

**How to talk Jewish to your kids:  
A resource guide for secular progressive families**

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## INTRODUCTION

### Where to begin? A Jewish progressive approach to teaching and learning

This Resource Guide contains discussion documents and conversation facilitators based on the themes that have emerged from the first year pilot project for the Peretz Family Education Program. It is intended to be a support to Secular and Progressively-oriented parents in finding ways to discuss themes, holidays, issues, and Jewish culture with their children.

I suggest that we think of Jewish teaching as a rather lively and perhaps radical approach to learning. The Jewish way of teaching is through story, discussion, questions, more questions, conversations, study, and ritual... oh, and lots of food! This way of teaching is a little different from the model that focuses on a set standardized curriculum, or a test with right and wrong answers, or an authoritarian notion of pedagogy in which the parent or teacher is always right and knows the correct answer. It is also different from teaching math, or computer programming, or any other systematized learning system where you have to follow a set of rules to get a predictable result. Jewish learning is not "training", in that it is not the same for everybody and it does not lead to the same uniform outcomes.

For me, Jewish learning is non-linear, a bit chaotic, and a joke or hearty laugh or song is never far away. The Jewish way is full of interpretation. It answers questions with more questions. It respects both elders and the young and listens carefully to how they might work out answers to various conundrums and problems.

As you learn to talk Jewish to your children, think about finding ways to always say "yes", to avoid the scolding scowl that indicates that the child has answered the question wrong. Find a way to link their creativity, developing minds, and critical thinking to what you know about, whatever it is that you are discussing. Jewish culture traditionally views children as holy, sacred, and the centre of family life. They are not brought up to be "seen and not heard". In fact, as the Passover haggadah discusses, the wise child is one who asks questions... lots of questions. And the Jewish way is to make it a priority and a "mitzvah" (both an obligation and a good deed) to take the time to answer them thoroughly, even if what we have in response is questions of our own. Be patient, be kind, be willing to say "I don't know, what do you think?"

I also suggest we depart from engaging in guilt, shame or blaming ways of approaching Jewish issues, all too common in the traumatized past of our parents' and grandparents' generations. I think the time is right for change. And Judaism is always changing. In the past, our culture has gone from a tribal tradition based on tributes and the blood sacrifice of animals, to one of rabbinic study and prayer, to one of secular humanist social action. Each generation gets a chance to write it anew, keeping the traditions they value,

respecting that which has gone before, and moving into the future. Hopefully, with each generation we can do this with more kindness, generosity, and compassion. In the secular humanist tradition of “Tikkun Olam,” this kind of kindness and respect for self and others can then lead to social actions and ways of being that help to uplift others, form ever-stronger bonds of community, and “repair the world.”

This resource guide, as well as our Family Education Program, is a place to start. Modify everything as you see fit. Make it yours. Teach it to your children so they can make it theirs.

Dr. Danny Bakan  
Educational Makher,  
Peretz Center for Secular Jewish Culture  
Vancouver, 2015



*(Dr. Danny says: Rabbi Laura always taught me that if you have two Jews, you will have four opinions!)*

[A note on the spellings used in this text: Familiar holidays and other terms are given in Yiddish followed by Hebrew in parentheses.]

## THE HISTORY OF THE PERETZ CENTRE

The Vancouver Peretz Institute, also known as the Vancouver Peretz Shule, was founded in 1945 in response to the threat to Jewish culture and Yiddish language posed by the Holocaust and WWII. The founding families felt an urgent need to establish a school to ensure the continuity of Jewish secular humanistic culture and thought. And they opened the doors to all—Jews and non-Jews—who felt a connection to Jewish culture, history and experience.

In 2001, we re-opened in our brand new building at the same location. To mark this occasion, we changed our name to the Peretz Centre for Secular Jewish Culture, and we continue to provide a wide variety of programs for all ages to individuals and families in the Greater Vancouver area.

The Peretz Centre is named after I.L. Peretz (1859-1915), who is, along with Sholem Aleichem and Mendele Mokher Sforim, one of the post-Haskalah (Enlightenment) pillars of modern Yiddish literature, culture and identity.

The Peretz Centre is affiliated with the International Federation of Secular Humanistic Jews, the Congress of Secular Jewish Organizations, and the Jewish Federation of Greater Vancouver.



*I. L. Peretz*

### JEWISH SECULAR HUMANISM

Jewish secular humanism provides the basis for the Peretz Centre's philosophy.

The word secular comes from the Latin, of this world. Secular philosophy developed as an alternative to the sacred or religious interpretation of life.

Secular humanism teaches that we have a kinship with all living things on this planet and that the world's problems can only be solved by people working together creatively, adhering to ethical and democratic principles.

But as we move toward a global community it is also vitally important to sustain our Jewish culture.

In the words of the late Rabbi Sherwin Wine, co-chair of the international Federation of Secular Humanistic Jews, it's important to preserve our Jewish culture because "Jewish History is a humanistic resource."

The Jewish experience, including the numerous attempts by groups and individuals over thousands of years to destroy the culture, serves as a reminder to all humanists of the importance of mutual dignity and respect, justice, freedom and peace for all. Jewish identity is the way to keep this message alive.

But Jewish culture, including stories, music, art and theatre, also stresses wisdom, humor and an ability to live by your wits.

The secular Jewish movement began over 100 years ago in Europe as scientists developed theories to explain the laws of the universe, and scientific discoveries began to have a greater influence on people's lives. Secularism began in Germany with the Haskalah (Enlightenment) movement. Moses Mendelssohn is considered the founder.

In general, the secular movement appealed to the working class and Yiddish-speaking people. It was more prevalent in the northern regions of the Pale of Settlement of Eastern Europe.

Yiddish culture, or Yiddishkayt, not only includes a rich and expressive language, it stresses a secular philosophy and supports improving the life of the common people.

