Humanistic Judaism

Civility, Certainty, Divinity, Diversity
by Rabbi Denise Handlarski

Enough is Enough
by Rabbi Jodi Kornfeld

The Meaning of Hanukkah for Humanistic Jews
by Natan Fuchs

The Akedah
by Eva R. Cohen

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This issue of Humanistic Judaism takes a look at some of the ethical guidance given in Secular Humanistic Jewish communities during the last High Holiday season.

“What would Ruth Bader Ginsburg do?” asks Rabbi Denise Handlarski in her “Civility, Certainty, Divinity, Diversity.” Rabbi Handlarski asks us to consider those concepts against the backdrop of U.S. Supreme Court Justice Ruth Bader Ginsburg’s life and her relationships with her legal and political opponents. While Justice Ginsburg was regularly at odds with others on the Court, including the late Justice Antonin Scalia, she also maintained friendships with her opponents. Rabbi Handlarski teases out some of the lessons we can learn from Justice Ginsburg’s experiences.

When is it enough? Rabbi Jodi Kornfeld takes a close look at the story of Jacob and Esau and, reading against the grain, finds that Esau is a (perhaps) surprising role model. Jacob is supposed to be the hero in the biblical narrative, and Esau would come to be associated with Israel’s historical foes. Yet it is Esau, Rabbi Kornfeld points out, who has the most to forgive in the Torah’s narrative, and who does so without hesitation and with gratitude. There is much, Rabbi Kornfeld reminds us, to be learned by looking at the shadow side of biblical narratives.

Eva Cohen takes a look at the power dynamics of the story of Abraham and Isaac. What bothers us most about the story of Abraham’s near-sacrifice of his son, Isaac? Cohen says that it’s not just a religious question: the story portrays a shocking incident of child abuse and of unquestioning submission to patriarchal power, and reminds us that our humanism demands that we challenge injustice and efforts at dominating others.

This issue also features articles on Hanukkah and the recent appointment of Brett Kavanaugh to the U.S. Supreme Court seat vacated by now-retired Justice Anthony Kennedy. Natan Fuchs looks at Hanukkah’s real history and how it has been portrayed throughout Jewish history, and finds value in the holiday even when the stories associated with it are untrue. Rabbi Jeremy Kridel (the editor of this magazine), writing for Jews for a Secular Democracy, looks at the likely effect of Kavanaugh’s elevation to the Supreme Court and concludes that while the immediate outcomes of cases may not be much different from what they would have been under Justice Kennedy, the power of Kavanaugh’s words may endanger secular democracy in the United States for decades to come.

We also have news from around our movement, including stories about a major recognition for the work of one of Beth Chaverim’s educators; a trip to Israel by members of Kahal Chaverim in New Jersey; Boston’s Kahal B’raira’s many efforts to build a better world, and Machar’s work in the Washington, D.C., area to provide a welcoming home to a refugee family from the Democratic Republic of Congo.

J. M. K.
Humanistic Judaism

Written for Oraynu Congregation for Humanistic Judaism. This followed Stories of Transformation about Argentinian journalist Jacobo Timerman and Supreme Court Justice Ruth Bader Ginsburg.

At Rosh Hashanah we asked the question: can humanists be happy? (For those who weren’t there, the answer is yes or, at least, I hope so.) The impetus for such a question comes from the fact that as humanists, many of us have a natural inclination to be critically-minded. This is good—our world needs far more critical thinkers. However, we are sometimes too critical of ourselves and others. And then it can be not so good.

Honesty time: Have you thought someone—a political figure or someone in your life—to be one of the following in recent months: an idiot, completely without moral compass, unworthy of your time or interest, or less than human?

Here’s the thing: we are living in an incredibly polarized time politically and socially. And consider how this thinking is applied to “the other side” in many ways: a person is an “idiot” because they are a “left-wing snowflake” or a “right-wing ideologue.” A person lacks a moral compass because they can’t see that refugees need a safe place to land. Or they are without that moral compass because they can’t see the strain on resources that are already at capacity and the vulnerable people here who need support now. People are unworthy of our time or interest because they are in circumstances of their own making, poor because they live in the wrong communities, don’t pursue an education, or use drugs and alcohol. Or people are unworthy of our time or interest because they have no sensitivity towards exactly the kinds of people described in these terms, so why bother trying to engage? I’m sure none of us wishes to admit that we see others as less than human. That last one is tricky but we sometimes fall into that trap of dehumanizations unwittingly whether calling someone else “an animal,” referring to them as certain body parts—you know the ones I mean—or calling them a “basket of deplorables.”

I wish to avoid false equivalence here. I do believe sometimes ideas and actions are unjust and cruel. I’m not saying “everyone has a right to their opinion.” I’m saying everyone has their opinion, and we are more effective when we seek to understand that person and how they came to think in the way they do.

What we have is a bizarre turn where we are so convinced of our position and perspective, and the stakes are so, so high—literally to many of us matters of life and death—that we become very ugly towards each other.

What I love about the Ruth Bader Ginsburg story is not so much her fierce pursuit of justice, or her brilliant ability to articulate her dissensions in both powerful words and poignant fashion. I love those things, of course. What I love about her most of all, however, is her deep and close relationship with the late Justice Antonin Scalia, a political foe but a personal friend. To me this suggests more than her rise in the face of sexism, more than her astute legal mind, more than her awareness of the significance of her bench—it showcases her deep humanity. She is able to see the person behind the politics; she is able to retain her humanity and the view of her opponent’s humanity, even when fervently disagreeing. And the stakes are high. It is precisely because they are high that we need this focus on the whole person, on their humanity, on speaking to and even loving someone whose values you may find deplorable but whose human value is not in question.

