



JCSS NEWSLETTER

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UPCOMING EVENTS

- **Mar. 13:** Secular Bible Discussion, at the JCC. (See p. 5)
- **Mar. 20:** Purim Celebration and Adult Program, at the DeHart Center, Maplewood, NJ
- **Apr 1:** Secular Shabbat. Home of Laura Goffman.
- **Apr. 3:** School Field Trip to the Museum of Jewish Heritage (See p. 4)
- **Apr. 17:** Model Seder, at the JCC.
- **May 1:** Adult Program: "Jews and Socialism" at the JCC.
- **May 13:** Secular Shabbat. Home of Bonnie Cushing.

SECOND CELEBRANT NOW AVAILABLE TO JCSS COMMUNITY FOR LIFE CYCLE EVENTS

The JCSS is proud to announce that Bonnie Cushing, a member for almost 10 years (and a social worker and therapist for considerably longer), has recently expanded her practice to include collaborating and officiating at personalized ceremonies for individuals, partners, families and groups. These life cycle ceremonies include, but are not limited to the following:

- baby welcomings, namings and adoptions
- coming of age ceremonies
- graduations
- housewarmings
- weddings & commitments
- significant birthdays
- anniversaries and renewal of vows
- funerals and memorials
- dedications
- community and civic events

Bonnie became certified as a professional Celebrant in 2002 through the Cele-

brant USA Foundation and Institute and the International College of Celebrancy, where she studied the history of ritual, ceremonial practices from around the world, the choreography, creation and management of ceremonies, and public presentation. She received her BA in Theatre Arts in 1977; a Masters in Social Work in 1987; and trained in family systems therapy with Nydia Preto-Garcia and Monica McGoldrick at the Multicultural Family Institute of NJ. Bonnie can be reached at 973-746-1640.

Our other celebrant, Rhea Seagull, is a certified Madrikha, extremely well-versed in the heritage of Secular Humanistic Judaism. She, too, is a long-time member of the JCSS, and has officiated at many of our members' significant life cycle events. She can be reached at 973-325-7247.

WHY I BELONG TO THE JCSS BY MARK ROSENMAN

We come from diverse backgrounds and joined the Jewish Cultural School and Society for different reasons. In this recurring column, the JCSS Newsletter will highlight one member's reflections on how he or she came to be a member of the JCSS. Submissions will be accepted by email at colepd@umdj.edu

You might say that my road to JCSS was something of a delayed reaction against my experience with Santa Claus as I was growing up in the 1950s and 60s. True! As I said at our son Max's graduation last spring, my family are Jew-

ish secularists by tradition. My mother's mother was a freethinker, one of those New York Jews who parted company with religious tradition as long ago as the 1920's. My father had a religious upbringing, but as he became more educated

WHY I BELONG TO THE JCSS (CONTINUED) BY MARK ROSENMAN

(Continued from page 1)

Ignorance is the evil -- knowledge will be the remedy. Knowledge not of what sort of beings we shall be hereafter, or what is beyond the skies, but a knowledge pertaining to *terra firma*, and we may have all the power, goodness and love that we have been taught belongs to God himself.

-- *Ernestine L. Rose*, address to the First National Infidel Convention, New York City, May 4, 1845



Remember!

To reclaim your \$100 activity deposit, each member family must:

- Attend at least two of nine members meetings, **AND**
- Participate in one holiday preparation **AND**
- Be a member of at least one JCSS committee.

and exposed to culture he broke completely with it. We were the ultimate assimilationist Jews. We had no observant friends. Christmas, complete with a tree full of ornaments and my father playing Santa Claus, was a huge highlight.

It's easy to look back on those assimilationist times with a combination of amusement and disdain. Yes, it's amazing the no one talked about the Holocaust, which was then as recent as the 80s are today. But the truth is more complex. For example, it made a great impression that my father, notwithstanding his lack of Jewish "affiliation," nonetheless followed every step of the Six Day war on the radio.

