

Humanistic Judaism

Humanistic Judaism (Hebrew: **יהדות הומניסטית** *Yahdut Humanistiṯ*) is a Jewish movement that offers a nontheistic alternative in contemporary Jewish life. It defines Judaism as the cultural and historical experience of the Jewish people and encourages humanistic and secular Jews to celebrate their Jewish identity by participating in Jewish holidays and lifecycle events (such as weddings and bar and bat mitzvahs) with inspirational ceremonies that draw upon but go beyond traditional literature.

Its philosophical foundation includes the following ideas:

- A Jew is someone who identifies with the historyculture, and future of the Jewish people;
- Judaism is the historic culture of the Jewish people, and religion is only one part of that culture;
- Jewish identity is best preserved in a free, pluralistic environment;
- People possess the power and responsibility to shape their own lives independent of supernatural authority;
- Ethics and morality should serve human needs, and choices should be based upon consideration of the consequences of actions rather than pre-ordained rules or commandments;
- Jewish history, like all history, is a human saga, a testament to the significance of human power and human responsibility. Biblical and other traditional texts are the products of human activity and are best understood through archaeology and other scientific analysis.
- The freedom and dignity of the Jewish people must go hand in hand with the freedom and dignity of every human being.^[1]

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Origins

In its current form, Humanistic Judaism was founded in 1963 by Rabbi Sherwin Wine.^{[2][3]} As a rabbi trained in Reform Judaism, with a small secular, non-theistic congregation in Michigan, Wine developed a Jewish liturgy that reflected his and his congregation's philosophical viewpoint by emphasizing Jewish culture, history, and identity along with Humanistic ethics, while excluding all prayers and references to God. This congregation developed into the Birmingham Temple, now in Farmington Hills, Michigan. It was soon joined by a previously Reform congregation in Illinois, as well as a group in Wilton, Connecticut.

In 1969, these congregations and others were united organizationally under the umbrella of the Society for Humanistic Judaism (SHJ). The Society for Humanistic Judaism has 10,000 members in 30 congregations spread throughout the United States and Canada.

The International Institute for Secular Humanistic Judaism was founded in 1986. It is the academic and intellectual center of Humanistic Judaism. It was established in Jerusalem in 1985 and currently has two centers of activity: one in Jerusalem and the other in Lincolnshire, IL. Rabbi Adam Chalom is the North American dean. The Institute offers professional training programs for Spokespersons, Educators, Leaders (also referred to in Hebrew as *madrikhim/ot* or in Yiddish as *vegvyazer*), and Rabbis, in addition to its publications, public seminars and colloquia for lay audiences.^[4]

Principles of belief and practice



The humanorah, which is the primary symbol of the Society for Humanistic Judaism.

Humanistic Judaism presents a far more radical departure from traditional Jewish religion than Mordecai Kaplan (co-founder of Reconstructionist Judaism) ever envisioned. Kaplan redefined God and other traditional religious terms so as to make them consistent with the naturalist outlook, and continued to use traditional prayer language. Wine rejected this approach as confusing, since participants could ascribe to these words whatever definitions they favored.^[5] Wine strove to achieve philosophical consistency and stability by creating rituals and ceremonies that were purely non-theistic. Services were created for Shabbat, Rosh Hashanah, Yom Kippur, and other Jewish holidays and festivals, often with reinterpretation of the meaning of the holiday to bring it into conformity with Secular Humanistic philosophy.^[6]

Humanistic Judaism was developed as a possible solution to the problem of retaining Jewish identity and continuity among non-religious. Recognizing that congregational religious life was thriving, Wine believed that secular Jews who had rejected theism would be attracted to an organization that provided all the same forms and activities as, for example, Reform temples, but which expressed a purely Secular Humanistic viewpoint. The International Institute for Secular Humanistic Judaism, which is sponsored by the Society for Humanistic Judaism and the Congress of Secular Jewish Organizations, trains rabbis and other leaders in the United States and in Israel. The Society for Humanistic Judaism was organized with the mission to mobilize people to celebrate Jewish identity and culture consistent with a humanistic philosophy of life.

