

# JBC Book Clubs Discussion Guide

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# Contents:

Important Jewish Dates in <i>The Ruined House</i> .....	3
A Brief History of the Second Temple in Jerusalem ..	5
What is the Seder Avodah?.....	6
JBC Book Clubs Discussion Questions .....	7
Looking at a Page of Talmud.....	9
Recipes Inspired by <i>The Ruined House</i> .....	10
Visiting Scribe Essays by Ruby Namdar.....	12
Recommended Reads and Related Media .....	15
About Jewish Book Council.....	16

# Important Jewish Dates in The Ruined House

As the novel progresses, both the Hebrew and English dates are noted. This timeline marks the significant dates of the Jewish year that appear in the novel.

## **2 Tishrei (Second Day of Rosh Hashana)**

Andrew P. Cohen has already experienced a strange episode, being the only New Yorker who felt any shift on the day that the celestial spheres were visible. On Rosh Hashana, Andrew has a normal day, and is reminded of the holiday by passing a family on its way to *Tashlich*. (Page 23)

## **10 Tishrei (Yom Kippur)**

Andrew attends services with Rachel, and they listen to Abby Rosenthal's sermon on the *Seder Avodah*. Andrew cuts out early to go to a lecture with Ann Lee. (Page 33)

## **15 Tishrei (Sukkot)**

On the first day of Sukkot, there is a vision of blood running in the streets, and a giant warrior appearing on the horizon. (Page 46)

## **23 Tishrei (Simchat Torah)**

Andrew attends the Big River Church happening with Ann Lee. As he listens to the choir, he reflects on the changing seasons, the arrival of autumn, and passing time. (Page 47)

## **25 Kislev- 1 Tevet (Hanukkah)**

The first day of Hanukkah is a lovely day on the Upper West Side. Four days later, Yeats' poem "The Ballad of Moll Magee" suddenly comes to Andrew. The last day of Hanukkah finds Andrew and Ann Lee enjoying a vacation on Long Island. (Page 110-113)

## **15-16 Nisan (Passover)**

Instead of attending Linda's seder, Andrew hosts a dinner party, serving a leg of lamb to his guests. After the successful social evening is over, Andrew falls asleep quickly, only to awaken a short time later. He spends most of the night enchanted by a peaceful, glowing scene. At dawn, he ventures out and has visions of the desert with women dancing with tambourines. His reverie shatters, and he finds that he is, in fact, on a cold park bench. He returns home to find himself sick. After his illness lifts, he has a productive day, and discovers a mysterious, anonymous term paper on his desk. (Page 201-215)

## **4 Iyar (Yom Haatzmaut)**

Andrew wakes in the middle of the night to find the sheets that he and Ann Lee are sleeping on to be bloody. After an anguished, humiliating interaction, Andrew goes back to sleep only to have a vision of a village on the road to Bethlehem. (Page 227)

**17 Tammuz**  
**(Fast day - when the**  
**Romans breached**  
**the outer walls of**  
**Jerusalem)**

Andrew is experiencing frequent visions, and is no longer in control of his perceptions. He wakes from a nightmare of a young mother silently screaming while a baby's skull is split open. He continues to have the same nightmare through the night. (Page 420)

**9 Av**  
**(Tisha B'Av, a day of**  
**mourning/fasting**  
**when the Temple was**  
**destroyed)**

Andrew has been completely incapacitated by visions, and is numb, broken, and unstable. Rachel finds him in this state, and begins to care for him. (Page 498)

# A Brief History of the Second Temple

The second Temple stood in Jerusalem for 420 years, from 349 BCE until its destruction at the hands of the Romans in 70 C.E. During the time that it stood, the Temple was the focal point of life in Judea, and a symbol of God's covenant with the people. The Temple and its rituals were led by priests (*kohanim*), who were the custodians of the Temple itself and Jewish ritual observance. Highest among these was the Kohen Gadol, the high priest, who was the chief religious figure of the time.

Unlike in the time of the first Temple, much of the second Temple period was spent under foreign rule, by the Persians, Greeks and Romans. Also during this era, there was internal struggling amongst the Jews, and distinct factions emerged. The two main groups were the Sadducees and Pharisees: the Pharisees were led by the rabbis and believed in separating themselves from the secular world of the Romans while the Sadducees rejected the rabbinic leadership and were more likely to befriend the Roman rulers (the additional two factions were the Zealots—who later became the fighters at Masada—and the Sicarii). It is said that the reason the Second Temple eventually fell to the Romans was that the Jews were divided and prone to in-fighting and baseless hatred, rather than presenting a united front to their enemies.

