

Discussion Questions for Abigail Pogrebin's *My Jewish Year: 18 Holidays, One Wondering Jew*

- 1) Early in *My Jewish Year* (p. 10), Abigail recalls that while interviewing celebrities for her first book, *Stars of David*, she realized that she hadn't asked herself the questions that she was asking others: "How much does being Jewish matter to you? Do you care what religion your children are? Do you feel a personal weight because of our hard history? Are you pro- or anti-*gefilte fish*?"; this realization helped bring about *My Jewish Year*. How would *you* answer her questions? (Yes, even the one on gefilte fish!)
- 2) Which holiday did you enjoy reading about the most? Which one did you learn the most about? Is there something that you found in this book that you hope to bring into your own life?
- 3) The subtitle of the book is a play on the term "wandering Jew." What is the difference between being a wandering Jew and a wondering one? Do you think the author is more wondering or wandering? Are there ways in which either of these terms applies to you?
- 4) Was there a quote or an explanation from one of the rabbis that stayed with you? What did you highlight or note while reading? Which rabbi would you most want to learn with, and why?
- 5) Did you learn something that surprised you or was unexpected? Was there something that personalized a holiday for you in a new way or a new interpretation with which you connected? What was the most provocative idea that you read?
- 6) What was your initial reaction to the premise of this book? Did it change over the course of reading? Are you surprised by where the author ended up?
- 7) Early in the book, Pogrebin also recalls that her son's bris was the impetus for writing her first book, because she had a sense that she was just "checking the box," religiously speaking (p. 9). Are there things that you do simply "to check the box"? Later, Judith Shulevitz tells the author that "the doing comes first" (p. 138), causing Pogrebin to reflect, "Do it and you will feel it. That's another theme of this year." This sentiment is echoed by Rabbi Lauren Berkun, who points out that the Israelites receive the Torah saying, "*Na'aseh V'nishmah*" ("We will do and we will listen") (p. 139). What do you think of this approach? Do you think action leads to engagement—or just checking the box?
- 8) On page 99, Judaism is described as the "biggest book club in the world." Do you think that's an apt description? In what ways?
- 9) In his book *God in Search of Man*, Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel writes, "A Jew is asked to take a leap of action rather than a leap of thought [or faith]." How do you think that statement applies to *My Jewish Year*? Do you agree with it? Which parts of the book are leaps of action, which are leaps of thought, and which are leaps of faith?
- 10) Early in the book (p. 10), Abigail recalls Leon Wieseltier telling her: "We have no right to allow our passivity to destroy this tradition that miraculously has made it across two thousand years of hardship right into our laps....Like it or not, we are stewards of something precious." Do you agree? Similarly, when Abigail writes about her children's b'nai mitzvah (p. 13), she remembers thinking, "*This is about you and also beyond you. None of this lasts without you.*" What responsibility do individual Jews have to the larger community? How is *My Jewish Year* a reflection of Wieseltier's statement?