

Jewish Culture

I. Introduction

Ethnic identity is expressed through culture, and Jewish identity finds its expression through Jewish culture. The study and celebration of Jewish culture is basic for Secular Humanistic Jews, for a primary plank of that ideology is an identification with the experience of the Jewish people (their history) and with the creations of the Jewish people (their culture). If Judaism is considered exclusively a religion, then culture is far less important than religious doctrine. If, however, Judaism is considered a civilization, then Jewish religion becomes as important a subsection as Jewish culture. And many contemporary Jews connect to their Judaism as a culture rather than through pious belief and practice.

Jewish culture finds its most frequent expression in two cycles of time: the cycle of the seasons (*i.e.*, the calendar year) and the cycle of life. As with every culture, major transitions in life are marked with important celebrations: birth, adulthood, marriage, and death. In both calendar and life-cycle celebrations, Jewish practice has evolved over history and in various ways in different parts of the Jewish world. Tradition regards current practices as “the way it has always been;” in other words, Abraham ate *matsa* for Passover even though the Exodus would not take place for another 500 years. Secular Humanistic Jews study the development of Jewish holidays and life-cycle celebrations over centuries to better understand the *real* origins of current practices and also to rediscover meanings to the observances that speak more powerfully to secular modern life.

Jewish culture is also the recording of creativity: literature, music, and art. One challenge with Jewish literature is that one work (the Bible) looms over all others, but it is crucial to realize that Jewish literary creativity continues to this day and in many forms. Historically, much Jewish literature, music, and art has focused on religious themes and expressions, but not all, and certainly not much of modern Jewish culture. When studying Jewish cultural creativity, Secular Humanistic Jews can examine the wide range of what Jews have produced, from Isaiah to Gershwin and everything in between.

The so-called “high culture” of literature and art is paralleled by a “low culture” of everyday life, which is lived in lifestyle, food, and language. Almost nothing is as “Jewish” as certain foods, yet what counts as Jewish food for one group seems alien to another – Sephardic Jews see *kugel* as alien, while *kibbeh* is exotic for Ashkenazim. Certain dietary restrictions historically applied across Jewish civilization, but today questions of diet are more complicated than ever between Kosher, vegetarian, and vegan. And in every land in which Jews lived, they created new forms of personal expression, often taking the languages around them and making them “Jewish” by writing them in Hebrew letters. The Jews have created (and forgotten) more languages than just about any other people. Yet a study of the wide varieties of Jewish culture can help identify what makes them all “Jewish,” and what it is that makes Secular Humanistic Judaism Jewish as well.

Jews have lived, live, and will live in Jewish culture; it is what they create, it is what they learn, it is who they are. When we celebrate Jewish culture, we really celebrate the Jewish people in all of their diversity and creativity.

Discussion Questions

I. Introduction

1. Why is the study of Jewish culture important for Secular Humanistic Jews?
2. What are some of the major differences between how Judaism historically viewed its cultural practices and how Secular Humanistic Jews see them?
3. What is the difference between “high” Jewish culture and “low” Jewish culture? Which may be more fruitful for Secular Humanistic Jews to study?
4. What are the boundaries of “Jewish Culture”? What is included, and what is left out by different definitions?
5. How does the answer to “what counts as Jewish culture” affect Secular Humanistic Judaism?

Readings: Holidays and Life Cycle Events

Primary source readings available at web sites listed. Students strongly encouraged to purchase *The Guide to Humanistic Judaism* (Farmington Hills, MI: Society for Humanistic Judaism, 1993). Available through SHJ office, 248-478-7610 or www.shj.org.

High Holidays and Major Festivals

Guide to Humanistic Judaism, entries on “Blessings,” “Calendar,” “Candlelighting,” “Fasting,” “Holidays,” “Passover,” “Rosh Hashana,” “Shabbat,” “Shavuot,” “Sh’ma,” “Sukkot,” “Wine,” “Yom Kippur”

Leviticus 23 – etext.lib.virginia.edu/rsv/browse.html

The Four Questions – <http://www.jewfaq.org/holidaya.htm#Music>.

