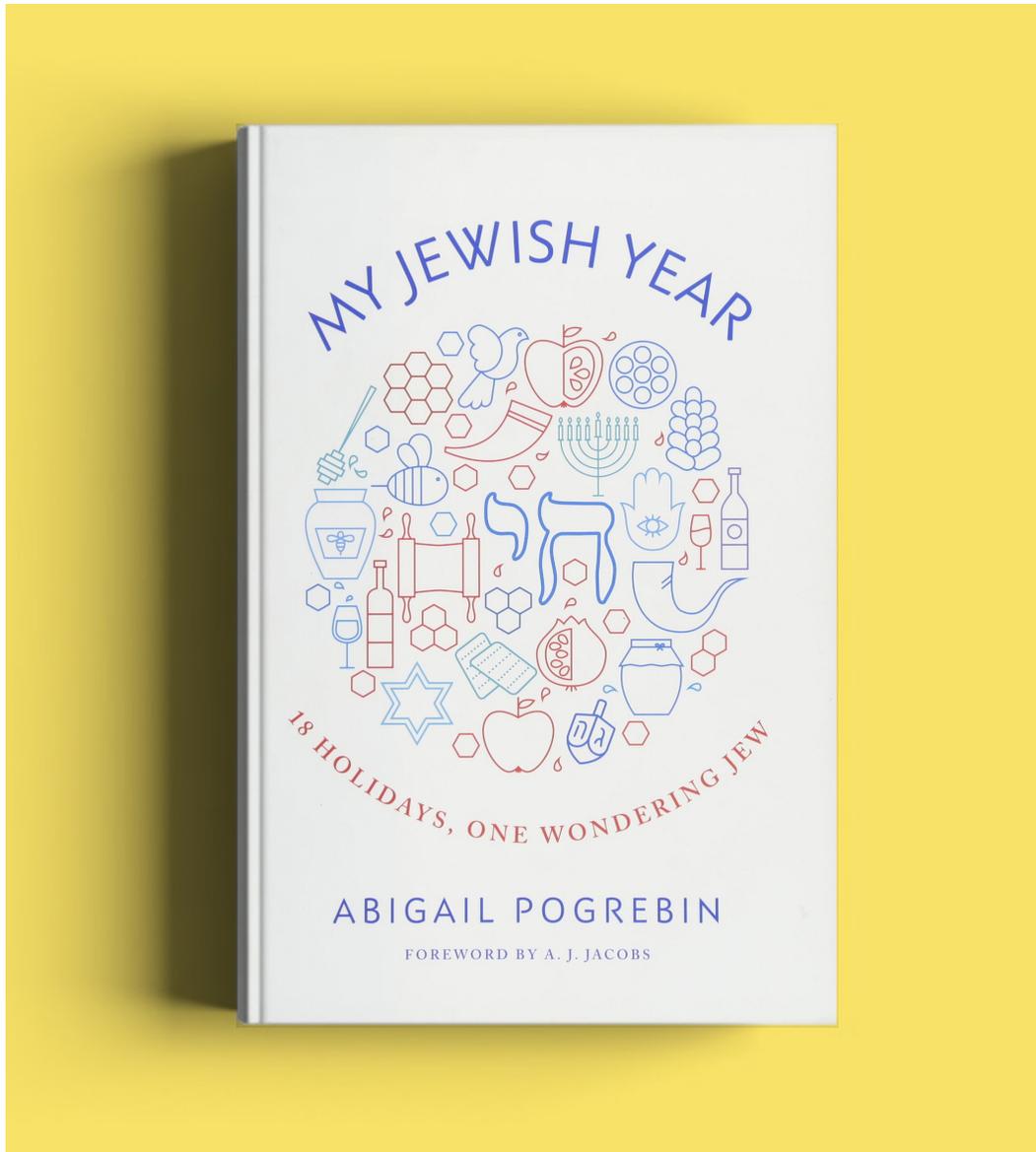


# JBC Book Clubs Discussion Guide

Created in partnership with Fig Tree Books,  
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[Jewishbookcouncil.org](http://Jewishbookcouncil.org)



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# Jewish Identity in America Today

“The much-dissected Pew Research Center study of 2013 revealed that most Jews do not connect their identity to Judaism. I wanted to find out if it’s because we haven’t looked there.” —from the introduction to *My Jewish Year*, page 14

In 2013, the Pew Research Center released a report on the American Jewish community and Jewish life in America. This was more than a study of demographics — it was a report on the state of Jewish life in the United States. For many, it painted a dispiriting picture of the declining centrality of Judaism in the lives of American Jews.

