

I: Issues And Occasions

Being a Secular Jew

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This following article was submitted for discussion at the 1977 Conference of Secular Jewish Organizations.

LET us imagine that there is a line going entirely around the room; color it whatever you choose, because choice is what it symbolizes. Let us call that line "The American Jew in a Multi-Ethnic Society." The line then becomes a multiple-choice "test" that we *do* answer for ourselves, whether we know it consciously or not.

Let us label one end of the line "Total Uncommitment." Here belong the Jews who have divorced themselves entirely from the Jewish community, whose Jewish identification is either a source of indifference or shame. So our line immediately begins to have branches or tributaries to allow for the subtlety of differences. In my own family there is an example of someone who has separated himself from his Jewishness: a cousin, several decades ago, changed his last name to single-syllabled Nordic elegance. Today he is living in Europe in a small community where several Holocaust survivors also live, but no one knows that he is Jewish. This is his deliberate choice.

At the other end of our imaginary line we might affix the label, "Total Commitment to Jewishness." Here there are many branches, and at this spot we might place the person whose every moment is absorbed by his relatedness to the Jewish community, be it as writer, like Cynthia Ozick, scholar, like Dr. Howard Sachar, or rabbi. Between these two extremes there are hundreds of choices, and the American Jew, consciously or not, makes an individual choice and hangs his or her identity at some spot along that line. Since our society does not force us to identify ourselves as Jews, we make our own choices. I think I know where I have chosen to be. I search and find a long, strong branch of the line marked "secular Jewishness" and place myself somewhere on it. Where are you on that line? Where would you like to be? Are you comfortable where you are?

A secular Jew, by accepting that designation, has already made certain choices. First, he affirms his Jewishness and his ties to the Jewish people. Second, he also affirms a secular view of reality. Twenty or thirty years ago there was no difficulty in understanding or accepting the meaning of the

word “secular.” Without consulting the Oxford Dictionary, it simply means that secularism is a doctrine that asserts the primacy of *this* world, in order to differentiate it from other-worldly or religious views of the world. The word and the concept behind it are crucially important today, especially when we talk about the separation of church and state, an area full of problems and tensions. We must also differentiate secularism from Judaism, which is the system of religious practices that Jews follow.

Today we are seeing a heightened increase in mysticism, particularly among our young people. This can be an involvement that takes many forms, ranging from fashionable cultic movements to trying to rewrite liturgy in church and synagogue or trying to go beyond liturgy to the mystic heart of the religion. The proliferation of these movements and their use of words in a new context have tended to push and blur the meanings of ideas and words concerning secularism and supraworldiness. We are in danger of creating our own small tower of Babel where different people mean different things when they use the word “secular.”

Very recently a young friend told me of his firm belief in reincarnation, his acceptance of flying saucers as being indeed from outer space, his belief that the pyramids of Egypt and the Yucatan were built by men from another planet, and that books like *The Chariot of the Gods* were true in every detail. This young man is married, a college graduate, and he dismisses religion as relevant only to “them” (the uneducated), as a way of keeping some semblance of social order.

Another young friend tells me of her belief in astrology, although this is contrary to her Reborn Church, which she recently joined by changing her denomination. I don’t mean to take these two examples and extrapolate them into a social phenomenon, but we have only to read the newspapers, go to the movies or listen to the music of the young people to know that their hunger for answers to the existential questions is very real and is forcing some of them into some bizarre behavior.

When I saw a paperback book on Kabbalah for sale in the lobby of a popular movie house, I knew mysticism was “in.” Now I read that the “laying on of hands” is being taught in some hospitals to nursing staffs and I marvel at how far we have sunk in the quagmire of irrationalism.

After the Atom Bomb and the Holocaust, the Western world “stood naked,” and some people needed to reinvent a new pantheon of gods because the old ones seemed to have abdicated. And this new pantheon is growing every day.

Those of us associated with secular Jewish schools have to be very thoughtful concerning these matters. Our children or grandchildren are at an age of transparent openness to the influence of their peers. It’s fashionable to want to “believe” in some form of mysticism, although it’s equally fashionable to belittle traditional ritual. Secular Jews know they

must have a continuous dialogue with our young people to strengthen their secularism. Clarity begins at home.