Minor and Modern Jewish Holidays

Guide to Humanistic Judaism, entries on “Hanukka,” “Lag B’Omer,” “Purim,” “Rosh Hodesh,” “Simhat Torah,” “Tisha B’Av,” “Tu B-Shevat,” “Yom Haatsma’ut,” “Yom Hashoa,” “Yom Hazikaron”

For reference, see Jewish holiday chart in *Historical Atlas of the Jewish People* (Barnavi), p72-3

Birth and Bar/Bat Mitzvah

Guide to Humanistic Judaism, entries on “Bar/Bat Mitsva,” “Birth Celebrations,” “Brit Milah,” “Celebrations”

Traditional Brit Milah Ceremony

Genesis 17 – etext.lib.virginia.edu/rsv/browse.html

Marriage and Death

Guide to Humanistic Judaism, entries on “Adult Ceremonies,” “Death,” “Funeral,” “Intermarriage,” “Marriage,” “Marriage Celebrations,” “Mourning practices”

Traditional Sheva B’rakhot (Seven Blessings)

Traditional Kaddish – www.jewfaq.org/prayer/kaddish.htm

Alternative Seven Blessings – Adam Chalom

Alternative Kaddishes – Peter Schweitzer, Sherwin Wine

Jewish Culture

Ila – Holidays – High Holidays and Major Festivals

As with all of Judaism, separating history from myth and legend regarding Jewish holidays is difficult. The origins of many holidays must be guessed, because later generations decreed how to observe them and eliminated alternatives. The major holidays of the Priestly calendar, later adopted and reinterpreted by the Rabbis, are listed in Leviticus 23 – Shabbat, Atonement, and Pilgrimage Festivals. Typical of later rabbinic innovations, the calendar listed there begins in spring, not fall, as does our rabbinic Jewish calendar. Nevertheless, the essentials of the Jewish approach to celebrating time remain.

The basic building blocks of Jewish culture are celebrations of units of time – day, week, month, year. The Jewish day begins at night and ends the next day, based on the biblical “And there was evening, and there was morning” (Genesis). The Jewish calendar is made up of 12 lunar months of 29 or 30 days and is coordinated with the solar year by adding a leap month 7 out of 19 years. The new moon marks the beginning of every month (*Rosh Hodesh*), and some major holidays take place on the 15th, the full moon. An important holiday in every month, however, occurs every 7 days – *Shabbat* (Sabbath). Originally a commemoration of the Genesis creation story, Shabbat and its many practices, restrictions, and customs are emblematic of Rabbinic Judaism.

The High Holidays in Leviticus are straightforward: in the 7th month, a special assembly is held on the first day of the month, and the 10th day is *yom ha-kippurim* (Day of Atonements), a day of self-denial and repentance. Those 10 days became known as Days of Judgment, or the Days of Awe, when it was decided who would live and who would die; since the rains in Israel, which determined food production, come shortly afterwards, the meaning fit. In Rabbinic Judaism, the “High Holy Days” became the beginning of the calendar, the first day now called *Rosh Hashana* (head of the year). Many practices and texts, both liturgical and biblical, were associated with these holidays, which remain a high point in synagogue attendance and Jewish identity.

The major pilgrimage festivals originally represented three times during each year when Israelite males were obligated to offer special sacrifices in the Jerusalem Temple. *Pesakh* (Passover), the spring pilgrimage, actually combined two earlier harvest festivals: the week-long *khag ha-matzot* (unleavened bread – wheat) and the one-day *khag ha-pesakh* (lamb sacrifice). *Shavuot* (Weeks) was the sacrifice of first fruits and took place 7 weeks after Passover. *Sukkot* (Booths) celebrated the fall harvest. The Priestly and Rabbinic editors of Jewish culture added their own meanings and rituals to these festivals. *Pesakh/Matzot* became the celebration of the Exodus story, and the festive meal and practices in fixed order (*seder*) as described by the Rabbis is still one of the most recognizable and universal Jewish practices. *Shavuot* received the added sense of Israel’s reception of the Torah from God at Mount Sinai. *Sukkot* now signified wandering in the Sinai Desert for 40 years. Each holiday also was assigned a special biblical reading from the Writings: Song of Songs for *Pesakh*, Ruth for *Shavuot*, and Ecclesiastes for *Sukkot*.

