

Shir Shalom's "Newsletter Lite"

July, 2001

This long overdue edition of your newsletter comes to you with apologies from your editor, who has lost (or at least misplaced) his momentum concerning the regular publication of past and forthcoming events of concern to the members of Shir Shalom. You'll notice that not only is the newsletter late; it is also in a much simpler format than that of the previous editions. I hope you don't mind too much.

Table of Contents

[New Arrivals](#)

[Letter from John](#)

[Rabbinic Judaism](#)

[Roots of Secular Humanistic Judaism](#)

[Visit by Rabbi Cohen](#)

[Paper Clip Project](#)

[A Little Humor](#)

[Calendar](#)

New Arrivals

ASCHER

Dan and Danielle Ascher are proud to announce the arrival of **Joshua Samuel Ascher**, who was born on May 16, 2001 at 11:19 PM, weighing in at 6 lbs., 14 oz. He is shown below with his big brother Benjamin, and again in a quiet moment alone.

We wish the very best to the entire family. Mazel tov!



..... And there's MORE!

BRODSKY

Miranda Nian Xin Brodsky, born April 20, 2000 in China, arrived home in Swarthmore in early June. She is shown below with her deliriously happy mother, Ingrid Rosenback. Our warmest congratulations to the entire Brodsky family.



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A newsletter wouldn't be a newsletter without a letter (or two) from John Brodsky.

Letter, by John Brodsky, to the editor of the Philadelphia Inquirer on March 17, in response to an article entitled "Proposal for federal funding for a faith-based program designed to improve the moral character of its enrollees."

(Abridged slightly by your editor)

To the attention of the reviewer:

In considering the merits of our application for funding as a faith-based program for individual personal improvement in moral character—and the resultant social benefits which must accompany this—one may well ask how an agnostic community can qualify.

Our answer is based on the definition of faith. Faith has been described—glibly—as, "The evidence of things unseen". This is a poor definition, as evidence is more reliably acquired by the senses; this is "evident". Evidence of things unseen is, actually, a bias developed from evidence of things seen, or believed, or imagined, in the past.

A better definition of faith describes it as a belief, or a set of beliefs, regarding the structure and the behavior of apparent phenomena. As we can never be certain that physical law will continue to operate in the future as it has done in the past, all suppositions about future effects resulting from past or present causes are based on faith.

Religious faith usually involves beliefs regarding creation and purpose. To these beliefs are typically attached ethical principles—though there is no logical connection between ethics and either "creation" or "purpose".

As regards purpose, there is often an assumed connection to ethics; but this is based on two additional beliefs. The first of these is that we can tell good from bad. This is a subjective humanistic axiom. It seems obvious, as it is based on affect; a biophysiological phenomenon which separates experience into rewarding (good) and punishing (bad).

The second belief which connects purpose to ethics is the belief in a Creator with a consciousness similar to our own—a God in man's image. This God would of course, agree on what is good and what is bad. This is a belief by assignation; regarding an infinite and therefore unknowable concept. There is, and has been, no good evidence for it. The faith this proposal concerns itself with does not address creation but does involve purpose and ethical principles; attaching them to humanistic concepts of value rather than to the normative codes usually found in religions.

An additional difference between religious faith and secular faith involves natural law. Religious faith in natural law is divided as follows: Some say that it may be repealed, (by the creator). This is called "miraculous". Some say that it may also be repealed by sentient beings of sufficient neurological complexity. This is called "free will".

Secular faith—where it exists in place of a thoroughgoing skepticism—is not divided, but it is far less certain than are the common forms of religious faith. Secular faith is based on probability, derived from the sensory evidence of events past. It usually takes the form of faith in causality.

SHIR SHALOM, affiliated with the Society for Humanistic Judaism, is primarily a cultural organization. Like most organizations, it is composed of individuals with faith, and can, therefore, be called a faith based institution. It has no aim to win converts by enculturation, though it is not opposed to this. It is not a religious organization, although some of its members may be religious in the sense of being creationists rather than "eternalists".

What this means for our proposed program of individual personal improvement in moral character is assayed in the list of aims and methods, as follows:

The program we offer is based on weekly group and one-on-one philosophical counseling. Individual psychological issues will be addressed with attention to their biological bases in affect and script theory. Historical references—based both on the personal biographies of the participants and the events of human history—will be used. Our aim is to replace emotional behavior based on negative scripting, with its negative effects, with rational behavior serving positive emotional goals for both the subjects involved and with their "objects": society at large. Faith in reason will be the byword.

The following two (lengthy) articles appeared in the newsletter of Kahal B'Raira, the SHJ affiliate in Boston. Their madrikh, Dennis Geller, writes and posts informative pieces intended to educate their membership about the wider world of Judaism and the philosophy of Humanistic Judaism. This article, along with others by Dennis, is available online at their website: www.kahalbraira.org

They appear here for your edification.

