



# CSJO NEWSLETTER

Congress of Secular Jewish Organizations

Summer 2004

## “Sholem Aleichem, Alaykhem Sholem” CSJO Conference and building communities

“Sholem Aleichem, Aleykhem Sholem” — Hello, how are you, what’s happening dude? — I’m fine, everything’s cool. And Mr. Sholem Aleichem? He’s fine too. And the Sholom Aleichem Club in Philadelphia? And the Sholem Community Organization in Los Angeles? They are doing just great. That’s what these words mean — and more!

“Sholem Aleichem, Aleykhem Sholem: Honoring the People’s author by Building Communities” — this will be the theme of the keynote addresses by Gerry Kane and Same Ruben at the annual CSJO conference at Arcadia University in suburban Philadelphia, starting Friday evening, May 28.

What is a CSJO conference? It is a gathering of some 150-200 adults, young adults, and teens for three days of workshops, laughter, music, dancing, schmoozing, and good times in general.

Saturday and Sunday will be packed with workshops and social events for adults, young adults, teens, ending with the annual banquet and multi-generational talent show on Sunday night.

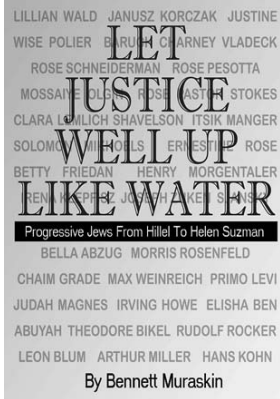
Registration packets have gone out to all CSJO affiliates and to as many individuals as the mailing lists allow. If you haven’t received your packet, contact your CSJO delegate or the registrar Carl Aley, at 215-572-6131 or Carllaley@aol.com.

## New publications by CSJO members

### Let Justice Well Up Like Water

By Bennett Muraskin

As many of you know, I have been working on a new book consisting of 62 short biographies of important progressive (mostly) secular Jews. I am proud to say that I have included 19 women as well as seven architects of modern Yiddish culture. The entire spectrum of the Jewish left from anarchist to Bundist to communist, socialist Zionist and others are represented.



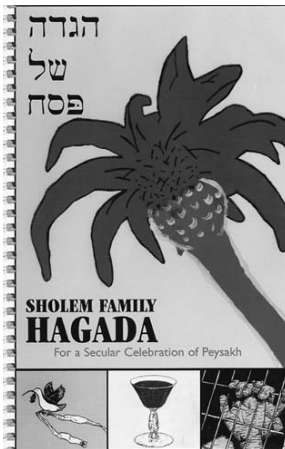
I am happy to report that **Let Justice Well Up Like Water: Progressive Jews from Hillel to Helen Suzman** is now in print, with the CSJO and The Center for Cultural Judaism as joint publishers. Shariee Calderone created the cover, and Larry Schofer created a promotional flyer. Carl Rosenberg, editor of (Canadian Jewish) *Outlook*, wrote the introduction. Others of you helped as well and are acknowledged in my introduction. So you can see this is a joint effort.

Five hundred copies have been ordered, paid for by grant money that I raised. Since we have no debt or outlay to make up, all the money from the sale of this book goes back to the CSJO as (if you excuse the word) “profit.”

The best and easiest way for the CSJO to sell this book is by doing it ourselves. I will be doing my part by speaking at CSJO, SHJ and Workmen Circle affiliates, and related venues. Please contact me or Rifke Feinstein for ordering, either in bulk or in single copies.

### Hagada for families

The Sholem Community Organization of Los Angeles has added to its tradition of secular Jewish publications with its newly revised *Sholem Family Hagada for a Secular Celebration of Peysakh*, edited by Hersh Hartman, education director, and Jeffrey Kaye.



The introduction lays out its approach: This latest version of the Sholem Family Hagada is one of scores of alternate hagadas in use throughout the world. Many are the creations of Secular and Humanistic Jews, who, unwilling to recite deistic formulas or to accept as literal truth the presentations of myth in the traditional hagada, nevertheless find great significance in the historical allusions of *peysakh* and in maintaining folk traditions in a communal family setting. We gratefully acknowledge the concepts — and, often, the texts — gleaned from many secular hagadas. It is meeting the needs of *families* that this secular hagada is different from most others of its kind.

The hagada has moving, full-color illustrations by Kevin Bostwick and an attractive layout by Scot Hart. It has lay-flat binding with heavier than usual pages (almost — but not quite — wine-resistant).

