



# Humanistic Judaism

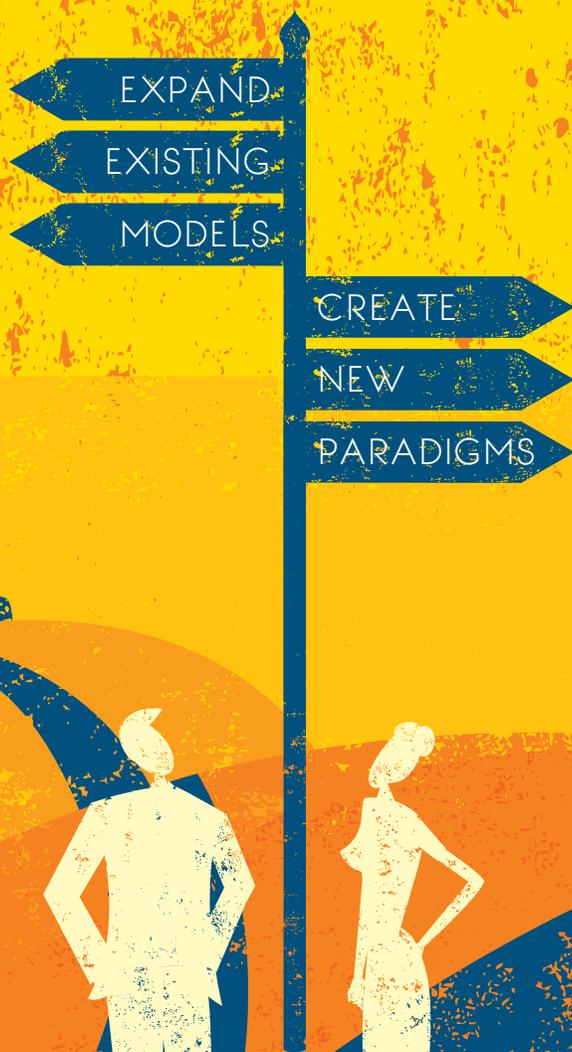
*Magazine*

## SHJ@50!

**Looking Back at Our First  
Half-Century of Jewish  
and Humanistic Meaning**

## The Next 50 Years of Humanistic Judaism

*by Paul Golin*



## Living Without God

*by Ronald Aronson*

## Why Ritual and Ceremony Matter

*by Richard D. Logan and  
Rabbi Jeremy Kridel*

## Community News

*and much more*

**Spring 2019**

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# From the Editor

Welcome to an exciting issue of *Humanistic Judaism* magazine!

This issue goes to press as the Society for Humanistic Judaism prepares to celebrate the fiftieth anniversary of its founding. As you may already know, the Society will be marking this occasion with a weekend-long conference, [SHJ@50](#), at the Birmingham Temple, our movement's founding congregation.

This month, we have included articles especially suited to this important moment for Secular Humanistic Judaism. In his article, SHJ Executive Director Paul Golin writes about our movement's future. What will the next fifty years bring? How can we focus on the goal of improving people's lives and making the world a better place? How does our vision of a cultural and humanistic approach to Judaism advance that goal? The answers will depend on how well the Society's leaders and affiliates are able to focus on defining and pursuing the mission of Humanistic Judaism as a movement, as well as a denomination.

Also in this issue, we are fortunate to have an excerpt from Professor Ronald Aronson's book, *Living Without God*. Professor Aronson presents a way for us as individuals to understand how becoming older calls upon us to remember who we are, by recommitting ourselves to what makes us vital while avoiding becoming self-parody. Professor Aronson closes his article with a new afterword in which he shares new insights nearly a decade after writing *Living Without God*.

Golin's and Professor Aronson's articles remind us that at both the individual and institutional levels, remaining relevant is about recommitting to the things that create meaning and purpose in our lives and in the world.

At every stage of life, whether as individuals or as communities, we make meaning in part by marking important moments through ritual and ceremony. This issue features an article about that topic by Richard Logan, Ph.D., President of the Society for Humanistic Judaism, and Rabbi Jeremy Kridel. (Rabbi Kridel is editor of this magazine.) Drawing on insights from anthropological studies, their article considers how ritual and ceremony help mark important moments and create senses of purpose and belonging. The article also considers how Secular Humanistic Judaism can benefit from ritual and ceremony without overdoing it.

This issue of *Humanistic Judaism* also features community news from around the movement, with contributions focused on how community anniversaries can be made meaningful, and how changing what we do to focus on our mission can help us remain relevant as things change around us.

All of this is to say: SHJ is celebrating fifty years with a renewed focus on the mission of Humanistic Judaism today and into the future! 

**J. M. K.**



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# The Next **50** Years of Humanistic Judaism

by Paul Golin  
A Mission-Driven Movement



Since its founding a half-century ago, the organizing model for Humanistic Judaism has been as a congregational denomination. Jewish congregational denominations are often referred to as “movements,” but what are they really moving? I’d argue very little, these days. They all started as genuine movements, though, and what they were trying to accomplish is right there in their names.

Reform Judaism was on a mission to, well, reform Judaism. It worked brilliantly—so much so that Conservative Judaism emerged out of shocked reaction to just how far Reform reformed. That movement sought to conserve more tradition. That worked too, and Conservative Judaism was the dominant American denomination for several decades. Reconstructionist Judaism’s mission is also in their name. To get back to an emphasis on their mission, they recently unveiled a new name, Reconstructing Judaism. (Upon learning this, I imagined rebranding our movement to “Humanizing Judaism”!)

What seems to happen when movements succeed is that they then calcify. Having found something that works, they just keep working it. When it no longer works as well, it becomes very difficult to change course, in part because it still works for the leaders. After all, that is why they are still there! The folks for whom it does not work have already left, or never entered.

Understanding why people are disaffiliating from organized Judaism is essential, and complicated. Conservative, Reform, Reconstructionist, and Humanistic Judaism all peaked at different times but are

now all past peak membership. (And before you buy into Orthodox triumphalism, understand that their alleged exponential growth has netted them a whopping 2% over a quarter century, going from 8% of all Jews in 1990 according to the National Jewish Population Survey to 10% of all Jews in 2013, according to the Pew Research Center.)

