Subtraction HUMANISTIC JEWS GATHER ON SHABAT. THEY LISTEN TO HEBREW MUSIC. THEY ACKNOWLEDGE ROSH HASHANAH AND YOM KIPPUR. WHAT THEY DON'T DO IS WORSHIP GOD.: [METRO Edition]

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ABSTRACT (ABSTRACT)

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"Jews are either born or converted, and these people [Humanistic Jews] are absolutely Jews," said Rabbi Stacy Offner of Shir Tikvah reform congregation in Minneapolis. "But Messianic Jews - who believe that a human being [became] the messiah - is beyond the pale. There's a word for those people: Christians."

In their own way, Humanistic Jews - proud to claim Freud and Einstein and others as their secular forbearers - recognize the Jewish New Year (Rosh Hashanah) and the 10 days leading to Yom Kippur. The latter, to most Jews, is the holiest day on their calendar, when they celebrate their relationship with God, and "locates itself as part of the sacred order," according to Israeli political scientist Charles Liebman.

FULL TEXT

The Jewish High Holidays have arrived, replete with prayer and fasting, repentance and ceremony. The small core of Humanistic Jews in the Twin Cities will take part in the observations of Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur, but without the deity who informs the Orthodox, Conservative and Reform denominations.

Without God.

God, the after-life, angels, prayer - none of it shows on the Humanistic radar. They have a word for those concepts: supernaturalism. However, not every Jew with a Humanistic bent would answer to the name atheist.

"We believe in spirituality, in the broad sense," said Harold Londer, a prime-mover in the group's growth in the Twin Cities. "We think in terms of people being something beyond day-to-day, mundane existence. It's something special that comes from within you."

"We don't ask God to forgive, like we're poor weak folks," said Muriel Sterne, who has spent a lifetime working in

human services. "We aren't supplicators. We are looking within."

Actions important

Sterne and four other Jewish Humanists sat around a table, shut off from a warm, soothing afternoon, but finding pleasure in sorting out their shared belief. What mattered, they said, was how one acted in the world. Phil Griffin, Muriel's husband and a retired college philosophy professor from Wisconsin, called it the "morality of the human relationship."

And Jane Katz, an oral historian, added, "We are responsible for our lives and for making the world a better place. We don't rely on the deity. We take that role."

The assembled Humanistic Jews - part of a group whose numbers in the Twin Cities have been variously estimated between 30 and 100, meeting one Friday each month at the Minneapolis Jewish Community Center in St. Louis Park - extolled the importance of Jewish culture, tradition and history.

"It's why we aren't Unitarians," said Allan Malkis, a research analyst with the Urban Coalition. "There's something about the Jewish culture and experience we identify with."

Thus the Humanistic Jews gather on Friday night and call it their Shabat, the Sabbath for other Jews. But instead of listening to a rabbi, they hear speakers from the community, everyone from academics to Arabs, and they listen to poetry and Hebrew music. Humanistic Jews acknowledge the Torah as what Londer calls a "source document" - not as divine revelation. They don't wear yarmulkas, but they do light candles - menorahs during Hanukkah. Their symbol, in fact, is a menorah, with the outline of a human being in the middle. Humanistic Jews don't hold Bar and Bat Mitzvahs, but they may eventually introduce coming-of-age ceremonies, members say.

Humanistic Jews participate in seders, but for them the food symbolizes freedom from slavery absent the divine implications of the Passover.

Sound of shofar

During their Friday service that combined Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur, the Humanistic Jews planned to blow the traditional shofar, or ram's horn

"I feel Jewish," Malkis said. "If someone asks, I say, `Yes, I'm Jewish, but I'm not religious.' "

"There is room [in Judaism] for people who don't believe in God," said Amanda Seigel, 24, the youngest of the group, who teaches Yiddish and Humanistic values to children in Sunday classes at the Hillel House on the University of Minnesota campus.

Yet that is precisely the question, asked across the ages in Judaism: What is a Jew? Or to put it another way: Does one have to believe in God to be Jewish?

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What is atheism?

Another reform rabbi, Norman Cohen, of the Bet Shalom congregation in Hopkins, also said he regarded Or Emet as a Jewish congregation. "With humor I say that a Jew is someone who believes in one God at most," he said.

"The problem with atheism is one of semantics. Someone may come to my study and say he or she has doubts about God. I don't find that appalling. I find it healthy.

"The paradigm for a Jew is Jacob. Among the other things he did was wrestling with God. I think Jews are God-wrestlers. A Jew needs to question, to grow in understanding, and what he or she believes at 5 years old will not be the same belief as at 15 or at 80. And it is life experiences that teach us how to do the wrestling."

