



CSJO NEWSLETTER

Congress of Secular Jewish Organizations

Winter 2003-4

CSJO to return to Philadelphia for Annual conference May 28-31

Mark your Calendars! The CSJO Conference will be held Memorial Day weekend, May 28-31, 2004, at Arcadia University near Philadelphia, PA. The theme is "Sholem Aleichem, Alaykhem Sholem" in honor of the 50th anniversaries of two of our affiliates— Sholem Aleichem Club of Philadelphia and Sholem Community Organization of Los Angeles. Jon Shinefeld of Philadelphia will be our conference treasurer once again, and Carl Aley will be our registrar. Sam Ruben has agreed to represent the young people in the Keynote address. The adult keynote

speaker will be named shortly.

There are two new developments in the cost of the conference. First, we are initiating an new Older Young Adult component (25-30) of the conference, priced at 75% of the Teen / Young Adult Price. Second, for first time attendees to the Teen / Young Adult Conference (13-24), the cost will be 50% of the Teen/Young Adult Conference. This is only for first time attendees.

Please mark your calendars now, as we are planning a wonderful weekend.

State of the Congress

Karen Knecht reports to our members



Karen Knecht with a mask of Paul Robeson at a recent CSJO conference. Singer and social spokesman Paul Robeson was recently honored with a stamp by the U.S. Postal Service.

By Karen Knecht, chairperson

Happy New Year to all. Hopefully this finds you healthy and ready to start a brand new year.

CSJO is already on the move for 2004. As you know, we are right in the middle of our fund-raising campaign. As of the writing of this article, we have reached the \$3,000.00 mark. Thanks to everyone for their support and their donations. We

still have a long way to go.

The semi-annual board meeting took place in November 2003 in Farmington Hills. It was a very busy, but very productive meeting. There were several issues that were discussed at length and decisions were made. The first being the creation of a third component of the Teen / Young Adult Conference. Jennifer Knecht and Denora Knecht, the elected representatives of the Young Adults, discussed the proposal of creating a 25 - 30 age group, to be called the Older Young Adults. They also proposed the addition of a young person to the Executive Committee who will serve a two year term. This representative will be elected at the Teen/Young Adult/ Older Young Adult Conference every two years. The board was very pleased to see that our young people

are developing methods to stay involved with CSJO.

I am pleased to announce that we have a new Co-Chairperson of our Social Action Committee. Joanne Shane Plummer has agreed to take on the responsibilities of promoting our philosophy regarding a variety of issues throughout the world.

I am also pleased to announce that Liz Ruchkin, from Baltimore is our new treasurer. After many years of hard work and balancing our books, Joan Kurtz decided to step down as treasurer. Liz was recruited by Judy Seid, and as of January 1, 2004, is our new treasurer. I know you join me in welcoming her to our CSJO family.

What about Joan, you ask? Well, we have created a new position in CSJO called the Membership Chair. Joan Kurtz was instrumental in developing the criteria for the position, and is now our Membership Chair. Her first responsibility is to develop a database of all of our members. Joan is very excited about this new position, and we welcome her energy and tenacity.

As some of you may know, Gerry Revzin has been our Associate Member-at-Large to the board for many years. With the creation of the Membership Chair, this position is no longer needed. However, as Gerry did for me many years ago, I came up with a wonderful idea. As we are not ready to let her go, I asked her if she would be willing to become the CSJO Historian. Without batting an eye, she said yes. So now her responsibility is to gather and organize all of our memories, both from her own experiences as well as the rest of us.

And finally, I would like to thank each and every person who goes the extra mile for CSJO. Without your dedication, without your support, and without you, CSJO would not be. So thank you so very much.

Some Thoughts on Our Jewish Secularism

by **Bernie Banet**

Reprinted from the Ann Arbor Jewish Cultural Society Newsletter, December 2003. Bernie Banet has served on the boards of the Ann Arbor Jewish Cultural Society and the Washtenaw Jewish Community Center, and has been a member of the Ann Arbor JCS for 25 years.

At the Ann Arbor Jewish Cultural Society (JCS) Sunday Schmooze on October 25, 2003, Rifke Feinstein, the Executive Director of the Congress of Secular Jewish Organizations, gave us a historical and contemporary overview of Jewish Secularism and the CSJO. The presentation and the lively discussion that followed raised again the question of what a “secular” approach to Jewishness means. I’ll try to use some of the points that were made in the discussion as a springboard and ask some questions that go beyond them.