Years later, after I'd majored in European history in college and gotten a masters degree in History, I discovered an interest in Jewish history. I was enthralled to see that Jews had a rich, glorious, and tortured history completely apart from the Bible and the religious tradition. I was especially drawn to the close, difficult connection between Jews and modern thought. Why had marginal Jews like Marx, Freud, and Einstein had such an incalculable impact on history?

Here's an excerpt from the famous letter that Freud wrote towards the

end of his life to the B'nai B'rith in Vienna: "Only to my Jewish nature did I owe the two qualities that had become indispensable to me on my hard road. Because I was a Jew I found myself free from the prejudices that limited others in the use of their intellect. And being a Jew I was prepared to enter opposition and to renounce agreement with the 'compact majority'." Freud expressed here the epitome of secular Judaism as I see it: a dedication to the intellect and its freedom; a destiny to always be at least a little different from others in the larger society.

Roll the tape forward to meeting Janice. I decided to enroll in an "adult bar mitzvah" program run by the rabbi who married us. Though I did creditably in reading the (mini) Torah portion and was proclaimed a man at age 39, my efforts to relate to religion by attending synagogue thereafter faltered badly. Lacking the touchstone of memories of childhood religious observance, I just didn't feel a connection to the prayers and ritual. Ditto when after our kids were born and we took them to High Holiday services. I felt that I was faking it and that they would realize as much as soon as they were old enough.

Enter Lisa Korn, whom we met soon after moving to Montclair. Over the next several years, Janice

started to hear about JCSS. We became members in 2000. Discussing with Max his paper about the story of David and Goliath for his graduation last spring was a real highlight. The story has such rich connections to myths in other cultures. My favorite aspect of the Bible is that it presents humanity in the full range of capacity for good and evil. Right before the battle David's brothers mock his chances of succeeding against Goliath, while steadfastly declining to challenge Goliath themselves. It's one of many striking insights that the Bible presents into the darker side of human nature.

Through JCSS we have met kindred spirits, people who like us want to be and feel Jewish outside what (seems to me) the artificially comforting confines of religion.

I hope that in the years to come our kids will come to their own idea of what it means for them to be Jewish. Meanwhile I'm grateful that, four thousand years since Abraham supposedly set out on his wanderings from Ur to find the land that God promised, Janice, Max, Lila and I have after our own wanderings found our way on Sunday mornings to JCSS.

PASSOVER: THE EDUCATOR'S DREAM HOLIDAY

BY SHIRA BIRNBAUM

From an educator's point of view, Passover is the dream holiday. The Passover seder is a virtual prototype of what education theorists call good instructional design. As a series of formally sequenced events, experiences and narrative elements, it is remarkably elegant, stimulating what are known to be key mental processes at the heart of learning. If you were a teacher, you couldn't ask for a better lesson plan. Years ago, when I was a college professor, I taught a seminar about "the learning process." Most of my students were teachers studying for their Masters degrees. The seder entered into our classroom discussions sometimes as a fun example of very clever teaching.

The first thing that needs to happen in a lesson, as any teacher will tell you, is that students have to be motivated. You need to get emotional "buy-in" by convincing kids somehow that a thing deserves their energy and attention. Educators sometimes call this the "expectancy phase" of learning (people in my business like to think up scientific-sounding names for things). In a seder, the "expectancy" part of the lesson is accomplished right at the start, by having young people assigned the job of asking the Four Questions. This serves as a ritualized "Wake Up" alarm that tells kids something important is about to happen and, like it or not, they're about to be smack

in the middle of it.

The second thing any lesson needs is an "attention-directing" element. That's the action, activity, or conversation that points specifically to something mysterious, different, or problematic and in need of resolution. Jean Piaget, one of history's major theorists of child development, believed that learning begins with shock or discomfort, which undermine pre-existing understandings or expectations and so force children to seek new explanations. The Four Questions are a perfect model for this. What's up with the matzah? What's the deal with the bitter herbs? In this phase of the seder, attention is nicely centered around some very specific problematic elements.

