

## Talk given by Rabbi Jeremy Kridel at the 2018 Rosh Hashanah service

There's an old Yiddish proverb that goes, "With one tuchus, you can't dance at two weddings." That makes sense, except maybe for when twins get married at the same time.

So what happens if one tuchus tries to dance at three weddings? I'll give you a hint: look around. The answer is in this room.

You get Secular Humanistic Judaism.

Secular, humanistic, Judaism. Three weddings. A colleague of mine, Rabbi Jeffrey Falick, says it's two weddings. I'm not so sure it's just two.

It's already hard to dance at two weddings. It's really hard to dance at three. Sometimes it's hard to even know what's happening at each of them — forget the dancing part!

I had a conversation with last year's mitzvah class that drove this point home for me. Our conversation went something like this: I asked, "What's Secular Humanistic Judaism?" And they had some sense for the secular part, and for the Jewish part, and then Humanism got a sort of ... "be a good person?" half-question, half-answer.

Now, one problem is that we've taught our students all manner of things that are part of the Humanism package, but maybe haven't always put as fine a point on things as we should have. They don't always know what wedding they're at, let alone how to dance at it.

But I think the other problem is that there are all kinds of humanism, and it's not always clear what the word even means: there's Renaissance humanism, religious humanism, secular humanism, even transhumanism. And there's the vague state of being secular. And there's Judaism, which actually isn't exactly the most easily defined thing itself. Three weddings, and we're trying to keep straight how we're supposed to dance at each of them.

Now, if you're like me — I'm a really bad dancer — you sometimes find that you're really only dancing at one or one-and-a-half of the weddings. And if you're as bad a dancer as I am, people may invite you to sit down and stop stepping on everyone else's toes.

But since this is the one time people can't tell me to stop dancing, I'll tell you which wedding is the hardest one for me to dance at.

It's the Humanistic one.

Being secular isn't necessarily difficult. Those of us who work at an occupation almost all work at non-religious jobs. Even when we work for religiously affiliated institutions, we usually do secular work. Those of us who have children mostly send them to schools that are basically secular. And we lead lives that rely upon the accomplishments of science and reasoned inquiry.

Being Jewish isn't necessarily difficult in a basic way, either. There are a lot of ways to feel or be Jewish. I can listen to the Judaism Unbound podcast, or to Israeli musician Idan Raichel, or watch "Fiddler on the

Roof,” or watch the Israeli TV show “Fauda” on Netflix, or I can read something from MyJewishLearning.com — or I can just remember a holiday memory — and I can feel and be Jewish.

But being a Humanist?

I’m not sure you can actually just be a Humanist.

Now, we’re all sitting here during Secular Humanistic Jewish High Holiday services. Then, I just went and told you we can’t be Humanists. So...we should all just go home, right?

If only because there’s probably no rabbi in the world who would say, “Five minutes, the talk is done, let’s go home!,” I’m not going to just let you go.

I heard a few disappointed sighs there.

We shouldn’t just go home because Humanism itself tells us that there’s more to it than just being. That’s because Humanism is an idea that gets its value from what we do with it, not simply that we are Humanists.

Did you know that, over the last eighty-some years, there have been three separate documents, each called “The Humanist Manifesto,” that have been released by groups of Humanists? The first one, sometimes called Humanist Manifesto I, was signed and released in 1933. Its most famous signer is philosopher and education theorist John Dewey.

The Second Manifesto, rather prosaically called Humanist Manifesto II by the American Humanist Association, was issued in 1973 and was signed by none other than Isaac Asimov. Nobel Prize-winner Francis Crick signed it, and so did Andre Sakharov, the nuclear physicist and Soviet political dissident. Folks who’ve been around Machar and the secular movement for a long time may remember Edd Doerr; he signed the Humanist Manifesto II. So, too, did the founder of Reconstructionist Judaism, Rabbi Mordecai Kaplan, whose secular sensibilities didn’t prevent him from seeing Judaism as a religious civilization.

Guess who else’s name is on that list?

Rabbi Sherwin Wine, the founder of our movement.

Here’s some of that Second Humanist Manifesto that religious humanist Mordecai Kaplan and secular humanist Sherwin Wine signed on to. On ethics: “We affirm that moral values derive their source from human experience. Ethics is autonomous and situational... Ethics stems from human need and interest.”

