

Society for Humanistic Judaism

ADOPTION INTO HUMANISTIC JUDAISM A SECULAR, CULTURAL JEWISH CONVERSION



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Society for Humanistic Judaism



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INTRODUCTION

I became a member of the Congregation for Humanistic Judaism in Michigan (Birmingham Temple), in 1972. I was newly married and had no children. My brother had died recently, and I needed a community that could help me make sense of his early demise in a car accident. The answer I discovered was that there was no answer. This made sense to me. I didn't have to struggle with the idea that there was a good "god," when there was nothing good about my brother's death.


From the early days of Humanistic Judaism, the rabbis connected to Humanistic Judaism were eager to accept all those who wished to be part of Humanistic Judaism. There were no questions about ancestry. There was not a Jewish knowledge exam. All who wanted to be members, could join. All those who were members, could participate fully in the congregations and the Society for Humanistic Judaism. There have been presidents of congregations, communities, and groups who were not born Jewish, or did not convert to Judaism. There were times that I, out of curiosity wondered, which members of a family were Jewish, only to discover that no one in that family was born Jewish. It changed my attitude, my expectations, and my understanding about who is or who could be Jewish.

In 1980, the Association of Humanistic Rabbis issued a resolution indicating that becoming a part of the Jewish people was a cultural identification, that we should support those desiring to become Jewish. We should support them in their quest and decisions about the course of study would remain with the individual rabbi or community who were welcoming them. It became obvious that those seeking to become Jews were "adopting" (embracing an additional identity), rather than "converting" (leaving prior family or cultural identities). The act required both a decision on the part of the individual seeking to be a Humanistic Jew and the acceptance of the community in which the individual was seeking to become Jewish.

At the second meeting of the International Federation of Secular and Humanistic Jews, those in attendance unanimously adopted the resolution on "Who is a Jew?" The resolution stated, "We... affirm that a Jew is a person of Jewish descent or any person who declares himself or herself to be a Jew and who identifies with the history, ethical values, culture, civilization, community, and fate of the Jewish people." The position was formalized and accepted by an international body.

When I married my current husband, who was born Roman Catholic, he was accepted as a full member of our community. When I applied to the rabbinic seminary of our movement, no one questioned me about the Jewishness of my husband.

I was ordained a rabbi in 2001, and I accepted the position as the rabbi of the Society for Humanistic Judaism. It became clear that most of the rabbinic questions concerned those individuals from all over the world who wanted to become Jewish and because of their beliefs finally found a "home" in Humanistic Judaism.



In deciding what our program would consist of, we affirmed that self-identification was the key component to becoming a Humanistic Jew. We reinforce that the connection for us is not based on beliefs, but rather a desire to be part of the Jewish family. When it came to a course of study, what made the most sense to me was to offer candidates ways to self-educate themselves. My role is to help candidates who desire to know more about Jewish culture, the Jewish people, and Humanistic Judaism to find resources. We offer a certificate and a Hebrew name if you choose. A short statement explaining why you want to become a Humanistic Jew is required. The cost of the program is included in the cost of Full (household) Membership or higher in the Society for Humanistic Judaism, which currently begins at \$95 (US).

There are a few rabbis in our movement who have created an entire course of study and they can guide you through the process. If you would like to explore that option, contact me and I will refer you to them. Their programs are more comprehensive and the charges for their programs will correspond to the increased time and interaction of those rabbis.

We do not require some of the religious rituals associated with conversion. For example, we do not require a beit din (a Jewish court consisting of three rabbis), but we have organized one a few times, or a mikvah (ritual immersion) or hatafat dam brit (drawing blood from the remnant of a male's foreskin).

Since our program serves people from all over the world, we do not include a ceremony. We have, however, created ceremonies of adoption (conversion) and can share them with you, and we have mikvah ceremonies for those who want to participate in this ritual, either in a "kosher" mikveh (some Reform or community mikveh's have allowed it) or in an outdoor river or lake.