Secular Jews accept the primacy of nature or natural causes to explain the universe. This does not mean that the secular Jew does not ask the great questions: "Why am I here? What does life mean? Is death the final answer?" And in asking, he knows there are no glib, simplistic answers. But it does mean that in our public practices and observances the secularist does not celebrate a supernatural force; he/she searches within world history for a tradition that celebrates what *people* can do together for each other to solve problems — the humanist tradition. Jewish history is a treasure house of that tradition.

I was a fortunate participant in a class that reviewed some of the recent findings in biology; Dr. Donald Proccocini, author of books and articles on genetic theory and developmental physiology, was our teacher. He stated unequivocally that life and the creation of the universe can now be satisfactorily explained in scientific terms. The vitalist goes beyond science for further explanations, but it is now possible, for the first time, to prove the materialist basis of life. Intoxicating stuff, this.

It has been charged that secularists, including secular Jews, are only nay-sayers, that they simply say, "We eschew religion and that is our only doctrine." Not at all. We are yea-sayers to a huge number of ideas. The secular Jew believes fundamentally in the world-view of naturalism; that which appears to be a mystery is not unknown at this time. The secular Jew also believes that people, contrary to biblical injunction, were not evolved in order to dominate nature, but to live *within* nature, respecting the circle of life. People live *in* history; every artifact and phenomenon has a history; every idea, every art form has a history. We do not live suspended between Hell or Heaven or Nirvana, waiting for eternal solutions or for the eternal verities to be disclosed to us. The truth is real people, responding to real problems.

The secular Jew says that problems are in their ultimate created by people and nature and must therefore be solved by people and nature. Hunger and disease and poverty do not represent the will of any god, but they do represent the complicated-as-hell will of some people, and when that is better understood, more people will ameliorate these horrors. Cultures do change, perceptions change, behavior changes. Who knows that better than the secular Jew who studies the history of his people? Israel started as a hope in the minds of only a few individuals; much history, laced with blood, ensued to make it a reality.

Jewish history and tradition are splendidly rich in humanist doctrine. Early on, the Talmud spelled out its priorities: "The Sabbath is holy, but life is holier." Secular Jews take the totality of Jewish experience as their province, they look at that experience through their particular world view

and then choose those periods, holidays, heroes, heroines and interpretations that strengthen that view.

Surely, this is a process that people have engaged in since the beginning of communication. If we read Jewish history with a view to the desirability of Jewish continuity, certain conclusions loom large. In Israel, one can have sincere political differences as each sees the political extensions of survival. But in the U.S., for the five-million-plus of us, a tiny fraction of the total population, there may not be as much latitude if we are to respond to events in a truly secular Jewish way.

In order to be secure, Jews in the U.S. must forever be part of a collation that seeks to solve social problems in a wideningly democratic way; in that lies safety, a future and the fulfillment of our prophetic tradition. It is not enough only to thunder out for the needs of the widow and the orphan, the hungry and the deprived. *Compassion has a political dimension.* In our awareness of the political process and our ability to act to influence social dynamics toward greater democracy and fuller justice lie the safety of the Jews and all ethnic groups in the U.S. and Canada and everywhere, as we have learned again and again. So the secular Jew believes in joining with others for political answers to human needs.

We should also turn our attention to ethics, not supplant the Ten Commandments but to see if we can supplement them in view of some of our more recent sensibilities. Even a hurried glance at the Ten Commandments reveals that they are overwhelmingly secular. They attempt to regulate the way people should behave toward each other; they are, incidentally, with a single exception, almost entirely negative in the way they are stated.

The exception is the one that urges us to honor our mothers and fathers, and if ever we want to think about the dimension of compassion in politics, we should remember the way older people are treated in this country.

The first commandment, which thunders, "You shall have no other gods before me," not only reveals a self-proclaimed jealous god, but a very insecure one as well. So insecure, in fact, that graven images of any kind are prohibited; and like any insecure parent he threatens punishment for disobedience, on the one hand, but promises life everlasting for obedience.

