

## **Unveiling the Dichotomy of Jewish Tradition and Modernity in *My Jewish Year: 18 Holidays One Wondering Jew* by Abigail Pogrebin**

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### **ABSTRACT**

*Tradition and modernity are dynamic forces that shape societies, belief systems and personal identities. They represent contrasting yet interconnected aspects of human existence. Throughout history, societies have witnessed the interplay between tradition and modernity which serves as a microcosm for a broader global dilemma. The chapter entitled, "Unveiling the Dichotomy of Jewish Tradition and Modernity in My Jewish Year: 18 Holidays One Wondering Jew by Abigail Pogrebin" investigates a dynamic interplay between tradition and modernity in My Jewish Year by Abigail Pogrebin. The clash between preserving age-old customs and embracing contemporary values has been a recurring theme in literature which is exquisitely portrayed in My Jewish Year. Drawing upon the theoretical framework of New Historicism, this study examines how the memoir explores the tensions arising from the clash between preserving traditional practices and the forces of modernization. Through a close reading of the narratives, this chapter highlights the author's nuanced portrayals of Jewish identity, cultural heritage and the complexities inherent in negotiating tradition and modernity.*

**Keywords:** *tradition, modernity, custom, heritage, identity, history*

New Historicism or Cultural Poetics emerged in America in 1980s as a reaction towards the historical approach of the New Historicism. This literary theory was proposed by Stephen Greenblatt in the twentieth century and its main tenet is the interpretation of literature in terms of the milieu from which it emerged. New historicism insists on "the historicity of texts and the textuality of history" (Woolfreys 169). Colebrook argues that New Historicism studies the relation between text and history. New historicist believes that history is a matter of interpretation and not fact.

Abigail Pogrebin's thought provoking memoir, *My Jewish Year: 18 Holidays, One Wondering Jew* provides a deeply personal account of her exploration of Jewish holidays over the course of a year. Pogrebin, a self-described wondering Jew embarks on a journey to reconnect with her Jewish roots, seeking a deeper understanding of her cultural and religious identity. The Jewish tradition is rooted in centuries-old customs, rituals and beliefs that have been passed down from generation to generation. Pogrebin's exploration of the Jewish year highlights the power of Jewish holidays and the profound meaning they hold for individuals and communities. These celebrations provide a sense of continuity and connection to a shared

history emphasizing the importance of preserving and honoring one's cultural heritage. While tradition and modernity may seem contradictory at times, Pogrebin's narrative emphasizes the importance of finding a balance between the two. She demonstrates that embracing modernity does not necessarily mean abandoning tradition. Instead, it entails reinterpretation, innovation and the integration of contemporary values while staying true to the core principles of Judaism.

Pogrebin's memoir takes the readers on a journey through the Jewish year encompassing various holidays, festivals and observances. Each celebration is a thread connecting past, present and future. Pogrebin delves deep into the historical roots of the traditions while simultaneously experiencing them in her contemporary life. This juxtaposition exemplifies the ongoing negotiation between tradition and modernity that Jewish people navigate. By embracing her identity as a wondering Jew, Pogrebin not only captures her individual journey but also underscores the complexity of Jewish identity in a diverse world. One of the central themes in Pogrebin's memoir is the interplay between tradition and modernity. This echoes throughout Jewish literature, with authors like Chaim Potok exploring similar tensions in his work *The Chosen*. In the context of *My Jewish Year*, the balance between ancient rituals and contemporary life becomes apparent. For instance, the observance of Passover is steeped in millennia-old traditions, yet Pogrebin's personal account reveals the ways in which she navigates these customs in a modern context.

Tradition often rooted in historical practices provides a sense of continuity and identity for communities. Jewish holidays, like many other religious observances are steeped in traditions that carry profound significance. However, the evolution of society and the influence of modernity challenge these age-old customs. Modernity, characterized by rapid societal change, technological advancements and evolving worldviews challenges established traditions by questioning their relevance in contemporary life. Pogrebin's exploration illustrates how modern interpretations of rituals can infuse vibrancy into these celebrations while staying true to their essence. This notion resonates well beyond the context of Jewish holidays; it exemplifies the broader societal challenge of maintaining heritage in a world that constantly evolves.

