



CSJO NEWSLETTER

Congress of Secular Jewish Organizations

Fall 2004

Sholem School and Community of Los Angeles celebrates the first 50 years

by Hersh Hartman



Hersh Hartman

The Sholem Educational Institute was formed ca. 1954. The basic stimulus for organizing the school was as a Sunday refuge for the children of victims of the Hollywood witchhunt. Some children were actually persecuted by their public school classmates when their parents' name(s) appeared in the rabidly anti-communist local press. Others were emotionally affected by the tensions at home, resulting from subpoenas, FBI visits, and/or blacklisting by the film studios. The main founders of

the school were mental health professionals, led by Dr. Carl Sugar, a psychoanalyst who had studied with Freud, and whose patients included many witchhunt victims.

Even though, there were other Secular Yiddish schools — the Jewish Peoples Fraternal Order, International Workers Order (JPFO IWO) *shuln*, which continued to exist in LA for many years thereafter as affiliates of “Jewish Clubs and Societies” — Sholem founders decided they needed a separate organization. For one thing, an affiliation or connection with already tarred Secular Yiddish schools would have worked counter to the intended function as a refuge.

Another factor was anti-communism. Why wouldn't the parents sign up their children in the *shuln* of the (socialist) arbeter ring and/or the (Labor Zionist) farband? Because these were as

rabidly anti-communist as the local environment and took particular delight in the discomfort of their old ideological enemies on the left. The arbeter ring and the (closely-allied Yiddish daily) *forverts* had played a major role in the expulsion of JPFO-shuln from NY city public school buildings, and the then city editor [later, editor] of the *forverts* was a star witness against the IWO in deportation hearings and, finally, in the NY State trial that liquidated the IWO, he gave testimony about the “subversion” inherent in the poems of [early Yiddish labor poets] Bovshover, Edelshtat, etc. I was there.

Although Dr. Sugar, in particular, was extremely knowledgeable in Yiddish literature (a “kenner,” [knower] he said of himself, and me, when we met), his experience with children of the second generation convinced him that the major emphasis on Yiddish-teaching in the JPFO shuln and their successors would not satisfy the needs of Sholem's intended students.

Sholem did hire a succession of Yiddish teachers during the 14 years or so before I became principal, but they had extremely limited success in relating to the pupils. This was the third, though minor, reason for the independence of Sholem. The parents of the new school had to start from scratch, as few of them had any knowledge of Yiddish and most knew very little of things Jewish. As the wife of one of the blacklisted writers told me many years later, “I knew nothing about Jewish history, so, naturally, I was put in charge of curriculum development.” While there were some drawbacks, the overall result of this newness was quite positive. It

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More on the Torah and Modern Morality

In the second part of a two-part article, Bennett Muraskin continues to take issue with the notion that the message of secular humanistic Jewishness can be found in the Torah. He argues here and in his 2001 book, *Humanist Readings in Jewish Folklore*, that we must look to the folk traditions to find our true tradition.

Part I began in this way: Is the Torah the basis for modern morality? Most Jews, even non-observant ones, would probably say yes, citing the Ten Commandments (Ex. 20:2-14), the commandment to “love your neighbor like yourself” (Lev. 19:18) and the often repeated warning, “do not oppress the stranger.” But none of these stand up to close scrutiny.

Bennett then discussed a series of topics. The articles picks up with a continuation of his analysis of sections of the Bible.

Bennett is a member of the Northern New Jersey Jewish Cultural School and Society.

THE LEGAL SYSTEM AND PERSONAL ETHICS



Bennett Muraskin signs one of his books

Israelites—and for the most part resident aliens—live under a harsh, but relatively egalitarian legal code. Among many capital offenses are promoting the worship of other gods (Deut. 13: 2-6, 7-11), blasphemy (Lev. 24:10-16,23), violating the Sabbath (Num. 15:32-36), striking, insults or defying a parent (Ex. 21:15, 17, Lev. 20:9, Deut. 21: 18-21), false prophecy (Deut. 18:20), homosexuality (Lev. 20:13) and witchcraft (Ex. 22:17). The injunction to inflict punishment by taking an eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth is meant quite literally. (Ex. 21: 23-25; Lev. 21:23-

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Roberta Feinstein: Executive Director's Report

Roberta reported to the CSJO board during its meeting at the annual CSJO conference in May 2004.

I don't do much traveling during the winter; however, I did visit our North Miami group, Secular Jewish Humanists of South Florida. Charles Baron created a program of Secular Jewish Life Cycles which I presented. My 21 year old granddaughter, along with a much older member, played bride and groom.

