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Abigail Pogrebin

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Sixty-two of the most accomplished Jews in America speak intimately—most for the first time—about how they feel about being Jewish. In unusually candid interviews conducted by former *60 Minutes* producer Abigail Pogrebin, celebrities ranging from Sarah Jessica Parker to Supreme Court Justice Ruth Bader Ginsburg, from Larry King to Mike Nichols, reveal how resonant, crucial or incidental being Jewish is in their lives. The connections they have to their Jewish heritage range from hours in synagogue to bagels and lox; but every person speaks to the weight and pride of their Jewish history, the burdens and pleasures of observance, the moments they've felt most Jewish (or not). This book of vivid, personal conversations uncovers how being Jewish fits into a public life, and also how the author's evolving religious identity was changed by what she heard.

Dustin Hoffman, Steven Spielberg, Gene Wilder, Joan Rivers, and Leonard Nimoy talk about their startling encounters with anti-Semitism.

Kenneth Cole, Eliot Spitzer, and Ronald Perelman explore the challenges of intermarriage.

Mike Wallace, Richard Dreyfuss, and Ruth Reichl express attitudes toward Israel that vary from unquestioning loyalty to complicated ambivalence.

William Kristol scoffs at the notion that Jewish values are incompatible with Conservative politics.

Alan Dershowitz, raised Orthodox, talks about why he gave up morning prayer.

Shawn Green describes the pressure that comes with being baseball's Jewish star.

Natalie Portman questions the ostentatious bat mitzvahs of her hometown.

Tony Kushner explains how being Jewish prepared him for being gay.

Leon Wieseltier throws down the gauntlet to Jews who haven't taken the trouble to study Judaism.

These are just a few key moments from many poignant, often surprising, conversations with public figures whom most of us thought we already knew.

“When my mother got her nose job, she wanted me to get one, too. She said I would be happier.”
—Dustin Hoffman

“It's a heritage to be proud of. And then, too, it's something that you can't escape because the world won't let you; so it's a good thing you can be proud of it.”
—Ruth Bader Ginsburg

“My wife [Kate Capshaw] chose to do a full conversion *before* we were married in 1991, and she married me as a Jew. I think *that*, more than anything else, brought me back to Judaism.”—Steven Spielberg

“As someone who was born in Israel, you’re put in a position of defending Israel because you know how much is at stake.”—Natalie Portman

“Jewish introspection and Jewish humor is a way of surviving . . . if you’re not handsome and you’re not athletic and you’re not rich, there’s still one last hope with girls, which is being funny.”—Mike Nichols

“I felt not only this enormous pride at being a Jew; I felt this enormous void at not being a *better* Jew.”—Ronald O. Perelman

“American Jews, like Americans, have a very consumerist attitude toward their identity: they pick and choose the bits of this and that they like.”—Leon Wieseltier

“I thought if I had straight hair and a perfect nose, my whole career would be different.”—Sarah Jessica Parker

“I’ve always rebelled a little when people say, ‘My Jewish values lead me to really care about the poor.’ I know some Christians who care about the poor, too.”—William Kristol

“There were many times when I kept silent about being Jewish as I got older, when Jewish jokes were told.”—William Shatner

“‘Jew bastard’ was something I heard a lot.”—Leonard Nimoy.

“I always liked shiksas.”—Larry King

“It specifically says in the Torah that you can eat shrimp and bacon in a Chinese restaurant.”—Jason Alexander

“Yom Kippur is something I do *alone*, with nobody else, because I believe that my relationship with God is mine and mine only.”—Diane von Furstenberg

Stars of David: Prominent Jews Talk about Being Jewish Details

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Linda says

I heard Abigail Pogrebin speak at Northwestern University recently and decided to check out this book. Fascinating look at famous Jews, where they started from in their Judaism and where they were when the interviews took place. Fast reading with interesting quips and quotes, but sad to see so many whose families no longer consider themselves Jews.

Kristy says

The first sentence of the epilogue says it all regarding my feelings about this book "A funny thing happened on my way to finishing this book: I became more Jewish".

I was raised in the faith by my Grandfather until

I was 12 1/2 and then we moved halfway across the country from him. My father had been raised in the faith but, as an adult, had pulled away and became more agnostic and my stepmother was devoutly Catholic so then I became confused.

I dabbled in other religions, my children were baptized, and things got weird.