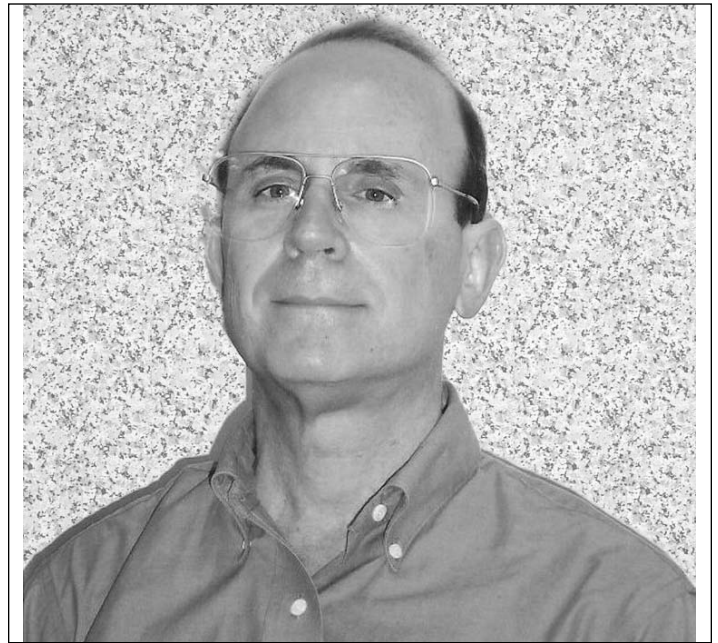
First of all, our **“secularism” is rather different from the Jewish Secularism of a hundred year ago.** The old Secularism, as Rifke reminded us, was centered on the Yiddish language, Yiddish culture, and the radical socialism of the Eastern European immigrants who worked in such venues as the sweatshops of the Lower East Side of Manhattan. That original Secularism seems to be fading, even among the CSJO organizations in other cities that are directly linked to the immigrant Secularists. Jews who are fluent in the Yiddish language or are still true believers in Old Left radicalism are fewer and fewer.

Some of us JCS members are children or grandchildren or great grandchildren of Yiddish speaking Secularists, but many of us are not. JCS itself was founded as the Jewish Cultural School in the 1960’s, decades after the era when the great debate was Trotsky vs. Stalin.

So what, then, defines our contemporary secular, or as we often say now, secular humanistic, approach to Jewishness? What I heard in the Sunday morning discussion were the following elements:

1) **A cultural or ethnic conception of Jewish identity.** We are Jews because we are descended from Jews and are part of Klal Yisrael, the worldwide Jewish community. We want to feel connected to our Jewish ancestors and family. We want to feel a link to the various cultures of the Diaspora, past and present, as well as to Israel, and we want to pass on this sense of being part of the Jewish tribe to our descendants.

We know that this conception of Jewishness is at odds with the



Bernie Banet

conventional American definition of what a Jew is, i.e. that a Jew is a practitioner of the religion of Judaism which is one of the traditional three American “faiths,” the others being Catholicism and Protestantism.

2) **An emphasis on humanistic values,** by which we appear to mean ethical behavior toward one another, empathy, justice, charity, freedom, human rights, human dignity, moral equality, moral responsibility, and preference for nonviolent resolution of conflicts. We abhor the domination of one caste or class or nation or race or religion or gender over another and wish to work actively for *tikkun olam*.

We believe that these values emerge from the totality of the Jewish experience. Yes, they are prescribed in the *Tanakh*, the Hebrew Bible, such as in *Neviim*, The Prophets, from which they influenced Christianity and Islam. The rabbis elaborated on these themes in the Talmud commentary, such as in the *Pirkei Avot* or Sayings of the Fathers. But it is not only the religious texts that carved this ethical emphasis into Jewish culture. It is also three thousand years of being often on the receiving end of bigotry and oppression. Whether or not there were actually Hebrew slaves in Egypt, we know that Jews lived through centuries of foreign dom-

ination in Judea and the nearby areas, and lived in Exile as a disfavored, sometimes violently persecuted, minority in the Babylonian, Roman, Christian and Muslim worlds. After this long experience of persecution and expulsion came, of course, the Holocaust in the “enlightened” 20th century. If we know our history, how can we not be active in the fight for human rights and human dignity? How can we not be concerned about morality?