The hagada may be ordered for \$9 including shipping. Contact [www.sholem.org](http://www.sholem.org) or 818-760-6625.

The Sholem Community Organization will be honored on its anniversary at the CSJO conference.

# CSJO Conferences, 1969-present

## 35 years of secular Jewish creativity

The upcoming CSJO conference continues a tradition that has come to serve as the backbone of the CSJO. What began as a discussion session among secular Jewish school leaders has become an institution that binds together people, organizations, and activities.

Gerry Revzin, one of the founders of CSJO and its first executive director, has begun a history of the CSJO conferences from the earliest days of the formation of the organization down to the present. The list is presented here as a work in progress. "Teen conference" has been inserted by Karen Knecht to signify that the teen conference ran alongside the adult conference.

This material is presented to serve as a stimulus for conference attendees old and new.

Those who have information regarding keynoters, conference themes, or other information should send it on to Gerry ([grevzin@compuserve.com](mailto:grevzin@compuserve.com)) or to Karen Knecht ([knechtfour@aol.com](mailto:knechtfour@aol.com)).

**1969** — Harold Gales of Detroit (former chair of CSJO) sends out first letter to Gerry Revzin (Chicago) suggesting that a meeting be convened in Detroit of activists in secular Sunday Schools.

**1970** - First meeting was convened in Detroit in April 1970 — response was excellent. Activists came from Chicago, Cleveland, Bethesda-Chevy Chase, Toronto, Palo Alto, Detroit A name was decided upon: Conference of Secular Jewish Education.

**1971**— Second meeting was convened in Detroit. Participating were communities from Bethesda-Chevy Chase; Michigan: New York; Philadelphia; Cleveland; London, Ontario; Ottawa; Toronto; Los Angeles; Chicago

**1972**— Third meeting was held in Butzel Center in Ortonville, Michigan. Attending were communities from New York City; Bethesda-Chevy Chase; Westchester County, NY; Philadelphia; Detroit; Cleveland; Chicago; Lansing, Michigan; Ann Arbor, Michigan; Toronto; Southern California Conference on Secular Jewish Education; New Jersey

**1973**— one day regional meeting was held in Toronto. THEME: THE SECULAR APPROACH TO JEWISH LIFE. No keynote.

**1974**—Conference held in Toronto—international in scope. Several adult organizations expressed interest in becoming part of

this movement, and membership was enlarged to include adult groups even if they did not have a school

**1975**— Cleveland— It was suggested by Jerry Bain (Toronto — former chair, CSJO) that the name be changed from Conference to Congress of Secular Jewish Organizations as this would best reflect the nature of the groups. Keynote: Harold Ticktin speaking on anti-semitism. One of the other speakers was Rabbi Sherwin Wine who spoke about the secular aspects of marriage and death.

**1975** — Cleveland — first teen conference.

**1976**—Philadelphia — Teen conference.

**1977**—Chicago — Teen conference

**1978**— Bethesda-Chevy Chase— THEME – LET'S TALK TACHLIS ABOUT OUR COMMITMENT TO THE JEWISH FUTURE. Teen conference.

**1979**—Toronto — THEME — JEWISH SECULARISM:A CONTINUING TRADITION FOR THE NEW TIMES; Teen/Young Adult conference

**1980**— Mini conference sponsored by the Southern California Jewish secular Conference held in December. Keynote—Larry Bush (now editor of Jewish Currents)

**1981**—no meeting held

**1982**—Detroit.Teen/Young Adult conference.THEME: A VISION FOR THE FUTURE; Keynote—Jerry Bain

**1982** – Mini—conference (educational) Briarcliff Manor, NY

**1983**—Philadelphia —Teen/YA; THEME: COMMUNITY:ITS IMPORTANCE IN SECULAR JEWISH LIFE

**1984**—Cleveland — Teen/YA; THEME: COMMUNITY AND CONTINUITY

**1985**— Toronto: Teen—YA; THEME: IMAGES OF THE MODERN JEW; keynote speaker Prof. Robert Brym

**1986**—Chicago — Teen/YA; THEME: CHANGING TIMES/NEW DIRECTIONS; Keynoters; Harold Gales, Gary Levy (Toronto), Laura Meckler (Cleveland)

