

Home / Legacy /

## Why Be A Secular Jew?

By Gil Student on Sep 7, 11 9:34 pm in Legacy, Posts / 73 responses



Back when I was young and knew everything, I saw Judaism as a binary option: either you adopt Judaism completely or not at all. If not, you might as well just go out and assimilate into the gentile majority. Those who did not do so, who continued their involvement with the Jewish community without committing to full religious observance, were acting irrationally, although we could not point that out to them out of hope that they or their children would eventually adopt full Judaism. In reality, there are good reasons for those who do not believe in all of Judaism's truth claims to maintain deep connections to their religion. Three books from the past few

years offer, directly or indirectly, reasons for these secular Judaisms.

## Nothing Succeeds Like Success

Steven L. Pease is not Jewish but has long been fascinated by the incredible members of the tribe who surround him in business and society. Noting the success of so many Jews, he set out to document the disproportionate achievement of Jews in the twentieth century. His book, *The Golden Age of Jewish Achievement: The Compendium of a Culture, a People, and Their Stunning Performance*, catalogs by area the success of Jews and offers some of their many incredible stories. Ranging from inventions to literature to business to philanthropy, Pease finds the most objective measure of achievement (e.g. Noble Prize, membership in the Equity Hall of Fame) and shows how Jews greatly surpassed their proportionate level.

This alone is interesting but fails to compel. The most important part of the book is Pease's exploration of why Jews have succeeded. In his introduction, he credits Jewish culture: "The point is that culture matters, and all cultures are not equal, no matter how much we might wish it otherwise." His final chapter digs much deeper. Because he makes no claim to sociological expertise, Pease's survey is delightfully full of humble investigation. His thorough research uncovers every theory, which he presents along with questions and critiques that have been posed. He offers no conclusion because he has no way of knowing which of the competing explanations is true. However, his clear and comprehensive overview of the literature leaves no stone unturned.

In the end, all you can say is that, for one reason or another, Jewish culture, history and genetics has yielded a remarkable story that should make every Jew proud. Pease does not say anything about Jewish identity but the implication of his research is that if you want to be a part of the incredible story he documents, you have to embrace your Jewish side. Celebrate, don't suppress, Jewish culture in your life. Study Jewish history and become a part of it. And marry Jewish so

your children will continue this incredible story. Pease's secular Jew is proud of his community's incredible success and desirous of joining and continuing that remarkable story.

## **Judaism As Excitement**

Ze'ev Maghen takes an entirely different tack in his mistitled *John Lennon and the Jews* (the book has almost nothing to do with the Beatles). He sees Judaism as an incredibly fulfilling religion whose laws and customs create a dynamic spiritual life. This book, which is structured as a Jewish response to Far Eastern philosophy, is not a religious apologetic. Maghen is irreverent and iconoclastic. With his relentless passion, effortless philosophical depth, and incurable devotion to 1980's pop culture, Maghen creates what seems to me to be the most viable non-Orthodox theology today (this non-Orthodox book by Maghen, who by the way is my sister's neighbor, was positively reviewed by Tikvah-funded Jewish Ideas Daily: [link](#)).

To Maghen, Judaism is a delightfully irrational religion that adds meaning and spirituality to life. Who wants to worship a purely rational God, he asks, who is so perfect that we can't relate to Him? Who wants a religion that is easy and boring? He loves the challenges of Judaism, the endless Talmudic debates and contradictions. He wants to wake up ridiculously early to bake matzah and then stay up late singing songs, telling stories and eating the matzah he worked so hard to make. Judaism is a great religion that brings joy to life and deepens our connections to our family and community. And who can live without family and community?

If I had to label Maghen's approach, I would call it Reconstructionist Judaism for the twenty-first century. He champions the power of Jewish religion to create better people, regardless of its truth claims. You don't have to believe it in order to love it. His weak point, though, aside from his light humor that masks both profundity and the occasional superficial argument, is that not everyone loves Judaism as much as he. Some people find it a troublesome burden. Maghen has little to offer them. But those who enjoy Jewish traditions will find his passionate and humorous book inspiring, a reason to be a proud and active Jew.

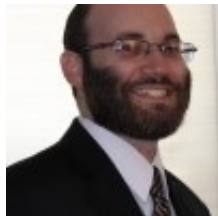
## **The Salad Bowl**

Unlike the previous books, Doron Kornbluth's *Why Be Jewish?* does not have an approach. Recognizing that everyone has a story, Kornbluth devotes each of the twenty chapters of his book to allowing very different people explain why Judaism is important in their lives. While the device of him writing in other people's voices is somewhat artificial — his choppy colloquial style is evident throughout — the result is powerful. I saw people I know in his words. I know those Jews who are proud that Jewish experiences have formed their personalities; and those who want to pass on the ancient torch that was passed to them; and those who enjoy seasonal rituals and celebrations; and those who only later in life begin exploring the rich intellectual heritage of Judaism; and those who were overwhelmed by the ancient holiness of the land of Israel; and many more of the very different proud Jews who pass through this book.

Kornbluth's book does not provide a reason to be Jewish. It provides many reasons, some intellectual and many emotional. Implicit in many, but not all, of Kornbluth's stories is the idea that people's personalities — their attitudes, preferences, mannerisms, emotional attachments, etc. — develop in their formative years and forever connect them to that culture of their youth. For me

and many fellow Jews that means that we have Judaism in our kishkes, integrated into our personalities. I find that a compelling reason to affiliate Jewishly — I am Jewish to my very core. Regardless of this idea's appeal to you, I suspect that most readers will find themselves touched by multiple characters in this book and will emerge more committed to exploring their Jewish identities.

Every Jew is unique and connects to his tradition in his own way. Sometimes he does so subconsciously, without fully understanding why Judaism is so important to him. These books offer assistance to understanding your reasons for being Jewish.



*Gil Student*

Rabbi Gil Student is the founder, publisher and editor-in-chief of Torah Musings.

The opinions and facts here are presented solely by the author. Torah Musings assumes no responsibility for them. Please address religious questions to your rabbi.