In addition to charting a well-known rise in intermarriage (58%), the study asked participants to identify as Jews by religion or Jews of no religion. While the majority of Jews say that they are proud to be Jewish, 22% now consider themselves to be Jews of no religion (with 32% of Jewish Millennials questioned saying that they are Jews of no religion). The study showed that “62% say being Jewish is mainly a matter of ancestry and culture, while just 15% say it is mainly a matter of religion. Even among Jews by religion, more than half (55%) say being Jewish is mainly a matter of ancestry and culture” (“A Portrait of Jewish Americans: Overview Findings from a Pew Research Center Survey of U.S. Jews”, p. 8).

So if religion is no longer as essential to Jewish life, what does define what it means to be a Jew? According to the survey, for the majority of American Jews, leading a moral life, being intellectually curious, working for justice and equality, remembering the Holocaust, and having a sense of humor are the characteristics that are essential parts of personal Jewish identity. While these traits are significant parts of Jewish culture (and many are based in Jewish religion), as generations move forward, there is a question as to the transmission of this Jewish identity. In fact, according to the study, 67% of Jews

of no religion said that their children were not being raised Jewish.

Judaism has survived thousands of years being passed “from generation to generation.” It is now up to the current generations of Jews—both those of religion and of no religion—to find ways to create meaningful Jewish identities, so that there is something to pass on to the next generation.

## **Additional Information**

New York Times: [Poll Shows Major Shift in Identity of U.S. Jews](#)

Pew Research Center: [Chapter 3: Jewish Identity](#)

Pew Research Center: [A Closer Look at Jewish Identity in Israel and the U.S.](#)

Pew Research Center: [A Portrait of Jewish Americans](#)

# JBC Book Clubs

## Discussion Questions

1. While interviewing celebrities for her first book, *Stars of David*, Abigail realized that she hadn't asked herself the questions that she was asking others, a realization that helped bring about this book (p. 10). How would you answer her questions?
2. Which holiday did you enjoy reading about the most? Which one did you learn the most about? Is there something that you found in this book that you hope to bring into your own life?
3. The subtitle of the book is a play on the term "wandering Jew." What is the difference between being a wandering Jew and a wondering one? Do you think the author is more wondering or wandering? Are there ways in which either of these terms applies to you?
4. Was there a quote or an explanation from one of the rabbis that stayed with you? What did you highlight or note while reading? Which rabbi would you most want to learn with, and why?
5. Did you learn something that surprised you or was unexpected? Was there something that personalized a holiday for you in a new way or a new interpretation with which you connected? What was the most provocative idea that you read?
6. What was your initial reaction to the premise of this book? Did it change over the course of reading? Are you surprised by where the author ended up?
7. Pogrebin writes that her son's bris was the impetus for writing her first book, because she had a sense that she was just "checking the box" (p. 9). Are there things that you do "to check the box"?
8. Judith Shulevitz tells the author that "the doing comes first" (p. 138), causing Pogrebin to reflect, "Do it and you will feel it. That's another theme of this year." This sentiment is echoed by Rabbi Lauren Berkun who points out that the Israelites receive the Torah saying, "*na'aseh v'nishmah*", we will do and we will listen (p. 139). What do you think of this approach? Do you think action leads to engagement or just checking the box?
9. On page 99, Judaism is described as the "biggest book club in the world." Do you think that's an apt description? In what ways?
10. In his book, *God in Search of Man*, Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel says that, "A Jew is asked to take a leap of action rather than a leap of thought [or faith]." How do you think that statement applies to this book? Do you agree with it? Which parts of the book are leaps of action, which are leaps of thought, and which are leaps of faith?
11. During his interview, Leon Wieseltier says, "We have no right to allow our passivity to destroy this tradition that miraculously has made it across two thousand years of hardship right into our laps....Like it or not, we are stewards of something precious" (p. 10). Do you agree with this? Similarly, Abigail writes about her children's b'nai mitzvah, "This is about you and also beyond you. None of this lasts without you" (p. 13). What responsibility do individual Jews have to the larger community? How is this book a reflection of Wieseltier's statement?

# No-Bake Chocolate Chip Cheesecake Bites

The recipes here were selected to give your book club meeting a taste of the holidays in snack form.

