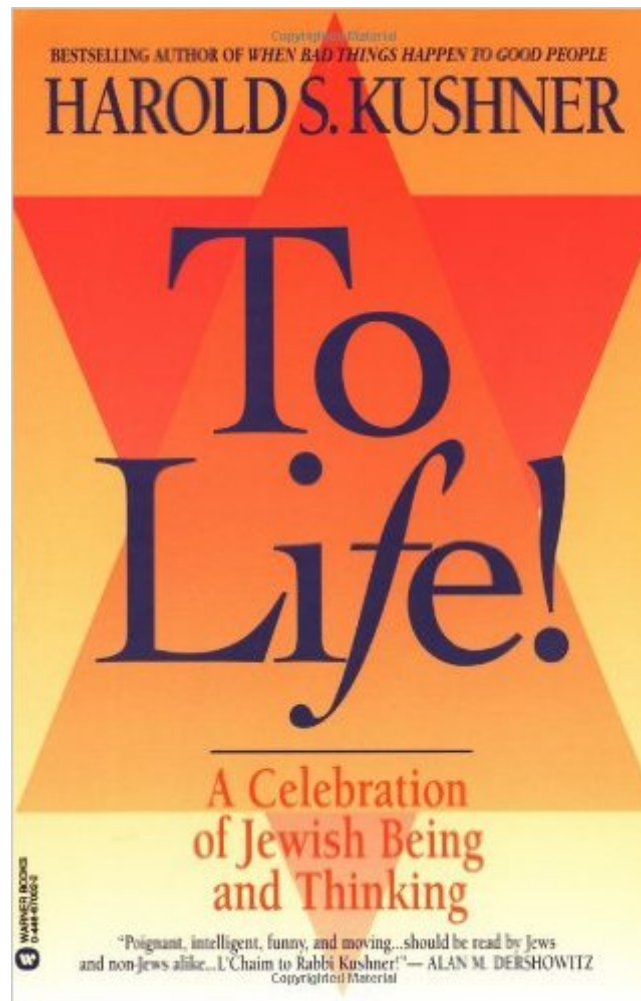


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# To Life: A Celebration Of Jewish Being And Thinking



## Synopsis

Filled with wisdom and gentle humor, here is the essential book on Judaism's traditions and practices from the bestselling author of *When Bad Things Happen to Good People*. Both practical and spiritual, Kushner makes Jewish tradition relevant to a new generation as he explores its many facets.

## Book Information

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## Customer Reviews

In this book, Rabbi Harold Kushner (perhaps best known as the author of 'When Bad Things Happen to Good People') explores the traditions and practices of Judaism with wit and wisdom. 'To Life!' is his celebration of his heritage, and the heritage of his entire community. "To Life!" conveys a sense of exuberance, a readiness to enjoy the pleasures of this world. It removes from wine, and from other pleasures, the taint of sin and self-indulgence, and invited us to look at all that God has created and find it good.' Judaism has a long history, longer than most continuing religious traditions in the world today. It is a testament to the foresight in Judaic teaching and wisdom that, despite its ancient origin, much of that wisdom is still relevant today. This may also have to do with the slow nature of change in the basic human nature, as well as the fact that timeless truths and problems are, well, timeless! This book is a very personal book for Kushner. He states in the first chapter his Rule One about how to answer the question What does Judaism say about...? -- "The only correct answer will always begin: "Some Jews believe as follows, and other Jews believe something different." The reason fo this is not just that we are a highly individualistic, independent-minded people. The main reason is that we have never found it necessary to spell out exactly what we are

