



# My Jewish Year: 18 Holidays, One Wondering Jew

*Abigail Pogrebin , A.J. Jacobs (Foreword)*

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Although she grew up following some holiday rituals, Pogrebin realized how little she knew about their foundational purpose and contemporary relevance; she wanted to understand what had kept these holidays alive and vibrant, some for thousands of years. Her curiosity led her to embark on an entire year of intensive research, observation, and writing about the milestones on the Jewish religious calendar.

## My Jewish Year: 18 Holidays, One Wondering Jew Details

Date : Published March 14th 2017 by Fig Tree Books

ISBN : 9781941493205

Author : Abigail Pogrebin , A.J. Jacobs (Foreword)

Format : Hardcover 326 pages

Genre : Religion, Judaism, Nonfiction, Literature, Jewish, Autobiography, Memoir, Judaica



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## From Reader Review *My Jewish Year: 18 Holidays, One Wondering Jew* for online ebook

### **natalie says**

Thanks Goodreads for allowing me the opportunity to win this book. *My Jewish Year* is a very well-written and well-researched book of what I'd call finding your past. I can't imagine myself that dedicated to finding out in such depth the 18 Jewish holidays. I'd confirm the front page "one Wondering Jew" statement. I consider myself someone who loves to find out facts and get down to the nitty, gritty of things, but would never find myself that dedicated to doing what Abigail Pogrebin has done in this book.

Really interesting and detailed information, but I don't think a lot of people outside of Judaism will commit to understanding the real meaning of all of this book. I may be wrong; I've been wrong before, but this is my honest opinion.

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### **Tatiana says**

*My Jewish Year: 18 Holidays, One Wondering Jew* is a commitment to read, but it's nothing compared to what author, Abigail Pogrebin, went through in order to compile it. Jews have a lot of holidays, many that require weeks or days of preparations, and many that go on for days. Just reading about it all is enough to fatigue, let alone participate in each, as Pogrebin did. And yes, observant Jews do it year after year, but there is something to be said for building up stamina.

That Pogrebin was a partially-practicing Jew, and someone who was bat mitzvah later in life, was an integral part of what made her memoir relatable to me. I have some Jewish blood, and it's always been an aspect of my lineage that's intrigued, but also retained a mysterious quality. The "wondering" aspect of this book resonated and nurtured my curiosity of the Jewish religion and lifestyle.

Something else that set this book apart was the research that Pogrebin did for each holiday. Rather than simply write her experience, step by step, she went to great lengths to interview rabbis and scholars in the field to dig deeper into history and Talmud. I thought I knew at least the High Holy Days fairly well, but the untold story of Hanukkah alone had me recanting. There is a lot to learn under the surface.

The entire book was a humbling experience, and fascinating. To have the traditions explained for purpose and spiritual value, as well as connected to history, other holidays, and significance to today's Jewish people and the world at large, was invaluable. Now that I have exhausted the library copy, I will have to get a copy of my own.

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### **Misty Lambeth says**

First I would like to thank Goodreads for a free copy of this book, it was an interesting read. I am not a religious person but love to explore different religions so it was great detailed book for me to get an idea of the Jewish holidays. I found it written well and sounds well researched.

Good for the author to get so deep into each of the 18 holidays!

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### **Jodi says**

I received my copy of this book thru the Goodreads Giveaway program. I don't know why the Jewish religion is so facinating to me - I was born and raised a Methodist, and more recently, have celebrated worship in a Lutheran church, but, perhaps it is the ritual, the ties to the past, the present and the future, that draw me in so strongly. Abigail Pogrebin is a gifted writer, and her exploration of the major AND minor Jewish holidays, and the reason behind them, is both enlightening and entertaining. I thoroughly enjoyed this book, and believe that it will give people who are wondering, and wandering, a footing in spiritual life that they may have been missing. I would happily have paid to read this book, and will keep it, to read again. Thank you, Ms. Pogrebin, for opening my eyes and my heart a bit more - matzel tov :)

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### **Sara says**

I thoroughly enjoyed Pogrebin's Jewish Year. The tone of the book is just exactly right; not preachy, but humble, not serious, but often humorous, not unduly wise, but wondering, and with a willingness on the author's part to generously share throughout.

I came to this book because I am an online attendant of services at Central Synagogue where Pogrebin often sits on the bima as president. I've grown to love this congregation and all they stand for, so I was predisposed towards liking the book. It is a smooth, yet meaty read. It could serve as a reference book for Jewish holidays but is also thought-provoking in regards to how to live one's life. Highly recommended for both learning and the candid way in which the author writes.

