

Tablets Shattered: The End of an American Jewish Century and the Future of Jewish Life

Joshua Leifer, National Jewish Book Awards Winner
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By Marc Katz – August 12, 2024

Part memoir and part journalistic exploration, *Tablets Shattered* by Joshua Leifer looks critically at the contemporary American Jewish political scene. Beginning with his ancestors' story of immigration to the US, Leifer charts how American Jewry got to where it is now, focusing especially on the differences between the various movements and ideologies that make up American Judaism today.

Leifer does not pull his punches. He is critical of everything from knee-jerk support of Israel's policies to the replacement of Judaism with social activism. He admires the communal nature of ultra-Or-

thodoxy while also taking issue with its insularity. He likes that liberal Judaism is open, but worries that it will lose the thing that makes it distinctly Jewish. One leaves the book with the feeling that Leifer doesn't fit neatly in any camp — that he wrote the book, in part, as a way to process the ways in which he feels both embraced and alienated by the diverse communities and ideologies of Jewish life.

Readers may find Leifer's discussion of Israel to be particularly impassioned. Leifer has written for and edited some of the most well-known left-wing publications in Jewish life — namely, *Jewish Currents* and *+972 Magazine*. He praises many of the newer organizations at the vanguard of protesting Israeli politics. Though many readers may be challenged by his perspective, Leifer is articulate and thoughtful in his critiques. For anyone who wants to understand the perspective of many younger Jews, *Tablets Shattered* represents their thinking well. It captures how disillusioned many feel with Israel's policies and the American Jewish establishment's refusal to see those flaws. At the same time — and especially in his afterword, written in the wake of October 7 — Leifer also criticizes those who do not approach Israel's view with nuance.

One of the book's strengths is its ability to corral

many diverse Jewish voices. Leifer does this in two ways. The first is through meticulous research; he mines articles and op-eds and quotes liberally. The second is through numerous interviews with thought leaders in the Jewish world. Leifer takes great care in his qualitative research and is able to engage with and honor ideas that he might disagree with.

Tablets Shattered is a thoughtful critique of the fault lines of American Jewry. Though biting at times, the book ends on a hopeful note. It's clear to Leifer that there is no perfect strand of American Judaism. No group has found the right balance of ethical, ritual, historical, and communal values. Each subsection of Jewish life sacrifices at least one value in their pursuit of the others. But each has their place, and each has something to offer. Readers will leave Leifer's book feeling that American Judaism is less a shattered tablet and more a rich tapestry with plenty of flaws and the capacity for real beauty.

Rabbi Marc Katz is the Rabbi at Temple Ner Tamid in Bloomfield, NJ. He is author of the books Yochanan's Gamble: Judaism's Pragmatic Approach to Life (JPS) chosen as a finalist for the PROSE award and The Heart of Loneliness: How Jewish Wisdom Can Help You Cope and Find Comfort (Turner Publishing) which was chosen as a final-

ist for the National Jewish Book Award.