On human reason: “Reason and intelligence are the most effective instruments that humankind possesses. There is no substitute: neither faith nor passion suffices in itself. The controlled use of scientific methods ... must be extended further in the solution of human problems. But reason must be tempered by humility, since no group has a monopoly on wisdom or virtue.”

On politics: “The separation of church and state and the separation of ideology and state are imperatives.” And the second Humanist Manifesto doesn’t just demand democracy and secularism in government. It also calls for democratic principles to come into play in every other area of life, because

individual autonomy and dignity are central to Humanism. “People,” it says, “are more important than decalogues, rules, proscriptions, or regulations.”

That last line is probably the most important one. “People are more important than decalogues, rules, proscriptions, or regulations.” Or, as Unitarian-Universalist Humanist minister David Breeden put it, “Humanism’s core value is that people matter more than ideas.”

It’s this principle, put together with secular and Jewish outlooks, that makes Humanistic Judaism what it is. Consider what secular Jewishness can look like: it can be like Humanistic Judaism. It can also take expressly Marxist forms, inventing “Fiddler on the Roof”-style lessons about the Torah, like Perchik’s insistence that the story of Jacob, when properly understood, teaches us the lesson, “Never trust an employer.”

It can look like the secular, largely socialist Zionism of the first generation of Israeli prime ministers — basically socialist, but far more concerned with a Jewish homeland than with unifying the workers of all nations.

And secular Jewishness isn’t only left-leaning. It can take the form of right-leaning Revisionist Zionism, which puts the needs of one people above all others without bothering with a religious justification. And it can take the form of Jewish identity advanced by what Commentary magazine used to be: a kind of Jewish-flavored but largely secular neoconservative agenda.

These are all secular ways of being Jewish. But none of these are Humanistic Judaism, because they all exist to make the world look like each ideology’s goal, regardless of what reality pushes in the way.

That’s not what Humanistic Judaism is about. Humanism and Humanistic Judaism don’t hold to the belief that there’s some perfect point in time toward which we’re striving. Humanism is much more in the present.

Each time we have to act, each time we face a dilemma, Humanism tells us to ask: what will the effects of my actions be on others? Will what I do make it more possible for me and others affected by my actions to be better, to realize more of our potential?

Not, “will my actions help realize the downfall of the bourgeoisie,” or “are my actions economically rational and likely to advance the growth of capitalism”? Simply, “What will the effects of my actions be on others? Is that outcome a good one?”

In some ways, that idea is freeing. In other ways, it’s absolutely terrifying.

It’s freeing because we don’t have a big, giant endpoint that we’re always measuring ourselves against. There isn’t a Big Idea that can distract us from the human needs in front of us, sacrificing an obvious good in the name of a more speculative, thousand-year goal. Humanism warns against saying, “This doesn’t advance my bigger ideological goals of ... whatever.” It puts us in the present, in the moment, and asks us to use our observations, our experiences, and our reason to make the best decision for the people our own actions will affect.

And that’s also what’s terrifying about Humanism.

Everything is upon us. We're responsible for our own actions. We have to decide. Not only that, we have to decide how to decide. What things are important to us? What things are more important to us? Who is important to us? Who is more important to us? When I act, how far in our global pond will my ripples go? What does our past tell us about how this decision will turn out?

Humanism demands that, when we answer those questions, we ensure that the largest number of people have the fullest opportunity to reach their potential. That you think something is important in making decisions is valuable, but it's not the most valuable thing: the results of following through on your priorities matter more.

That means Humanism gives us questions with few answers.

In a way, this is the most modern way of viewing our ethical obligations. We talk about right and wrong, but there are situations in which there simply isn't an obvious right or wrong course of action. There's no set of rules somewhere "out there" that, if we just followed them, would lead to the right result. We can't be sure that when we try to make ourselves more virtuous, whatever it is that means, that we'll end up doing the right thing.

Humanism is conscience. I talked about conscience earlier today and told you that it's often loud and in-your-face. Conscience is not a cricket who sits on your shoulder and reminds you to "do the right thing." Conscience isn't a thing that tells you what to do; it's the response to the obvious fact of suffering in front of you that asks you what you will do.

