



CSJO Newsletter

“The Voice of Cultural Jews”

Fall 2007

Congress of Secular Jewish Organizations

A Time of Remembrance

The death of Sherwin Wine has deprived the secular Jewish movement of a powerful voice. A time has come for a new generation of leaders to work with and develop the amazing array of groups and institutions that he helped to found.

The Congress of Secular Jewish Organizations has stood a little apart from Rabbi Wine, but he was always our ally in our struggle to restructure the world of North American Jewry.

We reprint here an obituary of Sherwin Wine by Bennett Muraskin. This article appeared in the magazine *Jewish Currents* and is reprinted with permission of the magazine.

It seemed also appropriate at this time to remember someone who made his mark in a different way. For many of us, Max Rosenfeld is a figure never to be forgotten, a man who helped us in the CSJO define what we were about.

Larry Schofer made the remarks printed below at the High Holiday celebration celebrated by the Philadelphia Kehilla for Secular Jews.

Sherwin Wine **1928-2007**

By Bennett Muraskin

Rabbi Sherwin T. Wine, a central figure in the secular Jewish movement worldwide, died tragically when his taxi was struck by a drunk driver while he was vacationing in Morocco. He was the founder of the Society for Humanistic Judaism (1969), a chief architect of both the International Institute for Secular Humanistic Judaism (1985) and the International Federation of Secular Humanistic Jews, the author of the groundbreaking *Judaism Beyond God* (1985), a major contributor to *Judaism in a Secular Age: An Anthology of Secular Humanist Jewish Thought* (1995) and the subject of a tribute book on the occasion of his 75th birthday, *A Life of Courage: Sherwin Wine and Humanistic Judaism* (2003), edited by Dan Cohn-Shertok, Harry T. Cook and Marilyn Rowens.

In 2003, the American Humanist Association selected him as Humanist of the Year, an honor also bestowed on Stephen Jay Gould, Betty Friedan, Carl Sagan and Barbara Ehrenreich. At the time of his untimely death, Wine was Dean of the International Institute and remained active as a teacher and speaker. The greater visibility that secular Jewish expression enjoys in North America (and throughout the world) today is in large part due to Wine's organizational, leadership and pedagogic prowess.

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Max Rosenfeld **1913-1997**

By Larry Schofer

It is pertinent to what I am about to say for you to know that I have been involved with the board of the Folkshul in the 1980s and 1990s, with the board of the Sholom Aleichem Club since the 1990s, and with the Congress of Secular Jewish Organizations for over 20 years.

The traditional name for Yom Kippur is Yom Hazikaron, the day of remembrance - not to mourn, but to remember.

I'd like to remember one man who touched our hearts and our minds here in Philadelphia and everywhere there is some feeling for the society built by Eastern European Jews in North America, a person whose fingerprints are all over the organizations represented in the Kehilla for Secular Jews. Max Rosenfeld died ten years ago, but we would be different without him.

Max was part of the group of founding families of the Folkshul we have today, and he served as principal for a number of years in the 1960s. By the time our family got there in the 1980s, he had retired from that job, but he could still inspire the school. Both our sons graduated from the Folkshul - we knew that any time there was a questions about curriculum, Max was the person to turn to.

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Congress of Secular Jewish Organizations

"The Voice of Secular Jews"

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CONGRESS OF SECULAR JEWISH ORGANIZATIONS

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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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Sherwin Wine – Continued from p. 1

Born in Detroit to immigrant parents from Poland, Wine grew up in a Jewish neighborhood in an observant home and attended a Conservative shul. He earned a Bachelor's and Master's degree in philosophy from University of Michigan and in 1951, enrolled in the rabbinic program at Hebrew Union College in Cincinnati. Ordained as a Reform rabbi in 1956, he volunteered to become an army chaplain and served in South Korea.

