

EARLY HISTORY OF KOL SHALOM COMMUNITY FOR HUMANISTIC JUDAISM

In February 1992, Jane Goldhamer, who was a member-at-large of the Society for Humanistic Judaism, attended a Western Region conference of the Society at Asilomar State Park in California. Although Jane had heard Rabbi Sherwin Wine speak several years earlier, and had been receiving the Journal of Humanistic Judaism and other mailings from SHJ, this was her first experience with the organization in action. She met members from many affiliates and was impressed by that intelligent, interesting, lively group, as well as the spirit of community and dedication to a common endeavor.

Jane had been living in Portland, Oregon since early 1985 and had not found an altogether comfortable niche, either in the Reform Temple or a Unitarian Fellowship. So when Miriam Jeris (then the SHJ Executive Director) and Barbara Brandt (then the Western Region Coordinator) and Toby Dorfman of San Diego all encouraged her to start an affiliate in Portland, the idea was appealing. Soon after she returned home, she received from SHJ a computer print-out of all the names and addresses of people in Oregon who had ever made contact with the Society.

Jane selected the addresses that were within the Portland area, added a few other people she thought might be interested, and sent a letter to about thirty addresses, proposing an April 26 meeting to talk about Humanistic Judaism. The response was gratifying, with thirty individuals showing up for that first meeting. They included Eva and Norm Rickles, Nessa Loewenthal, Walter Hellman and Judy Romano. Muriel Adler and seventeen others indicated interest but couldn't be there.

For the rest of 1992 and about half of 1993, we "lurched" along with no organization, no committees, no income and no name, coming up with the next month's program at each monthly meeting and getting out information on what was happening via a one-page newsletter that was more like a letter. Meetings were held at the Goldhamers' and they paid for postage and other small expenses.

Various people came to explore; some left and some stayed. In October 1992 we had a meeting to consider Getting Organized, but apparently the time was not yet ripe. Meanwhile, however, we had our first Rosh Hashanah service in the fall of 1992, at West Hills Unitarian-Universalist Fellowship (WHUUF), led by Barbara Brandt. She provided us with a service (which became the basis out of which our service has developed) and brought with her a woman cantor and shofar blower. (In her talk at the service, she outlined what we needed to do to grow and become official; many people were not ready for such action, and felt it had no place in a High Holiday service.) We also had a Hanukkah party in December and a seder in the spring of 1993, plus some Shabbat potlucks, discussion groups, and a picnic. And significantly, Jeffrey Hellman was Bar Mitzvah, having been prepared for this by his parents. Through these activities, we were beginning to form and interact as a community.

It was in September 1993 that the time was finally right to become a full-fledged organization, affiliated with SHJ. We had the required "minyan" of ten households who were ready to affiliate

and become organized as a Humanistic Jewish chapter. The founding members were Jane and Mike Goldhamer, Muriel and Irv Adler, Elissa Burian, Gloria Shaich and her niece Susan Wagor, Judy and Larry Ruby, Roberta and Walter Hellman, Janet and Tom Slaten, Myra Himmelfarb, Nessa Loewenthal, and Florence and Al Tauber.

We named ourselves "Humanistic Jews of Greater Portland," submitted our membership application to the SHJ, and were voted in at the Society's October board meeting. Our charter arrived in the mail soon after. We applied to the State of Oregon to be registered as a non-profit corporation and applied to the Internal Revenue Service for that status. (In 2001 we finally discovered that we were not in the most advantageous classification and became reclassified as a "church!") We received a nice "starter" library of basic HJ publications from the Society. At the November 1993 meeting (the first Annual Meeting), bylaws were adopted and officers were elected: Roberta and Walter Hellman as co-presidents, Elissa Burian as vice president, Larry Ruby as secretary and Jane Goldhamer as "coordinator"/treasurer. All of the other founding members were board members except for the Slatens, who said they didn't have time. Our beginning local dues were \$15 for an individual or \$30 for a family, in addition to the national dues of \$50 per membership.