With civil war brewing in Judea after the death of the Hasmonean queen Salome, the Romans took advantage of the divided loyalties to capture Jerusalem, led by Pompey. Jerusalem remained under siege from 63 C.E. until it fell and the Temple was destroyed seven years later.

Roman rule was oppressive and became increasingly so as the years went on, and, in 66 C.E., the Jews began to revolt against Roman rule. Over the course of the revolt, it is estimated that close to a fifth or a quarter of the Jewish population died.

Roman control of Jerusalem was handed over to Titus, and, just after Passover in 70 C.E., he launched an attack against the diminished population of Jerusalem. Despite battle fatigue and starvation, the Jews managed to hold Titus off for many weeks, until he finally breached the outer walls of Jerusalem on the 17th of Tammuz (which is now commemorated as a fast day). Titus' men entered Jerusalem and went house to house, burning and killing, until they reached the Temple. The Temple fell and was destroyed on the 9th of Av, a day of mourning for the Jews when it was felt that God had withdrawn from the people of Israel. The 9th of Av, or Tisha B'Av, remains a day of mourning and commemoration in the Jewish calendar.

# What Is the Seder Avodah?

The *Seder Avodah* is first mentioned during the Yom Kippur service that Andrew attends, and then appears in the Talmudic tale that is interspersed throughout the novel.

The *Seder Avodah* is a service that takes place on Yom Kippur, during Musaf. It is a re-enactment of the rituals of the High Priest (*Kohen Gadol*) on Yom Kippur.

For more on the *Seder Avodah*, see the links in the Related Media section

Yom Kippur is one of the holiest and most solemn days of the Jewish year. When the Temple stood in Jerusalem, Yom Kippur was the one day each year that the *Kohen Gadol* entered the Holy of Holies and asked forgiveness for the whole of the people of Israel. This ritual was attended with bated breath as the Jews waited to find out if their sins had been forgiven for that year.

After days of preparations, the High Priest offered three sacrifices — one for himself and his family, one for the priests, and one for the entire community. As part of the formulation of the confessions, the *Kohen Gadol* spoke God's name (the only time in the year that this occurred). Upon hearing the Tetragrammaton, the people of Israel who had gathered at the Temple prostrated themselves.

In addition to the three offerings of the High Priest, a goat was selected to be sent out to the wilderness. This goat, with a scarlet ribbon tied around its horns, represented the sins of the people. It was thrown over a cliff, and if the scarlet ribbon that had been left above with the people turned white, then all of Israel knew that God had forgiven their sins.

Once the Temple was destroyed, the rabbis determined that, although the fearsome and powerful ritual of atonement could no longer be performed, it still should be narrated. This narration remains as a 2,000-year-old connection to past traditions.

# JBC Book Clubs

## Discussion

### Questions

1. Is this a work of American Jewish fiction or Israeli fiction? Why? This book has been categorized as a “great Jewish American novel.” Do you agree? Does your perspective change when you consider that this book was written in Hebrew by an Israeli and published for an Israeli audience before it was translated into English for an American market?
2. Is Andrew a prophet who was chosen to receive divine images or a man suffering from a mental breakdown? If a prophet, why was he chosen and what is the message? If suffering from a psychiatric episode, why do you think he is visited by these specific images? Is there room in the modern world for a prophet or prophetic message?
3. In what ways are the sacrifice represented throughout the book?
4. The role of fathers appears throughout the book. List all of the paternal relationships that you identified. What do you think of this exploration of fathers?
5. What is the ruined house? Whose house? In what ways is the house symbolic and in what ways is it literal?
6. Does Andrew grow more or less likable or relatable as the book progresses?
7. Is this a story of repentance and atonement? Are Andrew’s visions a form of punishment—divine or self-inflicted—and if so, for what do you think he is being punished?
8. Read the description of the city on p. 344 (chapter 4). Are there parallels to draw between New York and Jerusalem in the time of the Second Temple, and if so, what are they?
9. There are times in the novel when what is real and what is delusion is not clear, even to the reader. Did those occasions bring you into Andrew’s world or alienate you? For example, chapter 13 (p. 378-381)—is this part of Andrew’s psychosis or does it actually occur in the narrative? How do you react to having an increasingly unreliable narrator?
10. In the Avodah service, the *Kohen Gadol* confesses the sins of himself and his household, those who serve in the Temple (the community leaders), and of the community at large. Who or what does Andrew represent? Are the sins that need atoning only his own?
11. Throughout the novel, there are interstitial sections of ancient Talmudic text with a narrative relating to the High Priest. How did these sections affect your reading of the novel? The description on the book jacket says that these hold the key to understanding Andrew’s drama — do you agree? How do you think the interstitial sections relate to the narrative as a whole? Is Andrew linked to one of the Temple characters? If so, do you think he is Obadiah or the high priest?
12. In writing about the Avodah service, [Rachel Adler says](#), “in multiple contemporary versions, we are drawn to reenact this story in which sin can be acknowledged and purged and the slate wiped clean, and to re-envision repeatedly a process of contrition and renewal over which the ineffable name of God echoes.” How does this relate to *The Ruined House*?
13. The epilogue, which is on September 18, 2001/1