This booklet includes our approach to Jewish adoption/conversion, the philosophical foundation behind our approach found in resolutions adopted by rabbinic and other communal leaders, ways to engage with the SHJ community if there is not an accessible local community, the requirements for the adoption process, some educational resources to choose from (many of them digital), a bibliography, some sample statements from those choosing to become Jewish, and a sample certificate.

I am privileged to support so many wonderful individuals seeking adoption to Humanistic Judaism. We embrace your desire to become a Humanistic Jew. Let us know how we can help.

Rabbi Miriam Jerris
rabbi@shj.org, 2023

ARE YOU A CANDIDATE FOR ADOPTING HUMANISTIC JUDAISM?

- I've always been drawn to the Jewish people and things Jewish. *Is that enough of a reason to become Jewish?*
- I want to convert to Judaism and I'm not religious, *will you accept me?*
- *What if I don't believe in God*, can I still pursue the Humanistic Judaism program?
- I've been studying for years and don't want to go through an Introduction to Judaism class. *Can I become a Humanistic Jew?*
- My parents and grandparents were not raised as Jews, but my great-grandmother on my father's side was Jewish. *Can I receive a certificate and a Hebrew name?*
- I discovered that I was partially Jewish when I had my DNA tested. I always wondered why I was so attracted to Judaism, but not the religion – the culture. *Can I adopt Humanistic Judaism?*
- I don't want to give up my family's secular and cultural connection to Christmas or Easter. *Can I still become a Humanistic Jew?*

The answer is YES! You are a candidate to adopt Humanistic Judaism.

WE WILL JOYFULLY WELCOME YOU TO THE FAMILY!!



ARE YOU A JEW? WHO DECIDES?

by Rabbi Miriam Jerris

Questions about who is a Jew or what is truly Jewish are not new questions for the Jewish community or for individual Jews. Who is in and who is out? Who decides? What is required? Typically, the leaders of the community or the rulers of an occupying nation set the guidelines and made the decisions.

We often learn about diversity from the condemnation in the Biblical text. The kings were ordered to remove the “high places” (where sacrifices were made outside of Jerusalem), and take down the pillars and the posts (symbols of the goddess Asherah). Multiple ways to observe were part of the Jewish historical landscape. Questions of the right or only way to be a Jew even feature in the Hanukkah story. Some Israelites, who did not fight against the Greek’s rules, including giving offerings to the Greek gods in the Jerusalem temple, felt it was a small price to pay for peace under Greek rule. The Maccabees did not agree. They maintained that they would live or die upholding the one true covenant with Yahweh.

The obsession with the meaning of Jewish identity has not diminished in modern times. Secular Humanistic Judaism makes a significant contribution to the dialogue. In 1988, the members of the International Federation of Secular Humanistic Jews issued a resolution called, “Who is a Jew?” It stated that a “Jew is a person of Jewish descent or any person who declares himself or herself to be a Jew and who identifies with the history, ethical values, culture, civilization, community, and fate of the Jewish people”. (see Page 9)

Although most secular Jews behaved as if this were the definition, the Jewish denominations and the State of Israel did not and do not agree. Declaring that Jewish identity is a matter of personal choice and self-identification, as Secular Humanistic Jews do, is a radical alternative to matrilineal or patrilineal descent or religious conversion.

Three years ago, we added a page to the Society for Humanistic Judaism website entitled, “Becoming a Humanistic Jew.” Prior to 2014, there were only a few people who completed the process and who became Jewish through the Society. Following the launch of our new website, forty-five people inquired the first year, and sixty did so in each of the following two years. In a six-month period ending in October 2017, thirty-seven people asked about becoming Humanistic Jews through the Society. Close to thirty people have completed the process in the last couple of years and have received a certificate and a Hebrew name.

You may be wondering what we require of a person to become a Humanistic Jew. Affirming the philosophy of self-identification, we ask individuals to become members of the Society. We agree to engage with those who do not live within a reasonable distance of an existing Secular Humanistic community. And the SHJ will always send a SHJ affiliate member a certificate signed by the SHJ rabbi if there is no rabbi in the local community. Other than SHJ membership, we ask for a three-quarter page reflection stating why they want to become a Secular Humanistic Jew. No reading is required, although a reading list is provided. I've never felt that it was philosophically consistent, or frankly, ethical to require more from someone not born Jewish than I would from someone who is born Jewish and not well educated. For me, self-identification is self-identification.

