



## Discussion and Study Guide

### *Contemporary Humanistic Judaism: Beliefs, Values, Practices*

**Edited by Adam Chalom and Jodi Kornfeld**

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#### **Introduction**

The introduction (xvii-xxxv) seeks to outline the core tenets of Humanistic Judaism; the history of secular Judaism more broadly; and the elements that differentiate Humanistic Judaism from other liberal and/or secular Judaisms. Humanistic Judaism emphasizes human power and responsibility in a positive and creative way that appeals to a growing population of secularized Jews. It is a movement where a Jew who does not believe in a personal god can say what one believes and believe what one says. Many Jews have not heard of Humanistic Judaism and do not know that there is an organized Jewish option for those holding such opinions. The introduction therefore raises basic threshold questions for the reader.

- What does the term “secular Jew” mean to you? Do you consider yourself a secular Jew?
- Do you make your own Jewish decisions about Jewish law, Jewish tradition, and Jewish customs? If so, how do your decisions differ from those of your family, friends or other synagogues you have experienced?
- Detail the differences, if any, between “Jewishness” and “Judaism.”
- Before coming to this text, were you aware that there was a long history of secular Judaism? How did your own family’s story intersect with this history? For example, were there Yiddish speakers in your family; were your family members part of secular Jewish organizations such as Workmen’s Circle/Arbeterring or The Bund; did your family experience a move from being religiously observant to being less observant?
- What values do you adhere to and advocate in connection with your Judaism: Continuity? Choice? Creativity? Comfort?
- Before coming to this text, were you aware that there was an organized Jewish option for Jews who base their identity on Jewish culture and/or do not believe in God?

## **Chapter 1: The Jewish Experience**

While humanistic conclusions about life and the universe can derive from philosophical inquiry and reason, Humanistic Judaism bases its non-theistic conclusions, values and expressions on its understanding of the Jewish historical experience. The movement's creative response to traditional liturgy, its emphasis on human rights, and its celebration of human power, freedom and responsibility all find roots and justification in the Jewish journey.

*Sherwin Wine, "Jewish History—Our Humanist Perspective" (pp. 8-9)*

This ceremonial Shabbat reading by Humanistic Judaism founding thinker Rabbi Sherwin Wine contrasts traditional understandings of Jewish history with a Humanistic approach which not only makes sense of the past but also motivates positive action in the present.

- What might have been psychological or emotional motivations for past Jewish ideas that justified Jewish suffering through ideas like "the chosen people" and "a loving god"? How can a Humanistic approach meet those needs with different, non-theistic answers?
- Which do you find more inspirational, Wine's humanistic response to the history of Jewish suffering or his use of this understanding to motivate positive human action today? Or is Wine's dichotomy of "traditional Judaism vs. Humanistic Judaism" too simplistic for you?

## Chapter 2: The God Question

Chapter 2 addresses the issue of God. In this book, God is capitalized when it refers to the usage that other denominations or traditional Jewish sources use, even if there are varying understandings of the concept. Humanistic Jews use “god,” as a concept created by human beings and a literary character in Jewish texts. This chapter considers belief or disbelief in God (often phrased as theism or atheism) as well as language used to convey the notion or image of God in liturgy and as metaphor. It tackles the question head on of how one can be Jewish without belief in a personal, interventionist God, or any “god” at all.

- Consider your own beliefs. Would you identify as a person who believes in God or who does not believe in God? Are you able to comfortably express your identity to others?
- How do you define “God?”
- Do you agree or disagree with the idea that one can be Jewish if one doesn’t believe in God? Explain.

*Sherwin Wine, “Judaism without God” pp. (13-17)*

In this article, Wine explains why god language was taken out of Humanistic Judaism rather than being definitionally reframed into a new concept that is more acceptable to modern sensibilities than “lord” or “king.” Words have meaning and those meanings should be accepted.

- He lists several reasons for the use of God language and why they are inappropriate for Humanistic Judaism. Do you agree with Wine’s characterization of these rationalizations to retain God language? Do you agree with his responses as to why they are inappropriate for Humanistic Judaism? Explain.
- Wine concludes that “Jews, as Jews and as individuals, are ultimately responsible for their own ‘fates’.” (p. 17) Does Jewish history support this idea? Explain.

*Yaakov Malkin, “God as a Literary Figure” (pp.18-21)*

Central to Humanistic Judaism and secular Jewish culture is the idea that “god” is a literary creation, man-made, with human attributes. In other words, God did not create mankind; mankind created “god.” This approach allows Jews to relate to “god” as any other literary character in any other literary genre throughout history. This character has no greater power in the world or in individual lives than any other character.

- Have you read Bible stories? If so, what do you take away from them when the character “god” is involved in the story? If not, why do you think that is?
- Why have these stories lasted and been so influential throughout history?
- Do you think Humanistic Judaism should “edit out” the character of “god,” or is there historical, literary and religious value to its retention?

## Chapter 3: Positive Humanism

Humanistic Jews celebrate and articulate what they positively believe, rather than focus on doubt and denial. Chapter 3 demonstrates how this positive approach to one's identity helps create a sense of meaning, comfort, and purpose beyond a negative secularism.

- What are some of your core beliefs and values about humanity, society, and the universe? How might you reframe negative statements into positive affirmations?

*Sherwin Wine, "Believing Is Better than Non-Believing" (pp. 23-26)*

This essay is one of Wine's most valued within the movement because of its clear expression of the importance of positive beliefs and values.

