

## **KEYNOTE: CSJO 2010 “My Convictions” by Hershl Hartman**

If modern “art” comic books have become a new literary form of the 21st century, a significant part of the credit belongs to my guest this morning, HARVEY PEKAR. Harvey is a famed comic book writer, the author of the long-running American Splendor series that became the award-winning 2003 film of the same name. A life-long Clevelander and Secular Jew whose parents were Yiddish-speaking owners of a small grocery store, Harvey has also written extensive jazz and literary criticism for many publications, appeared in film and comic festivals around the world (and on television with David Letterman in the 1990s). Among his many books are *THE BEATS*, *STUDS TERKEL: A Graphic Adaptation*, and an entry in a forthcoming book, *YIDDISHKAYT*, that will bring Secular Yiddish culture into the comics mainstream — and which I’ve had the honor to assist Paul Buhle in editing. Harvey, please take a bow.

So, this is getting to be a habit...unsettling at best and perhaps unhealthy. Keynoting three times in three decades is by far too great an honor for me and too great a strain on your interest and hospitality. I give you my solemn promise not to repeat for at least another decade...or more.

However, let it be noted that I am one of *four* members of The Sholem Community — fittingly, two adults, two teens — who have had the honor of addressing you in this slot. One of those Sholemites, Recognized *vegvayzer* Jeffrey Kaye, has just published an extremely timely book, *Moving Millions: How Coyote Capitalism Fuels Global Immigration*. I strongly recommend it. It can be ordered from Powell’s Books through the Sholem website, *sholem.org*. And, while I’m on the subject of books, I suppose I should mention that I intend to gather all the materials I’ve written over the years about Jewish holidays into a book, which I will discuss at my workshop tomorrow afternoon. Most of those materials are on display in the resources room, along with a draft introduction for the future book and a survey form that I’d like you all to complete. Okay, enough of book-plugging.

I assume that the reason I was asked to deliver this year's Keynote was that, 'way back in the old 20th Century, I alerted our Movement that the year 2010 would mark the Centennial of Secular Yiddish schools and urged Secular and Humanistic Jewish communities to make a Big Deal over it. That's the reason for the theme of this Conference: Four Creative Decades With Roots in a Glorious 100-Year History – 1910 – 2010.

From time to time over the past decade, I reminded us that *di tsayt shteyt nit shtil* — that time was moving on. Last year, I was able to locate the exact site, on Madison Street in the heart of New York's Lower East Side, where that first *yidish natsyonale shule* — National (ethnic) Jewish School — met on Saturdays and Sundays, starting on December 10, 1910. I found that the municipal community center now on that site has a huge, blank brick wall facing Madison Street, just begging for a large commemorative plaque that would proclaim its historical significance in Yiddish, English, Chinese and Spanish — all heard there. The idea charmed the director.

Unfortunately, neither CSJO nor the Arbeter Ring/Workmen's Circle were equally charmed. Despite resolutions adopted by the CSJO's Executive Board in 2008 and the National Executive Board of the Arbeter Ring in 2009, nothing has been done — on national or local levels — to mark the Centennial, except for the obscurely-worded theme of this Conference. Let the record blush to show that not a single workshop this weekend deals with the hidden meaning of the theme.

All is not totally bleak, however. Early this month, a new book appeared in hardback and is scheduled to appear in paperback on Monday: *Passionate Pioneers: The Story of Yiddish Secular Education in North America, 1910-1960* by Fradle Pomerantz Freidenreich. I have not yet seen the book, but wouldn't it have been wonderful and marvelously appropriate to have her standing here instead of me? In addition to what we might have learned, think of the lost publicity opportunity: "Historian of Secular Jewish Schools Addresses Their Descendants After 100 Years." (The headline would probably have been better.)

Yet, there's still a chance to utilize this significant date to draw attention — and potential members — to our schools and communities on a local level. Two of the goals I proposed to both CSJO and Arbeter Ring/Workmen's Circle

— finding the original site in New York and documenting the history of the *shuln* in North America — have been largely met, one of them with no help from us. It might be useful to review the other goals, updated to today:

- Using the newly-published study I mentioned to aid our *local* schools and communities in exploring their *own* histories. Engendering publicity in local Jewish and general media by reporting the results of this local research.

- An effort that was proposed on a national scale can be adapted locally: using local media to search out former students and graduates of the various Secular *shuln* that previously existed in your area to record their memories and impressions and to invite them to your activities. Possible headline: “Local Jewish Group Seeks Veterans of Its Antecedents.”

Just a few sentences at this point to recall what may be tragically unknown to some of you here. Our schools and communities didn’t spring from nowhere when CSJO was formed 40 years ago. They were seedlings that remained when four large and vibrant Yiddish-based movements were unable to adapt sufficiently to the vast sociological changes in postwar North America. Too, to some extent or another, they were also the victims of the witch-hunt that engulfed both the U.S. and Canada during the Cold War. All four of those movements had far more in common than the political differences that divided them, but they were unable to overcome those differences. The four were the Arbeter Ring, then socialist and fiercely anti-communist; the International Workers Order and its Jewish Peoples Fraternal Order, fiercely pro-communist; the *Farband* — the Socialist Zionist National Jewish Workers Alliance; and the small, non-partisan and intensely Yiddishistic Sholem Aleichem Folk Institute. If your school or community goes out looking for graduates and former students of Secular *shuln*, you need this score card to know the players. Know, too, based on my experience, that they won’t remember the politics of the *shule* they attended.