Changing circumstances in Jewish life necessitated changes in holiday observance: Jews in the Diaspora lived far from the Temple and could not worship by direct sacrifice, and after the Temple’s destruction in 70 C.E. new forms of worship for all Jews had to be created. At this point, new rabbinic interpretations and practices for these major holidays began to evolve, as they continue to do in modern times.

Discussion Questions

Major Holidays

1. How does the Jewish calendar differ from the Gregorian calendar? What advantages come from celebrating the Jewish cycle of the year?
2. When Leviticus 23 was written, what appears to have been the most important holiday? How does the Leviticus calendar differ from the modern Jewish calendar?
3. How do Secular Humanistic Jews treat the High Holidays?
4. What were the historical origins of the three pilgrimage festivals (Pesakh, Shavuot, Sukkot)? How were their meanings modified by Rabbinic Judaism?
5. How do Secular Humanistic Jews treat the three pilgrimage festivals?

Jewish Culture

IIb – Life Cycle Events – Marriage and Death

Like birth and coming of age, the creation of new families is a universally-celebrated phenomenon. And the end of the life cycle in death is similarly an important time for those who survive. These two ceremonies present some of the most recognizable and distinctive elements of Jewish culture, and also some of the most problematic.

Traditionally, marriage was seen as a re-enactment of the original pairing in the Garden of Eden. The basic Rabbinic legal requirements for marriage were simple: a gift of a ring from groom to bride with a special phrase (“Behold, you are consecrated to me by this ring according to the law of Moses and Israel”) in front of two witnesses was enough. Over centuries, different customs were added to this basic formula. A *Ketuba*, or marriage contract, spelled out what dowry a bride brought to a marriage and thus what property she was entitled to in case of a divorce. A *Huppah*, or canopy, was erected originally as a sign of the chance of rain but interpreted to symbolize their home together. The *Sheva B’rakhot* (see Traditional Seven Blessings) soon became part of the ceremony, as did the pre-nuptial ceremony of *Badeken*, or veiling, to ensure the correct bride was at the ceremony. The end of the wedding was marked by the breaking of a glass, originally to scare away evil spirits but popularly interpreted as a memorial of the destruction of the Temple. Hasidic communities in Eastern Europe would parade the couple around on chairs, a tradition that today is widely practiced among many Jews, regardless of affiliation.

In this case, many of the traditional texts are problematic for Secular Humanistic Jews, but not the concepts – a pre-nuptial agreement, a canopy, new versions of the seven blessings can all be creative ways to celebrate the creation of a new family. The traditional prohibition on marrying outside of the Jewish people, which dates back to 450 BCE, has become much weaker in modern times, and for Secular Humanistic Jews it may be a family problem but is no longer an ideological issue. The focus is on the couple creating the marriage, not on divine or communal sanction.

At the other extreme, death also can evoke primitive and powerful behaviors. Jews traditionally bury their dead within 24 hours (unless it is Shabbat or a festival), which makes sense in Middle Eastern climates. The close family of the deceased would cover mirrors, sit on low stools, tear their clothing (today a ribbon pinned on nice clothes) and in general not enjoy themselves for *shiva* {seven} days – hence the custom of “sitting *shiva*,” even if only for a few days. Every year, on the anniversary of the death, a special *yizkor* {He will remember} candle is lit for the entire day. The main text to be recited by mourners, both in synagogue and at graveside, is the *Kaddish* {sanctification}, an affirmation of faith. It became customary for those at the interment to each drop some earth on the coffin before it was sealed. In Rabbinic theology, death was only temporary, as at the end of days all would be resurrected in the land of Israel to eternal life.

For Secular Humanistic Jews, death is real and final. Use of the traditional *Kaddish* is controversial, and the other mourning practices are followed to varying degrees. For Secular Humanistic Jews, mourning rituals should conform to the needs of the living, not to fear of the spirits of the dead or to divine judgment. Some opt for cremation as an economical and ecological decision, while others choose burial. The focus of a memorial service is on celebrating the life of the deceased, and the concept of *Nizkor* – We will remember.

The Seven Wedding Blessings - Traditional

בְּרוּךְ אַתָּה יְיָ אֱלֹהֵינוּ מֶלֶךְ הָעוֹלָם שֶׁהִכֵּל בְּרָא לְכְבוֹדוֹ.

Blessed are you, YHWH, our God, king of the world, who created everything for his honor.