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### **Marilyn says**

I received a free copy of My Jewish Year 18 Holidays, One Wondering Jew by Abigail Pogrebin in exchange for an honest review. The concept of this book intrigued me from the onset. In the introduction, the reader learns of Ms. Pogrebin's upbringing. It reminded me of my own. Her family observed the major Jewish holidays like Rosh Hashanah, Yom Kippur, Passover and some Shabbat dinners which included lighting shabbat candles "when convenient" (in her own words). Her neighborhood and friends were mostly Jewish. However, she felt a disconnect. She was never taught the meaning behind many of the holidays she observed and realized there were many holidays on the Jewish calendar that she knew nothing about. Later, she was content living her married life as an American Jewish wife and mother in this way. Then something began to nag at her. She wanted to know more. Her quest began with weekly Torah learning. This led to her becoming a Bat Mitzvah at age 40 and finally finding a home at Central Synagogue, a Reform synagogue in New York City. Abigail's curiosity and quest for more answers concerning the Jewish holidays compelled her to pursue the answers and experience observing all the holidays that had eluded her.

I found it very interesting to read the explanations and insights from the many Rabbis (of various denominations), intellectuals, and political representatives that Abigail Pogrebin chose to interview. Their

insights into traditions and customs were quite insightful. Like Abigail, I learned something that I had not known before about each holiday and came to understand some better than before I read her book.

As young girl, I went to public school, attended Hebrew school 3 days a week after school, lived in a primarily Jewish neighborhood and had mostly Jewish friends. My parents did not really encourage me to attend Hebrew school but I liked it and encouraged them to continue sending me. I felt at home at our synagogue. It was a conservative synagogue, but men and women sat on separate sides and all prayers were read in Hebrew. From an early age, I became a regular at Saturday morning Shabbat services..first at Junior Congregation and later in the main Sanctuary. It felt right. I was one of three to become a Bat Mitzvah from our whole class. However, like Abigail Pogrebin, my family only observed Rosh Hashanah, Yom Kippur, and Passover. I still do and will probably continue to do so. After marrying and having children of my own, a Reform synagogue became our home, too. Both of my daughters became Bat Mitzvah,too. I tried to instill in them the traditions I grew up with.

I have definitely become more insightful about the Jewish holidays since reading Abigail Pogrebin's book. I admire her for plunging into a year of learning. At times, I felt like I was right there with her. I enjoyed reading My Jewish Year and would recommend it to anyone who wants to learn more about Jewish holidays, traditions and customs.

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### **Kate says**

I think it's a nice tribute to this book that so many who have commented here are not connected with the Jewish religion. I am one of those (agnostic, in fact.)

For me, the most interesting and impressive aspect of the entire book was the variety of ways that the Jewish holidays approach religious feeling: joy, repentance, uncertainty about the future, social responsibility... and cheesecake. (The light sense of humor mostly appealed to me as well.)

The author approached her subject wisely, directly relating her own family practices and her in-the-moment responses to the practices she observed in order to write the book. It was a pleasure to "visit" a variety of synagogues with her. Had she left it at that, her story would have been interesting, but somewhat lightweight. She gave it a more complete and more serious approach by including several personable, well-spoken rabbis and other experts to describe and explain the nature of each holiday.

I felt that I not only learned about the holidays themselves but shared one woman's experiences and even gained some insight into different ways of seeing the world that might in some way apply to my own life.

(I received this book as a Goodreads giveaway.)

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### **J. says**

A must read for anyone who wants to learn more about the holidays beyond what the usual overview provides. She provides much more informational depth to Purim, Tu B'shevat, and Shemini Atzeret. This book also really enhanced my understanding of the creation story.

However, I did feel as if she was getting sloppy and tired towards the end. She missed a lot regarding Shavuot (the book of Ruth, for example) and Tisha B'av and just stopped detailing much of her own experiences (not in the Shavuot chapter but afterwards).

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## **Rachel says**

I assumed this was "just" a holiday primer and wasn't personally interested in reading it even though I admire and respect Abigail Pogrebin's previous books and writing. But after at least three people recommended it to me and said they thought it would be a good pick for the Sisterhood Torah Fund Book Club, I gave in and took it home from the library. I only had to get through Ch.3 "The Fast of Gedaliah" before I ordered myself my own copy and realized that this would be THE PERFECT book to open our 10th book club season in October. So interesting, so thought provoking, so enlightening, so inspiring . . . and so worthwhile especially right before the start of a new Jewish Year.

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## **Elise says**

Throughout our lives, we take different paths. We seek new adventures. We struggle through different times and quests. It is our way of understanding who we are, and where we come from. This is the story of one such journey. My Jewish Year is the tale of Abigail Pogrebin's search for a deeper understanding of her own Jewish soul.