The first year of HJGP's life was a busy one. Among our activities was a two-day mini-conference led by Toby Dorfman, *madrikha* from San Diego; a talk by author Trudy Alexy (Elissa's cousin); a Sukkot social; co-sponsorship of a statewide Jewish Women's Leadership Conference (where we were represented by Nessa); a Hanukkah party; a meeting with a video movie and discussion; a talk by Professor Steve Wasserstrom on the Coalition for Human Dignity; a seder; a talk by Sid Lezak and Rodney Paige on their trip to the Mideast with a peace group; we joined the Community Relations Council of the Jewish Federation; we had a discussion of Jewish identity and a discussion of civil rights and social justice issues; a joint Shabbat potluck with Oregon New Jewish Agenda; a discussion on Black-Jewish relations; a picnic; a talk on the origin, history, and political uses of the *Sh'ma* by Al Tauber; participation in the Jewish Apples 'n' Honey Fair at the JCC; a panel discussion on intercultural marriage, with three of our intercultural couples on the panel; and a weekend visit from Rabbi Sherwin Wine.

At the Annual Meeting (first anniversary) in November 1994, we had grown to 31 households. Our mailing list had grown from 43 to 124 addresses (including 29 subscribing non-members, two courtesy mailings, 32 getting three free introductory newsletters, 22 to other SHJ affiliates, and eight to other Portland area Jewish and Humanist groups).

We finished 1994 with a weekend retreat at the Alton Collins Retreat Center near Estacada, OR. The Center afforded sleeping quarters, meeting rooms and a dining room with meals served by the staff. We hired a person to be in charge of children's activities, and several children were there. The 22 adult members who were there hatched a vision for our community and came up with a mission statement. In this new vision, during 1995:

1. We decided to have a general meeting once a month, on Friday evenings in months without a Shabbat potluck and on Sunday afternoons in months with a Shabbat potluck--but no meetings in months with major Jewish holiday celebrations.
2. Adult Education was going to remain as a subcommittee of the Program Committee, and a survey was to be made to determine preferences for different formats and study areas.

3. A Social Action Committee was agreed on, with Myra Himmelfarb and Susan Wager later agreeing to be co-chairs. Members could bring or send issues or proposed actions to the committee, and the committee would report on and report to the membership courses of individual and/or group actions. Agreements were laid out for making position statements.
4. An *ad hoc* committee was to be formed to plan each holiday celebration, with the board (at that time called the Executive Committee) also directly involved in plans for Passover and the High Holidays.
5. Children's Education would begin, with monthly activities dealing with Jewish culture and history. A children's library would be set up. The Hellmans would consult with anyone interested in a Bar or Bat Mitzvah, and the group would support this.
6. A *Mishpoche* Committee would be formed, headed by Elissa Burian and Florence Tauber. They would be apprised of needs of members at critical times and would alert other members to opportunities to help, as well as attempting to call on special resources within the membership.
7. A Telephone Committee would be formed.
8. Shabbat potlucks would be held in months with no holiday being celebrated. (In 1995, that was February, May, June, July or August, and November.) Judith Meller agreed to be the coordinator. Instead of having one potluck at one location for everyone, the new plan was to have several potluck locations on the same evening, with smaller groupings.

We strayed from some of these plans and succeeded at others in 1995. The Friday evening general meetings didn't become regular events. We did have good holiday celebrations, including a seder at the Valley Conference Center (we'd outgrown WHUUF for this) with 84 attendees, and High Holidays in the chapel of the Portland Jewish Academy at the JCC. (Some preferred the chapel to WHUUF for this, because it felt "more Jewish," while others liked WHUUF much better.) Local dues increased in 1995 from \$15 per individual and \$30 per family to \$30/individual and \$50/family, with national dues remaining at \$50 per year.

We developed an adult education program with Myra Himmelfarb and Harry Stein getting it started and Ray Guggenheim later replacing Harry. One focus was on life cycle observances and practices, and a subcommittee was formed to work on a funeral or memorial service. The *Mishpoche* Committee began to develop other helpful support functions. The Social Action Committee was an idea that didn't take off. Children's Education was the major success story of the year, with twelve children (ages four to eight) enrolling in September. Kara Bowman and Laura Greenberg were the volunteer teachers, Diane Koosed the resource person, and Susan Boyd and Andrea Uliano providing further help. The parents of the children decided to form a discussion group which would meet during the time the children were in class: ten to noon on the second Sunday of each month. Laura Close was interested in starting a teen group to do community service projects. (Unfortunately, there were few teens in our membership, and they had had no opportunity to get together and "bond.")