בְּרוּךְ אַתָּה יְיָ אֱלֹהֵינוּ מֶלֶךְ הָעוֹלָם יוֹצֵר הָאָדָם.

Blessed are you, YHWH, our God, king of the world, who creates humanity.

בְּרוּךְ אַתָּה יְיָ אֱלֹהֵינוּ מֶלֶךְ הָעוֹלָם אֲשֶׁר יָצַר אֶת הָאָדָם בְּצַלְמוֹ בְּצַלְמֵי
דְמוֹת תְּבִנֵיתוֹ וְהִתְקִין לוֹ מִמֶּנּוּ בְנֵי עֲדֵי עַד. בְּרוּךְ אַתָּה יְיָ יוֹצֵר הָאָדָם.

Blessed are you, YHWH, our God, king of the world, who created the human in his image, in the image of his likeness, and prepared for him, from himself, a building for eternity. Blessed are you YHWH, who creates humanity.

שׁוֹשׁ תְּשִׁישׁ וְתִגַּל הָעֵקֶרָה בְּקִבוּץ בְּנֵיהָ לְתוֹכָהּ בְּשִׂמְחָה. בְּרוּךְ אַתָּה יְיָ
מְשַׂמַּח צִיּוֹן בְּבָנֶיהָ.

May the barren one surely rejoice and celebrate, when her children gather within her in joy. Blessed are you YHWH, who makes Zion joyful with her children.

שְׂמֵחַ תְּשִׂיחַ רַעִים הָאֲהוּבִים כְּשִׂמְחָתְךָ יְצִירָתְךָ בְּגֵן עֵדֶן מְקֻדָּם.
בְּרוּךְ אַתָּה יְיָ מְשַׂמַּח חֵתָן וְכֻלָּהּ.

You surely make joyful companions, the lovers, as you made joyful your creation in the Garden of Eden in ancient times. Blessed are you YHWH, who makes joyful the groom and bride.

בְּרוּךְ אַתָּה יְיָ אֱלֹהֵינוּ מֶלֶךְ הָעוֹלָם אֲשֶׁר בְּרָא שְׂשׂוֹן וְשִׂמְחָה חֵתָן וְכֻלָּהּ
גִּילָה רִנָּה דִּיצָה וְחֵדוּה אֲהָבָה וְאַחֻוּה וְשְׁלוֹם וְרַעוּת. מְהֵרָה יְיָ אֱלֹהֵינוּ
יִשְׂמַע בְּעָרֵי יְהוּדָה וּבְחֻצוֹת יְרוּשָׁלַיִם קוֹל שְׂשׂוֹן וְקוֹל שִׂמְחָה קוֹל חֵתָן וְקוֹל
כֻּלָּה קוֹל מְצַהֲלוֹת חֲתָנִים מְחַפְּתִים וְנְעָרִים מְמַשְׁתִּיחַ נְגִינָתָם. בְּרוּךְ אַתָּה
יְיָ מְשַׂמַּח חֵתָן עִם הַכֻּלָּה.

Blessed are you, YHWH, our God, king of the world, who created happiness and joy, groom and bride, mirth and song, pleasure and delight, love and fellowship, peace and companionship. Quickly, YHWH our God, make heard in the cities of Judah and in the streets of Jerusalem the voice of happiness and the voice of joy, the voice of the groom and the voice of the bride, the voice of jubilant grooms from their canopies, and of youths from their feasts of their songs. Blessed are you, YHWH our God, who makes joyful the groom with the bride.

בְּרוּךְ אַתָּה יְיָ אֱלֹהֵינוּ מֶלֶךְ הָעוֹלָם בּוֹרֵא פְרֵי הַגֶּפֶן.

Blessed are you, YHWH, our God, king of the world, who creates the fruit of the vine.

