**GUIDE FOR A MULTIPLE-SESSION**

**CLASS, DISCUSSION, OR BOOK GROUP**

*Here All Along: Finding Meaning, Spirituality, and a Deeper Connection to Life – in Judaism (After Finally Choosing to Look There)*

by

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**Introduction – In the Beginning and In the Image: The Torah**

1. If you attended Hebrew school, does Hurwitz’s experience (pages ix-xii) feel similar to your own? Different? What would the ideal Jewish educational experience for children look like?
2. What do you think of the assertion that all Jews are “Jews by choice” (page xxxi) in America today? Do you feel that Judaism is really something that one chooses?
3. How do you feel about the critique of modern spirituality on pages xxi-xxiii? Is a mix-and-match approach to spirituality – where you pick and choose among various traditions – really such a bad thing?
4. Which of the arguments for why to be Jewish (pages xxiii to xxvi) resonate with you? Which don’t? Why?
5. Does the idea of being an “ethnic,” “cultural,” or “social justice” Jew resonate for you (pages xxvi-xxviii)? What do you think is valuable about those approaches to Judaism? What do you think is problematic about them?

**Chapter One – The Process of Judaism: Questioning, Debating, and Interpreting**

1. What was your reaction after reading the summary of the Torah on pages 3-5? Did you feel differently by the end of the chapter?
2. How did you feel when reading about the core Jewish “in the image” idea (pages 14-17)? How is that idea relevant in your own life, particularly in how you treat others?
3. In modern life, what is the relevance of the Torah’s language about caring for the stranger (pages 20-23)? In what ways are Jews still strangers? In what ways are Jews the ones who have the obligation to care for strangers? Are there times when those two identities conflict?
4. Did the section about chosenness on pages 23-25 affect your thinking about this topic? How do you feel about it?
5. Do you agree with the assertion that because the Torah is a political document, it’s appropriate for rabbis to speak about politics in their sermons (page 26)? What are the benefits and pitfalls of this approach?

**Chapter 2 – The Process of Judaism: Questioning, Debating, and Interpreting**

1. Does this chapter make you think differently about the Torah? If so, how?
2. What do you think about the Talmudic approach to interpreting sacred texts? Is there something to be said for having more dogma and less debate?
3. This book devotes one section of one chapter to antisemitism (pages 41-44). Judging from your own experience with antisemitism and/or your perception of other people’s experiences, is that enough? Too much?
4. What aspects of Judaism, if any, do you think are ripe for reinterpretation today?
5. Who should have a say in how Jewish tradition is understood and interpreted? Should some people have more of a say than others?

**Chapter 3 – Freeing God from “His” Human-Shaped Cage in the Sky**

1. What was your reaction to Hurwitz’s experience on her first meditation retreat (pages 54-60)? Have you ever tried anything like Hitbodedut? Do you want to? Why or why not?
2. When in your own life, if ever, do you feel like you have experienced the Divine?
3. Which of the God conceptions – if any – described in this chapter resonate for you (pages 64-74)? Which don’t? What is your own conception of the Divine?
4. How do you feel about atheism (pages 78-82)? Do you think it’s compatible with Judaism?
5. Hurwitz asserts that belief in God is not necessary to incentivize moral behavior (pages 78-79). Do you agree or disagree? Why?

**Chapter 4 – Mitzvot and the Spirituality of Doing**

1. How do you feel about the idea of human beings having a partnership with God (pages 86-88)? Does that affirm or conflict with your own personal conception of the Divine?
2. What do you think of the idea of an action-based spirituality (pages 88-91)? Does following Jewish law by doing things like helping those in need or refraining from speaking unkindly feel like a “spiritual” experience to you? Why or why not?
3. How would you define Jewish “observance”? What do you think makes someone Jewishly “observant”?

**Chapter 5 – Becoming a Great Person: Self-Restraint and Self-Transcendence**

1. When you read the section on speech in this chapter (pages 98-102), how did it make you feel? How might the Jewish thinking around gossip, shaming, and “stealing the mind” apply in your own life?
2. Do you think people are born with an inclination to be good, an inclination to be bad, or neither? What do you think of the Jewish idea of channeling our yetzer hara/bad inclination (pages 107-108) rather than trying to suppress it? What are the benefits of that approach? What are the pitfalls?
3. How might the Jewish thinking around tzedakah (pages 110-114) and hesed (pages 114-117) apply to your own efforts to assist those who are financially or emotionally in need?
4. What was your reaction to the Jewish thinking about how we should treat animals (pages 117-120)? Did this section make you think any differently about the food you purchase and consume?
5. Does the prospect of doing more Jewish study (pages 121-122) appeal to you? If so, how might you go about doing so?

