

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>.

If You Awaken Love: A Novel by Emuna Elon

(Toby Press, 221 pp., paperback \$14.95)

There are souls that know one another from primordial times, from before they ever descended to earth and entered the body. I shook with happiness the first time Yair read me that sentence from Rabbi Kook's *Lights of Holiness*," recalls Shlomtzion Dror, a forty-year-old divorcée living in Tel Aviv. In her youth, she never doubted that Yair Berman, her love from childhood and adolescence, was destined to be her mate. But Yair, a promising Talmud scholar, was urged by the Rosh Yeshiva to break off his engagement to Shlomtzion and marry another, a rejection from which she never completely recovered. Now, because her daughter Maya, from a subsequent marriage, has agreed to marry Yair's son, Shlomtzion has to face her first love as a future in-law. As if this weren't hard enough, she has to cross the Green Line to visit Yair in his West Bank settlement town.

This beautifully crafted love story reflects all the inner tensions of Israeli society between the Six-Day War and the Oslo Accords of the early nineties. Yair is part of the yeshiva world and a follower of the religious Zionism of Rabbi Kook's son, Tzvi Yehuda, founder of the settlers' movement. Shlomtzion, who tried to follow Yair in his religious devotion, broke with religious life after their break-up and is now a left-leaning secularist who hopes the Oslo Accords will bring peace. Meanwhile Yair's family—as well as her daughter Maya, a recent *baalat teshuva* (newly observant Orthodox)—have no faith in the promise of Oslo. "What kills me is how they keep calling it a peace agreement," Maya fumes. "An agreement that brings Arafat from Tunis and gives the PLO a military based in the middle of Israel is going to

bring us nothing but a horrible war."

In going to meet Yair and his family, Shlomtzion revisits the dreams of her youth—utopian dreams born in the idealistic period following the Six-Day War. This novel is special for the insights it provides into religious life and politics in Israel. Rather than vilifying either faction, it depicts people, often part of the same family, struggling with questions about their country's future.

How to Read the Bible: A Guide to Scripture Then and Now by James L. Kugel

(Free Press, 819 pp., paperback \$18.95)

Modern biblical scholarship, from its beginnings in nineteenth-century Germany where it was called "Higher Criticism" (and "Higher Anti-Semitism" by some Jews), posed a serious challenge to traditional Jewish and Christian beliefs. For one thing, if the biblical text was written by multiple authors over the course of centuries, was it still the "Word of God"? According to James Kugel, ancient interpreters made four assumptions about the Bible: that there was "hidden meaning" behind its words; that it contained "lessons" relevant to the present; that there were no

contradictions or mistakes in the text; and that it was God's word delivered through His prophets. All of these assumptions have been challenged by modern biblical scholarship, which seeks instead to discover the meaning of its texts in their original historical contexts.

The appeal of this scholarship and its allied fields (ancient languages and archaeology) is enormous, and for some readers opens up the biblical text in new and exciting ways. Marc Brettler's book with a similar title, *How to Read the Jewish Bible* (reviewed in *Reform Judaism*, Winter 2006), presents some of these historical insights on the ancient text, as he deliberately "peels back the layers of Jewish and Christian interpretations that have colored our views of the Hebrew Bible."

Kugel approaches the same material from a different angle. Like Brettler, he discusses what we've learned from modern scholarship about the origins of biblical texts, but he is less interested in "peeling back" layers of interpretation than exploring their significance. The interpretative process began before the end of the biblical period, when the Israelites returned to their land from Babylonian exile and had to rebuild all

their institutions anew. The ancient interpreters, from the author of Chronicles to the early rabbinic sages, looked to these texts for divine guidance; their way of reading the Bible, according to Kugel—as sacred teachings—made these texts into "The Bible." □