These first two commandments are usually placed in a religious category, but I should like to propose that they are political, concerned as they are with power and dominance and the hoped-for elimination of pagan rivals.

Another commandment often deemed religious is the one outlining the way to observe a day of rest — the Sabbath. How lovely that the first labor contract had to do not with wages or working conditions, but with time to oneself to abstain from working. What a pity that the fourth commandment did not go further and talk about wages and profits! But

here may be a place where some supplemental “commandments” might be indicated.

Was a day of rest already a practice among some tribes in the ancient world? The root of the word “Sabbath” goes back to the Greek and Hebrew, meaning simply “to rest.” To sanctify the idea of resting one day out of seven by calling it holy must have been a popular measure indeed; it was one idea in the platform of monotheism that proved irresistible; everybody adopted it, and wherever possible everybody practiced it.

But the other commandments abjuring us not to murder, lie, steal, covet or commit adultery are observed, alas, more in the breach than in the doing; yet they do not lose their moral force, except where modern psychology assures us that we all break some of these for the sake of social grace or the rampant ego.

Perhaps one of the future workshops of this Conference can give us “The Secular Jew’s Handbook on Ethics.” But here are a few suggestions: Anything that leads to understanding oneself and one’s fellow human beings is good. Conversely, anything that tends to distort or becloud or deflect understanding is bad.

Anything that on balance supports our feelings of loving rather than punishing, being positive rather than destructive is good. the converse is evident.

That which keeps our indignation keen concerning the wrongs people inflict on each other is good. Anything that encourages apathy about the pain of other people is harmful.

To repeat the phrase in the hagada, “Remember that you were slaves in Egypt,” without thinking through some of its implications is not sufficient. We must go past empathy to action; actively to oppose institutional bigotry, to help promote people’s liberation, otherwise our pious declaration could be in Sanskrit.

When we talk about the holiness of life, we must include those forms of life that greed threatens to extinguish; the hoop of life is all of one piece; we cannot diminish it without diminishing ourselves. It is wrong to be exploitive:

of the worker for hire,
of a sexual partner,
of a husband or wife to each other,
of any person, child or adult for personal gratification.

It is wrong to incite to anti-Semitism, whether blatantly or by innuendo. To denigrate any group based on its ethnicity is wrong and feeds the fires that could destroy us all.

The reverse of these coins might read something like this:
value yourself,
value and nurture those you love,

value and support your neighbors as they seek to find a more human dimension for themselves.

Your neighbor has become the world. Nuclear weapons and the speed of the machines of technology have placed us into one spaceship, one global village. When we befoul one ocean, we befoul them all; when we develop new missiles systems, we threaten everyone.

These suggestions are incomplete, but they point the way we may want to go.

The secular Jew is curious about everything in the Jewish past: its origins, its borrowings, its similarities to and differences from the rites and concepts of other peoples, the uses and abuses of religion; the history of secularism, and lots more. Secular Jews hope to pass on to their children not only stories and snippets of information, not only some customs and Jewish *Kheyndlekh*, but a proud and unified view of the universe which can provide them scope to grow to the limits of their gifts.

Just as the children read and study, so we, too, should continue to read and study about the Jewish community now and in the past, and what we can do to assure its future; about the limits and responsibilities of ethnicity; about the contribution secular Jews can make to the larger Jewish community.

Of course, we have Jewish music in our homes, go to see films with Jewish content, or a play with a Jewish theme, but we are careful not to become parochial in our vision or the experiences we seek. Marc Chagall is not the only painter; Jewish folk song is not the only folk music; Jewish ceremonial objects are rarely unique in design; American-Jewish literature and Yiddish literature are infinitely rewarding, yet other groups express themselves richly through poetry, novels and plays, and we will be made more deeply human for reading them. If we, as secular Jews, are to understand ourselves *in* the world, we must understand something *of* the world.

Secular Jews experience joy in their explorations of Jewish culture and history; in their endless discoveries that the Jewish heritage is basically secular, that religion is another social institution to be understood within framework along with other historical activities.

Well, that's my profile of the secular Jew. What's yours?

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