Seven Blessings – Creative Rabbi Adam Chalom

- 1) We are blessed by the glory and beauty of all the universe
Cong. – “Loo Y’Hee” or “May it Be”
- 2) We are blessed by the wonder & miracle of human existence
Cong. – “Loo Y’Hee” or “May it Be”
- 3) We are blessed to be male & female, men and women drawn to each other for love, companionship, family, and future.
Cong. – “Loo Y’Hee” or “May it Be”
- 4) We are blessed to celebrate the *simcha* (joy) of the Jewish people for new love and for new life. The people of Israel rejoice for our children.
Cong. – “Loo Y’Hee” or “May it Be”
- 5) We are blessed to enact the human drama of finding love and marriage in our lifetimes, as humanity has from the beginning. When we love, it is as pure as Eden, as joyful as Paradise.
Cong. – “Loo Y’Hee” or “May it Be”
- 6) We are blessed by joy and gladness, groom and bride, mirth, singing, pleasure, delight, love, brotherhood, peace, and companionship. May there be heard in the cities of Judah and the streets of Jerusalem the sound of joy and the sound of gladness – *kol sasson v’kol simkha*, the voice of the groom & the voice of the bride – *kol khatan v’kol kalah*. We are blessed by the love of bride and groom.
Cong. – “Loo Y’Hee” or “May it Be”
- 7) *Savri maranan v’rabanan d’etmol*
Kad’sheinu al ha-ya-yin
Savri maranan v’rabanan d’hayom
B’rukhim boray p’ri ha-ga-fen
The Rabbis and Sages of old proclaimed:
Let us sanctify this wine
The Rabbis and Sages of today proclaim:
Blessed is the fruit of the vine
{Wine blessing by Morris Sukenik}

Traditional Kaddish

יִתְגַּדַּל וְיִתְקַדַּשׁ שְׁמֵא רַבָּא. בְּעֵלְמָא דִּי בְּרָא כְרַעוּתָנָא וְיִמְלִיךְ מַלְכוּתָהּ בְּחַיִּיכוּן
וּבְיוֹמֵיכוּן וּבְחַיֵּי דְכָל בֵּית יִשְׂרָאֵל בְּעִנְיָהּ וּבְזִמְן קָרִיב וְאָמְרוּ אָמֵן.
יְהֵא שְׁמֵא רַבָּא מְבָרַךְ לְעָלְמָא וְלְעֵלְמֵי עֵלְמֵיָא.
יִתְבָּרַךְ וְיִשְׁתַּבַּח וְיִתְפָּאֵר וְיִתְרוֹמֵם וְיִתְנַשֵּׂא וְיִתְהַדָּר וְיִתְעַלֶּה וְיִתְהַלַּל שְׁמֵא דְקָדְשָׁא
בְּרִיךְ הוּא. לְעֵלְמָא מִן כָּל בְּרַבְתָּא וְשִׁירְתָּא תְּשַׁבְּחָתָהּ וְנַחֲמָתָא דְאִמְרִין בְּעֵלְמָא
וְאָמְרוּ אָמֵן.
יְהֵא שְׁלָמָא רַבָּא מִן שְׁמֵיָא וְחַיִּים עָלֵינוּ וְעַל כָּל יִשְׂרָאֵל וְאָמְרוּ אָמֵן.
עֲשֵׂה שְׁלוֹם בְּמִרוֹמֵיָן הוּא יַעֲשֶׂה שְׁלוֹם עָלֵינוּ וְעַל כָּל יִשְׂרָאֵל וְאָמְרוּ אָמֵן.

*Yeet-ga-dal v'yeet-ka-dash sh'mey rah-bah b'al-mah dee-v'ra chir-oo-tey v'yam-lich mal-chu-tey b'chy-
yey-chon u'v-cha-yey d'chol bayt yis-r'ayl ba-ah-ga-lah u'veez-mahn ka-reev v'eem-ru ah-meyn.*

Y'hey sh'mey rah-bah m'vah-rach l'ah-lam u'l'ahl-mey ahl-my-ah.

*Yeet-bah-rach v'yish-tah-bach v'yeet-pah-ar v'yeet-roh-mahrn v'yeet-nah-sey v'yeet-hah-dar v'yeet-ah-
ley v'yeet-hah-lal sh'mey d'koo-d'shah b'rich hoo l'ey-la meen kol bir-chah-tah v'shir-ah-tah toosh-
b'cha-tah v'neh-cheh-mah-ta dah-a-mee-ran b'al-ma v'eem-ru ah-meyn.*

Y'hey sh'lah-mah rah-bah meen sh'my-ah v'chy-eem ah-ley-nu v'al kol yis-r'ayl v'eem-ru ah-mehn.

Oh-sey sha-lom beem-roh-mav hoo yah-ah-sey sha-lom ah-ley-noo v'al kol yis-r'ayl v'eem-roo ah-meyn.

