

Jewish tradition (as appropriate), too.

Rather than castigating those who joined congregations as submitting to “circumstances of oppression and fear,” we should also explore the positive reasons they made their choice, and then reach out to them with new alternatives that speak to them where they are, not where their parents were or where we want them to be. This is what Humanistic Judaism strives to do — to reach secular Jews from many backgrounds: raised secular, raised Conservative or Reform or even Orthodox and evolved out of those origins; Americanized Israeli and Russian Jews; “just Jews” who feel culturally and ethnically Jews. A big-tent secular Jewishness or Hu-

manistic Judaism (or whatever you call it) should try to bring them all together by what they share — a cultural Jewish identity driven by a human-focused philosophy of life — which is greater than what divides them.

Demanding that secular Jewish circles believe in all 95 Theses means a small future, not the serious presence we both need and deserve.

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**Alice Rothchild**

## Secularism Is Endangered without Progressivism

**T**he vigorous secular Jewish culture of the early 20<sup>th</sup> century was grounded in a potent mix of *yidishkayt* and progressive politics. Yiddish, the language of the worker as well as the poet, was a fertile vehicle for American populism and activism, melded to a Jewish identity stretching back to the shtetls of Eastern Europe. As Jews lost their underdog/outsider status, many assimilated or joined suburban temples, and the old-world cohesion and the political pull of union struggles, civil rights, and women’s liberation lost their potency.

On another front, with the founding of the State of Israel in 1948, Jewish identity increasingly became synonymous with Zionism. Immediately after the Holocaust, this presented few issues for Jews, secular or religious, and was a point of group cohesion. But the Israeli-Palestinian conflict ground on for decades, with the emergence of painful insights from Israeli historians and increasing awareness of a coexisting Palestinian narrative. With the destructive persistence of the Israeli

occupation, politically progressive Jews found themselves forced to choose between an uncritical love of Israel or a complex, multi-dimensional understanding of the Middle East. Many secular Jews, uninvolved with any form of religious Judaism and weighted with a sense of alienation from the basic tribal instincts of the group, began to ask: Why be Jewish, if it means bearing responsibility for a country that is building walls and ghettos and treating Palestinians with a mixture of hubris and racism?

The policies of the Israeli government — despite the country’s vibrant educational, cultural, and religious contributions — have thus tainted many Jews’ pride in their history and their sense that Jews are on the side of justice. Without that sense, secular Jews are an increasingly endangered species. Besides self-deprecating humor, *klezmer* music, and comforting food, there is less and less to draw upon in secular Jewish culture that is both particularly engaging and particularly Jewish. The rise of the Jewish right, their links to

Christian evangelicals, and the muzzling of Jewish dissent on the topic of Israel, push many secular Jews over the edge.

The paucity of vibrant and growing progressive Jewish secular movements and cultural institutions combined with the troubling consequences of Zionism, make secular Judaism a hard sell to

the next generation in search of their unique place, identity, and community.

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**Jerald Bain**

## An Unorthodox View of Survival

**D**espite the cover title — “Does Jewish Secularism Have a Future?” — the May-June issue of JEWISH CURRENTS was mainly a nostalgic review of what was. Secular Jewish history of any merit seemed to end with the demise of *yidishkayt* in the 1960s. This was clearly enunciated by April Rosenblum in her article, which gave a very coherent and interesting version of events that, in her view, caused the disintegration and ultimate loss of the vibrant, secular, Yiddish/ideologically-based Judaism so near and dear to many of us raised in that tradition. But she ended her overview with this: “The loss of a proud, actively secular Jewish identity was a casualty of a larger push to subdue Jewish ethnicity as a whole . . . What has been lost is the range of possibilities in which actively secular Jewish identity is one of the legitimate ways to be a proud Jew.”

Has she not heard of the Congress of Secular Jewish Organizations (CSJO), the Society for Humanistic Judaism (SHJ), the Workmen’s Circle and many, many more Secular Jewish individuals, congregations and organizations in active pursuit of secular Jewish identity both old and new?

Lawrence Bush’s “Dinosaur Days” gave an entertaining, personalized romp through his Secular Jewish experience. But what did his last page say? “Guess it’s time to go looking for dinosaurs! Anybody else out there?” For those of us born and raised in a classical Secular Jewish milieu,

it is warm and fuzzy and heartwrenching to recall the past fondly — but yes, there is somebody else out there and they’re not hard to find (at least in larger cities).

Rabbi Adam Chalom’s eloquent tribute to Rabbi Sherwin Wine held out hope for a glimpse of the present and perhaps the future. It described Rabbi Wine’s transformation from a Reform rabbi into a Humanistic rabbi and the creation of the world’s first Humanistic congregation; the article did not, however, address the future or the achievements of the present. How many JEWISH CURRENTS readers know, for example, of the successful growth and development of SHJ congregations in Canada and United States?

Many of the ideas expressed by the respondents have been grist for the discussion mills of the conferences of both the CSJO and the SHJ. The concept of spirituality, for example, has been well-worked over. Is spirituality possible only in the context of divine inspiration? Of course not. Why do you need a god to experience awe at the grandeur and beauty of the natural world? Why do you need a god to feel inspiration and excitement, sometimes to the point of tears, upon seeing a beautiful work of art or hearing an incredible piece of music? Theists have no corner on the spiritual market.

*Another jarring sentiment arose from the pages* of the May-June issue: the desire of some to have