

## A 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 four groups: Jewish knowledge and beliefs, Jewish rituals (Shabbat, festivals, home and synagogue activities), the history of the Jewish people and novels and folklore.

Books marked with an asterisk \* are available for purchase at TBI.

There are three 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 \*), and an inexpensive edition of the *Haggadah* for Pesach (for example, *The Family Haggadah* \* produced by the Australasian Union for Progressive Judaism, with accompanying CD and cookbook; you'll need enough copies for everyone at the Seder table).

### JEWISH KNOWLEDGE & BELIEFS:

\*Wayne Dosick, *Living Judaism*. A complete guide to Jewish beliefs, practices and traditions, used as the textbook for the VUPJ "Introduction to Judaism" course.

\*Mark Washofsky, *Jewish Living: a Guide to Contemporary Reform Practice* (URJ Press). Provides Progressive responses to many of the difficult questions that face Judaism today in the areas of home and synagogue practice, Shabbat and festival observance, business and medical ethics, social justice and interfaith issues, and much more.

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

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

\*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.

Harold S. Kushner, *To Life! An introduction to Jewish life and values by the author of When Bad Things Happen to Good People*. Out of print, but still available on line, etc.

\*Lydia Kukoff, *Choosing Judaism*. An introduction to the process of conversion to (Progressive) Judaism, written by a 'Jew by choice'.

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*. The two volumes are sold as a boxed set, e.g., at Sunflower Bookshop and other bookstores.

Bradley Shavit Artson, *The Bedside Torah* (Contemporary Books, 2001). Torah study is a crucial part of the Jewish experience, and this is an entertaining, insightful guide to the major themes of Torah, with brief and incisive interpretations organised according to the weekly portion (*parashah*). Available at Sunflower Bookstore and other bookstores.

\*Harvey Fields, *A Torah Commentary for our Times* (URJ Press, 3 volumes in paperback). An outstanding modern commentary on the Torah, very accessible and yet richly erudite. Fields identifies 2 or 3 themes from each weekly portion which he then explores in depth by weaving together comments that are drawn from rabbis and scholars across the centuries. Great for personal learning.

Benjamin Blech, *Idiot's Guide to Understanding Judaism*. If you can get past the title, it's an excellent introduction to Jewish beliefs and practices. The companion volume, also by Blech, *Idiot's Guide to Jewish History*, is also recommended.

George Robinson, *Essential Judaism* (Pocket Books). A very large and full compendium of Jewish beliefs and practices, with good reviews from students who have used it.

David Ariel, *What Do Jews Believe?* (Schocken paperback). Brief, very well written, by a young American rabbi and scholar.

Jonathan Sacks, *The Dignity of Difference* (Continuum paperback). Jonathan Sacks is a leading British rabbi and a prolific author. I've chosen this book because I believe it is his most important and original work on the place of Judaism in the modern world, though the themes of the book reach far beyond Jewish experience.

## **JEWISH RITUALS:**

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

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

Irving Greenberg, *The Jewish Way: Living the Holidays* (Summit Books). The most exciting modern commentary on the Jewish festivals, with an emphasis on their meaning today rather than how to do them.

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.

\*Richard Siegel, Michael and Sharon Strassfeld, *The First Jewish Catalog* (Jewish Publication Society paperback). This is 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.

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).

Claudia Roden, *The Book of Jewish Food* (oversized Penguin paperback). Again, a great cookbook and also a guide to Jewish life in the kitchen and home.

Jonathan D. Sarna, *A Time to Every Purpose: letters to a young Jew* (Basic Books, 2008). The newest book to appear on the Jewish festivals, by one of our most original historians. I haven't read it but it looks great. At Sunflower Bookstore.

## **HISTORY OF THE JEWISH PEOPLE:**

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

Abba Eban, *Heritage: Civilization and the Jews*, (Wiedefeld & Nicolson). This is one of those books that should make every Jew proud to be Jewish; beautifully illustrated and filled with insights. Out of print but probably available over the internet.