Disaffiliation doesn’t just affect Judaism: most liberal religious streams in America are in decline. A growing number of Americans are disaffiliating from organized religion altogether. That seems like it could be good news for Humanistic Judaism as a secular movement, and the potential is there, but we are currently organized as a religion, albeit a non-theistic one. That is a hurdle we can overcome through clarifying our mission.

Today, most of the individual synagogues that are growing in any denomination are growing because they are mission-driven. All non-profit organizations that are growing—including within the secular ecosystem like American Atheists and American Humanist Association—are growing because they are on a mission.

Even for congregational denominations, a revival of mission has worked in the past. The Reform movement had a rebirth in the 1980s when it changed policies, trained professionals and lay leaders, created departments, and launched new programs, all on the mission of engaging interfaith families. Through this mission of inclusion, Reform regained the mantle of largest U.S.-based Jewish denomination, and it retains that position to this day.

Is Humanistic Judaism on a mission? Or have we, too, calcified?

Having visited almost all our congregations during my first two years at the Society for Humanistic Judaism, I have found committed leaders—most of whom are generously giving of their time as volunteers—who care deeply about Humanistic Judaism and want to “keep it going.” Continuity for continuity’s sake, however, is not a mission. What is not being articulated well enough is the “WHY?” Why do we want to keep it going? What does it do for us? What is the positive change it makes in the world?

Folks on the outside have not yet experienced the meaning and benefit of Humanistic Judaism, and the traditional congregational approach of “join first, then you’ll get it,” has grown increasingly ineffective for all denominations. We need to demonstrate it, live it, give pieces of it away for free (“outreach”), and articulate why we are doing it, every step of the way.

As I see it, the “why” we do it is because Judaism, Humanism, and Humanistic Judaism improve people’s lives and makes the world a better place. That is the broad articulation of our mission, and I am excited to advance it.

The specifics of exactly *how* Humanistic Judaism improves lives and makes the world a better place are what we must articulate for each and every program and event we offer—if not in writing on the marketing itself (though that is a good practice), then at least internally for ourselves, our leaders, and fellow members. We all need to be on the mission together.

### Growth Through the Congregational Mission

The few synagogues in America that are currently experiencing growth are doing so mostly along two broad missions: social justice and what is often called “intentional spirituality.” (Having a charismatic leader also helps, as does being in a city that Jews are moving into rather than away from.)

A social justice mission is about mobilizing congregational members to action on various causes. Other activities that may seem tangential to social justice, such as prayer services or youth education, are tied in (at times) to the mission. Everyone involved understands what the goals are and becomes energized about making positive change in their larger community.

Congregations with the mission of intentional

spiritually are pushing back on the emotionally-dead synagogue experiences of so many of our childhoods. Their mission is to passionately move people, usually through great music, participatory singing, dancing in the aisles, or through fervent prayers.



At first blush, it would seem that intentional spirituality is off the table for Humanistic Judaism. Some of our members will not even use the word “spiritual,” lest it imply a belief in supernatural spirits. But there is great growth potential in “secular spirituality,” as long as we define our terms. And in many ways, it should already be happening. Because after all, Shabbat services and Jewish holiday celebrations are essential

offerings in almost all congregations with Humanistic Judaism. Do they work? Do they achieve their goal?

What is the goal of Shabbat services? That is a question some in our communities may have never asked of themselves but should. Offering programming simply because that is what we are “supposed to do”—perhaps as perfunctory ritual before getting to the main purpose of the gathering, like a guest speaker or potluck dinner—is not a mission-driven approach to Shabbat.

While there are various, equally-valid notions about the mission of Shabbat services, for me it is to help people feel better afterwards than they did before they arrived. It is to make a purposeful, mindful break from the stress of the work week into a weekend calm; to help us connect to loved ones, family, and friends—ideally in person, though also to remember lost loved ones; and to feel thankful for what we’ve got. Shabbat can help put our week and our lives into perspective, and it ideally provides inspiration.

These practices of mindfulness and gratitude have scientifically-measurable health benefits. Meditation and yoga studios have exploded in popularity because people are seeking pathways to the very practices already baked into the source code of our religion. Humanistic Judaism today is uniquely poised to reclaim such offerings without asking people to say anything religious they do not agree with. This could be an exciting aspect of our mission. If this is the goal for Shabbat services, is that how it currently works in our communities? If not, what needs to change?

Some may ask why Shabbat services cannot just be a nice social occasion for like-minded people to get





together. After all, “community” is an essential aspect of Humanistic Judaism. It is, but just having a community is not a strong enough mission in and of itself. People do not need a non-profit to help them organize themselves for purely social activities. What tends to happen when events are primarily about community is that a club-like feel is fostered, making it difficult for newcomers to break in. To me, community is instead what happens organically when like-minded people are on a mission together.

That said, the social aspect could be the mission, if genuinely embraced as a mission. For example, there is growing recognition of a “loneliness epidemic” in America, particularly as people age. Our communities could take on the mission to defeat loneliness, by making sure all social activities were purposely geared toward engaging new people along with existing members, and by proactively taking the programs out to where people are (retirement communities, libraries, Starbucks) rather than expecting newcomers to find their way into our programming on their own. The mission would need to be clearly articulated, through messaging to insiders and newcomers, with specific goals and benchmarks established to measure our success.

A social justice mission might seem a more natural fit for Humanistic Judaism than intentional spirituality, but politics are considered too divisive in some of our communities. Nevertheless, those congregations who offer social justice as a centerpiece are making tangible differences in their wider communities and are engaging more members in their mission. Rabbi Jeffrey Falick of The Birmingham Temple is a fixture in the Detroit area on progressive causes and his community was the only Jewish institution in the whole state of Michigan to declare itself a sanctuary for refugees. Our new rabbi

in the U.S. capital, Jeremy Kridel (ed. note: Rabbi Kridel is also editor of this magazine), participates in Lobby Days and represents our movement regularly with allies in the wider Jewish social justice movement and the secular and humanistic movement. And last year, SHJ launched a social justice initiative called Jews for a Secular Democracy ([www.JFASD.org](http://www.JFASD.org)), to defend the separation of religion and government from a Jewish perspective, an issue with near-unanimous support in our movement.