## Ingredients

8 oz. room temperature cream cheese

1/4 cup room temperature butter

1 cup powdered sugar

1 tsp. vanilla

pinch of salt

1/2-3/4 cup mini chocolate chips

1/2 cup graham cracker crumbs

1. In a large (freezer-safe) bowl, beat the cream cheese, butter, vanilla and salt together until blended and creamy. Gradually add in sugar, and mix in. Add in chocolate chips and stir.

2. Freeze for 45 minutes to an hour, until the mixture is firm and can be shaped into balls.

3. When the batter is ready, line a cookie sheet with parchment or wax paper and place the graham cracker crumbs in a bowl. Scoop out balls of cheese mixture (size is up to you), and roll them in the graham cracker crumbs. Refrigerate until you are ready to serve.

# Matzah Brittle

## Ingredients

Sheets of matzah

1 cup of butter or margarine

1 cup brown sugar

2-3 cups of chocolate chips

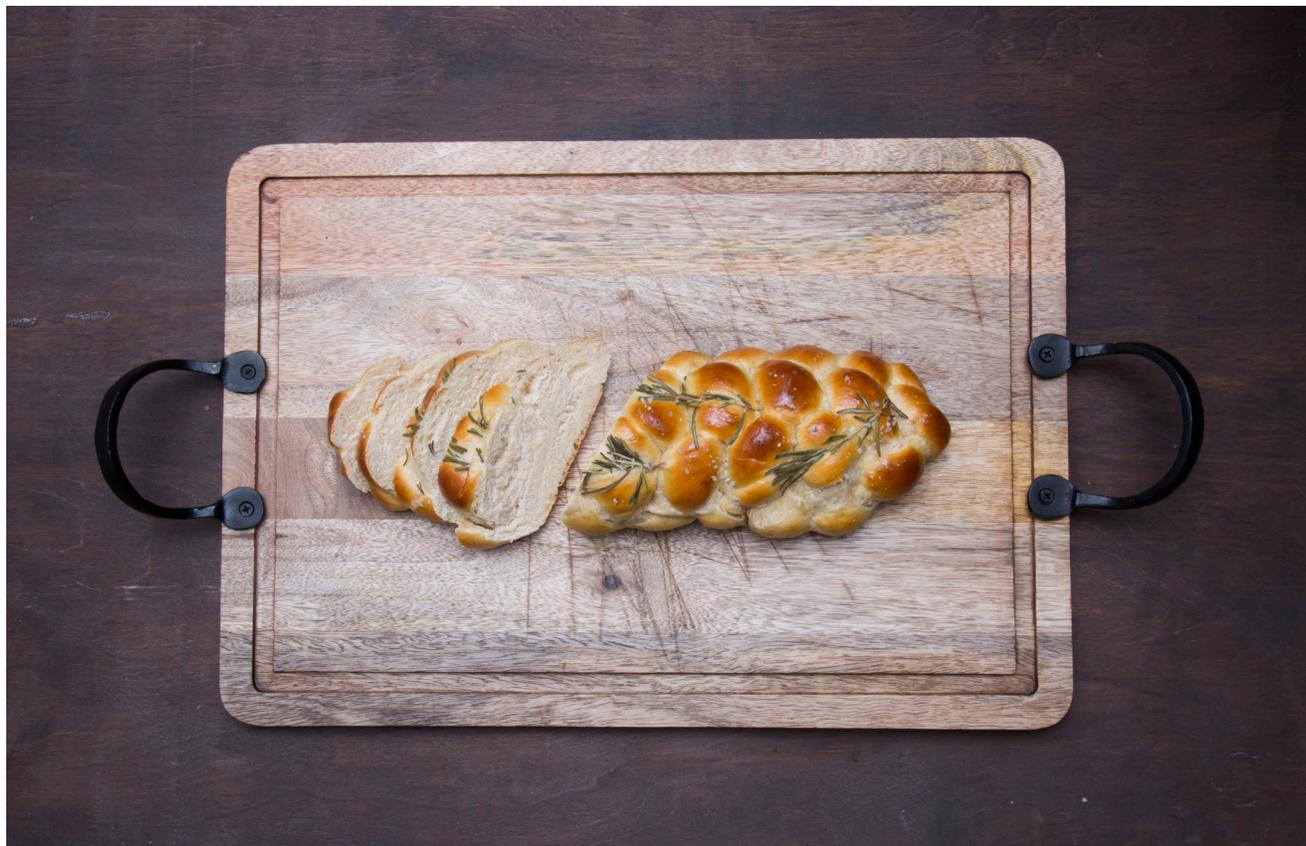
Optional: nuts, candied ginger, sea salt, chopped dried fruit, sprinkles