Those who subscribed to secular thought were not anti-sacred; they simply placed their focus on human endeavour. Secular Jews began to approach the social, cultural, economic and political aspects of their lives from the progressive, rationalist and humanistic point of view.

New political parties began to spring up. These were often left-wing with a Jewish influence. Eventually, schools were established that taught a variety of subjects using a secular approach. Newspapers followed shortly after.

Following the pogroms in Eastern Europe at the end of the nineteenth century and again following WWI, there was mass immigration of secular Jews to North America. They believed in social justice taught by both the prophets and the modern advocates of liberty. They were also active in the formation of the trade unions.

The Vancouver Peretz Institute was formed in response to the Holocaust and WWII. With the great centres of Yiddishkayt, Vilne and Warsaw, destroyed, the founders felt an urgent need to establish a school to insure the continuity of Jewish culture and secular humanistic thought. And they opened the door to all who felt a connection to Jewish culture, history and experience.

Today, much of our younger population consists of intercultural families: families in which one parent is Jewish, one not. At the Peretz Centre, we welcome all people who identify with Jewish history, tradition or culture.



*CHASSIDIC TALE: Rabbi Moshe Leib once said, when teaching that all qualities of being a person are valuable, including atheism: "If someone comes to you and asks for your help, you should not turn him off with pious words saying: 'have faith and take your troubles to God!' You should act as if there were no God, as if there were only one person in all this world who could help this person -only yourself!"*

## HOLIDAYS: THE YEARLY CYCLE

One of the foundations of Jewish education is to tie learning and study to the yearly cycles of the traditional Jewish Holy Days, Feasts, and Fasts. These days mark a year not only on the calendar, but also in the traditional foods, stories, rituals, and family events that celebrate them.

In the Jewish secular humanist communities, these holidays are often adapted and re-interpreted (a very Jewish way of doing things) to reflect values of progressive social justice, environmentalism, community, introspection and acts of charity and good will.

“The Hebrew or Jewish calendar is a lunisolar (i.e. both lunar and solar) calendar used today predominantly for Jewish religious observances. It determines the dates for Jewish holidays and the appropriate public reading of Torah portions, yortzayts (dates to commemorate the death of a relative), and daily Psalm readings, among many ceremonial uses. In Israel, it is used for religious purposes, provides a time frame for agriculture and is an official calendar for civil purposes, although the latter usage has been steadily declining in favor of the Gregorian calendar.” [[https://en.wikipedia.org/?title=Hebrew\\_calendar](https://en.wikipedia.org/?title=Hebrew_calendar)]

### Shabbes (Shabbat)

The most frequent holiday in the Jewish calendar is Shabbes. Though the celebration has its origins in the obscure and sometimes mythical past of the Jewish people, in modern Jewish life Shabbes has become a time when Jews gather to celebrate who they are.

“For Humanistic Jews, Shabbes is a time of joy, a celebration of our connections to Judaism and to family, friends, and community. It is an affirmation of our Jewish identity, an expression of solidarity with the Jewish People. It is a chance to relax from the busy week, a space for self-exploration and discovery.

“Shabbes allows opportunities for both home and community celebrations, featuring candlelighting, wine, and the eating of braided bread (challa), with blessings that express human power and responsibility. Shabbes celebrations for Humanistic Jews are tributes to Jewish culture and history, to the shared Jewish past, present, and future. The celebrations incorporate Jewish texts, both ancient and modern, original meditations, poetry, and music. Some community Shabbes celebrations are

based on a theme of Jewish history or humanistic philosophy, while others based particular Jewish works or authors. Some can even be based on the concept and history of Shabbes itself.

Humanistic Shabbes blessings over candles, wine, and challah celebrate the human elements of each Shabbes symbol." (<http://www.shj.org/humanistic-jewish-life/about-the-holidays/Shabbes/>)

"According to halakha (Jewish religious law), Shabbes is observed from a few minutes before sunset on Friday evening until the appearance of three stars in the sky on Saturday night. Shabbes is ushered in by lighting candles and reciting a blessing. Traditionally, three festive meals are eaten: in the evening, in the morning, and late in the afternoon. The evening meal typically begins with a blessing called kiddush and another blessing recited over two loaves of challah. Shabbes is closed the following evening with a havdalah blessing. Shabbes is a festive day when Jews exercise their freedom from the regular labors of everyday life. It offers an opportunity to contemplate the spiritual aspects of life and to spend time with family." (<https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Shabbes>)

"In modern America, we take the five-day work-week so much for granted that we forget what a radical concept a day of rest was in ancient times. The weekly day of rest has no parallel in any other ancient civilization. In ancient times, leisure was for the wealthy and the ruling classes only, never for the serving or laboring classes. In addition, the very idea of rest each week was unimaginable. The Greeks thought Jews were lazy because we insisted on having a "holiday" every seventh day." (<http://www.jewfaq.org/Shabbes.htm>)

### Conversations:

- ◇ What would life be like if there were no "day off"? Why do you think people need a day when they don't work? Why is this holiday a "holy-day"? Why would not working be "holy"?
- ◇ What aspects of observing Shabbes would fit your family to make a "day of rest" a valuable regular occurrence – if not every week, then maybe every once in a while. Special foods? Special visitors? Special activities? Special time together?
- ◇ Why do you think Jews light candles, eat bread, and drink wine at the Shabbas meal? What is "special" about these things? What makes them special to you?

## Rosh Hashanah—Hebrew for the “head” of the year—and Yom Kippur, the Day of Atonement

*(Dr Danny says, I like to think of it as a day of at-one-ment!)*



Traditionally understood as the “birthday” of all creation, Rosh Hashanah is the first of the “High Holidays,” the holiest days of the yearly cycle. It is the Jewish New Year. It is often a day of family gathering and feasting on apples dipped in honey, honey cake and other sweet foods to wish each other a “sweet new year”. It is customary to wish each other a “Gut Yontif” (Yiddish for “good holiday”) or “Shanah Tovah” (Hebrew for “a good year”).

