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Secular but equal: Montclair Jews who claim culture, not religion

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 By DAN KNITZER
 for *The Montclair Times*
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Ross Hamilton calls himself a “denier” of the religion into which he was born.

Though he has Jewish blood in his veins, the Montclair High School junior said he feels little connection to the Jewish religion. “Its laws seem outdated,” he said, explaining that he opposes the religious devotion to the Torah, and the “false sense of significance Judaism and all religions give people.”

He is an example of those who call themselves Secular Jews. According to the Jewish Outreach Institute Web site, joi.org, “Secular Humanistic Judaism is a movement begun in the 1960s, which embraces ‘a human-centered philosophy that combines rational thinking with a celebration of Jewish culture and identity.’ In the Humanistic Jewish, the focus is not on a relationship with God or religious ritual, but in a belief that the ‘secular roots of Jewish life are as important as the religious ones.’”

Hamilton hasn’t been to synagogue for four years except to attend bar/bat mitzvahs of his Jewish friends and family members. He dislikes “the fact that you have to thank God for everything you have and everything you are.” While he disagrees with religious Jews on many facets of the religion, Hamilton said he does not feel at all estranged from the religious Jews he encounters.

He is not alone. Others who have felt the same disunity seek comradeship with their non-religious Jewish brothers and sisters. Locally, some secular Jews find it in the United Jewish Communities (UJC) of MetroWest New Jersey, in Whippany, and the Jewish Cultural School and Society (JCSS) of West Orange. Both organizations serve Secular Humanistic Jews promoting religious observance.

The UJC of MetroWest is “not a religious entity,” but a predominantly Jewish advocacy group, said Lori Price Abrams, director of the Community Relations Committee. On their Web site, the UJC states its commitment to the plight of Israel, and that it is “dedicated to safeguarding and enhancing Jewish life, and to meeting the needs of all people, Jews and non-Jews, wherever they live.”

For example, the UJC has recently organized and supported campaigns and fundraisers to halt the genocide in Darfur, Sudan, alongside groups such as the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP), which was formed in 1909 by African Americans, whites and Jews to fight for civil rights and racial justice.



Abrams said that while the UJC is not strictly a religious organization, the population of 120,000 Jews that MetroWest serves is so active in these progressive grass-roots campaigns because of “our Jewish values.”

‘CLOSE, BUT NOT TOO CLOSE’

Hamilton, a graduate of the JCSS’ Sunday school in West Orange, confirms that organization’s role as a “refuge for Jews who want to be close to their religion, but not too close.” He sought this refuge out of “dissatisfaction with the teachings of Judaism,” both written, and spoken, that were so abundant in the traditional services he had seen. The blandness of such sayings as “it is God’s plan,” put him off to the religious aspects of Judaism, while the cultural aspects still fascinated him.

The JCSS “is dedicated to the study and celebration of Jewish history and culture within the philosophy of Secular Humanistic Judaism,” according to its Web site, jcssnj.org.

Peter Cole, JCSS communications chair, said that the secular group is affiliated with the Congress of Secular Jewish Organizations, a national organization with a similar mission that is based in Cleveland, Ohio.

Cole, a secular Jew since adolescence, never thought to join the JCSS until after he moved to Montclair with his family. “I wanted my kids to [feel the same] closeness [to Judaism] that I felt,” without all the religious aspects. I wanted them to feel the same ties to Jewish culture and history that I feel, independent of the religion.

“I often find myself trying to explain myself to relatives,” Cole said. “There is the religion, the history and the culture, which are related but can be separate. For someone who doesn’t believe in God or doesn’t believe in praying, I can still identify myself as Jewish by heritage without being a practitioner of the religion,” Cole said.

Cole believes that the JCSS’ richness lies in its focus on the vast cultural heritage of the Jewish people, as opposed to the religious studies associated with “regular synagogues.” While religiously Jewish adolescents read from the Torah on or around their 13th birthday, students of the JCSS must write and present a research paper on a topic of their choosing that is relevant to Judaism. “In addition, they complete a mitzvah project, a service project to the community,” Cole explained. “In a sense that it’s also a coming-of-age ceremony, it’s analogous to a bar or bat mitzvah,” Cole said. “The main difference is that there’s no reliance on a sacred text. There’s no religious component to the JCSS graduation.

“There are traditions that we honor, but not the reliance on religion,” Cole said.

There can also be disagreements. “Just like the tensions between Orthodox and Reform Jews, there are tensions between secular and religious Jews,” Cole explained. Still, he added, “I would say there is more we have in common than we have differences.”

STRONG BONDS

Kim Williams, after-school Kids Club Program director at the JCC in West Orange, said that many non-religious Jews come to the relatively secular JCC in the hopes of intertwining cultural and religious teachings. She described the “dozens of social events” that bring together New Jersey’s Jews such as the celebration of Hanukkah and Passover, both of which are held annually at the JCC. During Yom Kippur, one of the Jewish High Holidays, it is customary to fast for a day, to atone for one’s sins. Families associated with the JCC often break the fast together.

The extent to which certain Jewish movements study these ideals may differ, but in the Montclair area, they exist harmoniously. Rabbi Laurence Groffman of Temple Sholom of West Essex said that his synagogue “has had a long history of involvement with the UJC.”

And the JCSS has “a good bond” with Montclair synagogues B’nai Keshet and Shomrei Emunah, Cole said.

“There are a good number of secular Jews who are members of B’nai Keshet,” said Rabbi Elliott Tupperman of the Reconstructionist synagogue which he heads. “While belief is absolutely an important part of Reconstructionism, belonging comes before believing and all Jews, regardless of our beliefs, and with all of our beliefs, ultimately share Jewish peoplehood,” Tupperman said.

Dan Knitzer is a student at Montclair High School.

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