Our approach fully welcomes those who are choosing to declare that they are a Jew and they "identify with the history, ethical values, culture, civilization, community and fate of the Jewish people." There is no requirement to go to a mikveh (a ritual bath), to be circumcised, or participate in the ritual of hatafat dam brit (drawing a drop of blood from an already circumcised man). We do not refer to the process of becoming a Humanistic Jew as conversion. We speak of adoption. The individual "adopts" Judaism and we "adopt" them. Thus, there is no requirement to disconnect from family celebrations of non-Jewish holidays or to abandon a previously held identity. Individuals have multiple identities. In Secular Humanistic Judaism you can be "Jewish" and..."

The most rewarding aspect of this initiative is the outpouring of gratitude from those who become Humanistic Jews. The stories are diverse. Some people discover a Jewish ancestor; others have always "felt Jewish" or been drawn to things "Jewish." They ask if we accept transgender people. They come to us after studying for multiple years in Reform or Conservative Judaism, only to find that the rabbi decided that they didn't qualify, and thus the rabbi wouldn't convert them. People approach us because, as in so much else in Jewish life, we joyfully welcome those not accepted by other Jewish denominations.

I will share a few case histories so that you can get a sense of some of the feelings of those who have become Jewish through this process. **At the beginning of this year, Andres P. from Oregon joined SHJ and wrote his essay. He took the Hebrew name Adam. In March, I received a letter from him. He shared, "Enclosed is a picture of me holding the adoption/conversion certificate you sent me. It really means all the world to me. Thank you so much."**

Last month, we welcomed Jordan, age 17, as a Humanistic Jew. When she first wrote to me, we asked her mother for permission. Jordan wrote:

Growing up...Christianity always left me feeling empty and disenchanting. Ever since I was a child, I had been interested in Judaism... Upon learning about my Sephardic heritage a few years ago, I fell into a deep hole of research... While I love the fact that Judaism encourages debate and criticism regarding God, I just don't know if I can get behind worshipping a deity. I had an older cousin [whom] I loved very deeply and I lost her five years ago and that had me angry at God and I questioned if he ever existed at all... This left me very disheartened because I still didn't want to let go of the Jewish culture I had grown to have a deep appreciation and love for. When I found out about the Humanist Secular branch, I had finally found something to identify with and follow... As [Moshe] Katsav puts it, "To be a Jew means to belong to a nation whose people are linked to each other spiritually and emotionally, to belong to a group that shares a common significant past, one tradition, and a common destiny and fate."

Jordan chose the Hebrew name Shoshana Atarah.

From still another new Humanistic Jew, James E.:

I first discovered Judaism sixteen years ago and started learning on my own... Then six years ago I went through cancer treatment... I am happily in remission... I pursued a conversion religiously, without much success. That was for the better though because it wasn't until more self-reflection... that I realized it is the Jewish culture I am most interested in... I look forward to identifying as, and experiencing life as, one of the tribe of Jewish people.

These are just three examples of those who became Jewish through the SHJ and received a certificate. I am grateful to be able to provide the opportunity for Secular and Humanistic Jews to become Jewish. It is one of the most gratifying aspects of what I do as rabbi for the Society Humanistic Judaism.

(Originally published in Humanistic Judaism Magazine, Winter 2017)



WHY BECOME A HUMANISTIC JEW?

These heartfelt and inspiring statements are from new members sharing why they chose to become Humanistic Jews.

In my heart, I have been a Jew for a long time. I don't know why this is so, but it is so. Coming from a non-Jewish background, I have been tentative about this feeling, but it has been there for nearly 60 years, since I first ran into secular Jews... Being adopted into this tradition, and adopting it, is but a first step, but for me it is major."

S.E.

