

The Oak Parker Magazine 2016: The Village Spirit

In the early spring of 2003, my next-door neighbor and I were talking about the dilemma we each faced with our five-year-old sons and their Jewish identity. My neighbor had grown up near Kansas City in a Conservative Jewish household but no longer felt connected to that level of religious observance. I had grown up in a suburb of Cleveland, keeping kosher and understanding Orthodox rituals from my grandmother, but attending a Secular Jewish Sunday school started by my own parents.

So what about our own kids? Neither of us felt comfortable in the reform or conservative synagogues with the focus on God and prayer. As non-believers, how were we going to give them a relevant Jewish education that focused on their cultural rather than religious identity? There were a couple of other Jewish secular and humanistic communities in the northern suburbs, but nothing near Oak Park. We decided to hold a meeting at Dole library and find out if other folks were having the same dilemma.

To our great surprise, 15 people showed up, mostly parents of young children, all interested in being part of a Jewish community that focused on our cultural and ethical heritage, with a particular emphasis on social justice. From that meeting, we planned to host a potluck Passover seder. We rented the basement of Pilgrim Community Church (the beginning of our commitment to using community spaces rather than owning our own building), created our own Haggadah (the Passover guide), put up flyers around town (no “Mommail” existed then), and waited. We were overjoyed when 77 people came to celebrate Passover together.

By September we had developed a curriculum, incorporated as a non-profit organization, found our first home at Wonder Works Children’s Museum, and opened our doors as the Secular Jewish Community & School (SJCS).

So what is Secular Judaism? I like to say that it is like being Italian – the history, the music, the food, the culture – without being a practicing

Catholic. That is our experience and practice of our Jewishness. Secular Jewish communities focus on learning about our history, our cultural and ethical heritage and our obligation to social justice and *tikkun olam* – repair of the world.

SJCS is a community of about 50 families who meet on Sunday mornings at Irving Elementary School throughout the school year. We have a vibrant Sunday school for kids from age 4 through B'nai Mitzvah (age 13), a growing teen group, and a robust Adult Education program for our grown-ups. We celebrate holidays and life cycle events of our community – welcoming babies, commemorating milestones, and comforting each other in loss. We are a community that is willing to talk and struggle and listen to one another. We engage in a very active process of examining what we do and how we do it, to create something truly valuable for all of us.

The making of a community was certainly my wish when we began this great experiment in 2003. I wanted a place that would feel like home. A place where I didn't have to apologize for being a non-religious and non-theistic Jew. A place where I could be with others to celebrate my cultural heritage as well as my politics. A place where I could educate my children and give them a sense of belonging and feeling special about belonging, without feeling superior or "chosen". A place that would nurture me as well as allow me to nurture others. A place where I would feel challenged to **do** more and **say** more and **be** more and "**act**" more.

An important song to us as a community is entitled "Ani V'ata". It translates:

You and I will change the world. You and I, then everyone will join us. Though it's been said before, that doesn't matter. You and I can change the world.

It means that change is personal. It means that standing up for change can be difficult, sometimes even scary. I believe that an essential part of what we do as a community – and what we teach our kids – is to speak of things

that matter, and to act on our convictions. To me, this is a fundamental component of our Secular Jewishness.

The Secular Jewish Community & School has proudly been my home and community for over a decade, and we welcome those who would like to join us.

Elisa Lapine is the Community Leader of the Secular Jewish Community & School. For more information, please visit our website at <https://secularjewish.org>