The Writings of Rabbinic Judaism

Dennis Geller

Judaism -- what you call "orthodox" or "traditional" Judaism -- isn't really what you thought it was. But then so little is, these days. Your "image" of orthodox Judaism probably goes something like this "When the Second Temple was destroyed and the Jews were exiled (the beginning of the Diaspora) the Rabbis carried the religion along with them, retaining the Torah but more-or-less ignoring the stuff about Temple sacrifices. They carried this new religion into Europe and ended up settling in Poland, Lithuania, Russia and places like that. They wrote a large literature of interpretation of the Torah — stuff with names like Mishnah, Talmud, Gemara, and Shulkhan Arukh. As some of the Jews embraced the enlightenment, the remainder fell into rigid orthodoxy, including movements like Hasidism. There were also some splinter groups in places like Spain (<http://www.kahalbraira.org/roots.html>) and Africa, not to mention India and China."

Actually, the story is quite different. It takes place during the period between 70 C.E. and 1800 C.E.

Destruction of the Second Temple

We begin with the destruction of the Second Temple. During the period of the Second Temple (515 BCE — 70 C.E. (see <http://www.kahalbraira.org/hellenistic.html>) the religion that we call Biblical Judaism took shape, and the books that make up Tanakh (the Hebrew Bible) were collected, edited and written. During this process sections were rewritten and edited to support the then-current theology. This was a theology in which the High Priests were the center of the religion, and the source of government power. (In the First Temple period the priests were subservient to the monarch.) The religion that these High Priestly families created is the one described in the Bible — especially in the Torah. As we'll see, it is not "Orthodox Judaism."

With the destruction of the Temple and the associated exile the Jewish religion lost its centers — the Temple, which was the one place on Earth that God resided; sacrifice as the focal action of religious observance; and the sense of being a people attached to a homeland.

Pharisees

The Pharisees were a priestly (but not High Priestly) group, largely followed by the lower and middle-classes. They tended to be opposed to Hellenization. Their unique religious doctrine was to posit the existence of a second Torah, complementary to the written one. This "oral" Torah — which had been passed on from Moses outside of the priestly hierarchy because he did not "trust" Aaron and the priests — was not seen as a gloss on the Pentateuch, but rather was supposed to be an independent tradition of equivalent standing. The Pharisees developed a class of scholars that could interpret and transmit their oral sacred text; these were initially called *sofreem* — "masters of the book." It is important to note that while the Pharisees differed with the Sadducees, the High Priestly family, they were not in any kind of open (or even covert) opposition to the ruling religious tenets of Judaism. The priests all prayed together (and stayed together).

However, when the Temple was destroyed the Pharisees were in an advantageous position. They had, in the *sofreem*, the nucleus of a clergy that was not tied to the Temple. They saw how to take advantage of the synagogues. These were meeting places (the Hebrew name is *Beit HaKnesset*) that had come into fashion as local sites to gather for prayer at the time that morning and evening sacrifices were taking place in the Temple. The Pharisees also had organizational sense. And, they had *chutzpah*. In particular, when the rebellion broke out they decided not to support it. Rabbi Johanan was arrested by the rebels when Jerusalem was under siege, but by pretending to be dead got himself removed from the city in a coffin. He promptly made his way to the Roman General Vespasian and as a result of his smooth talking the Romans accepted the Pharisees as the religious leaders after the rebellion was suppressed.

Over the next hundred years the Pharisees created the Yeshiva, as the place where Rabbis were trained in the oral Torah. They made their headquarters in Yavneh in about 80 C.E., at an academy founded by Rabbi Gamliel, a descendant of Hillel. After the Bar Kochba rebellion in 132 CE (in which the Rabbis did caught up because the Romans under Hadrian had determined to make Jerusalem a Roman colony and had — among other nasty reactions to the rebellion against that decree — prohibited circumcision) the Pharisees made a clever move. With mass deportations and a renaming for Jerusalem and for Israel having been decreed by the victorious Romans, the Rabbi Judah HaNasi seems to have persuaded the Romans that, with 5-7% of the Empire being Jews, it would be in Roman interest to centralize authority of the Jews in one person — him. This begins the Patriarchate, which lasts as the agency responsible for the behavior of all Jews in the Empire until the fifth century. The center of the Patriarchate is north of Jerusalem, in three centers: Sepphoris, Beit She'an, and Tiberias.