- Finally, I proposed declaring Sunday, December 5th, 2010, as a North American celebration of the Centennial. That Sunday is in the midst of the *khanike* festival; it occurs during Advent; it is three days before *Muharram*, the Islamic New Year. Even if erection of a plaque on Madison Street on that day

with tv news cameras rolling, has become a pipe dream, each of our communities can celebrate on their own turf, in their own way. And don't forget to inform the media.

Most important: all of these suggestions can be incorporated in the plans of CSJO affiliated schools and communities for this coming year of activities, 2010-2011! Yes, it's very late...but it can be done. If there's the will to do it.

But, maybe I'm just a dreamer who believes that people who claim that part of their identities stems from their history as a people...that such people will pay attention to their *own, specific* history as Secular Jews. Time, what little there's left of it, will tell.

Which brings me, sort of, to the main reason I accepted the invitation to make this triplicated address. At first, I thought about laying down The Law about the meaning of Secular Jewishness. I have detected what seems to be a trend toward blurring its meanings in a vain attempt to gain "popularity" or "acceptance." I have heard high-priced consultants assure both local and national 501(c)(3) organizations that the very word, Secular, is either not understood or actually rejected by some sampling of the American Jewish community. And the organizations, having paid more-than-good money for that sage advice, had no choice but to nod sagely in agreement.

It's time, I thought, to set the record straight. It's time, I thought, to make clear that giving up a key aspect of our identity means losing all validity. Who needs another organization, another Sunday School, if it's not distinguishable from all the others?

But then I had another thought. Who am I to be laying down The Law? Secularists reject Higher Authority by definition and authority *figures* by tradition. Some among us, by dint of lifelong study and communication skills, are qualified to teach. Others, through talent, experience, and training, are able to create holiday observances and life-cycle ceremonies that have emotional and spiritual resonance. Some are emotionally capable to give leadership and to moderate among varying points of view. But none of these abilities, taken singly or even in some combination, *entitles* anyone to be an Authority Figure — at least, not among Secular Jews. Every idea, no matter who announces it,

is equally open to challenge, debate, and acceptance or rejection. It's in the lifeblood, the marrow, the DNA of Secular Jewishness.

Therefore, what follows is not The Law. It is, instead, a statement of personal conviction; "belief," if you will. Some may seek to draw parallels with the traditional Jewish "confession of faith," but they do so at the peril of a knuckle sandwich or, at least, a heated response from me.

So — **I am convinced that:**

The Jewish parts of our multifarious identities — regardless of whether through birth or by choice — are based on the history and culture of the Jews *as a people*, an historically-evolved nationality or ethnicity whose development must be understood rationally. It is a people like all others, not "chosen" by supernatural powers, nor by genetics, nor by any other concept of "specialness."

**I am convinced that:**

Part — just a part — of the culture of the Jewish *people* developed from the pre-historic clans of hunter-gatherers-herders known as the Hebrews. Like *all* pre-historic people, their concepts of the natural world and its beings, including human beings, tried to explain the unexplainable by reference to gods and spirits that looked over each clan and each place. Over centuries and millennia, those ideas evolved into a religion — with many concepts and ideas adopted from surrounding cultures, including such key ideas as monotheism, *shabes* or *shabat* or Sabbath (take your pick), and the primacy of the lunar calendar.

**I am convinced that:**

The ***religion of Judaism***, to pick up on the insight of Dr. Khayim Zhitlovski, is a branch on the tree of the Jewish *people*. The **noun** "Jewish" is equivalent to "Irish," "French," "African-American," "Latino/Latina," "Arab," etc. The equivalent of the **adjectives** "Christian," "Muslim," "Buddhist," etc. is **Judaic**. My conviction is supported by the Oxford Advanced Learner's Dictionary, which defines **Judaism** as "the religion of the Jewish people, based mainly on the Bible...and the Talmud." The **adjective** of that noun is given as "Judaic." As someone who, in this case, is anti-semantic, I am unable to accept a twisted rationale of some eighty or so years ago that declared "**Judaism**" to

include culture, ethnic identity and peoplehood. That same Oxford dictionary defines “ism” as: “...a set of *ideas* or system of *beliefs* or *behavior*.” There’s no culture, ethnicity or peoplehood in an “ism.”

I am Jewish, not Judaic. As my neighbor from south of the border is Mexican, but not Catholic. As my sister from the West Bank is Palestinian, but not Muslim. As members of the Sholem Community are Chinese, but not Confucian. Jewishness describes part of my identity, not *Judaism*.