3) **A skeptical view** of theistic religious doctrines about God. We feel in harmony with Jewish *Apikorsim* [dissident believers] of ages past, doubting the claims for divine revelation of scripture and preferring a scientific approach to understanding such topics as cosmology and the origins of life. In this view, the God of the Torah is a character created by Jewish authors in Jewish literature, and critical questioning of authority and received wisdom is to be encouraged, not squelched.

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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With our skepticism (of various shadings - agnosticism, "agnosticism," atheism) comes a rejection of the need to focus on God in our rituals and in our classes. We don't want to be hypocrites, raising our voices in prayer to a God who is not listening. With the skepticism, too, often comes a rejection of the centrality to our lives of Torah and Talmud. Without the reality of a God who intervenes in history and hears prayers we cannot find a reason to follow rabbinic Halakha, the religious law and its interpretation of the 613 commandments.

4) **An accepting approach to cultural and religious differences.** We want to remain ethnic, but we are not comfortable with ethnocentrism. We claim no "chosen people" status. We have no need to "convert" those who have different beliefs. And we don't believe that Jewish continuity of a valuable kind can be achieved in our present world by hostility to intermarriage or by insistence on matrilineal descent of Jewish ethnicity. We welcome those from other ethnic groups and faiths into our families and into our organizations.

Are these fundamental components coherent and mutually supportive? No, it seems to me, not always. Sometimes they don't go smoothly together and are in themselves difficult to implement. I think we should keep this in mind as we discuss issues important to the organization, such as curriculum, ritual, inclusiveness, "spirituality," and social action. Where do the tensions lie among and within the core principles? Let me suggest some of these conflicts or contradictions:

We want to be ethnic and cultural, yet we are highly assimilated and for the most part know little Yiddish or Hebrew or

CSJO appoints new treasurer and membership chair

Joan Kurtz (Suffolk County Folkshul), long-time treasurer of CSJO, stepped down from that job on January 1 — but we have not lost her! She has assumed the duties of Membership Chair. This position includes creating and maintaining a database of our members, affiliates and associates. Among other things, this will enable us to eventually create labels for mailings by zip code. In other words, bulk mailing will become a reality in due time. This will take time and some work on the part of our delegates, but it will be accomplished.

Joan's treasurer job will be taken on by Liz Ruchkin (Baltimore Chavura). Liz has three university degrees, and over the years has worked as a biostatistician, a bookkeeper/accountant, a tax preparer, and has taught math to all levels from 5th grade to integral calculus. "I always say that every ten years I change careers."

Liz has done many different types of volunteer jobs from working for a public television station to working in inner city schools. At present she is volunteering at a local hospital and serving as the treasurer of both the Baltimore Jewish Cultural Chavura and CSJO.



Joan Kurtz, with her ever sharpened pencil

Ladino, don't share the "old country" culture any more, and don't participate in the culture of contemporary Israel. Some of us only know as "Jewishness" the world of the synagogue or temple. Our attempts to use Hebrew and Yiddish in our rituals can seem unnatural, a dim recollection or even caricature of traditions in times past, places far away. As we sing *Hinei Matov* on *Rosh HaShana*, I picture an "American Culture" group on Mars solemnly singing "Home on the Range" to observe an annual Fourth of July ritual.

Unlike other ethnic associations in this country, we don't really get together to dance the dances of the old country, sing the old songs, eat the old foods, drink the old wines — unless you count trips to the local deli. The ancestral Jewish culture has largely ceased to exist for us, the result of decades of assimilation, but also because the Holocaust destroyed the Jewish communities in Europe, and because Israel and modern Hebrew have supplanted the ancestral Yiddish and European cultures with a new "virtual" homeland in the Middle East.

It could be argued that American Jewish culture, and Jewish contributions to American culture might be the focus of at least some of our interest. Certainly we could immerse ourselves in music, art, literature, movies, theater created by American Jews, and in biographies and histories without end. We could, but in

Curriculum materials available to affiliates

CSJO has purchased a publication of the International Institute for Secular Humanistic Judaism called IISHJ Adult Education Curriculum: *Introduction to Secular Humanistic Judaism*.

Included in the book and for reproducible use is a packet for each section: Jewish History, Jewish Culture, Philosophy.