Mishnah

The Mishnah is the written form of the major part of the oral law. It emerged between 160 and 200 CE. The purpose of the yeshiva became to introduce Mishnah and the study of Torah. Mishnah (the name means "repetition," a subliminal argument that the ideas in it are an oral tradition stretching back for a millennium) is an instance of a nifty new idea that the Rabbis got from the Greeks — categorization. It is organized in six topical *Orders* — Farming, Holidays, Family, Crime, Temple, and Purity. It is written in Hebrew, although the people spoke Aramaic when it was written, because Hebrew is the language that Moses would have spoken it initially. The redaction of Mishnah actually begins before the Bar Kochba revolt, at least in part in individual notebooks of scholars, but is brought together under the leadership of Judah HaNasi and edited for the next 300 years.

It is important to understand that Mishnah is proffered as an independent tradition. It contains no references to the Pentateuch, any more than that contains references to Mishnah.

While Mishnah has many valuable ethical and legal statements, it argues (usually implicitly) by authority or on the basis of reward and punishment. Most of what we consider Orthodox Judaism comes from Mishnah. The Messiah, final judgement, redemption in the Garden of Eden are all important ideas that do not appear in Tanakh or in Biblical Judaism; they are Mishnaic ideas.

Gemara and Talmud

Mishnah is fairly cryptic. Its statements and conclusions are terse to the point of puzzlement, and often were found to be merely starting points for complex discussions. The discussions over interpretation form the Gemara, and Mishnah and *Gemara* together are what we now know as *Talmud*. There are actually two Talmudim, one compiled in

Jerusalem and one in Babylon; the latter is considered more authoritative but both are referred to. Gemara is the product of discussions by a group of scholars called *amoraim* ("explainers"). It is often very chatty, presenting conflicting views and arguments based on Mishnah, Torah, and other parts of the oral Torah that were not put into Mishnah. In Gemara we find the use of Scripture to justify laws in Mishnah. This shows a weakening of the original strong separation that the Pharisees maintained between the written and oral Torahs, and also probably reflects a fact that (written) Torah was still regarded as more authoritative than Mishnah by "the people."

There are some other important writings associated with Talmud. You may hear about *Tosefta* and *Beraita*. Tosefta consists of other Mishnaic commentaries that didn't get into the Mishnah -- afterthoughts and late entries, as it were. The Beraita is an unwritten collection of commentaries that we know of because they are mentioned in the Talmud and used as authorities or to draw conclusions. There is also *Midrash*. Midrash is an explanation of --or conclusion from -- scripture, used to justify the Oral Law. It comes in two flavors: *Halakhic*, which relates to the laws of Torah, and *Aggadic*, which is not considered obligatory and casts its comments in the form of stories and veiled metaphors (Esau, Jacob's enemy and brother, is used to represent an enemy. especially Rome. So, a statement like "Esau enjoys this world but not the next" is a code for "Rome is powerful today, but soon we're going to be free of it.") You'll see similar veiling of reference in Daniel, which speaks about the oppression by Babylon when it, too, means Rome.

The Muslim World and Jewish Life

Now let's watch as the 7th century dawns. Before it is over Muhammad will have created Islam and built the largest empire ever known. Jews (and Christians and Zoroastrians) were given a special second-class status, and for a number of reasons Jews were able to do quite well within that constraint. Although they tended to live separately and maintain their religious and dietary laws, they were generally accepted in the highest circles, and became physicians, politicians, philosophers and poets. By 700 about 80% of the Jews of the world lived under this empire, and the Caliph named the Exilarch (the logical descendant of the Patriarch) to be the ruler of all of them. This resulted in a "Supreme Court" in Baghdad that was able to answer questions of Jewish Law forwarded to it from around the world. These answers, called Responsa, were produced primarily between 650 and 1050 and are another source of interpretations of the Oral Torah.

Under Islam the Jews were a world people with a central administration, working in alliance with the Muslims. But all good things are subject to inter-family squabbling and fundamentalist revisionism. This happened to the Muslim empire, as 10th century Egypt was taken by a rival to the Caliph and the empire was split East from West. In the 11th century the Turks took the Eastern part of the empire. Then in the 13th century Ghengis Khan arose and his grandson not only took Baghdad but also killed everyone in it. None of this was good for the Jews.

Meanwhile, in 9th-10th century Judaism an internal opposition arose. This is the Karaite "heresy." The Karaites reverted to the Sadducean belief that the Oral Torah was a fraud,

and chose to adhere strictly to the written Torah. In their heyday they claimed about half of all Jewry as adherents. One thing that helped them was the practice of writing scripture without vowels. This allowed for many ambiguities, which the Karaites and Rabbis each exploited to prove their points. As a result of Karaite successes, the Rabbis created a version of Tanakh (the *Masoretic* text) which had all the vowels, and therefore resolved the ambiguities. The Rabbis at this time also wrote a standard book of prayer — the *siddur*.