However, in the last 6 years - since my Grandfather died, I've felt a pull toward my heritage and my faith. So, my wife bought me this for Hanukkah this year (which is the only Jewish holiday I've celebrated regularly my whole life...even when I was dabbling) and from the first chapter I felt that pull get stronger.

Was this book the best book about Judaism ever written? No. It was more the appetizer than the meal but it made me think, it made me feel proud, and it made me want to find my Jewish feet and that, in my opinion, garners it 4 stars.

Katharine Holden says

Most of the subjects lack depth (William Shatner, Kyra Sedgwick, Joan Rivers, etc.) and the author merely lets them waffle on in the manner of an interview in People magazine. Subjects who may have had some depth (Richard Holbrooke) are wasted as the author carefully notes each phone call and assistant interruption instead of working to pull an interview together. Trivial.

Liane Wakabayashi says

I loved this book. Abigail Pogrebin, a producer at 60 Minutes, had carte blanche access to the biggest Jewish names in America and for this book, with her not so hidden agenda of making peace with her own Jewish identity, she interviewed celebrities about a part of their lives that is rarely discussed or even known in the media -- their Jewishness. About sixty assimilated Jews -- who form the backbone of this collection -- define for the author their take on being Jewish. It's typical here for Jewish identity to become a minor appendage to their mighty careers, but in some fascinating stories, like director Steven Spielberg, actor Dustin Hoffman and New Republic literary editor Leon Wieseltier, Judaism is more than a pastrami sandwich at Second Avenue Deli. It is the cart before the horse, the cart that carries their spiritual life, creative aspirations and intellectual activities to new heights. Some stand out stories, include Joan River's showing up late for High Holiday services, being refused entry into the shul. So what does the queen of the Shopping Channel do? She self comforts at Bergdorf.

Leora Eisenberg says

While this book was probably supposed to be a reaffirmation of Jewish culture and heritage, I just found it depressing-- because most of what I saw was loathing of Sunday School and Judaism being stripped down to Jewishness, i.e. Ashkenazi food.

As Ruth Reichl said in the book, "It's just how people think of you." That's what Jewishness has become. And as much as I want to love this book, it just makes me sad.

Carolyn says

I expected this book to be interesting and funny (and it is), but was surprised to discover how personally meaningful it was to me as a converted, but not very observant, Jew. I plan to reread it every year.

Lynn says

3.5 stars. This is an interesting book where the author interviews different prominent people and asks them questions about their feelings about being Jewish. Some had very interesting answers, some barely gave her the time of day, and some people were incredibly arrogant and full of themselves.

I found myself nodding in agreement with Natalie Portman and Sarah Jessica Parker, and being charmed by Ruth Bader Ginsburg. Fran Drescher cracked me up. Leon Weiseltier needs to seriously get over himself: he seems to think that his ways of being an observant Jew is the only way. Most of the stories were interesting but after a while it just seemed to be endless and tiresome. Maybe this is the type of book you pick up, read a few chapters, and read something else for a while. The epilogue was interesting in that the author told how writing this book impacted her own life and Judaism.

It should be noted that the book was written in 2005, and since then we have learned things about some of the interviewees that may color our impression of what they told the author.

I recommend it as an interesting read on Jewish studies.

Joni Daniels says

Published in 2005, I'm afraid it's a bit of a dated read now, but still interesting to read how famous personalities in the arts, literature, law, business, politics, medicine, the media, (etc) feel about being Jewish. The connection they all have is their Jewish heritage, and there are vast differences in how critical, influential, and important being Jewish is in their lives. Some are Jews by label/genetic makeup only and some are highly devout - but all speak to the burdens and the pride that come with the label of identification. Many experiences and thoughts mirror my own - I frequently felt that my story showed up in these pages. How Judaism (whether religious or cultural) shows up in your daily life is an interesting discussion topic.

Brina says

Lately I have been reading all the books by one author in succession. Stars of David is an anthology where the author Abigail Pogrebrin interviews 62 famous Americans who happen to be Jewish. And after reading it I find the state of Judaism (besides orthodoxy) in this country alarming.

Of the 62 people Pogrebrin interviewed, the majority shared these characteristics: turned off by Hebrew school, parents loosely observed traditions, married out of faith, do not observe much as adults, would not be surprised if children married out of faith yet would love to see children have Jewish foundations, have an inherent or perhaps subconscious longing to be more Jewish.