*Hanukkah* often referred to as the Festival of Lights symbolizes the triumph of light over darkness. Pogrebin's examination of this holiday offers insights into the struggle faced by American Jews in maintaining their traditions amidst a predominantly Christian society. She describes how she incorporates Jewish rituals into her daily life such as lighting candles on Friday nights or observing fasts. These practices help her feel connected to her Jewish heritage even as she lives in a society that is increasingly secular. Pogrebin encounters a wide variety

of Jewish communities throughout the year from ultra-orthodox to secular. She learns that each community has its own unique traditions and practices. In the realm of cultural and social dynamics the interplay between tradition and modernity remains a perennial topic of discussion. The tension between honoring the past and embracing the present is a crucial aspect when it comes to religious practices and observances. Abigail's memoir, *My Jewish Year* provides a valuable lens to examine this dichotomy.

New Historicism as emphasized by Woolfreys insists on understanding the historicity of texts recognizing that they are products of a specific time and place. Pogrebin's memoir embodies this notion as she documents her personal journey through the Jewish calendar exploring the meaning and significance of each holiday. By examining the historical context in which these traditions emerged Pogrebin unravels the layers of cultural, social and religious influences that have shaped Jewish customs over time. The interplay between historicity and textuality is evident in *My Jewish Year*. Pogrebin navigates the historical roots of Jewish holidays while examining their evolving significance in contemporary Jewish life. By giving voice to individuals who have reinterpreted Jewish holidays, Pogrebin emphasizes the importance of multiple narratives and the ongoing negotiation of historical meanings within the Jewish community.

Pogrebin's memoir can be seen as a realm of retrievable facts grounded in historical and cultural contexts. In *My Jewish Year*, Pogrebin serves as the human interpreter weaving together personal anecdotes, interviews and reflections to create a narrative that reflects her own experiences and perspectives. Pogrebin's position as an author and a member of the Jewish community gives her a certain authority in shaping the narrative of the memoir. She also acknowledges the multiplicity of voices and perspectives within the Jewish community incorporating interviews and conversations with individuals who offer diverse interpretations and experiences. The memoir also addresses the social implications of observing the Jewish holidays. Pogrebin's interactions with different Jewish denominations reveal the tensions and variations in practices reflecting the broader diversity within the Jewish community.

Pogrebin's journey highlights the concept of the textuality of history where history itself can be viewed as a collection of narratives, interpretations and experiences. As Pogrebin engages with various Jewish holidays, she encounters diverse perspectives and interpretations from the individuals she interacts with including rabbis, scholars and ordinary practitioners. Each person brings their own understanding and meaning to these ancient traditions weaving their personal narratives into the larger tapestry of Jewish history.

In addition to *My Jewish Year*, Pogrebin's memoir can be contextualized within a broader framework of literature and cultural discourse. Books like *The Sabbath* by Abraham Joshua Heschel and *This Is Real and You Are Completely Unprepared* by Alan Lew provide further insights into the spiritual and cultural significance of Jewish holidays. These works emphasize the importance of mindfulness, ritual and community in celebrating these occasions.

Tradition forms the bedrock of cultural and religious identity. It binds generations together providing a sense of belonging and continuity. In *My Jewish Year*, "Mom and Dad arrive on time; and my sister's and brothers' families rush in late from the office and school ... We always end up racing to say the blessings and scarf food before the sun sets and the urgent hour arrives when we have to start fasting as we clamber into cabs to get to Kol Nidre services" (*My Jewish Year* 51). In the context of Pogrebin's account the *Kol Nidre* service represents an ancient Jewish ritual that holds deep significance. It is a time for introspection, repentance and reconciliation. The tradition of observing this service is an intrinsic part of preserving Jewish heritage and spirituality. Living in a rapidly changing world, Pogrebin and her family find themselves torn between traditional customs and the demands of modern life. The pressures of work, school and other commitments encroach upon the time and attention is required to engage fully in religious observances. Pogrebin's mention of her sister and brother's families highlights the struggle of balancing traditional obligations with the demands of a hectic contemporary lifestyle. Despite their tardiness they actively participate in the *Kol Nidre* service which demonstrates their commitment to preserve their Jewish heritage while acknowledging the constraints of their modern lives.

