

The light of Humanistic Judaism



Highland Views

Chris Highland
Guest columnist

“Blessed is the light in the world. Blessed is the light in people. Blessed is the light of Shabbat.” (Humanistic Sabbath blessing)

Light plays an important role in religion. In the Abrahamic faiths we hear from beginning to end “Let there be light” and “the Lord will be the Light.” In the Society of Friends (Quakers) each person holds an “inner light” and Buddhists teach the path to “enlightenment.” In the secular community, we speak of the “light of reason” or the historical Enlightenment.

In a conversation with Rabbi Adam Chalom, he recited the blessing quoted above, repeated each week in his secular congregation near Chicago, Kol Ha-dash Humanistic Congregation. I asked him what that light means. He laughed, explaining the light as enlightenment, inspiration, hope. Something we all might consider a “blessing.”

I spoke with Rabbi Chalom after learning he will be the scholar in residence May 17-19 at the Jewish Secular Community of Asheville. He will be addressing the “balance of tradition and freedom.” How to engage with tradition while “living our values with integrity.” As he said to me, “We have both roots and choice.”

As the JSCA website announces, “The program will interest, excite and educate anyone—Jewish or not—who is looking to learn more and engage in a lively discussion about Judaism in general or organized Secular Humanistic Judaism.”

We discussed what a humanistic community looks like (Humanistic Judaism was founded by Rabbi Sherwin Wine in 1963. Rabbi Chalom was raised in Birmingham Temple, the first Humanistic Jewish congregation, located in suburban Detroit). They seek to be creative with the use of language. Poetry is helpful especially since “the God metaphor doesn’t work” in that setting. There is a “continuity with the past yet we have to find our own words” that speak to our contemporary experience.

He said the term “spirituality” is one example. He asked a group if they use that word. About half raised their hands. The other half said they didn’t like it. Then he asked those who like the word to describe their “spiritual” experiences. The other half of the group said they felt some of the same things without using the religious term.

In response to my question about the traditional “shema” (“Hear O Israel, the Lord thy God, the Lord is One”), Rabbi Chalom told me there are basically



Rabbi Adam Chalom COURTESY ADAM CHALOM

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three ways to incorporate it in a humanistic setting: recite the traditional words after explaining it’s not literal; adapt it with new words such as “the people are One”; or write original songs or secular meditations that reflect the “core beliefs” of the community.

He said that his congregation does not regularly use the shema or the kaddish (prayer for the dead) unless specifically requested for particular times.

The Humanistic Judaism practiced by Rabbi Chalom’s community is a kind of “religion beyond religion.” It’s a “community of shared ideas that meets the needs religion meets.” There is no “awe” or worship and no obligation to biblical commands. Defining elements include feminism and an acceptance of science. Some might call themselves “religious” and others not.

Could a “religion” be defined as a community living an ethical practice with a balance of free thought and tradition?

I wondered if there could be a Humanistic Christianity. Rabbi Chalom thinks there are certain branches of Christianity that are welcoming of humanistic ideas and ideals. Much of that acceptance depends on the attachment to supernatural notions.

According to the International Institute for Secular Humanistic Judaism (Rabbi Chalom is the North American Dean):

“We believe in the power of people to understand their world and to influence it for the better. We celebrate human

freedom and responsibility for our choices and actions. And we know that if justice is to exist in our world, we must create it together. Secular Humanistic Judaism is a cultural Jewish identity lived through this human-focused non-theistic philosophy of life.”

Among the “core principles” of Humanistic Judaism (from the Society for Humanistic Judaism):

“We demonstrate our bond to the Jewish people through humanistic celebrations of Jewish holidays and life-cycle events. We create and use non-theistic Jewish rituals, services, and celebrations that invoke the ethical core of Jewish history, literature, and culture.

“We rely on such sources as reason, observation, experimentation, creativity, and artistic expression to address questions about the world and in seeking to understand our experiences.

“We believe that it is human beings who have the responsibility for solving human problems.

“We are committed to passing these values on to present and future generations through education and by our example.”

For more information on the weekend with Rabbi Adam Chalom, which begins with a Friday evening shabbat service and discussion, visit www.jscasheville.org.

Chris Highland served as a Protestant minister and interfaith chaplain for many years. He is a teacher, writer, freethinker and humanist celebrant.