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Feldman, Noah. *To Be a Jew Today: A New Guide to God, Israel, and the Jewish People*. Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2024.

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It saddens me that at such a treacherous time in Jewish history, Noah Feldman could only summon the courage to write an engaging book instead of the masterpiece that was surely in his reach. Something stopped him. Perhaps lingering Jewish self-consciousness and angst leftover from his earlier life. Perhaps it's just Feldman's withholding temperament. But it's clear that as he wrote "To Be a Jew Today: A New Guide to God, Israel, and the Jewish People," something was keeping him from the promises he makes to speak with us in a more intimate manner in the first pages of his book. It seems personal revelation is not his strong suit despite his determination to be franker with us.

Feldman considers himself to be a loyal Jew but often a conflicted one claiming "I don't need an excuse to engage with Jewish belief, Jewish meaning, and Jewish identity. I was born to it, or at least educated to believe I was born to it. I had Hebrew tutors from the age of four and started full-time Jewish study at six. My parents, thoughtful keepers of their own brand of semi-professional Modern Orthodox Jewish practice, embraced intellectualism, liberalism, and serious religious observance all at the same time." Feldman seems to have tried his hardest not to disappoint his parents, but one senses by how little he reveals about his relationship with them, that there were hurdles that had to overcome.

Feldman's accomplishments are legendary; he is a "superstar" of sort. Born in 1970, he became a Rhodes Scholar and attended Oxford. He then went to Yale Law School and afterwards became part of the faculty at NYU Law School where he has taught for several years. Now a law professor at Harvard University, he writes frequently for the New York Times and the New York Review of Books. In 1999, he was a clerk for Supreme Court Justice David Souter. He has written countless books, many of them focusing on the inherent conflict between Islam and the tenets of democracy. While still a young man, he married a young Korean American woman and they eventually had two children and divorced in 2011. Once again, he remains solemnly quiet about his wife and children, and how he navigated his Judaism throughout the marriage. He tells us only a brief

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anecdote about taking his wife, who was then his fiancé, to a reunion of his Modern Orthodox day school which he attended from kindergarten through 12th grade. Everyone acted politely and he was stunned when the newsletter was sent out about the event, and he noticed that he and his then girlfriend had been purposely cropped out of the picture.

Feldman asks us bluntly right at the get-go "What's the point of being a Jew?" He explains there are 7.6 billion people on Earth and only 16 million of them are Jews. Around half live in Israel and the other half in the United States and there are small clusters of Jews in various places around the world. Feldman doesn't say so, but he seems worried about the future of the next Jewish generation. He describes young Jews as "trying to figure out whether to think of themselves as Jewish, and if so and how much. They're trying to figure out if they should marry Jews, or only marry Jews. They are exploring wide-ranging spiritual paths, Buddhist and Hindu, Yogic and New Age, and wondering how their journeys through consciousness might draw on Kabbalah, the ancient and not so ancient Jewish mystical way…" Feldman seems to feel an affinity with their longings, particularly for their attraction to some sort of universalism that negates the teachings of his childhood and the Jewish belief in our 'chosen' status.

Feldman concedes he spent his young scholarly life steering clear of Jewish exploration in favor of doing deep dives into the intricacies of Islam, as well as studying American slavery and its relationship to the constitutional ideals of freedom and equality. But he never really relinquished his fascination with Jewish mysticism, rationalism, progressivism, conservatism, and the ever-changing role Israel continues to play on the American Jewish psyche. Despite his intellectual fervor and contagious curiosity, he seems a pragmatic man who is grounded in provable truths; someone not prone to spiritual or religious fascinations.

Feldman writes about Moses Maimonides (1135-1204), who is thought of as the greatest Jewish thinker who has ever lived. Feldman is impressed by Maimonides' refusal to tell others what to think and encouraging them to form their own views about God and mankind. Feldman hopes to do the same for us here and admits he is trying to "illuminate for you, the reader, the multiplicity of different viewpoints and ideas, and to let you decide for yourself." But by not sharing with us his personal journey wading away from the grasp of Modern Orthodoxy, or his experiences intermarrying and raising children, we are left adrift. We don't understand why he doesn't see the need to merge his scholarly findings with fragments of autobiographical revelation

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which would illuminate all he writes. Instead, Feldman often steers toward the generic claiming there are many ways to be Jewish and all should be respected.

He provides for us a brief mention about the Hamas-Israel war, but one senses the bulk of his narrative was written before the war erupted. But Feldman is certain that it has affected Jews everywhere, "whether sympathetic to Israel or critical or some combination."