Tishrei ends with the lines, “Everything would be the way it was, almost. Only a whisper could still be heard where once stood the ruined house” (p. 511). How do you interpret these final lines?

# Looking at a Page of Talmud

The interstitial sections of *The Ruined House* are laid out to resemble a page of Talmud.

## The Talmud

The Talmud means “learning”, is made up of the Mishna, the Gemara, and commentaries. The text in the center is the Mishnah and Gemara, surrounded by commentary by the great scholar, Rashi, as well as the Tosafot (medieval commentaries).

## The Mishnah

The Mishnah is a compilation of the Oral Law that Rabbi Yehuda the Prince compiled after the destruction of the Second Temple.

## The Gemara

The Gemara, which follows the Mishnah in the center column, is the discussion and analysis of the Rabbis on the text of that Mishnah.

For more on reading a page of Talmud, see the Related Media section



# Lamb Tagine with Couscous

adapted from [Real Simple](#)  
serves 6-8

While Andrew prepares a dish of marinated lamb over a bed of couscous for a dinner party (p. 193), he is transported to the Temple.

## Ingredients

2 tsp. paprika  
4 c. low-sodium chicken broth  
1/4-1/2 tsp. ground turmeric  
1 10 oz box of couscous  
1/2 tsp. ground cumin  
2/3 c. chopped roasted almonds  
1/4 tsp. cayenne pepper  
1/4 c. chopped fresh parsley  
1 tsp. ground cinnamon  
1/4 c. chopped fresh cilantro  
10 threads of saffron, crushed  
3/4 c. chopped kalamata olives  
1 tsp. kosher salt  
4 tbsp. olive oil, divided  
2 1/2 lbs. lamb, cut into 1 1/2 in squares  
1 medium onion, sliced  
4 carrots, peeled and sliced  
2 cloves of minced garlic  
1 tbsp. grated fresh ginger  
zest of 1/2 lemon

1. In a resealable bag or in a large bowl, combine the first seven ingredients and 2 tbl. of the oil. Add the lamb and mix until the lamb pieces are well-coated. Close the bag or cover the bowl with plastic, and refrigerate at least 1 hour (and up to 12).
2. Heat the remaining oil in a large heavy pot or dutch oven. Add the onions and carrots, and cook for 15 minutes until tender. Remove the vegetables from the pot.
3. Add some of the lamb to the pot and brown on all sides. Remove the lamb to a plate, and repeat with remaining lamb until it is all browned.
4. Return the lamb and the vegetables to the pot and stir in the garlic, ginger, and lemon zest.
5. Add the broth, and bring to a boil. Stir in the couscous, and remove from heat. Cover the pot and let it sit for 10 minutes. Fluff the couscous, and stir in the parsley, cilantro, olives and almonds.

# Olive Oil Cake with Apricots and Almonds

adapted from [Karen's Kitchen](#)

At the disastrous dinner that Andrew attends at Cipriani, he is served an olive oil cake with apricot compote (p. 319).

## Ingredients

3/4 c. plus 2 tbsp. sugar  
1 c. milk  
zest of a lemon  
1 seeds of one vanilla bean or 1/2 tsp. vanilla paste  
1 1/2 tsp. cinnamon  
1 1/3 c. all purpose flour  
1/4 c. almond meal  
1 1/2 tsp. baking powder  
1 1/2 tsp. baking soda  
1/4 tsp. salt  
1/3 c. plus 1 tbsp. extra virgin olive oil  
2 eggs, lightly beaten  
5-6 apricots, quartered  
sliced almonds  
confectioner's sugar (optional)

1. Preheat the oven to 350 degrees F.

2. Grease a 9 in. pan and line the bottom with parchment paper.
3. In a small saucepan, heat the sugar, milk, lemon, vanilla (pod and seeds), and cinnamon. Stir constantly until the sugar dissolves and then remove from heat. Allow to cool for 15 minutes. Remove the vanilla bean pod.
4. In a large bowl, sift the flour, baking powder, baking soda and salt. Mix in the almond meal.
5. Add in the olive oil, eggs, and milk mixture, and whisk until the batter is smooth.
6. Pour the batter into the pan, and arrange the apricots on top. Sprinkle with the almonds.
7. Bake for 30-35 minutes, until a tester comes out clean.
8. Cool the cake in the pan on a wire rack for 10 minutes, then remove it from the pan and allow to cool completely.
9. Dust with confectioner's sugar, if desired.

