



CSJO NEWSLETTER

Congress of Secular Jewish Organizations

Summer 2005

2005 CSJO conference set for May 27-30 Humber College - Toronto, Canada

Theme: "Voices of Our Past, Visions of the Future"

Keynote Speakers: Jerry Bain, Toronto, CN

Judy Seid, Baltimore, MD

Denora Knecht, Corona, CA

Workshop Topics

The Nuts and Bolts of Community Social Action
Rediscovering Our Radical Roots
How To Manage a Jewish School
History of Circumcision
Jewish Perspective of Jesus
Ousting of UJPO by Canadian Jewish Congress during the McCarthy period
Was Maimonides An Atheist?
To Veil or Not To Veil - Traditional and Modern
Jewish Wedding Symbols

How To Teach Songs To Children
Brainstorming & Networking for Educators
Teen / Young Adult Conference Workshops

Saturday Night Entertainment

Teresa Tova
Renowned Canadian based Actor/Writer/Singer

To register, go to csjo.org.

The conference starts Friday evening, May 27, 2005.

A Jewish home for the faith-challenged

by Olga Gorelik

Olga Gorelik is a new member of the SholemCommunity (Los Angeles) who moved to the US from Belarus 14 years ago. A version of this article appeared in a California Russian-Jewish publication.

A long time ago, still back in Belarus, I heard a joke that I think came from the US: "When we were in the old country, we wanted to be called 'Russians', but they called us 'Jews'. Now here in the States we want to be called 'Jews', but they call us 'Russians.'" It was hard to imagine. I had no idea just how true it would turn out to be.

I remember the enthusiasm of American Jews eager to give us something we didn't know we were missing. And I remember trying to follow yet another synagogue service and failing miserably. Whether it was in English or Russian, it might as well have been in Chinese. Or Hebrew for that matter. The more questions I

asked, the less sense the whole thing made. "You are supposed to take it on faith," I was told. Faith? I like to blame our Soviet upbringing, or maybe my brain just isn't wired for it, but I can't accept on faith that considering the flipping of a light switch to be 'work' has nothing to do with the fact that 3000 years ago making fire was work.

I met a vibrant intelligent mother of three who told me that she gradually 'converted' from Reform to Orthodox as the observances made sense to her. Sense! Finally! She told me about the blessings. I liked the idea of remembering to be thankful for everything from seeing a rainbow to a successful trip to the bathroom. But as I watched her and her husband mumble a long after-dinner prayer as if trying to spit it out as fast as possible before the kids start going nuts, I couldn't help wondering how much thought can one give to a prayer said in such manner, and what good is it then.

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PRINCIPLES OF SECULAR HUMANISTIC JUDAISM

In an attempt to summarize discussions that have gone on for some time, and as a result for requests for a summary of CSJO principles, Bennett Muraskin drew up the following document. Bennett is the chair of the adult education committee of the Northern New Jersey Jewish Cultural Society and is the author of several books and many articles on the Secular Jewish experience.

“Secular”=concerned with this world, not the supernatural
“Humanistic”=belief that human beings, through use of their reason and sense of compassion, are solely responsible for their future

We believe that Judaism is more than a religion. Jews are a world people and Judaism has many cultural and ethical features that non-religious Jews can embrace.

For example:
its commitment to peace and social justice
its music and songs; poetry and literature
Hebrew, Yiddish, Ladino in the original or in translation

Jews express their Jewishness in many ways that are primarily secular
Zionist activities
Jewish scholarship and education, as researchers, teachers and students
Holocaust remembrance
Participating in Jewish charitable, humanitarian or advocacy organizations

Some of the most prominent Jews were secular: Spinoza, Einstein, Freud, Brandeis, Herzl, Ben Gurion, Sholom Aleichem, Peretz, Lillian Wald, Primo Levi, Arthur Miller

Secular Humanistic Jews
do not pray to or worship God
do not treat the Torah as a sacred text or a valid historical record
do not consider themselves bound by “Jewish law”

