

Secular Judaism – Faith, Values and Spirituality.
Yaakov Malkin, Vallentine Mitchell 2004.

What is immediately apparent from the opening pages of this book is the passionate commitment of this author to his subject. Not for Yaakov Malkin a gentle, take it or leave it, presentation of the joys of Secular Judaism, but a full-on approach to the reader, daring him or her to refuse to be convinced.

A tenuous awareness of the work of Rabbi Sherwin Wine meant that the concept of Secular Judaism as a philosophy of Judaism was not unknown to me, but this was my first exposure to a thorough analysis of it, from within, and an approach that demands its placement alongside every other branch of Judaism in the 21st century.

Malkin writes in a manner that in general terms any rational and open-minded Jew would find it hard to fault. He assesses the various trends in Jewish history, particularly the almost genetic propensity to divide, and the enduring strain of secular Judaism which, in his view, is not a novel phenomenon.

As a non-traditional Jew I found much in Secular Judaism with which it was hard to disagree, and find myself at one with the author in the way he presents the positive influence of the secular trend within Jewish history, most especially in the period since the Haskalah. I also agree with him that the vast majority of mainstream Jews live lives that are hugely influenced by the spirit of secularism, and whose Judaism similarly so.

I disagree with his placement of certain people in modern Jewish history in the 'secular' camp, most especially the early figures of Reform Judaism whose championing of the cause of a scientific approach to the study of Judaism does not, in my opinion, label them as secular; and I would have appreciated further justification of his choice of certain writers as being exemplars of secularism, simply because of the fact that the books they produced were fictional. But these are relatively minor issues.

Perhaps the most interesting and challenging part of Secular Judaism is the programme that Malkin sets out for the teaching of a Judaism that is founded on the sands of secularism, rather than embedded in the concrete of belief in a God he dismisses as 'man-made'. Malkin advocates a fresh approach to most of the standard parts of Judaism, not least the observance of Shabbat and the festivals, imbuing them with new meaning and rituals in which faith plays no part.

It is with deep regret, though, that I must admit to having found this book profoundly disappointing, and rather boring.

This is not to reflect badly on the author, whose heart is obviously in the right place, but rather on the difficulty inherent in presenting a subject the essence of which has already been leached out.

It may be unsatisfactory to Yaakov Malkin, but I suspect that many modern Jews, however actually and practically secular they may be, would rather wrestle with the problems that this engenders from within their faith communities rather than outside. I am afraid that I still cannot see the point of Secular Judaism.

Rabbi Dr Charles H Middleburgh