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Judaism For Dummies[®]

**by Rabbi Ted Falcon,
Ph. D. and David
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About the Authors

Rabbi Ted Falcon, Ph.D., one of the pioneers of Jewish spirituality within the Reform Jewish context, was ordained in 1968 from the Hebrew Union College–Jewish Institute of Religion, in Cincinnati, Ohio. He received a doctorate from the California School of Professional Psychology in 1975. He is a nationally recognized lecturer and teacher, and the author of *A Journey of Awakening: A Guide for Using the Kabbalistic Tree of Life in Jewish Meditation*, as well as a series of meditation tapes for healing and spiritual awakening. Rabbi Falcon founded *Makom Ohr Shalom*, a Synagogue for Jewish Meditation in Los Angeles, which is still among the largest synagogues of its type in the country. Ted lives in Seattle, where he is rabbi of Bet Alef Meditational Synagogue, a writer, and a psychotherapist in private practice.

David Blatner is an award-winning, best-selling author of eight books on a wide range of topics—from virtual reality to digital imaging to the number pi (π). Known for his easy-to-read and humorous style of writing about difficult subjects, Blatner is a Seattle-based freelance writer whose books have sold over 400,000 copies and have been translated into ten languages. He also frequently writes on the topic of electronic print and Web-based publishing, and has presented seminars in North America, South Africa, and Japan. Mr. Blatner has been a Jew his whole life.

Dedication

Ted: To my son, Seth, with much love and ever-increasing respect.

David: To my father, Adam, who planted the seed. (In more ways than one.)

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Introduction

It's amazing how many people have become interested in Judaism in recent years. Some people interested in Judaism are in search of meaningful connections to the past. Some have a hunger for deeper understanding and ritual, a longing for something precious to pass on to their children, something nourishing and loving to live by. For many Jews (and non-Jews, too) this has meant exploring the rich tapestry of Judaism—some discovering the religion for the first time, others re-examining the lost or forgotten traditions from their youth.

For non-Jews, perhaps this interest follows an increasing awareness of the significance of Judaism as the source both of Jesus as well as of the “Old Testament.” There also seems to be a greater openness these days to appreciating the depth of Judaism without seeing it as a threat to other faiths.

For Jews, perhaps this resurgence of interest stems from a community recovering from Holocaust horrors and rediscovering a trust that the faith and practice still exist. Certainly, much of the interest seems to come from the increasing realization that Judaism has much mystical, meditative, and spiritual depth to offer.

The problem is that the vast majority of Jewish books on the market today either tackle one particular subject in great depth (like 300 pages just on the holiday of

Sukkot), or they approach Judaism from an orthodox perspective of “These are the 2,145 things you *should* do if you know what’s good for you.” There’s nothing wrong with either of these approaches, but we want to offer something different. We believe that even a subject as deep and important as Judaism can be fun to read about. And the more you find out about the subject, the more fun it is.

With that in mind, we offer you *Judaism For Dummies*. Wherever you’re coming from—whether you’re interested in the religion or the spirituality, the culture or the ethnic traditions—this book offers you a glimpse into Judaism that you’ve never seen before, one that helps you appreciate what all the excitement is about. We don’t assume that you have any prior experience with the religion; we explain all the rituals, ideas, and terms that you need to know in a way that you can understand, even if you’re reading about these things for the first time.

Judaism and Dummies: Not an Oxymoron

Being a “dummy” is not just tolerated in Judaism—it’s actively encouraged, and has been for over 2,000 years. Each spring, during the holiday called Passover (see Chapter 24), Jews around the world re-read a book called the *Haggadah*. The book tells the story of how the

Hebrews escaped Egyptian slavery about 3,300 years ago, and it supplements the tale with a bunch of other poems, songs, and fables, including one about four children:

- ✓ The “Wise” child searches for depth and meaning in the Passover story, trying to find hidden connections and spiritual truths in the holiday.
- ✓ The “Wicked” child, whose rebellious nature requires detailed explanations for everything, demands that the holiday’s rituals be relevant in his or her own life.
- ✓ The “Simple” child just smiles, saying, “Tell me what to do and I’ll do it.” This child wants to know how but not why, and finds deep comfort in the rituals themselves.
- ✓ The *Haggadah* describes the fourth child only as the “One who doesn’t know enough to ask a question.” This child hungers for knowledge, but doesn’t know where to begin. This is the “dummy” that the title of this book refers to.

However, centuries of rabbis have taught that all these children live within each person, and that you must celebrate them all—and especially the dummy inside.

This book is designed for all four of your inner children. There are times when you might say, “Listen, I just want to know how this ritual is done.” So we describe rituals and give you step-by-step instructions. There are other times when you may want to stomp your feet and say, “What is this tradition? How is it relevant to me?” That’s

good! Sometimes everyone needs to express some rebelliousness, so we discuss those things in the book, too.

If you're a wise and worldly searcher with a longing for connection, you'll also find jewels in each chapter of this book. Ultimately, we hope you read the book from the open and honestly curious perspective of the dummy's "beginner's mind," which makes you available for deeper learning.

How to Use This Book

This book is a reference, meaning that you don't need to read it from cover to cover. (Though you're certainly welcome to do just that.) We wrote the chapters as self-contained packets of information, so for example, you don't need to read Chapter 4 to understand and benefit from Chapter 5.

The Index is very thorough, and so is the Table of Contents. If you already have some specific questions about Judaism on your mind, look for them there and then dive in.

How This Book Is Organized

Of course, it's impossible to encompass a topic this incredibly vast (literally millions of pages have been written about Judaism) in a little book like this, so we had to pick and choose what we consider the most important nuggets. If you don't find what you're looking for, check out our Web site (see the section "Feedback, Please" later in this introduction) and see if the answer is there, or go to one of the many sites we link to.

In order to get the most out of the book quickly and efficiently, we've broken it down into sections, each with its own theme.

Part I: What Jews Generally Believe

We begin by exploring the different groups within the Jewish community, like Ashkenazi and Sephardic, and denominations, like Orthodox, Reform, and so on. Then we target two of the most important issues in Judaism—God and Torah—before discussing the basic practices of Judaism, like the kosher laws and what happens in worship services. Part I ends with a look at the ancient (and really cool) practices of Jewish mysticism (usually called *Kabbalah*).

Part II: From Womb to Tomb: The Life Cycle

In Part II we discuss how Judaism honors and celebrates the major stages of life with rituals, including the *bris* (circumcision for boys), Bar and Bat Mitzvahs, weddings, and funeral rites.