

# ✻ Book Reviews

Edited by  
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## A LIST OF JEWISH BOOKS EVERY JEWISH COMMUNAL PROFESSIONAL WOULD LIKE TO HAVE IN THEIR LIBRARY

The Jewish people have long been known as "the people of the Book." This is true not only because of our love for the study of Torah and the classical Jewish sources but also for our deep and abiding love for books of all kinds and our general love of reading.

The renewed commitment of the Jewish people to Jewish learning in recent years has led to the proliferation of Jewish books, published both by Jewish publishing houses and mainline publishers. With so many Jewish books being published, it is often difficult to determine what is essential for a basic Jewish library in your home.

You will find here one Conservative rabbi's selection of the essential and most important books of Jewish interest, chosen both for their enduring value and availability.

### A NOTE OF APPRECIATION

I am grateful to the Jewish Book Council of the National Jewish Welfare Board for allowing me to use the descriptions found in *The Jewish Book of Jewish Books* for some of the entries in this selected list. Readers seeking a complete resource guide to Jewish books are encouraged to turn to the *Book of Jewish Books* edited by Ruth S. Frank and William Wollheim. Descriptions marked with an (\*) asterisk are from the *Book of Jewish Books*. Those not so marked were written specifically for this publication.

I would like to thank Mrs. Marjorie Wyler of the Jewish Theological Seminary of America for asking me to expand my original list of "Top Twenty Jewish Books," which appeared in several American Jewish newspapers.

## I BASIC JUDAISM

Donin, Hayim Halevy

*To Be a Jew: A Guide to Jewish Observance in Contemporary Life.*\* Basic Books, 1972, \$19.95.

Written from an Orthodox viewpoint, *To Be a Jew* is one of the best introductions to Jewish living available. The writing is clear and to the point. There is information on how to observe and discussion of the ideas and traditions lying behind the observance.

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Frankel, Ellen & Betsy Platkin Teutsch  
*The Encyclopedia of Jewish Symbols.* Jason Aronson, 1992, 206 pp.

Covering an enormous range of subjects, this book presents clear and lucid explanations of Jewish symbols, personalities, places, concepts, motifs, and events central to Jewish life.

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Klein, Isaac

*A Guide to Jewish Religious Practice.*\* Jewish Theological Seminary; distributed by KTAV, 1979, \$20.

A detailed, comprehensive, and authoritative guide to Jewish practice, written from the perspective of Conservative Judaism. Like Orthodoxy, Conservative Judaism accepts the supremacy of *halachah* (Jewish law) in guiding our lives, but it argues that as historical circumstances change so must our interpretations of the law.

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Kolatch, Alfred J.  
*The Jewish Book of Why.*\* Jonathan David,  
 1981, \$14.95.  
*The Second Jewish Book of Why.*\*  
 Jonathan David, 1985, \$14.95.

The first *Book of Why* looks at the how and why of hundreds of Jewish practices — from why a glass is broken at weddings and why it takes ten men to form a *minyan* to why Yom Kippur really is not the most sacred day of the Jewish year. It describes Orthodox, Conservative, and Reform traditions, and concentrates on the basics of Jewish life — life cycle, events, holidays, prayer, dietary laws, and so on. The second book takes the same question-and-answer approach to more controversial issues, including the role of women, conversion, intermarriage, organ transplants, and birth control. Both books are fascinating reading. Suitable for younger readers.

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Prager, Dennis and Joseph Telushkin  
*Nine Questions People Ask About Judaism.*  
 Simon & Schuster, 1981. \$7.95 pb.

An excellent thematic introduction to Judaism. The authors ask and lucidly answer nine key questions that get to the heart of Judaism and religion in general.

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Telushkin, Joseph  
*Jewish Literacy.* William Morrow and Co.  
 New York, 1991. \$25.95.

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## II. CUSTOMS AND OBSERVANCE

Diamant, Anita  
*The Jewish Wedding Book.* Summit Books,  
 1985. \$16.95 hc, \$9.95 pb.

A new and fairly complete guide to planning a Jewish wedding.

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Diamant, Anita  
*The New Jewish Baby Book.* Jewish Lights  
 Publishing, \$15.95, 1993.

While not as thorough as *The Jewish Wedding Book*, it is still helpful in explaining the Jewish laws and customs of the birth of a child. Diamant presents the reader with alternatives for naming ceremonies. List of children's names are very selective and incomplete. For names see Alfred J. Kolatch, *The Complete Dictionary of English and Hebrew Names.*

»» ««

Greenberg, Blu  
*How to Run a Traditional Jewish Household.*\* Simon & Schuster, 1984, \$19.95.

Written with warmth, humor, and a common-sense awareness of the difficulties of living in a world not geared to the needs of Orthodox Jews, this is a valuable guide for people who wish to run their home in accordance with Orthodox practice. Greenberg explains every detail of Jewish living in a direct and anecdotal style, drawing on her own life and the experiences of her family.

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Greenberg, Irving  
*The Jewish Way: Living the Holidays.*  
 Simon & Schuster Inc., 1993.