Read the rest of my review here: <https://journalingonpaper.com/2017/02...>

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## **Judie says**

Abigail Pogrebin grew up in a Jewish home. Her family celebrated Rosh Hashanah, Yom Kippur, Hanukkah, two Passover Seders, and occasional Friday Shabbats. In 2014, she decided she wanted to learn more about her religion and began a one-year mission to learn about the eighteen annual Jewish holidays (including six fast days), when and how they originated, what they are about, and how they are celebrated. During that period, she visited a synagogue (sometime more than one) on every religious holiday and provides a brief history of each, comparing ideas and practices from many different people (mostly rabbis) and sources, primarily in New York City where she lived. She spoke to Orthodox, Conservative, Reform, and Reconstructionist rabbis and read about their interpretations of the holidays. The result is MY JEWISH YEAR

Among her many observations, she tells of the relationship between Hanukkah and Passover, each is celebrated for eight days. She quotes a few rabbis about the sexiness of Sukkot. She tells the reasons for the six fast days during the year. She does not delve deeply into Jewish history or discuss the topic of the sections of the Torah read each Shabbat.

On the whole, the book is not judgmental; it is more of a journal of what she saw and learned as well as how her journey affected her, her husband, and her children as well as other relatives and friends.

I attended an afterschool/weekend religious school for twelve years. I went to services almost every Shabbath and for New Year, Yom Kippur, the three festivals (Sukkot, Passover, and Shavuot), Simchat Torah, Hanukkah, and Shavuot. I also served on the board of my Conservative synagogue and as president of

the sisterhood. I thought I knew almost everything about my religion. After my mother died, I attended the daily minyan twice a day for eleven months. I learned a lot more, especially about the services themselves. By reading MY JEWISH YEAR, I learned even more.

Some interesting insights: At Yom Kippur, we think about how, on that day, G-d seals our fate for the coming year, naming very specific ways that cause a person's death. During that year, she thought of how people she knew had died. Commenting on one of her sources for this book, she says how a little anxiety about what will happen to us during the year can have the positive result of encouraging us to act more thoughtfully throughout the entire year.

A person has to be deepened by the Torah; not blinded by it. One cannot hide in a cave and practice the religion. One has to live with other people and engage with them. Rashi became very judgmental after living in a cave for twelve years and had to go back for another year.

We are commanded to pursue justice. She asks each of us to consider what we have done to honor that commandment.

I received a review copy of from Goodreads First Reads two weeks before Passover and immediately turned to that section of the book. In it I found some suggestions to update our Seders as well as two items that can be used for devarim (readings) at shul during the holiday.

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## Rebecca says

**(4.5)** Like many an American Jew, Abigail Pogrebin was used to marking a limited number of holidays: Hanukkah, the Passover seder, Rosh Hashanah, Yom Kippur, and the occasional Sabbath dinner. Her mother, who co-founded *Ms.* magazine with Gloria Steinem, also inducted her and her twin sister into a special feminist seder. Pogrebin circumcised her son, and watched him and her daughter celebrate their bar and bat mitzvah. Yet she had the nagging feeling that she had never genuinely locked into her own religious tradition, and she longed to go beyond the beginner stage to truly understand what was going on here. So from September 2014 to September 2015, she celebrated all the Jewish holidays on the yearly calendar (actually 20), initially writing about them for a monthly article series for the *Forward*, and here including several additional chapters about observing Shabbat.

With every holiday Pogrebin seeks to move beyond clichés and simplistic interpretations, interviewing rabbis and scholars of every stripe and reading Torah commentaries to discover meanings she's missed before. So Yom Kippur isn't just the day of atonement; it's a time for pondering the possibility of your own death, taking stock of the life you've lived and asking what must change. Hanukkah, uncomfortably, is not just about persecution but about Jew-on-Jew violence. Sukkot is a reminder of impermanence and the need to rely on God.

There are opposite strands running through the Jewish ritual year: gratitude for survival (Purim) versus sorrow at grave tragedies (Holocaust Remembrance Day); feasting versus fasting. Observance ranges from dancing and eating symbolic fruits to sweeping the kitchen free of crumbs with a feather and reading an interminable list of victims' names aloud. Whether she's ultimately appreciative or bewildered, Pogrebin chooses to see the worth in recreating historical dramas.

However, true to the Jewish character, she always wrestles with what she's learning: when it's hard, when it contradicts American culture, or when it feels outdated, she says so. I might have liked more in the way of personal disclosure (although forthcoming about things like her father-in-law's death, she mostly keeps her own heart and conscience at a remove from the religious lessons, remaining an observer), but this is a minor

criticism.