Martin Gilbert, *Atlas of Jewish History* (Routledge). A modern classic, updated many times. Using maps with lots of information boxes scattered around them, this "Atlas" is a painless way to learn about Jewish history, a great achievement. At Sunflower Bookstore and elsewhere.

Paul Johnson, *A History of the Jews*. An outstanding summary of Jewish history by the Catholic historian who has also written a companion history of Christianity. Johnson is very sympathetic and sensitive to the currents of Jewish history.

Howard Sachar, *The Course of Modern Jewish History* (Vintage). For those who are keenly interested in the history of the Jewish people in the modern period, this large book has it all. It is a companion to Sachar's histories of Zionism, also highly recommended.

Joan Comay, *The World's Greatest Story*. Another modern classic, an accessible and trustworthy guidebook to the stories of the Hebrew Bible. At Borders and other bookstores.

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

Martin Gilbert, *The Holocaust: The Jewish Tragedy* (Collins paperback). A brilliant 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. Gilbert has written several other accounts of specific events relating to the Holocaust, including most recently an account of *Kristallnacht*, the infamous "night of broken glass" in Germany which is commemorated on 9<sup>th</sup> November every year.

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.

Anne Frank, *The Diary*. Still the most famous piece of Holocaust literature. A 'must' read. There are many editions, and it is always stocked at Borders.

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.

## **NOVELS & FOLKLORE:**

Leo Rosten, *The Joys of Yiddish* (Penguin paperback). An indispensable source of Jewish joy and wisdom. In and out of print but available on-line.

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

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

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. He has also written on Chasidic themes including *Souls on Fire* (Penguin paperback), a striking collection of Chasidic legends and stories.

Andre Schwarz-Bart, *The Last of the Just*. One of the earliest Holocaust novels to appear and still one of the greatest. Continually reprinted. Approaches the *Shoah* through the ancient Jewish legend of the "36 Righteous" who keep the world going even in the midst of great evil.

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*.

Leon Uris, *Exodus*. A novel dealing with the founding of the State of Israel. The movie stars Paul Newman. Uris also wrote *Mila 18*, which deals with the Warsaw Ghetto uprising. Very readable, gripping novels.

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*. My favourite Potok book is *My Name is Asher Lev*, which deals with the clash between aesthetic and religious values in an ultra-Orthodox Jewish household.

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. The series may be out of print but available on-line.

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. As the archeologists dig through a *tel* (mound), they unearth stories from the past. This novel is 'the source' of many people's knowledge of Jewish history. A recent best-seller, based on a similar structure but using the creation of a famous *Haggadah* as the focus for a series of historical tales, is Geraldine Brooks, *People of the Book* (Fourth Estate paperback, 2008), also recommended.

**BOOKSTORES WORTH VISITING:**

- Sunflower Bookstore - Glenhuntly Road, Elsternwick (opposite Coles Supermarket)  
Borders Bookstores - The Jam Factory, Chapel Street; Chadstone Shopping Centre  
Golds Bookstore - William Street, St. Kilda (off Carlisle Street)

**SOME HELPFUL WEBSITES**

- [www.myjewishlearning.com](http://www.myjewishlearning.com) excellent learning site  
[www.upj.org.au](http://www.upj.org.au) website of the Union for Progressive Judaism (Australasia)  
[www.urj.org.au](http://www.urj.org.au) website for the Union for Reform Judaism (USA)

Also, you are encouraged to subscribe to *ProjeNews*, the email service run by the UPJ. This email service sends out weekly Torah commentaries prepared by rabbis and educators in Australia, New Zealand and Asia, media articles on topics relating to Israel and to Progressive Judaism, and news of interest to our region. For a free subscription, please contact Ian Samuel, Tel:(03)95636336, Mobile:0416 044881 or Email: [ian@samuel.net.au](mailto:ian@samuel.net.au)

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