

The Movements of Judaism and their Founders

VIII: RABBI SHERWIN WINE AND HUMANISTIC JUDAISM

August 19, 2016

Shabbat shalom!

My summer sermon series this year – my fourth such series – has focused on some of the great religious movements of Judaism. Whether Reform, Conservative, Orthodox, Reconstructionist, Hasidic or Jewish Renewal, each expression has turned Judaism in new directions; each has tried to inspire the spirit and elevate the soul; each has tried, in its own way, to bring us closer to God.

Not so with this week's topic: Humanistic Judaism, which considers itself to be a major stream of modern Judaism, isn't just non-religious, it is decidedly anti-religious – a stance that some find appalling, others find very appealing, and just others just find confusing: After all, isn't it a contradiction in terms to have a religion that doesn't want to have anything to do with religion?

Like so many other expressions of Judaism, Humanistic Judaism began with the experience of a rabbi – in this case Rabbi Sherwin Wine – or at least he was the one who best articulated what they stand for, and created organizations to spread the word and further their work.

Sherwin Wine was ordained as a Reform Rabbi, and one of his first assignments was as a chaplain serving for several years in Korea, in the 1950's. He found that the Jews he met in service didn't seem interested in religion, but in Jewish culture – especially in the chicken soup and salami he was able to provide – and he came to realize that the cultural attachments of Judaism are what really mattered to the soldiers, and to him personally.

Returning to the U.S., Wine wound up serving a congregation in Detroit, where he announced from the pulpit that he was an atheist – he didn't believe in God. I guess that didn't go over particularly well since shortly thereafter he wasn't their rabbi any longer – rabbis didn't have contracts in those days. But through force of personality he founded another congregation nearby, the first humanistic congregation in the country, which gained national fame through coverage in Time Magazine. The congregation eliminated

any mention of God from their services, and created new rituals having to do with humanistic values and people's responsibility for their actions and their world.

Think of it: Even the "Sh'ma" had to go, and the "V'ahavta" that follows was changed from "You shall love the Lord your God" to "We revere the best in man."

Rabbi Wine taught that the goal of Judaism is to teach and achieve the highest ethical behavior. Today the Society for Humanistic Judaism, founded by Rabbi Wine in 1969, has some 10,000 members in 30 congregations in the United States and Canada, though the numbers of American Jews who would probably be in sympathy with Humanistic Judaism is apparently far higher: The last national survey of Jewish identity reported that about half of the 5.3 million Jews in the United States identify themselves as "secular" or "somewhat secular." Yet despite the trend towards secularization in American Judaism, Rabbi Wine was often castigated by his Reform colleagues, or dismissed derisively as representing a far out fringe not to be taken seriously.

If you look at the website of the Society for Humanistic Judaism that he founded, you will see statements of what they believe (sorry, I couldn't get around the use of the word "believe" in that sentence!). Here are some excerpts:

Humanistic Jews affirm that...

- ...A Jew is someone who identifies with the history, culture and future of the Jewish people [that one makes it very easy to convert, by the way]
- ...Jewish identity is best preserved in a free, pluralistic environment
- ...Jewish history is a human saga, a testament to the significance of human power and human responsibility.
- ...Judaism is the historic culture of the Jewish people.
- ...We possess the power and responsibility to shape our own lives independent of supernatural authority.
- ...The freedom and dignity of the Jewish people must go hand in hand with the freedom and dignity of every human being.

Another statement, called "Core Principles," states:

"We affirm our identity as members of the Jewish People. We draw strength from the history, culture, and achievements of our people. We see Jewish history as testimony to the continuing struggle for human dignity and, like the history of other peoples, as a product of human decisions and actions.

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. Our aim is to foster a positive Jewish identity, intellectual integrity, and ethical behavior among celebrants.

We affirm the value of study and discussion of Jewish and universal human issues. 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.”

Frankly, except for the term “non-theistic,” I can’t find fault with anything in either of these statements.

But “non-theistic” is a big one for me, and for Reform Judaism as well. Reform Judaism has seen itself as a religious expression of Judaism, centered on God and Torah, since our beginnings nearly 200 years ago. Reform Judaism’s relationship with God transcends – pardon the pun – any distinctions between Classical and Contemporary Reform. Every Reform platform all the way back to the famous Pittsburgh Platform of 1885 has emphasized the centrality of God.

The latest Reform platform, for example [adopted 1999], speaks of our faith this way:

“We affirm the reality and oneness of God, even as we may differ in our understanding of the Divine presence. We affirm that the Jewish people is bound to God by an eternal covenant, as reflected in our varied understandings of Creation, Revelation and Redemption. We affirm that every human being is created in the image of God, and that therefore every human life is sacred.”

I have never believed in God as a magician who decides which picnic gets rained out, or which football team wins the big game, or which worthy person overcomes illness or succumbs to it. But to me, Judaism without God – Judaism just as culture and ethics – isn’t very compelling, and doesn’t do justice to our teachings, values and extraordinary history.

25 years ago, not surprisingly, Rabbi Wine's congregation sought to join Reform Judaism's national body, the Union for Reform Judaism). The then-president of the Union, Rabbi Alexander Schindler, asked for advice from the CCAR Responsa Committee. In his question, Rabbi Schindler pointed out that the rabbi was a member of the CCAR, and the UAHC constitution provided that any Jewish congregation could be admitted so long as its object is to foster the development of Liberal Judaism.

The Responsa Committee said no. They cited not only the long history of Reform Platforms, but also the congregation's radical revision of the liturgy, which eliminated the Kiddush or the Kaddish, or the Bar'chu, Sh'ma, V'ahavta, Amidah or Aleinu, along with songs such as Adon Olam and Ein Keiloheinu, all of which of course mention God. They found that the congregation's philosophy does not admit of the concept of covenant, or of commandments, for that matter. They found that – though we have nothing to say about individuals and their religious points of view – a secular congregation is not in keeping with the national Reform Movement.

When the controversial application finally reached the Union's Board of Trustees, the Board's members overwhelmingly refused to admit the Congregation.

So now we have an independent stream of Judaism – a new denomination, if you will, with a program of rabbinic studies leading to ordination, their own rabbinic body, their own union of congregations, and books and websites.

We Jews are nothing if not pluralistic! We have so many choices – I've outlined just a few during this summer series – that figuring out what we really believe can be a real struggle. I certainly wrestle with this subject. Is God near to us, as the God that Tevya could argue with in Fiddler? Or is God distant and unapproachable, the philosophical unmoved mover who launched the universe, then disappeared? Or is God within each of us – each living being? Or perhaps God is the universe, as in Jewish mysticism and Hassidic thought...?

Next Friday night, the last in this series, we will look at another unusual approach to Judaism, now celebrating its 100th anniversary, known as Jewish Science.