CSJO sent a letter to Abe Arnold, of Winnipeg, congratulating him on the very prestigious award he received from the Canadian government (as noted in the CSJO Newsletter last year). Abe responded with thanks and noted that CSJO was doing a fine job and to keep up the good work.

I do keep in touch with affiliate groups and their delegates and invite them all to share their happenings with the other groups and with the newsletter editor Larry Schofer. Sometimes that works! As I receive information from our affiliates, I send the information to Larry who publishes the information in our newsletter.

After Judy Seid's interview was printed in the Baltimore Jewish Times, I contacted the interviewer, Ira Rifkin, and asked his permission to reprint the article in the CSJO newsletter. He agreed, as long as it was printed in its entirety and so Larry did just that. Now, other CSJO affiliate groups are wondering how to get their names in the local Jewish newspapers. Perhaps Judy can share that with us.

I, again, spent some time with the Cleveland local Workman's Circle/Arbeter Ring to discuss joint activities.

There were many requests for Bennett's new book, Let Justice Well Up Like Water and they were all filled.

When Egon Mayer died, CSJO made a donation to the Cold Spring Harbor Laboratory Association, which was important in Egon's life. The association supports cancer research. We received a lovely thank you letter from the association as well as a personal thank you from Egon's wife and daughter.

CSJO made a donation to the Zhitlovsky Center for Yiddish Culture in honor of Itche Goldberg's 100th birthday and we received a thank you.

CSJO sent a letter of condolence to Myrna Baron, executive director of the International Federation, on the death of her father. And letters of congratulations were sent to the Sholem Aleichem Club of Philadelphia, and the Sholem Community of Los



Karen Knecht, chair, presents commendation to Rifke Feinstein, executive director, at the annual conference.

Angeles, on their milestone 50th anniversaries.

The International Institute for Secular Humanistic Judaism occupied a lot of time, this past year, for Karen Knecht, Hersh Hartman, and for me as well as for other CSJO members who are also IISHJ board members. It was decided by IISHJ, after it was proposed by CSJO, that the two organizations' board meetings be held at times that would be convenient to both organizations. One meeting will take place in November, two weeks before American Thanksgiving, and the other meeting in April, on a Saturday, thereby making it more financially feasible for out-of-town members to attend. Bob Sims, our delegate from Ann Arbor, attended this year's IISHJ April meeting.

Social Action:

After receiving unanimous approval from the executive committee, CSJO sent \$100 to become a supporter of the March For Women's Lives. On April 25, Helene Tamarin, Judy Seid, David Gates, my friend Barbara and I, carried the CSJO banner in Washington, DC. We were able to rendezvous with Machar, the SHJ Washington, DC group, and we marched together. CSJO was mentioned in the organizing group's letterheads and in the local Cleveland media. The donation was made to the national organization and I wonder if anyone saw our name in their local media? If I may, just a few observations about the March...

There were mainly young people marching and carrying banners. I had expected the majority of the people there to be nearer my age, but I was happily wrong. There were contingents of young people representing diverse and varying groups...for example, there were groups of medical students who carried banners proclaiming that they were the future abortion providers; there was a group of young teen-agers from the Watts area of Los Angeles; scores of buses from various colleges, including some Christian colleges. The fact that these young people, who grew up under Roe v. Wade laws, were still protesting the threat to these laws, was very heartening.

There were many, many males participating in the march, showing that this was not just a woman's issue.

The marchers were, on the whole, single-minded. There were many anti-Bush signs and demonstrations (small ones), many Kerry for president signs and buttons, gay and lesbian rights' demonstrators, of course, but the emphasis was on the protection of a woman's right to choose and health care.

CONGRESS OF SECULAR JEWISH ORGANIZATIONS

A non-profit organization

An affiliate of the North American Federation of Secular Humanistic Jews, a Constituent Organization of the International Federation of Secular Humanistic Jews

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The passing of a giant of secular Jewish life — Jack Rosenfeld

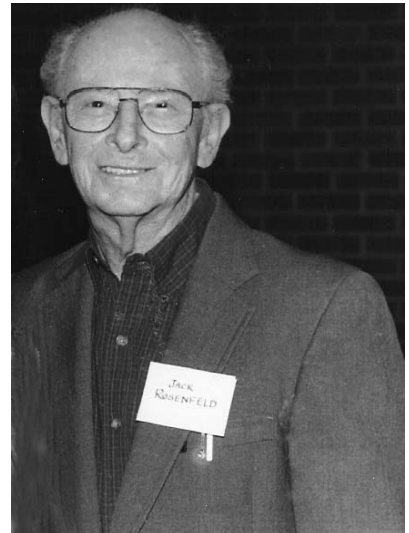
by Larry Schofer

This summer Jack Rosenfeld, a long-time supporter and past co-chair of the CSJO, passed away. As the Sholom Aleichem Club newsletter put it, August marked the passing of a giant of secular Jewish life.