“The Hebrew common greeting on Rosh Hashanah is “*Shanah Tovah*”, which, in Hebrew means “[have a] good year,” or similar greetings. Thus, in Yiddish the greeting is “*a gut yor*” (“a good year”) or “*a gut gebentsht yor*” (“a good blessed year”). Sephardic Jews traditionally say “*tizku l’shanim rabot*” or “*muchos anyos*”, both of which mean “many years”.” [from [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Rosh\\_Hashanah](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Rosh_Hashanah)]

*(Dr. Danny says: Hmm... maybe a “fast day” could also mean to “hold fast” in the sense of staying close to each other?)*



The ten days between Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur are called the “Days of Awe”. Religiously understood as the time when the gates of heaven are open in order to allow prayers to reach to the divine, and to make room for the possibility of redemption and restitution in the year to come. We as secular Jews have found meaningful ways to mark these days as a time of thoughtful reflection on our actions in the year that has passed and on how we can do better in the year to come.

### **A Peretz Centre Resource for the High Holidays:**

The booklet used at Peretz’s High Holidays observance: <http://www.peretz-centre.org/rituals.htm>



*(Dr. Danny says: Did you know that the Hebrew word for “sin” comes from archery and means to “miss the mark”. When thought of this way, to atone for our “sins” means to adjust our aim so we can be more on target!)*

## Activity:

Traditionally, many Jews engage in the ritual of Tashlikh, in which they go to a body of preferably running water and empty their pockets of stones or crumbs of bread to symbolize letting go of sins as they approach the New Year.

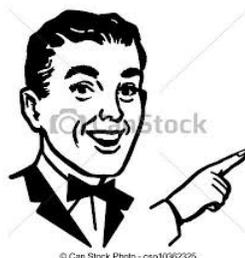
One way in which secular Jews engage in tashlikh is to engage in a self-reflective process of correcting their thoughts and actions to be more kind, compassionate, and considerate of others and the world. Families go to the water together and talk about parts of themselves, habits, behaviors, and thought patterns that they are ready to let go of. Throwing pebbles or breadcrumbs into the waves and currents is a powerful way to playfully let these things go.



*(Dr. Danny says: My daddy used to say that there are two really important holidays, Yom Kippur, and Passover. One is a feast, and one is a fast. Many secular Jews do not fast on Yom Kippur, but most of us still go to all the feasts!)*

## Conversations:

- ◇ Why is there a Jewish New Year and also a New Year on January 1st?
- ◇ What do you remember about the high holidays when you grew up? Can you share these memories with your children?
- ◇ Are there any ways you have acted towards your children or things you have said that you regret? Can you apologize for these things, explain why you did them, and ask your children to understand and forgive you for them.



*(Dr. Danny says: “Parenting is an imperfect art... every child must learn to someday forgive their parents.”)*

## Sukkes (Sukkot)

Sukkes is the Jewish holiday of thanksgiving for the harvest. Conveniently, it often falls around Canadian Thanksgiving, allowing secular Jewish families to tie in the traditional holiday with the modern one. A day of feasting outdoors, in a shelter (sukkah) with a roof made branches to see the stars through, Sukkes is a lovely visceral holiday to mark the change of seasons, the bounty of the harvest, and the joys of community.

“A sukkah is a temporary hut constructed for use during the week-long Jewish festival of Sukkot. It is topped with branches and often well decorated with autumnal, harvest or Judaic themes. The Book of Vayikra (Leviticus) describes it as a symbolic wilderness shelter, commemorating the time God provided for the Israelites in the wilderness they inhabited after they were freed from slavery in Egypt.[1] It is common for Jews to eat, sleep and otherwise spend time in the sukkah.” [<https://en.wikipedia.org/?title=Sukkah>]



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*Dr. Danny sings: A Sukkah A sukkah, mayne klayne sukkahle*

### Conversations:

- ◇ How do the seasons change and how are the cycles of the earth tied in to the foods we eat?
- ◇ What are your favorite foods of the harvest?
- ◇ As the days get shorter, do you notice how the weather changes? How would this effect people who lived long ago in a time where they did not have heating and electricity? How would people in different climates around the world experience this?
- ◇ What are we thankful for?

## Simkhes Torah (Simchat Torah)

“Simchat Torah or Simkhes Toreh (literally, “rejoicing of/[with the] Torah”) is a Jewish holiday that celebrates and marks the conclusion of the annual cycle of public Torah readings, and the beginning of a new cycle.” [[https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Simchat\\_Torah](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Simchat_Torah)]

Every year, religious Jews read the entire Torah scroll (which contains the Five Books of Moses: Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers and Deuteronomy) in weekly portions or “parshas”. Each year, on Simchas Torah, the Torah is celebrated, paraded, and “re-wound” in a festive celebration.

In our secular humanist tradition, we mark this holiday as an opportunity to teach about the Bible, tell stories, sing songs and understand the importance of reading and study in the Jewish tradition. We don’t teach that the Torah is “The Word of God” and in fact, this is more of a Christian tradition than a Jewish one. Nor do we teach that the Torah is “history” or “true” in the way these words are usually understood.

In fact, even in traditional Judaism, the stories and tales of the Bible are not meant to be taken literally. None of the Rabbis would ever teach that when it says “It was written with a finger of God” that God really has a finger. Nor does God get angry and wrathful. These are human traits, not those of the “Ein Soph” – the ultimate oneness of being that creates and sustains the world.