I want to admit to you publicly on this day that we account for our souls and make public declarations of where we falter: I am terrible at this. I am not sure I could have dinner with Scalia. My own brother and I have certain discussion topics that we intentionally avoid so that we don’t try to throttle the other over dinner.
I have no-go zones that I simply will not discuss, debate, or, frankly, develop a personal connection with someone if they hold opposing views. I'm sure you have some of these red line issues as well. For some it's women's rights. For some it's Israel. For some it's climate change. I guarantee you two things: there are people in this room who disagree with you on one or more of these issues. And they are here for the same reason you are: to use this opportunity given to us each year to reflect, to pursue self-betterment, and to foster a more meaningful life.

If we could find a way to dialogue, even when we disagree, we could open our minds and hearts in ways that we can't accomplish just sitting and listening to the rabbi, engaging though she may be.

I've been working on this dialogue-across-difference thing. One of my red-line issues is being pro-choice. I so strongly disagree with the anti-choice perspective, finding it rooted in misogyny, religious fanaticism and fundamentalism, and basic scientific misinformation about issues of gestation. I will admit to having thought thoughts like “these people are idiots with no moral compass who are not worthy of my time who are (insert name of body part, or item from the basket of deplorables here).” I would either not engage with the anti-choice segment or, if I passed them with their graphic signs, for example, I might shout out an expletive or insult. I would never really engage.

Please understand, I still feel just as passionately and strongly about this issue and still, if I'm honest, know in my heart that I'm right. The challenge is that they know in their hearts that they're right too, even though our ideas are diametrically opposed. So, what to do?

I recently had the opportunity to try build and flex this dialogue-across-difference muscle when I posted publicly on social media my “top ten things to say to abortion protestors” and, unsurprisingly, received some comments that were from the anti-choice side. I resisted the urge to name-call, to dismiss. I engaged. There was one person in particular who said some things that were filled with contempt for women. I asked him to consider that contempt; I said I'm sure his heart was in the right place but to me these issues are about women's rights and autonomy, things I care passionately about. That's right—I used “I” messages instead of simply criticizing him and his point of view.

Do I think I got through to him? No. But often these discussions, especially when occurring in public, are not about the person on the other side of the argument. They are about the people watching from the sidelines, either looking for models who share their point of view, or who are open to being convinced by the opposing one. In being resolute in my argument, but respectful in my discussion, I affirmed his humanity and, importantly, my own. Part of what I was doing was saying “Hey, look. I'm a woman. I'm intelligent. I'm worthwhile. My rights matter.” It's much easier to dismiss someone's humanity when they are dismissing yours.

I noticed something after that discussion. I felt lighter than I usually do when entering into arguments, especially online arguments! Could it be that treating someone else with respect actually feels good?

I want to tell you—in that moment, I felt super righteous. I had been cool and convincing. I also felt happy at how I had handled myself. There is an adage that I find very true: there is no such thing as winning an argument. We need to be civil with each other.

Let's talk about the notion of civility for a moment: on the one hand it is a no-brainer and, on the other hand, it is
You know a story touches some nerves when people can't stop commenting on it. News articles about child abuse and child endangerment spur epic, emotionally-charged online comment battles. The Akedah—in English, “The Binding”—is a biblical passage whose narrative of a father (Abraham) seeking to carry out God's orders to sacrifice his 'only' son (Isaac, his only son with his wife, Sarah, at any rate), whom he loves (Gen. 22:2), has similarly inspired strong feelings and moved rabbis, sages, poets, and other thinkers to write about it for at least the last 1500 years. On most badly-moderated websites, I'd encourage you not to read the comments. But when it comes to the Akedah, in Genesis 22:1-19, the comments—commentaries as well as other textual reflections—are instructive. Many are powerfully articulated and moving, and, in the way of all comments, they tell us as much about their writers and the assumptions and preoccupations of their place and period as they do about the biblical story itself.

A classical Jewish perspective—reflected in the Zikhronot, or traditional “Remembrance” prayers of Rosh Hashanah—lauds Abraham's ability to choke down his own compassion and love for his son to perform God's will, as well as God's mercy in sparing Isaac's life. For many early Jewish thinkers, though, the narrative was more complicated than that. In the Babylonian Talmud, the rabbis quote a line of God's dialogue from the book of Jeremiah that reads “And they have also built the high places of the Baal, to burn their sons in the fire for burnt offerings to Baal, which I did not command, and I did not speak, nor did it come into My heart” (Jer. 19:5). Here the God of the story is condemning human sacrifice as something that he never commanded—as something that never even "came into [his] heart." In other words, it is something that he would never want or desire. In a classic piece of wishful explanatory overreach, the rabbis of the Talmud interpret the phrase “nor did it come into My heart” as a specific reference to the Akedah episode. "Although God commanded Abraham to sacrifice Isaac," they write, “there was no intent in God's heart that he should actually do so; it was merely a test" (b. Taanit 4a). Like modern people, the rabbis of the fifth century CE seem to have been disturbed by the idea of a God that would actually want a parent to sacrifice his child. Only a Darth Vader-esque ruler of the universe would hope for that outcome! If they could persuade themselves and their readers that God never actually wanted Abraham to sacrifice Isaac—that he was only testing him—their notion of God as morally bankrupt could remain intact.