However, Orthodox Rabbi Chaim Goldberger of Kenesseth Israel in St. Louis Park expressed reservations about linking humanism with Judaism.

"If we were a religion in which men created God, I would understand," he said. "We would have the license to write God out of religion.

"But we are a religion in which God created man. Abraham was the one who brought the concept of monotheism to the world. I'm not certain that we have the authority to redefine Judaism in a way as to write God out.

"I suppose you could call it humanism," Goldberger said. "But to call it Judaism would actually be a contradiction in terms."

Twin Cities' founders

Harold Londer, an oncologist, and the late Larry Garfin, a pediatric dentist, founded the local congregation about a dozen years ago. Londer had been influenced by Rabbi Sherwin Wine, who established the first Humanistic congregation in the United States, in 1963, near Detroit.

Londer, raised as an Orthodox Jew in north Minneapolis, began breaking with Orthodoxy during his college years.

"I was learning about the real world and Jewish history," he said. "And things made me question if what I was being taught was true. How much was myth, how much was legend. How to live a good life.

"Increasingly I became more convinced that solutions to problems on Earth came more from people that they did from outside sources."

The Holocaust sat at the epicenter of quakes shaking Londer's beliefs.

"Try to rationalize that in terms of a just God," he said. "How do you explain 1.3 million children being killed in the Holocaust. Most of the traditional answers I don't find very satisfying.

"You hear from some in the Orthodox Jewry that it was some sort of punishment, that Jews were not following halakah (Jewish law). The anti-Semites say we weren't following Jesus. That doesn't make sense to me, millions of children dying for that."

"Humanists," Griffin said, "reject the idea of a God who was able to prevent the Holocaust and didn't. . . . The Jewish or Christian God doesn't hold up to scrutiny in light of the Holocaust."

Her hero

But what about the Jews who kept their faith in God during the Nazi atrocities and afterward - does this discount their belief?

Not to Jane Katz. "One of my heroes is Elie Wiesel," she said of one of the living icons of the Holocaust. "He held his dying father in his arms and still kept his belief.

"I want my kids to know there is a man like this in our tradition. I wish I held that sort of belief, but I don't."

Katz, raised in New York City, was sent to four Hebrew Sunday schools but never learned Hebrew. She accompanied her father to meetings of the Ethical Cultural Society, where many members were secular Jews and where social action was underscored.

Katz said she will attend Bet Shalom, a reform congregation in Hopkins, during the High Holidays, because she values the Jewish culture and tradition. Otherwise, she said, she feels like an "outsider" in a synagogue setting. She said she prefers the "fellowship" offered by Or Emet, which "makes me feel connected to my heritage."

Their own spin

In their own way, Humanistic Jews - proud to claim Freud and Einstein and others as their secular forbearers - recognize the Jewish New Year (Rosh Hashanah) and the 10 days leading to Yom Kippur. The latter, to most Jews, is the holiest day on their calendar, when they celebrate their relationship with God, and "locates itself as part of the sacred order," according to Israeli political scientist Charles Liebman.

However, to Jewish Humanists in the Twin Cities, Yom Kippur represents something else, a rededication to humanity. Muriel Sterne told a story. When she was young, she and her father, a Ukrainian Orthodox Jew, had a fight. They didn't speak. Then it was time for him to go to synagogue for Yom Kippur.

Sterne said, "He came to me, and he said he couldn't ask God for forgiveness, unless he asked me first. I was floored. Of course, I started talking to him again.

"But it says something about the primacy of human relationships, even among observant Jews."

30,000 members

In truth, the Humanistic Jewish movement in the United States appears to be marching in place. Rabbi Wine, the founder, estimated the North American total at 30,000, with his own Michigan congregation of 1,000 members the largest. There are only 13 members of the Association of Humanistic Rabbis, he said, and only 400 Humanistic Jews registered for an international meeting earlier this month in New York.

Nevertheless, Wine maintained optimism. "We have good volunteer leadership," he said. "Hopefully we'll grow to the point where rabbis trained in the movement can serve more people. Our first class graduated last October."

How many in the class?

"One," he said.

Sylvia Barack Fishman, assistant professor of contemporary American Jewish life at Brandeis University, near Boston, monitored the international meeting of Humanistic Jews. She saw little hope of the movement digging very deep into Judaism.

"It's hard to maintain a movement based on rejection," she said. "It's hard to find passion in rejection, unless the somebody is pushing you, and you push back.

"But they ask wonderful questions - even questions religious Jews ask. I don't find their answers very sophisticated, on a personal level. But they're wonderful, nice people. They care about being connected to Jewishness.

"They want to be connected to Jewish destiny," Barack Fishman said. "That's a big part of being Jewish."

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