So, when we teach Bible stories to children, we do not teach them as dogma; they are STORIES. And all stories are meant to be enjoyed, discussed, talked about, interpreted and made sense of by the people that tell and hear them. Why do we treat the Torah stories any differently than we treat the Greek, Roman, or Viking myths? We can tell these stories, enjoy them, learn them, and learn from them, without making them “idols”. In fact... there are lots of stories in the Bible about the fact that we should not make idols of anything – even the Torah scrolls! It’s what is inside that counts!

For more on Torah, including conversation ideas to share with your family, see “Cultural Traditions” below.

## Khanike (Hanukkah, Chanukah)

Hanukkah is the Festival of Light. Most people have heard that this holiday celebrates the Maccabean rebellion that defeated the Greek occupiers of the Temple in Jerusalem about 150 years BCE. It was a victory for the religious and cultural fundamentalists, the priests and temples, over those people who were becoming assimilated into Greek culture.

But there is more to the story. There is a holiday that predates the Maccabees that marked the “return of the light” as we approached the longest night of the year, the Winter Solstice. This holiday became the modern holiday to mark the military successes of the Maccabees later in history.

A further revision of the holiday took place even later, when the Rabbis added in the famous story of the oil that miraculously burned for eight days. This revision pulled the focus of the holiday away from Judah Maccabee, the military leader, and focused it on God. This is “The Great Miracle that Happened There” that is marked by the four letters of the dreidl (a spinning top which is used in a gambling game on Chanukah). It is also marked by the tradition of eating oil-rich foods such as latkes and greasy doughnuts.

So is Hanukkah a glorification of a military victory against oppression? A celebration of a return to traditional religious practice? A Winter Solstice festival? A commemoration of a miracle? Regardless of its confused and changing past, Hanukkah was not a major holiday for Jews before the rise of Christianity. Now, with Christmas being so important in our world, Chanukah is celebrated as a much bigger deal than it once was. And this is not a bad thing, really! It is great to have a time to be with family, to play and care for each other (sometimes with presents so the Jewish kids don't feel left out at Christmas, although traditionally, small amounts of money, Chanukah gelt, were the only gifts) and to eat those oily yummy foods!

“Chanukah is probably one of the best known Jewish holidays, not because of any great religious significance, but because of its proximity to Christmas. Many non-Jews (and even many assimilated Jews!) think of this holiday as the Jewish Christmas, adopting many of the Christmas customs, such as elaborate gift-giving and decoration. It is bitterly ironic that this holiday, which has its roots in a revolution against assimilation and suppression of Jewish religion, has become the most assimilated, secular holiday on our calendar.” [<https://www.jewishvirtuallibrary.org/jsource/Judaism/holiday7.html>. See this web page for details about the traditional Hanukkah story and associated prayers and customs]

The major customs associated with Hanukkah are lighting candles, playing dreydl and eating oily foods.

**Candles:** The Hanukiah is a special Hanukkah menorah with nine candle holders, holds nine one for each night, plus a shamash (servant), which is used to light the other candles: one on the first night, two on the second night, and so on. The Hanukiah is traditionally kept in the window as a beacon to remind passersby of the return of the light.

**Oily foods:** It is traditional to eat fried foods on Hanukkah to remind us of the miracle of oil. Among Ashkenazic Jews, this usually includes potato latkes. A modern revision of the classic recipe of potatoes, matzo meal and egg incorporates other vegetables: cabbage, zucchini and squash are common additions.

**Dreydls:** This is a gambling game played with a square top. Most people play for matchsticks, pennies, M&Ms or chocolate coins. A dreydl is marked with the following four Hebrew letters: Nun, Gimmel, Heh and Shin. On Israeli dreydls, there is no Shin but rather a Peh, which stands for Po, meaning here.

“The dreydl letters supposedly stand for the Hebrew phrase “nes gadol hayah sham,” a great miracle happened there. Actually, they stand for the Yiddish words nit (nothing), gantz (all), halb (half) and shtel (put), which are the rules of the game! There are some variations in the way people play the game, but the way I learned it, everyone puts in one coin. A person spins the dreydl. On Nun, nothing happens; on Gimmel (or, as we called it as kids, “gimme!”), you get the whole pot; on Heh, you get half of the pot; and on Shin, you put one in. When the pot is empty, everybody puts one in. Keep playing until one person has everything. Then redivide it, because nobody likes a poor winner.” [<https://www.jewishvirtuallibrary.org/jsource/Judaism/holiday7.html>]

## Conversations

- ◇ Which Hanukkah story resonates with you?
- ◇ If you were alive at the time of the Macabbees, would you have been for their rebellion or against it?
- ◇ Are there ways to have both Christmas and Hanukkah celebrations in your family?

## Purim

The festival of Purim is celebrated on the 14th day of the Hebrew month of Adar (late winter/early spring). The festival marks the salvation of the Jewish people in ancient Persia, when they were rescued by Queen Esther (a young Jewish woman chosen as a bride by the King of Persia) and her Uncle Mordechai from the king's advisor's plot to destroy the Jews.

Commonly accepted as a "non-fiction" account, many scholars believe the holiday has its roots in ancient fertility festivals and masquerades that may pre-date Jewish history. In the traditions of Jewish Mysticism, Purim is seen as an archetypical holiday about the defeat of evil in the world, and the story contains many symbols that refer to esoteric texts and Kabbalistic traditions. It is also a time of revelry and drunkenness. Maimonides wrote: "What is the obligation of the [Purim] feast? That one should eat meat ... and drink wine until he is drunk and falls asleep from drunkenness" (Mishneh Torah, Laws of Megillah, 2:15). It is also told that on Purim, one should get so drunk that one cannot tell the difference between Haman (the bad guy) and Mordechai (the hero).

