

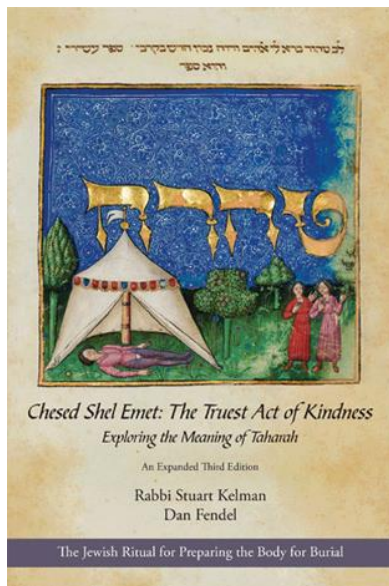


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Year in review: Some of the best Jewish books

by rabbi jack riemer, jns.org

The much-debated Pew Research Center survey has ignited fears that the Jewish community is in big trouble these days, but you wouldn't know it from the number of Jewish books that keep hitting the shelves. Here are nine of the new Jewish titles I have enjoyed and learned from this year.



“Chesed Shel Emet: The Truest Act of Kindness”

by Rabbi Stuart Kelman and Dan Fendel

(EKS, 93 pages)

This book will probably not make the best-seller list, but it is a helpful gateway to understanding the Jewish way of death and mourning. Most people have no idea what a chevra kadisha (burial society) does, what prayers its members say, or what these prayers mean. In this book, the Bay Area authors

go through the rituals step by step and provide clear and simple commentary for them. This book is for all those who seek the wisdom that Judaism offers in times of mourning.

“Like Dreamers: The Story of the Israeli Paratroopers Who Reunited Jerusalem and Divided a Nation”

by Yossi Klein Halevi

(HarperCollins, 575 pages)

Yossi Klein Halevi explains how Israel has changed since the Six-Day War, both for good and for bad, by telling the stories of seven of the soldiers who reunited Jerusalem. They helped win the war, but failed to win the peace.

This is a book that anyone who cares about Israel must read. It will not persuade you to change allegiances from dove to hawk, or vice versa, but it will help you to understand both perspectives — and everything between.

“The Liars’ Gospel”

by Naomi Alderman

(Little, Brown & Co., 309 pages)

To take what is probably the Western world’s best-known story and retell it in a whole new way — and make it convincing — takes imagination of the highest order. Naomi Alderman has pulled it off in this midrash on the New Testament.

In this novel about the life of Jesus, Alderman tells the story that we think we know through the eyes of four people — his mother, Mary; his friend Judas Iscariot; Calaphas, the Roman governor; and Barbaros, the rebel against Rome, whom the crowd chooses to save instead of Jesus. Each of them sees Jesus from a different point of view.

This novel enables us to understand Jesus in the light of the Jewish situation in his time, when Judea was a province of Rome on the edge of rebelling.

“Believing and Its Tensions”

by Rabbi Neil Gillman

(Jewish Lights, 110 pages)

Rabbi Neil Gillman takes on the issues of God, Torah, suffering and death in Jewish thought — and treats them well in just 100 pages. He makes use of the findings of anthropology and sociology to explain what it means to call God a myth, and probes the reality that lies beyond all myths. He argues that humanity is a partner in revelation and therefore plays a role in determining its authority. He deals with the central spiritual questions of how suffering and death fit into our religious faith. What is most impressive is that he does all this in language that the educated layman can understand.

“The Short, Strange Life of Herschel Grynszpan”

by Jonathan Kirsch

(Liveright, 352 pages)

His name has been forgotten, and what happened to him at the end is not known, but in his time, Herschel Grynszpan was a central figure. On Nov. 7, 1938, this 17-year-old Jewish refugee walked into the German Embassy in Paris and killed a low-level Nazi diplomat. He said that he did it out of love for his parents, who were being deported from Germany, and out of concern for his people. Two days later, Kristallnacht took place, supposedly a reaction to his deed. Was he an emotionally disturbed youngster, or the first resister to the Holocaust?

Jonathan Kirsch examines the possible explanations for Grynszpan's act and traces his whereabouts as he wanders from French prison to concentration camp to his final disappearance, never to be heard from again.

"The New Reform Judaism"

by Rabbi Dana Evan Kaplan

(U. of Nebraska Press, 360 pages)

Rabbi Dana Kaplan traces the ways in which Reform Judaism has met the challenges of living in a secular society and sets forth his view of what it must do moving forward. He argues that a tent so big it includes every point of view is too vague to win the souls of today's young people. Kaplan's book is a warning that, despite its expensive buildings and trained professional staffs, the Reform movement may not be able to sustain itself unless it can articulate a reason for its existence.

"But Where Is the Lamb?"

by James Goodman

(Schocken Books, 303 pages)

This book makes you feel like a guest at a truly eclectic symposium on the meaning of the biblical story of the Binding of Isaac, featuring Jews, Muslims and Christians; medievals and moderns; artists and novelists. It is amazing to see how the 19 sentences of the biblical account have given rise to so many different interpretations, and one leaves this book with the sense that the discussion is not nearly over yet.

"Broken Fragments"

edited by Douglas Kohn

(URJ Press, 215 pages)

In this anthology, subtitled "Jewish Experiences of Alzheimer's Disease Through Diagnosis, Adaptation, and Moving On," rabbis and therapists wrestle with difficult questions about the obligations, and the limits on the obligations, of people who are dealing with loved ones with dementia.

Can a man date other women if his wife no longer recognizes him? Are there guidelines for when the mind has died but the body has not? When is it right to move a person to an institution? Whether or

not you agree with the writers in this book, know that each of them writes out of painful personal experience.

“Relational Judaism”

by Ron Wolfson

(Jewish Lights, 262 pages)

People say Jewish organizational life is in big trouble, but no one seems to know exactly what to do about it. Ron Wolfson’s answer is to focus not so much on programming and physical infrastructure, but instead on building relationships. His thesis is that when people feel needed, they stay involved.

This is a book to be taken seriously by those who are concerned about the state of Jewish life.

<http://www.jweekly.com/article/full/70411/year-in-review-some-of-the-best-jewish-books/>