But before we leave the Muslim world we must mention two other Rabbinic innovations. With Talmud, Midrash, and all the Responsa, it was getting pretty hard for the average ibn Benjamin on the street to know how to behave. Maimonides addressed this need with a superbly organized code of law, called the *Mishneh Torah*. But even this was too complex to serve as a ready reference for the average Jew, so Joseph Caro created the Cliff's Notes of Judaism, the *Shulkhan Arukh* (the *Set Table*).

Philosophical Jews

In discussing the significant writings of the Rabbinic period, we should also say a few words about medieval Jewish philosophy. Note that philosophy as known to the Greeks — the pursuit of knowledge through reason — is antithetical to religion. It was certainly frowned upon during Second Temple times. However, when they reach positions of wealth and stability under the Muslims Jews become attracted to it, in part because they look for ways to prove their religious tenets through reason.

Hellenistic philosophy was dominated (is this ever a breathtaking oversimplification!) by four schools, Plato, Aristotle, Zeno and Epicurus. Plato's shtick was Idealism, which led to the later (neo-Platonic) supposition that the Universe contains two different kinds of thing: substance and mind. Here soul is a piece of the mind (or spirit) world that gets stuck in the material world. Your job as a living being, should you choose to accept it, is to get unstuck. Aristotle saw mind and matter as inseparable. As he wrote in his famous MCAS question, mind is to body as shape-of-chair is to chair. He imagined a spectrum of seven related levels (spheres) from purely material to purely form. Zeno, the Stoic, said that everything that exists exists in Nature, and that Nature itself has a controlling intelligence. Epicurus followed the atomic theory and materialism of Democritus. He rejected supernatural concepts — if there are gods, he said, they are made out of the same stuff as the rest of us. The prime good was pleasure, but not in a hedonistic way. Rather, he believed in achieving inner peace and equilibrium. He wanted to banish fear and religion. He later took up residence outside of Detroit...

Once Romans start killing each other for the chance to be emperor (see *I, Claudius*, by Robert Graves, or Suetonius if you prefer original sources) philosophy withered somewhat. Its next major upsurge in Western (loosely interpreted) history was in the Muslim empire, where the wealthy Court became interested in pleasure and secularism. Muslim philosophy built upon the four Hellenistic traditions mentioned above — with the caveat that the Epicureanism in particular was seen as a threat by all but the most liberal regimes. (One philosopher who flourished in such liberal times was Omar Khayyam.) When philosophy broke out among the Muslims it was quickly adopted by Jewish intellectuals.

Although the Rabbis generally opposed philosophy, there was a series of Jewish philosophers in the 11th — 15th century who attempted to reconcile reason with Rabbinic Judaism. As a beginning of attempts to introduce reason into Jewish life, such philosophers as Judah HaLevi, Maimonides, Gersonides and Joseph Albo, can be viewed as among the roots of Humanistic Judaism, although their speculations and conclusions were not particularly Humanistic. (One possible exception is the 11th century Afghan philosopher Hiwalbalkhi, who argued that reason could not be used to prove or disprove the existence of God or of an immortal soul or life after death. He was of course widely denounced, but not actually killed!).

The Beginnings of Ashkenazic Jewry

And now for something completely different. When Charlemagne was crowned Holy Roman Emperor in 800 he saw a need to build trade. So he turned to the small group of Jews — called Romaniots --in Northern Italy. He invited them North; the Jewish name for Northern Europe was *Ashkenaz*. Imagine this. Did the Muslims and the Jews that lived with them eat beets, cabbage, onion, turnips and Baltic Sea Herring? Did they wear heavy furs? No way. The move into Ashkenaz was a profound culture shock for these Jews, who had to give up almost all of their cultural, domestic and culinary customs in their strange new land. In fact, even the common practice of removing shoes in the synagogue to show respect had to be abandoned.

The Jews in Ashkenaz became traders, and then bankers. Traders because, as had happened in the Muslim world already, they had contacts in every port. Bankers originally on the large scale --financing commercial ventures and the building of castles. There's an excellent picture of the cultural differences between the Sephardic and Ashkenazi Jews at this time in a recent novel by A. B. Yehoshua, *A Journey to the End of the Millennium*. But around 1100, the Pope starts his Crusades and the Lombards of Northern Italy begin to compete as bankers, which two events lead to 400 years of Jewish decline; the final blow is the Black Death of 1348 which triggers outbursts of Anti-Semitism. (Not that this was absent before; for example in the Lateran Council of Innocent III the Jews were named as agents of the devil, segregated, and forced to wear a distinctive badge.) Unable to participate in the feudal agricultural system, and forced out of merchant banking, the Jews were reduced to lending money to the peasants.