Glorified and sanctified be God's great name throughout the world which He has created according to His will. May He establish His kingdom in your lifetime and during your days, and within the life of the entire House of Israel, speedily and soon; and say, Amen. May His great name be blessed forever and to all eternity. Blessed and praised, glorified and exalted, extolled and honored, adored and lauded be the name of the Holy One, blessed be He, beyond all the blessings and hymns, praises and consolations that are ever spoken in the world; and say, Amen. May there be abundant peace from heaven, and life, for us and for all Israel; and say, Amen. He who creates peace in His celestial heights, may He create peace for us and for all Israel; and say, Amen.

Alternatives to Traditional Kaddish

Modern Kaddish / Glory of Life

May the glory of life be extolled. *L'chaim.*

May the world be blessed with peace, all life hallowed by love and respect. *L'chaim.*

Let life be blessed, and glorified, exalted and honored. *L'chaim.*

Though beyond praises, songs, and adorations we may utter, let life be celebrated. *L'chaim.*

For us, for all Israel, for all people, may the promise and the gift of life come true. *L'chaim.*

May peace embrace all of us, all Israel, and all the world. *L'chaim.*

May peace be granted us, we who mourn, and be a comfort to all who are bereaved, and let us say, *L'chaim.*

— Rabbi Peter Schweitzer

Humanistic Kaddish

וַיִּתְנַדֵּל וַיִּתְקַדֵּשׁ שְׁלָמָא בְּעָלְמָא.
 נִבְרָא שְׁלָמָא כְּרַעוּתָנָא וְנִמְלִיךְ מְלְכוּתָהּ בְּחַיִּיכוּן וּבְיוֹמֵיכוּן וּבְחַיֵּי דְכָל בֵּית יִשְׂרָאֵל
 בְּעַגְלָהּ וּבְזִמְן קָרִיב וְאָמְרוּ שְׁלוֹם.
 יְהֵא שְׁלָמָא רַבָּא מְבָרַךְ לְעָלְמָא וְלְעָלְמֵי עָלְמֵיָא.
 וַיִּתְבָּרַךְ וַיִּשְׁתַּבַּח וַיִּתְפָּאֵר וַיִּתְרוֹמֵם וַיִּתְנַשֵּׂא וַיִּתְהַדָּר וַיִּתְעַלֶּה וַיִּתְהַלַּל שְׁלָמָא בְּעָלְמָא
 בְּרִיךְ הוּא. לְעֵלְהָ מִן כָּל בְּרַכְתָּא וְשִׁירְתָּא תְּשַׁבְּחָתָהּ וְנַחֲמָתָא דְאִמְרֵן בְּעָלְמָא
 וְאָמְרוּ שְׁלוֹם.
 יְהֵא שְׁלָמָא רַבָּא וְחַיִּים עָלֵינוּ וְעַל כָּל יִשְׂרָאֵל וְאָמְרוּ שְׁלוֹם.
 נַעֲשֵׂה שְׁלוֹם בְּעוֹלָם עָלֵינוּ וְעַל כָּל הָעוֹלָם וְאָמְרוּ שְׁלוֹם.

Wonderful is peace in the world.

Let us create a peaceful world and let us establish its kingdom now and in the future.

May peace come upon us to bless our lives.

May we always continue to honor peace in the world

even though no praise can equal the importance of its reality.

May peace and life prevail for us and for all Israel.

Let us work to create peace here on earth for all people, and let us say Peace.

The Memory of Good People

Zay-cher tza-deek lee-v'ra-kha. זכר צדיק לברכה

The memory of a good person is a blessing.

— Proverbs 10:7

Zay-cher tza-deek-keem lee-v'ra-kha. זכר צדיקים לברכה

The memory of good people is a blessing.

— Secular Humanistic Judaism

Sheem'oo

Listen now, you lovers of love.

Hear this, you seekers of happiness:

There is no happiness without love.

שְׁמַעוּ שְׁמַעוּ אוֹהְבֵי אֶהְבָּה.
 קְרְאוּ קְרְאוּ מוֹשִׁיעֵי יְשׁוּעָה.
 כִּי אֵין יְשׁוּעָה בְּלִי אֶהְבָּה
 אוֹ אֶהְבָּה אֶהְבָּה בִּין תְּהִי.