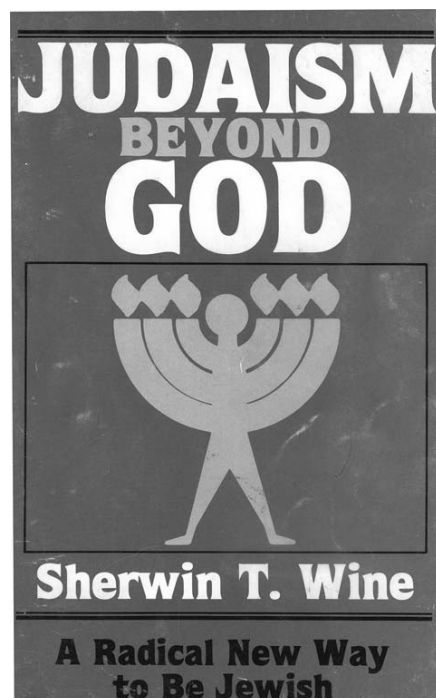
In 1958 he returned to civilian life and organized a new Reform congregation in Windsor, Ontario, just across the river from Detroit. In 1963, a disaffected few families from a Detroit Reform congregation where Wine previously served as associate rabbi, broke away and asked Wine to become their rabbi. Retaining the congregational format, Wine developed a new liturgy free of prayer and God-language, emphasizing Judaism as a philosophy consistent with modern humanistic ideals. This was the birth of the Birmingham Temple which Wine served as rabbi until 2003.

In 1969, Wine went national, bringing the Birmingham Temple together with an Illinois and a Connecticut congregation to form the Society for Humanistic Judaism (SHJ). His mission was to develop Humanistic Judaism, also known as Secular Humanistic Judaism, as a viable current within the Jewish community and the fifth branch of Judaism, joining Orthodox, Conservative, Reform and Reconstructionist at the far left of the Jewish congregational spectrum. Under his leadership and guidance, the SHJ has expanded to 30 congregations and affiliate organizations in the US, located in 16 states, the District of Columbia and one Canadian province.

In forming the SHJ, Wine was fully cognizant of the older secular Jewish movement with its socialist/Yiddish roots represented by the Congress of Secular Jewish Organizations (CSJO), founded in 1970, and Workmen's Circle, in existence for over a century. Wine was an invited guest at many CSJO conferences and for a number of years SHJ and CSJO held joint conferences. The two organizations share one joint affiliate, local groups have occasionally moved from one organization to another. In 1985, SHJ and CSJO formed the International Institute, which has educated leaders of both organizations.

Recently, Wine, as Dean of the Institute, ordained eight secular humanistic rabbis in Israel, a notable event that has garnered international press coverage. In addition to educating rabbis and leaders for the movement, the International Institute holds colloquia which attract distinguished scholars to discuss and debate major Jewish historical and political issues.

The International Federation of Secular Humanistic Jews consists of national organizations in Israel, the United States, Canada, Britain, France, Belgium, Australia, Mexico, Argentina, Uruguay and the countries of the former Soviet Union. There are six regions in the International Federation: North America, Israel, Europe, Eurasia, Latin America, and Australia. (The Workmen's Circle recently became a member of the North American section.) Every two years it holds an international conference. Among his many talents, Wine excelled as a tour guide on trips around the world sponsored by the International Federation.



Although secular Jews from the old school considered Wine too “religious” and others as too hierarchical, under his influence CSJO affiliates have introduced more “ritual” in their holiday and life cycle observances and more formal structure in their governance. On the other hand, although Wine favored rabbinic leadership, in practice only a small minority of SHJ affiliates have rabbis.

SHJ may be more politically centrist, Zionist and Hebrew-oriented than CSJO or Workmen's Circle, organizations that pride themselves on their leftist politics, Diaspora loyalties and embrace of secular Yiddish culture. However “out in the field,” among the local leadership and the rank and file, the three organizations are quite similar. Often it is more a matter of geography than ideology that determines individual or family affiliation; and in areas where these three organizations have their own affiliates, cooperation rather than competition is the norm.

Wine enjoyed a well deserved reputation as a dynamic speaker. Without notes (and without sitting down!), Sherwin could lecture for hours on a wide range of topics. His intelligence, wit and humor enlivened all of his presentations, and age did not diminish his abilities. Wine also excelled as a writer, using clear language and cogent arguments to hammer his points home.