# Visiting Scribe Essays by Ruby Namdar

As part of Jewish Book Council's Visiting Scribe series on The ProsenPeople blog, Ruby Namdar writes two essays on major components of *The Ruined House*, the Temple and the Talmud. His posts are available on the Jewish Book Council website and reprinted in full here.

## How I Learned to Stop Worrying and Love the Holy Temple

The Holy Temple in Jerusalem, what a formidable and alluring symbol! Yet for me, like for so many of my fellow contemporary Jews, the immediate reaction to any mention of the Holy Temple used to be one of alienation. The notion of the Temple—with its priestly practices, animal sacrifices, and incense burning rituals—felt to me to be foreign and archaic. It seemed almost pagan, and certainly not “Jewish.”

There are many reasons for this reaction, some more obvious, others less so. For many American Jews raised in the Reform tradition, the Temple was an absent symbol, removed from the liturgy in 1818 in order to “modernize” Judaism and make it more palatable for the German Jews who took their religious and cultural cues from their Christian surroundings. For those who, like myself, grew up in Israel, there was a complexity of a different kind: the absent Temple, replaced by the Muslim Haram al-Sharif compound with its famous golden dome, became the center of the messianic obsession of religious right wing groups that call for its reconstruction and the renewal of its priestly practices. Talking, writing, and even thinking about the Temple was viewed as a loaded political act instead of a cultural gesture.

Many of us are unaware of how central the memory of the ruined Temple and the yearful fantasy of its rebuilding were to our ancestors' Jewish consciousness. The destruction of the second Temple by the Romans in the year 70 CE was a formative moment in the collective Jewish mind, a trauma that we've never really healed from. The Temple symbolized a

golden era of innocence, of wholeness, that we have not experienced since its destruction. It wasn't only the falling out of grace with God, the loss of the sense of Chosenness—it was also the loss of the physical, sensuous elements of our faith and culture, and making do with mere words instead.

One of the most important elements of the Temple was its immense beauty: “He who has not seen the Temple in its full construction has never seen a glorious building in his life,” says the Talmud, elaborating on the magnificent colors of the fine marble with which King Herod built it. Some rabbis state that it was built of yellow and white marble. Others say yellow, blue and white marble. According to the Talmud, Herod intended at first to overlay it with gold, but the Rabbis told him, “Leave it alone for it is more beautiful as it is, since it has the appearance of the waves of the sea.” Other parts of the Talmud tell of the magical fruit bearing trees made of pure gold that were planted in the first Temple by King Solomon and would miraculously yield their fruit every season. My favorite parts are the Talmudic discussions of the priestly garments; a story is told about a certain High Priest whose mother made for him a fine linen tunic worth the enormous sum of twenty thousand *minahs*. Once this garment was ready, his fellow priests would not suffer him to put it on because he looked naked in it, his bare flesh shining through the fine material as wine shines through a glass goblet.

It was that legendary beauty that captivated my imagination and allowed me to stop being afraid to touch this potent cultural symbol, and to embrace the Holy Temple as a vibrant source of artistic in-

spiration. As a writer, my imagination is ignited by descriptions of immense beauty, riches, excess, and the very intriguing mixture of decadence and holiness, corruption and piety. The more I learned about the Temple from Talmudic and Midrashic stories as well as from the work of ancient historians such as Flavius Josephus, the more drawn I became to its strange and wonderful atmosphere. The grandeur, the pageantry, the obsessive attention to detail and aesthetics, were all so different—and refreshingly so, I may add—from what I knew as Judaism. This symbol became even more vivid for me when I started writing my novel *The Ruined House*, which describes a year in the life of Professor Andrew Cohen—a charming, successful and totally secular New York Jewish man—who’s going through a severe crisis and begins to see visions from the Holy Temple without understanding what he sees and why he sees it. For me, nothing could be more creatively inspiring than the tension between our modern, secular, and intellectual existence, embodied by Professor Andrew Cohen, and our ancient collective memory, embodied by the absent Temple and its mysterious rites and practices.