Next comes what educators sometimes call the "acquisition phase" of learning, also known, in educationese, as "information coding and storage entry." This is the part of a lesson when you get kids to identify what they already know and recognize what they need to find out, and then you guide them through discussions, readings, or hands-on exercises that build, add to or change their mental models or fact base. At Passover, the seder plate does the job. Taken as a whole, it works like an "advance organizer" – a narrative signpost with symbolic arrows that announce, right at the start, all the key "facts"

the student is expected to learn. Kids are alerted to listen and watch for meanings associated with each element on the plate – the degradation (salt water), the physical hardship (charoset, matzah), the difficult and scary transition (the shank bone), the renewal (the egg, the parsley). Taken separately, each food item then serves as a prompt or cue, guiding kids -- one narrative element at a time -- through the story of the exodus from Egypt. The elements on the plate just won't make sense unless the whole story gets told from start to finish, with no skipping or shortcuts. So the plate works like a quality-control device, too. And of course any story becomes more memorable if you get to eat the plot-line.

The next part of a good

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A religion old or new, that stressed the magnificence of the universe as revealed by modern science, might be able to draw forth reserves of reverence and awe hardly tapped by the conventional faiths. Sooner or later, such a religion will emerge.

—Carl Sagan,
Pale Blue Dot

Help Wanted!

Editor Needed for the JCSS Newsletter

After 10 years, Marsha Kalman has stepped down from this post. With no volunteers, the position is currently vacant. The JCSS Newsletter is produced quarterly. The editor is responsible for collecting submissions from the officers and faculty, updating the calendar, and pasting the material in templates, usually using Microsoft Publisher. Printing and distribution are not necessarily the editor's responsibility.

Anyone interested in volunteering, or for a more detailed description of the requirements of the position please contact Marsha (MEKalman@aol.com) or Peter (colepd@umdnj.edu).

Note: The position of JCSS Co-President (a two-year term, overlapping with the second year of the current President) is also vacant.



SAVE THE DATE: April 3rd

JCSS Field Trip
*Guided Tour at the
 Museum of Jewish Heritage:
 "Meeting Hatred with Humanity"*



Created as a living memorial to those who perished during the Holocaust, the Museum honors those who died by celebrating their lives - cherishing the traditions that they embraced, examining their achievements, and affirming the vibrant worldwide Jewish community that is their legacy today. The two quotes that define the Museum's mission - *Remember, Never Forget...There Is Hope For Your Future* - also define the Museum's perspective on the events of the twentieth century Jewish experience. Although the Museum centers on life before, during, and after the Holocaust, the obligation to remember is enriched and enhanced by a commitment to the principles of social justice, education, and culture.

We will be led on a private tour entitled "Meeting Hatred with Humanity" by Museum Gallery Educator, Carol Brier (Lisa Cole's mother). The tour begins at 12:30, and will be one and a half hours long. We can meet in the museum cafeteria for lunch at 11:30. The fee for the tour is \$5 per person. Contact Lisa Cole (973-233-0887) with any questions.



General Information

Museum of Jewish Heritage - A Living Memorial to the Holocaust
 36 Battery Place
 New York, NY 10280
 1.646.437.4200
www.mjhnyc.org

Parking

The Museum offers a \$3 discount on parking at three nearby garages. Visitors should present their parking ticket at the admissions desk to receive discount validation. Their website shows a map which includes locations of participating garages.

Fix reason firmly in her seat, and call to her tribunal every fact, every opinion. Question with boldness even the existence of a god; because, if there be one, he must approve the homage of reason rather than of blind-folded fear. Do not be frightened from this inquiry by any fear of its consequences.... If it end in a belief that there is no god, you will find incitements to virtue in the comfort and pleasantness you feel in its exercise and in the love of others it will procure for you.

-- Thomas Jefferson, to Peter Carr, 10 Aug. 1787.

