



Humanistic Judaism in America and Israel

FOR A long time, I have been familiar with the concept of “humanistic Judaism,” but I did not know that it is a living movement (albeit a small one), both in the USA and in Israel, with significant institutions locally, nationally and internationally. Reading a new excellent anthology of articles in *Contemporary Humanistic Judaism: Beliefs, Values, Practices* has been an eye-opener for me, as I am sure that it will be for anyone else who peruses its contents.

The editors are two Humanistic congregational rabbis who have both studied and taught Humanistic Judaism for a long time. One of them was raised in the movement and the other one came to it from a different Jewish denomination. Rabbi Adam Chalom is the rabbi of Kol Hadash Humanistic Congregation in suburban Chicago, and Rabbi Jodi Kornfeld is rabbi of Beth Haverim Humanistic Jewish Community, also in suburban Chicago.

From them I have learned that this movement today has over 40 Secular and Humanistic Jewish communities which engage thousands of Jews throughout North America. According to them:

Dozens of Secular Humanistic Jewish leaders, life-cycle officiants and more than 20 Humanistic rabbis serve Humanistic Jewish Communities in the USA and Canada. Most of these rabbis received ordination from the International Institute for Secular Humanistic Judaism (IISHJ) or from a similar institution in Israel known as Tmura-IISHJ, although some of them have been ordained by other Jewish seminaries.

How did this movement begin? Who was its main initiator? What was and is its philosophy and Jewish practice?

Humanistic Judaism was founded by Rabbi Sherwin Wine, a radical Reform rabbi, trained at the Hebrew Union Col-

lege, who was a courageous and committed philosopher, teacher, and activist. This book is dedicated to him, “whose vision launched a movement.” In 1963, with eight families, Rabbi Wine founded the first Humanistic Jewish congregation



Adam Chalom



Jodi Kornfeld

called the Birmingham Temple, in suburban Detroit, which remains the largest community in this movement. Before going to rabbinical school, Wine had studied philosophy at the University of Michigan. These studies were particularly influential in his life – they motivated him to develop a totally new philosophy and practice of Jewish life, which he and his followers thought would be relevant for the times in which we live.

The central problem that Wine sought to address was the fact that most non-orthodox contemporary Jews, including himself, no longer believed in God but were nevertheless Jewish and sought to live a Jewish life. Rabbi Wine became known as “the atheist rabbi” which of course was very controversial at the time. In 1965, Time Magazine quoted Wine as declaring, “I am an atheist.” With Rabbi Wine as its leader, the Birmingham congregation eliminated the name of God from services, creating humanistic rituals focused on humanistic values and people’s responsibility for their actions and their world.

This rich anthology explains the beliefs and practices of Humanistic Judaism in great detail, in many enlightening essays by leaders and supporters of the movement. These essays deal with beliefs, ethics, Identity, Israel/Zionism/Diaspora, Cultural Jewish Life, liturgy, life cycle, and education. This represents a comprehensive and systematic exposition of the beliefs and practices of this small contemporary movement in the Jewish world today.

According to the authors/editors of this book, Humanistic Judaism is based both in history and in contemporary Jewish life:

Our Judaism is broadly defined as the collective historical experience of the Jewish people – a widely and wildly diverse experience that has helped foster the extraordinary resilience of the Jewish people. We also embrace the interpersonal diversity of Jewishly connected individuals and families, including those born Jewish, those adopting Judaism and those who find themselves “fellow travelers” or loving partners in a wider Jewish family.

What brought this movement into being? Essentially, it is the product of the

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secularization of American (and Israeli) Jews over many decades. The editors argue cogently that most American Jews no longer believe in God, and therefore their liturgy and practice should no longer be God-centered. In this book one can find many fascinating examples of how they have made these changes, including liturgy, life-cycle events and an educational curriculum

The editors claim that most North American Jews see themselves as cultural Jews, and they have data to prove this:

The majority of American Jews view Jewish identity as cultural. When the Pew Research Center asked a random sample of American Jews to complete the sentence, "To you personally, is being Jewish mainly a matter of...with "religion", "ancestry", "culture" or "some combination" as options, 53 percent of the "Jewish Americans in 2020" survey participants said "ancestry", "culture" or "ancestry and culture"- not "religion", and not even "religion" in combination with "ancestry" or "culture" (p. 229)

This is the problem that this movement set out to deal with. They were critical of Reform Judaism for not being systematic and consistent enough, and therefore they felt that they had to break from it and establish a movement that is more radical.