One of his most compelling themes was that modern Jewish literature, inspired by Enlightenment values of reason and universal human rights, are more philosophically valid and ethically sound than ancient writings based on faith and ethnocentrism. In his unflinching criticism of Biblical authoritarianism, Wine articulated what many secular Jews were reluctant to say out of a misplaced reverence for the established official tradition. Wine discerned an underground tradition of critical thought, irreverence and humor

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Max Rosenfeld

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My wife Jane and I have belonged to the Sholom Aleichem Club for almost 20 years, one of the few Folkshul families to make that move, and we have never regretted it. Max was always there - as an inspiration for the Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur celebrations, for Passover, and for just plain fun. If Max was there, you were sure to enjoy some laughter.

The Sholom Aleichem Club Haggadah has gone through 5 editions and many printings. We have sold perhaps 40,000 copies - and it was Max who was one of the prime authors.

He helped participate in the founding of the Congress of Secular Jewish Organizations in the 1970s, and it was his rousing call for action by secular Jews everywhere that inspired the member groups to cooperate with the Society for Humanistic Judaism in founding the International Federation of Secular Humanistic Jews.

What did Max say and do that caused him to make such a strong impression on others?

That is an interesting question, because Max never came across in speech as a driven man. Quite the opposite - he was soft spoken and modest; he was a gentle giant - most of all, he was not afflicted with that most common of social diseases, he was not "hard of listening." If you spoke to him, you know that he heard what you had to say and valued your opinion.

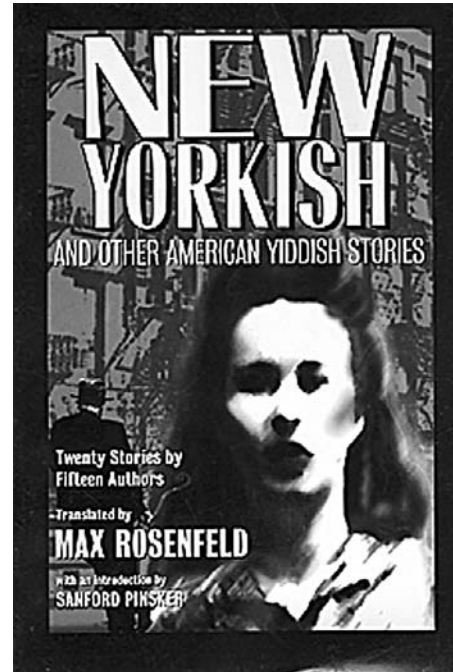
The secular tradition of Yiddish speaking Jews from the pre-World War I period and from 1920s and 1930s included a very strong disdain for organized religion. Many of you have heard of the Yom Kippur parties and dances that were put on by some groups in an attempt to thumb their noses at the traditional. The excesses of this anti-tradition had become muted by the end of the 1930s and had just about disappeared by the 1950s, but the feelings lingered.

Max knew this secular, militantly anti-religious tradition very well, but as early as the 1960s he was writing in the magazine *Jewish Currents* trying to convince others with a call for more understanding in this respect. He didn't use the word spirituality, but he was arguing for what by the 1980s he called "spirituality" in secular Jewish life - and by this he meant drawing on what was good from the old to make something better for the new era.

This wasn't just a matter simply of calling on some vague notion of the "prophetic tradition" - it meant using some of the tools and symbols of the old to create something new. When it came to Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur, he had to fight the intellectual battles of convincing Jews all over North America that themes of forgiveness and reconciliation can be part of a secular Jewish tradition.

How did he do it? One way was to pursue the translation of Yiddish literature in a fashion that could appeal to people today - just take a look at his translations gathered in the book *New Yorkish and Other American Yiddish Stories*. This book talks about life in America, not in some fantasized shtetl of the past.

And he didn't do it simply by preaching - that wasn't Max's way - but by working with the Sholom Aleichem Club to present a meaningful high holiday celebration. And so what we are doing today was born. Some of the readings his committee chose are still



with us today in our current celebration, like Yankev Glatstein's poem *Yizkor*, which you will find in the booklet we use, and Charles Reznikoff's superb adaptation of the *Rabbanan Kaddish*, which we will read in its entirety today.