### **Growth Beyond the Congregational Model**

Whether the focus is on intentional spirituality or social justice or some other stated mission, when a movement is on a mission, it becomes more than a collection of congregations: it becomes a cause. And people support causes, still.

Humanistic Judaism is a cause. We are on a mission. By being mission-driven, our relationship to members and the wider community modernizes. We replace (or augment) the traditional congregational pitch of “please pay us so you can receive the meaning and benefits” with the cause-based appeal of “please support us so others can experience the meaning you’ve already benefited from.” Members become the drivers of our mission, their engagement and support an essential component in the mission’s success.

Some of our congregations are already working in hybrid models that combine these approaches. Still, how many of our members consider their dues to be in support of a cause rather than paying a fee-for-service?

Once we have undergone the mindset change from denomination to cause, it opens up myriad possibilities for expressing Humanistic Judaism. And it should, because Humanistic Judaism is of course much more

than just its organizing model. It is a philosophy of life, a source of meaning, a global network of like-minded people addressing the biggest issues we face as human beings.

Each of us may offer different reasons why we find Humanistic Judaism so meaningful. Personally, I find it allows me to be open and honest about my beliefs while still centering Jewish identity as an essential part of who I am. It helps me feel more connected to Jewish history and community. And it allows me to mark holidays and lifecycle events with a set of rituals and liturgy that add meaning, without using any words that compromise my integrity.

When we focus on offering the values and benefits of our mission, we recognize that many different delivery mechanisms might also work alongside the congregational model. Social justice programs could spin off to be their own separate initiatives. Youth

education need not be confined to months-long Sunday school programs but can also include one-time drop-ins or public-space events. And the measures of success can likewise broaden beyond counting paid members to asking how many people we are engaging with Humanistic Judaism.

In Humanistic Judaism's first fifty years, the programmatic pillars of our movement have been holiday and lifecycle celebrations, and adult and youth education. During the next fifty, it can be those plus so much more. I am honored to be able to think about additional offerings, and I invite your help and welcome your ideas.

Humanistic Judaism will grow as a movement by focusing our mission on improving people's lives. And if somehow all we end up doing is improve people's lives without growing our movement, we will still have improved people's lives! Either way, it's a win. 🔥

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# Why Ritual and Ceremony **MATTER**

Ritual and Ceremony as Affirmation by Richard D. Logan, PhD and Rabbi Jeremy Kridel



When I was young, rituals and ceremonies, like high school graduation, seemed like a royal waste of time—and it didn't help that the school band was awful! Many of my peers later felt the same about college graduation. (All the ceremonies involved were secular.)

But majoring in anthropology and studying how ceremonies and rituals bring people together and help provide meaning began to change my views. Teaching at the University of Nairobi right after graduate school and researching traditional Kenyan village life for two years cemented the change. The Maasai pastoral-herding society, for example, is replete with ceremonies and rituals. Many mark life transitions, making them the most meaningful and transformative experiences in the Maasais' lives. Ritual and ceremony strengthen the Maasais' appreciation of their culture and affirm that they have a solid place in it. Consequently, I can attest that Maasai "know who they are" and don't question their identity to the extent we often see here.

Maasai males go through a series of four initiations as they transition through the major stages of life:

1. They become Junior Warriors at puberty, which includes undergoing the ritual of circumcision. Going through this ordeal with their contemporaries shows they have the strength to be adults, and this major ceremonial occasion also forever binds them as "brothers" in their age set.
2. Several years later, there is a massive ceremony where hundreds of Junior Warriors from all around Maasai-land are initiated together into Senior Warriorhood in the eunoto ceremony, whereby they become the primary protectors of the community.

3. Some years later, the same age set is initiated into Junior Elderhood, when they become administrators of the decisions of senior leaders.
4. Finally, with Senior Elderhood, the age mates are initiated into leadership, the Council of Elders.

Maasai women traditionally also go through rites of passage, including female genital cutting at puberty. But the Maasai are a patriarchal society, and cross-cultural studies demonstrate that cultures tend to have more, and more elaborate, ceremonies to mark the life transitions for the gender destined for leadership. Thus, the two most ceremonialized transitions for Maasai women are puberty and marriage. In societies where women are the prime authority figures, however, they must pass more ritual "tests" than most men to prove their worth. Examples include the matriarchal Navajos' kinaalda puberty ceremony, where girls are subjected to trials of isolation, deprivation, and the stress of a long-distance solitary run; and, later in life, ceremonies that mark their attaining leadership status. (I know a lot more about the Maasai than the Navajo. I was honored by being made an honorary Senior Maasai Elder in 1993.)

Even though the terms ceremony and ritual themselves overlap and are often used interchangeably, we can suggest this distinction:

Ceremony is a series of acts performed on a formal religious or public occasion, often one celebrating a particular group event or anniversary, e.g., "A rabbi performed the wedding ceremony."

Ritual often refers to a smaller, more private event. Frequently ceremonies (e.g., weddings) have ritual components (exchanging rings, vows).

For anthropologists, ritual and ceremony are “an inevitable component of culture” (Carrico 2019). They are more dramatized instances of the recurring “patterning” of group behavior that is culture. In ceremonies and rituals, people engage with their culture as something more real to them than on most other occasions, when culture is literally the ordinary routines of their daily lives. Planned ceremonies, and rituals, originate in, flow from, and manifest the group and its culture. Rituals and ceremonies make culture real because they stand out as “figure” against the background of daily life. Take the small-town parade ceremony: It is nothing more than people you know and familiar vehicles moving in order down the street, but since it is done with music and a uniformed band in a group pattern, the community affirms itself as a “real” entity. Because they so powerfully display patterning, ritual and ceremony came to be placed “... at the center of the development of anthropological thought” (Carrico 2019).