1. Preheat oven to 350 degrees F.
2. Cover a rimmed sheet pan with foil, and then lay matzah over the whole pan.
3. Melt margarine or butter in a small pot, and add the brown sugar. Bring to a boil for 1-2 minutes, stirring constantly, until sugar is melted. Pour the mixture over the matzah, pressing down on the matzah to make sure it gets coated.
4. Bake the matzah for 5-10 minutes, until the sugar mixture begins to bubble. Remove the pan from the oven and pour chocolate chips evenly over the matzah. Return the pan to the oven for 1-2 minutes, until chips are melted.
5. When chocolate has melted, take the pan out and spread chocolate in a layer over matzah. If using toppings, sprinkle them over the chocolate. Allow it to cool completely, then break the brittle into pieces and serve.

# Rosemary Garlic Challah

This recipe was created by Shannon Sarna, and appears in her book *Modern Jewish Baker: Challah, Babka, Bagels & More* (Countryman Press, September 2017).

Yields two medium-sized loaves of challah



## Ingredients: For the Dough

1.5 tbsp. dry active yeast  
.5 tsp. sugar  
1.25 cups lukewarm water  
5 cups unbleached bread flour  
.5 cup plus 2 tbsp. sugar  
.25 cup vegetable or olive oil  
1 heaping tbsp. dried rosemary  
1 tbsp. jarred garlic in oil  
.5 tbsp. salt  
2 eggs

## Ingredients: For the Topping

2 egg yolks + 1 tsp. water  
2 tsp. dried rosemary or a few sprigs of fresh rosemary, left intact  
1 tsp. thick sea salt

Photo credit: Sage McAvoy

1. In a small bowl place yeast, 1 tsp sugar and luke-warm water. Stir gently to mix. Allow to sit around 5-10 minutes, until it becomes foamy on top.
2. In a large bowl or stand mixer fitted with whisk attachment, mix together 1 1/2 cups flour, sugar, dried rosemary, garlic and salt. After the water-yeast mixture has become foamy, add to flour mixture along with oil. Mix thoroughly.
3. Add another 1.5 cups of flour and 2 eggs until smooth. Switch to the dough hook attachment if you are using a stand mixer. Add remaining flour 1 cup at a time and let the mixer run until the dough is smooth and sticks just slightly. If not using a mixer, use a wooden spoon until dough starts to come together and then dump out onto a floured work surface. Knead using the heel of your hand until dough is lump-free. Depending on humidity, time of year and the flour you use, you may need slightly more or less flour. You can add 1 tbsp. at a time until desired consistency.
4. Place dough in a greased bowl and cover with hot, damp towel. Allow to rise 3 hours.
5. Remove dough from bowl, punch down and divide into two. Braid each section into desired shape challah.
6. Allow challah to rise another 30-45 minutes.
7. Preheat oven to 375 degrees.
8. Beat two egg yolks with 1 tsp water in a small bowl. (You can also use just one egg beaten.) Using a pastry brush, glaze the challah with two coatings of egg wash.
9. If using fresh rosemary sprigs, run them under cold water briefly and then pat dry gently. Place rosemary sprigs or dried rosemary on top. Sprinkle with sea salt.
10. Bake for 25 minutes or until just golden on top and challah feels light and hollow.
11. Allow to cool on a wire baking rack until ready to serve. .

# Tu B'Shvat Salad

Look for all seven of the species associated with the Land of Israel (p. 147), plus nuts!

Adapted from [GoBarley.com](http://GoBarley.com)  
Makes approximately 8 servings

## Ingredients

1/2 large red onion, thinly sliced  
2 tbsp. red wine vinegar  
2 tsp. sumac  
3/4 cup pearl barley  
1/2 cup orange juice  
2 cups water  
1/2 cup cooked wheat berries  
1/2 cup slivered dried dates  
1/4 cup chopped dried figs  
1/2 cup pomegranate seeds  
1/4 cup shelled, roasted, unsalted pistachios  
1/2 cup red grapes, halved  
1/4 cup crumbled feta cheese (optional)  
1/4 cup chopped fresh cilantro  
olive oil  
salt and pepper