**1987**—Ypsilanti, Michigan — Teen/YA; THEME: JEWISH IDENTITY AND COMMITMENT:IF NOT NOW, WHEN?; keynoters; Gerry Revzin, Julie Gales (Ann Arbor—Detroit), Bailey Belman (Toronto)

**1988**—Philadelphia — Teen/YA; THEME: SECULAR JEWISH LIFE:THE PROMISE AND THE CHALLENGE; Keynoters; Max Rosenfeld (Philadelphia), Amy Meckler (Cleveland)

**1989**—Cleveland — Teen/YA; THEME: SECULAR JEWISH PRESENCE/OUR VISION—OUR VOICE.

**1990**—Toronto — Teen/YA; THEMES — BUILDING A STRONG SECULAR HUMANISTIC JEWISH MOVEMENT (Sherwin Wine a speaker); THE DIRECTION OF CSJO (panel presentation)

**1991**—Teen Conference at Butzel Center— Michigan

**1991**— Three (3) Regional Conferences; West Coast, Midwest, East Coast

**1992**—Windsor, Ontario: Teen/YA — THEME: JEWISH SECULARISM—PAST, PRESENT AND FUTURE; Keynote: Jerry Bain

### 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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1993—Philadelphia — Teen/YA. Keynoters; David Abramowitz (Toronto), Sean Lebofsky (Philadelphia)

1994—Cleveland — Teen/YA — THEME: FROM HERE TO ETERNITY—EXPLORING ISSUES IN CONTEMPORARY JEWISH LIFE — Keynoters; Moses Gates (Ann Arbor), Sherwin Wine

1995—Chicago — Teen/YA THEME: SECULARISM'S ABIDING PURPOSE — Keynoters; Bennett Muraskin (Northern New Jersey), Kevin Zwick (Orange County, now Oakland CA)

1996—Toronto — Teen/YA — THEME: TOWARDS JEWISH COMMUNITY—BRIDGING THE GAP — Keynoter: Prof. Egon Mayer

1997—North American Federation of Secular Humanistic Jews. Windsor, Ontario — Teen/YA

1998—Philadelphia — Teen/YA — THEME: THE UNFOLDING SECULAR JEWISH IDEA:OUR MOVEMENT IN THE 21st CENTURY; Keynoters; Michael Kleiner (Philadelphia), Ben Peck (Washington), Gwynne Sigal (Philadelphia)

1999—North American Federation joint conference (CSJO and

Society for Humanistic Judaism). Newark, NJ — Teen/YA — THEME — SECULAR HUMANISTIC JUDAISM, LIVING OUR JEWISH VALUES; Keynoters; Judy Seid (Baltimore), Toby Dorfman (Society for Humanistic Judaism, Megan Milenky (Philadelphia)

2000—Ypsilanti, Michigan — Teen/YA. Keynoters; Gerry Revzin, Rivka Gates (Ann Arbor), Jonathan Sugar (Ann Arbor)

2001—Philadelphia — Teen/YA — THEME: MAKING THE PIECES FIT—SHAPING OUR SECULAR JEWISHNESS; Keynoters; Jeff Kaye (Los Angeles), Rob Kurtz (Suffolk County NY)

2002—Windsor, Ontario (organizaed by JPI, Detroit) THEME: CORNUCOPIA OF SECULAR JEWISH OPPORTUNITIES: keynoters — David Abramowitz, Toronto; Jordan Blumenfeld—James (Los Angeles)

2003—Philadelphia. Keynoters — Jodi Goldfinger (Toronto) and Rifke Feinstein (Detroit—Cleveland)

2004—Philadelphia — THEME — SHOLEM ALEICHEM, ALEYKHEM SHOLEM; keynoters — Gerry Kane (Toronto) and Sam Ruben (Ann Arbor)

# The Torah and Modern Morality

## Bennett Muraskin explores Judaic texts

*In the first part of a two-part article, Bennett Muraskin takes 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.*

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.

Dealing first with the Ten Commandments, the first three commandments demand loyalty to God, forbid the making of graven images and taking the Lord's name in vain. No morality there. The fourth mandates observance of the Sabbath, a noble institution to be sure, but it is explained as commemorating the day God rested after creating the world. The fifth “Honor your father and mother” is vitiated by the second commandment in which the sins of fathers are inherited by four generations of ancestors. The sixth commandment, “you shall not kill” or “you shall not murder” is hard to take seriously in view of the fifteen or more capital offenses that are decreed in the Torah, for “crimes” including homosexuality, breaking the Sabbath and promoting the worship of other gods. God Himself murders so many Hebrews and Gentiles in the Torah that it is impossible to keep count.