For many contemporary writers and thinkers responding to the Akedah, however, it's not enough to be reassured by Talmudic commentary—or by the biblical scholars that take up its apologetic mantle many hundreds of years later—that the God of the story opposes child sacrifice. Operating from a place of secular concern, a God who would make such a shocking request of a father as a test of his faith—even if he never intended for the ask to be fulfilled—is troubling. Many people who grew up in religious Jewish households—including, I know, many Or Emet members—cite their encounter with the God of the Akedah narrative's cruel, capricious request as the thing that first led them to understand the idea of God as morally bankrupt. From this contemporary secular position, Abraham's conduct doesn't hold up very well under scrutiny either. What kind of parent would be willing to kill his son simply because he believed that his God wanted this thing to be done for obscure reasons?
Shouldn’t the highest duty of parenthood be to nurture and protect your own child from harm? Should a spiritual or ideological commitment ever be allowed to outweigh that parental duty?

Operating in a contemporary secular framework, threatening to kill your own child is child abuse. To be stopped just on the point of committing such a terrible act of violence is attempted murder. The baldness of these words in some ways freezes us on the surface of the story and keeps us from probing more deeply, but it’s worthwhile to consider further what Abraham actually does. He’s about to sacrifice his child because he believes that the highest power in the universe wants him to do this. He submits to this authority even though this act goes against a parent’s instinct to preserve a child’s life and safety.

Bowing to “higher authority” in spite of other instincts to protect and preserve a child’s life is something that many real parents still do. Consider the parent who foregoes lifesaving surgery or other medical treatment for their child because they believe that this goes against God’s will, that healing must be achieved through prayer. Consider the parent who sends their LGBTQ child to conversion therapy, bowing to certain religious dictates and trying to pseudo-scientifically rid that child of same-sex attraction or identification with a gender that does not align with what they were assigned at birth. This “therapy” dehumanizes and causes tremendous psychological harm, but it is still legal in the majority of states—including Minnesota. Consider the parents who give carte blanche to religious leaders, coaches, and other charismatic authority figures to exercise influence and control over the lives and bodies of their own and others’ children, and then deny the abuse that festers when authority does not allow itself to be challenged or checked.

In verse five of the Akedah, describing how he will go up the mountain with his son, Abraham says, “and I and the lad will go yonder.” A na’ar, or “lad,” is an ambiguous word in biblical Hebrew; it could refer to a youth anywhere from around age ten to age twenty- or thirty-something. Is Isaac a child in this story? One midrash maintains that Isaac was 37 years old when the events of the Akedah unfolded (Gen. Rabbah 56:8). Medieval Jewish commentator and philosopher Abraham Ibn Ezra disagrees. Commenting on Genesis 22:4, he argues that this interpretation goes against the p’shat, or plain meaning, of the text. According to Ibn Ezra, in the story “Isaac is old enough to carry the wood but young enough to be docile” (“Judaism: Akedah,” Jewish Virtual Library).

Where do we stand on this point? If Isaac is a child, he is a child forced to submit to his father’s authority. If he is an adult, he is an adult who submits to his father’s authority just as his father submits to divine authority.

Operating from a particular secular position in this particular contemporary moment, I argue that a part of what we’re still shaking ourselves free of is unquestioning submission to patriarchal authority. Patriarchal authority is something we can define in a broad sense—the authority granted to gods; to leaders, religious and otherwise; to the state; to corporations; to fathers; to parents and family systems that control our horizon of the possible. Any self-respecting commentary needs at least a few lines that could start a flame war, so at this point I’ll just observe that my “#hottake” on the Akedah for 5779 is “no gods, no masters.”

Continuing to tell and to comment on the Akedah puts us uncomfortably in touch with a system of belief that celebrates submitting to authority without question. Rejecting this framework, we can tap into other streams in the Jewish tradition, the humanistic tradition, and the Humanistic Jewish tradition that encourage us to challenge unjust authority and to protect the vulnerable. In doing this, we can continue to imagine new models of parenthood and of authority that place genuine caring, equity, responsiveness to critique, and respect for the dignity of all people at their center.

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Thank you for your interest in Humanistic Judaism!
For many reasons, those of us who are tightly connected to the secular movement have been dismayed by the confirmation of Brett Kavanaugh as an Associate Justice of the United States Supreme Court. The question we now face: with his elevation to the Court, what can we expect to see happen over the next few years in Supreme Court cases that might endanger secular democracy?

The answer is both “very little” and “quite a lot.” The stakes are high because, despite various senators’ assertions to the contrary, there is no such thing as “settled law” on the Supreme Court.

On the “very little” front: upon his retirement, Justice Anthony Kennedy was viewed as a persuadable, moderate voice on the Court. But that view is far too simplistic. Justice Kennedy wrote and voted as a moderate on a relatively small number of specific cases involving personal privacy and reproductive rights, affirmative action, and imposing the death penalty upon minors and individuals with intellectual disabilities. However, over the long run Justice Kennedy shifted in more politically conservative directions on many if not most other matters, including free speech, economic issues, and the power of the judiciary itself. (See Thomson-DeVeaux, for a data-driven analysis of Justice Kennedy’s record.)

Unfortunately, Justice Kennedy’s shifts rightward included his positions on church-state separation issues. During Justice Kavanaugh’s confirmation hearings, he and Senator John Cornyn (R-TX) lamented the result of Santa Fe Independent School District v. Doe, which the Supreme Court decided in 2000. Santa Fe involved the recitation of prayers by student volunteers at school commencement ceremonies and football games. Led by then-Justice John Paul Stevens, the Court determined that other students would clearly understand that such prayers would be messages endorsed by the school—and that was a violation of the First Amendment’s Establishment Clause. Justice Kennedy agreed with the Court’s decision, and voted with the majority. The dissent, led by then-Chief Justice Rehnquist, accused the Court’s majority of acting with sneering, open malice toward the place of religion in society.