A penetrating explanation and analysis of the festivals and holidays of Judaism.

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*Index of the Decisions of the Committee on Jewish Law of the Conservative Movement.*  
The Rabbinical Assembly, New York.

**T**he brief basic decisions of Jewish law of the Conservative Movement from 1927-1993.

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Lamm, Maurice  
*The Jewish Way in Death and Mourning.*  
Jonathan David, 1981, \$9.95.

**A**n excellent introduction to the traditional Jewish practices of death, burial and mourning. Explanation of laws and customs. Commentary on such prayers as the Kaddish.

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Olitzky, Kerry M. and Ronald H. Isaacs  
*The How To Handbook for Jewish Living.*  
KTAV Publishing House, 1993.

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Strassfeld, Michael  
*The Jewish Holidays: A Guide and Commentary.\** Illustrated by Betsy Platkin Teusch. Harper & Row, 1985, \$24.95 hc, \$16.95 pb.

**F**or each holiday, Strassfeld offers an introduction, a description of its rituals and customs, an exploration of its contemporary application and meaning, and a discussion of its key themes and the questions it raises. Using something like the talmudic format of marginal commentaries, Strassfeld has added observations by five modern Jewish thinker — Arnold Eisen, Everett Gendler, Arthur Green, Edward L. Greenstein, and Zalman Schachter-Shalomi.

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### III. CLASSIC JEWISH SOURCES/ JEWISH THOUGHT

Berg, Dr. Philip S.  
*Kabbalah for the Layman.* Research Center for Kabbalah, 200 Park Ave. South, NYC 10017. \$10.95 ea.

**A** very good introduction to the Kabbalah. Now in three volumes.

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Cohen, Arthur A. and Paul Mendes-Flohr  
*Contemporary Jewish Religious Thought.*  
The Free Press, 1987.

**O**ne hundred forty original essays on the fundamental concepts, movements, and beliefs in historical and contemporary Jewish thought.

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Goldin, Judah  
*The Living Talmud* (translation and commentary on Ethics). New American Library, \$3.95.

**A**n excellent translation with a brief introductory essay and selected traditional commentaries.

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Holtz, Barry W., ed.  
*Back to the Sources: Reading the Classic Jewish Texts.\** Summit Books, 1984, \$19.95.

**T**his collection is almost indispensable for anyone pursuing a course of self-study in the Jewish classics. Included are a series of essays by experts in the field, not just telling about the texts but also explaining how to study them. The eight sections include Bible, Talmud, *midrash*, medieval Bible commentaries, medieval philosophy,

*Kabbalah*, the Hasidic masters, and prayer and the prayer book. Each area is described in terms of its history, perspective, and significance. Among the contributors are Arthur Green, Alan Mintz, and Edward L. Greenstein. Each chapter is followed by a "Where to Go from Here" bibliography with advice for further study.

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Jacobs, Louis  
*A Jewish Theology*. Behrman House, 1973, \$12.95.

**A** dry but thorough systematic presentation of the main themes and topics of Jewish theology. Topics include Jewish ethics, sin and repentance, the chosen people, Messiah, and the Hereafter.

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Jacobs, Louis  
*The Book on Jewish Values*. Rossel Books, 1983.

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Steinsaltz, Aldin  
*The Essential Talmud*. \* Translated from the Hebrew by Chaya Galai. Basic Books, 1977, \$15 hc, \$7.95 pb.

**T**he best introduction to the Talmud available. Steinsaltz is one of Israel's foremost scholars. He writes with unusual clarity and with enormous learning. Here, he covers the history of the Talmud, its structure and content, and its methods and modes of thought. This book is accessible even to beginners, but never condescends or oversimplifies.

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#### IV. JEWISH HISTORY

Davidowicz, Lucy S.  
*War Against the Jews*. \* Holt, Rinehart & Winston. \$22.95.

**T**his is the best single-volume history of the Holocaust. Davidowicz deals with these main questions. How was it possible for a modern state to carry out the systematic murder of a people for no reason other than that they were Jewish? And how could the world stand by without halting this destruction?

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Feingold, Henry L.  
*Zion in America: The Jewish Experience from Colonial Times to the Present*. \* Hippocrene Books, 1981, \$10.95 pb.

**T**his survey of American Jewish history is concise and clear, emphasizing the broad sweep of events rather than concentrating on details. Feingold sees the American Jewish community as being unique among American ethnic groups in the extent to which it has preserved its sense of group identity.

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Hertzberg, Arthur  
*The Zionist Idea: A Historical Analysis and Reader*. \* Greenwood Press, reprint of 1959 edition, \$23.50 hc; Atheneum, \$7.95 pb.

**A** combination of course book and analysis, this 600-page (plus) volume presents the development of Zionist thought from its origins in the eighteenth century up to the works of Ben-Gurion, and reflects all shades of Zionist opinion. Hertzberg's lengthy introduction provides an excellent survey of the material.

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Prager, Dennis and Joseph Telushkin  
*Why the Jews?*. Touchstone, Simon & Schuster. \$9.95 pb.

