THE JEWISH BOOKSHELF

To be a Jew is to read. To learn, to study, to exercise the mind in pursuit of God and truth, is the holiest act. The Talmud, in a passage that dazzlingly illustrates the world of the sages, tells of a certain Rav Hamnuna who was taking a long time over his prayers and was thus late for his class in Jewish law. His teacher Rava said, “Here is a man who sets aside eternal life and engages in mere mortal pursuits.” (Shabbat 10a). Compared to study, prayer was a mere this-worldly activity. Is there any other religion in which that could be said?

So the idea of a Jewish bookshelf is something of a contradiction in terms. There are bookshelves, “houses full of books” (a rabbinic phrase), libraries, “houses of study.” “Of the making of many books, there is no end,” said Kohelet. Jorge Luis Borges, director of Argentina’s National Library, once wrote a short story, *The Library of Babylon*, in which he imagined a library containing every possible book. That is a Jewish idea of paradise. In Judaism, not only does the world contain the Book: the Book contains the world. “God looked into the Torah and created the universe.”

But we have to start somewhere. If someone were to ask me which ten books to read to understand what Jews are and what we believe, this would be my recommendation:

(1) **The book of Devarim, Deuteronomy**

Whilst the whole of the Torah is to be treasured no other single book so summarises the whole of Jewish faith: law, narrative, theology, the first two paragraphs of the Shema, the Ten Commandments, a summation of Jewish history and a visionary glimpse of the Jewish future. The name Devarim (literally “words”) is deliberately ironic. At his first encounter with God, Moses had said, “I am not a man of words” (*ish devarim*). Here at the end of his life he becomes not just a, but the, man of words in a series of eloquent speeches unparalleled in their prescience. The entire book of Devarim is, in fact, a covenant in vastly extended form, in which the relationship between the people Israel and God is articulated and affirmed. God will be their sovereign; they are summoned to create an exemplary society built on compassion, justice and the dignity of all, especially the powerless and marginal. If you want to understand what Judaism is, this is where you begin.

(2) **Sefer Tehillim, the book of Psalms**

Tenakh, the Hebrew Bible, consists of three kinds of text, Torah, Neviim (Prophets) and Ketuvim (“the Writings”). The simplest way of differentiating them is that the Torah is God’s word to man, Neviim is God’s word through man, and Ketuvim is man’s word to God. Of the last, the book of Psalms is supreme. It is the music of the Jewish soul in its conversation with God. It runs the entire musical range, from choral symphonies to chamber music, from praise to penitence, from public celebration to private, sometimes heart-rending, plea (“My God, my God, why have You forsaken me?”). There is no greater religious poetry than this.

(3) **Pirkei Avot**
All the great works of the sages – Mishnah, Gemarra, and Midrash – are essential reading. But Avot, AKA “The Ethics of the Fathers,” is unique as a sustained account of what it is to live the life of Torah. Avot is to the Oral Law what Proverbs is to Tenakh, a book of wisdom. But this is the distinctive wisdom of a group of people who traced their ancestry to the prophets and were real, if quiet, revolutionaries, turning Judaism from a religion of state, politics, Temple and priests into one of synagogue, school and house of study. Avot is the classic statement of the life of study and teaching.

(4) Rashi’s commentary to the Torah

Non-Jews almost never understand how Jews read the Torah: always in stereo, listening to the written text with one ear, the classic commentaries and super-commentaries with the other. Of these, none has been more loved than that of Rashi. He is always there when you need him, explaining why this word not that, what the connection is between one section and another, anticipating all the questions you are likely to ask. His answers are not always straightforward – his grandson Rashbam claimed to have gone further into the “plain sense” of the verse – but they faithfully reflect rabbinic tradition. Rashi may not be the last word in Torah commentary but he is the first. Indispensable.

(5) Judah Halevi, The Kuzari

Halevi (c. 1075-1141), the greatest Jewish poet of the Middle Ages, was also one of its finest thinkers. His philosophical masterpiece, The Kuzari, would read almost precisely like a riposte to Maimonides’ Guide for the Perplexed, were it not for the fact that it was written several decades earlier. Halevi stands at the opposite end of the spectrum to Maimonides, critical of the claims of reason to give an account of the human spirit, preferring “the God of Abraham” to “the God of Aristotle,” anticipating Buber’s distinction between I-Thou and I-It. Written as an imagined dialogue between the King of the Khazars (who converted to Judaism in the eighth century) and a rabbi, it is an engagingly readable statement of Jewish faith and a defence of Jewish particularity. It is available in several translations.

(6) Maimonides, Laws of Repentance

Maimonides was Judaism’s greatest philosopher, but his philosophical masterpiece, The Guide for the Perplexed, is deeply perplexing and deliberately obscure. His greatest single achievement was the Mishneh Torah, the most comprehensive, lucid and logically structured code of Jewish law ever written. Some parts of this are utterly unprecedented, and The Laws of Repentance is a fine example. Not only does it take you through the laws of repentance; it also guides you through its history, psychology and philosophy. You will encounter magnificent accounts of freewill, life after death, the messianic age, and what it is to serve God with love, all in ten short chapters of crystalline prose. No one else ever wrote halakhah like this.

(7) Sefer ha-Hinnukh

The classic work on the 613 commandments, written in the thirteenth century, author unknown, possibly R. Aharon ha-Levi of Barcelona. Judaism is the life of the commands which together
constitute the choreography of life aligned with the will of God. The commands turn the prose of the everyday into religious poetry, and life into a work of religious art. This work, proceeding through the commands, their scope and logic, in the order in which they appear in the Torah, is one of the best introductions to biblical law.

(8) Elie Wiesel, Souls on Fire

No account of Judaism would be complete without some taste of the Hassidic movement that swept across Eastern Europe in the eighteenth century. Hassidism, a revivalist movement that emphasized simple piety, devotion in prayer, and serving God in joy, was one of the most creative phenomena in Diaspora Jewish history, and the figure of the Tzaddik or Rebbe, the charismatic leader of a sect was a genuinely new type. There are several collections of stories about these colourful figures, and Wiesel’s is probably the most accessible. Touching, humane and profound, they are an essential dimension of a fully rounded Judaism.

(9) R. Joseph Soloveitchik, The Lonely Man of Faith

R. Joseph Soloveitchik (1903-1993) was perhaps the greatest Jewish thinker of the twentieth century, a unique blend of two worlds, the yeshivah (his grandfather, R. Hayyim of Brisk, was one of its greatest minds) and the university (he wrote a doctorate on neo-Kantian epistemology). This short work is a fine example of his method, a philosophically inflected form of midrash, in which he does several things at once: resolves a series of difficulties in the two creation accounts of Genesis, suggests an orthodox response to Biblical Criticism, develops a phenomenology of the religious personality, and offers a critique of Western modernity. A complex gem of contemporary Jewish thought at its best.

(10) Paul Johnson, A History of the Jews

“All Jews who are at all conscious of their identity as Jews,” wrote Isaiah Berlin, “are steeped in history.” So a Jewish bookshelf must have at least one volume covering the history of our people, a story with more sweep and drama than any fiction. It is hard to single one out – there are many, most of them excellent. For me, however, Johnson’s is one of the best written and the most insightful. Who could improve on this stunning summation of the Jewish task: “No people has ever insisted more firmly than the Jews that history has a purpose and humanity a destiny … The Jews, therefore, stand right at the centre of the perennial attempt to give human life the dignity of a purpose”? A lovely, uplifting book