

INTERVIEW 'THIS WAS NOT A PERFORMANCE. THIS WAS A REAL CONVERSATION'

What happens when a seemingly odd couple becomes friends and Torah study buddies?

In their new book, Reform journalist Abigail Pogrebin and Orthodox Rabbi Dov Linzer show genuine warmth and respect for one another while not dancing around their differences

By RENEE GHERT-ZAND
15 September 2024

In 2009, a male Orthodox rabbi and a female Reform journalist walked into a Jewish retreat and left as Torah study partners.

“Our exchange of ideas at the retreat really sparked a sort of unlikely friendship. Our Jewish differences run deep. We come from different ends of the spectrum regarding observance and approach to faith, but we just kept talking,” said journalist and author Abigail Pogrebin.

Over the next nine years, Pogrebin stayed in touch

regularly with Rabbi Dov Linzer, president and rabbinic head at Yeshivat Chovevei Torah Rabbinical School in Riverdale, New York.

Linzer asked Pogrebin for advice on op-ed pieces he wrote, and Pogrebin asked Linzer for feedback on the manuscript for a book she wrote about the annual cycle of Jewish holidays. Sometimes, they would meet for coffee to discuss leadership challenges — his at his yeshiva and hers as president of a prominent synagogue in Manhattan. No matter the reason to talk, Torah always crept into the conversation.

Linzer's suggestion in 2018 that they invite the public to listen in on their dialogues on the parasha (weekly Torah portion) resulted in a podcast on Tablet Magazine's website that ran for two years.

They have now transferred those enlightening and challenging discussions to the pages of a new book, "It Takes Two to Torah: An Orthodox Rabbi and Reform Journalist Discuss and Debate Their Way Through the Five Books of Moses," published September 10.

While the podcast was Linzer's idea, he credits Pogrebin for seeing the value in turning the transcripts of their hevruta (study partnership) into a book.

"Many people loved [the podcast] and said they

appreciated the candor and substance, but they couldn't keep up [with all the episodes], and they wished it existed all in one place so they could read it in its entirety," Pogrebin said.

According to the journalist, there is value in seeing how pluralism plays out on the page in a genuine way.

"This was not a performance. This was a real conversation. This kind of listening to each other despite differences is sometimes too rare. I hope our book inspires Torah study in families, synagogues, Jewish community centers, and other settings in the community," Pogrebin said.

The following interview with the co-authors of "It Takes Two to Torah," was edited for length and clarity.

The Times of Israel: Why is it important for Jews from different backgrounds, levels of observance, and genders to study Torah together?

Rabbi Dov Linzer: I've been learning Torah since I was 17. My head's been in a Gemara (Talmud) since then, for the last 40 years. With Gemara learning, we talk a lot about hevruta and mahloket [debate], and I thought I was exemplifying that in my life because I would always be having vigorous arguments with people in the beit midrash [study hall]. I'm surrounded by people learning

Torah, and we always encourage other perspectives. But when I thought through the conversations with Abby, I realized how totally in a bubble I was. My usual study partners and I shared 99.9% of our worldview.

Abby truly cares and has a different perspective. She is an advocate for herself, and I just loved the way in which our conversations forced me out of that bubble, to look at things with fresh eyes, and ultimately deepened my own understanding of the text.

Abigail Pogrebin: There have always been assumptions about boundaries, not just of worship but also of learning. That, to me, has meant something really powerful has been lost. I think that we gravitate towards our own people, our own silos, and it can be an echo chamber. When I did my research and interviews for my [Jewish] holidays book, I knew that my teachers are everywhere [and from all streams of Judaism] — no matter how I identify and that the synagogue I go to is Central Synagogue, which is Reform-affiliated. When we cheat ourselves of these perspectives, I think it's anti-Jewish in a certain way.

Abby, do you see this Torah podcast and book with Dov as a natural progression on your journey of Jewish learning, which began with your first book, “Stars of David”?