Judaism and Humanistic Judaism fill something I can't quite explain. Anytime I've tried to fill that space with something else or tried to conform to 'christonormativity' there is a deep part of my inner being that pulls in the opposite direction, and it gets stronger and stronger until I'm back to Judaism and then it rests, and it feels like home. Humanistic Judaism came at a time when I didn't think I would ever get to truly have that. For several reasons, from I live way too far away from a community to not knowing exactly where I fit within the various movements. Suddenly, those roadblocks melted away. I found an amazing online community I look forward to spending time with. It's the difference between night and day and I'm so grateful to finally have that.

M.D.

I wish to become a Humanistic Jew because I believe it would provide me with that missing sense of cultural and community identity, and also because I feel I could be a helpful member to the community. Many years ago, I dismissed the supernatural from my life; however, looking back, I realize I never dismissed wanting to help people, wanting to be a part of a wonderful community, wanting to honor my heritage, or wanting to be a good person—just because.

R.M.

After about a year of intense study and integrating Jewish practices into my life I feel fully committed to living a life as a Humanistic Jew. The embrace of pluralism and inclusion within the community along with "using only words that match our beliefs" aligns succinctly with my ethics and values of speaking with honesty and integrity. This is my match, where it feels I belong. Like Ruth, when given the choice, I choose to go where you go, lodge where you lodge, die where you die, and want you to be my people.

S.H.

WHO IS A JEW?

PREAMBLE

Who is a Jew? After more than thirty centuries Jews continue to debate this question.

At stake is the integrity of millions of Jews who do not find their Jewish identity in religious belief or religious practice, but who discover their Jewishness in the historic experience of the Jewish people. At stake also is the Jewish identity of thousands of men and women, in Israel and in other countries of the world, who want to be Jewish, but who are rejected by the narrow legalism of traditional religious authorities.

We, the members of the International Federation of Secular Humanistic Jews, believe that the survival of the Jewish people depends on a broad view of Jewish identity. We welcome into the Jewish people all men and women who sincerely desire to share the Jewish experience regardless of their ancestry. We challenge the assumption that the Jews are primarily or exclusively a religious community, and that religious convictions or behavior are essential to full membership in the Jewish people.

The Jewish people is a world people with a pluralistic culture and civilization all its own. Judaism, as the culture of the Jews, is more than theological commitment. It encompasses many languages, a vast body of literature, historical memories, and ethical values. In our times the shadow of the Holocaust and the rebirth of the State of Israel are a central part of Jewish consciousness.

We Jews have a moral responsibility to welcome all people who seek to identify with our culture and destiny. The children and spouses of intermarriage who desire to be part of the Jewish people must not be cast aside because they do not have Jewish mothers and do not wish to undergo religious conversion. The authority to define "who is a Jew" belongs to all the Jewish people and cannot be usurped by any part of it.

RESOLUTION

In response to the destructive definition of a Jew now proclaimed by some Orthodox authorities, and in the name of the historic experience of the Jewish people, we, therefore, affirm that a Jew is a person of Jewish descent or any person who declares himself or herself to be a Jew and who identifies with the history, ethical values, culture, civilization, community, and fate of the Jewish people.

Adopted at the IFSHJ Second Biennial Conference, Brussels, October 1988

STATEMENTS OF THE ASSOCIATION OF HUMANISTIC RABBIS

CONVERSION

We recognize the necessity of a new approach to Jewish conversion.

We believe:

1. That Jewish identity is primarily a cultural and ethnic identity.
2. That belief systems are too diverse among Jews to serve as criteria for membership.
3. That joining the Jewish community is a process of cultural identification.
4. That a person who seeks to embrace Jewish identity should be encouraged to do so and should be assisted in this endeavor.
5. That the cultural instruction for conversion should be left to the discretion of each rabbi, congregation, or community.

We are convinced that Jewish survival requires creative alternatives to traditional procedures.

Adopted in 1980

CONVERSION / ADOPTION

Preamble

The Jewish people began as a nation and evolved into an international family. Over three thousand years this nation/family has been the host to competing religious beliefs and diverse philosophies of life. The heart of Jewish identity has always been a strong sense of membership in the Jewish people and participation in its identification with its history and participation in its culture.