Jewish identity and intermarriage

Within Humanistic Judaism, Jewish identity is largely a matter of self-identification.^[7] Rabbis and other trained leaders officiate at intermarriages between Jews and non-Jews, and the Humanistic Judaism movement, unlike the Conservative and Orthodox Jewish denominations, does not take any position or action in opposition to intermarriage, rather it affirms that "Intermarriage is an American Jewish reality—a natural consequence of a liberal society in which individuals have the freedom to marry whomever they wish...that intermarriage is neither good nor bad, just as we believe that the marriage of two Jews, in itself, is neither good nor bad. The moral worth of a marriage always depends on the quality of the human relationship—on the degree of mutual love and respect that prevails."^[8] Secular Humanistic rabbis and leaders will also co-officiate at intercultural marriages between Jews and non-Jews. These views concerning Jewish identity and intermarriage are criticized by those who believe that they will hasten the assimilation of Jews into the general society and thus adversely affect Jewish continuity

Egalitarianism

Humanistic Judaism is egalitarian with respect to gender and gender identification, Jewish status, and sexual orientation. Brit shalom (baby-naming ceremonies), similar for boys and girls, are performed rather than the brit milah. Those who identify as Jews and those who do not, as well as LGBTI members, may participate in all ways in all Humanistic Jewish rituals and leadership roles.

Humanistic Judaism ordains both men and women as rabbis, and its first rabbi was a woman, Tamara Kolton, who was ordained in 1999.^[9] Its first cantor was also a woman, Deborah Davis, ordained in 2001;^[10] however, Humanistic Judaism has since stopped ordaining cantors. The Society for Humanistic Judaism issued a statement in 1996 stating in part, "we affirm that a woman has the moral right and should have the continuing legal right to decide whether or not to terminate a pregnancy in accordance with her own ethical standards. Because a decision to terminate a pregnancy carries serious, irreversible consequences, it is one to be made with great care and with keen awareness of the complex psychological, emotional, and ethical implications."^[11] They also issued a statement in 2011 condemning the passage of the "No Taxpayer Funding for Abortion Act" by the U.S. House of Representatives, which they called "a direct attack on a woman's right to choose."^[12] In 2012 they issued a resolution opposing conscience clauses that allow religious-affiliated institutions to be exempt from generally applicable requirements mandating reproductive healthcare services to individuals or employees.^[13] In 2013 they issued a resolution stating in part, "Therefore, be it resolved that: The Society

for Humanistic Judaism wholeheartedly supports the observance of Women's Equality Day on August 26 to commemorate the anniversary of the passage of the Nineteenth Amendment to the U.S. Constitution allowing women to vote; The Society condemns gender discrimination in all its forms, including restriction of rights, limited access to education, violence, and subjugation; and The Society commits itself to maintain vigilance and speak out in the fight to bring gender equality to our generation and to the generations that follow" ^[14]

In 2004 the Society for Humanistic Judaism issued a resolution supporting "the legal recognition of marriage and divorce between adults of the same sex", and affirming "the value of marriage between any two committed adults with the sense of obligations, responsibilities, and consequences thereof."^[15] In 2010 they pledged to speak out against homophobic bullying.^[16]

See also

- Hillelism
- History of the Jews in Metro Detroit
- Jewish secularism
- Mīmāṃsā (mimansa), a school of Hindu philosophy having some similarities in epistemology

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6. Rosenfeld, Max (1997). *Festivals, folklore & philosophy: A secularist revisits Jewish traditions* Sholom Aleichem Club. ISBN 978-0961087029
7. <http://www.humanisticrabbis.org/conversion/>"We believe: 1. That Jewish identity is primarily a cultural and ethnic identity. 2. That belief systems are too diverse among Jews to serve as criteria for membership. 3. That joining the Jewish community is a process of cultural identification. 4. That a person who seeks to embrace Jewish identity should be encouraged to do so and should be assisted in this endeavor
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External links

- [Society for Humanistic Judaism](#)
 - [International Institute for Secular Humanistic Judaism](#)
 - [Association of Humanistic Rabbis](#)
 - [BBC - Religions - Judaism: Humanistic Judaism](#)
 - [International Federation for Secular & Humanistic Judaism](#)
 - [Leadership Conference of Secular and Humanistic Jews](#)
 - [Israel program of International Institute for Secular Humanistic Judaism](#)
 - [Portal of Jewish Secular Rites in Israel](#)
 - [The City Congregation for Humanistic Judaism - New York City](#)
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