



HUMANISTIC JEWISH CONGREGATION OF SAN DIEGO

SERVING SAN DIEGO COUNTY SINCE 1985

Yom Kippur, 2008

Community Ownership and Value

Have you ever wondered why so many temples and synagogues begin their name with *Beth*? (Yes, we love our own Beth Goodman, and she does make an impact here, but an edifice she is not.) In San Diego alone we have six congregations: Beth Israel, Beth Am, Beth El, Beth Sholom, Beth Eliyahu Torah Center, and Beth Jacob. Only Chabad has more consistent names, because Chabad is everywhere!

The term *beth* is an anglicized form of the Hebrew, *bet*, or the Yiddish, *beis*, which means house. What were the founding members of these temples picturing when they named their organizations as such? Perhaps a unique physical space where activities of their members could be conducted. – most own their buildings? Maybe an association with the connotations of home – family, roots, development? Possibly a stronghold where the Jews would come to find protection and acceptance?

Institutional Judaism, which is what I find in these organizations, serves all those purposes for its members. It is the physical space, a family-network, and a place for acceptance. I personally need these things, but in *Beth institutions*, they just aren't in the format that I find meaningful. Today I want us to think about what WE find meaningful here, in the Humanistic Jewish Congregation. As we prepare ourselves individually to finish t'shuvah, turning back to the past and then forward toward the future, it is appropriate to look at the choice we have made to be HERE today.

First, I'd like to retell a story, *The Man Who Slept Through the End of the World*, by Moïse Nadir, translated by Irving Howe. I can relate to this subject because sleeping is something I do well. Within ten seconds of my head touching the pillow, I'm in dreamland. Just ask my husband, Gary. By the way, the numbers have been adjusted for inflation.

- Our hero was quite a sleeper
- Always sleeping at meetings, at concerts, at any important event
- Any position – sitting with elbows up & hands behind his head;
Standing & leaning against a wall
- Any place – theater, streets, synagogue
- Slept through 7 fires, once at a really big fire was carried out of the building in his bed, stayed asleep on the sidewalk until the police came and took him away



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- Slept under the wedding canopy; hit over the head with brass pestles for several hours before he woke up to say his vows; then...fell asleep again
- These explanations will make you understand this story of our hero
- Once he went to sleep and slept and slept and slept
- In his sleep, heard thunder in the streets, bed was shaking, seemed to be raining outside, so cozied down, pulled quilt closer, and slept on in the warmth of his bed
- Awoke to a strange void: wife no longer there, bed no longer there, quilt not there
- Wanted to look out of window to see what happened, but no window
- Wanted to run down 3 flights and yell, "Help!", but no stairs and no air through which to yell
- Wanted to just go out of doors, but no out of doors – Gone, poof, evaporated!
- Stood in confusion for a while, unable to comprehend what happened
- Then decided to go to sleep – it was one thing that worked for him before BUT there was no longer any earth on which to sleep
- (Two fingers to forehead) "Apparently I've slept through the end of the world. Isn't that a fine how-do-you-do?"
- Thought about this situation and felt depressed – no more world.
- He wondered to himself– What will I do without a world? Where will I work?
- How will I make a living? Especially now -- cost of living high, a dozen eggs costs three dollars and who knows if they're fresh? And what about the \$50 credit the gas company owes me?
- My wife – where has she gone, and did she take the \$300 pay I had in my pockets? – she isn't the type to disappear
- What if I want to sleep? What I stretch out on if there isn't any world? And won't I get a back ache?
- Who will finish the work I have waiting for me? Suppose I want a glass of malted – where will I get it?
- "Eh," he thought, "have you ever seen anything like it? A man should fall asleep with the world under his head and wake up without it!"
- Our hero stood there in his underwear, thinking of what to do
- "To hell with it! So there isn't any world! Who needs it anyway? Disappeared is disappeared: I might as well go to the movies and kills some time."
- Amazement – along with the world, the movies disappeared



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- Played all his thoughts back through, realized that he made his own mess by sleeping soundly enough to NOT disappear with everything else – how unfortunate
- Still wondering where he would get a malted
- Worrying about his wife, disappeared with whom? The presser from the top floor? If so, I'll murder her, so help me God!
- Who knows how late it is? Looked at his watch – no watch. Looked through left and right pockets in infinite emptiness – nothing to touch.
- Paid \$200 dollars for a watch – already disappeared.
- “All right. If the world went under, it went under. That I don't care about. It isn't my world. But the watch! Why should my watch go under? A new watch. \$200. It wasn't even wound.”
- And the glass of malted? Where to get it?
- And my wife...
- “I've slept through such a terrible catastrophe, I deserve the worst. Help, help, hee—lp! Where were my brains? Why didn't I keep an eye on the world and my wife? Why did I let them disappear when they were still so young?”
- Our hero began to beat his head against the void – but soft void, so it didn't hurt
- Remained alive to tell this story

Isn't it interesting in this story that after sleeping through the end of the world, much of what the hero of the story worried about were the minor annoyances? The price of eggs, the credit due him, a watch that wasn't even wound. Yes, he talked about his wife, but not in the sense of losing the love of his life. He spoke in terms of the earnings he couldn't find that he suspected she took, and his jealousy at the presser from the top floor.