Jack was an activist who produced dramatic productions for 40 years, who insisted that the secular Jewish ideas be represented in the general Jewish community, who fought for social justice, and who exhibited great organizational skills. He was a driving force in the Sholom Aleichem Club, and for a number of years he brought his passion to the CSJO as well.

He believed that secular Jews belonged in the larger community. In that regard he was a representative to the Jewish Community Relations Council, and he could always be counted on to be present and often to organize Club groups for Israeli Independence Day, Martin Luther King Day, and other community celebrations.

I do not feel that I can do justice to his life in this article, but I would like to reprint the remarks that I made at the memorial service for him. Many others spoke, and each had something wonderful to say about a wonderful human being. I hope this note provides some good memories for those of you who knew him, and I hope it says something about the man to those of you who did not have that privilege.



Jack Rosenfeld was a man of action

Jack Rosenfeld was a man of action. He was always ready to go to a meeting to discuss and to plan, but in the end he wanted results – a plan, a program, a publication.

And he didn't like the plans to be slipshod - many of us in the Sholom Aleichem Club remember the tedium of repeated rehearsals for Rosh Hashonah and seder programs. We went over and over the materials, and in the end it paid off. When those programs were completed, everybody walked away with the feeling of a marvelous experience.

Jack was a great democrat in planning meetings – he wanted everybody on board. But once the plan or the program was set, he had little patience with second-guessers who didn't participate in planning. He could be quite short with people who made last-minute, off-the-cuff for changes. His implied message was, "Why didn't you come to the meetings in the first place?"

I felt a kindred spirit in Jack. We worked together in many projects.

We were co-chairs of the Congress of Secular Jewish Organizations for several years, and we took solace in each other at our frustrations in getting a far-flung organization to actually do anything. We rejoiced together in the good work of others, and we bemoaned the people who felt the need to express their opinion on every subject, both large and small, and to express that opinion many times, no matter how many other people had preceded them with the same notions.

I remember when I was working with Jack's brother Max in planning the book that we eventually entitled *New Yorkish*. Initially it was the CSJO that approached Max about doing this book, and Max wasn't sure that anyone would be interested. Later on Jack approached me with the idea that the Sholom Aleichem Club co-publish the book, and from then on there was no turning back. When you worked with Jack, you knew he was always going to call you at the appointed time to ask you if your own tasks were done. When I lived up to Jack's demands, I knew that I had done well.

After that Jack asked me to co-chair the Club's publications committee with him, and I feel that the work of that committee was some of the most productive work I have ever participated in. Of course the primary people were the authors – Max and later Sherm Labovitz on our CD Main Oytser [still available] – but we cleared the path; we found the money; we found the printer; we found the distributor.

I remember wandering around in Jack's basement – it was like a book warehouse. Mainly club Haggadahs, but also flyers and brochures, *New Yorkish*, Max Rosenfeld's *Festivals, Folklore, and Philosophy*.

I introduced Jack to the world of desktop publishing. He was a printer by trade, and he knew all about publishing, but there were some things he didn't know about computers. No matter how often I urged him to adopt a new format, he always came up with a sheet of heavy paper with blue lines - blue because they wouldn't show up in the actual print. And, as one might expect, he did great things. It was a small step for me to move from his blue lines to computer generated margins - he understood, he knew how to make the printed word work.

In the last few years we did mainly marketing of our publications, and in this area Jack shone. He knew about bulk mail, mass marketing, brochures, and the like. The continued success of the Club Haggadah [5 editions and many, many printings] over 30 years bears witness to his expertise and to those who worked with him.

Let me close by repeating: Jack Rosenfeld was a man of action, and we have the evidence of his many acts all around us.

Affiliates report to the annual CSJO conference

Vancouver Peretz Institute: Leslie Dyson (representing the Peretz Community) said that her group has lots of ideas and that she would love to share them with anyone interested in contacting her.

Victoria (B.C.) Society for Humanistic Judaism: Shayna Kobrinsky sent in a flyer that announced that the Victoria Humanists group had participated in a social action program along with Jewish Family Services and the Open Door Inner City of Victoria. It was called a "Celebration of Sharing." Shayna reported that it was quite successful.