- Are there particular beliefs or values you hold that you generally express as an "unbeliever," in Wine's phrase? (p.24) Are there times that a negative expression might be important, valuable, or useful?
- Which of Wine's recommendations for "believers" do you find the most meaningful? Are there any with which you disagree?
- Wine claims that believers are stronger when they find others who share their beliefs. Yet the more explicitly an organization articulates its required beliefs, the greater the risk of argument, schism, and rejection by those who may agree with 90% of the program. How can Humanistic Jewish communities find the proper balance of clear beliefs and flexibility/inclusion?

*Greg Epstein, "What is Humanism?" (p. 27)*

How do Humanistic Jews better control their lives, and where do they find comfort when they cannot?

Rabbi Greg Epstein, the Humanist Chaplain at Harvard and MIT, articulates humanist responses to these basic human needs.

- Do you agree with Epstein's summary of humanism as "being good without God)?" (p.27) How might you summarize humanism or Humanistic Judaism in one or two sentences?
- Epstein offers several examples of moments when connection to community can provide both meaning and support. While he describes philosophical community, for Humanistic Jews a sense of Jewish community can also address those needs. Have you experienced this in your life?
- What are some of the implications of "Humanists believe in life *before* death" (p. 27)

*Peter Schweitzer, "Purpose" (pp. 28-29)*

Finding a strong sense of meaning and purpose in life can be challenging without a cosmic "purposer."

Rabbi Peter Schweitzer articulates the flip side of that challenge: the freedom to define for oneself how to live one's best life.

- Schweitzer provides a few options of "mantras" (p. 29) that could provide secular inspiration for daily life. Which of his examples speaks to you the most? Do you have similar sayings that inspire you?
- This essay was originally a High Holiday sermon, and Schweitzer connects the search for personal meaning to the meaning of those holidays to Humanistic Jews. Is there a particular time of year or moment in your life that you found or find particularly meaningful?

## Chapter 4: Ethics

Humanistic Judaism declares that one can be good without a god. In the absence of divine revelation, intervention or commands, justice and ethical action must come from human minds and hands. While there are other formulations of secular ethics, Humanistic Jewish ethics, as explained in chapter 4, “respond specifically to the Jewish people’s cultural heritage/historical experience.” (p. 31)

- Do you think that “secular ethics” is an oxymoron? Must one have a belief in god to be a good person? More specifically, must one have a belief in god to be a good Jew? Explain.
- With responsibility comes choices, and conversely with choices comes responsibility. What choices do you make and to what sources do you turn when making ethical decisions?

*Daniel Friedman, “After Halakha, What?” (pp. 33-36)*

Rabbi Daniel Friedman’s article asks the inevitable question in formulating Humanistic Jewish ethics: after, or without, Jewish law (*halakha*) as the guiding approach, what replaces it? He sets forth five principles or rules of behavior. (pp. 34-35)

- Do you agree with these principles? What rules or principles of your own would you add? Which would you delete? Explain.
- The foundational method for determining ethical behavior according to Friedman is the use of reason. (p. 34) Is this the only method or do you find other considerations also useful? Explain.
- The essay was written in 1996. Do ethics change over time? If so, how?

*Adam Chalom, “Are There Jewish Values?” (pp. 37-41)*

The title of this article refers to the common Jewish practice of claiming positive values as Jewish because historically Jews have valued them. Apart from the tautological underpinnings of this argument, Chalom reminds us that our tradition has often set forth and even cherished objectionable values at times; and that positive values are not unique to Judaism.

- How do you answer the title question? What is the basis for your answer? What values do you consider Jewish? Can values be both Jewish and also belong to other cultures? Explain.
- In seeking so-called Jewish values, Chalom suggests three routes: read the traditional sources, study the lived experience of the Jewish people and study Jewish history to see what lessons it can teach. (pp. 40-41) Are there other routes?

*Amos Oz, "Jews Argue with God" (pp. 42-44)*

Amos Oz is the only contributor to this chapter who is not a rabbi. His perspective as a secular Jew living a secularly Jewish life offers a different lived perspective. In this essay, he highlights the tradition of arguing with religious authority as genuinely Jewish and a significant component of Jewish culture.

- Oz notes that "we too are heirs to Jewish culture—not sole heirs, but legitimate heirs." (p. 44) Do you agree that the Jewish inheritance is equally open to a wide spectrum of Jews? Who decides?
- Do you think that arguing with tradition to the point of rejecting some or many parts of it is a worthwhile exercise? If so, are you willing to accept the consequences of these arguments, such as jettisoning parts of tradition for the sake of integrity? Explain.

*Denise Handlarski, "Truth and Reconciliation on Race" (pp. 45-46)*

Ethics do not exist in a vacuum; they must be acted upon and applied to real world situations. Handlarski writes of the Jewish experience as an oppressed minority and, at times, as an oppressor majority.

- Do you agree that both are reflective of the Jewish historical experience? Do Jews have a special obligation because of their historical experience as the outsider to work for equality and justice? Should they?
- Identify other situations where Jews generally and Humanistic Jews in particular should exercise their individual and collective voices to further the cause of a more just world.

## **Chapter 5: Spirituality**

Inspiration is not limited to supernatural sources. Humanistic Jews find inspiration through a natural transcendence beyond their individuality; nature, cultural inheritance, community, and ritual are all rich sources for a Humanistic spirituality. Art, beauty, music, meditation: different Humanistic Jews make different choices based on temperament and personal preference, and they may not agree even on the use of the word "spirituality" to describe the emotional and psychological uplift they experience.