There was some logic to this next step, and part of it was being aware of what I'm missing and where I feel there's this lacuna that I haven't addressed.

I grew up with very home-based Judaism, and I was very conscious as I became an adult of what I didn't know and why it bothered me. Asking celebrities like Dustin Hoffman and Ruth Bader Ginsburg questions, like whether they still care [about their Judaism] and whether they've raised their children as Jews, was a backdoor way of my asking myself these questions, which I hadn't yet. Fast forward to "My Jewish Year," where I saw all the haggim [holidays] but I am a Jew who celebrates about four of them. I never understood the scaffolding of the Jewish calendar and why this has endured so powerfully.

In a way, the Torah should have been my beginning because it's the foundational book. I think there's no Judaism without it, and it's part of what we return to every week, not just for reasons of obligation but also because it is the architecture of our faith, our religion, and our connection with God. I've read the Torah before, but never like this, never with the discipline we applied, and never in conversation with someone like Dov, who is a walking resource.

In what ways was Abby's professional experience as a journalist advantageous to your hevruta?

Pogrebin: What [Dov] has at his fingertips and what he can pull out of his pocket [in terms of Torah knowledge] is extraordinary. It made me question whether I was entitled to something where my mastery is so behind the eight ball. But Dov's sincere invitation to learn with him emboldened me to take a leap. That said, I did a lot of research before every session and would use the tools of a journalist. I didn't just go in blind... As the journalist going through this, I brought the "every Jew's" — or "every Jewish journalist's" — questions about things that Dov had taken for granted and had maybe not peeled back in a while.

Linzer: Abby does not let anybody get by with muddled answers and imprecise responses. She brings a different type of rigor and wants to talk about how things [in the sacred text] relate to what's happening around us in the world. Part of my having my head in the books for the last 40 years is that I'm totally immersed in a world of ideas. In the beit midrash, we may discuss how these ideas relate to one another, but we rarely ask how they relate to what's on the front page of The New York Times. Abby was very insistent about making those connections. She was bringing the combination of the deep engagement in the text and the deep engagement in the world, which constantly challenged me and forced me to ask questions of myself and the text that I had not before.

Your dialogues on the Torah portions occurred before October 7 and the ongoing war. Have you reflected on

them differently in light of the situation?

Linzer: My nephew, Maoz Morell, was killed while fighting in Gaza. There is this almost unbridgeable gulf between how Americans are looking at the events and experiencing and reacting to them and how Israelis — who suffered the events of October 7 and are still experiencing the trauma — are. It made me appreciate how we're presented with [apparently] unbridgeable contradictions or different perspectives [about life and the text], and we have to own that tension... That's part of what the engagement is about. It's about being in conversation.

Pogrebin: I reread our book 10 times before its publication, and like with the Torah, I saw something different each time because of where we are. I will mention the Akeida [the Binding of Isaac] because one of our conversations in the book is about Abraham's willingness to sacrifice his son when asked.

Since October 7, all of these [Israeli] children and parents have said, "Yes, [we will] go [to war], this is worth fighting for." Dov said in our conversation on the parasha [weekly Torah portion], "If you don't have anything you're prepared to die for, then you don't have anything you're prepared to live for," which is something I've never thought about as a lens on the Akeida. It's not like anything's worth your child's death, but there are all of these families who have decided that they are willing to

sacrifice to defend Israel right now. I think I will forever see Abraham and understand the Akeida differently.

“It Takes Two to Torah” is a book for readers of all ages, but why would you like to see young people engage with it in particular?

Linzer: Among the younger generation right now, we see many people having very black-and-white answers and not listening to one another. I hope our book finds an audience on college campuses, where it can be a way for Jews to be engaged in Torah and also in what it means to really listen to somebody with a different perspective and believe that you can grow and not be so self-assured in your position.

<https://www.timesofisrael.com/what-happens-when-a-seemingly-odd-couple-becomes-friends-and-torah-study-buddies/>