Morris Winchevsky School, Toronto: Maxine Hermolin reported that they celebrated their 75th Anniversary with a reunion and concert. There was a video history presenting decades of treasured memories. They conducted a twinning program with the Holocaust Center where their B'nai Mitzvah students dedicated their projects to the families of selected Holocaust victims. In the fall, they held their Jewish Book Fair. Family Education included a bagel making workshop. They instituted a Leadership Training Program. They have an active Book Club. They are engaging in aggressive outreach and coalition building to immigrant communities.

Sholem Community, Los Angeles: Hersh Hartman said that the two newest things were the booklet publication of the *Hidden History of Hanukkah* and the Sholem family Hagada for a Passover celebration.

Pacific Community, Orange County CA: Karen Knecht said that their school tried changing their name to B'nai Sholom School, but the idea did not work out. They conducted a Kugel Cook-off and held a community Seder. They are currently down in numbers and are in the process of orienting new officers and switching leadership positions.

Secular Jewish Humanists, Miami FL: Charles Baron reported that they meet once a month for general meetings and conduct socials once a month. They held a Hanukkah party that was well attended, 35 plus kids. CSJO leaders came to speak throughout the year, including Rifke Feinstein, Bennett Muraskin, Rhea Seagull, and Paul Shane. The Miami Herald published an article on both the CSJO group and the SHJ group in Boca Raton. It appeared on the front page of the "Tropical Life" section in both the Miami and Broward County editions and had a large photo of Vice-Chair David Weintraub looking into a Star of David-shaped mirror above the story.

Baltimore Cultural Chavurah: Fred Pincus said that their group meets once a month. They have an adult study group that also meets once a month. A new school has been started with three or four kids, a book group, two Bat Mitzvah, and a monthly newsletter.

Jewish Cultural School, Suffolk County NY: Shariee Calderone reported that they have had multiple holiday celebrations, four Shabbat Night Socials, three Parent Workshops, had two Guest Speakers, and one Museum field Trip. One of their teachers has been selected to go on a partially-funded (by the Long Island central Jewish agency) educator's trip to Israel. The JCS won a cultural arts grant from the same agency allocating \$300 towards a silk-dying quilt commemorating the 350th Anniversary of Jewish life in America. The group is also



Shariee Calderone (Suffolk County NY), Barry Dancis (Philadelphia Folkshul), and Larry Schofer (Philadelphia Sholom Aleichem Club) at the May conference.

proud that they recently attached their name to a collection list of other concerned tri-state area humanist, ethical, and Jewish groups regarded gay marriage rights.

Jewish Parents Institute, Detroit area, MI: Marilyn Wolfe reported that their group has seen a rise in active parents, but that overall the membership numbers are down. They currently have 43 member families. They have good teachers and kids who love to come, but they are weak in adult programming. They have a fair number of adults who don't come back. The group went from being a wealthy group to a poor group because they lost their Jewish community funding.

Jewish Cultural School & Society, Northern NJ: Lisa Cole reported that they have 30 families, including three that joined this year. They had a Hanukkah celebration with the Morris County, NJ group. They are planning a trip to Battery Park, and they have a book group.

Jewish Secular Community, Cleveland: Renee Lipson reported that they have 35 families, but no children. They are a group that is growing older. They have a Shabbat program and social events connected to the holidays. They have a Gourmet Group every other month and have a Madrikh, Mark Weber, who leads many of the programs.

Philadelphia Children's Folkshul: Mindy Blatt reported that they have some great programs including an Intergenerational Women's Group and a Yoga Class. They have lots of parent involvement. They currently meet for 2 ½ hours and the place is very busy during that time. They are trying to reach out to other organizations. They have an active restaurant club with 35 people; a Havurah with 15-20 people. They held a function that utilized a huge floor map of Israel for Israel programming for both adults and children.

DONATIONS

General Fund

Dit and Av Sohn, Toronto, Ontario

Max Rosenfeld Publications fund

In memory of Jack Rosenfeld

Max Cohen, PA

Gerry Revzin, IL

Sholem Aleichem Club, Philadelphia: Bob Kleiner reported that the club celebrated its 50th anniversary year with a banquet attended by over 125 members and guests. The Club's News and Comment printed issue number 500 — 50 years of 10 issues per year!

CSJO Executive Director Roberta Feinstein reported that the CSJO became a co-sponsor for The March for Women's Lives that was held in Washington, DC.

And later reports:

Shariee Calderone of the Suffolk County NY Children's School graduated from the Suffolk County Morasha Teacher Preparation Institute.

In this intensive two-year program meeting six hours a week, Shariee took course in various Judaic contents areas (e.g., text study, Jewish history) as well as in theoretical and practice courses on Jewish teaching.

Shariee is a delegate to the board of CSJO and is the Board secretary.