We had some Shabbat potlucks at the Goldhamers' which were well attended and popular events. We had a booth at the Apples 'n' Honey Fair at MJCC, at which Jeff Hellman and Alan Tauber (grandson of Florence and Al) made an endless supply of balloon animals for kids. Walt Hellman started the hj mailing list (e-mail), which was an immediate success and is still going

strong. Contributors to the list include members of SHJ and the Congress of Secular Jewish Organizations (CSJO) from everywhere, and people with Humanistic leanings who aren't affiliated due to their location or their disinclination; some have found HJ through the list and have become members. The Music Makers formed, with Walt Hellman (guitar), Diane Koosed (flute), Muriel Adler, Andrea Uliano, Judith Meller, and occasional others. Our financial situation was healthy, since we had very little overhead: no rent at the Goldhamers', all efforts on a volunteer basis, the newsletter and services reproduced by Mike Goldhamer at his office, at no cost. The HJGP office was also at the Goldhamers' and Jane took care of office operations as a volunteer.

In November 1996 Rabbi Wine paid us a second visit, and Kerry Kovac (who had become Public Relations/Publicity person) produced a set of two video tapes of interviews of the rabbi by Walt Hellman. We marketed the set to members throughout the national organization, and it has been very well received. The Society maintains a supply for emerging communities. A special format was produced for use by television stations, and the tapes were aired by Portland's public access channels.

Children's Education continued to develop, with Susan Boyd and Ira Cohen taking over the teaching of a class of slightly older children. Kara Bowman volunteered to be the Children's Education coordinator for 1996-7 and Carol Nieh was hired as our first paid teacher for younger children. Our 1996 seder drew 98 people at the Valley Conference Center, with Florence Tauber as Social Chair handling the arrangements. Sharon Buckmaster volunteered to take over the production of the seder observance and a revision of the Haggadah. This led to her becoming chair of the Ritual Committee. Mike Goldhamer got himself certified to perform marriages and "remarried" the Adlers at their 50th anniversary celebration. The memorial service that started with the Mishpoche Committee (which also played a part in spinning off the new Ritual Committee) was called into service when member George Tisher died and member Susan Wager was killed in an apartment fire.

In November 1997 membership stood at 51 households. Efforts were begun to get more of the membership actively involved in committees. A day-long board retreat in August 1997 produced a resolution to become a "participatory community" some bylaws changes to bring the bylaws into closer agreement with actual practices, and a revision of the mission statement to describe us more fully. These changes were voted in at the 1997 annual meeting. We submitted an application for a grant to pay for the cost of education of a *madrikha* for our group, but we didn't get the grant--not a huge disappointment, since we hadn't been able to generate any real interest among our group for volunteering to become a *madrikh*. Several of us attended the Western Region Conference in San Diego. We went from having one Shabbat potluck site for all, when the demand exceeded 45 diners (the largest number the Goldhamers could accommodate), to having several hosts on the same evening with smaller groups at each house.

1998 provided opportunities to use some of our life cycle ceremonies, when Jack Furman, and then Doug Bowman, adopted Judaism and were adopted in Shabbat services which included our *Kabbalat panim* (welcome) ceremonies. We also had a naming service for Joan Ross's small granddaughter Madeleine. We had a visit from SHJ rabbinic candidate Stacie Fine, featuring a Shabbat service, a Havdalah service, and a members' brunch.

Children's Education, co-directed by Debra Meadow and Diane Koosed, grew to three classes with the addition of a Bar/Bat Mitzvah class. Walter Hellman served as first-year teacher for the three young people in that two-year program. We totaled 62 members in November 1998, following a major article in the *Oregonian* in August which (along with a good ad for High Holiday services) brought a flood of inquiries and over sixty addresses added to the mailing list to receive three free introductory newsletters.

By the time of the 1998 annual meeting, we had become an established fixture in the Portland Jewish Community, being represented on the committees for community-wide activities such as the Yom HaShoah service, the Apples 'n' Honey Fair, the Community Relations Committee, and others. We presented one of seven sessions of a course at the JCC called "Explaining Different Approaches to Judaism." We had invitations to speak at Rose Schnitzer Manor (assisted living), the JCC's Wednesday Club, and the First Unitarian Church. We had been invited to present a Shabbat service at Robison Jewish Home, and were planning that. We had grown to 62 members, with a net gain of eleven since November 1997 (17 new, representing 30 adults and 17 children, and six lost memberships, two of whom moved away and four who had never shown much interest). We had a modest budget surplus and planned to set aside a "nest egg" for future needs that might arise.