The seventh commandment forbidding adultery applies only to women. The eighth commandment against stealing and the ninth, against bearing false witness are, indeed worthy principles, however the tenth commandment against coveting a neighbor's possessions includes a man's wife and slaves among them.

As for loving one's neighbor and not oppressing the stranger, what attitude toward the neighbor or stranger is conveyed by God's explicit instructions to the Israelites to exterminate every last person living in Canaan and His constant vilification of “idolators?”

The following is an attempt to draw up a balance sheet from a secular humanistic perspective.

### FAMILY RELATIONS

Let's start close to home—with family relations. The tone is set very early with the subordination of women to men. (Gen. 3:16-19) The male supremacist bias of the Torah is so obvious that it needs little comment here. God is the classic authoritarian father figure who speaks through his agent, Moses and appoints his brother, Aaron as high priest. Miriam is a “prophetess” who lacks any power. Whereas, Miriam is severely punished for questioning Moses' authority, Aaron, who commits the same offenses gets off with a reprimand. (Num. 12: 1-15)

Menstrual women are treated like lepers. (Lev. 15: 19-24) After childbirth women who deliver girls are considered “unclean” for twice as long than if they deliver boys. (Lev. 12: 1-5). A woman who has no children is completely useless. Divorce is the exclusive prerogative of the male. (Deut. 24: 1-3). Partisans of women's liberation can celebrate the courage of the Hebrew midwives (Ex. 1: 17-20), but in nearly every other instance, must argue against the text.

Favoritism typifies family relationships in the Torah from the beginning. Brothers, Cain and Abel each make offerings to God, but without explanation, God accepts only Abel's, provoking the former to murder the latter. (Gen. 4: 4-5). God condemns the murder, but takes no responsibility for the provocation. (Gen. 4: 9-10).

Our patriarchs and matriarchs are a dysfunctional bunch. Soon after Abraham appears on the scene, he twice allows powerful kings to take his wife, Sarah, as a concubine, by pretending she is his sister. As it turns out, both kings would have respected Sarah if only Abraham had the decency to introduce her as his wife. Then he profits when the kings shower him with gifts to atone for their guilt. (Gen. 12:13-20, 20:2-18). For her part, Sarah abuses Abraham's concubine, Hagar (Gen. 16:6-9) and, with Abraham's consent, throws her and Abraham's first borne son, Ishmael out of their home to die in the desert. Why? Because Ishmael teases his

younger half-brother, Isaac. (Gen. 21:9-13).

And in one of the worst cases of child abuse, Abraham nearly murders Isaac, just because God told him to. (Gen. 22:2) At least it is comforting to know that Isaac and Ishmael reunite to bury their father (Gen. 25:9), despite the abuse each of them suffered at his hands.

On the other side of the ledger, Abraham peacefully divides land with his nephew, Lot (Gen.13: 8-11), saves Lot and his family from enemy attack (Gen.14: 14-16) and refuses the spoils of his military victory. (Gen. 14: 21-24) Abraham's most admirable act is more altruistic. He bargains with God to save innocent lives in Sodom (Gen. 18: 22-32). Unfortunately, he did not show the same courage when it came to the welfare of his sons.

#### **Wives and Sisters**

Following in the footsteps of his father, Isaac is also ready to offer his wife Rebecca as a concubine to a powerful king (Gen. 26:6-10). Isaac is not much of a factor thereafter, as Rebecca becomes the dominant partner in the marriage. She distinguishes herself by conspiring with her younger son, Jacob, to cheat her older son, Esau out of Isaac's blessing. This is no small matter as it results in Isaac decreeing that Esau must serve his brother. (Gen. 27: 1-40). As one might expect, this provokes Esau to plot Isaac's murder (Gen. 27: 41-42), but eventually his temper cools and, to the credit of both brothers, they reconcile (Gen. 32: 4—33:15).

Sibling rivalry reaches its nadir in the Joseph story. Because Jacob so shamelessly favors Joseph over his brothers, all except for Reuben, decide to murder him. Reuben talks them out of it, so they sell him into slavery instead (Gen. 37: 1-28).