The 10th Biennial Conference of the International Federation of Secular Humanistic Jews will be held immediately after Thanksgiving and before Chanukah in the San Francisco — Friday, December 3 through Sunday, December 5, 2004.

Israeli peace activist and novelist Amos Oz will be one of the featured speakers.

History of the Sholem Community

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forced parents to learn along with their children, providing a strong communal feeling, though the idea of becoming a community was far in the future.

I became principal in 1967, three years after arriving in LA and having checked out the former JPFO *shuln* for my daughters. I found those *shuln* stuck in the past, both in teaching methodology and in the dogged Yiddishism that was not connecting with the children. When Sholem and I found each other, I was invited to lecture to the parents on Yiddish literature. Unbeknownst to me, this was an "audition" for a potential principal, and after a subsequent interview, I was hired.

The idea of expanding the school into a community first came from a panel in which I participated among rabbis from each of the denominations. The audience, in the late 70s, was made up of 16-year olds in the Long Beach Jewish Community Center who responded that they were most impressed by the concept of Jewishness that was taught at Sholem, but who kept asking: "What do you DO?" I came back from that event to urge that Sholem become a Community. I am such a charismatic leader that, one-two-three, the Community was born — about six years later!

The stimulus for formation of the Community began with a reading group that spent one whole school year studying Howe's "World of Our Fathers" with me. Such a close relationship developed among the participants that they agreed they did not want to give up the connection when their children graduated. Too, the growing political activism of the parent body could not be accommodated within the tax-exempt nature of a school (we were officially the Sholem Educational Institute, Inc.). Thus was born the Sholem Community Organization. In recent years, usage has

gradually changed to my preferred designation: The Sholem Community (there's that ol' charisma again).

Hershl Hartman is educational director of the Sholem Community. He is currently working on a history of Secular Yiddish shuln with a particular focus on Los Angeles.

Torah and Modern Morality

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25, Deut. 19:21)

However, the primitive concept that children are responsible for their parents' sins (Ex. 20:5) is later contradicted by Deut. 24:16, which says that each person is responsible his own wrongdoing. The legal code is softened somewhat by the requirement that it takes two witnesses to prove a criminal offense. (Num. 35:30, Deut. 17: 6-7; Deut 19:15).

Israelites are indeed commanded to do many admirable things—not to spread false rumors or give false testimony, and not to show favoritism or render unfair decisions in legal matters. (Ex. 23, 1-3, Lev. 19:15, Deut. 16: 18-20). The administration of justice is placed in the hands of magistrates, who are enjoined to be impartial and refuse bribes. (Ex. 32:8, Deut. 16: 18-19). Equal justice is to be meted out to the rich and the poor. (Ex. 23: 2-3)

One must not stand by while a neighbor's blood is shed (Lev. 19:16) but this does not give someone the right to take vengeance or hold a grudge (Lev. 19:18). It would be difficult to think of a more powerful moral imperative than the commandment not to bear false witness against one's neighbor. (Ex. 20: 13, Deut. 5:17)

Dishonesty of any kind is forbidden (Lev. 19:11), including moving property markers (Deut. 19:14) and cheating in a business transaction. (Lev. 25: 14-16) Honest weights and measures must be maintained (Ex. 19:35, Deut. 25: 13-16).

There is an affirmative obligation to return lost property to its owner or hold it in trust, if the owner is unknown. (Ex: 23:4, Deut 22:1-3) and to help one's enemy lift up his beast of burden if it has collapsed due to a heavy load. (Ex. 23:5. Deut. 22:4). In building a new home, safety precautions must be taken to avoid accidents. (Deut. 22:8) These rules clearly promote ethical behavior and should be important components of any civilized society.

SLAVERY

It may come as a surprise that people whose identity is ostensibly based on their liberation from slavery did not abolish slavery among themselves. However, at least the Torah prescribes humane treatment for all Israelite slaves. (Ex. 21:8-11, Lev. 25: 35-43). In Ex. 21:2, we read that male (not female) Israelite slaves must be freed after 7 years and provided with sustenance to get a start as a free person. In Deut. 15: 12-14, this right is extended to all Israelite slaves). Escaped slaves, presumably even non-Jewish ones, coming from outside Israel, must not be returned to their masters, even Jewish ones. (Deut. 23:16) But slavery, as an institution, is accepted as part of the natural landscape, with blatant discrimination against non-Jews.

