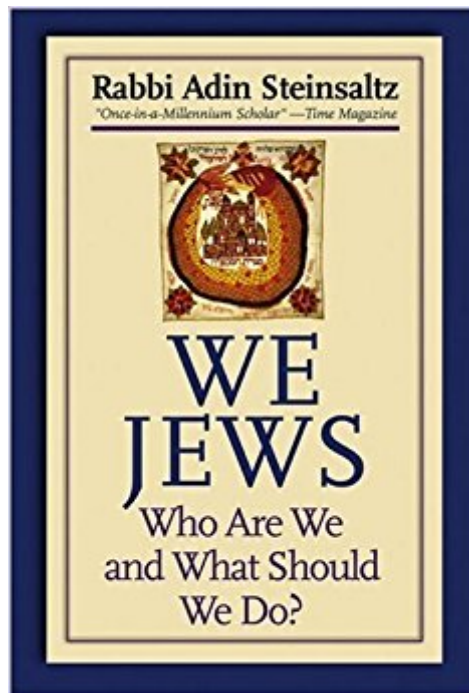




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# We Jews: Who Are We And What Should We Do



## Synopsis

In *We Jews*, Rabbi Steinsaltz explores the most important issues that concern Jews today as Jews. He provides wise and uplifting answers to Jews everywhere, whether they are secular and assimilated or orthodox. Are we a nation or a religion? Are the stereotypes of Jews really true? Why are Jews so controversial? How can we navigate the opposing forces of diversity, culture, and politics? Can we survive intermarriage and the loss of tradition? Do we still worship the Golden Calf? In this book, Rabbi Steinsaltz sees causes and consequences, achievements and failures, looks at the contemporary world, and observes the dreams and longings of modern Jewish people. Written as an intimate and inspiring internal memo to the whole Jewish family, *We Jews* answers these questions and many more in a way that is at once insightful and inspiring.

## Book Information

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## Customer Reviews

Based in Jerusalem, Steinsaltz is an internationally influential rabbi who is best known for his prodigious project of translating and reinterpreting the Talmud. This book is a series of 12 essays, each attempting to answer a perplexing and formidable question: What are the implications of the Jewish capacity to identify with the surrounding culture? Why do Jews have no united leadership? Are Jews a nation, a religion, an ethnic group or a race? Do Jews have unique character traits? Why do Jews want to save the world? Are Jews too emotional or too intellectual? What does it mean to be the "chosen" people? How is it that Jews have made such impressive contributions to artistic and intellectual achievement? What is the basis for anti-Semitism? What will become of the Jewish people? Most of these questions will apply more to Diaspora Jews than to those living in

Israel. The issues Steinsaltz identifies are tough conundrums that do not lend themselves to easy answers; he struggles valiantly but often vainly to come up with satisfactory solutions, suggesting that the value is in raising the questions, not necessarily in answering them. His elucidation of each subject demonstrates his profound erudition, not only enabling readers to see a great mind at work but also challenging them to seek their own resolution of the hard dilemmas that have been so clearly posed. (Apr.) Copyright © Reed Business Information, a division of Reed Elsevier Inc. All rights reserved.

Rabbi Steinsaltz is the author of 60 books, most of them dealing with Hasidic thought, kabbalah, and the Talmud. He writes in an introduction that the subjects explored in this book are matters that bother most Jews, especially those in the Diaspora. These issues include assimilation, a lack of united leadership and unity, and the question of Jewish identity. He discusses Jewish character traits and lies and misunderstandings regarding Jews and money, and he explores what he calls the Jewish Messiah complex, Jewish emotionalism and intellectualism, idolatry, their role in the world, their search for unifying principles, anti-Semitism, and the Jews' future. This scholarly study will prove invaluable to Jews attempting to understand their place in today's society after the Holocaust and to non-Jews seeking a better understanding of the Jewish people. George Cohen Copyright © American Library Association. All rights reserved

nice experience

Steinsaltz is the greatest living Talmud scholar, an Israeli born into a secular family, and a mystic and Kabbalist. The two things that stick with me most from this book - or perhaps I'll expand that to a few things: -he makes the argument that from the supposed 5 million Jews of the beginning of the CE, there should be 300 million from natural increase. Therefore the surviving 15 million descendents have undergone a tremendous selection pressure, both physical and mental, including those with the inner character and abilities to allow them to choose Judaism and survive. He then tries to list these inherited Jewish character traits. I will try and list them all below, but the one that struck me most was Individualism. He has a whole chapter on the Messiah complex that leads Jews to try and save the world, which I certainly recognize within myself. And he has very harsh words about the attempt to survive and continue as Jews for its own sake, if it is empty of Judaism and the Jewish mission to be a holy nation. His description of the Biblical injunction to be a nation of priests and a holy nation is stronger than anything I have read on the subject. He truly believes the essence