— Rabbi Sherwin Wine

**An Introduction
to
Jewish Culture**

**Answer Key
for
Discussion Questions**

Introduction to Jewish Culture Possible Answers for Discussion Leaders

Introduction

1. *Why is the study of Jewish culture important for Secular Humanistic Jews (SHJ)?*

Reflects Jewish historical identity, central to SHJ definition of Judaism, adds color/emotional contact to historical study and contemporary expressions, creates general knowledge base about activities of Jewish life, can raise ideas for creative new celebrations/rituals. Also connects SHJs with global + historical Jewish people, at least in information if not in behavior or belief.

2. *What are some of the major differences between how Judaism historically viewed its cultural practices and how Secular Humanistic Jews see them?*

Tradition: divinely established/sanctioned, the same since Sinai or Abraham, unrelated to observances of other cultures, modern Jews do not have authority to change.

SHJ: human creations as response to human needs, anthropology + comparative religion study useful to understand Jewish culture, Jewish culture has evolved many times, modern Jews may change in response to new circumstances.

3. *What is the difference between “high” Jewish culture and “low” Jewish culture? Which may be more fruitful for Secular Humanistic Jews to study?*

High: Literature, occasionally music and art. Historically most studied/created by men.

Low: Food, language, lifestyle – rules created by men but lived in family settings.

SHJ: Low culture can be studied relatively non-ideologically, but status remains with study of and connection with “high” Jewish culture.

4. *What are the boundaries of “Jewish Culture”? What is included, and what is left out by different definitions?*

Some of the possibilities for “boundaries”:

- 1) anything created by Jewish individuals (*e.g.*, Karl Marx or Einstein’s science)
- 2) cultural creations relating to Jewish identity (*e.g.*, Thomas Cahill’s *Gifts of the Jews*)
- 3) culture relating to Jewish identity created by Jews (*e.g.*, the movie *Life is Beautiful*)
- 4) culture on Jewish identity by Jews for Jews (*e.g.*, this curriculum)
- 5) culture on Jewish identity by Jews for Jews in traditional Jewish forms (*e.g.*, new *Haggada*)
- 6) Traditional Jewish culture with nothing consciously created for modern Jewish life
- 7) Whatever Jews or groups of Jews themselves call “Jewish” (*e.g.*, the “Jewish Mother”)

Further examples of inclusion/exclusion for each possibility should be discussed.

5. *How does the answer to “what counts as Jewish culture” affect Secular Humanistic Judaism?*

Defines our sources to choose from in creating celebrations, study, and claiming connections.

Affects what SHJ creates for itself – is that Jewish culture, or not. Defines relations with more traditional Jewish practices in the past and today.

Introduction to Jewish Culture
Possible Answers for Discussion Leaders

Major Holidays

1. *How does the Jewish calendar differ from the Gregorian calendar? What advantages come from celebrating the Jewish cycle of the year?*

Gregorian: 365 days with (+1 day) leap year every 4 years, based on solar cycle around earth. Dated from claimed birth of Jesus in year 0.

Jewish: 355 days, 12 months of 29 or 30 days, 7 (+1 month) leap years in 19 years. Dated from “creation of the world” in year 0. Can be more connected to seasons + nature (e.g., full moon every 15th of Jewish month, new year starts at turn of seasons).

2. *When Leviticus 23 was written, what appears to have been the most important holiday? How does the Leviticus calendar differ from the modern Jewish calendar?*

Passover (spring) was the new year, and *Yom ha-Kippurim* (day of atonements) was the major fall holiday. Months were numbers, not named; no leap years were mentioned in Leviticus. Holidays included in Leviticus: Pesakh, Yom Kippur, Shabbat, Shavuot, Sukkot. No Purim, Hanukka, Tu B'Shevat, or modern Jewish holidays.

3. *How do Secular Humanistic Jews treat the High Holidays?*

See *Guide to Humanistic Judaism*: “Rosh Hashana” and “Yom Kippur,” also discuss individual experiences of the class. Chance to express Jewish identity & basic philosophy/commitments, opportunity for self-reflection or judgment, repairing relationships, connecting with community, and so on.