Joseph is sold as a slave in Egypt, but after a number of adventures, miraculously becomes one of Pharaoh's top executives. When his brothers come to Egypt to escape famine, he takes his revenge by accusing them of spying, taking one of his brothers hostage and planting a valuable object on another who he arrests and threatens to enslave (Gen. 42:9-45:3). However, this time his brothers act decently by sticking up for each other. Joseph relents and forgives them (Gen. 45: 9-21). Their father, Jacob comes to Egypt for a grand reunion. In keeping with family "tradition," the old man blesses Joseph's younger son, Ephraim over the older son, Manasseh (Gen. 48:19-20) although, in this case, there is no record that his favoritism caused friction between the two.

#### **Family strife**

Jacob also makes predictions about the future of his sons, praising some and denigrating others. Among those Jacob condemns is Reuben. His offense was that he once slept with Jacob's concubine. (Gen. 48: 4) This deed was apparently more important to Jacob than Reuben's conduct in saving Joseph's life. He also lambastes his youngest son, Benjamin as "a ravenous wolf" (Gen. 49:27) even though he was not even born when Joseph disappeared, and is previously depicted as a beloved child (Gen. 42: 34-38).

On the other hand, Jacob's description of Simeon and Levi as lawless and violent (Gen 49: 4-7) is most likely an accurate reference to their conduct toward a foreign tribe. Specifically, a member of this tribe raped their sister, Dinah. However the tribal elders agreed to make amends, going so far as to agree to share their wealth with Jacob's clan and prove their kinship by having their men circumcised. While they were recovering from the operation, Simeon and Levi massacred the men. The rest of the brothers then joined in, destroying the tribe's town, seizing their property and

enslaving their wives and children. (Gen. 35: 5-29). However, Jacob says nothing about his other sons' role in this atrocity. One is also left wondering how Levi's descendants could become the priestly caste, given this blot on his name.

Moses' family is shown to be more caring. His mother, Yocheved, saves Moses from Pharaoh's decree to murder Jewish baby boys, although setting him adrift in a river is a strange way to do it. After Pharaoh's daughter plucks baby Moses from the river, Yocheved and Moses' sister, Miriam see to his welfare (Ex. 2). Years later in the desert, when God punishes Miriam, but not Aaron, for questioning Moses' authority, both brothers plead with God on her behalf. (Num. 12).

After Moses flees Egypt to Midian and gets married, an angry God is the source of grave family crisis. He threatens to kill Moses for neglecting to circumcise his son, Gershon. Moses' wife, Zipporah, comes to the rescue by seizing a sharp stone and performing the operation on the spot. (Ex. 4: 24-26). Poor Gershon is barely heard from again. Neither is Zipporah, whom Moses practically abandons.

The Biblical patriarchs and matriarchs behavior toward each other and their children is reprehensible. Perhaps we can at least derive some satisfaction (*shep nakhes*) from the siblings, who were generally more forgiving.

#### **RELATIONS WITH NON-JEWS**

What about the treatment of non-Jews? The die is cast very early when Noah curses his son, Ham and all his descendants including Cushites (apparently Africans,) Egyptians, Canaanites and Philistines (Gen 9:22-25, 10: 6-13).

The Ammonites and Moabites, descendants of Lot, Abraham's nephew, originally enjoy protected status (Deut. 2:9,19), despite their depraved origins in incest between Lot and his daughters (Gen. 19:30-38). They lose it by opposing the Israelites' attempts to reach the Promised Land. This deed earns them eternal opprobrium. They may never be accepted as Israelites and worse than that, Israelites are enjoined never to concern themselves with their welfare. (Deut. 23:4-7)

The Moabites are lumped together with the Midianites, two neighboring tribes. Both are reviled as idol worshippers and their women are whores. (Num. 25:1-13) Like the Ammorites, they must be shunned. (The heroine of the Book of Ruth is a Moabite and her great grandson is none other than King David, but this is not Torah.) Moses leads a ferocious attack on attack on the Midianites, sparing only the virgins, who are enslaved. (Num. 31:

### ***CSJO fund drive continues - List of contributors***

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1-18).

Yet Moses married a Midianite, Zipporah (Ex. 2:16) who, as related above, saved his life. (Ex. 4:24-26) Moses also received refuge (Ex. 2:20-21) and valuable advice from his Midianite father-in-law, Jethro. (Ex. 18: 17-27) Some gratitude!

