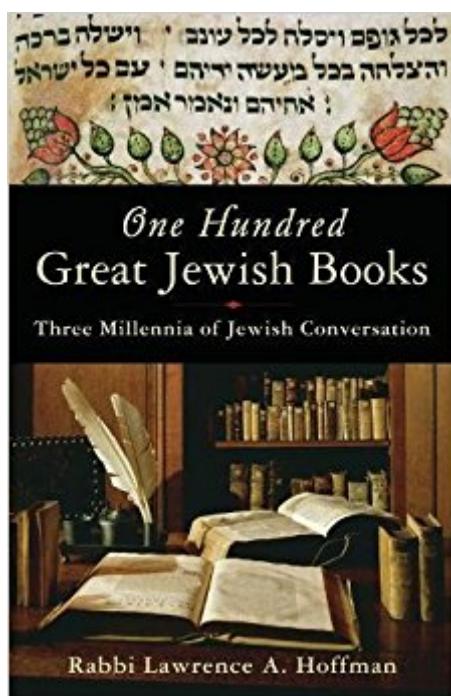


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# One Hundred Great Jewish Books: Three Millennia Of Jewish Conversation



## Synopsis

An introduction to one hundred great Jewish books, arranged as a concise and thought-provoking guide to the Jewish conversation across many centuries. Each of the entries features one work in its historical and cultural context, provides a summary of content and author, and reflects on its relevance for today's readers.

## Book Information

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## Customer Reviews

"Hoffman's lucid and eloquent interpretations will appeal to Jewish and non-Jewish readers searching to understand Judaism and to 'connect the dots' in their own lives." &#151;Publisher's Weekly on The Journey Home" The ultimate Jewish book review! Lawrence Hoffman has made a fascinating selection of one hundred great Jewish books, offering a brief introduction to each. This reader-friendly approach masks a wide-ranging erudition, embracing the great variety of Jewish literature throughout the ages. Want to know what Jewish books are worth reading? You could have no better guide!"&#151;Rabbi Arthur Green, Rector, Hebrew College Rabbinical School"Rabbi Hoffman is widely regarded as one of the most brilliant scholars in Jewish life today. This, his latest book, is Hoffman at his best: wise, artful, and deeply engaging. It is a spectacular introduction to Judaism in a new and exciting way: a conversation through the ages that his book opens up in a compelling and page-turning way."&#151;Rabbi Richard Jacobs, President-Elect, Union for Reform Judaism"What is a great Jewish book? In this fascinating volume, renowned scholar and

omnivorous reader Rabbi Lawrence A. Hoffman offers wise, pithy introductions to one hundred amazing books, each a vibrant participant in the clamorous Jewish conversation that began when God called out to Abraham and continues still. Anyone interested in the greatest productions of the People of the Book should start here."; Jonathan D. Sarna, Chief Historian, National Museum of American Jewish History"; Rabbi Hoffman . . . has compiled a list of what he considers to be great Jewish books. . . . The selections are organized by broad topic. . . . Guaranteed to spark conversation and offer excellent selections for book clubs."; "Booklist (November 1, 2011)

Rabbi Lawrence A. Hoffman is a rabbi and the Barbara and Stephen Friedman Professor of Liturgy, Worship, and Ritual at Hebrew Union College; Jewish Institute of Religion in New York City. He lectures widely on bringing spiritual innovation into contemporary Jewish life and is; the author of many books, including Israel: A Spiritual Travel Guide, The Journey Home, and the National Jewish Book Award winner My People's Prayer Book.

The subtitle is the real key here. Hoffman's book is a doorway into a new and exciting way of looking at Judaism: as an ongoing conversation. And the 100 great Jewish books mentioned in the title are the means Hoffman uses to introduce the reader to that conversation. Just the list alone would make the book worth buying. So would Hoffman's concise and expert descriptions of the books and their importance. But the real jewel here is the package Hoffman has put together. This is as much a book about the nature of Judaism as it is about Jewish books. Moreover, in spite of its depth, the book is an easy read, in part because the content is so conveniently divided up into two to three page descriptions. One of the most intriguing books I've read.