Aside from the drunkenness of the adults, this holiday is traditionally a wonderful time for children, with costumes, games, special foods, parties and celebrations. (One special food eaten at this holiday is hamentashn, a triangular pastry pocket (thought to be the shape of Haman's hat) with a sweet filling that could be prunes, poppyseed, nuts, jam, chocolate, or other similar filling.)

The story of Purim however, can be a bit challenging for Secular Humanist Jews trying to "heal the trauma" that is deeply embedded in our traditions from centuries of persecution. There is a joke that all Jewish holidays are about the theme "They tried to kill us, they didn't, lets eat", and this can indeed be seen as one of the themes of Chanukah and Passover. Purim is the epitome of this narrative, and if we are trying to raise our children to connect with the joy of being Jewish rather than the tragedy, we may have to be a bit creative with how we tell the tale.

### Conversations:

- ◇ What are some holidays in other traditions that involve dressing up in costumes and being a "little bit wild"? Maybe Halloween, Mardi Gras, or Carnival? How is Purim the same or different from these?
- ◇ Often Purim is celebrated with silly plays, costumes, carnival games, dancing, eating and drinking special foods and drinks. What is a Purim party that might fit your family? Who would you dress up as for a Purim costume party?



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***Dr. Danny says: Maybe the story of Purim highlights the benefits of Jews having mixed-marriages. If Esther had not married the non-Jewish king, the "whole megillah" would be a lot shorter!***

## Tu b'Shvat

Tu b'Shvat is the "New Year of the Trees" and is celebrated on the 15th of the Hebrew month of Sh'vat. Originally an ancient agricultural festival of spring, in the 17th century the holiday took on mystical connotations with a special "Seder" meal that celebrated esoteric principles by eating different kinds of fruits and nuts. This seder is now a rich and wonderful tradition, and can easily be adapted by secular humanists. Many Jews honor this holiday as a kind of "earth day", marking it with a special meal, planting trees and teaching about environmentalism and ecology.

"In the 16th century in the Land of Israel, Rabbi Yitzchak Luria of Safed and his disciples created a Tu b'Shvat seder, somewhat like the Passover seder, that celebrated the Tree of Life (the Kabbalistic map of the Sefirot). The earliest published version of this seder is called the P'ri Eitz Hadar, which means "The Fruit of the Beautiful Tree". The seder evokes Kabbalistic themes of restoring cosmic blessing by strengthening and repairing the Tree of Life, generally using the framework of the Four Worlds of emanation that can be roughly mapped onto the physical metaphor of a tree, that is, roots, trunk, branches and leaves. In conjunction with this practice, many Chassidic Jews eat etrog on this day." ([https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Tu\\_BiShvat\\_seder](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Tu_BiShvat_seder))

### Conversations:

- ◇ Why are trees so important that they have their own new year's day?
- ◇ What are ways in which we can say "happy birthday" to a tree?
- ◇ Can you find all kinds of different fruits and nuts and find what is the same and different about them?
- ◇ Traditionally, foods at a Tu b'Shvat seder come to us all the way from Israel. What kinds of foods would we have if we had a "100-mile" seder with locally grown fruits and veggies?

## Peysakh (Pesach; Passover)

*CHASSIDIC TALE: Rabbi Bunam used to say: A secret is something you say in such a way that everyone can hear it, and yet no one who is not supposed to know can know it. (Buber, 313)*



## TRADITIONS

### Torah

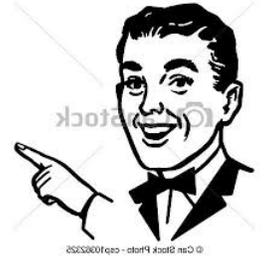
“The term Torah means instruction and offers a way of life for those who follow it; it can mean the continued narrative from Genesis to the end of the Tanakh, and it can even mean the totality of Jewish teaching, culture and practice. Common to all these meanings, Torah consists of the foundational narrative of the Jews: their call into being by God, their trials and tribulations, and their covenant with their God, which involves following a way of life embodied in a set of moral and religious obligations and civil laws (*halakha*).

“In rabbinic literature the word “Torah” denotes both the five books, (the “Torah that is written”), and an Oral Torah, (the “Torah that is spoken”). The Oral Torah consists of interpretations and amplifications which according to rabbinic tradition have been handed down from generation to generation and are now embodied in the Talmud and Midrash.

“According to rabbinic tradition, all of the teachings found in the Torah, both written and oral, were given by God through Moses, a prophet, some of them at Mount Sinai and others at the Tabernacle, and all the teachings were written down by Moses, which resulted in the Torah we have today. According to a Midrash (interpretation), the Torah was created prior to the creation of the world, and was used as the blueprint for Creation. The majority of Biblical scholars believe that the written books were a product of the Babylonian exilic period (c. 600 BCE) and that it was completed by the Persian period (c. 400 BCE).

Traditionally, the words of the Torah are written on a scroll by a sofer (scribe) on parchment in Hebrew. A Torah portion is read publicly at least once every three days, in the halachically prescribed tune, in the presence of a congregation.[5] Reading the Torah publicly is one of the bases for Jewish communal life” (<https://en.wikipedia.org/?title=Torah>)

*Dr. Danny says: "Ya know, if you read closely, you will see that Moses destroyed the first set of commandments he brought down from Sinai. Moses was known to have an anger-management problem -in fact, some say it was for this reason he was not allowed to enter the promised land. So when we read the Torah, the Five Books of Moses, that were traditionally said to be written by Moses (if he even existed at all - which is a subject of much debate), we have to remember that this is Moses's interpretation of the Torah he got from God. Maybe it is not God who is vengeful, jealous, wrathful, and full of anger and judgement - but Moses? Maybe we are all just flawed human beings who need to learn, love, forgive and change to be more like the people we want to be?"*



### **Conversations:**

- ◇ Do you think the stories in the Bible are meant to be understood literally? Do you think other stories (e.g. Harry Potter, Winnie the Pooh, Shrek, Frozen, The Magic Schoolbus) are meant to be understood literally? If not, why is the Torah different from these other stories? Why is it so important to the Jewish people?
- ◇ If the Torah is not just the "written" Torah, but also all of creation ... what are other ways to study Torah? Can science be a way of studying Torah? Math? Aren't all of these part of creation?