What about Ishmael and his Arab descendants? Ishmael, Abraham's first son, is described as a "wild ass of a man" constantly at war with his neighbors (Gen: 17:12), although God promises to "make a great nation of him." (Gen 21:18). Ishmaelites appear briefly as merchants who buy Joseph and transport him to Egypt, and then virtually disappear from the Torah.

Esau, the older twin son of Isaac and Rebecca, fares better. Initially, he is depicted as a dummy who sells his birthright to his younger brother, Isaac, for a dish of stew (Gen. 25:30-34), but later he is treated respectfully (Gen. 32:4, 33: 1-15) as the founder of the nation of Edom. During the conquest of Canaan, God commands the Israelites not to attack Edom because Edomites are kinsmen. (Deut. 2:2) After two generations, they may "be admitted into the congregation of the Lord." (Deut. 23: 8-9).

### **Slavery in Egypt**

The Egyptians suffer the fate of being chosen by God to enslave the Israelites (Gen 15:13-15) and then to be punished for it. Actually, the Egyptians had a real grievance against the Israelites, because when Joseph was power in Egypt, he gave his brothers the choice land (Gen. 47: 5-6), reduced all Egyptian peasants to serfdom and forced them to relocate far from their homes (Ex. 47:14-25). So perhaps the Egyptian enslavement of the Israelites was an act of revenge.

As is well known from the Exodus story, God afflicts all the Egyptians with ten plagues, each more horrible than the next, culminating in the death of every Egyptian first born, including slaves, prisoners and livestock. These victims have no conceivable responsibility for Pharaoh's oppressive rule. (Ex. 11:5, 12:29) To add insult to injury, as the Israelites begin their exodus, they are authorized to strip the Egyptians of all their wealth. (Ex. 3:22, 12:35-36) Israelites are forbidden ever to return there to live permanently. (Deut. 17:16)

However, the Torah has a schizophrenic attitude toward Egypt. Abraham and Jacob's sons both visit there to escape famine and are welcomed. (Gen. 12:10-20, 42, 43) Perhaps for that reason, Egyptians, like Edomites, are not to be abhorred, and may be "admitted into the congregation of the Lord" in the third generation after a conversion. (Deut. 23: 8-9)

### **The Canaanites**

It should pain any Jew to speak of the Torah's treatment of the Canaanites. Their fate is to be dispossessed and exterminated down to the last man, woman and child. This is no passing fancy. (Ex. 23:23-32, 33:2. 34: 11-16, 24, Deut. 7, 1-2, 16, 22-24, 12: 2-3, 20: 16-18, 31:3,4-6). The Torah justifies this by accusing the Canaanites, and the six other nations who inhabited the land God promised the Israelites, of human sacrifice, incest, bestiality, homosexuality, witchcraft and other "abhorrent practices" (Lev. 18: 24-30, Deut 18: 9-14). But isn't it just like a conqueror to demonize the natives? And what about the people of Heshbon and Bashan? They are exterminated merely for being in the way. (Deut. 2:26-34, 3:3-7). The former are accused of refusing to allow the Israelites to pass through their land, but this is an unfair accusation. It is God himself who deliberately makes their king uncooperative, so He has an excuse to flex His muscles and wreak

## **Letters**

On April 6th, I had the pleasure of attending the 2nd Seder organized by the Secular Jewish Community School of Oak Park [suburb of Chicago]. 121 persons attended ranging in age from babes in arms to grandparents. It was a wonderful experience, and I was pleased to be part of it. Elisa Lapine and her members did a magnificent job of organizing the event, making sure all the food was there (prepared by the members of the community) and also producing a beautiful Haggadah. I "kvelled" naches because two of the members, Hersh and Mark, are teachers in the school. Both men had graduated from the South Side School of Jewish Studies with which I had been associated for 33 years until it closed its doors in 1983. So, the apple doesn't fall far from the tree after all. A Yashekoiech (congratulations) to the Oak Park School for a job well done. Oak Park is a suburb of Chicago and a wonderful community.  
*Gerry Revzin*

My congratulations to (Rabbi) Judy Seid on both her rabbinic ordination and her great coverage in the *Baltimore Jewish Times* that was reprinted in the latest CSJO newsletter. However, there was a factual mistake in the original article that was repeated when reprinted – Judy was both trained and ordained by the International Institute for Secular Humanistic Judaism; she was not ordained by the Leadership Conference of Secular and Humanistic Jews (whose title was missing the "and" in the article, by the way). While Leaders/Madrikhim(ot)/Vegvayzers are certified/ordained by the LCSHJ, our Rabbis are ordained by the Institute. Details aside, the event itself and the publicity afterwards were very well deserved – Mazel Tov!