## Dressing

1/2 cup orange juice  
2 tbsp. olive oil  
1 tsp. grated ginger  
1/2 tsp. dried thyme  
pinch of cinnamon  
pinch of cayenne pepper

1. Preheat oven to 425 degrees F. Spread halved grapes on a pan and toss with 1-2 tbsp. olive oil, salt and pepper. Roast grapes for 20-25 minutes, then set aside.
2. In a medium pan, combine the barley, juice and water. Simmer over medium-low heat until barley is tender, about 40 minutes. Remove from heat, fluff the barley with a fork, and allow to cool.
3. While barley is cooking, combine the red onions, wine vinegar, sumac and 1/4 tsp. of kosher salt in a small bowl. Allow to sit for 15-20 minutes to pickle.
4. In a large bowl, combine dates, figs, pomegranate seeds, pistachios, roasted grapes, cooked wheat berries, feta cheese, cilantro, and pickled red onions. Stir in the barley.
5. In a separate bowl, whisk together the dressing ingredients. Pour the dressing over the salad, and stir to combine. Cover and refrigerate for 1 hour (or up to 24 hours) before serving.

# Post-Epilogue Q&A

with Abigail Pogrebin

**The epilogue is dated September, 2015 — if you wrote it now, would it be about the same? Would anything be different?**

The epilogue was actually significantly rewritten, or expanded, in August 2016, so it reflects a fairly up-to-date snapshot of where I landed Jewishly after this holiday immersion. On a more personal level, I would be writing today about the fact that my close friend, Julie, did indeed succumb to her cancer last March (a dramatization of the 17th of Tammuz teaching that we have no choice but to ride out the suffering to the finish line), that my mother-in-law has struggled with life alone, which brings home how often our holiday rituals point up who has companions and who does not. I'd be writing about my daughter being on the verge of college next fall and how the Jewish year looks to an almost-empty nester, how profound the idea of a "new year" — be it any of the four: Elul, Rosh Hashanah, Tu B'shevat or Passover — becomes when one's children are both out on their own.

The recent spike in anti-Semitic incidents would certainly be part of the epilogue if I were writing it today, because they have re-conjured Rabbi Yosef Blau's teaching about Asarah BeTevet - the 10 Tevet fast - namely that we should pay attention to the start of something bad instead of waiting for the clouds to become a full-blown tornado. I have also been reminded, of course, of how many times the holidays commemorate Jewish pain — be it Hanukkah, Purim, Passover, Yom HaShoah, or Tisha B'av — and I would likely have harkened, in the epilogue, to the fear that any thread of hate crimes could lead to more.

**Leon Wieseltier's quote from his interview started you off — is there a quote (or quotes) from the rabbis that you interviewed that has really stayed with you?**

Too many to list, but here are some of my favorites:

"Holiday rituals are ancient technologies that carry contemporary wisdom. Judaism works." – Rabbi David Ingber

"On Yom Kippur, it's all about, 'What have I done?' But on Sukkot it's, 'What can I do?'" – Rabbi Naomi Levy

"Some people today know exactly what that feels like — to know how it's going to end and have no choice but to wait it out. That's what I think 17 Tammuz is. It's the Jewish people nearing the end in Jerusalem. We were nearing the end and we had to wait it out." – Dr. Elana Stein Hain

"What do we hire a holiday to do for us? What is the yearning to which the holiday is a response?" – Rabbi Irwin Kula

"These holidays, I think, were always meant to take us out of the mundane. And they keep you ethically alert. We're just untrained in taking responsibility for creating something sacred in our lives. – Rabbi Peter J. Rubinstein

**Are there things that have come to mean more to you or have a different meaning in the time since they were written?**

Having repeated (since the first time I tried it) the Elul exercise of Cheshbon HaNefesh – accounting for the soul – I have found it to be startlingly focusing, moving, and important as an approach to atonement. My Jewish Year changed my High Holiday habit for good.

Shabbat has also taken on a different meaning because I've recommitted to be off email during Shabbat, in a way that is notably freeing. I also find this weekly holiday reminds me of whom I need to check on – who is struggling in my life, to whom do I owe a call or a visit.

The lessons and tensions around *sinat chinam* – baseless hatred — which I learned at Tisha B'av (the notion that Jews were punished by God for turning on each other instead of the real enemy) — has certainly reared its head again and again, not just because I keep seeing too many instances of Jew vs. Jew, but American vs. American. I'm struck by how easily we battle our own.

