



## **A Rabbi's Journey to Humanistic Judaism**

**By Rabbi Peter H. Schweitzer**

I have often speculated that had I learned Hebrew as a child and then become bar mitzvah, I probably would not have undertaken an exploration of my Jewish roots in college (majoring in Judaic studies and becoming a student leader at Hillel), visited Israel to work on an archeological dig, and finally gone on to become a rabbi. Instead, like most of my peers, I would have checked-out at age 13, or 16 after confirmation. And, like most of my peers today, I would probably check-in only a few times a year or, perhaps, give up affiliation altogether with organized Judaism.

### **Do I Believe the Words I'm Praying?**

As a child, I learned the *Sh'ma* and the *Borkhu, Hiney Mah Tov*, and *Ayn Kehloheynu* [prayers or songs]. But I never paid attention to the words. In fact, even after I entered the rabbinate I was concerned more with the choreography of the service than with the content. Only later did I wonder who this God was to whom I was praying, or question the core beliefs of traditional Judaism that I had simply accepted on the authority of inherited doctrine.

It was while conducting funeral services as a rabbi that I first began to find inconsistencies between my own beliefs and the prayers. The liturgy of these occasions struck me as naive and dishonest. It offered little comfort with its stiff-upper-lip denial of suffering. In the face of death and tragedy, and certainly after the Holocaust and nuclear devastation, I could not accept God as a shepherd whose rod and staff were supposed to comfort me.

In fact, I came to discover that the biblical deity is not always so charitable and comforting. Portrayed as a kind despot ("Our Father, Our King"), God is often bossy, arrogant, and vindictive--not exactly one's idea of a beneficent caretaker. Post-modernists redefine God as a Force or Spirit of the Universe, but this attempt at theological sleight of hand cannot hide the truth: Yahweh, the Jewish God, is no metaphorical abstraction. Rather, *He* is a very male God, oftentimes macho, and perfectly appropriate to a patriarchal society invested in mythology, but not to an egalitarian culture like our own that is committed to reason, scientific knowledge, and human ingenuity.

Our contemporary lives also teach us that life is often unfair, and it takes human courage, rather than divine blessings, to endure pain. If comfort is to be found, it comes from within oneself--from self-reliance--or from the support of family and friends. It also comes from the members of a community who support one another, share each other's joys, and accept the diversity of cultural backgrounds.

### **Comfort Comes From Intellectual Integrity**

Comfort comes also from intellectual integrity. I need to use words that I can recite unequivocally. I cannot use language for which I must apologize. My liturgical language is clear and honest, while also evocative and uplifting.

When I develop new liturgy for my congregation, I borrow and modify forms and notions from the past that speak to our modern sensibilities. Traditional melodies, kept as tributes to our memories, are laid over with new lyrics that are true to our beliefs. New meditations and songs reflect our creativity. We affirm our identification with the Jewish people and the Jewish experience while we also affirm our right and responsibility to question, reject, modify, adapt, and create celebrations and liturgy anew. As it has throughout history, Judaism continues to evolve.

I was raised to believe that the Torah was sacrosanct and unsurpassed in its wisdom. I have since learned that the Torah does not contain all truth, but is a fallible human document written over a vast period by many authors whose views do not necessarily agree. The Torah addresses the needs and realities of a particular epoch and place far different and remote from our own. We live in an Internet-world and our horizons encompass an entire universe far beyond the ancient desert. While Humanistic Jews preserve time-honored lessons of Torah and Talmud, we also obtain equally important and compelling teachings from modern literature and science that address contemporary situations and challenges. We draw lessons from the collective experiences of the Jewish people and of people universally. We also draw lessons from the experiences of our own families and personal lives.

My own journey has been one of exploration and growth. As a child, I lovingly embraced the songs and stories of my people. As an adolescent, I discovered philosophy and rational inquiry. As an adult, I reclaimed my Jewish roots but also discovered that I could do so with integrity and authenticity as a Secular Humanistic Jew. My participation in the Jewish people is no less strong and passionate than it was in my youth. But now it is an affiliation I embrace not just with my heart, but with my head as well. And also, as before, with all my might.