In 1999 another local dues increase was put in place, increasing members' obligations to \$50 per individual and \$100 per family. We began to investigate safe investment possibilities to earn some income. We began paying the teachers for Children's Education and tuition charges were also increased to \$75 for the first child and \$60 for other children in the family, with \$300 for the Mitzvah class. The three Mitzvah students entered the second year of their preparation, under the direction of Sharon Buckmaster, Debra Meadow and Walt Hellman. While the first year had a classroom and homework format, the second year centered more on individual efforts and experiential matters: a research topic and a community service project. Basic requirements for being in the Mitzvah class were membership of the family in HJGP and participation in a prescribed number of events. The Ritual Committee took care that these students had roles in the seder and the High Holiday celebrations; and attention was given to including as many students as possible, of all ages, in HJGP family events.

The Apples'n'Honey Fair at the JCC was replaced by a Jewish Festival held on the campus of Reed College. This was attended by huge crowds and gave us even more and better exposure. We had a visit from rabbinic student Ben Biber in May and an October visit from Rabbi Wine. We did the Shabbat service at Robison Jewish Home, and one resident confided to us that it was the best she had ever attended. The Music Makers started work on recording a CD of fourteen of their songs. The "First Sunday Forum," meeting at the same time as Children's Education, had a pre-planned series of programs, some with outside speakers and others done by members, and it began to attract other people in addition to parents. The Social Action Committee decided to focus on the issue of the need for parity in insurance coverage for mental health treatment, and began plotting what they could do to further that goal. We participated in the community-wide Yom HaShoah commemoration, as well as on committees of the Jewish community. We presented a workshop featuring one of the Wine-Hellman videos, at the annual Humanist/Freethought Symposium. The Goldhamers and Nessa Loewenthal were at the

Birmingham Temple in October for the ordination of Tamara Kolton, the first rabbi to be trained in the International Institute for Secular Humanistic Judaism.

1999 was the first year in which our membership did not grow. At the time of the 1998 Annual Meeting there were 62 member households, and 60 by the time of the 1999 Annual Meeting. Although we gained ten new members and one who rejoined after a couple of years away, we lost one of the new ones in the same year and twelve others. Three left town, four were unable to participate for different reasons, one wasn't ever really interested, and five went to other congregations. (Reconstructionist, Jewish Renewal, and three to the South Metro group which also welcomes intercultural couples and has a very good Children's Education program and a rabbi—our stiffest competition.)

In 1999 we were having regular offerings of the monthly Sunday Forum and Children's Education classes, Yiddish group, book discussion group, board meetings and Music Makers practice sessions, the periodic Havdalah potlucks, and Task Force meetings to plan holiday celebrations and other events as needed. The hoped-for periodic Shabbat services hadn't yet materialized.

Moving through 2000, we were increasingly busy and achieved some new highs, with 105 at our seder at the Airport Sheraton Hotel and at least 115 adults (plus children) at the Yom Kippur service and potluck—which had previously drawn about 70 adults. Rosh Hashanah was held at West Hills Unitarian-Universalist Fellowship as had become our wont, we were unable to get it for Yom Kippur and instead rented the Unity World Healing Center in Lake Oswego. Our wonderful new cantorial performer was David Maier, an operatic tenor. We continued to be thrilled by Janet Guggenheim's piano performance of the Ernst Block *Kol Nidre*, accompanying Jerry Bobbe on cello.