Fast forward, now, to 2014, when the Supreme Court decided City of Greece v. Galloway. The City of Greece, in upstate New York, opened its monthly city commission meetings with a prayer from clergypersons who were listed in a local directory of congregations. The list was composed primarily of Christian congregations, and thus the prayers were overwhelmingly Christian in nature. This time, Justice Kennedy wrote the opinion of the Court, and held that given the long tradition of “legislative prayer” for the perceived benefit of legislators, the City of Greece’s sectarian prayers did not violate the Establishment Clause.
Why is this important for predicting the effects of newly-elevated Justice Kavanaugh? Because now—Justice Kavanaugh had a few things to say during his confirmation hearings about Santa Fe and City of Greece, and none of it should give comfort to those of us who wish to preserve a secular democracy. During the confirmation hearings, Sen. Cornyn said that the result of Santa Fe “sticks in my craw” because of its disdain for religion in public life, and that it’s now not possible to speak about religion in a public forum under the First Amendment. (That assertion is, of course, entirely false.) Then-Judge Kavanaugh offered Sen. Cornyn consolation. He, too, rued the result of Santa Fe; after all, they both had submitted briefs to the Court in that case. But Kavanaugh noted that later cases, including City of Greece, showed that there had been “some developments” to assure a voice for “religion in the public square.”

In other words: by the end of his career, Justice Kennedy, who had once voted against permitting prayer in a school, was writing for the Court on matters of secular democracy in a way that allowed then-Judge Kavanaugh to console Sen. Cornyn. In a fourteen-year period, both the Court and Justice Kennedy had changed direction on Establishment Clause issues. Again: there is no such thing as settled law when a case comes to the U.S. Supreme Court.

But over the next few years, it is unlikely that specific votes on church-state issues will change much, because Kennedy was already voting with the conservative wing of the Court. And Chief Justice John Roberts, who has demonstrated considerable concern for the legitimacy of the Court as an institution (Rosen, “Robert’s Rules,” The Atlantic, Jan/Feb 2007), is likely to avoid assigning cases to the most partisan of the Justices (Barnes, “Chief Justice Favors Some When Assigning Court’s Major Decisions,” Washington Post, Nov. 9, 2015). But as we’ll soon see, Justice Kavanaugh is an unusually partisan judge.

This, then, was the “very little” part of the difference between Justice Kennedy and Justice Kavanaugh.

So where is the “quite a lot” piece of the puzzle? It comes down to this: what the Court says is often as important as how the votes shake out in specific cases.

Justice Kennedy was not, in the opinion of a number of legal scholars, a particularly good writer of opinions. He wrote far more than was necessary, sometimes using treacly language (Horwitz, “A Hallmark of an Opinion: Justice

Kennedy’s Writing Style and How Much—or Little—It Matters,” 2015). In big cases on personal privacy rights—like Obergefell v. Hodges (2015), on same-sex marriage, or Planned Parenthood v. Casey (1992), on abortion—Justice Kennedy’s writing waxed so rhapsodic that a passage in Casey is called, pejoratively, the “sweet mystery of life” passage. Lawyers have a term for this kind of language: obiter dicta, or, essentially, “fluff” that isn’t important for deciding cases.

Yet Kennedy’s fluff has been anything but. He used his “mystery of life” language in Casey to buttress his opinion in Lawrence v. Texas (2003), where he wrote for the Court in striking down a sodomy ban. More than a decade later, the shift in Justice Kennedy’s views on religion in public life was on full display, when he used language similar to the dissent in Santa Fe—a dissent in which he did not participate and that decried the Court’s purported animosity toward religion in the public square—when he wrote the opinion for the Court in favor of a bakery that refused to serve a gay couple in Masterpiece Cakeshop, Ltd. v. Colorado Civil Rights Commission (2018).

Simply put, how an opinion is written matters, and language that looks like “fluff” is often anything but. Given this, Justice Kavanaugh’s writing should worry us greatly.

The Cardozo Law Review published a data-driven analysis of Justice Kavanaugh’s writing as a federal appellate judge (Ash and Chen). In their analysis, the researchers found that Justice Kavanaugh’s writing was closest to—but notably more partisan than—Justice Samuel Alito’s. Analyzing word choice, selection of topics, and voting records, the study found that Justice Kavanaugh’s writing displayed hostility toward matters viewed as important to liberals. When he wrote in dissent, his opinions were more polarized against Democratic-appointed judges than any sitting Supreme Court Justice. Even more frightening, as a circuit court judge Justice Kavanaugh was significantly more likely to write dissents during election seasons, as though partisan contests in the country got him “riled up” and affected his jurisprudence. And his use of constitutional citations—which the study in question used as a way to measure tendencies toward constitutional originalism—was far more frequent than any of the currently-sitting Justices. Simply put: Kavanaugh is a “true outlier,” in a way that even Justices who are or have been more hostile toward church-state separation, like Scalia and Thomas, are not.

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Enough is Enough by Rabbi Jodi Kornfeld

A version of this article was delivered as a High Holidays sermon at Beth Chaverim in Deerfield, IL.

During our Rosh Hashanah celebration, we began the story of twin brothers Jacob and Esau coming to meet one another after twenty years. They have endured physical and emotional distance for two decades because Jacob was perceived to have stolen the birthright due Esau, and Esau impulsively threatened to kill him.

