

The People of the Book

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While I was in rabbinical school, I served as a student intern at Temple Shaaray Tefila on the Upper East Side of Manhattan. During my time with the congregation, the senior rabbi of the synagogue was Rabbi Jonathan Stein -- who, by that point in his rabbinate, had enjoyed a long and distinguished career. All four walls of his large office were lined with built-in bookcases, and every bookcase was packed from floor to ceiling with books -- and some of them in rows that were two books deep. There must have been thousands of books in that office. When congregants -- or, in my case, a young rabbinical student -- would come into Rabbi Stein's office and look around in wonder at his impressive library, the distinguished rabbi, with his usual wit and humor, would gesture towards the books and say: "I've read every single title."

A few weeks ago, the [Jewish Book Council](#) announced the [2021 winners of the National Jewish Book Awards](#) -- their annual prize for the most notable Jewish books from the past year. And in the weeks since the list of award-winners was published, like Rabbi Stein, I can proudly say: "I've read every single title."

Don't get me wrong. I haven't read every book -- only the titles. And I must say, even just the titles fascinate me. Among the honorees are titles such as [*Beyond the Synagogue: Jewish Nostalgia as Religious Practice*](#), a book that explores the deep religious meaning that American Jews have found in seemingly mundane experiences, like going to a deli. Another title is [*Becoming a Soulful Parent*](#), a book that applies the tools of Jewish spirituality to the challenges of raising children. Another book is entitled [*An Account of a Minor and Ultimately Even Negligible Episode in the History of a Very Famous Family*](#), which is a novel that imagines a fictional visit by Ben-Zion Netanyahu (father of the former Israeli Prime Minister) to the campus of a small liberal arts college in the United States -- an encounter between Israeli Jewishness and American Jewishness. And of course, there was an award for the writer Dara Horn's much acclaimed and much discussed book on anti-Semitism -- which, in addition to winning a National Jewish Book Award, would likely also win an award for the most provocative title of the year. The book is called [*People Love Dead Jews*](#).

Browsing through the list of winners is like browsing through Rabbi Stein's library. While it may be true that, at this point, "I've read every single title" (and no more than that), nevertheless, reading every title makes me want to read every book.

Throughout our history, the Jewish people have always been lovers of books. One of our most famous and proud nicknames is that we are "the People of the Book." We Jews love to read, love to write, love to explore new ideas -- love to utilize the power of language to transform our minds, our souls, and our world.

It's been said that when you enter any sacred space, like a church, a mosque, or a synagogue, you will find at the front and center of the room the image or symbol that that particular faith

group holds most dear. For the Jewish people, the symbol that we hold most dear is not a shrine or an altar, not a statue of a person, not some dogmatic statement of faith, but rather, is a book -- our Torah scroll. We love this book so much that we treat it with the utmost reverence. We stand up when we are in its presence, as if it were an honored guest. We try never to let it touch the floor, as if it were too exalted for so lowly a stature. We cradle it in our arms, parade it around the room, and lovingly kiss our finger when we reach out to touch it, as if it were a baby entrusted to our care -- a precious child, our hope for the future.

Our nickname “the People of the Book” originally comes from the Islamic world. In the early Muslim caliphates, although Jews did not practice the majority religion, still, our ancestors were granted a special political status. On account of our shared reverence for the stories of the Bible, our Muslim neighbors treated our ancestors kindly and fairly: granting them, in Arabic, *dhimmi* status -- that is, the equal protection that Sharia law extends to non-Muslims who are, nevertheless, “People of the Book.”

And indeed, in places where Jews lived among a majority Muslim society, our ancestors thrived. In Baghdad, in Muslim Spain, in Iran, and in Egypt, we Jews enjoyed prolific Golden Eras -- many centuries of literary productivity, generating some of the greatest Jewish writers and books of all time. The philosopher Maimonides, the poet Yehuda HaLevi, the Jewish legal scholar Joseph Karo, the mystical book of the Zohar, and countless others were all written by Jews in Muslim lands. Perhaps our most famous book, the Babylonian Talmud -- which, unlike the Hebrew Bible, is not a book that we share with other faith traditions, but rather, is exclusively a part of the Jewish religious canon -- the Talmud was written in Iraq. For Jews in Muslim lands, the term “the People of the Book” signified more than just a protected political status. It was our shining legacy.

However, as you browse through the titles of the National Jewish Book Award winners, it quickly becomes clear that the term “the People of the Book” is at least partly inaccurate. Among the twenty titles that received awards, only one of them is explicitly about the book -- the Torah. The other nineteen award-winners are on all kinds of secular Jewish topics, representing many different genres of literature -- including biographies, academia, cookbooks, personal memoirs, history books, and illustrated children’s books. The vast majority are not explicitly religious.

I imagine that the same might be said about each of our own Jewish book collections at home. While we likely might have a copy of the Hebrew Bible, the prayer book, and the Passover Haggadah, it is also likely that alongside these religious books, we might have a novel by Philip Roth or Geraldine Brooks, books about Israel or the Holocaust, books about the Jewish contributions to Hollywood and Broadway, a book of Jewish jokes or familiar Yiddish phrases, or perhaps books that are indeed inspirational but are not explicitly religious in content, like the well-known *Chicken Soup for the Jewish Soul*. In our house, popular children’s books like *Hershel and the Hanukkah Goblins* and *Latkes, Latkes, Good to Eat* are at least as beloved as the actual story of Chanukah. Judging either by the National Jewish Book Award winners or by our own personal libraries, we might reasonably say we Jews are not so much “the People of the Book,” but perhaps more accurately, “the People of the Books.”