Interestingly, participants often give less attention to the smaller ritual components of a ceremony than they do to the ceremonies themselves. Ceremonies require more logistics and planning than their ritual components do. For example, the rituals inside weddings—exchange of rings, vows, the kiss, etc.—are often simply treated as givens. Similarly, the ceremony of Thanksgiving includes the rituals of giving thanks, carving the turkey, etc.; the Mardi Gras celebration includes the ritual of handing out beads; initiation ceremonies may include the ritual of circumcision or other painful ordeals; a graduation ceremony includes the ritual of moving the tassel of your cap; and a kids’ pick-up baseball game begins with the ritual of choosing up sides by tossing the bat—a ritual, like so many others, ordained back in the mists of time, and now a given in the culture of childhood.

Ritual is, in other words, “not entirely encoded [i.e., thought about] by the performers” (Rappaport 1999, 48). In other words, individuals follow patterns set before their time. This feature of ritual reflects that culture often works in hidden ways and leads us to do many things, like saying “hello” or shaking hands, in certain ways without thinking much about how we do them.

Moreover, “[ritual is] an especially dramatic attempt to bring some particular part of life firmly and definitely into orderly control” (Moore and Myerhoff 1977, 3). Think of the many rituals in a funeral as ways of working

through and finding reassurance that meaning—and culture—still remain after the dislocation of loss, rituals of polite interaction as ways of controlling aggression, or wedding and marriage as ways of regulating sexuality. Rituals help us deal with life events and comfort us with the knowledge that order endures.

Ritual and ceremony also:

- A. Give occasion to a life or group event: they are signs that something matters to the group and individuals involved;
- B. Have a social integration function: everyone is together doing the same thing in the same way at the same time. As my congregation, Or Emet’s Shabbat service booklet says: “They bind us together”;
- C. Are often dramatized reminders of who a people are. This is especially significant if there is celebration of a group’s history. Historical memory, peoplehood, community, identity, honoring core values, and social integration, are prime features of many Jewish rituals and ceremonies—even when the stated purpose may be religious;
- D. Affirm that the group is real: if done well, ritual and ceremony also evoke admiration, respect, and even loyalty. Sometimes they even evoke awe and make both observers and participants experience the event as especially meaningful. Awe and meaning can be hard to distinguish from “spiritual.”

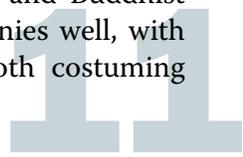


But here is the rub: it can be hard for secular organizations to do ritual and ceremony well. This is especially true for organizations that are newer, small and voluntary, or that eschew forms

that might look “too religious.” As a counterpoint: Jewish secular organizations borrowed much from “traditional” religious ceremonies and rituals that were actually centered largely on cultural themes like peoplehood, Jewish identity, etc., in the first place. Further, Humanistic Judaism has shown that these can be modified into humanistic observances that remain meaningful.

A key question, then, is this: can we learn from groups that do ritual and ceremony well, and if so, what can we learn?

First, we know that religious organizations—churches, synagogues, mosques, Hindu and Buddhist temples, etc.—all do rituals and ceremonies well, with pomp, precision, solemnity, beauty (both costuming



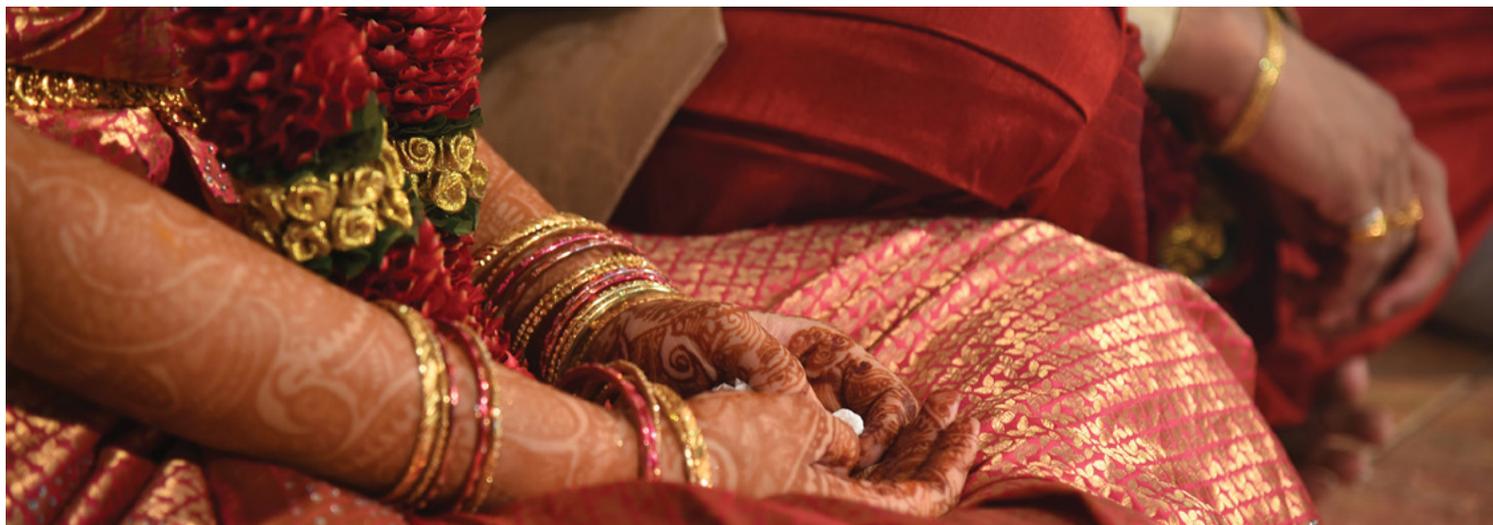


Photo: Courtesy: Veronika Melissa Pujari on Pixabay

and music), and in ways that provide support, comfort, and a sense of meaning. Because they provide so much, ceremonies and rituals clearly play a role in religions' staying power.

But where do we find secular groups that do ritual and ceremony well?