In the 14th century the Jews begin to move into the new Western Slavic state of Poland, which had been formed from smaller states in self-defense against the Germans, and which, unlike the other Slavic areas of Russia and Yugoslavia, had chosen the Roman Catholic instead of the Greek Orthodox religion. The new Poland had no economy to speak of, and so again the Jews were invited to immigrate and create one. One difference in Poland (and, when it merged with Poland, in Lithuania) was that Jews also became estate managers.

The Decline of Polish Jewry

Poland was initially a great place to be Jewish. They were granted a strong self-autonomy — communally as well as locally, with a federated government meeting in Lublin, and later a second in Lithuania. But in 1648 the Russian peasants rose up in rebellion against their Polish landlords — and the Jewish estate managers. They massacred 100,000 Poles and 100,000 Jews under the leadership of Chmielnitski. The Polish economy was destroyed so badly that it never completely recovered. There were now hundreds of thousands of economically depressed Jews. In particular, whereas with wealth the Jews had developed a class of parasites called Yeshiva *buchers* — young men who were able to spend their lives studying at the Yeshiva -- the economy could no longer support such excess. However, the practice continued, so important had it become to have people studying all the time and giving nothing back, that the communities impoverished themselves further to support it.

The New Judaism of Ashkenaz

What has all this to do with Rabbinic literature? With the Mishnah and Talmud and Responsa it may seem that we've got it all, but there's one more significant tradition. It's part of a religious idea much older and more universal than Judaism — shamanism. Judaism has always had people who claimed to be in direct contact with God. In Biblical times these were the prophets, and were honored. In medieval times these often appeared as false Messiahs, the best known being Shab'tai Tzvi in the 17th century Ottoman empire. In 18th century Ukraine a different sort of mystic appeared. Yisrael Ben Eleazar was shammes in a shul when he discovered that he had miraculous powers. Although he never claimed to be the Messiah his reputation spread, especially because of his compassionate teachings. One of the things he did that marks him as outside traditional religious doctrine and as one with magical powers was to say the name of God in his sermons; because of this he was called the Master of the Good Name — the *Ba'al Shem Tov*.

His students spread out to form what we know as the Hasidic movement. Each center formed around a miracle worker — its Rebbe. By the middle of the 18th century almost 50% of the Jews in Poland followed Hasidism.

How did the established Rabbis welcome them? Exactly as you'd expect— with horror. In fact the Hasidim were excommunicated en masse by the head of the Vilna shul. However, the movement continued to grow; the Rabbinic establishment was called by them the opposition — *mitnagdim*.

The Rabbis challenged the Hasidim to justify their teaching by reference to Torah. That being non-trivial, the Hasidim turned to an earlier tradition that was already associated with miracle workers — *Kabbala*. Kabbala is a Platonic mystical philosophy that begins with the *Sefer Ha Bahir* in the 12th century, and receives its most significant exposition in the *Zohar* (The Shining) in 14th century Spain. The *Zohar*, incidentally, was written in Aramaic to "prove" that it was an authentic book from the Second Temple era. In Kabbala every word of Torah is taken to have two meanings, with heavy application of

anagramming, *gematria* (numerology), and puns used to tease out the hidden "true" meaning.

Although originally reviled, after 135 years the Hasidic movement was finally regarded as firmly Orthodox — "ultra-Orthodox" as is sometimes said. By the time the 18th century came to a close, however, Rabbinic Judaism was collapsing due to such external forces as the money economy and the Enlightenment.

And here we are.

Roots of Secular Humanistic Judaism

by Dennis Geller

In August, Margi and I attended a seminar on the Roots of Secular Humanistic Judaism, at the Birmingham Temple in Detroit. The course was co-taught by Rabbi Sherwin Wine and Herschel Hartmann, a well-known secularist, Yiddishist, educator, long-time political activist, and leading light in the CSJO. In this note I'll try to summarize the quite extensive material covered.

The story begins with the Enlightenment. True, we can find some of our roots further back, occasionally in Tanakh or Talmud, certainly in Greek and Hellenistic civilizations, and in other writings at other times. But, especially in early Jewish tradition, we should not make the mistake of taking writings or events out of context and then attributing to them either secular or humanistic intent that they could not actually have shared. However much we may revere and be attracted to aspects of our thousands of years of history, a basic lesson of this course was that our movement is new. We cannot find "I am the master of my fate" in the Torah. It represents new ideas that could not and did not exist before the Enlightenment, the Industrial Revolution, urbanization of the bourgeoisie, leisure, and modern sociopolitics.

The Enlightenment, for a brief review, begins in the 17th century, with a mixture of science, philosophy, and religious and political turmoil. Through its major philosophers we can associate it with these questions: What is the best method for the discovery of truth; What is the nature of reality; What is the nature of people; What are right and wrong, and how do we know; What is the best way to organize a society. The revolution reflected in these questions, is recognized by changes in economy (mercantilism and then capitalism), knowledge (science and technology are the fuel for this revolution), secularity (in the sense that religion becomes less necessary and living standards rise), power (the acceptance the human beings are not helpless in the face of the universe), values (deriving from shifts in authority and a developing taste for making personal choices), and political changes (capitalism requires competent managers in government as well as business).

