

# Retiring 'outside of box' rabbi faces new challenges

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CORRESPONDENT

When Sherwin Wine retires next month after 40 years as founding rabbi of Birmingham Temple, he merely will transfer his energy to his other passions. "I'm shifting my work," says Wine, a dynamic, imposing, outspoken Birmingham resident who thinks outside the box.

"I want to work on visiting more communities, training more rabbis and doing more writing."

Wine, who at 75 operates at full throttle intellectually and physically, will continue to travel the world and to further develop the Birmingham-based Center for New Thinking, his take on community education.

The visiting, training and writing all fit his goal of securing the religion he began — Humanistic Judaism — as the fifth branch of Judaism, alongside Orthodox, Conservative, Reform and Reconstructionist.

"One of the big concerns a few years back was whether Humanistic Judaism would continue," Wine says. "People were saying, 'What's going to happen when Sherwin goes? I hated that.'"

## MOVEMENT GROWS

Wine estimates that 30,000 members in 12 countries consider themselves part of the Humanistic Jewish movement,

with the outreach larger than that. They identify culturally, historically and traditionally with Judaism and with its ethical values, but they don't believe in God.

"For us, the heart of religion is not God, prayer or worship — but human behavior," Wine said back in 1975. That was during the time when he was labeled "the atheist rabbi" and the subject of condemnation.

Today, he says, "Our focus was not to deny God but to affirm people. We're helping create something long lasting for the world of religion, philosophy and Judaism." Completing his fifth book, *The Jews From a Humanistic Perspective*, is a priority. These and other writings preserve his work the way his talks never can. "That's because he speaks from a single, salmon-colored, 4-inch by 6-inch card, never writing out the full text of what he will say."

"I think very carefully about my talks," he says. "I consider the podium a barrier between the speaker and audience. For me, talking to people is a very enjoyable experience."

Those who encounter him even once are impressed by his memory, which allows him to recall historical facts as easily as he inquires after each temple member's child by name.

"It's not just his memory, it's his whole system of knowledge," explains Rabbi Adam Plaut, 27, who along with Rabbi

Tamara Kolton, 32, will lead Birmingham Temple after Wine's retirement next month.

## 'A GENIUS'

"He's clearly a genius," Kolton adds, citing his command of world events. "But he understands it's not only the day that Napoleon conquered Europe that is important but the day that your daughter is born."

His humor is delicious and it's really part of enjoying him. Retirement also will allow Wine to travel. Antarctica and Cuba are places he hasn't been.

"I like politically interesting trips," Wine says. "I don't sleep a lot when I travel. I walk, sometimes as much as 20 miles in a day. I know what I want to see and I don't want to waste my time. Next to philosophy my major interest has been history. Travel is my way of seeing history in the flesh. It's my greatest recreation."

Connie Wolberg, a Southfield-based travel agent and temple member, has arranged many of his trips, accompanying him on some. She is amazed at his energy, thirst for new adventure, and ability to take mishaps with humor. Her favorite story involves an over-zealous guide in West Africa who took Wine and his longtime partner Richard McMains to see a witch doctor supposedly renowned for his supernatural powers. "This somehow involved the

killing of a chicken," Wolberg says. "But the chicken objected to being sacrificed and eventually Rabbi Wine and McMains joined the witch doctor, numerous family members and the guide in chasing this hysterical chicken all over the back yard. It is a vision, totally lacking in rabbinical dignity, that I will cherish forever."

Wine's wry comment: "You can always learn from other clergies."

## CHOOSING HIS PATH

Wine did not grow up in Detroit bent on founding a new religion. He came from an observant family, active in the conservative Shaarey Zedek synagogue, now in Southfield. As a philosophy student at the University of Michigan, he thought he might want to become a college professor or an attorney.

But the academic world "was less adventurous than I wanted my life to be," he said. And law felt by the wayside when he decided, "I couldn't defend someone who was guilty." "I was always very connected to Judaism," he said. "I wanted to combine philosophy and Judaism and the thing that seemed closest to that was the Reform Rabbinate. Even as he applied, he knew that he did not believe in God. The philosophers that he regards as his mentors — Bertman

Russell, John Dewey, Jean Paul Sartre, Albert Camus, Baruch Spinoza — had already helped him shape a humanistic philosophy."

"They were my teachers," he says. "I didn't have anyone in the rabbinate world who was my mentor. They didn't agree with me. I liked being a rabbi. But I didn't like the praying," he said. "I decided I would explain to everyone what I meant by the word 'God.'"