There simply isn't a sure-fire way of being a good person, of doing the right thing in every situation. There isn't even a way to know what the right thing is to do in every situation. Conscience is a question; conscience doesn't tell you what to do, so much as it alerts you that you must decide what to do.

If this makes Humanistic ethics seem hard, there's a reason for that: Humanism is hard. Like the world we live in, Humanism gives us no guarantees. Humanism tells us to look at human history, at what we know and can know, and asks us to make choices for ourselves based on what our actions will or might do to others and to ourselves. That's the only way we can really figure out the value of our choices: what happened? What will happen? What might happen? What can happen?

Humanism mostly doesn't care what you thought you were doing. It cares about what you did and what came of it. Humanism is about people first; it's about consequences.

It's situational ethics: not shifting norms as we find personal advantage at the moment (that's no sort of ethics at all), but recognizing that no two moments are exactly alike and that we must respond to the situation we find before us at the moment of action.

Actually... Humanism is a little like Dr. Phil. Yeah, that Dr. Phil. The guy on TV.

Hear me out on this.

There's a lot that's not quite right about Dr. Phil's show. But if you've ever seen his shtick, you know that Dr. Phil doesn't care what you thought you were doing. Dr. Phil listens to someone on his show who's made one bad decision after another. Someone who has really screwed up over and over again, and who can rationalize all of it.

And then he just looks at them.

And he asks, with that Texas drawl carrying a not-so-subtle hint of sarcasm, “How’s that working for you?”

“How’s that working for you?” That’s Humanism’s central ethical question, because it asks you to look at the facts.

And — that’s the question that Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur have traditionally posed.

This is at the core of the idea of teshuvah, of repentance, the central theme of the High Holidays. We’re accustomed to translating this as repentance, and we talk in our services here about making the world better, and about self-improvement and making amends, but it’s more complex than that.

Teshuvah means repentance. The Hebrew root for the word is shuv, which means to come back.

Coming back can also mean having a “come back” — a response. And so, the Hebrew word teshuvah means repentance — but it also means, “an answer.”

Doing teshuvah is about providing answers. It’s about accounting for ourselves, both within ourselves and with others, and answering: What have I done? What did that cause? Why did I do that? What do I do now?

If conscience is the question — “what will you do now that you see the truth?” — teshuvah is the answer.

Maimonides, that greatest of Jewish philosophers, goes so far as to say that, done right, teshuvah transforms us: u-m’shaneh sh’mo, k’lomar, ‘Ani acher, v’eini oto’: Teshuvah “changes one’s identity, as if to say, ‘I am someone else, and I am not that person.’” (MT Hilkhos Teshuva 2:4) How do we know someone is truly sorry for what they have done? They change their actions. That’s what repentance — teshuvah — is about. We answer the question with action.

And by causing us to change what we do, teshuvah — facing the challenge of prior actions, understanding how better to act, and answering our past with changes in how we act — changes who we are.

Humanism understands who we are through the lens of what we do. Done right, teshuvah is almost fundamentally a Humanistic process because it’s not just about working through the consequences of our actions. Teshuvah is also about how we make future choices. It’s about what we do tomorrow, and the day after that, and the day after that.

Teshuvah is an answer to Hillel’s question: “If I am not for myself, who will be for me; but if I am only for myself, what am I?” It’s about who we are, and what we’ll become.

And teshuvah is how, on Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur, we actually can dance at three weddings with one tuchus — Secular, Humanistic, Judaism.

Secular: we use reason and engage the knowable world. Humanistic: we look at the consequences of what we do as our guide. Judaism: we stand on the shoulders of prior generations, whose folly and wisdom alike were laid bare each year at this time, for more than two thousand years. We stand on their shoulders and say: what have I done? What have we done? What should we have done? What now can we do?

We ask questions, and we give an answer, a teshuvah. And, if we do it right, our Humanism binds us to one another, to the world, and to our past, and guides us to change.

On Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur, we dance, each of us, with one tuchus at three weddings, looking for teshuvot; looking for answers. As we move through this High Holiday season, I leave you to consider this: What will your answer — what will your teshuvah — be? What answers will you find?

How will you dance at the three weddings?