

Group provides community for non-religious Jews

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By Sharon Chisvin

THE prolific Yiddish writer Sholem Aleichem passed away almost 100 years ago, but his name and his particular devotion to humanistic values and Yiddish culture are being kept alive by a group of Winnipeggers.

Winnipeg's Sholem Aleichem group was established about 13 years ago to provide a sense of community to those who identify themselves as culturally Jewish, but not religiously Jewish. For the group's members, Judaism is not defined by religious observance or any of the rituals and beliefs that reflect such observances. Instead, their Jewish identity is derived from an appreciation of Jewish history, literature, ethics and culture.

"The objective of Sholem Aleichem is to form an intergenerational community to foster and preserve Jewish identity in a secular context and to foster the development and application of humanistic values," explains Sholem Aleichem board of directors chairwoman Lissa Donner.

The Sholem Aleichem Community recognizes and celebrates most Jewish holidays, she says, but does so in a way that focuses entirely on the morals and lessons to be learned from each holiday, and not on the role of divine intervention in human life.

"We are committed to the ethical values forged by the experiences of the Jewish people through the ages, the values of peace, social justice, community responsibility and the right to pursue personal fulfillment," Donner adds.

"We believe that the power and responsibility to achieve these goals belongs only to human beings."

Donner joined Sholem Aleichem shortly after she returned to her hometown of Winnipeg from Toronto in 1997. Since then, she says, the group has been an important source of community and strength for both her and her daughter.

The Winnipeg group is affiliated with the International Federation of Secular Humanistic Jews, and is reflective of a long tradition of secular Judaism within the Jewish community here. In the first half of the 20th century, the Winnipeg Jewish community was host to a variety of secular humanistic groups that sponsored schools, cultural events and social service programs.

"Secular humanism is an approach to understanding the world that emphasizes human responsibility, self-reliance and the idea that human beings have full responsibility for themselves, their fellow human beings and the planet," explains Sholem Aleichem board member Matthew Decter.

Decter, who has always identified as a secular Jew, was attracted to Sholem Aleichem for its pluralism and openness and for the opportunity it gave him to give his son a sense of community and of Jewish identity.

"The Sholem Aleichem Community is a place where people who feel connected to the history and culture of the Jewish people can come together and celebrate their heritage, as well as help build a future for the Jewish people as a whole," he says.

The community currently has about 30 active members, many of them from households in which one parent is Jewish and one is not. It attracts many more to its regular events, however.

These events include Sabbath dinners and holidays celebrations, generally held at members' homes or at local community centres.

The group's secular Passover Seder, which retells the liberation story of the Hebrew people but also focuses on contemporary human rights issues, attracts about 100 people.

The group also commemorates life-cycle events in a fashion that reflects its humanistic values. At Sholem Aleichem, becoming a Bar or Bat Mitzvah at the age of 12 or 13 involves undertaking a community service volunteer project and an independent research project on a Jewish topic. There is no call to the Torah.

In 2004 the community's Bar and Bat Mitzvah celebration featured the debut of the Klezmer Kids, a group of talented Sholem Aleichem youngsters performing the music of the Eastern European shtetls.

Through this music -- lively, plaintive and effusive -- Winnipeg's Sholem Aleichem Community reinforces and rejoices in its connection to Jewish history, Jewish culture and secular humanistic Jewish life.

Sharon Chisvin is a Winnipeg writer.