An important analysis of anti-Semitism and hatred of Jews and Judaism throughout world history.

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Sachar, Howard M.  
*A History of Israel: From the Rise of Zionism to Our Time*. \* Knopf, 1979, \$14.95.

This history of Israel is notable for its erudition and its constant awareness of the larger context in which events took place. It covers politics, cultural history, the interplay between Israel and world Jewry, and the role of Israel in world affairs.

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Schwarz, Leo, W., ed.  
*Great Ages and Ideas of the Jewish People*. \* Modern Library/Random House, 1956, \$7.95.

The contributors to this book are all first-rate historians. Included are Salo W. Baron, Gerson D. Cohen, Abraham S. Halkin, Yehezkel Kaufmann, Ralph Marcus, and Cecil Roth. Kaufmann's section on the "Biblical Age" is outstanding although demanding, and of all the one-volume historical surveys, this one covers that period most thoroughly.

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Silberman, Charles  
*A Certain People: American Jews and their Lives Today*. \* Summit Books, 1985, \$19.95.

A study of the current state of American Jewry that is glowingly optimistic in its findings. Silberman reports that Jews are secure in America, that anti-Semitism is not a significant factor in their lives, and that all aspects of American society are open to them. Some have felt that his optimism is superficial, that he makes the mistake of seeing good external conditions and ignoring the inner content of American Jewish life.

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### V. JEWISH LITERATURE

Ausubel, Nathan, ed.  
*A Treasury of Jewish Folklore*. \* Crown, 1948, \$10.95.

Hundreds of stories, proverbs, riddles, tales, and songs from Jewish tradition telling of wise men and fools, demons and angels, scholars, schlemiels, rabbis, merchants, doctors, matchmakers, and misers. Truly, this book is a treasury — and a bargain also. Ausubel's *Treasury of Jewish Poetry* (Crown, 1957) is out of print but worth looking for.

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Bellow, Saul  
*Great Jewish Stories*. \* Laurel/Dell, 1985, \$4.95 pb.

Too bad there isn't a hardcover edition of this anthology — it's the best collection of Jewish stories available, and a more permanent version would be welcome. Bellow has written a short introduction, but it's his selection of stories that makes this book shine. The stories aren't just by Jewish writers; they all deal with Jewish life and the Jewish view of the world.

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Howe, Irving, and Eliezer Greenberg, eds. *A Treasury of Yiddish Stories*.\* Schocken Books, 1973, \$11.95 pb.

Arranged into such thematic sections as "Portrait of a World," "Jewish Children," and "New Worlds," this anthology includes stories by Sholom Aleichem, I.L. Peretz, I.J. Singer, and I.B. Singer, among others. An introduction on the culture of Eastern Europe discusses the major themes and most important writers.

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Howe, Irving and Ruth R. Wisse *The Best of Sholom Aleichem*. Jason Aronson Inc., 1989.

The best collection of Sholom Aleichem's work.

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**VI. BIBLE**

*Tanakh (The Holy Scriptures)*. Jewish Publication Society, 1985, \$23.95.

A new one-volume English translation of the Hebrew Bible. Every home should have it.

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*The Torah*. Union of American Hebrew Congregations, 1981, W. Gunther Plant and Bernard Bamberger, editors.

Reform Movement's edition of Five Books of Moses with introductions to (1) each of the five books, (2) selected themes and topics, and (3) ancient Near Eastern society. Valuable notes, references and commentaries on specific verses as well as general themes of the Torah.

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*The JPS Torah Commentary*. Jewish Publication Society, 1989-1995. Five volumes. \$50 per volume.

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**VII. AMERICAN JEWISH HISTORY/  
JEWISH COMMUNAL HISTORY**

Bayme, Steven, ed. *Facing the Future: Essays on Contemporary Jewish Life*. New York: American Jewish Committee, 1989.

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Cohen, Steven M. *American Modernity and Jewish Identity*. New York: Tavistock Publications, 1983.

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Davidowicz, Lucy S. *On Equal Terms: Jews in America, 1881-1981*. New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1982.

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Elazar, Daniel *Community and Policy: The Organizational Dynamics of American Jewry*. Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 1976.

A classic study on Jewish communal history and community building.

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**VIII. GENERAL REFERENCES**

Feldman, David *Health and Medicine in the Jewish Tradition*. Crossroad Publishing Co., 1986. \$14.95.

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Greenberg, Sidney  
*Light from Jewish Lamps*. Jason Aronson,  
1986. \$30.00.

A valuable, if somewhat dated, anthology of Jewish thoughts on the ideals and basic concepts of Judaism.

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Klagsbrun, Francine  
*Voices of Wisdom: Jewish Ideals and Ethics for Everyday Living*. Partheon Books, 1980.

One of the finest Jewish anthologies ever assembled. A valuable resource on ba-

sic Jewish ethics and wisdom. I use this volume all the time.

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Linzer, Norman  
*The Jewish Family*. Human Sciences Press, 1984.

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Meier, Rabbi Levi  
*Jewish Values in Health and Medicine*. University Press of America, 1991. \$17.00.

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