What comes out from this snippet from Reznikoff is an illustration of Max's life and Max's message:

*Upon the Jews and upon all the nations,
To them and you for the new year: Peace, Safety, A Living,
Life.*

If Max had a hero, he would be Sholom Aleichem himself. Sholom Aleichem made a will in which he called on his descendants to honor him not by mourning, but by gathering on the day of remembering him and reading some parts of his work that they liked - preferably parts with humor. I would like to believe that Max felt the same way - don't mourn, but be joyful by looking to the future with optimistic eyes. I hope that is what we are doing in these celebrations - we are clearly answering some need, given that we are now running standing room only programs for Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur.

I'd like to close by calling on traditional Jewish literature - a portion of the *Pirke Avot*, the *Sayings of the Fathers*, which is part of the *Mishna*. Like *Tevye* of the stories that became *Fiddler on the Roof*, and like Max Rosenfeld, I want to quote the classics of Jewish literature and give them a new twist.

I think the rabbis were talking about Max Rosenfeld when they said that there are 7 characteristics of a wise man:

Donations

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Max Rosenfeld

A wise man does not speak before one who has more wisdom; he does not interrupt; he thinks before he answers; his answers are relevant to the matter under discussion; he deals with first things first and last things last; he admits what he does not know; and he speaks the truth.

That was Max - I'll never forget him.

Books by Max Rosenfeld:

Published by the Sholom Aleichem Club and CSJO jointly:

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

Published by the Sholom Aleichem Club:

Pushcarts and Peddlers. Stories edited and translated by Max Rosenfeld. (Now available as a reprint by the CSJO)

Festivals, Folklore, and Philosophy. Essays on the secular Jewish tradition. (out of print)

Haggadah for a Secular Celebration of Pesach (Co-author. Out of print)

The CSJO administers the Max Rosenfeld Publication Fund for the support of publications to carry on his work. Donations may be directed to the CSJO executive director, 320 Claymore Blvd., Richmond Heights OH 44143. with a notation "For Max Rosenfeld publications fund."

Sherwin Wine

that had more to do with forming the modern Jewish personality than Torah, Talmud or prayer. However, in some cases, he ignored humanistic themes in older Jewish sources merely because they were wrapped in religious verbiage.

In addition to *Judaism Beyond God*, Wine wrote *Celebrations: A Ceremonial and Philosophical Guide for Humanists and Humanistic Jews* and *Staying Sane in a Crazy World*, a humanistic self-help book. His articles often appeared in the journals Humanistic Judaism, Free Inquiry and The Humanist.

Wine's last major public appearance was at a Humanist Conference in Harvard University in April 2007 where he was a featured speaker along with luminaries such as author Salmon Rushdie, Indian economist Amartya Sen, scientist E.O. Wilson and biographer of Spinoza Rebecca Goldstein.

The family of Rabbi Sherwin T. Wine has suggested that contributions in his memory be directed to the 21st Century Fund, which benefits the International Institute for Secular Humanistic Judaism, the Society for Humanistic Judaism and the Birmingham Temple. Donations payable to the 21st Century Fund should be sent to:

Rabbi Sherwin T. Wine Memorial Fund
c/o The Birmingham Temple
28611 West Twelve Mile Road
Farmington Hills, MI 48334

HELLO FROM CSJO!

Colloquium 2007, Jews and the Muslim World: Solving the Puzzle, was held in Detroit from October 19-21. The Colloquium was sponsored by the International Institute for Secular Humanistic Judaism, IISHJ. This Colloquium was dedicated to the founder of the Colloquium idea, Rabbi Sherwin Wine.

It was a stimulating and educational meeting that brought together great minds from various fields of study relating to the topic. The new Dean of the Institute, Rabbi Adam Chalom, did a brilliant job of synthesizing all the material that was presented.

The IISHJ board meeting was held on the Thursday evening before the start of the Colloquium and was led admirably by the new dean. I believe that the fear and trepidation, that was once felt since the death of Rabbi Wine, has now dissipated because of the

leadership of Rabbi Chalom.

To add to the alphabet soup of movement organizations, the International Federation of Secular Humanistic Jews, IFSHJ, held its first meeting in a number of years and there was enthusiastic interest in its revival.

As a board member of both the IISHJ and the IFSHJ, I feel very optimistic about the future of both these organizations and the Secular Humanistic Jewish Movement.

All the best...

Rifke

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