This is such a bighearted and open-minded book. I was consistently impressed by how Pogrebin draws thematic connections and locates the resonance of religious ritual in her daily life. With an eye to readability, she gives useful background information on each holiday and finishes with a recap and an extensive glossary. The book strikes me as a model for how any person of faith should engage with their tradition: not just offering lip service and grudgingly showing up to a few services a year, but knowing what you believe and practice, and why.

### **Favorite lines:**

“it’s a quintessential Jewish act: seeking, grappling. If you’re reaching, it’s because you believe there’s something to grab hold of.”

“I’m beginning to think that Judaism is obsessed with brevity and instability. But rather than finding the message depressing, it’s clarifying.”

“Judaism is always asking us to apply epic stories to everyday decisions.”

“Judaism reminds us not to run from transitions, but to consecrate them.”

A shorter version of this review appears alongside two other theology titles for an Easter post on my blog, Bookish Beck.

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### **Michael says**

Before I get started, a standard disclosure: I received an Advance Reading Copy of this book through a Goodreads giveaway, and I am friends with one of the editors at Fig Tree Books who worked on this memoir.

At the beginning of her book about choosing to observe the Jewish holidays more intently than she ever had before, Abigail Pogrebin humorously lists the reactions of her non-Jewish friends, non-observant Jewish friends, and observant Jewish friends when she tells them about her plan. I think this is a good way to enter her book, because no reader will be able to approach her story from a tabula rasa. Pogrebin’s memoir is one that inevitably will be read and appreciated on a variety of levels, depending on the experience the reader brings to it.

In my own case, I grew up in a classic American Jewish way: non-observant but affiliated with the Conservative movement, and leaving behind my Jewish education after I became a Bar Mitzvah. But in graduate school I drifted into more observance, and today I identify with the Modern Orthodox movement. In a way, this made me a good reader for her book, as I could view it from the perspective of someone who did something similar: started from very little observance and built up to observe the holidays more.

Given that, my general feeling about this book is that it is perfect for two audiences. Non-Jews and non-observant Jews alike will find a lot to learn about and think about from Pogrebin’s memoir. For those who are not Jewish, Pogrebin’s book is an excellent introduction to the Jewish holidays and to Jewish observance as it is really practiced among the majority of American Jews who choose to do so. Jews who aren’t



observant will find a lot of Jewish ritual they are already familiar with but will also learn about Jewish observances, such as the minor fasts, that they may very well have never heard of before.

Observant Jews may also find the book of interest but troubling. One set of observant Jews will find much of what Pogrebin mentions to be overly familiar, as they already observe all the holidays she mentions; another set will probably respond with curiosity to her discussion of the more liberal practices that she incorporates into her journey. A third set will read about her looser practices and so might dismiss her experiences. Indeed, I think I was expecting Pogrebin to have spent a more “shomer shabbas, shomer kashrut” year when I started the book, but that was clearly not her intent and I should not criticize the book for being other than what I expected. (Other readers might not end up being so generous.)

There was one odd omission. Despite her stated intent to observe and write about every single Jewish holiday on the calendar, Pogrebin never, not once, mentions Rosh Chodesh, the minor holiday of the beginning of each Hebrew month. I have no idea why she skipped it; perhaps the editors felt the book was running long; perhaps she felt a holiday whose only observance is the addition of some prayers to the liturgy wasn't as vital to cover. I think its omission stood out for me because I know liberal and Reform Jewish women like Pogrebin who have chosen to claim Rosh Chodesh as an important holiday for women to acknowledge. It seemed like an obvious connection for Pogrebin to make as well. Whatever her reasons, I'm hoping she'll tackle it in another book.

I want to thank Fig Tree Books for the opportunity to review an ARC of Pogrebin's memoir; as I said, there is a wide audience out there for whom this book will be vital reading, and I hope they find it.

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### **Patricia Stover Hobbs says**

First, I am not Jewish. Be that as it may, I wanted to read this to learn more about the Jewish people. My parents at one time owned a kosher style deli in Las Vegas Nevada so I did not go into this completely blind to the faith/religion.

I loved reading this book. It was funny, informative, interesting and made me think I could be her friend. This is not always true with all authors. Of course I am of an age where I read Erma Bombeck and laughed out loud in public no less! So, I recommend this to everyone, no matter your religious faith. This brings you closer to her as a person and as I said you will learn a thing or two.

My only criticism is the forward is a little long. Both of them, hers and her friends. You could dial the first one back a notch or two. Then again if you have absolutely no idea what is involved in this religion you will want to read all of the forwards. I hope everyone who reads this enjoys it as much as I did.

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### **Erika Dreifus says**

Delighted to be part of the team at Fig Tree Books that will be bringing this book to readers early next year.

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