### **The Drama of the Talmudic Page**

I did not grow up religious, and received no Yeshiva-style Talmudic training. Growing up in a nostalgically traditional home and attending a secular public school in Jerusalem during the seventies, I knew almost nothing about the Talmud. All I knew was that it was ancient, complex to the point of being unintelligible, and completely irrelevant to my life as a modern Jew.

There were a few reasons behind this ignorance. For decades the Talmud—once the most dominant sources of Jewish learning—has been marginalized and pushed aside by secular Zionist culture. Instead of studying the strange and wonderful tales of the Talmudic ages, we studied the differently wonderful epic tales of the Bible, stories of kings and warriors which resonated much better with the Zionist Zeitgeist. Another reason for the alienation we felt towards the Talmud was the language barrier.

The Talmud is written mostly in Aramaic, a dead language that, not unlike Latin, was preserved only in a narrow religious context. Talmudic Aramaic, albeit bearing some similarities to Hebrew and being written in Hebrew characters, is a foreign language for most Israelis.

Lastly, there was the layout: the complex, maze-like, multi-columned page with its almost microscopic letters and strange, archaic fonts. This layout served as a wall, fencing us out of our ancestral cultural heritage and one of the most intellectually challenging works known to humanity, the Talmud. Paradoxically, it was a discussion of a wall, and especially the technical and legal aspects of it, that the Israeli education system chose as the gateway to our acquaintance with the Talmud. It was in high school when we received our first and last dose of Talmud. A short, round, aging teacher wearing a tattered yarmulke on his balding head stood helplessly in front of a class of indifferent, hostile teenagers and tried to open our minds to the intricacies of the discussion about sizes, lengths and width of walls, fences and partitions separating two adjacent yards. How pathetic, how hopeless, how doomed to failure was this effort! Now, knowing what exciting narrative parts and incredible textual riches are hiding in the Talmud, I cannot but think that this sugia (Talmudic debate) was deliberately chosen in order to stifle any interest we may ever develop in this grand intellectual work.

Ironically, the same layout that stood as a tall wall between me and the Talmud is now one of my main points of attraction to its wonderful world. Having discovered aggadah (Talmudic narrative parts) with its intense chamber drama featuring sages instead of kings and intellectuals instead of warriors, I also opened myself to exploring the drama of the Talmudic page itself. And what a drama it is! Where else will one find so many levels and layers of meaning arranged side by side on the same page? Apart from the aesthetic value of the pages, many of which were early print masterpieces laid out by the leading master typesetters of Europe, there was the vast richness of content. So many generations of commentators

huddle together on the same page, vocally conversing and debating with each other across the divide of time and place. On the same Talmudic page you can find the words of a second century C.E. scholar from Babylonia (where the modern state of Iraq and parts of Syria are now), a Hebrew scholar from Roman-era Palestine, a medieval French and Italian scholar, as well as Renaissance-era scholars from Morocco, Germany, and Poland. The lively conversation can resonate over a gap of a thousand years, and remain as heated as if the speakers are sitting in the same room.

I find the drama of the Talmudic page so inspiring, so captivating, that I felt compelled to “import” it into my own work. The subplot of my new novel, *The Ruined House*, is not only told as a Talmudic tale but is also laid out on the page as one. Parts of the text are my own fiction, while others are original quotes from different parts of the Talmud and of various other midrashic and kabbalistic sources. Few projects in the past were as challenging, but also gave me as much pleasure, as composing and laying out the pages of this “Talmudic” subplot. I know that I am taking a risk, and that the drama of the Talmudic page may at first scare off some of my readers, but I am taking this risk happily knowing that those who brave these pages will gain something unique and truly gratifying.

# Recommended Reads and Related Media

## Reviews and Articles

[NY Times Book Review](#)

[Tablet Magazine](#)

[Jewish Week](#)

[Jewish Book Council](#)

[Washington Independent Review of Books](#)

[Forward](#)

[Mosaic Magazine](#)

## More on The Ruined House

[Ruby Namdar on Tisha B'Av](#)

[Video: Ruby Namdar on the Temple](#) (from the Metropolitan Museum's exhibit on Jerusalem)

[JTA on Ruby Namdar](#)

## Additional Information on How to Look at a Page of Talmud

[A Page from the Babylonian Talmud](#)

[Talmud Tutor - Talmud Page Layout](#)

[The Layout of the Talmud -Scribd](#)

## More Information on Seder Avodah

[The Role of The Kohen Gadol \(High Priest\) in the Yom Kippur Avodah](#)

[MyJewishLearning: Avodah Service](#)

[Sh'ma: Yom Kippuer - The Avodah Service](#)

[The Power of Words](#)

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