Adult Program Calendar 2004-2005

In addition to family events, JCSS adults enjoy monthly Sunday morning discussion groups. Adults may also participate in conferences/seminars hosted by CSJO, the Society for Humanistic Judaism, the International Federation for Secular Humanistic Judaism. JCSS also co-sponsors trips to the theater, concerts, museums, historic sites and events. Our Adult Program Chair, Bennett Muraskin is a nationally known lecturer and writer on Secular Jewish topics. He has published numerous articles in Jewish magazines and has spoken at North American conventions.

Unless otherwise noted, the JCSS holds these meetings from 9:45am to Noon in the same rented facilities used for Sunday morning children's classes and members' meetings: at the West Orange JCC (760 Northfield Ave) in the Right Nursery.

Sunday, Sept. 19: How Secular Humanistic Jews View The Bible

Sunday, October 17: Basic Judaism: An Introduction To The Religious Tradition

Sunday, November 7: What Is Anti-Semitism?

Sunday, January 9: Guest Speaker-- TBA

Sunday, February 13: Guest Speaker Ed Klein, Leader Of The Queens Society For Humanistic Judaism and Professional Musician, Will Discuss Jewish Themes In Opera

Sunday, March 20: Fun With Yiddish On Purim (Note: This event will take place at the JCSS Purim celebration.)

Sunday, May 1: Jews And Socialism

Sunday, May 22: Jewish Short Stories On Tape

SECULAR BIBLE

DISCUSSION

The first meeting of the JCSS *Secular Bible Discussion Group* will be Sunday March 13th, at 9:45 at the JCC.

We plan to discuss the first half of the Book of Genesis, chapters 1-25. Read any version of the Bible you wish and be prepared to talk about it from a secular perspective.



Mark Rosenman suggests you might want to look at Genesis, Translation and Commentary by Robert Alter, that has a lot of historical and literary commentary (albeit very academic).



Sample topics the group might want to focus on:

- Jewish national identity-- religion as the means to differentiate us
- The meaning of God's promise to Abraham
- The balance between "tribal" and "ethical" values.
- God's demands for unquestioned obedience.

Questions? Call Mark: 203-316-3049.

PASSOVER: THE EDUCATOR'S DREAM HOLIDAY (CONTINUED)

BY SHIRA BIRNBAUM

(Continued from page 3)

lesson plan is the “retrieval” and “transfer of learning” phase. That’s when the student is asked to identify fundamental or general principles exemplified in the lesson by finding other examples, thinking of similar or related cases, or representing the principles in a boiled-down-to-the-essence schematic or graphic form. So, toward the end of the seder, we are instructed to restate and summarize the exodus story (a transformation from degradation to liberation). We then note the suffering of all who are not free today. And, finally, we identify, consider and scrutinize multiple varieties of bondage and unfreedom in recent history (the Holocaust, for example) and contemporary life (racism, sexism, greed, ignorance, overwork, underpay, colonialism, imperialism, hunger, homelessness, and so on). In this phase of the ceremony, the script calls on us to talk about people other than ourselves, time periods other than the distant past, and locations other than the historical Egypt.

The final component of any lesson is the “performance of learning” phase. That’s when students demonstrate what

they’ve acquired. Most people think of it as the test at the end of the chapter, though nowadays teachers prefer asking for essays, plays or artworks that reveal deeper levels of understanding than what is measured by simple multiple-choice tests. The seder goes even farther: it asks us to “perform” our learning by committing, collectively and individually, to the ongoing work of liberating all those who are still in bondage. Multiple-choice testing just doesn’t make the grade on this holiday. Real social action becomes the ultimate chapter test.

Passover has always brought me great joy. Not just because it’s wonderful to have my extended family together, or because the chicken soup and matzah balls are always delicious, or because the singing is great fun. In addition to all that, the seder impresses me on a professional level. I think it is the world’s oldest, most extraordinary and longest-lasting lesson plan, and I know of few ceremonies as cleverly and carefully designed. What a delight!



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The JCSS is dedicated to the study and celebration of Jewish history and culture within the philosophy of Jewish Secular Humanism.

VISIT US AT
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