me – and in you.

Many of the Jewish holidays have been maintained within Wine's Humanistic Judaism, but the interpretations of the meanings of these holidays has been amended for consistency with the outlook of this movement. For example, [Rosh Hashanah](#) is said, within Humanistic Judaism, to be a time for renewal and reflection, focusing on the affirmation of human power and human dignity. [Yom Kippur](#) is, according to Wine and his movement, a celebration of inner strength and a time of self-forgiveness. Prayers and references to God are excluded from the services even for these holidays.

The [Torah](#) and other traditional Jewish religious texts are, for Wine, important historical documents that need to be evaluated scientifically to determine their origins and degree of factuality. For him, writings of the Jews of the past 250 years have more philosophical and ethical validity than ancient writings because they are more likely to be infused with the values of the [Haskalah](#), the Jewish Enlightenment, and the more general Western [Enlightenment](#).

Unlike other streams of Judaism, Humanistic Judaism does not condemn or discourage intermarriage, and its clergy are happy to officiate at weddings between Jews and non-Jews. Wine's view has been that criticizing people for marrying whomever they choose is not only unethical but also counterproductive to efforts to ensure Jewish continuity. For Wine and Humanistic Judaism, Jewish identity is largely a matter of self-identification.

Wine has been closely affiliated with the non-Jewish Humanist movement. In responding to questions as to why a specifically Jewish organization should exist within Humanism, he has said that the history of the Jews is a clear demonstration that only people can solve human problems of survival and that there is no supernatural force that will come to our aid.

Wine has written numerous books and articles. His *Judaism Beyond God* is a description of the history and outlook of the Humanistic Judaism movement. *Celebrations: A Ceremonial and Philosophic Guide for Humanists and Humanistic Jews* is, as its name indicates, a compendium of Wine's liturgical writings and "meditations," intended for use at various holiday and life cycle ceremonies. *Staying Sane in a Crazy World* is a general self-help book, with advice on how reliance on reason can help us live meaningful and fulfilling lives.

Courage

Death needs courage. It is so overwhelmingly final that it fills our lives with dread and anxious fear. When it arrives at the end of a long and happy life it is never welcome, yet not deeply resented. But when it comes too soon, invading young lives, disrupting hopes and dreams, it adds anger to our fear. We cry out at the injustice of destiny and wait for answers that never seem to come.

Courage is the power to confront a world that is not always fair. It is the refusal to beg for what will never be given. It is the willingness to accept what cannot be changed.

Courage is loving life even in the face of death. It is sharing our strength with others even when we feel weak. It is embracing our family and friends even when we fear to lose them. It is opening ourselves to love, even for the last time.

Courage is self-esteem. It prefers quiet determination to whining. It prefers doing to waiting. It affirms that exits, like entrances, have their own dignity.

Rabbi Sherwin Wine, in *Celebration*

The Little Book of Atheist Spirituality
Andre' Comte-Sponville
Pages 33-37

Christian Atheist or Integrated Goy?

To illustrate what I mean by fidelity I would like to share a few stories with you—or rather, two memories, one joke and one story.

Let me begin with the most recent memory. It dates back some fifteen years, to an interdisciplinary colloquium held in Salzburg, Austria, on the evolution of our societies. One of the debates in which I took part was run by Jean Boissonnat, then editor in chief of a major French economic journal. Without concealing my atheism, I approached the day's topic from the perspective of what I now call fidelity, drawing my references not only from Montaigne, Rousseau, Kant and Wittgenstein but also, more surprisingly, from the Old and New Testaments, which I commented on in my own way, sometimes quoting from Thomas Aquinas, Pascal or Kierkegaard. Surprised by this orientation, admittedly a quirky one on the French intellectual scene, Boissonnat finally exclaimed, "When you come right down to it, Mr. Comte-Sponville, you're a Christian atheist!" I found the expression too self-contradictory to be acceptable. "Christians believe in God, and I do not, I replied, so I'm not a Christian. What I am—or at least what I try to be—is a faithful atheist." Unless I am mistaken, that was the first time the expression crossed my lips.

Back in Paris a few days later, I told a friend about this exchange, quoting Boissonnat's term for me and describing my own surprise and response to it. Here was my friend's reaction: "It doesn't matter whether you call yourself a Christian atheist or a faithful atheist; when you come right down to it, Boissonnat is right! Look at our Jewish friends—many of them describe themselves as 'atheistic Jews.' What do they mean by that? Not that they have Judaism in their genes—that would be scientifically debatable and most of them could care less about their genes. No, what they mean is that they don't believe in God—thus, they are atheistic—but still consider themselves to be Jewish. Why? Not because of genes, which are irrelevant in this case; not because of faith, which they don't have: and not *only* (sorry, Sartre!) because of anti-Semitism. No, if they feel Jewish, it's because they recognize and value their appurtenance to a specific history, tradition and community. Well, just as they claim to be 'atheistic Jews,' you can claim to be an 'atheistic Christian' or a 'Christian atheist'!"

