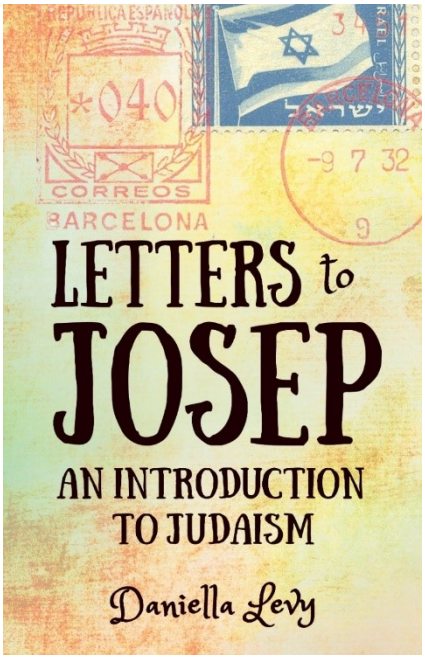
Judaism Made Simple.

(...and highly entertaining.)

How does it look and feel to live as an Orthodox Jew?



Josep, a secular Catholic from Barcelona, wondered exactly that. And when he met Daniella, an American-Israeli Orthodox Jew, he had more questions than he knew how to ask.

Inspired by his curiosity, Daniella began to describe her faith and her life to Josep: from celebrating the Sabbath to keeping kosher, from the Hebrew calendar to the Jewish concept of the afterlife.

The result? This collection of amusing and enlightening letters. Daniella untangles the threads of a highly complex religion so accessibly that even the most uninitiated can relate. But she addresses difficult concepts with enough depth that the knowledgeable will find new insight, too. Every page resonates with the warmth, candor, and respect that characterize this unlikely friendship... served up with a liberal dash of humor.

Whether you're a curious non-Jew or a Jew hoping to expand your knowledge, *Letters to Josep: An Introduction to Judaism* will charm, inform, and inspire you.

Letters to Josep

An Introduction to Judaism

Daniella Levy

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More information at LettersToJosep.com/the-book

About the Author

Daniella Levy is an Orthodox Jewish writer, translator, and educator living in Israel with her husband, Rabbi Eitan Levy, and their three sons. Her work has been published in both English and Hebrew, in print and online, on platforms such as Pnima Magazine, Kveller, Ynet News, JWire, Hevria, and the Shaharitekoa Journal of Literature and Art. She has translated materials on topics ranging from psychology to parenting to botany.

Born in New York, she immigrated to Israel as a child. Her formal education in English ended at that point, but her love of reading and writing did not. She wrote her first book at the age of ten, and by fifteen had already completed two full-length novels. Her Talmud studies notes from high school consisted of a series of silly dramatizations of Jewish sages yelling at each other. She's pretty sure her teacher would have been horrified.

Daniella briefly studied Jewish studies, theater and education at Emunah College in Jerusalem. A black belt in Shorin Ryu Matsubayashi karate, she is certified as a self-defense instructor by IMPACT International, El Halev, and the Israeli Ministry of Education and Sports. She is also certified as a bridal counselor by Nishmat and the Gush Etzion Municipality, and has training in childbirth education through Childbirth International.

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Sample Q&A

Is Josep a real person?

He and I have a running joke now about the questionability of his existence. Many people seem to find it more plausible that I invented him as a literary device, rather than believe that I actually have a Catholic friend in Barcelona. I guess that just demonstrates how unusual a friendship it is!

Yes, he is a real person. The picture to the right is of him. "Josep" is a pseudonym, though he is not particularly secretive about his identity. He wrote a foreword for the book.

How do you know each other?

The short version is that we served together on the press team for a youth conference in Barcelona. The long version—a tale of my distressing experiences as a religious Jew there and Josep's attempts to set things right—can be found in the introduction (or on the blog: letterstojosep.com/how-it-all-began).

Why did you write him these letters?

Before we met, he had harbored an odd interest in Jews and Judaism, but had never met an actual Jew. He was a pro-Israel political science student—quite a lonely position!—but he had never met an actual Israeli before. Furthermore, around the time we met, he had been doing some research about his genealogy and discovered that some of his family's surnames are converso surnames. He had wanted to look further into this, but didn't know how.

This was the first time I'd had an opportunity to share my enthusiasm with someone who was interested, but knew very little about [Judaism]. And it was so much fun, I just couldn't stop!

And then I turned up! Aside from being an Israeli and an Orthodox Jew, it just so happened that I had a few excellent contacts for him, one of whom was Gloria Mound, director of the Casa Shalom Institute of Marrano-Anusim studies. So after I returned to Israel, I got in touch with him and connected them. In the meantime, he expressed interest in learning more about Judaism, so I started to write these e-mails explaining various aspects of my life as a Jew.

I love being Jewish, and have practiced my religion with great sense of joy and connection since my teens. This was the first time I'd had an opportunity to share my enthusiasm with someone who was interested, but knew very little about it. And it was so much fun, I just couldn't stop!

What made you decide to turn them into a book?

