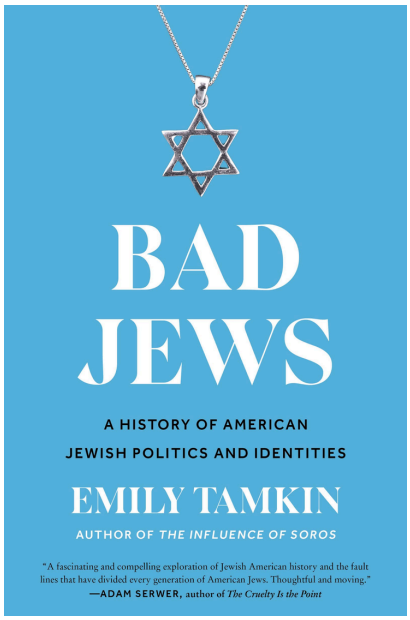
Changing the Conversation: Book Discussion Guides

These book discussion guides can be used for a multi-session book club or a single-session conversation about each book. They can be adapted for teens and adults.

“Bad Jews: A History of American Jewish Politics and Identities” by Emily Tamkin (2022)



Journalist Emily Tamkin's “Bad Jews: A History of American Jewish Politics and Identities” is an exploration of Jewish identity, politics, and cultural evolution in the United States. The book does not aim to define what makes someone a "good" or "bad" Jew, but instead examines the diverse, often conflicting ways American Jews have understood and expressed their identity across generations. Tamkin’s central argument is that being Jewish in America has never meant one thing, and trying to enforce a singular definition of Jewish identity is not only impossible but also harmful.

This book provides chapters categorizing Jews that connect with Zionism, Jews that connect with civil rights, and the Jews that she calls the “Pushing Jews,” those who are seeking to push the Jewish community, typically from a further left position. Consider two different ways to approach discussing this book:

1. Focus on specific chapters and discuss the particular types of Jews described in each section. To do this, we recommend focusing on the Introduction, Chapter 3, Chapter 8, and Chapter 9.
2. Have larger thematic conversations about the book as a whole. Below are a series of questions divided into thematic categories.

“Bad Jews: A History of American Jewish Politics and Identities” (continued)

Identity and Belonging

1. Tamkin argues that there is no single definition of what it means to be a Jew. What aspects of Jewish identity feel most central to you in defining who is a Jew?
2. How does the concept of a “bad Jew” reflect internal tensions within Jewish communities? Have you encountered or felt this label applied to yourself or others?

Zionism, Anti-Zionism and Internal Division

1. Tamkin explores how Zionism has long divided Jewish communities. What surprised you in learning about the history of Jews and Zionism? How do you see these tensions playing out today?
2. How has support or criticism of Israel become a litmus test for being a "good" or "bad" Jew in some spaces? How is this gatekeeping helpful or harmful to the Jewish community as a whole? To individual Jewish communities? What might be some unintended consequences of this litmus test?
3. The book presents multiple Jewish voices, some deeply committed to Zionism, others passionately opposed. What surprised you about learning about these voices? What most surprised you about those with opinions that differ the most from yours?

“Bad Jews: A History of American Jewish Politics and Identities” (continued)

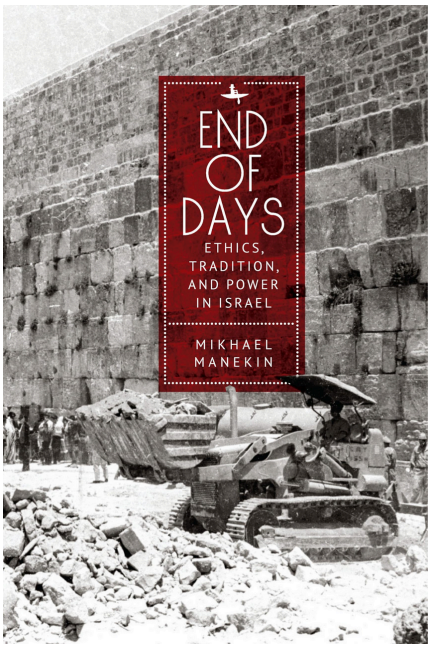
Jewish Trauma, Power and Moral Responsibility

1. How has Holocaust trauma influenced how American Jews view the need for statehood and safety? How does this trauma shape Jewish thinking more broadly? What are some of the unexpected positive effects of this painful history for Jewish communal dynamics? What are some of the negative effects?
2. In a section about Jews struggling to stay in contemporary social justice movements, Tamkin shares a lesson attributed to Rabbi Sharon Brous: “If Jews are not in the rooms where decisions are made, then shame on us for walking out of the room.” What do you make of this quote? Do you agree?
3. In what ways has fear of antisemitism been used fairly or unfairly to justify communal political positions, including unconditional support for Israeli policies?

Jewish Communal Implications

1. How can Jewish communities navigate the balance between safety, solidarity, and moral responsibility in a time of global polarization and rising antisemitism?
2. What does Tamkin’s analysis suggest about the future of Jewish political engagement in America?
3. What does Tamkin’s analysis make you wonder or hope for the future of the Jewish community?