For most of Jewish history the Jewish people welcomed others to join the Jewish family. Jewish conversion is adoption into the culture and future of the Jewish people.

Statement

We, the members of the Association of Humanistic Rabbis, welcome all individuals into the Jewish people who desire to link their lives with the experience of the Jewish nation/family to identify with its historic memories and to participate in its culture and future. Both personal choice and acceptance by a Jewish community to which they belong are necessary to make their adoption significant and valid.

The act of adoption should be preceded by a period of preparation when the prospective adoptee studies the fundamentals of Jewish history and Jewish culture. The welcoming community may offer a celebration and certificate of adoption.

Adopted June 2005

THIRTEEN THINGS YOU CAN DO TO ENGAGE IN THE CAUSE OF HUMANISTIC JUDAISM WITH NO GROUP IN YOUR AREA

1. You can [subscribe](#) to the SHJ E-Newsletter.
2. You can explore the [Society for Humanistic Judaism website](#).
3. You can participate in the [Humanistic Judaism Discussion](#) on Facebook.
4. You can follow us on social media the SHJ [Facebook page](#), [Twitter](#) and [Instagram](#).
5. You can peruse our [YouTube Channel](#).
6. You can check out our initiative [Jews for a Secular Democracy's website](#) and interact with others on the [Jews for a Secular Democracy Facebook Page](#).
7. You can explore and listen to services, lectures, holiday celebrations, classes on a site called [Library SHJ](#).
8. You can watch lectures and classes on YouTube hosted by the [International Institute for Secular Humanistic Judaism](#).
9. You can check out the [Association of Humanistic Rabbis](#). Many of our rabbis have blogs and individual websites.
10. You can read portions of [past issues](#) of our magazine, or [subscribe to our magazine](#), *Humanistic Judaism*.
11. Check out one of our local affiliated communities in person [here](#).
12. Learn from Rabbi Sherwin Wine, our late founding rabbi [here](#).
13. Include SHJ in your tzedakah/giving by [donating](#) or by [joining our community](#).

PROCESS FOR ADOPTING HUMANISTIC JUDAISM

REQUIREMENTS

1. A short statement (less than a page) on why you would like to be a Humanistic Jew including why Humanistic Judaism is the best Jewish option for you. The statement is not meant to be academic. We are interested in your personal reflections on your Humanistic Jewish identity.
2. Choose a Hebrew name (we will help you if you wish). We only use first and middle names and do not use the ben Avraham or bat Sara construct.
3. Full (household) Membership (\$95 per year) or above in the Society for Humanistic Judaism. Student memberships, subscriptions to the magazine and on-line memberships do not qualify for this program. If you do not live in North America, please contact info@shj.org to become a member.
4. Additional shipping fee will be charged for Adoptions outside of the U.S.
5. OPTIONAL: Engage in self-learning (see “Educational Resources” on next page).

CERTIFICATION

Following receipt of SHJ membership, your personal statement, and your chosen Hebrew name, an adoption/conversion certificate signed by Rabbi Miriam Jerris and SHJ President Rabbi Mary Raskin will be sent to the individual choosing to become a Humanistic Jew. If under the age of 18, parental consent is required.

Becoming a Humanistic Jew is a self-identification process and recognized by Humanistic Judaism. Other denominations may not accept this as a valid conversion. However, some congregations and rabbis have. This conversion is not currently accepted for Aliyah to Israel.

EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES

There are many ways to learn about and study Secular Humanistic Judaism. We have created a list of resources that allows you to make choices based on your interests and educational gaps.