These two are hardly a model of brotherly love. The protagonist in the biblical narrative is Jacob. He is, after all, to become one of the three patriarchs in the ancient tradition, and it is his story that the biblical author advances. The biblical text gives little real detail about Esau, but he is not portrayed sympathetically overall.

This, then, is the biblical and psychological context for today’s Torah portion from Genesis 33. On the eve of their long-awaited meeting, Jacob wrestled with an emissary of the biblical God to the point where he was renamed יִשְׂרָאֵל, “Israel,” one who prevails. This becomes the theological wind behind his back as the inevitable and feared meeting takes place. The biblical author is advancing a theological agenda that continues to favor Jacob, with whom the biblical God is aligned, at Esau’s expense. His descendants, the Edomites, are the text’s enemies of the Israelites. The Book of Malachi, from the biblical Prophets, dispels any doubt by having the biblical God say, “I loved Jacob, but Esau I hated” (Mal. 1:3). Again, this is not an exemplary model of ancient divine compassion.

But the portrayal of Esau in Genesis 33 runs so contrary to the rest of the biblical text that it represents a counter-tradition that we should heed. Esau’s behavior is unexpected and surprising, tender and gracious. It is what he does and then what he says, without ever uttering the words “I forgive you,” that matter. Despite the author’s hostility towards him, Esau’s behavior provides the perfect material for a Yom Kippur message of forgiveness. Missed opportunities, mistaken understandings, and misinterpreted overtures can lead to a toxic status quo instead of the healing obtained by forgiveness. Words spoken in the heat of the moment can have the unintended consequence of lasting impact.

Esau engages in two acts that merit consideration. First, upon seeing Jacob, Esau ran to meet his brother, embraced him, and kissed him. With that, both brothers wept. Only after that physical moment of reconciliation can he say in response to the gifts offered by Jacob, “I have enough, my brother, let what you have be yours” (Gen. 33:9). If these actions were reversed, with the statement coming before the physical embrace, it would perhaps ring hollow as a way of putting off true reconciliation. Instead, Esau has freed himself from the bondage of anger. Jacob continues to insist on foisting the gifts on Esau; “take them, take them,” he implores his brother until Esau relents (Gen. 33:10-11). Jacob’s echo of Esau’s statement “I have enough” sounds half-hearted, repeating Esau’s own words seemingly to win favor with him. Jacob has not freed himself from the past.

Significantly, these two actions and approaches are displayed here by twins. They play the role of opposites, the shadow side of one another. In Jungian psychology, the shadow is the unconscious aspect of one’s personality; it is everything of which a person is not fully conscious. In mythology and biblical stories, the shadow is often personified as a twin or a brother. The psychoanalyst C.L. Jung is sometimes summarized as having said, “that which we do not bring to consciousness appears in our lives as fate.” The character Jacob has placed his fate in the hands of the biblical God and remains indifferent to the control he might otherwise have. He cannot escape the past but continues to use the tool of appeasement to paper over it. The character Esau, meanwhile, has taken his fate into his own hands, demonstrating forgiveness by releasing the fear, anger, and resentment that characterized his long-ago conduct.

But it is the words that Esau utters that teach us an important lesson on this Day of Atonement. “I have enough, my brother, let what you have be yours.” Given their past history and the biblical author’s antipathy toward Esau, these words could be given a sarcastic or ironic interpretation, one in which Esau is letting Jacob know that he has achieved much without that birthright to which he felt entitled, and which he felt Jacob took from him. But in light of the prior description of the physical embrace and tears, I don’t think that’s what Esau is saying at all. Instead, I suggest he is expressing a state of completion, of satisfaction, and of being free from jealousy. That there could be two interpretations suggests two very different approaches to one’s life; which one
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Thank you for your interest in Humanistic Judaism!
The Meaning of Hanukkah for Humanistic Jews
by Natan Fuchs

Two holidays in the Jewish calendar represent the Jewish yearning for freedom—Passover, the spring holiday, and Hanukkah, the holiday that marks the beginning of winter. Both these holidays come with mythological stories about a Jewish fight for freedom. The traditional Passover story is one of our ancestors escaping from slavery and becoming a free nation. The Hanukkah story is also one of a struggle against a despotic power and gaining freedom. Since we are approaching the wintertime and the Hanukkah celebration, I will share with you a Humanistic Jewish look at this holiday.

Those of us who come from a traditional Jewish background are probably familiar with the so-called “Hanukkah Miracle” story. For two years, the Jews, under the leadership of Judah and his four Maccabee brothers, waged a bloody struggle against the Hellenistic Seleucid Empire. They fought for Jewish liberation and the freedom to openly practice the Jewish religion. On the 25th day of the month of Kislev in 165 BCE, when the victorious Jewish army finally entered the temple in Jerusalem, they found to their dismay that the temple had been defiled by the evil Greeks and their equally evil and idolatrous Jewish Hellenist allies. After a cleansing of the temple they wished to re-light the temple menorah. Unfortunately, they discovered that there was only enough pure oil to keep the menorah lit for one day. But somehow, miraculously, the menorah remained lit for eight days, by which time enough olive oil could be produced to continue to keep it lit. Hence, the eight days of Hanukkah.

But there is also a secular tradition with its own Hanukkah story. Those of us who come from a secular Jewish background might simply celebrate the Maccabees’ victory over the Seleucid army as a war for Jewish freedom. In 1948, during the State of Israel’s war for its independence, Howard Fast, a secular socialist Jewish American writer, wrote a novel that described the Maccabees’ war as something resembling a socialist war for freedom. Fast wrote his novel in the first person, in the form of a memoir of Jonathan, the youngest and last of Maccabee brothers. In Jonathan’s memory, he and his glorious brothers led a fight for freedom. They sought to create a Jewish society that would be the antithesis of the Hellenistic world around them. It was to be a society that thrived on freedom for all, and rejected the slavery that abounded in the Hellenistic world.

