

9 Essential Questions and Answers
about Humanistic Judaism

A guide by HumanisticJudaism.org.uk

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What is Humanistic Judaism?

Humanistic Judaism is a branch of Judaism that offers secular and cultural Jews a set of guiding principles along with meaningful practices to celebrate and preserve their Jewish identity and heritage.

Essentially, it's ...

... a philosophy of life that understands reason as the source of truth.

... an approach to living that draws lessons and inspiration from human intelligence, common experience, and the shared experiences of the Jewish people.

... a series of observances and rituals that celebrate and mark the passages of life and cycles of the seasons with language and practices that are modern, egalitarian, secular and intrinsically Jewish.

... a body of teachings based on critical thinking that yields new and unfolding wisdom that evolves from one generation to the next.

What do Humanistic Jews believe?

We believe that we determine the purpose and direction of our own lives independent of a supernatural being, whether or not such a supernatural being exists. We manage our lives either on our own or with the support of family and friends, teachers and caregivers.

We are responsible for our own actions and also for our failure to act. To a large extent, we have the power to

shape our own lives and to make changes for the better for ourselves and in the world around us. At the same

time we acknowledge a variety of circumstances that influence our ability to control our lives, including physical ability, economic opportunity, political rights, mental and physical health, and the harmful actions of others and of nature.

We have an obligation to treat each other with dignity. We honor each person's humanity and look for commonality rather than differences. We deplore hurtful speech and negative rhetoric, but we respect the rights of others to speak their minds even if we do not accept their beliefs.

We acquire wisdom through rational, critical thinking and the scientific method. That knowledge is found in many places and from many people and is not transmitted by revelation nor automatically handed down from one generation to the next.

What does Humanistic Judaism teach?

We start with the idea that Judaism is the cumulative cultural and historical experience of the Jewish people out of which has developed cherished values and teachings. From generation to generation, we have passed down stories, languages, music and food, as well as customs and practices.

Yet while rooted in the past, Jewish culture is ever-evolving. Innovation itself is part of Jewish tradition, and each generation defines and asserts itself on its own terms.

Classical and historical texts are valuable, but we do not accept them automatically or authoritatively as the sole

sources of learning, wisdom or truth. We look for wisdom everywhere.

Our identity is not primarily shaped by ancient or mythic events, but from the experiences of modern times, the Holocaust and the founding of the state of Israel, as well as the personal journeys of our own families.

These experiences of the Jewish people have taught us to care for those who are oppressed and are in poverty, regardless of their nationality or religious affiliation.

For us, Jewish history is a human saga that testifies to the significance of human power, courage, ingenuity, compassion and adaptability.

How do Humanistic Jews relate to Jewish history and the Torah?

We study our historical texts and literature to understand our roots, and those of Western Civilization. We approach our history critically to distinguish between myth and reality, folklore and fact. We believe that history is not directed by supernatural powers or forces but is lived and written by people.

We understand that the Torah, the Five Books of Moses, was written by human beings during a specific period of time known as the Biblical era. It reflects various schools of thought along with evolving political and social views. The Torah holds an important place in our heritage, but it is not a source of all wisdom for all times, nor do we place it on a higher plane than the rest of our literature. In fact, there are many aspects and teachings of Torah that we reject as outdated or inconsistent with our modern sense of justice, ethics, and behavior.

Along with the rest of the Bible, the Torah is part of a vast heritage of Jewish literature that includes the Talmud, medieval commentaries, modern philosophy,

contemporary fiction, poetry, drama and memoirs. All of this literature instructs us and records the journeys and experiences of our people. From it we derive lessons for how to connect with that heritage and live our lives today.

Do Humanistic Jews believe in God?

It depends who you ask, and it depends what you mean.

As individuals, we have our own personal beliefs that tend to include the following approaches:

- * Some are certain that God does not exist, or exists only as a character of literature and mythology. They may understand God as a human construction devised to explain various questions about the universe, humankind, and the existence of evil and suffering.
- * Some are uncertain whether God exists or not. They do not dismiss God but do not rely on God either.
- * Some believe that God does exist as a force in the universe or a provider of purpose in their lives.
- * Still others have their own particular set of beliefs.

The common denominator of all these ideas is that a belief in God does not affect how we live our daily lives. We recognize that life is often unfair and requires

fortitude and the strength of others to face the ordeals of life.

Our services and celebrations use non-theistic language that affirms the human-centered orientation of our philosophy. Just as we don't expect a deity to answer our prayers, nor do we turn to God as a source for wisdom

and truth. We use our own collective intelligence to develop guidelines for ethical right behavior.

What are Humanistic Jewish practices?

We preserve the aspects of our culture and tradition that offer meaningful connections to our collective past, and we practice Judaism in ways that are relevant to our own lives and are compatible with our values.

Our services, readings, music, ceremonies and rituals are constantly evolving. We seek to capture essential ideas from our rich heritage and express them in meaningful, contemporary, secular terms.

We embrace traditions that are compatible with our modern sensibilities and we adapt some practices and retain them by using language that is consistent with our philosophy. And we discard other observances that don't reflect our modern point of view.

We celebrate Jewish holidays and life's significant moments as expressions of the cycles of human life, nature and events in Jewish history.

We have naming ceremonies for babies. We teach our children and provide them with an innovative and meaningful secular bar/bat mitzvah. We marry couples and officiate at partnership ceremonies. We welcome

Jews-by-choice into our community. And we celebrate the end of life with a meaningful funeral or memorial.

We see the High Holidays as an affirmation of human power and human dignity. Our celebrations guide us toward self-reflection and provide the opportunity to seek and offer forgiveness among ourselves.

One of the highlights of our year is our community Passover Seder, when we read from our own humanistic *Haggadah* and enjoy a festive meal together.

All of our ceremonies use language that is consistent with our secular principles. Our readings are poetic, uplifting, and inclusive. We introduce new music, sometimes retaining traditional melodies for which we have provided new lyrics.

Who is Jewish in the eyes of Humanistic Jews?

Jewish identity may be conferred by birth to a person born to a Jewish parent, either father or mother, but ultimately needs to be affirmed by individuals in their own right as they progress into adulthood.

Jewish identity may also be conferred by the Jewish community on those who, although not born Jewish, have chosen to identify themselves with the history, culture, and hopes of the Jewish people.

We also know that many Jews choose to enter loving relations with partners who are not Jewish and who have no intention of converting to or adopting Judaism. We honor that choice and we extend a warm invitation to that couple to become valued members of our community.

Who are Humanistic Jews?

We are a diverse group of people with a variety of backgrounds.

Some of us were raised in secular homes with substantial Jewish knowledge and awareness, or with little at all.

Some had a religious upbringing and were previously affiliated with a congregation in a different movement, but found that traditional teachings were incompatible with their own beliefs.

We are uncertain agnostics, out-spoken atheists, positive humanists, comfortable deists. Ultimately, however, these individual choices are largely academic. What really counts is how we commit ourselves to a message of tolerance, respect, and fostering the ideal of *tikkun olam* – making a better world.

What is the relationship between Humanistic Jews and the Jewish community?

We think of the Jewish people as one large family that is comprised of many branches. Like all families, we're closer to some relatives than we are to others. But even if we don't share the same practices or beliefs, we're still linked by our family roots, heritage and history. We look for commonality in the shared values, memories, and aspirations that unite us.