## Tikkun Olam: Repairing the World

The Hebrew phrase “Tikkun Olam” means to repair the world. This term originated in the somewhat secretive Jewish mystical and magical tradition known as the “Kabbalah” about five hundred years ago. In an ancient Kabbalistic fable, when the Creator made the world the limited nature of our existence could not contain all of the goodness of the infinite. Basically, if all the goodness and wholeness of the universe was manifested in our present reality, we would cease to exist because we would be encompassed by an infinite “wholeness” which had no limitations. In our world of Time/Space, all of the holiness of the universe cannot be contained. Because of this, the world was “broken” by the very limitations that enabled it to exist at all. This, they taught, was the answer to why evil existed in the world when the ultimate essence of God is goodness.

The Kabbalists and mystics believed that one of the “holy” characteristics of the human being was our ability to bring the whole-i-ness back into the world, thus repairing it one “broken shard” at a time. In other words, they taught that the world, with all its suffering, injustice, discrimination, meanness, bullying, war, starvation, pain and hardship is a broken world, and, it was our duty to work to “repair” it.

“Tikkun Olam” (literally, “world repair”) has come to connote social action and the pursuit of social justice. The phrase has origins in classical rabbinic literature and in Lurianic kabbalah, a major strand of Jewish mysticism originating with the work of the 16th-century kabbalist Isaac Luria.” (<http://www.myjewishlearning.com/article/tikkun-olam-repairing-the-world/>)



*CHASSIDIC TALE: The rabbi of Kobryn once looked at the Heavens and cried: “Angel, little angel! It is no great trick to be an angel up there in the sky! You don’t have to eat and drink, beget children and earn money. Just come down to earth and worry about eating and drinking, about raising children and earning money, and we shall see if you keep on being an angel If you succeed, you may boast – but not now!”*

### Conversations:

- ◇ What are some things in the world that you think need to be “repaired”?
- ◇ What are some ways in which your family are already at work to repair the world?
- ◇ Can you think of any new things you would like to do with your family to bring even more repair to the world?

## Jewish languages: Yiddish/Hebrew/Aramaic/Ladino/English etc. and other Jewish Languages

*Dr Danny says: Is there a language that isn't Jewish? I guess not Maori, Kwak'wala, Musqueum, Swahili? Unless they were the lost tribes?*



Jews speak many languages. One of the oldest of these is called Aramaic. Some of the oldest parts of the traditional prayer service are in this language. Ladino is the language of everyday use for the Sephardic Jews of Spanish descent. It is essentially a dialect of Spanish with lots of Hebrew additions and is written in the Hebrew alphabet. Yiddish is the common language of the Ashkenazi Jews of Eastern Europe. It is a rich and very expressive language that started as a dialect of German but has much Hebrew and Slavic vocabulary. It too was written in the Hebrew alphabet but now has a standardized Roman alphabet transliteration. There is a rich tradition of Yiddish literature. Many Yiddish words and phrases have found their way into common English use. A “nosh” is a snack. To “kvetch” is to complain. A “mensch” is a really good person.

Hebrew was traditionally only a language used in prayer and in the study of the Torah and Talmud. It did not become a “secular” language until modern times, largely due to its being chosen as the language of the Jewish State of Israel in the 20th century. Now many people think of Hebrew as the Jewish language, but really, this is a modern phenomenon, and one that has been the subject of much debate over the last 100 years.

## **Bubele, did you eat? Jewish food!**

Jewish food! How good is that? Every Jewish culture has contributed its own spin on Jewish cooking. With the home, food, and the dinner table being so important to Jews (partly due to Kosher laws which required Jews to cook and eat foods in special ways), is it any surprise that Jewish cooking remains a central part of our communities and identity? Whether you are gathering for a Passover Seder (in which the food itself becomes the centre of the ceremony and the teaching/learning), eating hamantashn on Purim, latkes on Hanukah, enjoying honey cake on Rosh Hashanah, or just really like brisket, gefilte fish, kugel and shmaltz herring with rye bread, the foods seem to help us feel a little bit more connected to our roots. And they do so in such a yummy way!

Jewish foods come from all over. There are contributions to the menu from the Ashkenazi communities of Eastern Europe, the Sephardic Jews of Spanish descent, the Israelis who add in a Middle Eastern flavor, and the diasporic communities of New York, Montreal and the Eastern Seaboard of North America with their delis and smoked meats. Whatever your roots, these foods help to strengthen our family traditions, and are a delicious way to bring joy into Jewish life.

Many recipes are available online, through cookbooks and from the “oral” tradition of family culture (pun intended). Some famous Jewish foods are:

Kneydlakh – matzah balls

Challah, rye bread, matzah, rugelakh and other baked goods.

Latkes (potato pancakes)

Blintzes (Jewish stuffed crepes)

Kasha varnishkes (roasted buckwheat groats and (usually, bowtie) noodles)

Kreplakh – Jewish won ton

Brisket – (slow roasted beef pot roast)

Chicken soup (like I need to explain?)