- Do you feel comfortable using the word "spirituality" for these experiences? Why or why not?
- What are other examples of experiences or activities that meet your needs for inspiration?

*Yaakov Malkin, "What Makes the Secular Need Spirituality" (pp. 49-52)*

The last few generations have seen a rapid growth in "spirituality seekers," even among secular people. Yaakov Malkin, a founding thinker of Secular Humanistic Judaism in Israel, describes both the origins of this phenomenon in psychology and sociology and also recommends paths to meet those abiding needs.

- Why have secular people continued to seek spiritual experiences? Where have they looked, and what does Malkin recommend?
- Do you agree with Malkin's connection of secular spirituality to happiness? (p.51) Why or why not?
- According to Malkin, how does connection with a community (both present and past) meet the spiritual needs of secular people? (p.51)

*Judith Seid, "A Secular Spirituality" (pp. 53-55)*

While early secular Judaisms and Jews may have rejected "spirituality" as inherently supernatural, contemporary Secular and Humanistic Jews are open to inspiration consistent with their beliefs and identities. Rabbi Judith Seid expands on the many options for Secular and Humanistic Jews who pursue spiritual experience.

- Seid offers three descriptions of the secular spiritual experience (Rosenfeld, Wine, Rowens). (pp. 53-54) Which resonates the most with you, and why?
- What does Seid mean by "congruence," (p. 54) and how do her examples of secular spiritual experience demonstrate it? Which experiences sound most attractive or meaningful for you to experience?

*Terry Toll, "Lighting Candles" (pp. 56-57)*

Individual Jews perform Jewish rituals for many reasons beyond a belief in divine commandment. Terry Toll articulates several positive reasons for lighting candles in Humanistic Jewish life that reflect the movement's approach to reclaiming "religious" Jewish practice for non-theistic Jews.

- Toll begins her essay by listing some Jewish occasions for lighting candles. (p. 56) Which Jewish candle lighting context is most meaningful to you, and why?
- Toll offers several interpretations of the symbolism, resonance, and imagery of candlelight. Which speaks to you the most, and why?

*Humanistic Judaism Facebook Discussion on Kippot (pp. 59-64)*

If the standard for Humanistic Jewish ritual performance is personal meaning, different Humanistic Jews will make different choices. A spirited dialogue in the Humanistic Judaism Discussion Facebook group exemplified the many variables involved in these decisions, including cultural and personal resonance, philosophical consistency, public perception, and the difference between individual choice and community norms.

- What is the reasoning given in the original *The Guide to Humanistic Judaism* passage for rejecting Humanistic Jews wearing *kippot*? (p. 59) Is that compelling to you, or not, and why?
- What are some of the reasons offered by those who choose to wear them today? Are any of those compelling to you, and why or why not?
- What take-aways does this conversation offer for community norms, individual practice, and respect for diverse choices?

## **Chapter 6: Jewish Self-Definition**

Humanistic Judaism relies on individuals becoming Jewish to self-identify as such rather than having that status bestowed by an outside entity or authority. (p. 69) One is Jewish if one identifies with the collective historic experience of the Jewish people; in short, if someone says they are Jewish, they are.

- Do you agree with this approach? Explain.
- Do you think this approach sets appropriate boundaries for who is Jewish? If not, why not?

*Sherwin Wine, "Kinship" (pp. 73-75)*

Wine founded Humanistic Judaism on the twin pillars of the philosophy of humanism and ethnic/cultural Judaism. This required a clear understanding of Jewish identity. Wine describes this as "kinship," a concept broad enough to expand beyond religion, theology and ritual; it is even beyond parentage and partners.

- Is "kinship" an apt description of Jewish identity? Why or why not?
- Is there another descriptor that you think better fits the Jewish experience and that is broad enough to include all those who are Jewish?
- Should notions such as vulnerability, shared danger, victimhood, blood, and ancestry be a part of the classification of Jewish identity? Why or why not?

*International Federation of Secular Humanistic Jews, "Statement on 'Who is a Jew?'" (pp. 77-78)*

The IFSHJ issued a statement in 1986 addressing "Who is a Jew?" The statement continues to be used today in Humanistic Judaism. The very question likewise continues to be debated to this day.

- Do you agree that a broad view of Jewish identity is a positive value? Why or why not?
- Is Jewish identity best served when it exceeds the limitations of a religious definition? Why or why not?
- How would you write the resolution?

*Association of Humanistic Rabbis, "Statement on Conversion/Adoption" (pp. 79-80)*

If Jewish identity is self-determined and dependent on the individual, and Humanistic Judaism also values the importance of community, then the idea that a person both "adopts" Humanistic Judaism and is also adopted into a community meets both those needs. Adoption is better suited to an anti-authoritarian form of Judaism.

- In what ways is Humanistic Judaism anti-authoritarian?
- Can an individual make decisions about their identity independent of an external body confirming that decision? Why or why not?
- Do you think that "adoption" is the appropriate language to describe this decision of self-identifying as Jewish? Why or why not? Should a fixed period and curriculum of study be required?



*Karen Levy, "Changing Perceptions, Changing Realities" (pp. 82-85)*

Rabbi Karen Levy addresses the question of whether Humanistic Judaism should be considered a religion or something else. She concludes that it must be seen as a religious movement to be perceived as a legitimate source of Jewish spirituality, ceremonies and teaching. She suggests that we must work within the confines of common definitions using words that have well-recognized meanings.