Some of the most engrossing passages have to do with warn memories of his younger life. He speaks about his Haredi cousins in Borough Park and how much he envied "the crisp black fedoras the boys were to wear when they became Bar Mitzvah." He admits being envious about their certainty about God and God's law, as well as their absolute allegiance to the Torah. He tells us about another sub-group of Haredi who are the Hasidim who wear Polish-style fur hats and black coats. These Hasidim revere their founder, the Rabbi Israel Baal Shem Tov (1698-1760) and see themselves as almost literally connected to God. And there is still another group of Hasidim, the Yeshivish, who see themselves as inheritors of "intellectual-spiritual-legal Torah study." Feldman feels many of the Hasidim are involved in religious practices and rituals that make them feel certain they are truly engaging with God. The mysticism that is part of their religious practices involves studying the Kabbalah which offers various cosmic perspectives on how one can achieve spiritual states of euphoric union with the Almighty.

Feldman knows there have been Jews for centuries who have longed for a religion more in alignment with the modern world. He points to men like Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel who became a renowned teacher of Jewish mysticism affiliated with Hebrew Union College, then the flagship of American Reform Judaism. Many Reform Jewish congregations are accepting of women rabbis, gay marriage, and other modern lifestyles. He mentions another Progressive Rabbi, Mordechai Kaplan (1881-1983), who suggested Judaism could be maintained even without belief in God.

Feldman explains how the landscape in Israel is drastically different. He describes for us the Evolutionists who recognize Religious Zionism's merger with modern nationalism. These people believe Zionism to be a modern development divinely sanctioned by God's will. Naftali Bennett, Itamar Ben-Gvir, and Bezalel Smotrich, all prominent figures in Israeli right-wing politics, fit into this category. Feldman explains how Israel is changing in ways that it's secular founders would have found unfathomable and distasteful.

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Feldman is drawn to Jews who have the chutzpah to simply walk away from being Jewish, like Isaac Deutscher (1907-1967), who was raised an Observant Jew and became a Marxist. He lists others who abandoned the faith like Benedict de Spinoza, Heinrich Heine, Karl Marx, Rosa Luxemburg, Leon Trotsky, and Sigmund Freud. Feldman thinks of these Jews not as traitorous, but rather Jews who are stuck in a perpetual struggle with God and Judaism whether they realize they are or not. Feldman identifies as a Jew and elaborates very little on what that designation precisely means for him but adds that he is very comfortable with Western knowledge and the doors it has opened for him. Yet, Feldman also believes his early education allowed him to experience a rigorous Talmudism which a great grounding as well as equal time to study secular subjects which prepared him for Harvard. Feldman writes tenderly about what he thinks his Jewish education gifted him with saying: "I have tried in my own imperfect way to live up to the values that the school taught me, expressing my respect and love for the wisdom of the tradition while trying to reconcile my upbringing, even when some others imagine me to have not done so by virtue of my marriage." He continues saying "What I learned there informs every part of my inner life. In the sense of shared history and formation, I remain of the community while no longer fully of the community." We realize the suppressed emotion bottled up inside of him that rests uncomfortably beneath this confession.

Still, so many questions Feldman leaves unanswered. How did his parents and family react to his marrying a non-Jew? How did he raise his children? Does he go to synagogue? What Jewish rituals, if any, does he follow? Does he regret his decision to move away from Modern Orthodoxy or does he feel it liberated him from constraints he found too binding? He claims to be writing a book about what it means to be a Jew but leaves out the crucial and often crushing decisions modern Jews face as they try to navigate the outside non-Jewish world. It's not easy to move away from the pack, especially when so many people you love and trust are part of that group you are leaving. We would love to hear Feldman discuss how he handled the landmines he surely faced as he wandered further from the fold.

Perhaps a clue to Feldman's concealed nature is presented to us covertly. His book is dedicated to Rabbi Ben-Zion Gold. He spent six years in concentration camps and lost his entire family as well as his belief in God. When he got to America, he found a home with the Jewish Theological Seminary where he no longer embraced his prewar certainties about anything but reveled being

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among Jews and studying Talmud. He stopped worrying when doubts surfaced as they did frequently. Similarly, with Noah Feldman, we feel we are witnessing a man going through similar struggles about where he belongs and how he wants to identify himself as a Jew. Feldman clearly has a special love for the early years of his life and the discipline, traditions, and rituals Modern Orthodox Jewish life showered upon him. But ultimately, it wasn't' enough for him and he felt compelled to explore other arenas not sanctified by the rabbis who taught him as a young child. Feldman, like so many Jews, now lives with all the ambivalences, compromises, and negotiations his choice has brought upon him. But he refuses to allow that to erase what he remembers as a cherished experience.

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