“End of Days: Ethics, Tradition, and Power in Israel” by Mikhael Manekin (2023)



Activist and Orthodox Jew Mikhael Manekin’s “End of Days: Ethics, Tradition, and Power in Israel” is an exploration of moral philosophy in the context of contemporary Israeli politics. Weaving together Tanach, mussar literature, and halacha, Manekin critiques religious Zionism’s emphasis on power while calling for a reevaluation of the role of personal Jewish ethics and piety. Part memoir, part family history, and part religious manifesto, “End of Days” demands clear-eyed reconciliation of our religious tradition’s values and those dominant in modern Israeli and American Jewish culture.

While the introduction and first sections of the book can be read by anyone, the work as whole spends much of its time diving deep into Halachic analysis and close readings of Torah texts. Manekin assumes his reader is along for that kind of journey, and while it is a worthwhile one, it may not be the right read for every community. If you and your community are excited about in-depth Torah learning and substantive Jewish ethical conversations you will not leave “End of Days” disappointed.

“End of Days: Ethics, Tradition, and Power in Israel” (continued)

Questions:

1. Manekin opens by contrasting the Judaism of his grandfather’s world with the Judaism of his own. In what ways do you find the vision of his “Grandfather’s Judaism” compelling? In what ways is it limiting?

2. Manekin contrasts a traditional answer about the cause of the Jews’ exile — “political zeal and national pride,” in his words — with Religious Zionist answers. What lessons can be drawn from each potential cause of exile? What lessons do they have for us as diaspora Jews?

3. The book laments the “replacement of the Jew who speaks with God with the Jew who makes declarations in God’s name.” Are there times it is appropriate or necessary to speak in God’s name? What would we lose and what would we gain from this shift if Manekin is right?

4. Manekin quotes at length one of the first religious books written for soldiers in the IDF, “The Laws of Military and War.” The authors write about feeling upset or conflicted about the occupation and appropriation of Palestinians’s homes at the founding of the state as “ethical questions” that “only arise when we judge our deeds with a narrow perspective” rather than focusing on our right to “exist as a nation and our right to the Land of Israel.” What is the relationship between Jewish people’s rights and their implications for other people?

“End of Days: Ethics, Tradition, and Power in Israel” (continued)

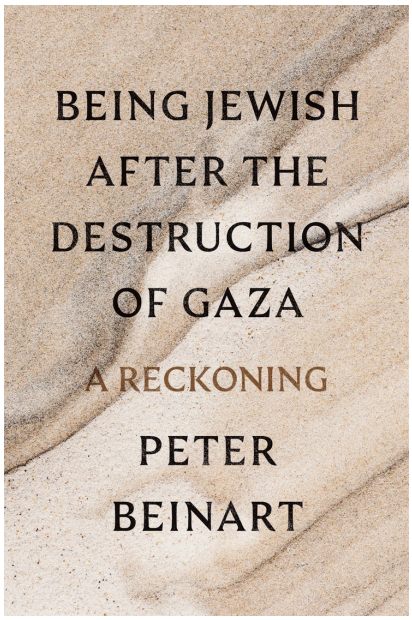
Questions:

5. Manekin describes the ethical and spiritual dangers of blurring the lines between religious authority and state authority. Do you think the State of Israel has a role in representing the Jewish people, religiously or otherwise? In what ways can the State of Israel speaking on behalf of the Jewish people be positive and in what ways can it be negative? How do you think about these questions as a Jew living in the diaspora?

6. Manekin describes his decision to wear a *gartel* (a Hasidic prayer belt) during prayer, like his grandfather. He writes, “We need barriers that will distinguish between us and our impulses…The mixing of worlds and blurring of boundaries constrains my freedom and subordinates my world of Torah to the world around me…when we are in touch with God, we must be different people.” In what ways do you see the collapse in distinctions between freedom and Torah as being dangerous in Israel? In America?

“Being Jewish After the Destruction of Gaza”
by Peter Beinart (2025)

Journalist and activist Peter Beinart’s “Being Jewish After the Destruction of Gaza” is a reflection on Jewish identity in the aftermath of Gaza’s devastation, offering a moral and theological reckoning that can be a tool for making sense of the aftermath of October 7. He uses Jewish text and tradition as a jumping off point throughout the book.



Questions:

1. Beinart opens with the story of Elisha ben Abuya and Rabbi Meir walking together, learning Torah until they reach the techum, the Shabbat boundary. Rabbi Meir cannot cross without violating a commandment but walks right up to the line to learn Torah with his heretical colleague, Elisha ben Abuya, who walks on past it. Beinart compares himself to Elisha ben Abuya, who has crossed this sacred boundary, and his reader to Rabbi Meir — inviting them to learn with him right up until they hit a boundary they feel they cannot cross, but he will. What did you think about this analogy? What possible boundaries did you notice yourself willing to walk past with Beinart and at which did you choose to stop?

“Being Jewish After the Destruction of Gaza” (continued)

Questions:

2. Beinart critiques the story he grew up with of Jews as “history’s permanent, righteous victims” as one that has been turned into a “moral sedative.” Do you agree with him about the story we tell about ourselves and its moral impact? Are there other stories you think we could put at the heart of Jewishness?

3. How does Beinart grapple with the tension between his Jewish identity and the actions of the Israeli state in Gaza? In what ways does he argue that Jewishness should be redefined or reclaimed in the wake of such violence?

4. How does Beinart use Jewish historical experiences—particularly the memory of persecution—to argue for a more universal and justice-oriented Jewish ethic? What risks and responsibilities does he see in invoking Jewish trauma when confronting contemporary violence?