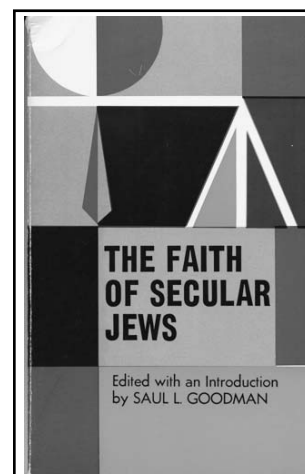
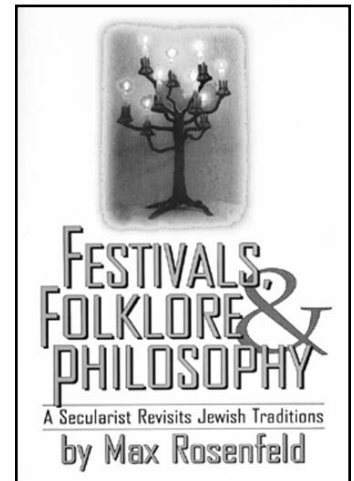
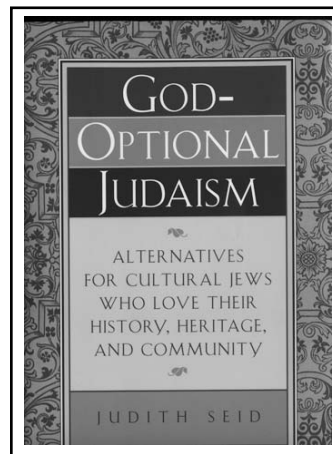
Secular Humanistic Jews
celebrate Jewish holidays and life-cycle events
care about Israel and the freedom and security of Jews every-

where
consider the Torah as containing the founding legends of the Jewish people
pick and choose among Jewish rituals we feel meaningful, or create new ones

Furthermore, Secular Humanistic Jews tend to be more focused than religious Jews on
social action/universal human rights
the survival of Yiddish culture, especially its literature and songs
the Jewish experience in the US/Canada and Eastern European diaspora

In sum, we take to heart Hillel’s saying. “What is hateful to you, do not do to others” and the principle of tikkun olam—our duty to work toward the healing of the world.

Our movement consists of the Congress of Secular Jewish Organizations (CSJO), the Society for Humanistic Judaism (SHJ) and the Workman’s Circle/Arbeter Ring, which all belong to the International Federation of Secular Humanistic Jews.



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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For the Faith Challenged

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Even worse was finding out that at their house much of the lights and the stove stay on for 24 hours every Shabbat and during holidays. Disposable tableware was used liberally if not exclusively (at least in my presence) because their dishwasher wasn't kosher. I thought a mitsva is supposed to be a good thing! Call me a crazy environmentalist, but that is just wrong.

I decided I was through with Judaism. "Then you are not really Jewish," I was told. "There is no such thing as 'ethnically Jewish'." Excuse me?! And all the crap I had to endure the first 22 years of my life just didn't happen? And what about the culture, music, literature? What was Sholem Aleykhem? Russian? I got to share my frustration with playwright Yehuda Hyman who happened to be working on a play about the Jews of Los Angeles. It gave him a character and me two roles in the play that had a sold-out run. But I got even more out of it. A young cast member, Nadine Levyfield, invited all of us to her secular Bas Mitsve ceremony.

On the back of the little program I read: "I am a Jew. I am a descendant of the Prophets, and of the Uprisings in Europe's ghettos and death camps. My heritage is in the songs of Hirsh Glick and Solomon, in the wisdom of the Maimonides, Sholem Aleykhem and Perets, in the heroism of the Maccabees and Hanna Senesh." Call me sentimental, but I wanted to cry. I didn't know all of the names but I knew what it all meant. It was what I knew all along but almost began to doubt. A little band sang Yiddish songs and though I still couldn't understand a word, the familiar sound of the beautiful language spoken by my grandparents made me feel warm.

Nadine and her friend Emily made presentations - one on the Warsaw Ghetto Uprising, the other on Skinheads. These were culminations of their Bas Mitsve process, which included at least two years of studying Jewish history and culture at the Sunday school at the Sholem community as well as some community service. I knew right then and there that this was exactly what I wanted for my son. Not merely to learn to decipher Hebrew and read from the Torah without understanding a single word, but to connect with

his Jewish identity through history, music, the sounds of many languages spoken by our ancestors.

I found a home at Sholem for myself too. A place to be a Jew and not have to give up common sense. A place to celebrate Jewish holidays in a way that means something - now, in the 21st century. For example, around Yom Kippur in addition to the beautiful secular Kol Nidre program, both kids and adults had discussions about ethics. Not someone telling everyone a la Mayakovsky* "What Is Good, and What Is Bad," but a discussion largely about how things are not black or white.

I used to think that not only was I not Jewish enough, I was also too poor to be Jewish. From sky-high temple membership fees (not negotiable as long as you have some kind of a paycheck) and High Holiday tickets to schedules that assume women don't work.

Sholem's approach to organization is similar to its approach to Jewishness - substance over style. Why spend tons of money on fancy buildings when you can rent space from Culver City Middle School for a few hours a week. The teachers are paid - and highly qualified. But most of the administrative work is done by members. Suddenly, being an affiliated Jew is affordable.