We had four Shabbat services at Walker Road, organized by Walt Hellman, and three Shabbat potlucks, each one with several host homes and small groups of guests. Karen Gurevitch did a great job of finding hosts and matching them up with those who wanted to be guests. The book group and Yiddish group met regularly and we had a hike and a picnic during the summer. The Mental Health group designed a questionnaire to explore people's experiences with insurance coverage for mental health, and distributed it throughout the Portland Jewish community. We had a story on that in the *Jewish Review*. Many of us attended the community Yom HaShoah service and the *Kristallnacht* service. We had a table at the Jewish Festival (next to Chabad's table, with their summer contingent of *yeshiva bokhers* trying to get all the men to lay tefillin). Walt Hellman taught "Humanistic Judaism 101" at the JCC in May and again in September as one of the classes in the Jewish *Shuk* sponsored by the Board of Rabbis, the Federation and the JCC. Joan Ross, who had been our representative on the Community Relations Council, stepped down from that role. Four of our members participated in a regional conference in Blaine, WA, with the SHJ affiliate from Victoria, B.C. and CSJO affiliates from Seattle and Vancouver, B.C. We had some excellent press, due to Kerry Kovac's expertise and hard work.

Children's Education made great strides in 2000, with the appointment of Diane Koosed as paid Director. (We sent her to a workshop sponsored by SHJ and held at Beth Or congregation in Deerfield, IL.) In the fall we moved from once-monthly classes to twice a month, doubling the

number of Sunday Forums as well. We had a truly wonderful B'nai Mitzvah celebration in June, starring Emily Kunen, Evan Moore and Leah Olson. In the fall, eight more youngsters enrolled in the first-year Mitzvah class. A youth group formed, with Laura Greenberg as advisor.

Membership growth was negligible in 2000, with 63 households at the high point and 62 as of the Annual Meeting. After rapid growth in the first years, it began to look as if we had reached our natural "ceiling." We gained six new members, plus two who rejoined, but we lost nine who moved away or disaffiliated, and lost one household when single members Karen Rash and Gary Gitner (who had met at a Shabbat potluck) married and became one household. Mike Goldhamer officiated at this marriage.

The 1998 local dues increase to \$100 per family was succeeded in 2000 by new local dues of \$110, while single dues went from \$50 to \$55. In 1999 national dues increased from \$50 to \$65, the first increase in fifteen years. We recognized that more increases would lie ahead as we continue to develop. The Goldhamers notified the board of directors that it should begin to investigate alternatives for a place for our activities, in the event that the Walker Road house wouldn't be available any longer, as well as something that would give us more meeting space and parking space. Janet Guggenheim generously gave a benefit salon concert, with refreshments and ticket arrangements done by Elissa Burian, which brought in a little extra money, and Mike Goldhamer performed seven weddings, for which the couples made donations to HJGP. However, fund-raising results were largely negated by an idealistic board decision not to charge for attendance at High Holiday services as we had done previously. Arguments for the charges were that we put a lot of money and work into producing something which is desirable to many people who don't choose to join and support a congregation, and that they should pay for this opportunity since the expense and efforts are not theirs. Arguments for no admission charge were that we might attract more attendees and that they would voluntarily contribute enough to keep the revenue where it should be. The disappointing reality was that, although we had a record attendance, most of the people who came had come before or were on our mailing list, did not just come because of the admission policy, the majority did not contribute, and we cleared expenses only by virtue of large contributions by the same members who also put in a lot of effort.

As 2000 was a year of moving toward change, 2001 saw some major changes come into being. Local dues again increased, as the first of three projected annual increases, to \$210 per family and \$115 per individual. A Site Committee (Irv Adler, Michael Moore, Klaus Knab, Elissa Burian and Jane Goldhamer) put in a lot of time investigating a range of possibilities for a new location for activities. We wanted four children's classrooms, a larger adult meeting room, more parking space, something more handicapped-friendly, and adequate storage space. Jane Goldhamer had a rental house that would have met most of these requirements—although it was not "ideal," would have needed a wheelchair ramp, and didn't have much more parking space than Walker Road. She offered to rent it to the community for \$1000 per month (less than present rental income), with the community spending an estimated \$500 per month more for utilities, renter's insurance, telephone and cleaning, but with the strong possibility of being able to rent to other groups by the hour for their meetings. The board was not willing to commit to such an expenditure, and Irv Adler was able to negotiate a contract with the JCC for rental by the hour of classrooms in Portland Jewish Academy. The price would be \$6000 for nine months.

Irv negotiated further and got permission to put a storage cabinet for Children's Education supplies in the JCC auditorium, and the Adlers purchased and donated the cabinet as well as two storage bins for Sunday Forum and Shabbat service supplies. The Goldhamers consented to keep the remainder of the supplies and equipment for another year, after which storage space would have to be rented for those things if we were to remain at the JCC.