* Overview of the entire course: session topics, assigned readings, recommended reading

* List of readings for each unit

* Introductory essays for each session

* Occasional additional readings or information sheets

* Discussion questions for each packet

Organizational affiliates interested in receiving the packets should contact Rifke Feinstein, executive director, at csjo@csjo.org (or 320 Claymore Blvd., Richmond Heights, OH 44143).

Corrections to affiliate list published in the last newsletter (D) = delegate

New York...school is now called "Jewish Cultural School (Suffolk County)"

Illinois "The New School for Jewish Studies"...Ron Damashek (D); r.damashek@electrinet.com

"Secular Jewish Community School of Oak Park (Chicago)"...Elisa Lapine (D); elapine2002@yahoo.com

Michigan...Jewish Parents Institute; Julie Schaefer's newemail address: JulieFreedom2@yahoo.com

CANADA

1. MANITOBA

UJPO Br. 16 (Winnipeg)...Roz Usiskin (D); rusiskin@mts.net
Sholem Aleichem Community Winnipeg...Henry Shorr (D); shorr@mb.sympatico.ca

2. VICTORIA

Sharon Kobrinsky (D); skobrinsky@shaw.ca

general we adult members don't do that, either.

In our rituals and classes we emphasize our concern for others through praise of personal ethics, *tzedakah* (justice, righteousness, charity) and social activism. We congratulate ourselves for our ancestors' goodness in this regard, but find it difficult to know how to act collectively to further these ideals. We don't look to God or the rabbis for ethical guidance, but then how do we support one another to examine and implement our good intentions? We resist a "party line" political correctness approach, and don't always feel 100% in support of wider Jewish communal efforts such as the Federation's fundraising. We make community service a requirement for our b'nei mitzvah class, but beyond that, how do we mobilize ourselves to act on our belief that as Jews we should participate in *tikkun olam*, repairing a flawed world?

Although we reject religious observance or religious belief as a requirement for determining "who is a Jew," we often fall back now on the Jewish religious tradition to organize our calendar, our lessons, and our ceremonies, because the religion is the aspect of Jewish culture with which we are most familiar. In the absence of other aspects of Jewish culture in a vibrant living form, whether Yiddish or Israeli — we celebrate the religious holidays and use some of the ceremonies, but take "God" out and add our own emphases and interpretations. We become a secular congregation, and follow the attendance patterns of our Conservative and Reform friends — large crowds for the New Year holidays or for a bar mitzvah or bat mitzvah, and not much turnout for a Shabbat event of any kind, even if once a month rather than once a week.

As you know, some skeptical and humanistic Jews, inspired by Rabbi Sherwin Wine, organize Temples and congregations, calling their "Humanistic Judaism" a fifth branch of the religion of Judaism. At this point we in JCS, and the CSJO groups as a whole, reject the religious labels (Temple, congregation, Rabbi) but at

JCS we now mirror in practice much of what is done at the Birmingham Temple and the Society for Humanistic Judaism. We are comfortable in the same international federation as the SHJ congregations. We have b'nei mitzvah ceremonies for our youth, and we have added into our calendar even Yom Kippur, previously avoided as inherently "too religious."

We consider ourselves humanists, with what we suggest are universal values, but we also value the tribal, the Jewish. We want to accept all cultures as valuable, yet the reason we are JCS members and not simply Humanists is we believe that there is something of "special" value in Jewish identity and the Jewish people. Then, however, we seem to fear that teaching about this specialness risks ethnocentrism or exceptionalism, a covert attempt to reintroduce the Chosen People concept with a different vocabulary. Is it ethnocentric to be concerned about contemporary anti-Semitism, anti-Jewish terrorism, or the future of Israel?

We want to be accepting and welcoming of diversity. We have no creeds or behavioral requirements or genealogical tests for membership. But that openness can conflict with both our Jewishness and our skeptical, secular essence. It can also work against the desire to maintain Jewish continuity from generation to generation. How do we react when members want traditional Hebrew prayers incorporated into our ceremonies or classes? What about incorporating or at least trying not to contradict beliefs and practices from other religious or "spiritual" traditions? Can we teach in our school about religions, Jewish and otherwise, from a secular Jewish viewpoint without being offensive to some members?

I submit these tensions or "cultural contradictions" as food for thought. I don't think there's an easy way to resolve them. Perhaps if we accept that they exist we can be more understanding of one another when choices, and disagreements about those choices, arise. At any rate, I hope that these observations will trigger further discussion.