- Do you consider Humanistic Judaism a religion or something else? Explain.
- Do you think that it is an oxymoron to be both secular and a religion? Can there be a secular religion? Explain.

## **Chapter 7: Welcoming and Inclusion**

Humanistic Judaism was ahead of the curve when it came to accepting and celebrating diverse Jewish families, including the intermarried. A diverse American Jewish community that accepts many Jewish alternatives is stronger for all.

- Have you had a profound welcoming experience in a Jewish community? Have you ever felt strongly rejected?
- Why is a diverse American Jewish community a positive asset for Jewish survival and thriving?

*Tamara Kolton, "Healing the Jewish People Through Pluralism" (pp. 89-90)*

Rabbi Tamara Kolton, the first Humanistic rabbi ordained by the International Institute for Secular Humanistic Judaism, represented a new generation in Humanistic Jewish leadership that defined itself in relationship (rather than opposition) to the organized Jewish community. This essay expresses the positive value of accepting diverse Jewish answers.

- What are some of the strongest challenges to acceptance that Humanistic Judaism and Humanistic Jews face from other Jewish communities?
- What risks are produced by Humanistic Jews "delegitimizing" other Jewish denominations?
- How can Humanistic Jews assert their own legitimacy even as they disagree with core beliefs and practices of other Jews?

*Jeffrey Falick, "Dancing at Two Weddings" (pp. 91-92)*

Humanistic Judaism's acceptance of multiple identities (multi-heritage and multi-racial Jews being "Jewish AND" rather than only "Jewish OR") is also reflected in its balance of particular Jewish and universal humanist identities. Rabbi Jeffrey Falick describes this dance between the Jewish people and all humanity as another example of the historical Jewish dilemma between looking inward and being open to the outside world.

- What problems does Falick identify with John Lennon's secular anthem "Imagine"? (pp. 91-92) Do you agree with Falick's objections to its use in a Humanistic Jewish context?
- Can we have the best of both worlds by connecting with our Jewish roots (inherited or adopted) while also living out universal Humanist values? Have you had experiences where your Jewishness conflicted with your Humanism, or vice versa?

Miriam Jerris, *“Gate Openers: Reaching Out to the Next Generation of Children from Inter-marriage”* (pp. 94-97)

Since its founding, Humanistic Judaism has celebrated intermarriage ceremonies and families for both the practical benefits of outreach and the moral principle that free marriage for love is a positive good. Rabbi Miriam Jerris, one of a number of intermarried Humanistic rabbis, expresses the importance of being a “gate opener” rather than a “gatekeeper” of Jewish ceremony and community.

- According to Jerris, why does rabbinic rejection of intermarrying couples not work to prevent intermarriage? (pp. 94-95) Why is a Humanistic Jewish welcoming approach more effective for long-term Jewish thriving?
- What statistics and analysis does Jerris present to undermine conventional wisdom on intermarriage? Which do you find the most compelling?

*Society for Humanistic Judaism, “Radical Inclusion”* (p. 98)

As with intermarriage, celebrating Jewish diversity is both practical outreach and philosophical consistency for Humanistic Judaism. The national Society for Humanistic Judaism’s statement of Radical Inclusion expresses both of these values.

- How does this statement claim that its inclusion is in fact part of Jewish tradition? Do you agree with that claim?
- How does the belief that Jewish people (rather than a god) created and re-create Judaism support this radical inclusion?

## **Chapter 8: Israel/Zionism and Diaspora**

The relationship between American Jews and the State of Israel is complex, at times inconsistent and even contradictory. Humanistic Judaism is no different in this regard than other denominations of Judaism. Yet, when one’s Jewish identity is based on Jewish culture, there is much to be learned from and shared with secular Israelis and Israeli culture. Without a religious tie to Israel as the biblically “Promised Land,” the cultural bond is crucial.

- What are your feelings about Israel? How does Israel’s security affect those feelings?
- Can one be a Humanistic Jew who lives outside of Israel and a Zionist? Where do the values of each intersect and where might they conflict?

*Sherwin Wine, “Being a Secular Humanistic Jew in the Diaspora”* (pp. 102-105)

The very word “diaspora” implies a homeland from which one is dispersed to other geographical locations, sometimes by choice, sometimes by force of circumstances. Wine’s thesis in this article is that “we are a world people.” (p. 102) If that is not the case, he argues, then every Jewish community not based in Israel is inferior and cannot grow. Judaism does not equal what is sometimes called “Israelism.”

- How do you identify as a Jew in relationship to Israel? What is your “homeland?” Do you consider yourself part of a diaspora? If so, what diaspora is it?
- What does it mean to be part of a world people?

*Shulamit Aloni, "One Hundred Years of Zionism, Fifty Years of Statehood" (pp. 106-110)*

Aloni represents the voice of secular Israelis, identifying the tension between being a Jewish state and being a democratic state. The lack of an Israeli constitution has allowed the country's shift from purely democratic concerns and to permit "religious ethnocentrism" to seep into every aspect of an Israeli's life, whether such a person is religious or not. She urges a return to democratic principles in order to be a "normal sovereign state [that] develop[s] its own culture and language, tak[es] care of its citizens, and liv[es] in peace and cooperation with its neighbors and the rest of the world." (p. 109)

- Do you agree that Israel has left its secular and democratic foundations behind in favor of becoming a religious state? What evidence do you have for your position?
- Is your opinion of Israel dependent on its balance between religious and secular values? Explain.
- Israel is one of several nations organized around particular ethnic cultures, with laws of ethnic return, and emphasizing the majority's language, national symbols, and history. Is such a structure compatible with democratic values or inherently suspect? Why or why not?

