

Colloquium 2009

By Edward J. Klein

The Society for Humanistic Judaism's Colloquium 2009, "Challenging Convention: Secular and Humanist and Jew" was held on Oct. 23-25 in Farmington Hills MI at the Birmingham Temple. This was the eighth Colloquium—the first occurred in 1995—and the second one since the death of Rabbi Sherwin T. Wine.

Rabbi Adam Chalom opened the Colloquium with two observations, "Don't look to the past for permission; pursue the truth wherever it leads," and a question: "Is organized religion a force for evil or good?"

The keynote speaker was Jacques Berlinerblau, Associate Professor of Jewish Civilization at Georgetown University. Sardonicly echoing fundamentalist attacks on secular Jews, he described the latter as broken, unreconstructed and unperfected "deformities in the seed of Abraham." (His ironic comments drew laughter from the audience.) He sees two types of secular Jews: the organized, those who are linked but not shackled by Judaism; and the non-organized, the vast majority of secular Jews. His Manifesto for us includes: Shock the professors (for visibility, in order to be more than a blip on the screen of Judaism); learn the techniques from Chabad (whose outreach is so successful); reject denominationalism (post-denominationalism is inclusive Judaism); understand and relate to other Jews; trust secular rabbis and get them out there (again for visibility, to make people aware of our movement); the need for money (no bread, no Torah); the need for buildings (I suggested he use the term "edifice complex," which he liked a lot); and reclaim the term "secular."

Lori Lipman Brown, former director of the Secular Coalition for America, said that secular Americans must have a voice to promote secular government. She finds "under God" in the Pledge of Allegiance to be divisive and urges secularists to work with theists on our shared values.

Ron Aronson, Distinguished Professor of the History of Ideas at Wayne State University, asked us to stop being polite to people who pray (for us) and to stop being invisible, noting that the number of atheists in the United States is now 36 million and that the percentage of atheists in Canada is even higher. He likes the term the "new new" atheist (post-atheist), which should have a positive message.

Rabbi Greg Epstein, the Humanist Chaplain of Harvard University, spoke about the one billion people in the world without God. Can one have purpose in life without God? He noted that none of the Golden Rules mentions God, but that reason and science cannot visit you in the hospital, pointing to the need for community. While we should pursue happiness, we should settle for "happyish" and dignity. Unfortunately,

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CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT: Rabbi Adam Chalom, Caryn Aviv, Jacques Berlinerblau and Lori Lipman Brown.

ly, Greg's book, *Good Without God: What a Billion Non-Religious People Do Believe*, was released the day following the Colloquium.

Caryn Aviv, Marsico Lecturer at the University of Denver, spoke about "post-denominationalism," Jew-Bus, Conservadox, non-halakhic-neo-khasidic, flexidox, much of which is belonging without believing. We must reach out to young Jews as well as the LGBT (lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender) communities, whom Aviv prefers to call "Queer" Jews. She does find secular Jewish culture "sexy," noting the large number of websites and publications catering to young and LGBT Jews.

Rabbi Sivan Malkin Maas of Israel told us that Cultural Judaism has become mainstream in Israel and that secular Jews can claim the Bible and tradition as their own. She warned us to watch out for Torah idolatry. 300,000 Israelis are considered religiousless. Many secular Jews are anti-religious, but believe that the "real" Judaism is that of the religious. 22% of Jews in Israel do not use rabbis to marry but go outside the country (Cyprus, etc.) to get married. Many couples live together and there are no statistics for them. Rabbi Mass called the Israel Museum, a museum of world Jewish culture in Jerusalem, "The 'Third' Temple."

At Colloquium 2009 two women were ordained as Secular Humanistic Rabbis in the movement. Both Rabbi Jodi Kornfeld of Deerfield, Illinois and Rabbi Karen Levy of Toronto, Ontario gave heartfelt ordination messages.

Rabbi Chalom, in wrapping up the Colloquium, said that nothing divides Jews more than "God, Torah and Israel." Respecting **beliefs** is dishonest—rather one should respect the **person**. Secular, humanistic Judaism has an important message, with books, pamphlets, and personal testimonies, as well as courses given by the Institute all over North America. We should be following traditions with honesty and integrity, but not imitating them. Every generation has told us that this is the "last" generation of Jews and this traditional statement has been wrong every time. In parting, Rabbi Chalom gave us two new terms for us to use to spread the "gospel" of secular, humanistic Judaism: Be a "Humangelical" and "Humangelize." ♦