We moved our operations in September 2001 and there were immediate tangible benefits to the move (parking, larger classrooms, and the use of the JCC board room for Shabbat services), plus an intangible benefit of the demonstration by our presence there, that we are a legitimate, recognized part of the Portland Jewish Community. Attendance at Sunday Forums and other events has increased. More of the work has been distributed among members, although storage and transportation of things to and from events continued to be a problem. Costs also increased, but the board did not feel comfortable about charging any admission for Sunday Forum, to defray part of the expense of rent, speakers' fees and bagels, cream cheese, coffee and tea.

Teen member Leah Olson was hired to lead a new class of pre-schoolers, although that class had only one student during its first year and activities were combined with those of the Alef (K-2) class. Three well-qualified teachers were hired for the Alef, Bet and B'nai Mitzvah classes. Member tuition was \$175 for the first child in a family and \$125 for each younger child, with \$300 tuition for the Mitzvah class. These fees helped to cover part of the cost of rent, teachers and director's salaries, and educational materials. Approximately 20 children were enrolled for the year, including the eight Mitzvah students who were to be finished in June, leaving some concern about class size in school year 2002-03.

A steady stream of small contributions and a few very generous ones made this source of income a helpful one. No members were willing to give more than token voluntary dues increases, only three weddings were performed, and no fund-raising project was in place. A "Ways and Means" Committee was organized by Jane, reviewed possible fund-raising programs, and recommended to the board the "\$crip" program. Janet Brumbaugh agreed to operate the program (a not inconsiderable amount of work) for a 15% commission.

The other major change in 2001 was the name change. In 1993 the small group of founding members had settled on "Humanistic Jews of Greater Portland," which described the area we covered and our basic philosophy, but did not describe what kind of organization we were, or expected to become. Since then, there was a growing feeling that the name was "clunky," that it seemed to exclude our non-Jewish members, and that it didn't convey an image of what we were becoming or had become. There seemed to be a fairly general agreement on these points among those who expressed an opinion; but, beyond that, a range of conflicting and strongly felt opinions. A membership meeting was held to weigh the choices. Part of the membership loved the idea of having a Hebrew name—and more and more of the SHJ affiliates had been adopting one. Jane Goldhamer loved the name *Kol Adam* (voice of humanity); many others preferred *Kol Shalom* (voice of peace) because they liked the sound and feel of the familiar *shalom*. Others were highly offended, to varying degrees, at the idea of having any Hebrew name. And then there was the descriptive noun issue: Society? Community? Congregation? Strong arguments were voiced that our activities are those of a congregation, and it would be the word that best described us, as well as placing us favorably in the Jewish community in terms of putting us in a

recognized category. Some members had a great deal of difficulty with the idea of being members of a “congregation”, and one was ready to quit if we took that designation. While more members voted in favor of a Hebrew name and the congregation name than for any other combination of the two main issues, the board decided to compromise so as to take into account the feelings of those who needed a more secular title. Accordingly, the name finally chosen was Kol Shalom, Community for Humanistic Judaism. The reaction of Jewish community leaders seems to have been favorable, as if they are indeed able to recognize more easily where we fit in to the scheme of things.

The Membership Committee and the board had high hopes of reaching a new high of 70 member households in 2001, and came within one of that goal: a net gain of seven over the 62 members at the time of the 2000 Annual Meeting. Two more were already planning to join in January 2002—which they did, but four members did not renew.

At this writing, we are in the second quarter of 2002, having had 150 reservations for our annual seder, but the history of our community will go on. Local dues for 2002 are \$285 for a family membership and \$160 for a single, and another increase is planned for 2003. So far this year we’ve had a very successful weekend visit from new SHJ Rabbi Adam Chalom. We hope to have 75 member households by the end of the year. We had a board retreat in December 2001 in which the board reviewed and planned philosophical positions and policies and what it hoped to accomplish in the coming year under incoming president Sherry Archer. “Pods” were formed to consider and prepare presentations to the board on areas such as secularism/religion; participation and pluralism; long range planning; programming; and role in the Jewish community. The plan was for part of each board meeting to be devoted to a “pod” presentation of its discussion and recommendations and the board’s further discussion and adoption of policy. Our evolution continues!

Jane Goldhamer, Coordinator
April 2002