While they are undoubtedly correct in their assessment of the problem, one must wonder why this movement did not take off in a big way in the USA. Was it simply too extreme for most normative Jews, even Reform/Progressive/ Liberal ones? Or was it a matter of organizational issues – money, leadership, personnel, institution-building? My assumption is that all of these reasons inhibited its growth and development during the past sixty years. It may also have to do with the notion that many assimilated Jews in America (and Israel) are still looking for more "tradition" and are not prepared to give up on God completely.

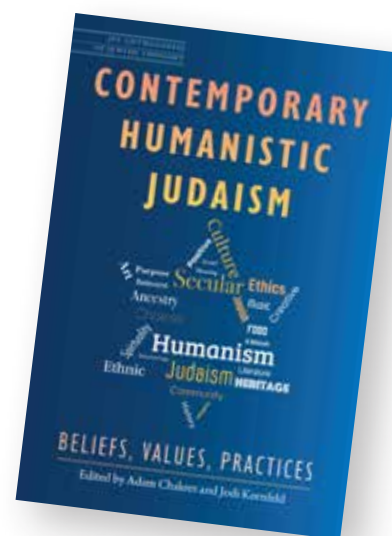
Nevertheless, there has been some growth and institution-building. The movement established the International Institute for Secular Humanistic Judaism (IISHJ) in Jerusalem in 1985 and cur-

rently has two centers of activity, one in Jerusalem and the other in Farmington Hills, Michigan. IISHJ – North America began offering its Leadership Program in 1986 as a joint program serving the communities of the Cultural and Secular Jewish Organization and the Society For Humanistic Judaism. It began a rabbinic program in 1992, and its first rabbinic ordination in North America took place in 1999; subsequent ordinations have taken place biennially as students complete their programs. Its Colloquium program began in 1997, drawing together scholars and activists to explore the pressing issues of the secular Jewish world. The current IISHJ Dean for North America is Rabbo Adam Chalom, one of the editors of this book.

The movement has also established a framework for operation in Israel. Known as *Temura* (Change), the Israeli sister organization to IISHJ-North America, began in 2004 and held its first ordination in 2006; they have likewise continued biennially. *Tmura*-IISHJ has also sponsored a rabbinic association for its graduates and has recently initiated Secular Humanistic Jewish communities in several locations in Israel. The current Dean of *Temura*-IISHJ is Rabbi Sivan Malkin Maas.

One would think that this organization would be growing by leaps and bounds among secular-cultural Jews in Israel, but this is not the case. It remains very small and largely unknown, although it has much potential. The lack of growth is probably due to the great secular-religious divide in Israel, and to the shockingly poor Jewish educations that secular Jews have paradoxically received in Israel. It also is related to the fact that secular-cultural Jews in Israel had become more secular than cultural – they have traded in their Jewish culture for secular culture over the decades as part of a particularly strange process of assimilation in Israel, through which many secular Jews have largely abandoned their Jewish identity for a cosmopolitan universalist one. Nevertheless, I believe that there is a definite place for this movement in Israeli society since the majority of Jews here are still secular-cultural.

For me, this book is especially important at this time because of the very idea of humanistic Judaism, i.e. that Judaism is a religion, culture and peoplehood that contains tremendous resources for ethical living, for caring about other human beings – not only the members of our tribe – and for caring about the global crisis of climate change. In recent decades – and certainly during the last 14 months, as a result of the repercussions of the wars in Israel and the region, and because of the statements and actions of certain personalities in the government of Israel who represent "Jewish Power" and "Religious Zionism" – the voices of a substantial, sensitive and systematic humanistic Judaism have been drowned out to a large degree in the public square. This book reminds us that Judaism is at its essence humanistic, and this should never be forgotten, and that people who believe this should act upon their principles and not forfeit Judaism to the extremists. ■



**Contemporary Humanistic Judaism:
Beliefs, Values, Practices**

Edited by Adam Chalom
and Jodi Kornfeld

The Jewish Publication Society and
the University of Nebraska,
Lincoln, Nebraska, 2025