

## **BASIC JEWISH READING LIST**

The books on this list are intended to provide a basic introduction to Jewish life, thought and heritage. They are arranged in five groups: Jewish knowledge and beliefs, Jewish rituals, practice and life cycle, (both home and synagogue activities), the history of the Jewish people, prayer and spirituality and novels and folklore.

There are four books which are essential in any Jewish home, and which are not included in this list: The Jewish prayer-book (*Siddur*), a copy of the Torah (or *Chumash*, e.g., "The Torah: A Modern Commentary" edited by Gunter Plaut), a Jewish Bible (*Tanakh*, which includes the books of the Torah but without commentary) and an edition of the *Haggadah* for Pesach (e.g., Chaim Raphael's "A Feast of History"). For each of these four books there are Progressive, Conservative and Orthodox texts, and it would be ideal for a person to have a variety of these texts in their home.

### **NOVELS & FOLKLORE:**

Lynne Reid Banks, *One More River*. This novel, which is directed particularly towards early teenage readers, is constructed around the friendship of a Jewish girl with an Arab boy in Israel

David Goldstein, *Jewish Mythology* (Hamlyn paperback). Traditional stories and rabbinic legends (*midrash*) about the characters of the Bible, with beautiful illustrations.

Henry Kemelmann, *Friday the Rabbi Slept Late*. This novel, one of the "days of the week" mysteries by Kemelmann, uses Talmudic logic in order to solve the mystery.

Judith Kerr, *Hitler Stole Pink Rabbit*. This novel, mainly for pre-teens, describes a Jewish family's wartime experiences as seen through the eyes of the children.

Primo Levi, *If This Is a Man* (Abacus paperback). Levi's account of his experiences in Auschwitz is second to none. Again, Levi has written many books on the Shoah and related themes, for example, the underground resistance during the War. His books may be the best in relating the experience and are all highly recommended.

James Michener, *The Source*. A cross-section of Jewish history in Israel from Biblical times to the present day, using an archaeological dig as the "frame" story.

Amos Oz. Any book by Oz will present from a novelist's perspective a wonderful insight into contemporary Israeli life, focusing particularly on relations between Arab and Jew.

Chaim Potok, *The Chosen* (Penguin paperback). This novel deals with the clash between traditional and modern Jewish values in America. Its companion volume is *The Promise*. In my opinion, the best of the Potok books is *My Name is Asher Lev*.

Leo Rosten, *The Joys of Yiddish* (Penguin paperback). An indispensable source of joy and Jewish wisdom.

Howard Schwartz, *Elijah's Violin and Other Jewish Folktales* (Penguin paperback). A wonderful collection of Jewish fantasy and fancy.

Isaac Bashevis Singer, *The Slave* (Penguin paperback). This book brilliantly evokes the life and values of the Jewish people in the shtetl (traditional Jewish towns in Eastern

Europe prior to the War). Other outstanding books by Singer include *The Magician of Lublin* and his *Collected Stories*.

Milton Steinberg, *As a Driven Leaf* (Behrman House). This is a novel set in Roman times and drawing on figures and stories from the Talmud; an excellent and gripping introduction to the early Rabbinic period of Judaism.

Leon Uris, *Exodus*. A novel dealing with the founding of Israel; and *Mila 18*, dealing with the Warsaw Ghetto uprising.

Elie Wiesel, *Night*. This brief but powerful novel, based on the author's experiences during the Shoah, has introduced the Holocaust to many readers over the years. Wiesel has written many other books on themes of the Holocaust and Jewish survival, and all of these are worth reading, although more surreal in approach compared to Primo Levi. Wiesel has also written on Chasidic themes including *Souls on Fire* (Penguin paperback), a remarkable collection of Chasidic legends and stories.

A.B. Yehoshua. An excellent contemporary Israeli novelist whose works reflect the pressures and concerns of Israelis.

## **JEWISH KNOWLEDGE, BELIEFS and CONTEMPORARY THOUGHT:**

Philip Birnbaum, *Encyclopedia of Jewish Concepts*. This one volume provides detailed definitions of basic concepts, rituals and terminology. An excellent resource.

Eugene Borowitz, *Liberal Judaism*. One of the pre-eminent philosophers of the Progressive movement discusses varieties of belief in Judaism about issues such as the divinity of Torah, the concept of the afterlife, the existence of God and other matters in easily readable form.

Eugene Borowitz, *Renewing the Covenant*. This is a more complex, philosophical discussion about practicing Judaism in a post-modern world.

David Hartman, *A Living Covenant*. Hartman, along with Irving Greengberg, is a leading tolerant Orthodox rabbi who presents his concept of "the innovative spirit in traditional Judaism."