These celebrities are but a small sample size of Jews in America but represent all that is wrong with secular Judaism. What lead these people to abandon Judaism and marry out of faith? Most were turned off by Hebrew school and organized religion. Interestingly not a single Orthodox Jew was interviewed for this anthology. Would that have turned off the rest? As frum by choice I only hope that these personas' children and grandchildren somehow see the joys of being Jewish and re-enter the fold so to speak. The one positive is that the author after interviewing these people decided to be take on more observances in her own life.

I give the book 3 stars because even though I was turned off by people's lack of observance, their interviews were candid and most often humorous as well. This is definitely a good book for discussion.

Edy says

thought this was an excellent anthology, both in terms of the diversity of people interviewed as well as the interviewer's keen perception of her subjects.

Alan Dershowitz's "Candle Theory of Judaism" was interesting-- "The closer you get to the flame of Judaism, the less likely you are to be a productive, successful, creative person. The great successes in Judaism are people who moved away from the flame. But the problem with that is that the further you move away from the flame, the less likely you are to have Jewish children and grandchildren. It's a great paradox. There's no answer. You need to be the right distance away. If you look at almost all the great people that Judaism has produced over time, you find that many of them do not have Jewish grandchildren. Particularly in this century." p 248

Les says

This was a great book. The people that were interviewed were the most famous and the views that they gave about being Jewish were very interesting and the answers they gave were very deep and very emotional. Some of the people interviewed were as follows: Leonard Nimoy, Fran Drescher, Ruth Bader Ginsburg, Joan Rivers, Ed Koch, Stephen Breyer. There were six other people interviewed. You will love this book and you don't have to be Jewish. They spoke about their faith and what their feelings were about God.

Talia Carner says

Riveting and revealing...

What struck me in this highly polished, riveting interviews of the many Jewish stars is the amount of research Abigail Pogrebin had conducted in preparation for each interview. It was clear that she had read everything published by and about each of the celebrities from various fields, be it politics or music. She read foreign media if relevant. The result of this exploration of what it means for these successful people in the public eye to be Jewish is how this identity is embedded in most of them, as inseparable as their other identities such as their gender.

While I found it fascinating to read about their pride in their Jewishness, it also hurt to read how little many of them had done to halt or slow down the assimilation of their own children. Mike Wallace, who named his son "Chris," (how more Christian can a name be?) insisted to Chris that he was nevertheless Jewish. Kenneth Cole, in a rare baring-of-his-heart moment admitted to regret "every day" the agreement he had made with his wife, Maria Cuomo, to raise their daughters as Catholic. Kyra Sedgwick, who had been obsessed with the Holocaust in her young adulthood, married without even a rabbi present.

But then, from the interviews, the picture that emerges is that many prominent Jews did not appreciate the depth of their connection to their Jewish roots until later in life.

Lessons learned? Hebrew school must change drastically in the USA to save the next generation of Jews.

Jill says

When I first started this book, I think I was disappointed in the often ambiguous and sometimes negative feelings the 62 interviewees share about being Jewish. But this book is thought-provoking and worth reading, and I learned a lot about the 62 interviewees and being Jewish in the United States. And I liked one of the final lines of the book, when Pogrebin summarizes what she's learned: "What I do know is that being Jewish is powerful and, in a sense, unavoidable -- whether one embraces it or leaves it on the shelf, whether one lives a visible life or an anonymous one."

Harriet Brown says

Stars of David

Stars of David by Abigail Pogrebin is a fascinating book. It gives differing point of view on Judaism. I highly recommend this book.

Schnauel says

I thought this was an interesting book. I am neither religious nor Jewish so I read it as an outsider. It made me curious how much of what would said would also hold for other religions. Many people seemed to have religion forced on them as children, they grew into adults and turned away from it only to return either when they had children of their own or later in life.

Of course, Judaism also has the religion/ethnicity split and it was interesting to see how people separated the culture and the religion. I liked the point made by more than one person that rejecting Judaism is fine, just so long as you know what it is you're rejecting. I think that holds true for all religions.

Many people felt culturally Jewish though not necessarily religiously Jewish but almost to a person they said no matter how tenuous they felt that relationship to be, they would immediately defend Israel from an outside threat. There was a split opinion on whether it was every okay to criticize Israeli policy.

One of the things I found the most fascinating was how many people were only slightly self-identified as Jewish until they visited Israel. That visit seemed to change every person who took the trip.