*Tzemah Yoreh, "Constructive Conversations About Israel" (pp. 111-113)*

Rabbi Tzemah Yoreh has faced the challenge of engaging in constructive conversations about Israel from the perspective of someone raised in a religious Zionist household, has lived in Israel, was ordained as a Humanistic rabbi, and leads a Humanistic Jewish congregation. He sees that Israel is not only a hot button issue but often is the untouchable third rail in Jewish life, making meaningful dialogue all but impossible. Jews of all denominations, including Humanistic Jews, too often dig in and refuse to truly hear opposing viewpoints. Here he offers a framework for starting the discussion.

- Have you found yourself in the kinds of conversations that Yoreh describes, where "the other side" disparages, refuses to take you seriously, and even expresses hatred toward you? When have these conversations occurred?
- Explain the value in considering multiple perspectives on Israel. What paths can be used to achieve this goal?
- What would be your "red lines" beyond which conversation about Israel is no longer possible, productive or advisable?

## **Chapter 9: Cultural Judaism**

Many American Jews, including Humanistic Jews, define their Jewish identity as cultural. If one defines one's Judaism as culture, then traditional religious texts like the Bible and Talmud are Jewish literature; and Jewish literature continues to be created in many languages and genres. Jewish culture includes a wider "canon" of food, music, art, movies, and more that can also reflect interactions with other cultures. A cultural definition of "Jewish practice" includes everything from holiday services to concerts, book clubs, and cooking. Most important, a Humanistic Judaism that is cultural can be flexible, multifaceted, diverse, and creative rather than focused on rules and restrictions.

- What aspects or genres of Jewish culture do you find most meaningful? Can you recall/share an experience of Jewish culture outside of a religious service that was particularly memorable?
- What is a new aspect of Jewish culture you've learned about or experienced in the past few years? Why are new Jewish cultural experiences important?
- Do you see a problem with Jews celebrating Jewish cultures that are not part of their personal heritage (e.g., Ashkenazi Jews celebrating Ethiopian Beta Israel holidays like Sigd)? Or is that concern irrelevant if Jewish identity is an extended kinship (see ch. 6)?

*Amos Oz, "A Full Cart or an Empty One? Thoughts on Jewish Culture" (pp. 124-125)*

Israeli author and intellectual Amos Oz rejects the claim that Jewish culture outside of the synagogue is lesser, an "empty cart" compared to traditional religious Judaism. Rather, Oz sees a broad understanding of Jewish culture, including its rebels and heretics, as just as viable to preserve and continue a living tradition.

- How does Oz differentiate the role of a museum curator from an inheritor in his claim to be a legitimate heir to Jewish tradition? (p. 125) Do you agree with this metaphor, or is it inaccurate?
- How does Oz celebrate the heretic and the rebel as part of a living Jewish tradition?

*Yehuda Bauer, "Judaism is..." (p. 126)*

Holocaust scholar Yehuda Bauer provides a verbally concise yet conceptually expansive description of the wide varieties of Jewish cultural expression. By claiming them as elements of "Judaism," by extension Bauer justifies basing Humanistic Judaism on a cultural Jewish identity.

- Why does Bauer claim that "Judaism" should not be limited to "the religious beliefs of Jews." Do you find his arguments compelling?
- Do you agree with Bauer's central claim that these elements of Jewish culture should be considered as integral parts of "Judaism"? Why or why not?

*Daniel Friedman, "Recovering Our Stories" ( pp. 127-129)*

If the Bible was, in fact, written by people, then it is myth, legend, and literature rather than revealed scripture. As Rabbi Daniel Friedman argues, this makes it simultaneously less authoritative and even more important for Humanistic Jews to study as the starting point for the Jewish cultural imagination.

- Do you feel that Bible stories can be useful for Humanistic Jews, young and old, to explore their own values, beliefs, and feelings? Why or why not?
- Is treating the Hebrew god as a character in a biblical story an appropriate way for Humanistic Jews to deal with the issue? What might be some of the challenges to doing so, particularly in youth education?

*Sivan Malkin Maas, "Cultural Zionism: Reclaiming Convention" ( pp.130-133)*

Rabbi Sivan Maas, the first ordained Israeli Secular Humanistic rabbi, offers the provocative claim that choosing from Jewish tradition what is most meaningful is itself a venerable Jewish tradition. She claims that a cultural Judaism is conventional, traditional, and the mainstream of Jewish life.

- How does Maas use examples from Zionism, Israeli history, and Hebrew to support her claim that reclaiming traditional images and terms is itself part of Jewish tradition? Do you agree?
- Do you agree that the Passover *haggadah* is a good example of both evolving Jewish culture and the "tradition" of rabbis changing Judaism (see Schweitzer, ch. 12)?

## **Chapter 10: A Cultural Jewish Canon**

Modernity marks a shift from religious texts to secular ones. The cultural Jewish canon has expanded beyond male Ashkenazi creators to include works by women, Jews of color, Sephardim, and Mizrahi Jews, as well as different forms of media. To be meaningful to a Humanistic Jew, a cultural Jewish canon must be fluid, not fixed. Yet this is the antithesis to the very notion of a canon. Boundaries are necessary in order to give shape and form to the contents, but they cannot be so porous that the very idea of a canon becomes meaningless.

- Explain how a Jewish canon can be expanded to accurately reflect the increasing diversity of the ongoing historic Jewish experience.
- Are there any limits to what can be part of a Jewish canon?