Kugel (puddings: potato, noodle and more)

Chopped liver (chicken or beef livers, eggs, onions, shmaltz and a bissele love)

Knishes (Stuffed baked dough rolls filled with mashed potato, plain or with mushrooms, kasha, spinach, etc. in addition)

Falafel (chick pea patties, served with tahini (sesame paste) and tabouli (cracked wheat))

Kosher fermented dill pickles (see recipe attached – easy to make when pickling cukes are in season)

Tzimmes (sweet vegetable or vegetable and fruit stew)

Montreal smoked meat (mmmm Shwartzes)  
Pastrami, corned beef (mmmm Carnegie Deli)  
Gefilte fish (chopped fish cakes)  
Pickled herring (and matjes herring, shmaltz herring and more)

*Dr. Danny says: My grandmother had four sets of dishes – one for meat, one for dairy, one for Passover, and one set reserved for Chinese Take Out!*



### ***Jews and Chinese food***

As Benjy Stone, the protagonist in the 1982 film *My Favorite Year*, states: “Jews know about two things: suffering, and where to find great Chinese food.” Although the progressive Secular movement seeks to encourage future generations to identify a bit less with suffering as a core family trait, we doubt that the Jewish appreciation of Chinese food will go away soon.

Although it is a famous joke to say that that Jews traditionally celebrate Christmas with Chinese food and a movie, there is actually some truth to this tradition. Inner city Ashkenazi Jewish immigrants to New York (via the Ellis Island immigration portal) found themselves in a culture-shock-inducing environment. As old traditions of “kashrut” (kosher dietary laws) loosened in the new world, Chinese food allowed a bit of compromise. Lacking dairy, the meals of these restaurants could be seen as “soft kosher” in that the bits of pork and shellfish might be overlooked – especially as it was often served mixed up with the rice, noodles, beef, chicken and vegetables.

In addition, many other restaurants of New York were Italian restaurants, which mixed milk and meat (think of veal parmesan, spaghetti with meat and cheese, etc.), and often displayed icons of Christianity that were challenging for the Jews. Plus, in the racially divided 20th century, Jews who went to Chinese restaurants were perceived as “white” rather than as a racially defined lower strata of citizen. On top of this, the Chinese restaurants were open on Easter, Good Friday, and Christmas, and the Jews had these days off from work. All in all, this led to an odd but intriguing culinary association.

For more on this see: <http://www.theatlantic.com/national/archive/2014/12/why-american-jews-eat-chinese-food-on-christmas/384011/>

## APPENDIX I: SECULAR HUMANISM

### *Secular Humanism (from [http://folkshul.org/content/\"who-secular-jew\"](http://folkshul.org/content/\))*

**Secular Person:** A person who explains observations and feelings in natural, non-theistic, concrete ways.

**Secular Humanism:** A rational philosophy informed by science, inspired by art and motivated by compassion. Affirming the dignity of each human being, it supports the maximization of individual liberty and opportunity consonant with social and planetary responsibility. It advocates the extension of participatory democracy and the expansion of the open society, standing for human rights and social justice. Free of supernaturalism, it recognizes human beings as a part of nature and holds that values – be they religious, ethical, social, or political – have their source in human instinct, experience, and culture. Humanism thus derives the goals of life from human need and interest rather than from theological or ideological abstractions, and asserts that humanity must take responsibility for its own destiny [definition from *The Humanist*, May/June 1997].

**Jew:** A person of Jewish descent or any person who declares himself or herself to be a Jew; and who identifies with the community, history, ethical values, culture, civilization and fate of the Jewish people [adapted from the Resolution of the International Federation of Secular Humanistic Jews, Second Biennial Conference, Brussels, Belgium, October 1, 1988]. Jewish ethical values include (among others) love of learning, personal responsibility for our actions and their consequences, Tzedakah (duty vs. charity), social justice, respect for life, and love and enjoyment of life.

**Secular Humanistic Jew:** A person who belongs to and carries on the traditions of the Jewish people; who respects and works to increase human integrity and dignity; who explains all experience, including that of the Jewish people, in natural ways; who uses critical thinking bound by experience and tested in a public forum to evaluate explanations; and whose significant goals include among others increasing the happiness, freedom, social justice and progress of humankind.

### ***Who is a Humanist?***

A definition of humanism would be helpful. It is a word that is apt to get fuzzy. Dr. Corliss Lamont, one of America's leading humanist philosophers, has worked out a ten-point definition in his book, *The Philosophy of Humanism*. Here these ten points have been condensed to five:

1. Humanism considers all forms of the supernatural as myth which man has

developed in his long history to explain things he could not understand or control. It regards Nature as a constantly changing system of matter and energy which exists outside of any mind or consciousness.

2. Humanism believes that man is an evolutionary product of Nature, of which he is a part.

3. Humanism believes that human beings possess the power of solving their own problems; that they have a freedom of choice, although within certain objective limits.

4. Humanism holds as its highest goals this-worldly happiness, freedom and progress of all mankind.

5. Humanism believes in applying reason and scientific method to society – which means the full use of democratic procedures throughout all economic, political and cultural life.

This definition, in addition to de-emphasizing supernaturalism, contains an emphasis upon the ethics and ideals of brotherhood and social justice. These ideals and values, as they have found Jewish expression, are a basic ingredient of secular Jewishness, and they permeate secular Jewish education. This is not to say that religious education does not contain these values. It does. But religious education bases its reason for the socially-conscious values on God; Humanism bases it on Man.

### ***Philosophical Foundations of Secular Humanistic Judaism***

Secular Humanistic Jews are committed to behavior and practices that are consistent with the following principles and world view:

**Universalism:** We recognize the need, and respect the right of all people to congregate in groups and live in dignity and harmony. We support a free and open society which enables enrichment of our own culture and permits us to share with surrounding cultures. As Jews and humans, we need to take our place in the world to work for the common good of humanity, to secure justice and fairness in society, to ensure equal rights and freedoms for all and to eliminate discrimination and intolerance.

**Jewish Pluralism:** There is unity in diversity and membership in the Jewish People should be open and inclusive. Only Jewish pluralism will guarantee the survival of the Jewish People.