SOCIAL JUSTICE

Jewish law is especially concerned with the plight of the poor and disadvantaged. In fact, as Edward Greenstein wrote in **Back to the Sources: Reading the Classic Jewish Texts**, edited by

Barry W. Holtz, “Many of the Torah’s laws which distinguish them from the laws of other nations in the ancient Near East seem to exemplify a special regard for the disadvantaged.” This may have been due to the significance of the Exodus in Jewish tradition and/or the likelihood that the earliest Hebrews were malcontents who left hierarchical Canaanite cities to establish egalitarian farming communities.

In any event, the Torah provides widows, orphans and the poor with special protection. (Ex. 22:21, Deut. 10: 18-19, 14:29, 24: 17-22) Poor people must be generously supported (Deut. 15: 7, 11) and must not be further impoverished or harassed if they fall into debt, (Ex. 22: 24-26, Deut. 24: 6, 10-13). It is forbidden to abuse a needy or destitute laborer or delay payment of his wages. (Lev. 19:13, Deut. 24: 14-14). While working in the fields, a worker may eat his fill of the produce. (Deut. 23: 25-26.)

Landowners must leave the corners of their fields unharvested and leave whatever crops may have been missed in the initial harvesting process for the poor to take their portion. (Lev. 19:9, 32:22, Deut. 19:9, 24: 19-21) Every seven years all land must be left fallow and whatever grows on its own also belongs to the poor. (Ex. 23: 10-11, Lev. 25: 6, Deut. 24: 19) Other measures to insure a relatively fair distribution of wealth include a ban on usury (Ex. 22:24-26), debt cancellation every 7 years (Deut 15:1) and property redistribution and liberation of Israelite slaves every 50 years, i.e the jubilee year. (Lev. 25: 10-12)

Proclaim Liberty Throughout the Land

This is the meaning of the often-misunderstood phrase “proclaim liberty throughout the land.” It has nothing to do with political liberty, but everything to do with social equality. Even the king is personally forbidden to accumulate excessive wealth! (Deut. 17:17)

We know that many of these laws, especially the most radical ones, were never enforced, but their very existence must have served as a reminder of the importance of social justice as an ideal in Jewish tradition.

That at least some of these concepts still have resonance is shown by the existence of an organization called Jubilee 2000 that sought IMF forgiveness of Third World debt in honor of the new millennium. It succeeded in reducing debt service payments for some Third World nations by up to 30%.

The crown jewel in the Torah’s conception of social justice is the Sabbath. The entire population, including strangers and slaves, (and draft animals!) are granted one day off from work every week to rest (Ex. 20:8, 23:12) to commemorate the Israelite liberation from Egyptian slavery. (Deut. 5:12) Chaim Zhitlovsky, one of the greatest philosophers of Jewish secularism, called the Sabbath “the holiday with social significance, when for the first time the right to rest was proclaimed for the slave and the worker.” It is undoubtedly one of the greatest Jewish contributions to world civilization and a direct precursor to the struggle for a shorter work week and more vacation time.

ATTITUDE TOWARD AUTHORITY

As impressive as these laws are, it must be admitted that the Torah’s primary mission is not social justice, but to enshrine the Israelites as God’s Chosen People and to suppress all rivals. Worshipping other gods and deviating from the Law, not oppressing the poor, are by far the greatest sin an Israelite can commit. The Torah is pervaded by a polemical, militant spirit directed against religious dissenters. (Deut. 31: 17 is but one of numerous

The Grande Dame of CSJO, Gerry Revzin, is celebrating her 85th birthday!



Above: Gerry Revzin wearing her delegate’s tag and her CSJO T-shirt at a CSJO conference.

Below: Gerry Revzin and Jeff Zolitor, at that time chair of CSJO, present plaque of appreciation to Bess Katz at a CSJO banquet.

examples). Therefore, even the Torah’s positive messages are packaged and delivered in hyper-authoritarian language.

God demands total obedience from his Chosen People (Deut. 5: 29-30) and when he does not get it, He rules by threats of violence and actual violence. Yet despite divine massacres, plagues and earthquakes of “Biblical proportions” the Israelites remain a “stiff-necked people.” By humanistic standards, this would be a compliment, because it signifies a refusal to submit to tyranny, but in the Torah, this is considered outrageous behavior. (Deut. 31:27)

On top of this, God inflicts collective punishment. Everyone over 20 years old is sentenced to die in the desert, except for the two loyal scouts. Even the children, who clearly were not responsible for the unrest, will have to wander in the desert for 40 years before they get to enter the Promised Land. “Thus you shall know what it means to thwart Me.” (Num. 14: 34)

But it could have been worse. God's original reaction to the Israelites' disloyalty was to wipe out everybody and start over. (Num. 14:12) In fact, this is God's *modus operandi*. He threatened to exterminate the Israelites once before (Ex. 33:3-5) and actually began to do so in response to another challenge to His authority (Num. 17: 8-14), killing 14,700 people, before Moses and Aaron convinced him to relent. . For more blood purges, see Ex. 32: 35. Num.11: 1-2, 11: 31-34, 14: 44-45.