Bringing this tale into focus for us, I can draw the analogy that we are sleeping through our world when we take the elements of our lives for granted. When the minor annoyances become the focus of our thoughts, then we risk missing the grander features of living – what we give our love to, what we dream about, what we find beautiful.

The problem is that in the pursuit of meaningful experiences, little things can get in the way. That's Life. When we are unclear or irresolute about the end goal, then the impact of these small disturbances grows more significant. In this final day of the High Holidays, I want to apply this premise to our Humanistic Jewish community.



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Participating on any level in a community is messy. This can be said whenever you put a group of people together, because of the unique background and expectations they bring to the association. So we have to compromise on the little things. We have to live with minor annoyances. We have to do the dance of give and take in order to move forward the common agenda of the group. At the same time, we have to advocate in a respectful way for what we need out of the group. And we have to be willing to invest some of ourselves in order to realize our interests.

Sometimes the energy expended gets to be too much for us. In this congregation, as in any organization, the doers get worn out. Sitting in the High Holiday services this year have been/are the **retired** doers, members who have sat in the same board positions or set-up the same refreshments that our current doers are involved in. At the same time, I see some people who I would encourage to become the next wave of doers.

The impetus to get out of one's chair, so to speak, is a determination of value. What is this experience of Jewish connection is worth to you? That is, how deeply you are affected by your experience with Judaism and how seriously do you hold your values of Humanism?

One way to calculate the worth of this particular community is to ask what would happen if it were not here. What would you do for a Jewish connection? Where would you go to think about being a better person? And most importantly, would you feel comfortable and true within yourself doing an alternative?

In the modern American Jewish experience, we can **get by** without a purposeful Jewish association. This is because we don't live behind the gates of a closed community, nor do we face the humiliation of being forced to mark our Judaism with a yellow star or a tall, pointed hat as a brand for ridicule. We are accepted into the mainstream. We can practice being humanitarians by helping others, and in so doing maintain some of the values of Judaism without the trouble of belonging to a community.

However, such a retreat leaves the survival of the Jewish people in jeopardy. Professor Dov Liberman, writing in the 1997 *Journal of Humanistic Judaism*, states, [quote]

"The answer to the question of whether Judaism can exist without Jewish ethnicity would seem to be clear. Jews who shed their ethnic identity can contribute to other cultures and ethnic groups, including the American one. They can even maintain that their contributions are inspired by their Jewish heritage.



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But even if these assertions are true, the sad fact remains that throughout the course of Jewish history such people and their children have almost invariably been lost to Judaism. The maintenance of its singular traditions and culture is crucial to the continuation of the Jewish people. Jewish history makes clear that without a commitment to Jewish ethnicity and peoplehood, centered around the specifics of Jewish culture, there can be no Jewish future. [end quote]

Embedded within the Jewish culture is the Jewish religion, with a prescribed set of beliefs and practices that frame our spiritual and moral identity. The endurance of Judaism for over four thousand years is due to the core values about how human beings develop that identity, rather than the specific practices delineated in the texts of the religion. That is the why Humanistic Judaism is a rational force for progress in the continuance of Judaism, because we are interested in forming religious practices that focus on those core, human-centered values, rather than on a supernatural deity.

It is a fact of Jewish survival that we need community. The first thing Jews have always done when settling in a new area is to establish specifically Jewish institutions, be it a benevolent society and cemetery, school, hospital, or synagogue. These are often the places we seek out when we visit new communities as tourists.

The Jewish community of San Diego was established in 1861 with one Orthodox congregation Adath Jeshurun, now Temple Beth Israel, and has expanded into a vibrant, pluralistic federation. The Humanistic Jewish Congregation is a necessary part of this Jewish society, filling the need for a home for individuals who share a similar approach to essential Jewish ideals.

If our presence fits your needs, then you have an obligation to show pride of ownership in this group. Just as you put effort into keeping up the quality of your residence and expect your neighbors to do the same, so to must you participate in helping maintain this Jewish community home.

We have something great to offer people who are feeling isolated or disconnected to their Jewish roots, or any roots, for that matter. Most importantly, we offer their children a viable alternative for Jewish connection.



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YOU found this branch of Judaism because you believe in a rational approach to life, and you were ready and willing to choose to stand for that view. Along the way, you found a home and fellowship among other Jewish people. You need to share that message with others and to tell them that there is an alternative to doing nothing as a Jew. Share your passion for how Humanistic Judaism has brought more meaning to your life. Choose one new way to participate in this home, and find someone else to join you. That is how you will make the year to come extra-ordinary for you and for others.

-Madrikha Beverly Zarnow