of Jewish character, expressed or not, is to be a servant of God, and if we don't want to do this, we might as well give up. One other point he made that I found very convincing: Jews are not a race, nation or religion but a family. From a family, you can be estranged, you can betray...but you are never anything but a son or daughter. Jews are the children of God and of the patriarchs and matriarchs. We can betray our inner essence as well, but our inherited heritage cannot be erased either. Some things from the book: His list of Jewish intrinsic traits: All murders of Jews and all the difficulties of being Jewish resulted in a constant winnowing out of people who remained Jewish. Those who remained Jewish and passed it on to their children had to possess character traits, "a combination of qualities that allows them to withstand such difficulties, and also to transmit the message to their children." 1. high survival capacity: adaptability, flexibility, will to live, belief in life, talent for imitation and simulation/to create a false self/to believe in one's false self, to be a wanderer/an alien/a cosmopolitan. negative expression: pushiness, materialism, loss of values in materialism. Flexibility and adaptability can result in spinelessness, loss of self-respect, pandering, aping with no self-esteem. 2. stubbornness. Persistence. Can be directed towards remaining Jewish, or towards other pursuits - business, science etc. 3. individualism. Main spiritual and religious duties of a Jew are as an individual. No priest or imam does religion for you. "most of his duties are between himself and God alone." a. Also, no organizations in civil life required Jew limit his individualism. No guilds, army, church, state jobs, corporation jobs...the opposite, each Jew had to make his economic survival alone, on private initiative (why didn't Jews organize themselves economically? politically?) b. Negative side: weak in teamwork, cooperation, even when Jewish survival at stake. Can result in selfish egotism. 4. buoyed by faith. Deep need for faith. "It is not possible to follow God as a Jew should do...except on the basis of a deep core of faith." "Whoever does not have faith - the ability to construct his life on the basis of concerns other than real and immediate materialistic considerations - is incapable of continuing to live as a Jew. Such ability and compulsion to believe are, perhaps, what has most distinguished essential Jewishness since its formation. The very first choice of Israel was the choice of belief and this choice strengthened over the generations, because it is impossible to be a Jew without it." (elsewhere, he argues being a Jew is to be born into the Jewish family, is impossible to stop being!) a. Messiah complex universal Jewish psychological 'complex'. The need to 'redeem reality, to reform it, to improve it. No one can continue a life of distress and insecurity, in which he is sometimes despised and humiliated by others, unless he feels a deep sense of mission....the individual Jew may lose his messianic faith, but he is incapable of losing his need to hasten the redemption." b. Connected to the search for redemption is Intellectualism c. Readiness to join cults and messianic movements such as

Communism"...a Jew may distance himself from his cultural heritage and even leave it entirely...but a person cannot escape his essential self....A person can observe anything in world, either close or distant, but every subject he observes or deals with...he can only see with Jewish eyes, and he can only think about it with the mind of a Jew." P158 Rabbi Judah Halevi, Book of the Kuzari: "Israel exists among the nations like a heart among the limbs." "Imagine that someone has a document that can open the Gates of Heaven. He takes this document and runs with it to the ends of the earth. When he finds he is unable to reach Heaven in his lifetime, he gives the document to his children. And his children go on running with it and keeping it safe, generation after generation. But with time the words...are rubbed away. The people who carry the document are no longer able to read it....Later still it is reduced to a mere piece of paper, and even this piece of paper starts to rot....Eventually, however, the people ...will discover they are running very hard and very fast but carrying nothing. And so they will stop running." P184-5 Jews have lost our meaning, our mission, our message. We are an empty shell, not even an intact shell. Loss of 'inner sense'. "People cannot go on living in the past, even if the past was pleasant - and ours was not." We must have a living Jewish culture that will create a heritage for generations - not 'indulgence money. People paid to get rid of the guilt that came from discarding their Jewishness." Survival with hope requires an investment of life.

This is a book that cannot be rushed through. It has pearl after pearl to be discovered by the reader. I'm loving it.

Rabbi Steinsaltz's magnificent and brilliant book "The Thirteen Petalled Rose" is on my list of the ten most meaningful books I have ever read. So it was with great pleasure that I looked forward to reading his newest book, "We Jews". This book is far from the spirituality of "The Thirteen Petalled Rose". It seeks to answer practical Jewish questions such as 'do Jews have their own set of character traits', 'are we a nation or a religion' and 'are Jews excessively cold or excessively emotional'. Many of the answers to these questions seem to be generalizations that are incapable of proof, such as his belief that Jews inherently share character traits such as flexibility and adaptability, stubbornness and persistence, individualism, intellectualism etc. His chapter on the Jews monistic perception of the world drawn from their monotheism and how it affected the work of Marx, Freud and Einstein is indeed fascinating. In the end Rabbi Steinsaltz pessimistically concludes that given the way Jews are living (i.e. the large degree of assimilation) will lead to their end as a people. He implies that perhaps there could be a slim hope for Jewish continuity in the

building of 'a second center, comparable to, possibly better than the main center in Israel'. He never tells us the location of that center, but I assume it to be in America. He tells us Jewish continuity will require a lot of work, but never mentions with any specificity what that work looks like, and in the end that is the difficulty with this book. It is short on the details. Each chapter ends with questions by Arthur Kurzweil with whom Rabbi Steinsaltz worked on this book, followed by the rabbi's answers. In these sections too answers are never fully explored. The Q & A could have been fascinating. Having studied with Arthur Kurzweil I know he is a brilliant man, and the inclusion of more of his questions and their answers could have been a wonderful way to flesh out this book. Unfortunately this was not done, which leaves this reader feeling terribly short changed.

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