In *My Jewish Year*, Pogrebin opines, "My siblings and I wrote new Hanukkah-appropriate lyrics to a medley of Broadway show tunes. From West Side Story: 'When you're a Jew all the way from your first little bris, to your bar mitzvah day....' From Evita: 'Don't cry for me, Antiochus... the truth is I burned the latkes....'" (*My Jewish Year* 7). Pogrebin's act of writing *Hanukkah* lyrics to a medley of Broadway show tunes reflects her desire to bridge the gap between tradition and modernity. By infusing modern elements into the celebration she seeks to engage younger generations and make the holiday more accessible and relatable to their experiences. The fusion of traditional themes with modern artistic expression opens up avenues for engagement sparking conversations and creating connections between Jewish tradition and the wider world.

*Sukkot* known as the Feast of Tabernacles is a Jewish holiday that commemorates the Israelites' journey through the wilderness and their dependence on God for sustenance. One of the central features of *Sukkot* is the construction of *sukkahs*, temporary huts or booths. These

structures serve as a reminder of the Israelites' dwellings during their time in the desert. Traditionally, *sukkahs* are built with simple materials such as branches and foliage embodying a sense of humility and impermanence.

Pogrebin avows, "For an hour, I am given proud house tours of *sukkahs* with chandeliers and velvet walls, with silky tablecloths and verdant roofing. I receive tutorials on how to build a solid-but-porous roof, how many guests a *sukkah* can accommodate" (*My Jewish Year* 84). Pogrebin witnesses an intriguing divergence from traditional *sukkahs*. The descriptions of chandeliers, velvet walls, silky tablecloths and verdant roofing demonstrate a departure from the modesty typically associated with this observance. The traditional *sukkah* emphasizes the value of simplicity and detachment from material possessions reminding individuals of the transitory nature of physical existence. The extravagant *sukkahs* with their opulent adornments reflect a more modern approach to Jewish holiday observance. This shift can be seen as an attempt to bridge the gap between tradition and modernity accommodating the desires and preferences of contemporary Jews while still honoring the religious significance of *Sukkot*. By incorporating luxury elements, these *sukkahs* attract younger generations who are more accustomed to opulent surroundings.

While modernity offers opportunities for reinterpretation and creativity it also raises questions about the preservation of religious authenticity. By embracing modern designs and embellishments there is a risk of diluting the core messages and symbolism inherent in traditional practices. Striking a balance between innovation and the preservation of religious integrity becomes crucial to avoid losing the essence of the holiday. The line describing the tutorial on building a "solid but porous roof" (*My Jewish Year* 71) encapsulates the essence of navigating the tension between tradition and modernity. The solid roof signifies the importance of maintaining the foundational values and teachings passed down through generations. Simultaneously, the porous nature of the roof suggests an openness to change, new perspectives and contemporary expressions of faith. This imagery embodies the ongoing dialogue between tradition and modernity within Jewish holiday observance.

Pogrebin explores the intricate relationship between tradition and modernity within Judaism. One particularly intriguing aspect is the evolving nature of rabbinic decrees surrounding the observance of *Shabbat*. It is the Jewish day of rest which has been a cornerstone of Jewish observance for millennia. The prohibitions and guidelines surrounding *Shabbat* observance have been shaped by centuries of rabbinic interpretation. One such prohibition is the ban on kindling a fire on *Shabbat*. This prohibition rooted in the biblical commandment aims to preserve the essence of rest and refrain from work during the sacred

day. As modernity and technological advancements have emerged Jewish communities have faced new challenges in upholding *Shabbat* observance while embracing progress.