It was an idea I had in the first year or so, when our correspondence was most intense. I figured there were probably many more people like him who would have liked to learn about Judaism but didn't know where to start and didn't have the fortune of meeting someone as expressive about it as I am. But as our correspondence waned and we both moved on to other things, the idea for the book faded too. Years later, we picked things up again, but he has always had trouble keeping up with my e-mails, and was going through a particularly difficult period at the time. I didn't want to overwhelm him, so I had the idea to start a blog, where I could post those letters whenever I felt like writing them, and he could visit and read them whenever he was able. That's how LetterstoJosep.com was born. The blog was well-received, and readers began to encourage me to turn it into a book. So I did!

How is *Letters to Josep* different from other books about Judaism?

I would say there are three things that make *Letters to Josep* unique.

The first is the tone. These letters were written to a real friend, and they reflect the warmth, respect, honesty, and sense of humor that characterize that friendship. They are also quite personal, sometimes divulging my own struggles with various aspects of Judaism or theology. Judaism is obviously portrayed in a positive light, but I don't shy away from asking tough questions, and I don't settle for apologetics and feel-good, contrived answers.

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The second is the goal of the book. It's not meant to guide people closer to Judaism, nor to persuade anyone to become Jewish or observant. Josep still identifies as a non-practicing Catholic, and it was never my intention to change that about him. The sole purpose of the book is to *describe*.

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Which brings us to the third difference: while many books about Judaism consist of instructions for keeping Jewish law or abstract discussion of spiritual concepts, *Letters to Josep* tells the reader how it *looks and feels* to live as an Orthodox Jew. I'm not an authority on Jewish law. The only authority on which I am writing this book is that I'm an Orthodox Jew, I'm good at explaining things, and I'm Josep's friend. And that's really what the book is about—sharing an experience.

How are the letters organized?

I think one of the book's selling points is its clear structure. Jewish law is so complex and full of intricate detail, it's very easy to lose the forest for the trees. *Letters to Josep* is a map of the forest.

The letters are organized into three categories: Observant Jewish Life, the Jewish Year, and Jewish Concepts. The first section contains explanations of the basic day-to-day observances: keeping kosher, Shabbat, prayer, customs around the Jewish lifecycle, etc. The second section takes the reader chronologically through the Hebrew calendar and all the Jewish holidays. The third section discusses more abstract ideas and issues: Jewish identity, education, the Jewish concepts of the Messianic Age and the afterlife, and so on.

Who might benefit from reading your book?

The book has two primary potential audiences. The first is, of course, people like Josep—non-Jews, or Jews raised with no connection to traditional Judaism, who are curious about what it's like to live as an Orthodox Jew. The second is secular friends and family members of Orthodox Jews who want to better understand what all this crazy stuff they do is about.

I think, especially in the case of family members of a person who recently became observant, a book like *Letters to Josep* might be particularly welcome. My mother grew up secular, and when she decided to be observant, her parents took it pretty hard. How do you tell your own mother that you can't eat in her kitchen anymore? How do you explain to your best friend that you can't attend his wedding because it's on a Saturday? People have a tendency to take other people's religious or ideological shifts personally, as though choosing a different path is a statement about *their* choices. It's so hard to navigate these things without someone getting offended or hurt.

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Handing someone a copy of *Letters to Josep* is like inviting them to chill out with me over a cup of tea. I'll give it to them straight and clear, no personal tensions, no judgement. The book doesn't say, "This is what I think you should do." It says, "This is who I am and how I see things." It's very nonthreatening, and I think this can help bring understanding and harmony to those tense relationships.

By the way, my grandfather—the staunch atheist who was so upset when my mother became religious—absolutely loves the book. So I must be doing something right!

Reviews & Testimonials

"Although I have been observant for over thirty years and I've been teaching Torah for at least twenty, I was impressed with [Daniella's] skillful, conversational method of explaining even the most basic of areas of Judaism… so straightforward, even simple, that it's beautiful and enlightening. I can see myself recommending [this] book to many people."

—Sari Horovitz Hoffman, Jewish educator

"Before I picked up 'Letters to Josep,' I knew very little about Judaism. How do you form a complete understanding of a culture that has not only been around for thousands of years, but also has such a tumultuous history? Levy makes the complex and rich traditions completely approachable, a pleasure to read. The conversational tone she strikes is friendly and put me at ease, but at the same time her faith in and love of her roots shines through. She is just as honest about the flaws of the Jewish tradition as she is about its glories."

—Kate Kearns

"Daniella has a remarkable gift of 'telling' and explaining instead of 'preaching.' She is witty, informative, warm, honest, intelligent and incredibly well learned. Her style is easy to understand and gives the answers to questions without needing all the reference books or a pile of dictionaries right in front of you! She writes caring, informative letters to her friend, who could be any one of us… Your life and your soul will be enriched by the collection of letters in this book."

—Miryam Heiliczer, RN, CM

"This is a love story…not a story of romance or fiction… but of a shared, unbroken connection through the centuries, Judaism. Daniella is the teacher. Josep is the student… This is a book of lessons; lessons in Judaism expressed with enlightenment, sensitivity, humor, perplexity and love."

—Bonnee Shafner Oderberg

"This book provides clear insights into the life of Torah-observant Judaism. The author's conversational, friendly tone presents both academic and experiential knowledge in an easy, yet very informative, read… I wish I'd had such a book myself when I was beginning my journey of observant Judaism."

—Karyn, Amazon reviewer