

Letter from BACK TO BASIC Judaism to the local Humanistic Judaism leadership:

Hello Mike,

I believe we met, and maybe more than once, at your services. I have been on your mailing list for a long time.

I am bothered by the stream of articles over the years in your Humanistic Judaism newsletter making the point that there is nothing unique about Judaism ... not our holidays, not our contributions, not our ethics, nothing. That attitude is bad for the survival of Judaism, I believe.... and bad for the survival and success of your movement. I have been sympathetic to Humanistic Judaism because I feel that believing in G-d is not a necessary condition for appreciating Judaism's special contributions to civilization.

I am very interested in the survival of Judaism and am starting a new denomination called, Back to Basics Judaism. One of our basic principles will be that Judaism does have a very different approach than all other religions. If you would care to talk about our respective approaches or even have a public discussion with your group that would be great.

Please forward a copy of this email to Harold. He knows me also and might be interested in my concerns about your movement.

Hello Harold,

The most exciting thing I am doing these days is trying to launch a new website where I hope to put my ideas about Judaism. It is hard to communicate about abstract subjects using email but I will write a brief response to your points, interspersed with your text. I will write in capitals so that my additions can be easily found below.

Harold wrote:

I think you are missing the point regarding our movement. The main (and one might say only) reason for our existence is the feeling that our Jewish heritage is unique! Otherwise, we would be Unitarians, Buddhists, or who knows what else. The history, culture, holidays, celebrations, and, most importantly, the Jewish people are the essence of our congregation.

AS I WAS WRITING TO MIKE, MANY MONTHS I HAVE OPENED YOUR NEWSLETTER TO FIND ARTICLES ARGUING THAT SOME HOLIDAYS, SOME CELEBRATIONS, SOME ASPECTS OF OUR HISTORY, AND SOME OF OUR GREAT IDEAS ARE NOT UNIQUE. WHY CAN'T THERE BE ARTICLES POINTING OUT THE WAYS JUDAISM IS DIFFERENT FROM OTHER SPIRITUAL PURSUITS. YES, OUR HISTORY IS UNIQUE IN ITS TWISTS AND TURNS, LIKE EVERY PEOPLE'S IS. OUR CALENDAR OF CELEBRATIONS ARE UNIQUE AS A WHOLE BUT YOUR ARTICLES SAY NONE ARE INDIVIDUALLY UNIQUE.

THE PROBLEM IS THAT HISTORY, CELEBRATIONS, AND HOLIDAYS ARE NOT SUFFICIENT FOR MOST PEOPLE TO WANT TO STAY JEWS, AS IS PLAIN. WHAT DO YOU TELL YOUNG PEOPLE OR POTENTIAL CONVERTS AS REASONS FOR JOINING JUDAISM? I BELIEVE THAT THERE ARE GOOD, FORWARD-LOOKING REASONS AND NOT JUST BACKWARD-LOOKING REASONS.

The point we are making in the newsletter is that other religions and cultures also share this quality of "uniqueness". We reject the idea that we are a "chosen people" and have some special relationship with a deity.

WE MAY NOT BE A CHOSEN PEOPLE AND THERE MAY NOT BE A DEITY BUT THE INDIVIDUALS WHO SET JUDAISM ON ITS COURSE, IN TERMS OF IT'S ETHICAL AND SOCIETAL TEACHINGS, DID HAVE IN MIND A PARTICULARLY ETHICAL SOCIETY SERVING AS AN EXAMPLE FOR THE SURROUNDING NATIONS. A PERSON CAN IDENTIFY WITH THIS GOAL WITHOUT BELIEVING IN GOD. THAT IS WHAT I MEAN BY A FORWARD-LOOKING IDEA AND SOMETHING THAT CAN INSPIRE/ENERGIZE PEOPLE.

Other religions (and non-religious people) value education, honor their parents; believe in the importance of charity, etc. Though our history encompasses one of the greatest tragedies in recorded history, the Holocaust, we clearly are not the only people who have suffered immensely. Unfortunately, to this day, such misery persists for people all over the world. (Our congregation) is now approaching its 20th year of existence. We are affiliated with the Society for Humanistic Judaism, in North America and the International Federation for Secular and Humanistic Jews. Though we are a small group, we offer a caring, supportive, spiritual, and intellectually honest approach to our members. We recognize that in a world where fundamentalism abounds, where people are still being killed worldwide in the name of "God", that we can be a beacon of reason and love.

AS I MENTIONED IN MY PREVIOUS LETTER, I EMPATHIZE WITH HUMANISTIC JUDAISM, BUT YOU STILL NEED A MISSION. WHAT CONVINCING THING DO YOU TELL YOUR CHILDREN AND INTERESTED ADULTS AS THE REASONS THEY SHOULD CARE ABOUT THEIR JUDAISM INSTEAD OF BLENDING INTO THE JUDEO-CHRISTIAN AMERICAN CULTURE. DO YOU TELL THEM THAT THERE ARE NO SIGNIFICANT DIFFERENCES BETWEEN THE CHRISTIAN OR MOSLEM APPROACHES AS COMPARED TO THE JEWISH ONE? I DON'T THINK HISTORY AND HOLIDAYS ARE ENOUGH; JUST LOOK AT WHAT'S HAPPENING TO AMERICAN JUDAISM. SOME TORTURED HISTORY AND CUTE HOLIDAYS, FOOD, OR MUSIC, IS NOT GOING TO TAKE US INTO THE NEXT CENTURY.

I feel badly that you have misinterpreted some of our material. We are Jewish Humanists, and both the "Jewish" and the "Humanist" describe who and what we are. We have a congregational Seder next Friday, and, if you would like to see how we blend these two traditions, you are certainly welcome to attend.

I SINCERELY APPRECIATE YOUR INVITATION TO THE CONGREGATIONAL SEDER BUT I NEED US TO REACH SOME UNDERSTANDING OF EACH OTHER'S VIEWS, BEFORE I CAN FEEL COMFORTABLE WITH YOUR GROUP. I AGREE WITH YOU THAT THE PASSOVER STORY HAS MUCH TO TEACH US EVEN IF GOD IS NOT CONSIDERED ONE OF THE CHARACTERS, BUT IF THE FACT IS NOT MENTIONED THAT THESE FREED PEOPLE TOOK UPON THEMSELVES A CERTAIN MISSION THAT IS STILL VALID FOR OUR PRESENT AND FUTURE, THEN THE CELEBRATION IS LESS THAN IT COULD BE.

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