In *My Jewish Year*, Pogrebin limns, “I once attended a Jewish conference where making hot tea was prohibited, even if the water was on a burner that had been turned on before *Shabbat*, because the tea bag leaves would be transformed by the hot water in a way that constituted cooking” (*My Jewish Year* 114). The ban on making hot tea illustrates this evolving landscape. Historically, kindling a fire required physical effort making it a clear violation of *Shabbat*. The advent of electric kettles, electric burners and the act of turning a knob or pressing a button to generate heat has raised further questions about the interpretation of the prohibition. As these devices do not involve direct human intervention in generating heat, it prompts some to argue that they are not in violation of traditional laws. However, others argue that the underlying principles of *Shabbat* observance extend beyond the technical aspects and should consider the broader intent of refraining from work.

Tradition holds a significant place within Jewish culture and religion. Rooted in historical and religious teachings traditions act as a guide for Jewish individuals preserving their heritage and connecting them to their ancestors. As society progresses and new technologies emerge adherence of religious faiths are often faced with the challenging of adapting age-old traditions to the modern world. In the case of Judaism, technological advancements have raised numerous questions regarding the interpretation and application of ancient laws and prohibitions. Pogrebin’s memoir demonstrates how rabbinic decisors have grappled with these issues particularly in relation to the prohibition on making hot tea on *Shabbat*.

Throughout the centuries, Jewish legal authorities known as rabbinic decisors have continually engaged with the impact of modernity on religious practices. The prohibition on making hot tea on *Shabbat* serves as an example of this evolution. Initially, the rabbinic decisors put a ban on kindling a fire on *Shabbat*, as it is considered a violation of *Shabbat* laws. However with the advent of gas burners and electric kettles debates arose regarding whether these forms of heating water constituted the same level of transgression. Pogrebin’s memoir sheds light on how these decisors assess the permissibility of various practices such as the use of pre-existing heat sources or non-sparking heating elements.

The broader implications of the interplay between tradition and modernity extend beyond Jewish holidays. This theme transcends religious boundaries and resonates across cultural, social and geographical divides. In a globalized world, where cultures interact and intertwine, the tension between tradition and modernity becomes a universal concern and is

present in various facets of life, including family dynamics, education, governance and artistic expression. The dynamics of change and continuity influence how societies grapple with globalization, technological advancements and shifting values. In a world characterized by rapid transformations, societies often find themselves at crossroads, needing to redefine the relevance of tradition in the context of modern realities. Different societies grapple with preserving cultural roots while embracing contemporary ideals. This dynamic is particularly evident in phenomenal evolution and transition of the authentic culture which is recorded in many of the books of *Tanakh* and other Second Temple literature books like Sirach, Tobit, etc. As societies evolve institutions must strike a balance between venerating the past and adapting to new paradigms. Finding this equilibrium fosters resilience, allowing societies to draw strength from their roots while fostering innovation and progress. The struggle between retaining authenticity and accommodating change extends to domains such as education, gender roles and technology adoption. The interplay between tradition and modernity is far from static; it is a dynamic process that requires ongoing dialogue and understanding.

The literary work, *My Jewish Year: 18 Holidays, One Wondering Jew* by Abigail Pogrebin sheds light on the complex interplay between tradition and modernity within the Jewish community. Through rich storytelling and personal introspection, Abigail Pogrebin captures the complexities and challenges faced by individuals seeking to maintain their cultural heritage in a rapidly changing world. *My Jewish Year* serves as a reminder that tradition and modernity are not irreconcilable forces but rather intertwined aspects of a vibrant and evolving cultural tapestry. By embracing the essence of the traditions while adapting to the demands of the present, individuals can forge a path that acknowledges their past while embracing the possibilities of the future.

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