

## What to read now that we can't go out?

By Janine Stein

A few summers ago, I studied at Pardes in Jerusalem. It was a life-changing experience, mostly for the animated conversations I had with my fellow students. We would meet at the bakery round the corner, and chat intensely while ordering our morning coffee and pastry. There was one conversation with a young American student that was particularly memorable. We were talking about the Jewish books that had shown us new possibilities in the tradition we had inherited. I scribbled down my list on a piece of paper and this is what it said:

*Tale of Love and Darkness* by Amos Oz

*Carnal Israel* by Daniel Boyarin

*Lonely Man of Faith* by Joseph B. Soloveitchik

*If This is a Man* by Primo Levi

*Man in Search of Meaning* by Viktor Frankl

*Kohelet*

*The Slave* by I.B. Singer

*Radical Judaism* by Arthur Green

*Maimonides' Confrontation with Mysticism* by Menachem Kellner

*Guide to the Perplexed* by Maimonides

*Totality and Infinity* by Emmanuel Levinas

*People of the Book* by Moshe Halberthal

*Nomos and Narrative* by Robert Carver

*Jerusalem* by Moses Mendelssohn

I stand by my list. I remember where I was when I read each of the books on that list. These books changed my life, but they are not the books I would recommend now. Honestly, now the only things I can manage to read are the WhatsApp messages on my phone. I am also reading cookbooks. Do Ottolenghi, Honey & Co, Claudia Roden and Evelyn Rose count as essential Jewish books at the time of Corona?

I can also manage cartoons, and so I recommend to you anything by Rutu Modan. Her book, *Exit Wounds*, is a good place to start. The cartoons in the New Yorker are always spot on, and I manage to read some of the shorter articles. Garry Shteyngart's piece in the Dispatches from a Pandemic in the April 13, 2020 edition was particularly readable.

Family photo albums are comforting too. Not many words at all, but wonderful pictures. Did we know how good we had it? The only book I am reading regularly is the Babylonian Talmud. It is outrageous and comes in bite-sized chunks which is very much what my brain needs at the moment. I am trying to read a page of Talmud a day and writing about it as a way of marking this strange time.

My siddur is a treasure now too, particularly as I discover new parts of it. I was never one to get to shul before the Torah reading, and now I see what I had missed. The poetry of the Morning Service includes these beautiful lines:

'Only to You, we give thanks. Though our mouths were full of song as the sea, and our tongues of exultation as the multitude of its waves, and our lips of praise as the wide-extended skies; though our eyes shone with light like the sun and the moon, and our hands were spread forth like the eagles of heavens, and our feet as swift as hinds, we should still be unable to thank you and bless your name.'

I can imagine the poet from two thousand years ago, looking up at the sky and seeing the eagle's wings spread out, flying, flying, flying away. The poet knows that his project of gratitude can never be completed, but two thousand years later, we know that it can be inherited. We are the ones who are alive today to continue the project. Today we look up at the sky when a plane flies overhead because mostly they don't anymore. No one is going anywhere.

After Corona, I hope to start reading again. But before the reading will come the hugging, and the gratitude to have made it to the other side.

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