CSJO fund drive begins - List of contributors

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Bernice and Jack Stein
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Michael Prival
Bess and Marty Katz
Gerry Revzin
Rose Soglin`
Al/Mickey Stern
Herbert Goodfriend
Bruce/Marjorie Goldman
Michael Katz/Linda Gratz
Edward J. Klein
Freda Egnal
South Side Jewish Secular Group Chicago)
Joel/Margot Flaks
Norman/Ethel Rosenfeld
Lil Schwartz
Robert/Elaine Sims
Santa Barbara Jewish Secular Society
Art and Trish Miron
Larry and Jane Schofer

Conference 2003 - Jodi Goldfinger's keynote address

Good morning everyone. I'm glad to see many of you are awake, even some people under the age of 18! For those of you who don't know me, my name is Jodi Goldfinger. I live in the suburbs of Toronto, and I promise you I'm feeling fine and don't have SARS. This is my 11th conference. Although for the first few years if I wasn't still asleep during the keynote, I definitely SLEPT through the keynote. But for the last several years I've actually been awake and really enjoyed them. Many of them have even been quite memorable and inspiring, all of them written by intelligent people, who have lots of interesting things to say. So when I was asked to do the keynote at the conference last year, I was a little bit hesitant, and it took me a while to accept the offer.

After hearing what the topic was, Creating and Sharing Jewish Outlooks, or C-S-J-O, I was slightly confused. So, I sat in my room for days trying to figure out what a Jewish Outlook is. Is it a belief system, or a single idea or thought, or is it an action, or behaviour? To be honest I'm still trying to figure it out. What I think am sure of, is that we already have outlooks. That's what makes an organization come together-having these similar ideas, and belief system and acting on them.

Organizations and Individuals

We not only have outlooks as an organization or community, but as individuals too. Our outlooks work on a hierarchy in a similar fashion to Maslow's hierarchy of needs. Often outlooks in different groups will overlap or impact on each other. I feel the order is as follows. First and foremost is you yourself. We have outlooks regarding personal responsibility, personal growth, the search for personal happiness, and making a personal difference in the world. These are the most important ones, because this is our foundation as individuals. These are what define who we are, and what helps to shape the rest of our outlooks.

Second are those outlooks about our relationships with our families and our partners. Next we have our group or community outlooks. As humans we have a natural herding instinct. We have a tendency to group with people that are increasingly similar to us. For us, our Secular Humanistic Jewish communities fall into this group or community category of outlooks. Here we can express our Jewish heritage, creativity, passion and joy in ways that have integrity for us.

Humans and the Environment

The fourth category, is our connection to all Humanity. These outlooks have to do with human survival and interrelationships. The last level is the way in which we relate to and understand the natural world. Plants, animals, the environment, and the universe including energy, matter, space and time. The interesting thing about this hierarchy is that within it our outlooks are constantly shifting and changing, depending on our place in our life, and on education, or on our environment, or peers, or even on our mood. As we learn and grow, our outlooks expand and change.

So the question is: As a community how do we create an outlook when it's already there? Isn't it kind of like energy, which can't be created or destroyed, just change forms? Or is an outlook more like a game of broken telephone? Where one person decides

what the truth is or what they want it to be, and they share it with those people around them, who in turn share it with their buddies, and so on. Meanwhile everyone who hears this truth interprets it differently, and when they share it, they change it ever so slightly and add in a bit of their own pizzazz. So it's created, and shuffled around, and altered, even sometimes to the point that it's almost unrecognizable, but it still stems from the same point.

Now here is my personal issue. I need to know everything. No exceptions. I will never understand something, until I know its story. Where it started, how it got to its current state, and why it's important to look at. Be it geography, or science, or religion, I am by nature an extremely curious person, and need to question everything. And then I got to thinking. So here is this Jewish outlook, whose meaning we are unsure of at this point, and we know that it's been changed and altered to the current state. So now the plan is to get back to the original message in broken telephone, or the outlook and figure out what it was.

So I took a look at the torah writings and ideas of other Jews, and the story representing our first outlook is the one of this perfect paradise, or the Garden of Eden. The first people were put there as the gardeners. Their job was to keep the garden beautiful for themselves, their children, and their children's children. There they could laugh, and run and play, and be shiny happy people.