Movement Websites

- Society for Humanistic Judaism – www.shj.org – [Find other communities](#)
- Jews for a Secular Democracy – www.jfasd.org
- International Institute for Secular Humanistic Judaism – Educational Arm, including officiant, leadership, and rabbinic training - www.iishj.org
- Association of Humanistic Rabbis – humanisticrabbis.org
- Sherwin T. Wine Legacy – www.sherwinwine.com
- Cultural and Secular Jewish Organizations – www.csjo.org
- Tmura Israel - <https://www.israeli-judaism.org.il>

Program and Study Videos

- [Colloquia](#) – The IISHJ has held educational weekends. The videos can be found on the IISHJ YouTube channel (<https://www.youtube.com/user/IISHJvid>). Study questions for some of these programs may be available.
- Introduction to Humanistic Judaism: A Humanist Perspective. Four session videos by Rabbi Sherwin Wine (<https://shj.org/product/introduction-to-judaism-a-humanist-perspective/>)
 - o Session 1 – Jewish Enlightenment
 - o Session 2 – Jewish Nationalism
 - o Session 3 – American Jewish Experience
 - o Session 4 – The Movement
- [Introduction to Humanistic Judaism: Judaism Beyond God – Video presentation for each chapter.](#)

Congregation for Humanistic Judaism of Metro Detroit, MI

Resources of Congregation for Humanistic Judaism of Metro Detroit, MI – www.libraryshj.com

- Congregation for Humanistic Judaism of Metro-Detroit YouTube Channel
<https://www.youtube.com/c/BTCongregationforHumanisticJudaism>
- [Catalogue for Shabbat services and holiday services and Shabbat sermons and presentations](#)
- Torah with Rabbi Jeffrey Falick [Rebbe's Tisch](#).
- An Introduction to Jews and Judaisms by Rabbi Jeffrey Falick
<https://www.youtube.com/playlist?list=PLk4FoMDuewFPR7XHOjBJGv2VPfXed9HDr>
- Who Wrote the Bible? Rabbi Jeffrey Falick
 - o Pt. 1: <https://vimeo.com/130984310>
 - o Pt. 2: <https://vimeo.com/131461172>
 - o Pt. 3: <https://vimeo.com/132129963>
 - o Pt. 4: <https://vimeo.com/133391390>
 - o Pt. 5: <https://vimeo.com/134096045>
 - o Pt. 6: <https://vimeo.com/134757975>

[Kol Hadash Humanistic Congregation](#)

Rabbi Chalom, Kol Hadash Humanistic Congregation, Deerfield, IL

- Three section Adult Education curricula:
 - o Jewish History
Rabbi Adam Chalom teaching Jewish History
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=EVXMfrJ8SUU&list=PLyHcweASuE6_PI19EOGi0wqoAF8dbfV1C
 - o Philosophy
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=d9zkePRrKI0&list=PLyHcweASuE6_EQ1JxfdA1KBpPJPgdk-Zt
 - o Jewish Culture
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=JRUVjv5uhxT4>
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=mxSqlBIQjV4>
- [Kol Hadash Humanistic Congregation Podcast](#) Rabbi Adam Chalom – High Holiday talks and reflections

[Machar, The Washington Congregation for Secular Humanistic Judaism, DC, Maryland and Virginia](#), Rabbi Jeremy Kridel. They offer Shabbat and holiday programming including a full schedule of [Adult Education](#).

[The City Congregation, NY](#) welcomes the public to their Shabbat and Educational Programs. They have [Adult Education](#) classes and programs led by Rabbi Dr. Tzemah Yoreh. For weekly Talmud classes led by Avi Gorelick [click here](#).

[Oraynu Congregation for Humanistic Judaism](#)

This community is in Metro Toronto, Ontario, Canada. Adult Education offerings are available [at this link](#). Rabbi Jonathan Cohen is offering Torah study.

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Society for Humanistic Judaism

Conversion / Adoption Certificate

תְּעוּדַת גִּירוּת

This certifies that

has been warmly adopted and welcomed as a member of the Jewish people,
has linked their fate to the fate of the Jewish people,
and taken the Hebrew name

as a sign of membership in the Jewish people.

On this the _____ day of the Hebrew month of _____ in the year _____, corresponding to _____.

...For wherever you go, I will go; wherever you lodge, I will lodge; your people shall be my people... (Excerpted from Ruth 1:16)

כִּי אֶל-אֱשֶׁר תֵּלַכְי אֵלֶיךָ, וּבְאֶשֶׁר תִּלְיִנִי אֵלָיו, עַמְּךָ עָמִי

Rabbi

President