Abraham Joshua Heschel, *A Passion for Truth*. Heschel, raised in an Orthodox home, became a teacher at the Conservative seminary and contributed many books highlighting both the spiritual and ethical basis of Judaism. He is one of the most important thinkers of modern Judaism.

Louis Jacobs, *The Book of Jewish Belief* (Behrman House paperback). Clear, concise essays on all the basic concepts of Judaism, illustrated, very readable.

Louis Jacobs, *God, Torah and Israel*. One of the founders of Masorti, or Conservative, Judaism in England, and one of the great thinkers of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, Jacobs presents a critique of the different movements and a defense of non-fundamentalist, halakhic Judaism.

Alfred Kolatch, *The Jewish Book of Why* (Jonathan David). A wonderful pot-pourri of Jewish knowledge. There is also a *Second Jewish Book of Why*.

Harold S. Kushner, *When Bad Things Happen to Good People* (paperback). A sensitive response to the problem of evil, adopting a Jewish perspective based on the biblical Book of Job.

Harold S. Kushner, *To Life!* An introduction to Jewish life and values by the author of *When Bad Things Happen to Good People*.

Gilbert Rosenthal, *The Many Faces of Judaism* (UAHC paperback). An introduction to the plurality of Jewish beliefs and attitudes.

Jonathan Sacks, *Arguments for the Sake of Heaven*. Rabbi Sacks is the Chief Rabbi of the British Commonwealth. He has written many books and is one of the leading proponents of Orthodox Judaism. His *For the Sake of Heaven* as well other books discuss his program of "inclusivist" as opposed to "pluralist" thought (non-orthodox Jews are included as Jews, but their Judaism is in error). His *Faith in the Future* and *One People* also address major themes of thought and belief in contemporary Jewish culture.

Joseph Soloveitchik, *Halakhic Man*. Soloveitchik was known as "the rav", a title expressing his preeminence as a teacher of Orthodox Judaism. Anything written by him reflects the depth of his thought as he combines traditional orthodoxy with his worldly learning.

Daniel Syme, *Finding God* (UAHC paperback). "God-talk" by outstanding Jewish thinkers through the ages, for a teenaged and adult audience seeking Jewish responses to questions about God.

Herman Wouk, *This is my God* (Fontana paperback). Very accessible introduction to Jewish beliefs and practices, by an Orthodox Jew who is also a leading novelist.

## **JEWISH RITUALS LIFE CYCLE and FESTIVALS:**

Blue Greenberg, *How to Run a Traditional Jewish Household*. An excellent resource from one of the eminent women thinkers of Judaism that infuses spiritual significance into practical insight about home, daily and festival ritual.

Irving Greenberg, *The Jewish Way: Living the Holidays* (Summit Books). Blu's husband has a more philosophical approach. The most exciting modern commentary on the Jewish festivals, with an emphasis on their meaning today rather than how to do them.

Louis Jacobs, *The Book of Jewish Practice* (Behrman House paperback). A companion volume to his *The Book of Jewish Belief*, focussing on our obligations as Jews (*mitzvot*) and customs.

Isaac Klein, *A Guide to Jewish Religious Practice*. Perhaps the best one volume book that details how to live Jewishly in home and in synagogue from a leading rabbi of the Conservative movement.

Alfred Kolatch, *The Jewish Home Advisor* is an Orthodox sourcebook for details of home practice.

Lydia Kukoff, *Choosing Judaism*. An introduction to the process of conversion to (Progressive) Judaism, by a proselyte.

Maurice Lamm, *The Jewish Way in Love and Marriage*. A leading orthodox thinker presents the basic traditions about marriage. *The Jewish Way in Death and Mourning* is similarly an excellent presentation of the basic laws and traditions for that time and *Becoming a Jew* for conversion.

Dalia Hardof Renberg, *The Complete Family Guide to the Jewish Holidays* (Robson Books). Background to the festivals, activities for the children, recipes, etc.

Evelyn Rose, *The Complete International Jewish Cookbook*. Valuable not only for its recipes but also as an introduction and guide to all aspects of Judaism related to food (e.g., the festivals, kashrut, etc.)

Richard Siegel, Michael and Sharon Strassfeld, *The First Jewish Catalog* (Jewish Publication Society paperback). Now a Jewish "New Age" classic; a lively guide to Jewish practices, aimed at those who want to start from scratch, filled with illustrations, wit and wisdom. There are also a *Second* and a *Third Catalog*, with essays and resources on many topics which would interest readers today. Very American in its approach, it also provides historical perspective on the rise of Jewish renewal.