The immense popularity of the Changing of the Guard at Buckingham Palace shows that monarchies often do ritual and ceremony very well. The ceremonies and rituals of monarchies are colorful, precise, and done with pomp and solemnity, so much so that it is hard not to see the enterprise as highly meaningful. One reason for doing ceremony well is that it makes the monarchy stand out as figure against the background of everyday life in the United Kingdom—and by extension, in the United States too! They also validate a monarchy's status above its subjects and are a large part of its staying power.

Then there is, perhaps surprisingly, the urban gang, where ceremonies and myriad specific rituals are central features, including initiation (being beaten or sexed in, committing one's first crime, etc.), later initiation to ever higher statuses, loyalty oaths, and an elaborate array of components of gang culture (signs, insignia, colors, dress, "tagging", codes of conduct, etc.). Gang funeral ceremonies can rival the elaborate funerals of great Viking war heroes. Many of the ritual components are givens and help make gang life so compelling, fulfilling, and, yes, meaningful—and, again, real as a culture and as charismatic figure against a usually desultory background.

American national celebrations, usually secular, like Independence Day, Memorial Day, Veterans Day, etc., and other large public events that involve no national holidays, like sporting events, all must be given strong ceremonial marking to underline that each is an occasion. To ceremonialize these events, we often turn

to our one national secular organization that does ritual and ceremony well—the military. A national military honor guard often presents the symbols of the nation—the "colors"—thus marking the occasion while also reminding people of the "realness" of the institution of the nation. Militaries do rituals and ceremonies well for all the same reasons religions, monarchies and gangs do—to be organically real to their members and to society, and also to engender commitment.

Even though I have sung the praises of ritual and ceremony, they can be overdone. We surely do not want to emulate monarchies, the military, or gangs, other than to realize that they show that ritual and ceremony really do matter, even for secular groups. We do not favor indoctrination or want to strengthen the staying power of those who should not have it. It is also true that, even with only good intentions, groups who are ethical and moral can still engage in too much ritual and ceremony—or maybe too little.

My hope is that ritual and ceremony matter to Humanistic Judaism because they do several good things for us: they help make our communities and movement real, they help us stand out against the background of members' daily lives, and they can help us stand out to others. I would especially hold up our B Mitzvahs to highlight another important point: we generally pull these off with simple elegance compared to more traditional forms. Our B Mitzvah ceremonies have enough familiar ceremonial form and ritual content to be experienced as truly Jewish, but we take great care not to present ceremony and ritual for their own sake. We want the ceremony and ritual to affirm the youth, not for the youth to be a vehicle for the rites. In keeping with this, the ritual and ceremony must be spare enough to let the youth shine through.

One of the key pieces that makes our B Mitzvah ceremonies so compelling as a model is part of what

makes Secular Humanistic Judaism so distinct: changing the liturgy to match what we believe and the goals of the ceremony. A B Mitzvah celebration in many congregations outside our movement often makes the youth's growing maturity somewhat secondary to the ceremony by embedding the B Mitzvah rituals within a "regular" liturgy. The student may read from the Torah or read a haftarah, and may help lead services, and those achievements are recognized. But if the ceremony is on a Shabbat morning, the liturgy is largely the same as if there were no B Mitzvah being celebrated at all. The youth whose B Mitzvah is being celebrated is in some respects a drop-in: the youth is recognized, but the liturgy is not reworked to recognize how momentous the occasion truly is.



Compare this with how B Mitzvah ceremonies are conducted in different Humanistic Jewish communities. At our founding congregation, the Birmingham Temple, B Mitzvah ceremonies occur on Shabbat, and the holiday is recognized. Yet the bulk of the liturgy is not focused on Shabbat: it is focused on what it means for a youth to recognize and embrace maturation and responsibility, and showcases the individual youth's work on projects and service work as demonstrating growth. At Machar, our movement's congregation in Washington, D.C., group B Mitzvah ceremonies are conducted. Family and the youths' accomplishments receive pride of place: Shabbat liturgy is kept to a minimum, family and friends recognize the B Mitzvah students' growth, and the students deliver presentations or performances on topics connected to Secular Humanistic Judaism. Each family tailors their student's portion of the ceremony to the student's and the family's interests and emotions by choosing music and readings that speak for that family.

Throughout Secular Humanistic Judaism, our communities strive to keep formal B Mitzvah ritual and ceremony from being centerpieces of these occasions: to ensure that the character and accomplishments of the youth shine through. These features of our approach to B Mitzvah are a strength we should carry on, and they provide a model to build on.

By building ceremonies around rituals and liturgy that focus squarely on the occasion being celebrated, we can embrace the challenge of being a secular organization that does ritual and ceremony well, so that we will stand out as figure and have staying power—but not for control, or for creating commitment for its own

sake. And we can refine these forms collectively so that they reflect the moderation of group consensus. Indeed, groups have always worked together to make ceremony and ritual important parts of their cultures; we are no exception.

So, there is a broad lesson: for ritual and ceremony to be done well, quality can matter more than quantity, simple elegance more than elaboration. A few simpler

songs done well can be more meaningful, more moving, and more "spiritual" than more songs done less well. And sometimes the simplest ritual can be the most meaningful and most moving, like the Navajo girl simply running alone like the wind over the desert as the primary test in her kinaalda rite of passage, or a group singing together and becoming—literally, and instantly—the

voice of the organically real community. The simple reverent lighting of a candle in loved ones' memories can say "the light of their life is still with us" more movingly than words. And it is hard not to be reverentially quiet during a candle lighting; it can evoke a hushed "spiritual" reverence like no other ritual event in a ceremony.

I mention simple elegance because one of the tensions in SHJ communities is between those who want more educational or other cultural programming time and those who want more ceremony. Elegant simplicity that is both moving and not overbearing might be common ground where these two groups can meet, and on which to build ritual and ceremony that work well for us—not to mention that simplicity is easier to pull off.

