

FOREWORD

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ABBY POGREBIN SUBTITLES her book *18 Holidays, One Wondering Jew*.

Which is an excellent way to describe it.

But let me break her year down a little further for you.

We're talking a year filled with:

- Fifty-one rabbis
- Six days of fasting
- Countless prayers
- One day without deodorant
- A couple of barrels of booze (Shabbat wine and Simchat Torah scotch among them)
- Untold amounts of revelation, joy, and, of course, guilt

In short, a *lot* of Judaism.

We're talking an Ironman triathlon of holiday observance (or so it seems to those of us not brought up Orthodox).

For most of her life, Abby was only loosely connected to her heritage. To borrow a phrase from my own book, Abby was Jewish in the same way the Olive Garden was Italian. Not very. (No offense to the Olive Garden. Great breadsticks.)

But she hungered for a more authentic taste of Judaism.

And this wonderful book is the result.

I'm impressed that Abby finished the year, with all its fasts and feasts, praying and partying. And I'm even more impressed that she produced this book—it's wise, thought-provoking, and funny.

I've known Abby since we were about the age when most of our friends were becoming *bar* or *bat mitzvah*. (Neither of us Olive Garden types went through the ritual ourselves at the time.)

Ever since, I've followed her career with a mix of *naches* (pleasure) and envy. I loved her work as a producer on *60 Minutes*. And her book *Stars of David*, where prominent Jews—from Ruth Bader Ginsburg to Larry King—reflect on their faith. And her book *One and the Same*, about her experience as an identical twin.

But this could be my favorite work Abby has ever done.

She achieves a beautiful balance—in many ways.

She balances passion and skepticism. Learning and memoir.

She balances humor and tragedy—which, as Abby points out, is a very Jewish thing to do. The holidays themselves careen from celebrations to penance and remembrance. As Abby told me, “There’s really no stretch of mourning and sadness that’s not broken up by revelry. The calendar doesn’t let you get too low without some dose of happiness.”

She balances the modern impulse to rush around with the ancient imperative to slow down (a huge challenge for a Type A like Abby).

She balances her individuality with the demands of community. Because unlike Netflix, the Jewish calendar does not conform to your own schedule. You don’t get to choose when to observe.

And she balances tradition with reinvention. She experiences the Orthodox route, but also experiments with ways to tweak the rituals (“For starters, I plan to add some games and quizzes to keep my kids engaged during Passover. Name the second plague? Frogs!”).

Her book has changed the way I look at Jewish rituals, history, and the religion itself. She is a dogged investigator and frank witness. Obscure holidays suddenly made sense; the ones I thought I knew took surprising turns.

A few years ago, I wrote my own book about the Hebrew Scriptures—*The Year of Living Biblically*. Mine was a much different journey. I was trying to follow the written law, the hundreds of rules contained in the Bible itself. (Do not shave the corners of your beard; don’t wear clothes made of mixed fibers.)

Abby's journey is very different. She followed both the written and the oral Torah. She took on both the Bible and the thousands of years of commentary and ritual. Her quest is more explicitly Jewish.

And yet I did recognize one common theme in our books: the head-to-toe immersion in a topic.

Before I embarked on my book, I was frankly quite anxious. I was nervous about how it would affect my day job as a magazine editor and my marriage (the beard alone would be a crucible for my wife). I was anxious about the public reaction. I knew it would be easy for detractors to slam my approach as misguided. Would observant folks condemn me as too irreverent? Would atheists slam me for being too gentle on the Bible? Would I be afflicted by boils?

So I went to breakfast with a rabbi friend of mine, Andy Bachman, then head of Brooklyn's Congregation Beth Elohim. And Rabbi Bachman told me a story (which I've written about before; but I figure Judaism is all about the repetition of stories, so maybe you'll forgive me).

The story is a legend from the *Midrash*, and it goes like this: when Moses was fleeing the Egyptians, he arrived at the Red Sea with his thousands of followers. Moses lifted up his staff, hoping for a miracle—but the sea did not part.

The Egyptian soldiers were closing in, and Moses and his followers were stuck at the shore. It was only a matter of time before every one of them would be slaughtered. Naturally, Moses and his followers were panicking. No one knew what to do.

And then, just before the Egyptian army caught up to them, a Hebrew named Nachshon did something unexpected. He simply walked into the Red Sea. He waded up to his ankles, then his knees, then his waist, then his shoulders. And right when the water was about to get up to his nostrils, it happened: the sea parted.

The point, said Rabbi Bachman, is that "sometimes miracles occur only when you jump in."

Thank you, Abby, for jumping in.