Unfortunately, that secular Hanukkah story is just as fictitious as the religious one. In the real history, Jonathan ruled in Jerusalem as high priest for ten years, from 152 to 142 BCE. And the ancient Jews never really rejected slavery. Slavery was just as common in the Jewish world, both before and following the Maccabean revolt, as it was in the rest of the ancient world. The success of the Maccabean revolt had actually resulted in a Jewish kingdom, ruled by the descendants of Judah’s brother, Simon Maccabee, first as high priests, and then as priest-kings.

This succession of rulers, called the Hasmonean dynasty, did not actually reject the surrounding Hellenistic world. In fact, its rulers actually attempted to create an interesting mix, a religiously Jewish Hellenistic kingdom. Jonathan was the last Hasmonean ruler with a purely Hebrew name. The ruler-priest that followed Jonathan was a ruthless despot named John Hyrcanus. Israeli archeologists recently uncovered a mass grave, in which more than a hundred men, women, and children had been buried. These were the bodies of Pharisees, who

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A Bucket List Trip to Israel

We were a small group of eight people (four couples) who are members of Kahal Chaverim, The New Jersey Congregation for Humanistic Judaism, who in October of 2017 arranged for a bucket-list trip to Israel. In planning this “Jewish Heritage trip to Israel,” we decided that a private tour would be better than a large group tour. It allowed us to have more flexibility and the freedom to have more “contact” with our tour guide and to experience this eventful trip together. It was easier logistically as a small group to get around and see all the ancient, historic, religious and modern sights.

One of the highlights of our trip was a visit to the Western Wall. We wanted to make our visit to Israel and to the Western Wall relate to our identifying as Humanistic Jews. Putting a prayer or note into the wall appealing to God or a supernatural being did not seem in keeping with our beliefs. What could we place in the wall that would be relevant and in keeping with our humanistic beliefs and tradition?

At the closing of our 2017 Yom Kippur service, we as a congregation collectively said the following:

May you have
A year of goodness and prosperity
A year of love, friendship, and comfort
A year of peace and contentment, of joy and of spiritual welfare
A year of virtue and right choices
A year of health in mind and body.

This reading seemed totally appropriate for our note. We read this collectively at the wall (in the separate Men’s and Women’s sections) before placing a copy in a crack in the wall.

This experience standing at the Western Wall in Jerusalem—touching the stones, doing our Jewish humanistic reading, and seeing other Jews from around the world standing at the Wall was a spiritual moment for all of us.

Photo Caption: On Mt. Scopus in Jerusalem: Penny and Jerry Appelbaum, Rick and Maxine Pascal, Alan and Beth Slutsky, Herb and Barbara Lutsky, with Doron Hoffman, our tour guide from Shalom Israel Tours.
Kahal B’raira Is Building a Better World

Here in Greater Boston at Kahal B’raira, we are working to build a better world. To paraphrase SHJ Executive Director Paul Golin, we have no expectation for supernatural intervention. We’re on our own to make positive changes in our life. Here are examples of our efforts through education and community service.

We educate ourselves and challenge our preconceptions to better understand our world. Recently, we featured playwright and actress Rohina Malik in her one woman show, Unveiled, about five Muslim women. Ms. Malik takes a look at love, culture, language, racism, Islam, and life in ways both unique and universal. The performance was followed by an insightful Q&A with our congregation. The entire experience is highly recommended, should anyone get the chance to see this play, or arrange for something like it in their community. More information can be found on her website.

At Kahal B’raira, we are also committed to building a better world through community service. Some examples of our service include hands-on projects and activities that educate members and offer meaningful experiences for adults, teens, and children:

- Hunger Relief Efforts: volunteering at farms, food pantries, homeless shelters, and food drives
- Foster Care Projects: holiday gift drive and welcomes boxes
- Annual Blood Drive
- Martin Luther King Jr. Day of Service
- Assisting Syrian Refugees

As Humanistic Jews, the acts of learning together and working together are core parts of our mission, supporting our ethics and ideals. Building a better world is how we connect as a community and have a deeper impact on the world around us. We learn firsthand how our strength is within us and with each other.

Jon Levine

Beth Chaverim’s Richard Strauss Receives CFJE-Grinspoon Congregational Educator Award

Beth Chaverim is so proud to announce that for igniting the imaginations of scores of Sunday School students over the past 33 years, Richard Strauss, our long-time seventh/eighth grade teacher and a founding member of the congregation, has been chosen to receive the 2018 CFJE-Grinspoon Foundation Outstanding Congregational Education Teacher Award. This award is given to a single educator in the Chicago area based on the nomination of his/her congregation.

Strauss created his own curriculum, “I Witness the Holocaust,” and wrote the textbook for his seventh and eighth grade students, who learn to become witnesses, never bystanders. In nominating him, Beth Chaverim Rabbi Jodi Kornfeld quoted a former student who, years later, wrote “I never had such a great teacher, who cared so much about his teaching, his students, and his passion about his work.”