Ritual and ceremony already live in our communities alongside our stimulating programs, social action, and education. Our commitments to social justice, reason, and evidence-based thinking help us keep our ceremony and ritual in perspective—from being either clumsy or overly elaborated—as a source of meaning and purpose in themselves. They affirm who we are, and we must be committed to using ceremony and ritual only in ways that further affirm and support what we stand for. 🔥

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# CommunityNews

- ◉ **Or Emet**—Minneapolis/St. Paul, MN
- ◉ **Beth Ami** — Boulder, CO
- ◉ **Kahal B'raira** — Boston, MA

- ◉ **Machar, The Washington Congregation for Secular Humanistic Judaism** — Washington, D.C.
- ◉ **Congregation for Humanistic Judaism** — Fairfield County, CT

## A Night to Remember

October 13, 2018: Everyone was ready to party and celebrate our leaders, members, and the 30<sup>th</sup> anniversary of Or Emet's relationship with the Society for Humanistic Judaism.

Eva Cohen, our rabbinic candidate, led a lovely Havdalah service. Then David Fox, donning the stovepipe hat of Abraham "Lin-Cohen," ceremoniously delivered the following address:



*One score and ten years ago,  
Harold Londer and Larry Garfin  
brought forth in Minnesota a new congregation,  
conceived in liberty and dedicated to the proposition  
that one can think rationally while honoring Judaism.*

*Now we are engaged in a great celebration,  
in testament to the fact that such a congregation  
can long endure ~ and grow ~ and flourish.*

*We have gathered to remember and to applaud  
the vision and the efforts of our past,  
our happiness in the present,  
and our commitment to the future of  
Or Emet Minnesota Congregation  
for Humanistic Judaism.*



Honoring Harold Londer, Or Emet's co-founder and inspiring leader for more than three decades, was the evening's highlight. Joan Barnett unveiled a portrait of Harold painted by Susan Weinberg and presented it to him along with a book of his writings titled, "In His Words."

Lionel Davis was honored for giving Or Emet years of beautiful, creative music. Lionel passed away recently, and we are grateful that we had this opportunity to celebrate his warmth and wit.

Next were congratulatory messages from SHJ's Rabbi Miriam Jerris and Executive Director Paul Golin, who was visiting our community that weekend.

Our singing "Thirty Years" together, to the tune of "Sixteen Tons," was a great finish to the evening! 🔥

## No School? No Problem!

Years ago, Rabbi Sherwin Wine visited the fledgling Beth Ami—CCHJ community in Denver and, somewhat commandingly, told us to build a school. He explained that without one, our future was limited, and our focus should be on bringing children into the fold. It made sense. Over the decades, Beth Ami has cycled through a variety of school venues, educators, and curricula, reaching a high of 20 enrolled students, only to plummet in recent years.

In 2015, we became the Jewish Cultural Family School. At least one parent accompanied their child for Sunday classes with the goal of promoting follow-up practices of the experiential, age-appropriate curriculum. We sang and played games and explored critical thinking while referencing the excellent SHJ Curriculum for Children's Education. We prepared healthy food and ate a multigenerational lunch together. We crafted and acted and celebrated holidays humanistically. Adult education was offered gratis and simultaneously with children's classes to engage parents and other interested participants. And yet, over the course of several years, our numbers dwindled.

We seemed to be losing ground to soccer, skiing, vacations, and a host of competing programs. Maybe it was the proposition that Humanistic Jews didn't commit to regular attendance. Or maybe children wanted to be with their friends at larger schools at established shuls. What to do?

School Director Lenore Kingston and Cultural Director Marti Hirsch re-focused, revised, and re-oriented the successful family/experiential model, along with a Beth Ami family with three young children. The result of their brainstorming produced Beth Ami Holiday Happenings, celebrations of Jewish holidays through a humanistic lens geared to children and adults

of all ages. We have celebrated Sukkot, Hanukkah, and Tu B'Shevat in homes and back yards, with each holiday event including food preparation, songs, books, games, and several activities for different ages.

As illustrated in the photos, our potluck Hanukkah event included latkes, a service project to benefit a local food bank, reading an amusing new Hanukkah picture book, playing dreidel, schmoozing with new and old friends, and concluded after dark by lighting many menorahs and singing a medley of traditional and updated songs.



Tu B'Shevat, the new year of the trees, is a challenge during Colorado winters. Beth Ami gathered to focus on the prairie ecosystem and co-dependency of its flora and fauna. We played team-building games to illustrate our own interdependency and ate smoothies and salad from (mostly) local and sustainable produce. Songs and piano accompaniment focused on seasons, life cycles, and celebrating our natural surroundings.

We have lowered the barriers to participate in these Holiday Happenings by welcoming families, couples, and individuals of all ages and abilities.



By gathering in homes, we reduce overhead and have not charged admission. The potluck approach allows everyone to participate and offer what they are comfortable bringing. We've created some consistency by always including food preparation and eating, music, literature, a craft, and games that highlight the particular holiday being celebrated. With planning, division of labor, advertising via newsletter, emails, phone calls, and a warm welcome to all who show up, the Beth

Ami Holiday Happenings have now replaced our Jewish Cultural School by offering rich family experiences that address so many needs in our community.

Sheila Malcolm

# Community News

## Kahal B'raira Is Building a Better World

Kahal B'raira was an early affiliate of the Society for Humanistic Judaism. As such we still have some institutional memory of that early period, though it grieves us to announce the passing of Barbara Schnuer who, along with her deceased husband Sy Schnuer, founded Kahal B'raira. On our 45th anniversary, we videotaped Barbara and Sy talking about that founding. In the video, Barbara said she "saw an article on the Birmingham Temple...and their rabbi's description of Secular Humanistic Judaism and immediately I said, 'Oh, that's who I am.'"



Sy and Barbara traveled to a meeting of the Society for Humanistic Judaism and later hosted Sherwin Wine in Boston. They cut and pasted liturgy they borrowed from the Connecticut Congregation for Humanistic Judaism to create KB's first High Holiday celebration. It is this type of sharing between affiliate communities that is the very essence of what our Society is about.

In March, Boston is pleased to be hosting the HuJews Conclave; we love to show off our city. In addition to a HuJews community service project, KB adults will be leading groups of Conclave attendees on a walking tour of Jewish Boston, focusing on the downtown area.