*Rabbi Adam Chalom*

*Assistant to the Dean*

*International Institute for Secular Humanistic Judaism*

vengeance. (Deut.2: 30).

"Do not oppress or mistreat the stranger," although not one of the 613 commandments, is repeated 36 times in the Torah and usually accompanied by the explanation "because you were strangers in the land of Egypt. (See for example, Ex. 22:20-23, Lev. 19:33, Deut. 10:18-19, 24: 17-18) Furthermore, the Torah states explicitly that "there shall be one law for the citizen and the stranger who dwells among you," (Ex. 12-49) and that the stranger is entitled to equal love and respect. (Lev. 19:33-34). So how do we account for the hate and disrespect displayed toward most the foreign peoples encountered by the Israelites?

### **Foreigners**

The answer is that there are two categories of strangers—resident aliens and foreigners. The former are those have agreed to live under Jewish law, which means they must give up their own gods and their males must be circumcised. (Ex. 12: 48-49). They enjoy protected status and may intermarry with Israelites, but suffer three major disabilities. They cannot own land (Lev. 25:45-46); they can be permanently enslaved (Jewish slaves must be freed after 7 years) and unlike Jewish slaves, they may be treated "ruthlessly" by their owners. (Ex. 21-2, Lev. 25:45-46).

Foreigners are treated far worse. Conduct forbidden among Jews is permissible if directed against them. For instance, they may be kidnapped and enslaved (Deut. 24:7), required to pay

interest on loans, dunned for their unpaid debts and are exempt from debt annulment after 7 years. (Ex. 22:24, Deut. 15, 1-3, 23:21) As non-Jews without resident alien status, most of them would be considered idol worshippers, in which case they would be better off dead. Israelites are commanded to destroy them, their cities and their religious symbols, root and branch. (Deut. 7:5, 12:2, 13: 13-17) They are not permitted to live in the land of Israel and it is even forbidden for Israelites to save their lives. (Ex. 23:33, Deut. 20:16)

“Do not show mercy to idolators...do not pity idolators or prevent yourself from hating them”...Show him no pity or compassion and do not shield him, but take his life” are some of the choice words reserved for those who worship other gods than Yahweh. (Deut. 7:2, 13: 9-10). The commandment to “Love your neighbor as yourself” obviously does not apply to them, as they are not considered to be pariahs.

Actually, the accusation in the Torah that pagan peoples are “idolators” is slanderous. As Richard Elliot Friedman notes in his acclaimed book, **Who Wrote the Bible?** the religions of other ancient peoples in the Mid-East revolved around worshipping nature gods. The statues they built were considered representations of these gods, not the gods themselves. Further, Israelites worshipped pagan gods as well, especially the Canaanite El. The word “Israel” actually means “El rules.”

In sum, there are no “righteous Gentiles” in the Torah. Balaam, a foreign prophet, who refuses to curse the Israelites in defiance of the King of Moab (Num: 23:7-10) is nevertheless depicted as a fool (Num. 22:22-35) or as someone who leads Israelite men to sin (Num. 31:16). He is massacred on Moses’ order, along with other enemies of Israel, in this case the Midianites. (Num. 31:8).

**To be continued**

## **News of CSJO activities**



The Sholom Aleichem Club of Philadelphia celebrated its 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary with a party banquet on May 2. Over 100 people attended this celebration of the many achievements of the club, which has been one of the mainstays of the CSJO. The Club meets ten times a year with a focus on various topics, political, cultural, and everything in between. The souvenir book at the banquet contained a listing of the hundreds of programs that been presented.

The Club’s newsletter, News and Comment, published issue number 500 in May. The Club has published four books (one in conjunction with CSJO) on secular Jewish life, mainly relating to the Eastern European Jewish heritage in America, and a CD of Jewish songs. (These materials may be purchased through the CSJO executive director.)

In keeping with the social action statement of CSJO supporting a woman’s right to choose, CSJO was a sponsor of the Women’s March For Freedom in Washington in April.

A contingent from CSJO marched in this great demonstration.

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.



**CSJO NEWSLETTER**  
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