*Julian Levinson, "People of the (Secular) Book" (pp. 137-140)*

Julian Levinson maintains that there is "little agreement" as to how to define the content of secular Jewish culture. (p. 137) Using literature as one paradigm, he raises the issue of what the boundaries are or should be to qualify as Jewish literature: Must it be written by a Jewish author? Must it have a Jewish content? Must it be about Jews? What about texts that cross various Jewish lines such as secular poetry used in liturgy or religious texts used directly or by allusion in secular works?

- How would you answer Levinson's questions?
- Can his paradigm be applied to other forms of Jewish culture? Why or why not?
- Does the Jewish community need a consensus on what counts as Jewish culture? Why or why not?

*Jodi Kornfeld, "Of Course There's Jewish Art!"* (pp. 140-144)

Similar definitional questions (artist? content?) are raised by Rabbi Jodi Kornfeld in the realm of Jewish art, but with the added layer of needing to address whether there is even such a thing as Jewish art given the perceived constraints of the Second Commandment against idolatry. The answer is that there is and always has been Jewish art from biblical times, through the medieval period and onto the modern era.

- How would you define Jewish art?
- Why has Jewish art been given a lesser recognized place in the cultural Jewish canon than the written word?
- Has seeing a particular work of Jewish visual art ever been meaningful to you, and if so, what was the work of art and when/where did you see it?

*Jonathan Friedmann, "Music By, For, As Humanistic Jews"* (pp. 145-148)

Music plays an important part in creating meaningful rituals, liturgy and celebrations for Humanistic Jews. Cantor Jonathan Friedmann identifies "seven main sources of music for Humanistic Jewish gatherings" including Israeli music, Broadway musicals songs, and songs written specifically for the movement. (p. 147)

- Do you think these sources are of equal weight, or of equal importance to you? Why or why not?
- How do these sources differ from other Jewish denominations' use of music?
- What are some of your favorite Jewish songs, and why?

This chapter includes three examples of modern literature in various genres - short story, memoir and novel. The authors are all Jewish, as is the subject matter. Jewish literature can act as a mirror for the Jewish experience broadly or for one's own Jewish experience personally.

- After reading the excerpts, are you more or less inclined to read the entire work from which they came? Why or why not?
- Do your own reading preferences purposefully include modern Jewish literature? What are some of your favorite Jewish books, and why?

*Nathan Englander, "What We Talk About When We Talk About Anne Frank"* (pp. 148-150)

- Do you recognize yourself in Englander's excerpt? In what ways?
- Have you engaged in a version of the debate described between the two couples? If so, when and with whom?

*Etgar Keret, "My Lamented Sister" (pp. 150-152)*

- Does family matter more than religious doctrine? To what lengths would you go to maintain a relationship with someone who has become more traditional if you are not?
- Do you agree that more liberal forms of Judaism are more tolerant and accommodating of Orthodoxy? If so, in what ways? Is the reverse true?

*Nicole Krauss, "Adding to the Jewish Story" (pp. 152-154)*

- Do you agree that a Jewish writer is inevitably influenced by "echoes of two thousand years of Jewish history" as Krause writes? (p. 153) Explain.
- Viewing Jewish texts all the way back to the Bible as literature, how can you determine the author's agenda, intent and message? In other words, does modern literary criticism apply to even ancient Jewish texts? Explain.

## **Chapter 11: Living Humanistic Judaism**

Philosophy, values, and identity are reflected in life choices and important events. Humanistic Judaism is not just abstract theory; it is lived through Jewish life: holidays, education, life cycle celebrations. At the same time, every modern liberal Judaism must be able to answer the basic value proposition of continuing Jewish identity and creating new expressions. It is not simply a question of "why be Jewish" or "what can I do for Judaism;" it is also appropriate to want to know "what can Humanistic Judaism do for me, and for the world?"

- Which of the examples of creative responses to Jewish holiday or life cycle observances described in the introduction to this chapter strike you as the most interesting? (pp. 158-159)

*Eva Goldfinger, "Is Judaism Worth Preserving?" (pp. 162-163)*

In a world of ever-increasing change, everyone and everything faces choices about what to keep and what to discard. For Judaism to be worth preserving, Rabbi Eva Goldfinger argues, it must keep the best of the past while being responsive to the present. The tradition of change is our tradition (see Maas, ch. 9).

- Why do you think some Jews choose to no longer be Jewish? Could Humanistic Judaism answer their concerns?
- What does Goldfinger recommend to keep Judaism vibrant and relevant today and tomorrow? Do you agree with her recommendations? (p. 163)

*Society for Humanistic Judaism Statement of Values* (pp. 164-165)

Humanistic Judaism contains a paradox: it is a movement claiming shared values and beliefs that also encourages individuals to be in charge of their own lives and make up their own minds. Any attempt to articulate what Humanistic Jews share, then, will balance positive beliefs and actions with autonomy and choice. This statement of values from the national Society for Humanistic Judaism strives to articulate a consensus for the movement on both identity and action.

- What are the potential benefits and drawbacks of having explicit statements defining identity, values, and actions for Humanistic Jews?
- Which of the items listed in the statement (either the selection printed or the complete statement at <https://shj.org/about-shj/mission-and-vision/>) do you find most interesting? Are any of them problematic?