**Jewish Peoplehood:** We are a unique, not a chosen, people, among many unique peoples. We identify with the history, culture, and future of the Jewish People and

are proud of our membership in it. We value the contributions of Jews and Judaism to the betterment of our world, and affirm the value of preserving Jewish identities.

**Judaism:** Judaism is the historical experience and cultural creator (civilization) of the Jewish People which has evolved, and will continue to evolve, based on the needs and influences of the time. Judaism consists of many traditions. Secular Humanistic Judaism is a logical result of the lessons of Jewish history that taught us that we are and must be self-reliant.

**Social Ethics:** As social animals, humans cannot be self-fulfilled in isolation. We have a moral obligation to be self-reliant and to ensure conditions which encourage self-actualization for all. This can best be achieved in a democratic society where individual rights and group rights are balanced. We value all social structures that promote well being (i.e. friendship, family, community).

**Ethics:** Ethics is the study of what humans ought to be and evolves out of experience and understanding of the consequences of our actions. All actions ought to satisfy human needs primarily for survival, pleasure and dignity, the harmonization of which leads to happiness. We should glean from all available sources the ethical values that serve these needs.

**Moral Authority:** Human beings are the arbiters of morality and must have the freedom and power as well as the responsibility to be the masters of their own lives.

**Solving Problems:** Human beings are responsible for solving their problems and we are committed to the view that the application of reason and science can lead to the improvement of the human condition. We cultivate the arts of negotiation and compromise as a means of resolving differences and achieving solutions.

**Purpose or Meaning of Life:** Self-actualization for every human being gives life purpose. Only the individual can create specific meaning in her or his life. Perpetuating life and improving its quality can add profound meaning to human life. We believe in optimism rather than pessimism, hope rather than despair, learning in the place of dogma, truth instead of ignorance, joy rather than guilt or sin, tolerance in the place of fear, love instead of hatred, compassion over selfishness, beauty instead of ugliness, and reason rather than blind faith or irrationality.

**Nature And Reality:** Human beings are part of the evolving natural universe which we view through our senses and understand through rational thought. The universe exists independently of any individual and is free from supernatural intervention.

**Nature of Truth:** Truths can be discovered through reason using scientific method and empirical evidence by testing hypotheses generated from intuition, observa-

tion, faith or any other way. Truths are universal, not ethnic and the value of ideas is judged by their truthfulness, not their Jewishness. Uncertainty is a condition of life and our conception of truths evolve as our knowledge and understanding deepen.

\*Adapted from Eva Goldfinger, <http://www.oraynu.org/about-us/philosophy/>

It should be noted particularly that the secular approach does not rule out the indispensable role of tradition and folklore in Jewish life and education. Without these aspects it could hardly be considered Jewish education. The holidays, therefore, are an integral part of our curriculum. The Bible stories, moreover, cannot be taught without an explanation of the important place which the idea of God held in the thinking of the ancient Hebrews. ([http://folkshul.org/content/\"who-secular-jew\"](http://folkshul.org/content/\))

## CHALLENGING TOPICS: BLUES FOR SECULAR JEWS

### Who is a Jew?

According to the demographic data for Vancouver of 2011, as recently released by Statistics Canada, intermarriage rates are up, as is the population of young Jewish children in both intermarried and two-Jewish-parents families.

- ◇ The intermarriage rate of Vancouver Jews is 43.5%. This compares to 25% in the Canadian Jewish population.
- ◇ There are 7,820 Jews living in intermarried households in Vancouver. Of these, 1,850 are children. More than two-thirds of these children will be raised without any religious affiliation.
- ◇ The intermarriage rate of couples under 30 years of age is 63.6%.

Intermarried Jews have some unique issues to deal with. Some of these make for rather difficult conversations. For instance, in most Jewish communities being Jewish is traced through the mother. This means that many Jewish dads have kids who may not be considered Jewish by many organizations and individuals. At Peretz we firmly stand with values of inclusion that encourage all families who have a connection to being Jewish to embrace and celebrate that identity. We will support you and your children in any way we can, and consider all who have a connection to being in a Jewish family, to embrace being Jewish, in whatever way works for them.

### Intergenerational trauma:

The long history of religious persecution has left many scars on people of Jewish descent. Sometimes these scars have become so “normalized” that they can be invisible. In some families affects us today; how the more recent cases of pogroms and the Holocaust still reverberate in our psyches.

### The communist and left-wing Jewish legacy,

Like it or not, many many Jews of Ashkenazi descent were involved with communist, socialist and even anarchist movements. As the 20th century unfolded, many of these left-wing Jews entered into the labour movement, peace activism, social justice or other progressive causes. These days, this legacy is a source of shame for some, a place of pride for others. Michael Learner has argued, quite convincingly, that the left-wing progressive stance of socially minded Jews has a long precedent in the tradition (see his books Jewish renewal or The Left Hand of God). In fact, he believes that one of the causes of antisemitism was that the very progressive values of freedom from enslavement and the

will to stand up to tyrants and kings is foundational to the Torah stories. Whatever the reason for it, being a progressive Jew is not something to be ashamed of, and the difficult legacy of the Communist movement, including the atrocities of Stalin and the post-war Soviet Union make this a difficult conversation.

## **Circumcision**

Many secular and intermarried families have made the choice to not have their sons circumcised. Although this ancient custom has traditionally been seen as a requirement for being considered of Jewish identity, it has long been debated. In fact, early reform Jews in the 19th century argued against it as barbaric. Now, even reform and non-religious Jews have their boys circumcised, some just as a medical procedure at birth rather than at the traditional “bris”. There are many arguments, on both sides, about the health benefits of circumcision, and it is difficult to have a conversation about the practice that does not get complicated by many passionate and mixed feelings.