Rabbi Jodi Kornfeld

Photo: Courtesy Sadaf Syed.
Machar Welcomes the Strangers

On Saturday, October 13, Machar members set up an apartment for a family of refugees arriving in Maryland from the Democratic Republic of Congo. Our members provided all items for the apartment, including furniture, toiletries, linens, kitchen items, and food. We thank everyone who contributed to this project over many months! The generosity and compassion of our community is something special. This apartment setup was carried out in partnership with KindWorks, a wonderful community organization that has completed more than 30 setups for refugees and asylum seekers. Thank you, KindWorks! It was a pleasure as well to work with the International Rescue Committee, which arranged the family’s arrival and will support them now that they are here. Thank you also, IRC!

We wish this arriving family peace, safety, and happiness as they begin this next chapter of their lives.

Alexa of KindWorks adds: “This beautiful setup by an amazing group of volunteers has a wonderful update. Generous Machar members put in extra groceries of fruit, meat, rice, oil, and spices for our new neighbors. Another Machar member went to Cape Coast Cuisine to purchase an abundant, authentic welcome meal of two kinds of rice, fried fish, tasty chicken, goat stew, fried plantains, and desserts! Monica, the Ghanaian owner of the restaurant, served up the dishes herself and remembered aloud how the Jewish community helped her many years ago upon her arrival here. Thank you, Machar, for an uplifting and wholly warm welcome for this family!”

Sara Baum and Larry Lawrence

Top Left: L to R: Matthew Miller, Sara Baum, Joyce Frieden Rosenthal, Darlene Basch, Monica Zamisch, and Holly Campbell-Rosen. Top Right: Larry Lawrence, Monica Zamisch, and Marc Mauer assembling a table. Bottom Left: Lucy S. and Jamie L. Bottom Right: Completed living room of the furnished apartment.
In 1969, Secular Humanistic Judaism became a movement when its founder, Rabbi Sherwin Wine of The Birmingham Temple, joined with two other communities to form the Society for Humanistic Judaism (SHJ).

To mark 50 years of SHJ, let’s celebrate the accomplishments of our movement’s first half-century and plan for the next 50 years! Come together with current, past, and future leaders from Humanistic Judaism communities throughout the U.S. and Canada for a weekend of joyous celebration, dynamic speakers, and meaningful learning while we rekindle old friendships, create new ones, and generate the next big ideas.

Come help us celebrate and shape the Jewish Future.
If you are on Facebook, please visit the Event Page at http://bit.ly/shj50

Looking forward to seeing you there!

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Let us have what we need to live and live with what we have. By so doing, we will discover that might just be enough.
Humanistic Judaism

is a most dangerous proposition. The root of "civil" is *civis*, "citizen" in Latin. Who counts as a citizen though? Does it include the immigrant or the refugee? Does it include the Indigenous peoples? Think of the brutal history of colonization globally: a civilizing mission; a mission driven by the idea that the people indigenous to the majority of the planet were not fully human yet.

Indeed, today, there is such an interesting use of the word "civil." A few months ago, when the U.S. started separating immigrants and refugees from their children, and then placing those children in cages, the spokesperson for the White House reminded people to be "civil" when discussing it. I was struck by how that term is still being used to oppress, to suppress dissent, to whitewash. It's not dissimilar from the approach of the colonizers who took seriously what they called the "white man's burden" to civilize others.

Let's not forget the role religion plays in these civilizing missions. Colonizers across the continent of Africa used it to "civilize" the people there. People seeking refuge in North America now are catalogued by religion and treated accordingly. The idea of the citizen is very fraught indeed. And yet I take seriously what it means to be a citizen—of my country and of the world. I dislike it when politicians refer to their constituents as "taxpayers." I am a taxpayer, but does this buy me access or a voice? My children are not taxpayers, but they are citizens. The same is true for some elderly people, some people with disabilities, some people down on their luck. As citizens, we deserve equal protection under the law—exactly what Ruth Bader Ginsburg has spent her life and career fighting for.

To me, what it means to be a citizen is to fight for those rights, to stand up for my fellow citizens, of my country, of the world, and be serious about the equal protections we are owed. It's why I care about abortion access, climate change and environmental justice, anti-Black racism, and the treatment of Indigenous peoples across our country and the world. I have a responsibility to engage—I am a citizen.

I am also a Jew. And Jews have often been called uncivilized. We have been subject to the same types of categorizations and civilizing missions that others have experienced and continue to experience. Part of the idea of the uncivilized Jew is simply a reflection of deep antisemitism. It is garbage. I want to rescue part of the image, however. Jews have been known as a "stiff-necked people," meaning that we are stubborn. Part of our stubbornness is our refusal to bow before leaders and gods with whom we don't agree or in whom we don't believe. For Humanistic, secular, atheist, agnostic Jews, we keep in line with the very Jewish tradition of refusing to bow before what we perceive to be false gods. It is in our ethos as a people and as individuals. I value our stiff-neckedness. I want to be stubborn where it matters. I have my red lines. I don't think that makes me uncivilized; it makes me an engaged and vocal citizen.

This idea that the cagers of children should call on their opponents to remain civil really throws into harsh relief how dangerous the term can be. Some of these same people are incredibly disrespectful, discourteous, and dangerous in their attacks on their political opponents, calling them all manner of things including "snowflake," "Pollyanna," "Fake news." I notice a trend for people to call for civility in exactly the moment that they are violating civility, and undermining the humanity, of others.

We have to do this better. It is frustrating, believe me. I know, to be the one who remains calm, poised, and, yes, civil, when the other side is the opposite of all those things. But there is no winning an argument. And the stakes are high. We have to dialogue across difference and "they" will never be civil to "us" if "we" can't be civil to "them." Because, ultimately, there is no us and them. As I said, we disagree, even in the world of Humanistic Judaism where we agree on so much. Ultimately, finally, there is only us—we humans, fallible and frail, trying to live out our lives, being citizens of the world we must share.