Even “the Book” itself (the Hebrew Bible) is in fact not one single book, but rather, is a collection of books -- written at a variety of different times, in a variety of different places, by a variety of different authors, with a variety of different worldviews and motivations, spanning a variety of different genres. Some books of the bible may have been written as early as 1000 BCE; others, not until 200 BCE. Some were written in the Land of Israel; others, in faraway Persia. Some are books that are filled with religious piety; others are books of poetry (like the Book of Psalms), or a novella (like the Book of Ruth), or a collection of aphorisms, similar to *Bartlett’s Quotations* (like the Book of Proverbs). There is even a comedic farce (like the Book of Esther)!

What we now refer to as “the Book” is, in fact, a collection of books, spanning a variety of genres. If we look back into Jewish history, we will see that there has not always been perfect consensus as to which books should be included in the collection, and which books should be left out. There are many ancient Jewish books that did not make it into the Bible’s final cut: for instance, the Book of Jubilees, or the Book of Maccabees, or the Book of Ben Sira. Somewhere along the way, by some process that isn’t precisely understood by historians, our ancestors made a decision about which books to include in the Biblical canon and which to disregard -- sort of like an ancient version of today’s Jewish Book Council, deciding which books should be recognized with a National Jewish Book Award, and which should not.

There’s a famous debate that is recorded in the Mishnah,¹ in which the ancient Rabbis are arguing over whether certain books of the Bible possess the gravitas to truly be considered sacred. The debate centers around two books in particular: the Song of Songs, and the Book of Ecclesiastes. The Song of Songs, for its part, is a collection of ancient Hebrew love letters. It describes in vivid, sensual detail the courtship between two young lovers. In some passages, it could reasonably be described as erotica. It is hardly a wonder that the ancient Rabbis were divided over whether such a book ought to be considered sacred.

The other book that the Rabbis debate is the Book of Ecclesiastes. Ecclesiastes, for its part, is a philosophical treatise that expresses a skeptical view of human existence. It argues that life is meaningless, that piety is useless, and that justice is merely only an illusion. And yet, despite the seemingly secular and potentially subversive content of both the Song of Songs and the Book of Ecclesiastes, the ancient Rabbis ultimately decided that both of them were fit to be called sacred -- and today, we treat both books with the same reverence that we would afford any other part of the Hebrew Bible.

Let us consider, for a moment, what this debate among the ancient Rabbis was all about -- and why it matters for us today. On some level, the Rabbis were asking: What are the books that we care about? What content should a Jewish person read and study in order to be considered a well-educated Jew?² Do the books need to be explicitly religious -- or is there a meaningful

¹ Yadayim 3:5

² For more on this question, see: (1) *Moment Magazine*’s symposium [The Five Books Project](#), and (2) Hannah Pressman’s essay in *The New Jewish Canon* (2020, ed. Kurtzer and Sufrin) on Telushkin, Hyman, and Ochs.

place for other kinds of Jewish writing? Put differently: Should we define ourselves narrowly as “the People of the Book,” or more broadly as “the People of the Books”?

If we are to take the broader definition -- that there is indeed a meaningful place not only for religious books, but also for other kinds of Jewish writing -- then a whole new set of questions emerges. For example: to what extent should a person who is well-read in secular Jewish texts be familiar with and conversant in the classical religious canon? Should there be some sort of “core curriculum” of, say, Hebrew bible, prayer book, and Talmud that is required before a person can branch out into more wide-ranging “elective” Jewish reading, like fiction, history, and memoir? Additionally, we might ask: What are the limits to the term “the People of the Book”? Is it sufficient for a Jew to be well-read in general -- say, as an avid-reader of *The New Yorker*, or in the best of contemporary non-fiction -- but have never picked up the Book of Genesis or the Passover Haggadah?

In short, the question we are asking is: What exactly do we mean when we say that we are “the People of the Book” -- and even more importantly, how should that nickname inform our Jewish lives?

I ask these questions this evening without offering any definitive answers -- and I would welcome the conversation that these questions might lead to. But for now, I’ll leave us with the following thought, attributed to the medieval Jewish sage Hai Gaon. Hai Gaon lived in what is present-day Iraq -- where, as a Jew in a majority Muslim culture, he was granted equal protection under the law as one of “the People of the Book.” Fittingly, although he wrote hundreds of published works, not a single one was a book. Rather, he is best known for having written many letters, which we continue to study to this day.

Hai Gaon wrote: “There are three things that a person should hold dear: a field, a friend, and a book.” A field allows a person to earn a living. A friend provides a person with companionship. “But a book is even better than a friend. For a book can provide companionship as well. And while a friend might desert you, a book will go with you anywhere. A book can reach across time and space, and express eternal ideas -- and in that way, a book can become transcendent.”

And isn’t this part of what it means to be Jewish: to treat that which is transcendent as if it were our dearest, closest friend? Perhaps this is what we mean when we say that we are “the People of the Book” -- not just that we a people who loves to read and write, but more importantly, that we are a people who believe that even when we feel alone, even when we feel that all seems lost and senseless, we nevertheless can always reach for a book and find there waiting for us exactly the thing that we need: guidance, wisdom, inspiration, companionship, the lofty ideals that we most associate with God. For us, a book is like the divine: a loving friend, eternally present, just waiting to be opened.