I did not follow this friend's advice, for fear that it might lead to confusion or misunderstanding. In its essence, however, and despite obvious differences (there is no equivalent in Christian history of the Diaspora, the Shoah or Israel), his reasoning was accurate. I do feel attached to the Christian (or Judeo-Christian) tradition, in much the same way as my atheistic Jewish friends are attached to their own communities. Indeed, some of them have helped me to understand just this—which leads me to my second story.

It took place several years before the first. I was teaching philosophy in a provincial high

school. I happened to be back in Paris one day and, strolling down the Boulevard Saint-Michel, I ran into an old college mate of mine with whom I'd been out of touch for a number of years. We decided to have a cup of coffee together on the Place de la Sorbonne. Standing at the bar, we gave each other a rundown of what we'd been doing since we'd last met—I taught first here, then there, got married, had children, published such-and-such a book.

Then my friend added, "There's something else. I attend synagogue now.

"Were you Jewish?"

"I still am!"

"You never mentioned it! How would I have known?"

"Given my name

"You know, apart from Levy or Cohen, names don't mean much to people who are neither Jewish nor anti-Semitic."

Back in the days when we were students together, my friend had been one of those Jews who were so integrated that it didn't seem to be an issue at all, either religiously (most of them were atheists'), ethnically (all of them were antiracists) or culturally (almost all of them were universalists). They felt Jewish. as a number of them had explained to me, only to the extent that other people were anti-Semitic--and in our milieu at the time, either anti-Semites were few and far between or else they kept a very low profile! As far as I can recall, this friend was no exception to the rule. He'd never mentioned religion or Judaism in the course of our student years. People thought of him as an atheist or an agnostic—and, like almost all of us, he probably was. Having gradually moved away from the Maoism of his youth, he had gotten interested in Kant and phenomenology. I had not known that he was Jewish, and it would have seemed irrelevant to me at the time. Why would nonbelievers discuss the faith they didn't have? Now here he was, barely ten years later, attending synagogue! Surprised by this development, I questioned him about what I saw as its most salient feature.

"You mean you believe in God now?"

My friend smiled at me disarmingly. "For Jews," he replied, "believing or not believing in God isn't the main issue."

I was nonplussed. For someone raised in the Catholic tradition like me, believing or not believing in God was practically the *only* issue! My friend went on to explain why this was not the case for him. Why attach so much importance, he asked me, to a question we can never resolve—and over which we have no control? Isn't it preferable to deal with things we know about and that depend on us?

Still smiling, he quoted the well-known Jewish quip: "God doesn't exist, but we are his Chosen People." In short, my friend explained to me that for Jews, or for him at least, the attachment to a specific history, tradition, Law, Book-- and thus to a specific community--was far more important than the contingent (or at least secondary) matter of believing or not believing in God. Also, he was a father now, and he cared about passing his recently

rediscovered inheritance on to his children. “Judaism,” he insisted, “is the only religion in which the first duty of parents is to teach their children to read—so that they can read the Torah.

That friend was the first in a long series. In France, a whole generation of Jews—including those who considered themselves atheists, as most of my friends did—seemed to be reevaluating their relationship to Judaism, and this gave me food for thought. I came to see that what they thought of as their tradition was also, to a great extent, *our* tradition. If they were justified in returning to it, exploring it and laying claim to it, even without believing in God, might there not be some degree of stupidity in the contempt we liked to show for it? Might it not be worth wondering how it happened that the Jewish people—though for so many centuries they had had no state, no land, no structure other than memory and fidelity—had shown such enormous creativity and freedom of spirit and made such an extraordinary contribution to scientific and human progress

As I walked home after that conversation, I suddenly felt as if I had stumbled into uncharted territory.

The term *Judeo-Christian* was pejorative in those days, especially when used as an adjective. Judeo-Christian morality, for instance, was invariably rejected as repressive, castrating and guilt-inducing. Nietzsche and hedonism were the masters of the day. True, they had felt—at first—like a gust of fresh, liberating air. As time went by, however, I began to see this attitude as both unfair and dangerous. ‘Is it the word *Judeo* that bothers us.’ I wondered, “or the word *Christian*?” The answer depended on time and place. I personally had to admit, however, that neither of these words bothered me. On the contrary, to the atheist I had become, they represented a double debt of honor or spirit. And so, every now and then, as a form of homage to my Jewish friends, and also out of revulsion for anti-Semites—I began, when asked about my religion, to describe myself as an “integrated goy.” It was only a joke, of course, but it said something true about what it means to be a faithful atheist in a Judeo-Christian land.