From these movements we see the growth of a number of familiar philosophical movements. We can trace the roots of agnosticism and atheism as far back as Aristotle, whose notion of a deity was a prime mover, more a geometrical concept than a conscious intervening creature. Spinoza got in hot water for saying that God "is" nature and others, in particular Kant, weighed in as well. By the 18th and 19th centuries disbelief was a perfectly acceptable idea in polite society, and God was given a final philosophic death blow by the Logical Positivists, especially A.J. Ayer, who demonstrated that you can't prove the existence of God because there's no way to establish exactly what it meant by "god." Materialism, meanwhile, was rejecting the existence of any supernatural world.

Another important movement was humanism. There are two common confusions here (I've made them, anyway). Humanism is not humanitarianism, the desire to help and be concerned about people in general and specific. Neither is it quite the same as what was meant in the Renaissance by humanism, which simply meant the appreciation of the human body and mind. The humanism that developed during the Enlightenment affirmed both the significance and the power of humans. Comte spoke of the development of knowledge as a relocation of power, and Feuerbach came right out and said "Man creates Gods." These would have been fighting words a hundred years earlier. Now they were polite salon conversation.

While Jews were becoming enlightened and assimilated (to a lesser extent than today, of course) in Western Europe, the story was quite different in the East. There, although the intellectuals, the maskilim, came from the west to teach, they found themselves learning. They had to learn Yiddish to communicate with the masses, and this began a mirror process of developing depth in the language, which soon led to the great explosion of Yiddish as a language of literature. The people of Eastern Europe were also ready to explode. Packed into the Pale of Settlement, treated badly at the best of times, and much more urbanized and industrialized than the rest of Russia (which was not hard, given that Russia had only two cities of note and maintained its serf-based economy) the Jews were ready for action. Among those actions was labor action, notably the founding of the Jewish Labor Bund in 1897. Given that the Jews were in essence a nation within Russia, as other national groups also were, their aspirations – awakened by the maskilim and their students – focused not on Zionism but on some form of self-determination where they were (A movement called Doh-ikheit, or here-ness). Note though that there was another strong movement the Territorialists, that also wanted to preserve the "nation" as it existed in the Pale, but though to find an unpopulated area in Africa, Western Australia or Pella, IA, to move to. After the Russian Revolution the Bund was able to win its demand to be part of the movement but as explicit representative of the Jewish people. Their further demand that there be Jewish cultural self-determination in any region where Jews were a majority was rejected until the '20s, when in those areas all schools and government activities were made officially bilingual. This happy state existed until 1937

when Stalin cut it off and exiled many Yiddish leaders. Among the opposition of the nationalists to the Zionist agenda were the following arguments: (1) Zionism separates Jewish workers from others; (2) Zionism only postpones liberation, since there's no realistic hope of getting control of Palestine from the Turks; (3) Zionism has bourgeois leaders who were not above dealing with the oppressors, as Hertz had once met with high Czarist ministers.

Let's note briefly some of the pioneer advocates of Secular Jewishness. One was Moses Hess (1812-1875), perhaps the first to call for a return to Israel from a purely secular perspective. Hess (once a collaborator of Marx and Engels but later estranged from their movement) proposed a return of all Jews to the homeland and the development of a communally owned land based on social justice and other Jewish values. A second was Asher Ginzberg, who called himself Ahah HaAm -- "one of the people" (1856-1912). He became a critic of the early settlements (the First Aliyah), arguing instead for building a single model settlement that would need no philanthropic infusions of cash to survive, and for an enlightened policy of relations with the Arabs. Rather than having the homeland become the single solution to all Jewish problems, he argued for a national spiritual center that would energize Jews throughout the Diaspora. Eliezar Ben-Yehuda (born Eliezar Perelman, 1858-1922) was the person most responsible for the institutionalization and revival of Hebrew. Among his credits are the establishment of girls' Hebrew schools, sponsoring the use of Hebrew to teach secular as well as Jewish subjects, and publishing the first newspaper in Hebrew to deviate from religious traditions and write about secular subjects. And, to name just one more, there was Leon Pinsker (1821-1891), a doctor from Odessa. Pinsker was editor of a newspaper whose goal was to encourage Jewish readers to learn Russian and become acquainted with Russian culture, and was also specifically involved with a society formed to disseminate the teachings of the Enlightenment to the Jews. However, after a series of pogroms in 1881 he published "Autoemancipation" in which he argued that the Jewish problem would never be solved so long as Jews lived among others and lacked a homeland of their own. He argued that increased tolerance of religion would not ultimately help the Jews because "we are not a religious sect but rather a people that was once a nation." Without a physical territory in which to establish their nationhood -- a nationhood open to all Jews, regardless of religious belief -- Jews would continue to be oppressed, even when assimilated in Enlightened countries.

