

By GILA WERTHEIMER  
ASSOCIATE EDITOR

**D**URING THESE DAYS LEADING UP TO the High Holidays, and then the Holiday period itself, the impetus to introspection, to searching for responses to timeless questions, to opening ourselves to change, intensifies. That is likely to include the desire to read something fitting for this time of year.

Two books — neither one is specifically about the Holidays — are relevant to this period, and both are directed to the non-specialist reader.

**W**E LIKE TO QUANTIFY things, to number questions and answers, to know there are limits. Often the quantifying comes in tens — the top 10 books, movies, adventures, colleges, cities, wonders of the world. And, of course, the big 10 — the Ten Commandments.

Quantifying by nines isn't so usual. In the 1980s, there was *The Nine Questions People Ask About Judaism* by DENNIS PRAGER and JOSEPH TELUSHKIN. Now there's *Nine Essential Things I've Learned About Life* by HAROLD S. KUSHNER (Anchor Books, 171 pp., \$15 pb).

This is Rabbi Kushner's 13th book, all of them variations on the timeless theme of living a life of meaning and coping with what life throws our way.

His own personal crisis and coping with the rare illness and then death of his young son led to what is likely his best-known book, *When Bad Things Happen to Good People* published in 1981 (JEWISH STAR, Aug. 15, 1983).

Since then, Rabbi Kushner has not stopped questioning, and examining, his religious beliefs that take him from the tragic to the joyous, and guiding others in their questioning.

He also gave a well-

received talk here in 2004 on his book *The Lord is My Shepherd* (JEWISH STAR, May 21, 2004).

Rabbi Kushner, who is 81, grew up in Brooklyn, and after graduating Columbia University, Rabbi Kushner enrolled in the rabbinical school of the Jewish Theological Seminary. There he thrived on the "extraordinary intellectual feast" on offer from some of the great Jewish scholars and intellectuals of the time. He "emerged five years later [in 1960] as a Conservative rabbi," Rabbi Kushner writes.

Theologically, he was well prepared as a congregational rabbi; but he found that theology usually didn't answer his congregants' questions or address their issues. These were more about relationships, feelings of unfairness, family matters and how to respond to crises. So he learned on the job.

High on the list, and featured in a number of Rabbi Kushner's essential things he has learned, is God. How to respond to questions (or statements) about belief, or its lack, the classic "if God is good how come so much is bad" query, the literalness of the Bible, the efficacy of prayer, whether or not God punishes people, and so on. Over his 30 years as a



## BOOK MARKS

pulpit rabbi at Temple Israel in Natick, Massachusetts, a Boston suburb, Rabbi Kushner honed and clarified his own beliefs as he served his congregants, seeking answers, sometimes finding them, sometimes not, but always responding, with words when that was suitable, or with his presence and support when that was called for.

At the heart of Rabbi Kushner's faith is his personal tragedy, which is, in essence, "don't blame God." He puts it more eloquently:

"I find God not in the tests that life imposes but in the always surprising capacity of ordinary men and women to rise to the occasion."

And:

"What God does is promise us, I will be with you; you will feel burdened but you will never feel abandoned."

Rabbi Kushner's essay on personal forgiveness, "Forgiveness Is a Favor You Do Yourself", is especially relevant for Yom Kippur.

He has seen changes in American Judaism over the decades, and has had to re-adjust his own approaches and assumptions to suit the times.

There's a certain bluntness in some of Rabbi Kushner's essays, almost as if he hasn't the patience to soft-pedal his ideas and beliefs.

That's not a criticism; in fact, it's welcome. There are no apologies or circuitous explanations, but instead a clear-eyed view of living a Jewish life.

Whether or not one embraces his approach, his insights offer much to think about, and certainly bring lofty religious questions right down to earth.



HAROLD KUSHNER / ANS REUTERS FILE PHOTO

**T**HE HOLIDAY PERIOD ends with the celebration of Simchat Torah, when we finish reading the Torah, and then immediately begin all over again, with the Book of Genesis.

This makes it just the right time to dip into a collection of essays, *Reading Genesis: Beginnings* edited by BETH KISSILEFF (Bloomsbury, 288 pp., \$29.95 pb).

With a host of contributors, diverse in their approaches and perspectives, Kissileff has put together a thought-provoking, stimulating collection that ranges far from a standard explication of the biblical text.

Her model for this is the approach taken by scholar, teacher and writer Dr. AVIVAH GOTTLIEB ZORNBERG, whose lectures Kissi-

leff attended in Jerusalem in the 1980s.

They were a revelation, as Zornberg demonstrated "that literature, psychoanalysis, and literary theory can illuminate the biblical text." This, Kissileff writes, is her goal with this volume.

Some of the essays are general, some more specific, addressing events, details or biblical figures.

Lawyer, Harvard Law School professor and prolific writer ALAN DERSHOWITZ teaches a course that focuses on Genesis.

Why choose this first book, a narrative account, rather than the books that emphasize and detail many of the laws?

It is the broad themes of justice and injustice in the stories of Genesis that, according to Dershowitz, underpin the later laws and their formalization.

It is, as its Hebrew title, *Beresheit*, proclaims, the beginning. It "forces readers of all ages to struggle with eternal issues of right and wrong."

Cookbook author JOAN NATHAN considers food and wine in the Genesis narrative, from the Creation and the Garden of Eden, through the Joseph story,

with its cycles of plenty and scarcity.

In a personal reminiscence, Amherst College professor, translator and writer ILAN STAVANS considers the Tower of Babel told by way of a conversation he had in Israel with translator and author HILLEL HALKIN.

REBECCA NEWBERGER GOLDSTEIN is a philosopher with a doctorate from Princeton, as well as a novelist, with awards that include a Guggenheim Fellowship, a MacArthur Fellowship and a National Humanities Medal.