Moses frequently displays great courage in confronting God and skillfully allaying His wrath. The way he does it tells us something about God's personality in the Torah. Moses convinces God that if He kills the Israelites in the desert that would give the Egyptians the last laugh and make Him appear ineffectual in the eyes on other nations. (Ex. 32: 12-13, Num. 14: 13-17). This is egoism run amuck.

Moses' confrontations with God are among the earliest examples of a Jewish tradition to speak truth to power, so highly prized by secular and humanistic Jews. But only someone with the stature of an Abraham or a Moses can get away with it. Otherwise, dissenters are not tolerated. "Do not hinder the execution of a false prophet" (Deut. 18:22) is just another way of saying that people simply have no right to think for themselves.

Moses, however, is far from blameless. He also has blood on his hands, having ordered two gruesome massacres in Exodus 32: 25-29 and Numbers 31: 1-18 to suppress unrest among the Israelites. However this that is not why God refuses to allow him to enter the Promised Land. After *shlepping* the Israelites around in the desert for 40 years, Moses' offense is that he disobeys God by extracting water from a rock by striking it, rather than by talking to it. Hard to believe? Check out Numbers 20: 8-12. This punishment is especially galling because in a previous instance (Ex. 17: 6) striking a rock to produce water is exactly what God ordered Moses to do.

At the end of the day, the Torah, through the voice of Moses, makes its moral posture painfully clear. (Deuteronomy 28: 15-60) "...if you do not obey the Lord your God and observe faithfully all His commandments and laws, all these curses shall come upon you and take effect:

The Lord will loose against you calamity, panic and frustration in all the enterprises you undertake, so that you shall soon be utterly wiped out because of your evil-doing in forsaking Me. The Lord will make pestilence cling to you...will strike you with consumption, fever and inflammation, with scorching heat and drought, with blight and mildew, they shall hound you until you perish...Your carcasses shall become food for all the birds of the sky and the beasts of the earth...The Lord will strike you with madness, blindness and dismay...You will be constantly abused and robbed, with none to give help...you will be abused and downtrodden constantly until you are driven mad. Because you would not serve the Lord they God in joy and gladness over the abundance of everything, you shall have to serve in hunger and in thirst, naked and lacking everything. He will put an iron yoke upon neck until He has wiped you out. "

Similar blood-curdling tirades appears in (Lev. 26: 14-38, Deut. 32:19-25), not even sparing the infant and the aged.

What does that noble phrase "Justice, justice you shall pursue" mean in practice? The next few chapters and verses tell the story.

Anyone who worships other gods must be stoned to death, (Deut. 17:2-5) and no pity must be shown to any lawbreakers. (Deut. 19:21) Legal authority will reside with the Levites, a hereditary priesthood whose authority may not be questioned on pain of death. "All the people will hear and be afraid and not act presumptuously again." (Deut. 17: 12-13)

Is there a process for change? Or is Jewish law really written in stone, like the Ten Commandments? Although we all know that in the real world, Jews began interpreting the Torah the minute it was written, the Torah actually forbids any deviations. (Ex. 23: 21-22, Deut. 13: 1. 28: 14) "Be careful then and do as the Lord your God has commanded you. Do not turn aside to the right or the left, follow only the path that the Lord your God has enjoined you..."(Deut. 5: 29-30) These principles are hardly compatible with the democratic freedoms and the right to self-government we have come to cherish, but they are indeed central to the message of the Torah.

FREE WILL

What about free will? The enslavement of the Israelites and their liberation are all pre-ordained. (Gen. 15: 13-14) After the fifth plague, Pharaoh repeatedly tries to surrender, but God purposely "hardens his heart" to make it crystal clear who is boss. (Ex. 4: 21, 9: 12, 10: 1-3, 20, 27, 11: 9) The rest of the plagues are meant to impress the unbelievers with God's might. This cat and mouse game continues even as God *compels* Pharaoh to send his army after the fleeing Israelites (Ex. 14: 4, 8) and pursue them to its doom in the Red Sea. (Ex. 14: 17) As Jonathan Kirsch, a respected author, comments in **Moses: A Life**, "The crowning irony...is that the theology of the Ten Plagues denies the very theme that is regarded as the shining moral example of the Exodus—the theme of the liberation. If God determines exactly how a human being will act and react, then there is no place for free will and no real freedom at all."