SHJ Executive Director Paul Golin, in Boston for the Conclave, will take time that weekend to join KB for an evening Havdalah and potluck dinner.

Members of KB will also be traveling to Detroit to celebrate 50 years with the larger world of Humanistic Judaism. We look forward to meeting you! It will be a time to look back and look forward.

Sadly, there are only a few members left who took part in the original story of the Society. So now it falls to us to plant more seeds for the future.

L'chaim! 

**Gladys Maged and Jon Levine**

## When a Congregation Comes of Age: Machar Celebrates 40 Years

A hallmark of any mature organization is when it lives vibrantly in the present.

Machar celebrated previous mile markers by honoring the visionaries whose guidance meant everything to getting and keeping us going. The tone of our 40<sup>th</sup> anniversary was all the more special as old and new members blended seamlessly into one organic whole, living fully in our present while having clear eyes on our collective future.

In that spirit, we officially welcomed our new rabbi, Jeremy Kridel (ed. note: also the editor of this periodical), in our 40<sup>th</sup> year, on an evening that began with Havdalah. Cards highlighting events from our early years were on the dinner tables for all to share and remember.

While we long ago transitioned to movement-trained rabbis and paid administrator and Sunday School staff, our outstanding Adult Ed program, newsletter, and ceremonial events continue to succeed through the yeoman efforts of volunteers. Our Senior Havurah has transformed into



Women in Transition (WITs), where women from multiple generations gather for a monthly potluck and sharing. Our annual Coffeehouse showcases amazing talent from three

generations. The energizing walks of our Nature Lovers' group end with lunches in delightful venues. With members living in such a wide geography, Friday Shabbat services have yielded to popular Saturday Havdalah evenings, mostly decentralized and hosted by a variety of families.

During the 40<sup>th</sup> year, our board worked with Paul Golin to develop themes to organize our goals and events going forward, many of which have already proved to be successful.

Everything old is new again as we continue to combine the best of our past with an ever-renewing spirit of belief in ourselves and our congregation's future. 



*Top: Rabbi Jeremy leads Machar's Adult Ed program after his ordainment celebration.*

*Bottom: Long-time members sit with newer to share our history from game cards.*

**Darlene Basch**

## The Dove

For many years our congregation (CHJ) has had a Fall Retreat, when a subgroup of us goes to the Catskills for a weekend. There is a program of very interesting discussions on Jewish culture and history, films, walks in the woods, and opportunities to get to know each other better. We choose very rustic settings, sometimes in quaint turn-of-the-century “resorts” near the Delaware River or deep in the Connecticut woods.

Usually we have Jewish themes for the evening films, but sometimes it is just entertainment. One time we saw a short foreign film called, in English, “The Dove.” It was maybe 15 minutes long, a film with heavy Ingmar Bergman-style dark, visual symbolism. Very serious. It was in Swedish with English subtitles. After about seven or so minutes a few people started to laugh. This was quite a puzzle because this was a very serious film. Then a few more started to laugh. Eventually everybody got the joke. We were all reading the subtitles but the spoken dialogue (which was, to us, in the background of our attention) had started out in Swedish but then had slowly changed into a type of “Swenglish,” and then to almost pure English with a heavy Swedish accent, and with a very funny script.

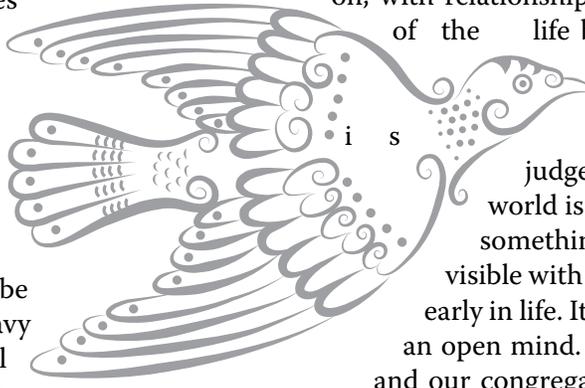
At some point we were probably all thinking, subconsciously: “Hey, I must have a gift for languages—I can almost understand Swedish!” Then we soon realized what was going on here—a joke on us. The two things that I took away from this experience were, “How come other

people got the joke before I did?” and “Why can’t more of life be like this—where you realize fairly early on that the subtitles, given to you by others (teachers, parents, authority figures, etc.) are not the only possible translation of life’s running dialogue?”

We would like more times where we “get it” earlier on, with relationships, the stock market, with our vision of the life before us, and fewer times of seeing how good hindsight is. Life is like that. Oscar Wilde once said, “It is only shallow people who do not judge by appearances. The mystery of the world is the visible, not the invisible.” There is something to that, but we usually approach the visible with preconceived notions, often acquired early in life. It is hard to approach the “visible” with an open mind. One of the nice things about Sukkot and our congregation’s retreat is that they feature the idea of a natural setting that is not about us and which has an independent existence. We are used to “reading” our surroundings with literacy tools that are not the only ones possible. Being out in the midst of nature can open our eyes to other ways of seeing.

One way to think of the Humanistic Judaism movement is that it is an attempt to see beyond the traditional interpretations (the subtitles, as it were) of the Jewish experience and to listen more closely to the actual dialogue (like in the “Dove” film)—to see what parts of the experience of historical and contemporary Jews are relevant to us today and can speak to us, and then to integrate this into our events. 🔥

**Dave Shafer**



Graphic: Courtesy of Tan Cundrawan on Pixabay

## A Fifth Question for your Passover Seder

**On all other nights, we seek a truthful understanding of our world.**

**Why, on this night, do we claim myth as history?**

Many Jews would agree that the Passover story could not have happened as described in the Book of Exodus. Yet even secular Jews retell the story, not because we believe it is history, but because of its history. It’s a foundational story. It represents the forging of a people who have endured to this day against seemingly insurmountable odds. It connects us to our family and ancestors who have told the same story for three thousand years. And it raises challenging questions that help us evolve as thoughtful and compassionate people.

Our “remembered” suffering makes us more sensitive to the suffering of others. We “welcome the stranger because we were once strangers in the land of Egypt.”