Despite its title, which subliminally implies limitation, "One Hundred Great Jewish Books" is not a top one hundred listing - an absurdity given the immense catalog of essential Jewish reading - but instead is meant to be what Lawrence Hoffman describes as "an altogether new kind of introduction to Judaism, intended to enrich the explanations of Jewish history, thought, and practice that other books provide." Unfortunately, on the first page of his introduction Hoffman makes a statement that's bound to alienate many readers, and also defines his surprisingly limited frame of reference regarding what constitutes a "great" book. "For the majority of Jews in Israel," he writes, "religion is associated with Jewish fundamentalism and its ultra-Orthodox political parties that would return Judaism to the Middle Ages if they could." This statement is at best a gross simplification; at worst, deliberately divisive if not provocative. As a rabbi, especially one who identifies with a branch of

Judaism that supposedly emphasizes diversity, inclusiveness and open-mindedness, Hoffman should know better than this. Hoffman acknowledges that his choices for inclusion in his survey are "somewhat personal"; and even though he never mentions it, the one hundred book cut-off is artificial given that there are far more than a hundred books on his list. It just depends on how you count them. For example, the Babylonian Talmud is counted as only one book despite the 63 named tractates which run to 72 volumes in the current Hebrew/English Artscroll edition. Hoffman also counts the Midrash Rabbah as one book even though it takes up 10 volumes in the Soncino Press edition. Since the Talmud and Midrash Rabbah are among the fundamental works that define Judaism as we know it, with the Talmud especially being a cornerstone of the Tradition, their inclusion in Hoffman's list is automatic. But, since not everyone has the time or inclination to tackle the Talmud, which entire lifetimes are devoted to studying, Hoffman's list includes Solomon Schechter's "Aspects of Rabbinic Theology" - not as a substitute for the Talmud, but as a brief commentary on it. This is one of his wiser selections, for Schechter's book, all but forgotten today, is an invaluable guide to understanding the inspired, eclectic thinking of the Rabbinic Sages. On the other hand, Abraham Cohen's essential overview, "Everyman's Talmud," which addresses the rabbinic material from a different angle, is a curious omission from Hoffman's survey. I could argue about the inclusion and omission of many of the books on Hoffman's list. Freud's "Moses and Monotheism," an outdated piece of nonsense, is included (even Hoffman calls it "bad history and questionable psychology"), but Gershom Scholem's definitive critical study "Major Trends in Jewish Mysticism" isn't? Hannah Arendt's "Eichmann in Jerusalem," a highly controversial (and in my view deeply flawed) analysis of the Nazis' war against the Jews telescoped through the trial of one of its chief perpetrators, may be well known but given Arendt's romantic relationship with the Nazi Martin Heidegger, and her ongoing defense of him after the war, it's offensive to even suggest it as a "Jewish book," let alone a great one. On the other hand, Hoffman does include some terrific things like I.J. Singer's "The Brothers Ashkenazi" and I.B. Singer's memoir, "In My Father's Court," both classics of 20th century Jewish literature. Conversely, while Arthur Green's "Tormented Master" is a brilliant analysis of Nachman of Breslov, it seems questionable to have its author provide a flattering endorsement that appears on the back cover of Hoffman's book. The same goes for Jonathan Sarna, whose "American Judaism" is one of Hoffman's one hundred recommendations, and whose endorsement also adorns the back cover of Hoffman's book. Hoffman's essays accompanying his selections are interesting, insightful and well written. Despite some cavils, "One Hundred Great Jewish Books" is a worthwhile resource for the inquisitive reader especially when it comes to mining the extended reaches of contemporary Jewish literature.

A book to cherish.

Interesting overview.

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