**I am convinced that:**

Jewish history is not a chain of oppression, victimization and woe. The folk-traditions of many relatively small peoples tend to stress their oppression at the hands of others. Ask the Ukrainians about centuries-long *Russian* oppression. Then ask the Russian minority in Eastern Ukraine about centuries-long *Ukrainian* oppression. The stories will sound very familiar. As a Secular Jew, I understand that such ethnocentric concepts are *not valid* by objective historical analysis. It wasn’t hatred of Jews that produced the various conquests of Judah and Israel in ancient biblical times. It was the unfortunate geographical location on the path of marauding empires using that little land bridge between Asia and Africa that brought about all those destructions. Similarly, the “eternal victim” idea of ethnocentric Jewish history bemoans oppression of Jews in Poland in recent centuries...but it fails to recognize the many, many centuries during which Polish Jews lived peacefully with their neighbors (and adopted many of their words into Yiddish).

**I am convinced that:**

Yiddish, and the effort to preserve and advance both the language and its thousand-year culture, is *not* a matter of nostalgia. Alone among all the various and vastly dissimilar cultures of Jews in varied parts of the world, it was the people of Ashkenaz who developed a language and a literature of untold richness. It was in Yiddish that profound philosophical works developed the concepts of Secular Jewishness and revealed the facts of Jewish history. It is in the vast seas of Yiddish poetry and prose that Secular Jews can find *Secular* works of inspiration...of emotion...yes, of spirituality. To seek those things in crude adaptations of Hebrew and Aramaic prayers and blessings, while the

treasures of our Yiddish culture lie scattered at our feet is, to me, incomprehensible and a capital crime against our own heritage.

Which is not to argue for an impossible return to the Yiddish foundation of Secular Jewishness. But it is to call — as I may have twenty years ago — for a determined effort to support the English translation of the vast body of Yiddish literature that remains mute and moldering on dusty bookshelves. And I would add, two decades later, translations by people not obsessed with their academic standings or with the need to be cute and best-selling.

**I am convinced that:**

Secular Jewishness, when it is true to itself, is the best answer to the “problem” that so concerns all the Jewish big-names and big-givers and the Executive Vice Presidents of all the big letterheads that boast the big-givers’ big names. It’s the “problem” of what they call “intermarriage,” or “mixed marriages,” or “out-marriage.”

I insist with all the vehemence of my being that there is **NO** “problem” when two loving people form a family without regard to their ethnic heritages, their religious upbringing or beliefs, or their genders. The “problem” arises when their families...or others in their ethnic or religious communities...or societies...or antiquated laws...reject and marginalize them.

Some “advanced” rabbis and congregations “accept” not-born-Jewish partners—but too often, only if that partner undergoes conversion. Some other rabbis and congregations even “welcome” them. I am convinced that *only* Secular Jewish communities and schools, because of our understanding of ethnicity, history and culture, are equipped to go beyond “acceptance” or “welcoming.” In the Sholem Community, we **celebrate *intercultural families*** and the richness of diversity they bring to us. Most of those families have chosen to explore the Jewish part of their identities without giving up the other part of their heritages. Too many have been driven away by the “official” Jewish community. Given the trends in our increasingly open and accepting society, Secular Jewish communities and schools can make a huge contribution to the Jewish community as a whole by *celebrating diversity* instead of clinging to an old ghetto mentality. And we can recruit scores of such families.

**I am convinced that:**

A multi-cultural society does not require elimination of differences. Though human conflicts are often couched in religious or nationalistic terms, there are usually more fundamental motives in play — usually, greed. (Just think about the extent to which the “war on terror” is intertwined with oil.) Humanity is a tapestry of varied colors and textures. Each strand of that common human weaving must contribute its *own* unique coloration and feel. Our experience in North America has demonstrated that, when minority cultures have been excluded, we were left with the dominance of white, male, Anglo-Saxon Protestants. That cultural impoverishment is being slowly — too slowly — improved. Secular Jewishness can make a distinct contribution to the ideal of multi-culturalism.

Finally, **I am convinced that:**

Jewish history has proven the vital importance *for Jews* of progressive democracy. Benjamin Nones (or Nunez), a hero of the American revolution and a Jeffersonian democrat at the time of America’s first witch-hunt against dissent, put it clearly when he said: “In monarchies, we live but to experience wrongs. Only in Republics do we have rights.” Even in ancient Babylon, the decree that allowed the captive Jews to return to Jerusalem was part of an overall repatriation effort by an enlightened monarch. Throughout history, Jews benefitted in societies that gave more freedom to their people. Jews suffered — drastically in some cases, including those in recent memory — when ruling cliques and classes oppressed the population in general.

Accordingly, **I am convinced that:** greater democracy...peoples’ control over corporations and Wall Street...universal, single-payer health care...a green environment...free, quality education from pre-school through college...an end to imperial invasions and wars...self-determination of all nationalities...equal rights for all...that these are all “good for the Jews.”

So there are my convictions. Using the rational thought that was humanity’s gift from the Enlightenment and the Jews’ gift from the *haskole*, you are free to choose those you agree or disagree with...thoughtfully. I can’t ask more, but I demand no less.