Being a Jew

by Herb Silverman

As an adolescent I was attracted to humanism, though I had never heard of that word or such a worldview. In the Orthodox Judaism in which I was raised, the performance of mitzvahs (good deeds) was encouraged. That seemed like the right thing to do and doing good deeds made me feel good. But the prayers I recited were a different matter. While all the prayers sounded fine to me in Hebrew, when I began translating them into English and thinking carefully about the meaning of the words, I was often appalled. The god of the Bible killed or asked us to kill those not like us, and he expected our constant praise and worship. At the age of 12, I decided to follow only what made sense to me and the idea of God no longer made any sense. I became a mitzvah-performing atheist, which for me is a reasonable definition of "humanist."

My parents were not particularly religious, but we followed what my grandmother wanted us to do, which led me to an Orthodox Bar Mitzvah. Because of the Holocaust my family mainly viewed Judaism as anti-anti-Semitism. We tried not to associate with goyim (gentiles) unless we had to. I had a relative who escaped from Auschwitz, and had an arm tattoo to prove it. We believed that the people who attended the Reform Jewish synagogue on the next block were almost as bad as the goyim.

I also gave up the belief that I was one of the "chosen" people — a conviction that God had chosen the Jews to be special because he cared more about us and held us to a higher standard than those goyim. I stopped viewing gentiles as "the other" and established friendships independent of the religion into which they were born. I had an Orthodox aunt who refused to meet my spouse because **Sharon Fratepietro** is a shiksa (female gentile).

The Jewish rituals didn't make much sense either, and I eventually stopped performing most of them. For instance, since age eight I had been fasting on Yom Kippur, the holiest day of the year. At fifteen, I ate. I didn't believe there was a god who would determine on that day (as tradition has it) who shall live and who shall die in the coming year. When an aunt became upset about my not fasting, I pointed out that she also hadn't fasted. Her response was "Yes, but I didn't have all of your Jewish education."

I enjoyed studying Torah (the Hebrew Bible) as a youngster and the Talmud was even more fun. The Torah is the foundation for religious Jews. The Talmud is a collection of writings by rabbinical scholars who attempted to clarify scriptural passages and biblical law. I found it fascinating to read clever commentaries in which different sages made good arguments to justify their points of view, even when they came to opposite conclusions. Perhaps such Talmudic study might explain why so many Jews grow up to be lawyers. And atheists. My rabbis encouraged questions, but not "Who created God?" There apparently was no good answer to this decidedly un-Talmudic inquiry.

One rabbi raised the question of why the Torah repeatedly says, "God of Abraham, God of Isaac, and God of Jacob," instead of the more concise "God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob." His Talmudic explanation was that each of these patriarchs had slightly different versions of God and that we must all search for and find our own god. I took the rabbi's comment very seriously, and my search at age 12 led me to a god who couldn't possibly exist. I was thrilled by my reasoning, but a little bit frightened. I didn't believe there was a god and I didn't know anyone else who thought as I did. So I became a quiet atheist even before I knew the term "atheist."

That changed as I grew up and, after a while, I wouldn't hesitate to tell people about my atheist views. Religion wasn't much discussed when I became a mathematics professor and lived in New York and Massachusetts. All my friends were probably atheists. I was an apathetic atheist. In Talmudic speak, you might say that God led me to mathematics, which turned me into an atheist.

Why do I want to remain a Jew even though I am an atheist? I am a cultural (not religious) Jew. Everybody considers me a Jew. **Adolph Hitler** would have considered me a Jew. I don't want to give Hitler a posthumous victory by denying my being Jewish.

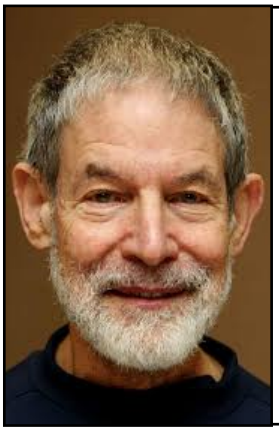
I became an accidental activist atheist when I moved to the Bible Belt in 1976 to teach at the College of Charleston in South Carolina. There I discovered overt discrimination against atheists. When I learned in 1990 that the South Carolina State Constitution required a god belief to serve in public office, I decided to try to do something about this obviously unconstitutional provision. With the help of the ACLU, I challenged that requirement in court.

Several newspapers picked up the story about my candidacy. Soon after, I got a call from a very distressed woman in Philadelphia — my mother! She read about my candidacy in *The Philadelphia Inquirer*. I had to admit this was not the best way to find out that her only child was a gubernatorial candidate, and an atheist. She worried that my candidacy would sully my reputation and hurt Jews. I had thought that a lack of publicity for my campaign would spare my mother such grief.

In 1997, my victory in the South Carolina Supreme Court overturned the provision in the South Carolina State Constitution that prohibited atheists from holding public office. More information can be found at the below link:

https://caselaw.findlaw.com/court/sc-supreme-court/1084357.html

My life turned around because of this victory and I became very active in secular causes through the Secular Coalition for America.



Herb Silverman is a regular contributor to the Freethought Society's (FS) quarterly publication, *The Freethought Society News.*

The editors are grateful for all of his excellent submissions. Silverman's article archives can be found at the following FS website page:

https://www.ftsociety.org/herb-silverman-articles/