A two-year stint as a Jewish chaplain in Korea further cemented that idea and his communication skills. "The Jewish soldiers there weren't interested in praying," he said. "They were farm boys from places like central Iowa and I learned how to talk to them. They needed to be nurtured."

Returning home as assistant rabbi at Temple Beth El, now in Bloomfield Township, and then as rabbi of a new Reform congregation in Windsor, he grew increasingly uncomfortable with what he terms "God language." "Redefining a familiar word just so you can stay in the organization wasn't being honest."

That's when he left to form Birmingham Temple, which took its name from its initial gathering in the home of a Birmingham couple. "I've always regarded myself as a philosopher-missionary," Wine says. "I've provided people a new setting for what they believe." Although the temple eventually

moved to a permanent site in Farmington Hills, Wine himself chose to move to Birmingham, a city he loves. He is a familiar figure walking its downtown and residential streets and having breakfast each morning at The Townsend Hotel.

## A NEW DIRECTION

Once he retires, residents will see him regularly take a new route — from his condominium with the walled garden on the west side of Birmingham to his new library office on the east side, at Adams Square. That's where he and the faculty of the Center for New Thinking — the Rev. Harry Cook, art historian Michael Farrell and journalist Jack Lesserberry — hold some of their classes. Others take place at the Birmingham Unitarian Church and The Community House.

The nonprofit center, which he began in 1977, is another aspect of his original mind. Last month, the American Humanist Society named Wine "Humanist of the Year." He joins a line up that includes Jonas Salk, Carl Sagan, Julian Huxley, Benjamin Spock, Linus Pauling, Margaret Sanger, Kurt Vonnegut, Alice Walker and Isaac Asimov.

"I look at my life and I really like what's happened," says Wine. "I feel very fulfilled because my life's work has touched a lot of people in a very positive way."

## RABBI

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well-behaved children. "That did it," Drapp says, "we're life members."

Franklin residents Dornice and Irving Goldman have supported the temple since they joined about 1970, just as the original temple building was going up. Since then two additions have been built.

"Nobody will ever take Sherwin's place," Dornice says. "But I think these two young rabbis are just marvelous," with a charisma of their own.

Today, the humanistic philosophy that Wine gave birth to in our Detroit suburb is generally accepted as a fifth, albeit small, branch of Judaism, and the Birmingham Temple is the cornerstone of a movement that includes:

■ Forty congregations across North America, knit together by the North American Society for Humanistic Judaism, based in Farmington Hills.

■ Humanistic Jewish organizations in 12 countries, knit together by the International Federation of Secular Humanist Jews, based in New York City.

■ The International Institute for Secular Humanistic Judaism, consisting of two para-rabbinical

training schools, based in Tel Aviv and Jerusalem, and one rabbinical training school which Wine leads in Farmington Hills.

## BUILDING A FOUNDATION

"We're training our own rabbis and leaders," Wine says, citing four ordained rabbis including Chalom and Kolton, two more coming this year, and six on tap. "Over 40 years, we've laid the foundation for a movement."

Nationally, Humanistic Judaism is recognized by United Jewish Communities, the umbrella group for Jewish organizations in the United States. Locally, rabbis and leaders of Jewish organizations no longer call for Wine's outsider

from the rabbinate.

Indeed, Birmingham Temple's special events, services and celebrations of bar and bat mitzvahs are routinely announced and covered by the *Detroit Jewish News*, which once refused to print them.

Larger stories about the humanistic Jewish movement appear in the national and international Jewish press as well as major media such as *The New York Times*.

The temple's theme song, one of many with lyrics by Wine, explains the philosophy: "Where is my light? My light is in me. Where is my hope? My hope is in me. Where is my strength? My strength is in me. And in you."

## TEMPLE ACTIVITIES

Birmingham Temple marked its 40th anniversary and honored Rabbi Sherwin Wine with several activities last month, including a road rally and an original musical.

Here's what's coming up this month:

June 20: Grand Celebration of 40 Years of Marriages

Rabbi Wine married many couples over 40 years. Many of them embraced Humanistic Judaism and became Birmingham Temple mem-

bers. Their reunion will include voices of love and commitment, couples talking about marriage and a festive reception with special poetry and songs.

June 27: Grand Celebration of Rabbi Wine's Retirement

Along with many surprises, Rabbi Dan Cohn-Sherbok, Rev. Harry Cook, Rabbi Tamara Kolton and Rabbi Adam Chalom will give tribute to Rabbi Wine. Guests will be able to buy Rabbi Wine's new biography, *A Life of Courage*, during the celebration.

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