### A Story of Meaning for All People

The journey from slavery to freedom is a universal message and we thank those who travel with us. In the Torah’s mythical narrative, a “mixed multitude” joined the Israelites at Mount Sinai. Moses’ wife Zipporah was not an Israelite and her father Jethro, a Midianite priest, provided such wise counsel that a portion of Exodus is named in his honor. Let’s learn from Moses’ intermarried family that love is more powerful than hate and all are welcome at our Passover Seder.



# Tributes

## To Susan & Marshall Rubin

In honor of your 50<sup>th</sup> Wedding Anniversary  
From Barbara Palmer & Don Poore  
From Susan & Marvin Kanfer

## To Shari Gelber

In loving memory of your mother,  
Penny Frankel Ackerman  
From Miriam Jerris & Steve Stawicki  
From Enid & Steve Wetzner

## To Mary Raskin

Thinking of you and wishing you a speedy recovery  
From Miriam Jerris & Steve Stawicki  
From Andrea & Mark Friedlander

## To Andrea & Mark Friedlander

In celebration of your daughter  
Jamie & John Croll's engagement  
From Miriam Jerris & Steve Stawicki

## To Helen Forman

For a Speedy Recovery  
From Miriam Jerris & Steve Stawicki

## To Rabbi Miriam Jerris

Wishing you a Speedy Recovery  
From Andrea & Mark Friedlander

## To Jeremy Kridel

In loving memory of your stepfather, Michael Udell  
From Miriam Jerris & Steve Stawicki

## To Le Anne Steinberg

In loving memory of your husband, Bert Steinberg  
From Paul Golin, Miriam Jerris, SHJ Board of  
Directors, and the staff at SHJ

## To Linda Vendeland

In loving memory of Dale L. (Jack) Vendeland  
From Leonard N. Friedson & Carla Rautenberg

## To SHJ

In memory of Ed Klein  
From Barry Swan

## To SHJ

In memory of Doree Samuels  
From Gary Samuels

## To Lianna & Katy Levine

In celebration of the births of Parker and Milo  
From Zava Basile & Jonathan Levine

## To Larry Lawrence & Amy Kotkin

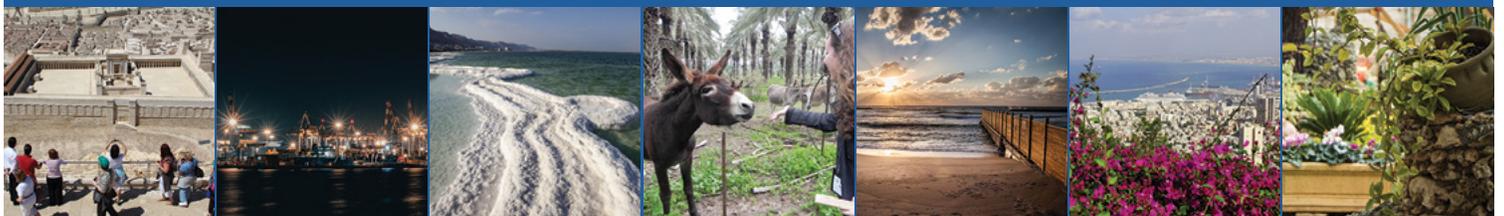
In celebration of the birth of your grandson  
From Miriam Jerris & Steve Stawicki

## To Shelia & Ron Sebor

In celebration of the birth of your grandchild  
From Miriam Jerris & Steve Stawicki

## To Priscilla Molnar

In loving memory of your husband, Paul Molnar  
From Paul Golin, Miriam Jerris, SHJ Board of  
Directors, and the staff at SHJ



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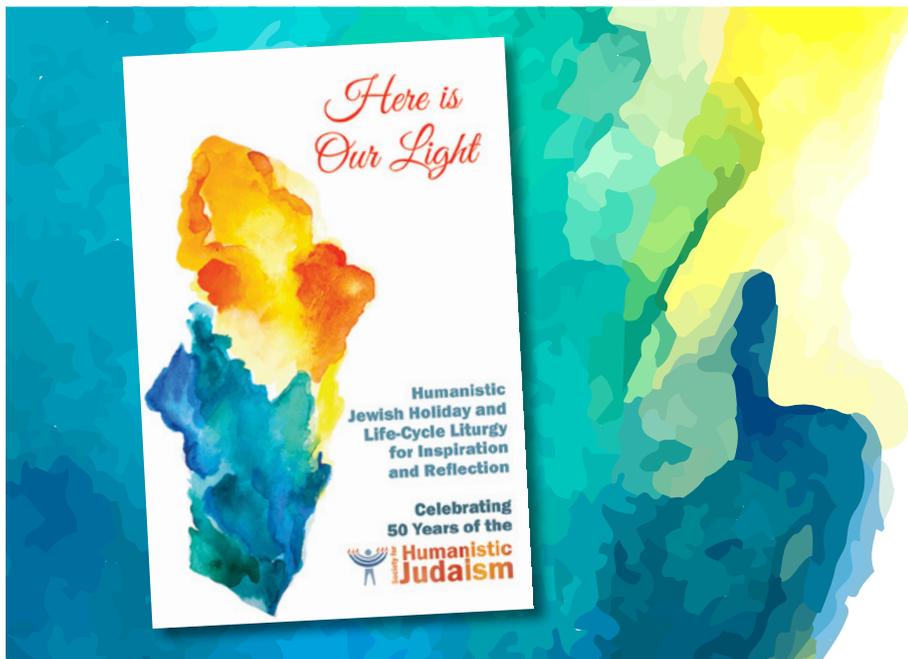
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## NEW LITURGY BOOK!

Available on Amazon.com

May 2019

This book collects some of the best Humanistic Judaism liturgy from leaders, thinkers, and clergy from across the movement and over the past half-century.

The liturgical pieces within can augment existing holiday observances (Shabbat, Passover, Hanukkah, etc.) and life-cycle ceremonies (baby namings, b'nai mitzvahs, weddings, etc.), and can serve as the core around which to build new services or ceremonies.





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