Her subject is Lot's wife, a story that as a child, she found frightening. Why, she asked, did she look back?

She asked her father and her teachers, but only as an adult did she find a new way of understanding Lot's wife. It came from a 13th-century commentator, Rabbi DAVID KIMCHI (known as the Radak), and with it, the ground of the story shifted.

The theme of waiting is the subject addressed by SANDER GILMAN, professor at Emory University and prolific author and editor. He discusses it as both a Jewish preoccupation and a paradox.

And there are more essays, 23 in all, each one a different statement that this first book of the Hebrew Bible is read and reread, turned and pondered, and each time, it speaks to a reader's fresh understanding. □

## Warm-up for the High Holy Days



## SYNAGOGUE GUIDE

### CHICAGO LOOP SYNAGOGUE

16 S. Clark St.  
Chicago • 312-346-7370  
chicagoloopsynagogue.org

Spend the High Holidays in Chicago's historic Loop, where the liturgy will be chanted by acclaimed Cantor and Broadway performer Dudu Fisher.

He will be accompanied by the Tel Aviv Lev-Ran Singers, under the musical direction of Menashe Lev-Ran.

Beautiful and reverent Holiday services, conducted by Rabbi Stanley Kroll, will be family seating.

Various High Holiday packages are available, including accommodations at the Standard Club and gourmet kosher meals. Contact the synagogue for details.

### CONGREGATION KOL EMETH

5130 Touhy Ave.  
Skokie • 847-673-3370  
kolemethskokie.org

We are proud to be part of the Chicagoland Jewish community for 50 years.

As a Conservative, Egalitarian congregation, we are devoted to the preservation of Jewish values and culture.

We are a welcoming home serving religious, cultural and educational needs of the community.

Our membership is diverse, united by the common bond where community means friendship and religious practice means spiritual inspiration.

Our spiritual leader is Rabbi Barry Schechter, well known for his programs on Jewish humor.

### CONGREGATION RODFEI ZEDEK

5200 S. Hyde Park Blvd.  
Chicago • 773-752-2770  
rodfei.org

Join us for the High Holy Days; stay for the year!

Rodfei Zedek is an egalitarian Conservative synagogue offering a timeless yet contemporary approach to Jewish worship, study and living, providing varied opportunities for personal growth.

We offer programming for children and families, and our activities for adults span Jewish and secular interests.

Our multi-generational congregation provides many opportunities to learn, pray and celebrate Jewish life in a welcoming community.

### TANNENBAUM CHABAD HOUSE NORTHWESTERN JEWISH CENTER

2014 Orrington  
Evanston • 847-869-8060  
contact@nuchabad.org

Community High Holiday services will be held at Tannenbaum Chabad House at no charge.

The traditional services are easy to follow and include English translations. They are led by Rabbi Dov Hillel Klein and Rabbi Meir Hecht.

The prayers are meaningful, the people are friendly and everyone feels at home.

Holiday dinners follow Rosh Hashanah services, with RSVP requested, and a nominal charge.

### TEMPLE JEREMIAH

937 Happ Rd.  
Northfield • 847-441-5760  
templjeremiah.org

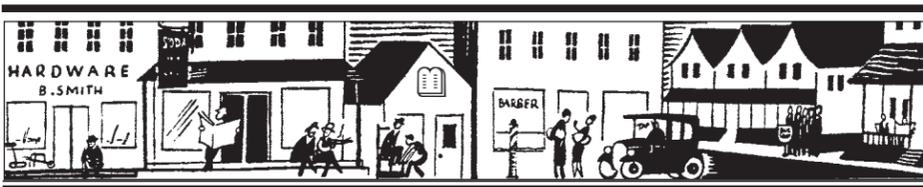
Temple Jeremiah will hold a Rosh Hashanah service for families with special needs.

The service, on the first day of the Holiday, Monday, October 3, will be held at the temple, from 3:30-4:30 p.m.

There is no charge, and the service is open to the community.

Temple Jeremiah is a Reform congregation, dedicated to lifelong Jewish education, tzedakah, social justice and the State of Israel.

Please visit our website, or phone, for information on all our High Holy Day services. □



## COMMUNITY CALENDAR

September 23 - 29

### Maot Chitim

Sun., Sept. 25 - Maot Chitim is seeking volunteers to deliver High Holiday food parcels to Jews in need in the Chicagoland area. Deliveries start at 9 a.m. and continue to 11 a.m.

Warehouse location to pick up parcels is at 8260 N. Austin, Morton Grove.

To volunteer or donate, call 847-674-3224; go to maotchitim.org for info.

### Speakers

Sun., Sept. 25 - Retired attorney and author Wal-

ter Roth will present a program on his newest book, *Everyday Heroic Lives: Portraits from Chicago's Jewish Past*, 11:30 a.m., Rodfei Zedek, 5200 S. Hyde Park Blvd, Chicago.

The program will feature a performance by actress Roslyn Alexander. Call 773-752-2770.

### Synagogues

Fri., Sept. 23 - Community Shabbat dinner with guest speaker Dr. David Nesenoff, who will discuss "Tangled Up In Life: Negotiating Peace In Our Lives in Our Relation-

ships". Program starts with services at 6 p.m., with dinner, 6:30 p.m., Chabad of Northbrook, 2095 Landwehr Rd., Northbrook. Reservations required. Call 847-564-8770; go to chabadnorthbrook.com

Sat., Sept. 24 - Selichot evening program, "Remembering Ourselves to Remember" led by David Gottlieb, in an exploration of what it means for a community to remember at this time of year, 8 p.m., with Selichot service at 10 p.m., Rodfei Zedek, 5200 Hyde Park Blvd., Chicago.

Call 773-752-2770; go to rodfei.org □