One harder revelation has been that it still isn't easy to walk into new holiday rituals without a more fluid command of Hebrew. I've come up against that dividing line more than a few times, in Jewish spaces in which there are well-versed worshippers adept at Hebrew, and despite all my deep research and learning, I still feel somewhat like an imposter.

**Would you recommend this experiment to other “wondering Jews” (possibly minus the writing part)?**

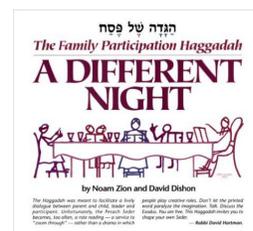
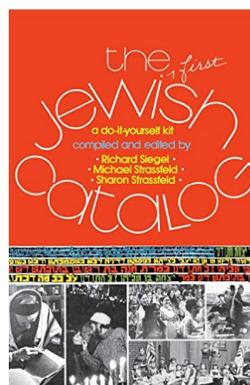
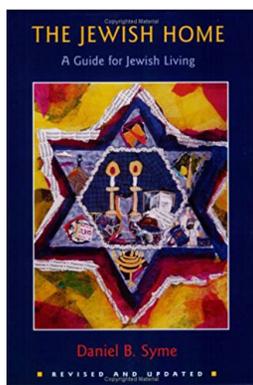
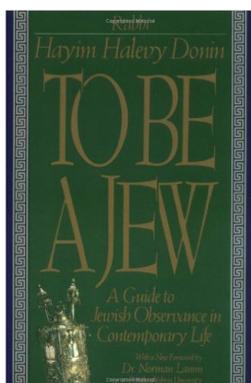
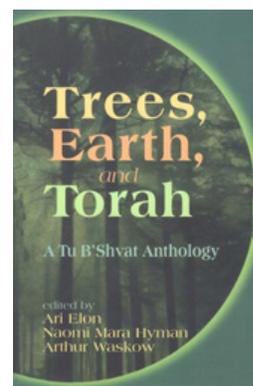
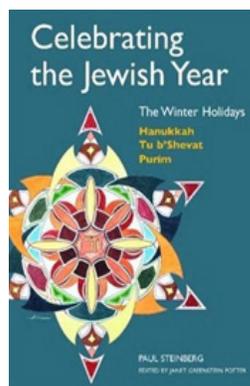
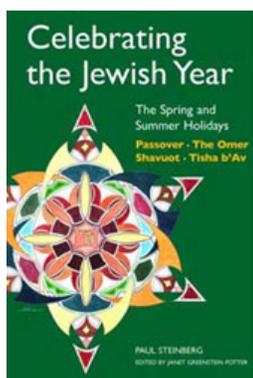
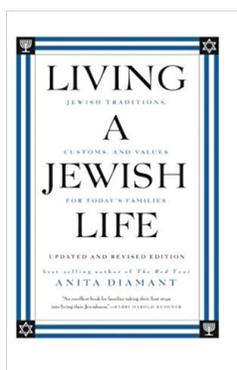
Abigail: I absolutely would recommend this project for any other “Wondering Jew,” because there are so many truly fascinating paths to follow for each holiday (just Google holiday programming in your neighborhood and see which synagogue or JCC has something planned). Every festival and fast delivers rich layers of meaning, which are guaranteed to speak to your current experience. Even if you don't take on the calendar in its entirety, adding just one or

two new holidays to your year will likely deepen your connection to a tradition that has endured, in part, because it remains relevant in every age.

# Recommended Reads for Your Own Jewish Year

*My Jewish Year* features many helpful appendices to help you navigate the book and the Jewish holidays. If you are interested in learning more on your own, look to the back of the book, particularly to the bibliography and web links.

Below are a few more books for those interested in exploring the Jewish year.



JBC Book Clubs, a program of Jewish Book Council, provides resources and support for book clubs interested in reading books of Jewish interest. On the Jewish Book Council website, find thousands of book reviews, discussion questions and discussion guides, thematic reading lists, and more. JBC Book Clubs is a one-stop shop to build and enhance your book club's conversations—let us guide you on your literary journey.

Jewish Book Council, with roots dating back to 1925, is the only nonprofit dedicated to the promotion of Jewish-interest literature. For nearly 70 years, we have supported and celebrated Jewish authors and books, and used literature to bring people together for meaningful discussions around Jewish life, identity, and culture.

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