## **Chapter 12: Liturgy**

The word “liturgy” is often associated with formal worship services. Humanistic Judaism does not engage in worship yet nonetheless has developed a body of liturgy used when Humanistic Jews celebrate holidays and life cycle events together. Humanistic Jewish liturgy centers the natural world and the power of people to do good. There is no standard *siddur* or prayer book; instead, liturgies are produced by individual Humanistic Jewish communities and their lay or rabbinic leadership. This liturgy also adheres to the values of integrity and consistency by reflecting the central tenets of Humanistic Judaism in both English and Hebrew (or any other Jewish language).

- Is it useful to have many varieties of liturgies instead of a set *siddur*? Why or why not?
- Do you agree that creativity in liturgy is a positive thing? Explain.

*Marcia Falk, “Honoring Torah”* (pp. 170-171)

Marcia Falk is a liturgist, poet and feminist. She invites her readers to use the liturgy she has written both as individuals and in community. This excerpt raises a series of questions about wrestling with the tradition, even that which is difficult and painful, including questioning who was included, who was left out, and what the place of Torah should be today.

- How would you answer her questions? Explain.
- How do Falk’s multiple identities (woman, feminist, poet, etc.) inform her liturgy?
- Would this passage be appropriate to include in Humanistic Jewish liturgy? Why or why not?



Adam Chalom, “*Our Quarterback, Our King: Two Problems with Liberal Theology*” (pp. 172-175)

It is a movement axiom that one says what one believes and believes what one says, in any Jewish language. In this essay, Chalom explains why philosophical consistency is a value to be prioritized over continuity with tradition, and that this valuation distinguishes Humanistic Judaism from other liberal theologies.

- Which is of greater importance to you - philosophical consistency or continuity with tradition? Explain.
- What do you do when you find yourself at another denomination’s service that uses language or ritual practices you otherwise would not say or do? Do you participate or just listen? Why?

Adam Chalom, Jodi Kornfeld, Jeremy Kridel, Peter Schweitzer, Frank Tamburello, “*Liturgical Readings*” (pp. 176-179)

The liturgical readings included are examples of those written by Humanistic Jewish rabbis and used in Humanistic Jewish communities.

- How do you respond to these readings? Are they more or less meaningful to you than traditional ones? Explain.
- Would reading these passages in Hebrew as well as English be meaningful? Why or why not?

Yehuda Amichai, “*A Man Doesn’t Have Time*” and “*The Waters Cannot Return in Repentance*” (pp. 180-181)

The two Amichai poems included in this volume are meant to be examples and not definitive. They demonstrate the use of poetry as liturgical readings. Unlike the Reform *siddur* which includes additional readings such as Amichai poems in the margins of *Mishkan T’filah*, Humanistic Jewish liturgies put them at the center.

- How does the inclusion of secular poetry change the nature of a service?
- Do you think that for liturgical purposes, the author should be Jewish? Why or why not?

Peter Schweitzer, “*The Passover Symbols*” (pp. 182-184)

There are more versions of the Passover Haggadah than any other Jewish book. *The Liberated Haggadah* is a Humanistic Jewish example. In this excerpt, Schweitzer has taken the portion explaining the meaning of the Passover symbols and added further modern interpretation as well as a new symbol.

- Do you make changes to your own Passover celebration to include new symbols? If so, what are they and how do you incorporate them into the seder?
- How would you accommodate a seder attended by both Humanistic and non-Humanistic Jews, particularly within a single family?

## Chapter 13: Life Cycle

Every culture, including Judaism, marks important moments of birth, coming of age, partnership, and death. These ceremonies express and embody both cultural inheritance and philosophic values and beliefs. Humanistic Jewish celebrations of life reflect the meeting points of three factors: Jewish culture and heritage, Humanistic beliefs and values, and the individuals and families involved. The creative approach required to connect with all three can produce moving experiences for all.

- If you have experienced Jewish life cycle celebrations (yourself, your family, or as an observer), which did you find the most meaningful, and why?
- Which Jewish life cycle celebration do you think would be the most challenging to adapt for Humanistic Jewish life? Which would be the most interesting?

*Leadership Conference of Secular and Humanistic Jews, "Statement on Circumcision and Jewish Identity" (p.189)*

The predominant Jewish ritual for welcoming a child is infant circumcision (for boys) and the conferring of a name (for all genders). If circumcision is seen as a cultural inheritance rather than religious obligation, as the Leadership Conference of Secular Humanistic Jews (LCSHJ) explains, then the ceremony will need to change for Humanistic Jews.

- What is implicitly radical in the statement that "Circumcision is not required for Jewish identity?"
- Do you feel it is enough to accept parental choice whether or not to circumcise their children, or should the LCSHJ have firmly rejected the practice?
- What would you include in a Humanistic Jewish baby-welcoming ceremony?

*Camila Grunberg, "The Meaning of Life" (pp. 190-192)*

Humanistic Judaism's creative response to Jewish inheritance is clearly demonstrated in its approach to b mitzvah celebrations by enabling students to choose Torah readings or Jewish-related topics that are relevant and meaningful to them. This passage from one b mitzvah speech reflects that approach.

- Do you think a Humanistic b mitzvah presentation should include a Torah reading, or can the options be wider? What is lost or gained with either approach?
- Do you agree with what Grunberg discusses regarding "the meaning of life?" Where have you found meaning in your life?

*Association of Humanistic Rabbis, “Ketubah Texts”* (pp. 193-194)

The marriage *ketubah* demonstrates how many contemporary liberal Jews (including but not limited to Humanistic Jews) take a creative response to their inheritance; they like the continuity of signing a ceremonial document while they prefer modern language regarding love, equality, and mutual support. These *ketubah* texts reflect a Humanistic approach to marriage that celebrates those values.