4. *What were the historical origins of the 3 pilgrimage festivals (Pesakh, Shavuot, Sukkot)? How were their meanings modified by Priestly and Rabbinic Judaism?*

Pesakh: originally 2 holidays (agricultural *Matsot* for 7 days, shepherd *Pesakh* for 1), both celebrating spring and new harvest. Exodus narrative connection/Jerusalem Temple sacrifice established by Priests. Retelling Exodus story in festive meal (*seder*) created by Rabbis.

Shavuot: Harvest festival, Priests added Temple tithe and sacrifice. Rabbis connected it with Exodus story by claiming Torah revealed then.

Sukkot: Fall harvest festival, booths built for reapers in fields. Priests connect with Exodus story (what Israelites lived in while wandering in desert).

5. *How do Secular Humanistic Jews treat the 3 pilgrimage festivals?*

See *Guide to Humanistic Judaism* on “Pesakh,” “Shavuot,” “Sukkot,” and also discuss individual experiences of the class.

Passover: connect exodus legend with other famous Jewish migrations, celebrate tradition of *seder* itself, creatively explain symbols of Passover meal.

Shavuot: celebration of ALL Jewish literature (not just Torah), harvest of Jewish creativity, time for study.

Sukkot: connect with agriculture, cycle of seasons/nature, harvest, etc.

**Introduction to Jewish Culture
Possible Answers for Discussion Leaders**

Life Cycle – Marriage and Death

1. *What elements of the traditional Jewish marriage ceremony can be used by Secular Humanistic Jews? What elements are generally not used?*

Used: *Huppah*, modern-language *ketubah* + seven blessings, ring exchange (mutual), breaking glass (by both partners), Hebrew, parental involvement (walking down aisle and/or standing under/near *huppah*), chair-lifting.

Not Used: fasting of bride and groom, traditional seven blessings, *badekn* (veiling) ceremony, traditional ring exchange phrase or *ketubah* language.

2. *How do the creative Seven Blessings differ from the traditional Seven Blessings? How are they similar?*
Different: creative blessings mostly in English, no reference to God, focus on people instead of God though in passive language (some may be more comfortable with “we are fortunate” or “we are joyful” instead of “we are blessed”), creative has congregational response.

Similar: similar themes for each blessing, some Hebrew phrases the same, both Jewish-specific. Goal is traditional feel without traditional words, but doesn't fit traditional melody or cadence. Some Secular Humanistic Jewish officiants allow others at ceremony to recite traditional 7 blessings even if they will not – analogous to co-officiation with religious/non-Jewish clergy.

3. *What elements of traditional Jewish mourning can be used by Secular Humanistic Jews? What elements are generally not used?*

Used: Eulogy, communal observance, burial, graveside service, *yahrtzeit* (death anniversary), name recitation, dropping earth on grave, headstone unveiling within a year, naming after deceased relatives (Ashkenazic tradition).

Not Used: strict *Shiva* rules (cover mirrors, clothing/washing restrictions, 7 days), strict burial rules (forbid cremation and delay), traditional Kaddish (as with weddings, family members sometimes recite it), different mourning standards based on closeness of relation, imagery of afterlife/judgment or divine intercession.

4. *How do the Modern Kaddish and Humanistic Kaddish differ from the traditional Kaddish? How are they similar?*

Different: Modern Kaddish focuses on death and departed while traditional focuses on God and doesn't mention the deceased, Modern Kaddish in English while traditional in Aramaic, traditional has audience responses throughout. Modern more universal, uses “*L'Chaim* [to life]” instead of “*Amen*.”

Similar: Both express wishes for life in general, neither focuses on the deceased or the mourners. Goal of either Modern or Humanistic Kaddish is traditional cadence with Secular Humanistic meaning, plus audience comprehension; challenge is traditional appeal of ritual behavior, especially in personal crisis or mourning.

5. *How does the Secular Humanistic Jewish perspective on Jewish life-cycle events influence the creation and celebration of marriages and funerals?*

Focus is more (not entirely) on needs of living individuals celebrating the ceremony. Language used may be creative or traditional, but consistent with Secular Humanistic beliefs. Ceremonies performed FOR celebrants, not TO them (should reflect who they are). Focus on people celebrating/observing event rather than God or tradition for its own sake, creative use of Jewish traditions, openness to personal choice (use of rituals, intermarriage) and new texts/traditions.