This talk is entitled "Civility, certainty, divinity, diversity." I think civility is challenged by the other three ideas. Our certainty. My certainty that I'm right and your certainty that you're right. I'm part of a cohort of Rabbis Without Borders—rabbis reimagining how to make Jewish
life meaningful and relevant for our people. One of the books we discussed together was by Rabbi Brad Hirshfield, entitled *You Don't Have to Be Wrong for Me to Be Right*. In it, he discusses the violence done to Jews and Judaism when we are shouted down, ostracized, made to feel ashamed for who we are. Many of us in this room have experienced that from outside and inside Judaism. We are subject to antisemitism. We are subject to people telling us we're not “real” Jews or we’re “doing Jewish” wrong. We are subject to questions about our choice in partner or the validity of the Jewishness of our children if we are intermarried. We are subject to the sting of feeling a lack of belonging—with our people, without our people. What if we agreed that someone doesn’t have to be wrong for us to be right? Jewishly, what if we agreed that it makes sense to worry about Jewish continuity even if and as we celebrate intermarriage?

What if we took seriously the idea that the person who votes differently to me has very real concerns that they care about, and that’s what compels them to vote the way they do? What if instead of calling each other snowflakes, deplorables, and worse, we actually listened to each other? For us to retain our civility we must sometimes question our certainty. And when we feel certain, we must acknowledge that the other side does too.

Civility, certainty, divinity... well, if you’re reading this you are probably suspicious or skeptical of the idea of the divine. I don’t believe that any supernatural force, certainly not the God of the bible, is going to counsel me on how to navigate these tough times. I am extremely anxious, as are many of you, about the certainty that comes with the belief that one’s ideas are divinely inspired or inscribed. There is just no arguing with someone who—yes, conveniently, yes, sometimes uncritically—believes that their political and social points of view all happen to match up perfectly with their religion or god they worship. I advocate for dialoguing across difference; I’m still working out how to dialogue with divinity. What I have in place of a belief in the divine is a belief in my fellow humans. This belief, like all beliefs, gets tested. It wavers. But it is foundational to how I move through the world. The very meaning of what it is to be humanistic is that we place our faith in each other. We often hear about the “divine spark in every person.” I like that metaphor, not because we are made in the image of a god. I like it because, to me, humanity is holy. It’s the only phenomenon on which I can place my belief. I’m not saying people are gods. I’m saying if we treated each other like we could see the spark of divinity inside each person we’d be living in a better world.

Civility, certainty, divinity, diversity. I’d love my political opponents to get a little more comfortable with diversity. I am so proud to be part of this community that meaningfully and truly celebrates diversity. There are Jews here of all skin tones and backgrounds, Jews by choice, Jews by birth, Jews by marriage. There are people here who are intermarried, in-married, and unmarried. Some of you awesome folks are LGBTQ, some are allies. And, yes, we are diverse politically too. Members of my staff and board here vote differently than I do—I admit I find it astonishing. And yet, we love each other.

Right now, I find that civility is threatened by certainty and the divinity of humanity is strengthened by diversity. I want us to hold fast to our beliefs, and at the very same time, reconcile some of these contradictions and challenges. When in doubt, ask yourself WWRBGD? What would Ruth Bader Ginsburg do? I think we can agree that she’d remain civil, even when certain. She’d acknowledge the divinity in her fellow human and celebrate the diversity of humanity. On this day of atoning, of accounting for our souls, of acknowledging our faults and faultlines, and of actualizing our goals of who we wish to be moving forward, she’s a pretty great role model. I don’t believe the year ahead is going to be a particularly easy one. We face many challenges as a community and as individuals. What I wish for you is what we spoke about at Rosh Hashanah. Find ways to let joy in. Try to occupy the nexus between what’s meaningful and what’s pleasurable. Seek out ways to elevate the sense of your own humanity and that of those around you. Love yourselves and love each other. Even if the year ahead is filled with challenges, may it be a meaningful, rewarding, good, and yes, sweet year.
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Tributes

To SHJ  
In Celebration of Miriam Jerris’ Birthday  
From Susan & Alvin Averbach, Gabie Berliner, Barry Fineman, Heather Kroot, Judy & Charles Nave, Alana Shindler, Le Anne & Bert Steinberg, Barry Swan, Warren Turner, Susan & Scott Warrow, Renee Weitzner, Deborah Williams & Brian Silverstein, Devere & Michael Witkin

To Rabbi Jodi Kornfeld  
In loving memory of your stepmother Rosemary Kaplan  
From Miriam Jerris & Steve Stawicki

To Susan & Scott Warrow  
In loving memory of your father Jerry Hooker  
From Miriam Jerris & Steve Stawicki

To SHJ  
In loving memory of Ira Roth  
From Patty & Lee Koenigsberg

To Barbara Sugerman  
In loving memory of your husband Donald  
From Miriam Jerris & Steve Stawicki

To Jodi Kornfeld  
In celebration of your newest granddaughter Kirby Ruth Kornfeld  
From Miriam Jerris & Steve Stawicki

To SHJ  
In honor of Rabbi Adam Chalom for his presentation at Chautauqua in 2018  
From Margery & Richard Buxbaum

To Miriam Jerris  
In honor of Miriam Jerris with appreciation for the beautiful service at Donald Sugerman’s Memorial  
From Barbara Sugerman & Family

To Mark Friedlander  
For a speedy recovery  
Miriam Jerris & Steve Stawicki
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