



Where visions of community often begin. (A view from the Pisgah Inn along the Blue Ridge Parkway.)

CHRIS HIGHLAND

What do secular Jews believe?



Highland Views

Chris Highland
Columnist

Moshe was a good friend who served as a rabbi of a local synagogue. He and the people of that congregation were consistent supporters of my interfaith chaplaincy work.

Moshe and I grew close when I was a chaplain in the county jail and one of his members had been arrested on a serious charge. From inside and outside, I helped mediate between the man, his family and their rabbi.

Sitting with Moshe in his office one afternoon we discussed this family and their situation. Moshe gave me a firm handshake, looked me in the eye and said, "You are the rabbi for the inmates in the jail."

I never forgot those humbling words. It was a summary of the heart of chaplaincy, as I practiced it, reminding me I was not representing one faith tradition or community inside the walls but all communities that base their beliefs on compassion and justice.

Not long after he retired, I had lunch with Moshe and we discussed our teaching and writing. As I described my journey out of faith, Moshe nodded and smiled. He told me he felt his Jewishness was central for him but not a belief in a deity. We both agreed the word "God" was problematic and the term "atheist" was not a helpful label for us — community was far more important than creed.

To gather more insight on this, I met with three leading voices in the Jewish Secular Community of Asheville: June Dreznick, their new president; Carol Falender, past president; and Madelon Clark, co-founder with Carol of the JSCA.

Asked how others in the Jewish community view them, Madelon said, "Interaction with other Jews is generally positive, though some wonder how we can create a Jewish community without God."

Carol added, "We are very welcome at the table by other synagogues. We are a part of Jewish life here in Asheville."

The women feel that "Judaism is much more than a religion — more than a belief system. It's also a set of values."

As June states it, "Secular Judaism is much more than simply 'We don't believe in God.'" Carol echoed, "It's about what I AM instead of what I am NOT."

Madelon thinks that people seeking a "concept called God" or something "spiritual" are "not going to find that in this secular community."

The Jewish Secular Community of Asheville was formalized five years ago, becoming a 501(c)3 non-profit. The idea for it grew naturally from conversa-

tions Madelon and Carol had while hiking on local trails. They decided to gather friends for a Passover seder, and then more came for Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur.

The JSCA now numbers about 140, with some interfaith couples, families, singles and youth. As June says, many were raised with religion and drifted away from faith, but now they are "looking for connection."

Preferring to call themselves a "community" rather than a synagogue, they are member-led, with no appointed rabbi. This brings, in their words, a certain "richness and turbulence."

There is a "ritual committee" and a "shabbat program" group. With a smile, I'm told members have "lots of opinions on how to conduct the services."

Services are held on the first Friday of each month at Abiding Savior Lutheran Church in Fairview (see jscasheville.org for details). These include singing, readings, responses and a variety of speakers addressing topics of interest. Services are designed in an "organic" manner shaped by the needs of the community.

There are educational learning groups and members are involved in social justice activities where they link with other congregations and groups such as the Ethical Humanists.

This local congregation is affiliated with Humanistic Judaism, defined as "a Jewish movement that replaces religious dogma with a humanistic philosophy, while retaining and reimagining those aspects of Jewish life that still provide deep meaning and value."

This approach obviously raises questions, so members understand that, "It's part of our job to explain who and what we are" (they also recommend the book, "God-optional Judaism" by Judith Seid).

"Anyone who identifies as a Jew can join" and "guests are always welcome." This hospitality is partially due to the sense that, as they told me, "We've been pushed out of a lot of tents."

June, Madelon and Carol told me they simply wish for people to know their community is here, that Secular Judaism is an option, and that JSCA offers a "Jewish footprint to follow" each year through the "rhythms of life."

They pointed to their logo: arms linked in a circle, with human beings at the center.

This seems to summarize and symbolize the heart of this relatively new congregation in Asheville. As Madelon succinctly stated, "We may reject religion but we don't reject people."

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