Michael Strassfeld, *The Jewish Holidays*. An outstanding, if quite demanding, commentary to the Jewish festivals and holydays, with marvelous contributions by other rabbis enhancing Strassfeld's text.

Daniel Syme, *The Jewish Home*. A fine overview of Jewish practice as found in Progressive Jewish homes.

Leo Trepp, *The Complete Book of Jewish Observance* (Behrman House hardback). A solid, well-written and balanced review of all areas of Jewish practice, which though Orthodox in orientation takes into account the wide variations in contemporary Jewish attitudes.

Arthur Waskow, *Seasons of our Joy*. One of the founding teachers of the Jewish renewal movement, Waskow provides spiritual insight into the festivals, connecting their celebration with the environment in which they are based.

## **HISTORY OF THE JEWISH PEOPLE (INCLUDING SHOAH, ISRAEL and MOVEMENTS):**

Joan Comay, *The World's Greatest Story*. An accessible and trustworthy guidebook through the Bible.

Abba Eban, *My People* (Vols. 1 & 2). A very readable introduction to Jewish History.

Abba Eban, *Heritage: Civilization and the Jews*, (Wiedenfled & Nicolson). This is the book that makes every Jew proud to be Jewish; beautifully illustrated.

Amos Elon, *The Israelis: Founders and Sons* (Penguin paperback). An outstanding, clearly written introduction to the making of modern Israel.

Anne Frank, *The Diary*. Must be read.

Martin Gilbert, *The Holocaust: The Jewish Tragedy* (Collins paperback). A now standard history of the Shoah, or Holocaust, which juxtaposes careful historical record with first-hand accounts to create a remarkably powerful portrait of this traumatic period.

Martin Gilbert, *Jewish History Atlas* (Wiedenfled & Nicolson paperback). Using maps with lots of information boxes scattered around them, this "Atlas" is the most painless way to learn about Jewish history, a great achievement.

Neil Gillman, *Conservative Judaism*. An accessible discussion of the development of the movement.

Paul Johnson, *A History of the Jews*. An outstanding review of Jewish history by the Catholic historian, who has also written a companion history of Christianity.

Michael Meyer, *Responses to Modernity*. A great scholarly analysis of the impact of modernity on Judaism and the development of the various streams in Judaism.

Chaim Potok, *Wanderings*. A coffee table presentation of the Jewish experience, especially under the theme of Diaspora, or the spread of the Jewish people around the world.

Anne Frank, *The Diary*. Must be read.

Seymour Rossel, *Israel: Covenant People, Covenant Land* (UAHC paperback). One of the best books on this topic for teenage readers, but also a good introduction for adults, dealing with our relationship to the Jewish people and the Land of Israel.

Robert Seltzer *Jewish People, Jewish Thought*. The most challenging and thorough intellectual history of the Jewish people, it contains a lifetime of study.

Hannah Senesh, *Her Life and Diary* (Schocken paperback). An extremely moving account of the life and thoughts of this Jewish heroine, who undertook espionage work during World War II.

## PRAYER, MYSTICISM AND SPIRITUALITY

David A. Cooper, *God is a Verb*. A contemporary thinker and rabbi of Jewish renewal presents a practical guide to Jewish mysticism – providing an easy entry into the tradition as well as meditative practices.

Chayim Donin, *To Pray as a Jew*. Donin is an orthodox rabbi and this presents a standard orthodox approach to prayer.

Reuven Hammer, *Entering Jewish Prayer*. Hammer, a conservative rabbi, presents a meaningful overview of the history and relevance of the siddur and prayers therein.

Moshe Idel, *Kabbalah: A New Perspective*. Idel is the new “scholar on the block” and this is his intellectual response to the work of Gershon Scholem.

Aryeh Kaplan, *Meditation and Kabbalah*. Kaplan was one of the great teachers of the Jewish traditions regarding Jewish meditation, mysticism and kabbalah. All of his books are excellent resources. *The Bahir* and *Sefer Yetzirah*, are his translations of primary sources.

Lawrence Kushner, *Honey from the Rock*. Lawrence Kushner is probably the foremost Progressive rabbi who presents a spiritual approach to Judaism in his many books which include as well *The River of Light*, *The book of Letters* and *The Book of Words*.

Daniel C. Matt. *The Essential Kabbalah*, presents “the heart of Jewish mysticism” from a renowned author about the topic.

Gershom Scholem, *Kabbalah*. Scholem has been considered the greatest 20<sup>th</sup> century historian of the kabbalah. All his books, like Idel’s, are presented from the perspective of scholarly analysis.

David Sheinkin, *Path of the Kabbalah*. An excellent introduction into the origins, history, principles, symbolism and language of Jewish mysticism.