



Meet Humanistic Judaism: An Alternative Practice

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What are people to do who feel Jewish in their kishkas but don't feel at home attending temple or synagogue services that involve prayer and worship? As statistics tell us, many in this predicament simply become unaffiliated and, taking their children with them, gradually drift away from Jewish practice. Others, intent on maintaining their Jewish connections in ways that feel comfortable and honest, search for and find alternative means of expressing their inner Judaism. In New York, The City Congregation for Humanistic Judaism, part of a national and international movement (communities on five continents include ones in Israel and the Former Soviet Union) offers a way for secular Jews to come together and celebrate Jewish culture and history as well as moments of joy and sorrow in a non-theistic manner. Although secular, humanistic Jews have been around for a long time—think pioneering kibbutzniks in Israel— a formal organization, the Society for Humanistic Judaism, was only established in 1969 by the late Rabbi Sherwin T. Wine.

Humanistic Judaism is a people-centered philosophy. It sees human reason and power rather than faith as the source of truth, and human intelligence and experience as capable of guiding lives. Judaism is seen as more than a set of religious beliefs and practices. Common history, culture, and experience are valued and explored. Classical texts and traditional teachings are viewed as important sources of learning and inspiration but are subject to the same scrutiny as other documents, and distinctions are made between legend and fact. The movement maintains no one person has a monopoly on truth, and lessons can be drawn from diverse cultures and teachings. Humanistic Jews believe they are responsible for shaping their own lives and for working towards the welfare of others.

So how does this worthy philosophy play out in New York's City Congregation for Humanistic Judaism? About 115 households from the five boroughs, as well as several from Long Island, New Jersey, Connecticut, and Westchester, come together in Manhattan for the High Holidays, Shabbats, and youth and adult education. They are diverse in ages, family configurations, and backgrounds. Some are from traditional Jewish homes where a parent was a temple president or where Yiddish was spoken. Others were raised in determinedly secular environments. There are children of Holocaust survivors, two Jewish-parent families, singles and single parents, and mixed marriage couples. From within this *mélange*, teens become Bar and Bat Mitzvahs, babies are named, and marriages performed. But the details and language diverge as traditional observances seen as meaningful are adopted, other practices adapted and, sometimes, entirely new forms created. Innovation is welcomed as part of Jewish tradition and is, in fact, seen as strength in a vital and evolving religion. Shabbat services involve lighting of candles and blessing of wine and challah, but rather than prayers and references to a theistic authority, words and music that express human power and responsibility and affirm the gifts of light, life, family, friends, peace, Shabbat, and Jewish identity are spoken. Well-thought-out programs following services, often over a communal meal or dessert, stimulate lively discussion. High Holiday services are particularly beautiful as members reflect and share, tell stories, and draw upon literature and music--both ancient and contemporary--to make connections and consider possibilities for changes and improvements. The traditional ideas of "atoning for sins," contrition, and self-denial are not compatible with Humanistic Judaism. Rather, Humanistic Jews see the holidays as an affirmation of human power and dignity, focusing on inner strength to self-examine, become better people, and go forth to make a difference. On Yom Kippur, the beloved Kol Nidre is sung and a revised kaddish that speaks of renewal, hope, and the goodness of life is recited. Apples and honey, of course, are part of the Rosh Hashanah celebration.

The City Congregation strongly identifies with the passion for education. In Kidschool, children ages five and up receive a thorough grounding in Jewish culture, history, and values with age-appropriate lessons and activities. Events of the Holocaust and importance of the State of Israel are taught. Jewish literature, both ancient and modern, is examined, and critical thinking encouraged. The highly regarded Bar/Bat Mitzvah program is unique, creative, and meaningful. With the guidance of a volunteer mentor from the congregation, each student undertakes an individual journey that includes in-depth study of his or her own Jewish heritage. Investigation of family history leads to Jewish roots and connections, and probing and self-examination to identification of personal Jewish values. This is a period of discovery, and freedom of thought is encouraged. Children from intercultural backgrounds study broader connections as they prepare to assume a role in the adult Jewish community. In the program, a hero or role model who personifies student goals is chosen. Values are turned into action in community service projects such as Bikkur Holim (visiting the sick), Shmirat HaAdama (guarding the earth), and Tzaar Baalei Hayyim (concern for the suffering of animals). Mitzvah students prepare major research papers on an aspect of Jewish culture and deliver the often impressive work at their services. Topics have included Jewish Humor, the Holocaust and Righteous Gentiles, Jewish Immigration, Freud and Humanism, and Noah and the Flood Myths. Leading their Mitzvah services, Bar/Bat Mitzvah students share insights from their journeys of self-discovery and Jewish connectedness. They demonstrate knowledge of who they are and their communal responsibilities.

The City Congregation's rabbi, Peter Schweitzer, who was ordained at Hebrew Union College, is a wise, low-key leader who deftly guides and educates his smart, funny, and committed flock. Knowledgeable about ancient Hebrew texts as well as Yiddishkeit, he makes connections and encourages inquiry. Congregants explore the richness of Jewish heritage with the rabbi at the very popular "Adult Perspectives," a bi-monthly program that gives members and visitors, who are always welcome, a chance to listen to experts, learn, and discuss a wide array of topics that, this year, ranged from an insider's view of Jewish life in Russia to connections between psychotherapy and Humanistic Judaism.

A booklet, recently published by the American Jewish Committee, "Religious Switching Among American Jews" by Dr. Tom W. Smith of the National Opinion Research Center at the University of Chicago, reports that, generally, Judaism does not lose its adherents to other religions but, rather, has lost significant numbers to the ranks of "unaffiliated." The study notes many unaffiliated still identify with their heritage but regard themselves as secular or cultural Jews. Even without religious practice, Smith sees "ethnicity" and "peoplehood" as factors that reinforce Jewish identification, but historically, without some religious framework, identity fades in two generations.

Humanistic Judaism provides a way for secular members of the community to actively identify and participate as Jews. Many express delight at finding like-minded people with whom to share their heritage. When their children (including those of mixed marriages) commit to a life of Jewish values as they become Bar and Bat Mitzvah, they serve the Jewish communal self-interest. A large tent that includes groups such as The City Congregation is vital to Jewish continuity as it ensures that all who identify as Jewish can find a compatible home.

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