

For Discussion

The Union for Reform Judaism recommends two **Significant Jewish Books** each quarter for individuals and book groups. Study and discussion guides are available at <http://urj.org/books>.

Spiritual Radical: Abraham Joshua Heschel in America by Edward K. Kaplan

(Yale University Press, 530 pp., \$40)

Edward Kaplan's biography of Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel provides an insightful portrait of American Judaism in the 1940s, '50s, and '60s. Arriving as a refugee scholar in 1940 at the invitation of Hebrew Union College President Julian Morgenstern, Heschel felt like "a brand plucked from the fire." Constantly worried about his mother and sister in the Warsaw ghetto, he was incredulous at the seeming apathy of American Jews to the desperate situation of their European brethren. His commitment to activism was born in these heartbreaking years.

As the scion of two prominent Hasidic dynasties in Europe, Heschel sought to infuse an arid, over-secularized American Judaism with a compelling spirituality based on faith in a living God. With the publication of *Man Is Not Alone* (1951) and *God In Search of Man* (1955), Heschel emerged as an inspirational religious leader for American Jews.

This narrative contains behind-the-scenes views of Heschel's well-known activities: his participation in the civil rights movement (marching with Dr. Martin Luther King in 1963), his early support for Soviet Jews, and his controversial stand against the war in Vietnam.

Far from a hagiography, Kaplan presents a portrait of a complex man who regarded himself as the bearer of an Eastern European religious sensibility. His vision found its true adherents with his last crop of students at the Jewish Theological Seminary in the late '60s, who became teachers of the next generation.

People of the Book: A Novel by Geraldine Brooks

(Viking, 372 pp., \$25.95)

Few people realize that the expression "People of the Book" is Arabic in origin and refers to the tolerated, if subordinate, status of Jews in Muslim states. Over the centuries, Jews have adopted the phrase to describe themselves and their devotion to the Torah. Geraldine Brooks' novel, *People of the Book*, deals with both themes: interfaith relations and a defining Jewish text.

Brooks first learned about the existence of the *Sarajevo Haggadah* as a *Wall Street Journal* correspondent covering the Bosnian War. At the time, the 14th-century illuminated manuscript, valued at more than \$700 million, was missing from the National Museum of Bosnia and Herzegovina. Later it was revealed that it had been hidden and protected by Bosnian Muslim librarians. Brooks notes that this was the second time such a rescue took place: Dervis Korkut, a former curator of the museum, hid the same manuscript from the Nazis during World War II. He also hid in his own home a teenaged Jewish girl named Mira Papo.

"Why did this little book always find its protectors when so many others did

not?" Brooks posed the question and answered it in an interview: "It is interesting to me that the book was created in a period—*convivencia* Spain—when diversity was tolerated, even somewhat celebrated, and that it found its way centuries later to a similar place, Sarajevo. So even when hateful forces arose in those societies and crushed the spirit of multiethnic, interfaith acceptance, there were those individuals who saw what was happening and acted to stop it in any way they could."

The novel begins with an Australian book conservator, Hanna Heath, who is called in to restore the book after the Bosnian War. Finding clues within its pages—an insect's wing, a wine stain, a strand of white hair—she becomes a historical sleuth, locating the places where the *Sarajevo Haggadah* had probably been over its 500-year history: *fin-de-siècle* Vienna, 16th-century Venice, 15th-century Seville. Meanwhile, in alternating chapters, Brooks supplies fictional back stories, correlating with the history of these times and places.

The fictional stories in this novel are intriguing, but one true story is missing from the novel that Brooks herself records in an article published in *The New Yorker* (reprinted on her website): Israel's rescue

of the family of the late Dervis Korkut, who was recognized as a "Righteous Gentile" by Yad Vashem. During the war in Kosovo, Korkut's daughter and her family were airlifted to Tel Aviv, where they were welcomed by Mira Papo's son. □