**Chapter 6 – Prayer and More: Finding the Primal in Jewish Spiritual Practice**

1. Did Hurwitz’s description of her struggles with prayer (pages 123-126) resonate for you? Why or why not?
2. Which of the purposes of prayer – connecting us to others (page 128); connecting us to ourselves (128-129); cultivating gratitude, awe, and humility (129-130); and spurring us to act (131-132) – have you personally experienced when praying, if any? Which would you like to experience, if any? Do you think prayer, as you understand and experience it, can really fulfill these purposes?
3. Of the spiritual practices listed in this chapter – unscripted personal prayer (pages 132-133), scripted communal prayer (134-142), blessings practice (142-144), meditation (144-147), and study (147-148) – which is most meaningful to you? Which is least meaningful? Which, if any, would you like to try?
4. Would understanding some of the deeper meanings behind the prayers enhance your prayer experience? Or would that detract from it, making prayer feel more intellectual and less spiritual?
5. When, if ever, have you found prayer to be especially helpful? Especially unhelpful? Is there any prayer that particularly moves you?

**Chapter 7 – Giving Shabbat a Chance**

1. Does the idea of observing Shabbat by following the traditional rules about not working, cooking, driving, using electricity, etc. appeal to you? Why or why not?
2. Do you have a Shabbat practice, or does observing Shabbat in any way appeal to you? If not, why? If so, what would your ideal Shabbat look like?
3. If you have a Shabbat practice or wish to have one, what are the challenges you face in doing so? Can anyone in the group offer advice or support for overcoming those obstacles?
4. Which of the six potential benefits of Shabbat listed on pages 162-169 do you most yearn for in your own life? If you had the chance, how might you create a Shabbat observance that fulfills that yearning?

**Chapter 8 – Jewish Holidays and the Power of a Well-Placed Banana**

1. If you’ve ever participated in a Passover seder, what elements of it were most meaningful to you? What elements do you think need to be better explained or interpreted? If you were going to plan a seder of your own, what rituals or readings would you include to make the Exodus story come alive?
2. Of the three Rosh Hashanah themes listed on pages 188-192 – kingship, remembrance, and forgiveness – which one most resonates with you? Which one do you most struggle with?
3. How did the excerpt from Rabbi Berger’s Yom Kippur sermon (page 194) hit you? Did it disturb you? Motivate you? Should the kind of rigorous self-examination we do at Yom Kippur be done more than once a year? Less?
4. What’s your take on Hanukkah? Has it become merely a Jewish version of Christmas? Is it important to ensure that Jewish kids don’t feel left out at that time of year?
5. Do you have any “banana on the seder plate” ideas – tweaks, rituals, practices, etc. to help them come alive for modern times – for holidays other than Passover?

**Chapter 9 – Life Cycle Rituals (Well, Mainly Just Death)**

1. How did you feel after reading about how the deceased are traditionally prepared for burial (pages 209-212)? Is this something you would want for your loved ones? For yourself?
2. If you’ve ever experienced the Jewish rituals for supporting mourners (pages 212-222), were they helpful? If you haven’t, do you think they would be helpful for you in a time of grief?
3. What do you make of the Kaddish and the interpretations offered in this book (pages 218-220)? Do any of them resonate for you? Do you have a different interpretation of this prayer?
4. What do you think of the various Jewish afterlife conceptions on pages 223-227? Do any of them resonate with you? Are any of them off-putting to you?
5. How do you feel about Judaism’s emphasis on this world versus an afterlife? Is it troubling? Comforting?

**Conclusion (Though Also, Hopefully, a Beginning) – Again, Why Bother with Judaism?**

1. If it were up to you to create an Option 3 kind of Judaism, what would it look like?
2. Do you agree that lack of literacy is one of the most important challenges in Judaism today? Or do you think there are other challenges that should be a higher priority?
3. Of the pieces of advice offered for exploring Judaism on pages 245-252, which felt most relevant to you? Why?
4. This book concludes with a list of things the author loves about Judaism (pages 253-254). If you were to articulate your own such list, what would it include?
5. Looking through the Appendix of Resources for Getting Started (pages 259-265), which areas look most interesting and exciting to you? Which resources would you most like to pursue?