And you are never not enough or too anything. It doesn't matter what's in your blood, what you believe, or what your family is like. Sholem is one of very few Jewish institutions where a non-Jewish spouse is not told to leave his or her identity at the door.

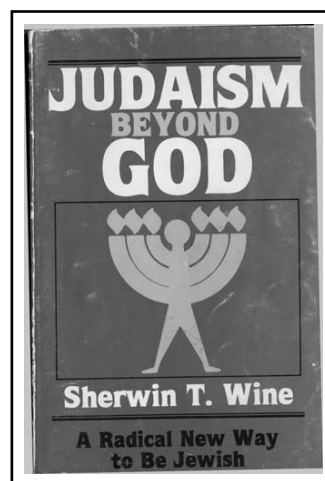
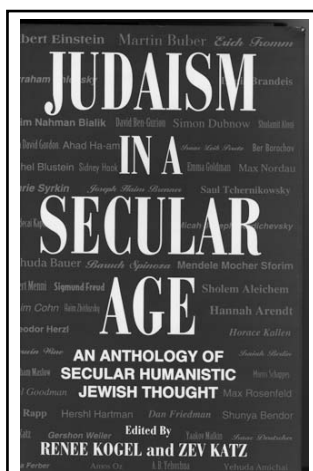
And there is something very cool about listening to a very Chinese woman gush about her son's Bar Mitsve topic - the Jews of China. Or watching a Mexican-American woman mouth the words of Tum Balalayka while her precocious 7 year old is singing along with the others. Call me an optimist, but it makes me feel really good. Our heritage, our culture will live on. Sholem may not be for everyone. If you are a staunch Republican, you probably won't agree with the ideology of social justice, which is essential to Secular Jewishness - and has been since the times of the Prophets.

Russian revolutionary and post-revolutionary poet who among other things wrote a poem "What Is Good, and What Is Bad" that all Soviet children grew up on.

CSJO support for social action

The CSJO has published a number of position papers on social action issues. Judy Seid of the Baltimore Jewish Cultural Chavurah has submitted the following:

In Maryland, the legislature passed a law allowing same-sex partners into hospital rooms, if they have already registered. I have sent the following letter to the editor, using CSJO's position paper as the basis. Maryland's Secular and Cultural Jews applaud our legislature for its first step towards ensuring full civil rights for same-sex partners. We endorse the position of the Congress of Secular Jewish Organizations: Voice of Cultural Jews in calling for an end to all forms of discrimination based on sexual orientation or gender identity and for the repeal of the Defense of Marriage Act, and in holding that, "while it is part of the democratic process to mobilize religious principles in support of, or opposition to, government policies, the right of all people to seek 'life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness' - not Leviticus 20:13 or any other biblical passage - is what we hold sacred as America's creed."



Teen/Young Adult Activity

From *Straight As an Arrow*, newsletter of the teens and young adults, edited by Andrea Muraskin.

Judy Seid suggests action by college students:

I recently met with our local Hillel, serving all the Baltimore colleges and universities. I told them we would be happy to provide a Secular Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur observance to go along with the others – form the religious movements – that they provide.

They told me that they would not allow this because students have not been asking for it. I said that students didn't know it existed and might be interested if they did know. They told me that when students start asking for Secular observances, they would be happy to consider providing them.

So, here's the pitch. Call you up your local Hillel director (NOT the kid who answers the phone!) and ask if there any activities for Secularists. If each college student who reads SAAA does this once a year, eventually a few Hillels will let us in.

Institute Trip to Spain

This summer the IFSHJ (International Federation of Secular Humanist Jews) 2005 travel series with Rabbi Sherwin Wine offers a wonderful new addition to our travel plans — The Jews of Spain, August 8-15.

The personalized trip with daily lectures by Rabbi Wine will explore the glory of Jewish life in Medieval Spain and the beauty of Modern Spain, including visits to Madrid, Toledo, Cordoba — the birthplace of Maimonides, Barcelona, Girona and Figueras. Details of the itinerary are available online at <http://www.ifshj.org/> or contact me by email or in the New York office at 212-564-6711 x301.

Myrna Baron

Sholom Aleichem Club Publications SALE! All books regularly \$12.95 now \$12

Mayn Oytser - a CD of Yiddish music, sung by Sherm Labovitz, accompanied by Alexander Botwinik -regularly \$12. **Haggadah for a Secular Celebration of Pesach** - award winning Haggadah in its 5th edition!

Accompanying tape to help community singing - 7 songs and the Four Questions. \$5.

New Yorkish and Other American Yiddish Stories. Translated by Max Rosenfeld.

Shipping: \$3 for the first item, \$.50 each additional item.

Contact Larry Schofer at lawrence.schofer@verizon.net or 215-248-3762.



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