- If you signed a ketubah when getting married, did you choose the text? Was it a legalistic document or a work of art to be displayed?
- Which of these two texts speaks to you more strongly? Are there any phrases you would add, delete, or change?

*Sherwin Wine, “Sitting Shiva”* (pp. 195-196)

During a time of loss, the dignity and personal values of the bereaved are at least as important as respecting tradition, which means that Humanistic Jews may choose to not perform traditional practices, or to perform them in their own manner and with new meaning. This essay by Rabbi Sherwin Wine addresses the home *shiva* after a funeral, both its rituals and its overall experience.

- Have you experienced a home *shiva*, in your own family or at an acquaintance? What did you find meaningful about the experience, and was there anything you found off-putting?
- Does Wine’s description of the traditional *shiva* match your experiences? Where and how does it diverge?
- What practice(s) suggested by Wine would resonate the most with you?

## **Chapter 14: Humanistic Jewish Education**

Outwardly Humanistic Jewish supplemental schools resemble other denominations. The key distinguishing factors are the ongoing emphasis on evolving cultural Judaism, on Hebrew taught as a modern language rather than as the language of prayer, and on Humanistic Jewish philosophy.

- If you received a Jewish education, were these foci part of it? If you have children, were or are these foci part of your children’s Jewish education, if any?
- What is your reaction to the change in emphasis?

*Mitchell Silver, “Treasures of the Legacy”* (pp. 199-200)

Mitchell Silver asks the central question of why maintain and attempt to pass on a Jewish identity. He offers numerous reasons, including the argument that Jewish culture is valuable and can provide you with your place in your community and history.

- Do you agree with Silver’s answers to the question? How would you answer the question?
- Explain what Silver means by “Jewish history is the Torah of Secular Jewish education.” (p. 200)

Ruth Duskin Feldman, “Jewish Education and the Future” (pp. 202-204)

The issue Ruth Duskin Feldman identified in her 1991 essay remains today - given limited time and resources, what is the proper balance between general Jewish literacy and Humanistic Jewish philosophy and practice? By way of example, she offers the *Sh'ma*, noting that Humanistic Jewish children should not be reciting it but should know what it is. (p. 203)

- What do you think is the proper balance between general Jewish practice, ritual and liturgy not used by Humanistic Jews and Humanistic Jewish philosophy, practice, ritual and liturgy?
- If you did not receive a Humanistic Jewish education, were you taught anything about Humanistic Judaism? When did you learn of its existence?

Sherwin Wine, “The Torah” (pp. 205-208)

Humanistic Judaism considers the Torah to be a work of literature written by human authors with a particular theological agenda. Wine asks the logical next questions: “what is the place of the Torah in the educational and ceremonial life of the humanistic Jew?” (p. 205) and how should we use the Torah?

- How do you answer these questions? Do you agree with Wine’s answers?
- Are there any other texts that warrant the same consideration? If so, what are they?

Denise Handlarski, “The Torah, the Ten Commandments, and Us” (pp. 209-210)

Jews have created interpretations of Torah portions throughout history resulting in scores of *midrashim*. Humanistic Judaism’s approach influences the interpretations created by virtue of its understanding of the text as human-authored and myth, and not as an historical record. Handlarski uses the story of “The Golden Calf” to illustrate this approach.

- What Torah texts have you read, if any? If so, under what circumstances? How do you interpret the text?
- Should modern values be read back in time to the text, or should the text stand on its own and apply to modern issues only where applicable? For example, can feminist ideas be read into what today would be considered a patriarchal text? Explain.

Society for Humanistic Judaism Curriculum for Children’s Education, “Philosophy” (pp. 211-212)

Youth education is an encapsulation of the core values and priorities of any Jewish community. The Society for Humanistic Judaism offers thirteen philosophical underpinnings of a curriculum for children’s education.

- Do these principles clearly express the philosophy of Humanistic Jewish education? What would you add or delete? Explain.
- How might you fill out the principles with the practical, i.e. what would you include in the classroom experience that is unique to Humanistic Judaism; and what from Judaism more broadly considered?

## **Afterword**

*“Choosing to Live as a Secular Humanistic Jew,” Declaration of Eighth Biennial Conference of the International Federation of Secular Humanistic Jews (pp. 213-214)*

This declaration was created in the year 2000 to define the central values, commitments, and identity of Secular Humanistic Jews worldwide.

- What do you think of the statements included in this declaration? Is there anything you would rephrase, eliminate, or add?
- Have you chosen to identify as a Secular Humanistic Jew (before or after completing this book)? Why or why not?

## **Go Forth and Learn**

This section (pp. 215-222) includes material that expands and extends the themes of this book in a variety of media. In looking over the entries, consider the following:

- Which of the listings have you read, seen or heard?
- What novels, short stories, movies, art, tv shows, music, or scholarly works would you include to reflect contemporary Humanistic Judaism?
- Are the entries part of a wider Jewish canon of cultural material? Or is the concept of “canon” not appropriate for contemporary creative culture and Jewish diversity?
- Do you agree that a Jewish canon should extend beyond traditional sources and include all manner of creative, cultural output, or should it be limited to some core texts common to most (if not all) Jewish communities and ideologies?

## **Last Thoughts**

- Which chapter or specific selection resonated the most with you?
- What would you have liked to read more about?
- Were there any subjects related to Judaism, Humanism, or the intersection of the two that were not sufficiently addressed?