supposed to believe.' A key difference between Judaism and many religions, including Christianity, is that it is an ethnically-based religion, not only in practice but in approach. The Jews were a people before they had a religion. With most every other religion, the converse is true. When Mordecai Kaplan asked Kushner and his rabbinical school fellow students to write down the ten greatest Jews of the twentieth century (the list included Einstein, Freud, Herzl, etc.) and then asked them to write down the synagogue each attended each week, the point was made clearly -- they were not Jews by virtue of religious observance, but through membership in a community. Kushner proceeds in a classic Jewish style -- to tell stories. The community is built up largely of the stories carried forward from generation to generation, about the community and its collective responsibility to God and to each other, with neither aspect able to be separated from the other. Story-telling is something that the Christian community has learned and taken to heart from this practice, and indeed, in carrying the Hebrew scriptures into the canon of Christian scriptures, tells many of the same stories. Kushner discusses sacredness and holiness -- he quotes Martin Buber who, in distinction from the thought of much of the world who believe there is the holy and the profane (unholy), believed the proper division exists between the holy and the not-yet-holy. Everything has a potential for holiness, as part of God's creation. 'Everything we do can be transformed into a Sinai experience, an encounter with the sacred. The goal of Judaism is not to teach us how to escape from the profane world to the cleansing presence of God, but to teach us how to bring God into the world, how to take the ordinary and make it holy.' Throughout the book, in his discussion of the calendar -- from which he discusses holidays and rituals of importance-- to the ways of prayer, the diversity of Jewish belief about God and humanity, and the ideas of the state of Israel and historical and continuing anti-semitism, Kushner approaches each subject with clarity, compassion, wit, and the love only a life-long devotion to Judaism can bring. His final chapter, 'Why You Need to be a Jew', is aimed largely at the assimilationists, those who would forego much of Jewish life in favour of the greater culture. In this chapter, one can find reasons for a reaffirmation of one's own religion, whatever it may be, and find arguments for taking it seriously. Kushner's book is a blessing to all who read it, of any tradition. Shalom.

THERE ARE NO "SLAMS" IN THIS BOOK!! I'm a Jew who sings with my Christian friends in their church choir every Sunday (to support them in their worship). Many of them sing in the synagogue choir down the street. Although I'm a devout Jew, I've begun to see the world a bit through Christian eyes. Let me say, flat out, that I found no criticisms of Christianity in this book. In fact, just the opposite: Rabbi Kushner strikes me as thoughtful and respectful of Christianity. For instance, he

never makes the claim that Christianity is a religion of faith without works. He says clearly that the differences between faith and works in Judaism and Christianity are differences in emphasis. Judaism is more focused on this-worldly matters than other major religions. That's a fact, not a criticism. Furthermore, he does not say that Christianity is "part pagan." In the chapter in which he discusses Christianity, he refers to early Christians who adopted aspects of paganism into early Christianity. Few scholars would dispute this. His brief discussion of baptism was in the context of explaining that one is born Jewish in a way that one cannot be born a Christian. Again, this is a fact, not a criticism or a put-down of Christianity. I read this book back in 1993 when it was first published. Today my wife and I light candles, bless our son and daughter, and chant the blessings over wine and bread every Friday night.....largely because of this book. Thank you Rabbi Kushner.

To Life! is a heartfelt book that serves as an introduction to anyone who wants to get reacquainted with Judaism and reconnect with its roots and core ideas; it's meant as a book for anyone, even non-Jews who want to get an idea of what Judaism is about. Keep in mind that Kushner is a rabbi from Judaism's Conservative movement, so the perspective you're getting is largely from his take on Jewish observance and belief, though he does make efforts to show you the Reform and Orthodox perspectives as well. And more importantly, he conveys to you certain ideas, cultural values, and beliefs that tie all Jews together, regardless of their level of observance. He covers the holidays, the Jewish approach to life's milestones (including a very poignant section on loss), the Torah and some of the rationale behind its regulations, and also the Jewish approach to some great moral and theological questions. The book is not meant to give you all the answers, but to inspire you to think and do more reading and more searching. Kushner writes with a full heart and an open mind; this is a man who has lived through difficult and painful experiences, and yet still takes joy in life, as Judaism encourages one to do - to make holy and blessed the ordinary moments of life.

("I'chaim" -- To Life! -- is the traditional Jewish toast, offered over a raised glass of something potent, a prayer that life will bring us good things and success) This is a great book for Jews or non-Jews... or anyone who loves life! Like Kushner's other work, this book makes you shake your head in wonder, thinking, "it all makes sense now..." Even if you've been Jewish your entire life, if you're still wondering where the joy is supposed to be in living Jewishly, you need to listen to what Kushner has to say. And if you're related to a Jew, married to a Jew, or thinking about becoming one yourself, this book will absolutely help you understand what it's all about.

If you want to learn about Judaism, either as a non-Jew or one such as I who received a crappy Jewish education as a child and wants to renew my association with my heritage, this is the first step. Clearly and enjoyably outlines all the basics of being Jewish in a positive and easily readable way. L'chaim!

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