As a humanist, I try to be the best person I can possibly be. And each day I try to push those limits even further to stretch that 'possibly be' to become a broader range of 'best person'. As a secularist, I live my life as if there is no one, or nothing watching over me, and there is no plan that I must follow. The only plan that I have is to be responsible not only for myself but for others, because as long as there is injustice anywhere, I'm not finished here. Part of my responsibility is to push myself to make this

Publications available from CSJO

COMING SOON:

Bennett Muraskin, LET JUSTICE WELL UP LIKE WATER: PROGRESSIVE JEWS FROM HILLEL TO HELEN SUZMAN.

APPLES AND HONEY: MUSIC AND READINGS FOR A SECULAR HUMANISTIC OBSERVANCE OF THE JEWISH NEW YEAR FESTIVAL. Edited by Julie Gales and Pat Martz for CSJO. Explanations, songs with music, readings. \$23.50

HAGGADAH FOR A SECULAR CELEBRATION OF PESACH. Sholom Aleichem Club of Philadelphia. Fifth edition. 62 pp. \$11. Tape (see above under MUSIC) plus Haggadah \$17.

SHOLEM FAMILY HAGADA. By the Sholem Community Organization, Los Angeles. 22 pp. \$5.

HUMANIST READINGS IN JEWISH FOLKLORE. By Bennett Muraskin. \$20 (\$15 for CSJO members).

GOD-OPTIONAL JUDAISM by Judith Seid. \$19.95.

Information at csjo@csjo.org. Order from Rifke Feinstein, Executive Director CJSO, 320 Claymore Blvd., Richmond Heights OH 44143.

world a better place by sharing my humanistic outlook, and helping every person I come in contact with become the 'best person' they can 'possibly be'.

This humanistic outlook doesn't really seem to be specifically Jewish at all. This is a common way that we as humans should be living. We all have the same ultimate goal don't we? We all just want to lead happy and healthy lives, and wish the same for others.

So how does this relate to us as Jews? Well, with whom are we sharing this outlook? Are we sharing our outlook with other Jews or with the world? Now it's important to share our outlook with the rest of the non-Jewish world, because it helps to gain tolerance of Judaism, but everybody seems to have the same focus. Everyone is so intent on sharing their outlooks with the world.

There are Jews in our own backyards, who don't even know we exist, and if they do, what do they know about us? We need to be known for who we are and what we actually believe, not by distortions created by people who don't even know us. Our reputation should be based on our actions because they speak the loudest. People view us by what we do, and therefore we need to be consistent in what we are doing. The way we live our lives become the message of Secular Humanistic Judaism.

So what are the ways that we share this outlook? We've taken on the action of joining a group to strengthen our voice. But is that enough? The group is just a bunch of people until something worthwhile is put into action. We go to these workshops that give us ways to share our outlooks with our communities at home, and the people in our society, but how much of the information that we gather here do we actually put to use? How often do we shout out to the media, taking action politically or otherwise on issues that underlie our life philosophies? Are we socially active enough? How often do we make our presence known in the other Jewish communities? Not often enough, because there are still Jews out there who don't even know we exist. Many Jews haven't found a comfortable place in Judaism, and it is these people that can ben-

efit most from us sharing our outlooks.

I'm an entrepreneur. Always have been. My parents told me stories about how I would take all those free catalogues you get in the mail, and go door to door selling them, when I was barely old enough to walk. So let's turn this sharing our Jewish outlook into advertising. I think we should make a conscious effort this year to share our outlooks with, say 3 people whom we think would be interested. There are about 75-100 people here. We could reach approximately 225-300 new people that have never heard of us before, that will now know we exist. That's not to say we're gonna be up 300 new members next year, but what if each of those 300 people knew one other person that they felt would be interested in our organizations outlooks. That's 600 people over the next year that would now know we exist.

We need to talk to the world community and act within that community. We need to talk to every Jew we meet, not only Secular Humanistic Jews. It's really important for us to make sure that the Jewish community is aware of our outlooks and existence. Right now, we're still whispering and we are not heard. We need to be there, voicing our opinions, and insisting that our voice be included in the "Jewish Voice." CSJO needs to be represented. We need to act within the Jewish community. We cannot expect to make an impact in the Jewish world if we don't participate in it. It is time to stop whispering for fear that other Jews might not like our message. It is time to stop being invisible. Our secular humanistic ideas and ideals are surely needed in our world today. We have a responsibility to share them in voice and in action. Let us do so with purpose and passion. If not now, when?



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