All of these secular Jewish movements (and many others!) did not suddenly morph into our movement, Secular Humanistic Judaism, although they did flow more directly into the other secular Jewish movements which I'll mention below. Despite the successes of the nationalist movement, embodied in the State of Israel (we have slipped ahead, haven't we?) these successes left a number of problems for the Jews of North America. The destruction of the heart of Yiddish Nationalism and the relative decline in the socialist labor movements as American and Canadian Jews became suburbanized and professional, as well as the decline in anti-Semitism, took the organizing

centers away from North American Jews. This left secular Jews with no way to join with others. Thus, the typical phenomenon had them joining Reform or Conservative congregations to get some form of Jewish education for their children, and submerging their personal philosophies in order to do so. In 1963 the Birmingham Temple began with a handful of families, but grew quickly. The "humanistic" approach was adopted both because of its empowering and positive content and to counter the negative message that "secular" standing alone in the title seemed to imply.

But there are other secular Jewish trends in North America that, growing organically from roots in the European traditions, did not follow the same path as the founders (and now 30 communities) of SHJ. In the early days of immigration Jews were bound together by the Landsmanschaften – the social and mutual help societies composed of people from the same shtetl or area – and by the trade unions. These spawned, as their direct usefulness waned, other organizations. The Arbeter Ring was created in 1901 and was an important force that, after some intergenerational decline, is regaining some of its former strength today. There were some union oriented organizations, notable the Jewish National Labor Alliance, that provided their members with complete expressions of their Jewishness. There were also anarchist and socialist groups of various stripes. But in more modern times there have been groups that defined secularism to exclude both religion and politics from their definitions. Among these were the Sholem Aleichem Volks Institute and the International Workers Order. At the peak in the 40's organizations like these had at least 150,000 members; each had a national Yiddish school. However, as the population moved to the suburbs these organizations largely declined. In isolated places secular Jews banded together to create secular Jewish schools, and these eventually banded together to form the CSJO.

**A report, by John Brodsky, on the visit to Shir Shalom on May 18, 2001,
by Henry Cohen, Rabbi Emeritus of Congregation Beth David,
in Philadelphia**

I met Rabbi Henry Cohen on the pages of The Philadelphia Inquirer. He had written, in a letter to the editors regarding the coming presidential election, that 95% of American Jews have "some belief in God".

I was astonished, as I had recently been informed — at The Cooper Union meeting of secular Jews [*editor's note: John is referring to the biennial Colloquium of 2000*] — that most of us are agnostic! Indeed, I don't know any Jews, whether they profess a belief in creation or not, who feel that cosmology has any effect on their code of ethics.

So I struck up a correspondence, and I learned that the rabbi believed there was something special about Judaism which deserved preservation intact. I have always

wondered about that. It also reminded me of a remark made by a past speaker at one of our group's meetings.

He was a professional historian, Jewish, with an expertise in east European and Soviet Jewry. He is married to a non-Jewish woman. They have a son who is to be bar mitzvah. When I asked him what was to become of Judaism, he remarked, "Oh, it will disappear — except for isolated pockets of orthodoxy."

What impressed me was the benign expression of acceptance on his face; this Jewish scholar, whose 'son-of-a-shicksa' was being raised Jewish. How relaxed, I noticed—almost Buddhist—at peace and at rest within the tides of history.

I assume that Rabbi Cohen would agree that any attempt to preserve Judaism as 'a people' requires emotional enculturation more than it does the continuation of any particular intellectual philosophy. So I invited him to convince us that this enculturation in a worthy endeavor.

As befits a mensch — as opposed to a meshugeneh, (see our newsletter Uol 2 #3)— the rabbi did a fine job with his argument, supporting his position with reference to a flexible and modern form of Judaism.

He pointed out that as long as people existed in "divisions greater than families and smaller than nations" (and it was noted that there may be evolution—influenced genetic factors guiding this), subgroups based on reason must maintain themselves in the interest of the whole of humanity.

When questioned regarding non-denominational secular humanistic groups, the rabbi withheld comment; again emphasizing that in a world characterized by much dogma and rigidity, all groups which function within a tradition of debate and free inquiry are to be treasured.