Free will makes a fleeting appearance in a poetic passage in which Moses declares, "I call heaven and earth to witness against you this day: I have put before you life and death, blessing and curse. Choose life—if you and your offspring would live—by loving the Lord [and] heeding His commands..." (Deut. 30: 19-20). But this lofty pronouncement is enforced by the same old fear tactics (Deut. 30: 17-18): threats of annihilation. Moses even predicts that after his death, no sooner than the Israelites settle in the Promised Land, they will once again "turn to other gods (Deut 31: 20) ...act wickedly..." (i.e. relapse into pagan practices) and incur the wrath of God. (Deut. 31: 29).

MORALITY IN THE TALMUD

In sum, the Torah's moral teachings are, at best, a mixed bag—fairly wretched when it comes to family relations, horrible vis-à-vis foreigners and women, better as to the resident alien, harsh but egalitarian in its legal code, decent on personal ethics among Jews, strong on social justice and abysmal in its methods of persuasion and governance.

One could truthfully argue that Jewish moral teachings rest more on the Talmud, but it is not the Talmud that is at the center of Jewish liturgy and ceremony. In fact, the Talmud is practically invisible in synagogue life outside of the occasional poorly attended adult education class.

Yet the Talmud's moral teachings are also ambiguous. They are superior to the Torah with respect to family relations, personal ethics and the legal system. Its methods of persuasion and gov-

ernance are relatively enlightened. However it leaves much to be desired in other areas. The Talmud is more ethnocentric and sexist, and less concerned with social justice than the Torah. Rituals govern every aspect of a Jew's life.

The rabbis interpreted the Torah's mandate to "Love your neighbor as yourself" to apply to Jews only and made numerous derogatory references to Christians. Although minority opinions were respected among rabbinic circles, those defined as heretics ("minim" or "apikorsim") were suppressed or shunned. Furthermore, the Talmud is written in a style that makes it nearly inaccessible, in part because it devotes inordinate attention to the most trivial matters.

But it has a saving grace. Pirkey Avot (Sayings of the Fathers) is the best exposition of moral values in traditional Jewish literature. It is here that we find Hillel's famous encapsulation of the golden rule, "What is hateful to you, do not do to your fellow," and Rabbi Tarfon's adage, "It is not your obligation to complete the task [of perfecting the world], but neither are you free to desist [from doing your part.]. Rabbi Shemaiah admonishes "Love work, hate power and do not try to be on intimate terms with those who rule." Hillel reminds us that "In a place where there are no men (sic), you strive be a man." Let us hope that these essentially humanistic principles, which are NOT enforced by fear of divine reprisal, remain central to our identity as Jews.

CONCLUSION

One can, of course, pick and choose which moral precepts from the Torah to follow. How many of us care that the Torah bans cross-dressing (Deut. 22:5) and wearing blended fabrics (Deut. 22: 11)? On the other hand "Do not oppress the stranger," although severely compromised in the text, is a worthy ideal. But if there is so much that is either morally objectionable or irrelevant in the Torah, why sanctify it, as all religious Jews do from the ultra-orthodox to Reconstructionist? If we reject authoritarianism and ethnocentrism in our worldview, why worship five books that

are rife them? To me "tradition" is not a sufficient answer. As Mordecai Kaplan said, it has a vote, but not a veto.

Morality comes from many sources, primarily from practical experience. It is neither eternal, nor dependent on belief in a deity. As Albert Einstein put it, "A man's [sic] ethical behavior should be based effectively on sympathy, education and social ties and needs. No religious basis is necessary. "

A moral code should not be embraced unless it is based on universal human equality and a free exchange of ideas. The Torah's morality, predicated on absolute obedience to God and the elevation of Israelites to privileged, i.e. "chosen" status, fails this test. It is no accident that only the religious right advocates the posting of the Ten Commandments in public school classrooms. *Ultimately, the Torah is the raw material for Christian and Jewish religious fundamentalism.*

May the day come when the Torah is retired to the library where it belongs, and Jews spent as much time, if not more, deriving inspiration from other Jewish literature. For starters, we can look to the Biblical books of Ruth, Jonah, Job, Song of Songs and Ecclesiastes, whose humanistic themes (existential, in the case of Ecclesiastes) prove that our roots, as secular humanistic Jews, go back to ancient times.

I already touted the virtues of Pirkey Avot. Jewish folklore, from the Agada in the Talmud and Midrash to Hasidic and other Yiddish sources, is also a fertile source of pre-modern Jewish humanism. Once we get to the modern era, of course, this kind of literature is abundant, and I believe its finest expressions can be found in the Yiddish writers we value so highly and those who write in other languages but are steeped in their progressive humanism.