Throughout his presentation, reference to the recurrent polarity between "the given" and the "man-made" arose. While it may seem obvious that codes based on religion, or on other forms of cultural tradition, are in large measure "given", (i.e., handed down, though not necessarily eternally — handed down from a supernatural source), there is another distinction between the given and the man-made, it is an ethical distinction based on emotional experience with others. The distinction is between a rational or 'common sensical' situation—based ethics growing out of a trust in human nature, and a more rigid control by law, based on a lack of trust in human nature. Religious law relies on the latter. Debate over religious law relies on the former. Jewish tradition it would seem, is humanistic, in that free inquiry — the cornerstone of man—made law — is central.

Regarding creation, Jewish belief varies. Regarding morality, Jews believe in themselves.

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THE PAPER CLIP PROJECT

A unique project has been underway in Tennessee. The following report, lifted from the San Diego SHJ Community's newsletter, should be of interest to us all.

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I would like to share some information about the extraordinary Paper Clip Project conducted by students of the Whitwell Middle School, located in Tennessee. The Whitwell students collected six million paperclips to represent the Jews of the Holocaust. - in fact, they are still collecting them and have 20,223,112 as of June 15! The following information is from their website: www.marionschools.org/holocaust/

Whitwell Middle School is a small rural middle school located in eastern Tennessee. Our student body consists of about 425 students who are mostly Christian with very little cultural diversity. In our entire student body, we have only 5 African-American and 1 Hispanic student. We have no Jewish or Catholic children ...It is for this reason that we decided that our students needed to be prepared to handle the diverse world that they will be charged with leading in the future.

When we mentioned that 6,000,000 Jews were murdered in the Holocaust, our students could not believe that that many people were killed and no one did anything to stop it. So, to show them just how many 6,000,000 is, we came up with the paper clip project.

We choose paper clips for a special reason. During World War II, Norwegians wore paper clips on their clothes to silently show their opposition to Nazism and Anti-Semitism.

When the paper clips are collected, we will use them to erect a monument in memory of those murdered in the Holocaust. We had planned to melt the clips into a mold and make a sculpture. However, since each paperclip was given to represent a human life or soul, putting them into fire is wrong. We are trying to find an authentic railroad car that was used to transport the prisoners to the death camps. We would like to place glass ... creating a walkway through the middle of the train. ... (which) will be full of paperclips.

Our project is on-going. Please send paper clips to support our educational endeavors.

Whitwell Middle School
Paper Clip Project
1130 Main Street
Whitwell, TN 37397

And now for a little levity

Subject: Fw: Sad News

Date: Mon, Jun 11, 2001, 5:18 PM

Dear Friends,

It is with the saddest heart I pass on the following news.

Please join me in remembering a great icon -- the veteran Pillsbury spokesman.

The Pillsbury Doughboy died yesterday of a yeast infection and complications from repeated pokes in the belly. He was 71. Doughboy was buried in a lightly greased coffin.

Dozens of celebrities turned out to pay their respects, including Mrs. Butterworth, Hungry Jack, the California Raisins, Betty Crocker, Twinkie the Kid, and Aunt Jemima.

The gravesite was piled high with flours. Longtime friend Captain Crunch delivered the eulogy, describing Doughboy as a man who never knew how much he was kneaded.

Doughboy rose quickly in show business, but his later life was filled with turnovers. He was not considered a very "smart cookie," wasting much of his dough on half-baked schemes. Despite being a little flaky at times, he was still, even as a crusty old man, considered a roll model for millions. Toward the end it was thought he would rise again, but alas, he was no tart.

Doughboy is survived by his wife, Play Dough; two children, John Dough and Jane Dough; plus they had one in the oven. He is also survived by his elderly father, Pop Tart.

The funeral was held at 3:50 for about twenty minutes.

CALENDAR

August 5, Sunday, 11:30 AM: Annual meeting and pool party, at Gail Farber's home in Villanova.

August 29, Wednesday: Board meeting (location and time to be decided).

September 7, Friday: Shabbat gathering and Israeli folk dancing, at Laura Cohn's home in Bala.

September 17, Monday evening: Rosh Hashanah observance. (Particulars to be announced.)

September 26, Wednesday evening: Kol Nidrei (Erev Yom Kipur) observance. (Particulars to be announced.) **Note: This will be Shir Shalom's only gathering for Yom Kipur.** Other organizations in the consortium will be sponsoring other observances on the day of Yom Kipur.

October 7, Sunday: Sukkot gathering. Annual Sukkah party at the Wickman home in North Wales. (Details to be announced.)

October 27, Saturday evening: Havdalah gathering at Gail Farber's new home. Details and directions to be announced in advance of the event. Congratulations to Gail and Roger on their new home.

November 30, Friday evening: Shabbat gathering, probably at Lynne and Alan's home.

December 16, Sunday afternoon: Hanukkah at John and Ingrid's home in Swarthmore. Let's make Miranda's first Hanukkah one to

remember!