

The Oxford Dictionary of the Jewish Religion

Adele Berlin, editor in chief. *The Oxford Dictionary of the Jewish Religion*. 2nd edition. New York: Oxford University Press, 2011. 934 pp. \$120.00. Hardcover. ISBN: 0199730040. Also available electronically via Oxford University Press.

Confused about the difference between the third and fifth phases of the *Kabbalah*? Wondering how *Tiqqun Olam* relates to social justice? What does Jewish law say about capital punishment? What are the halakhah's positions on negligence? When does *Shivah* begin? Who was Hillel, the namesake for the Foundation for Jewish Campus Life, whose mission is to enrich the lives of Jewish undergraduate and graduate students? How does conversion to Judaism compare in ancient and modern times? Why do I have to look under Proselyte to find the answer?

These are examples of the myriad questions one can explore with the second edition of the *Oxford Dictionary of the Jewish Religion*. The goal of the *Dictionary* is to be both scholarly and accessible. As noted in the preface, Editor in Chief Adele Berlin and Senior Editor Maxine Grossman continue the 1996 work of R.J. Zwi Werblowsky and Geoffrey Wigoder, focusing on broad aspects of Jewish religion: “religious terminology, texts, figures, institutions, concepts, beliefs, and practices” (vii). This edition uses much of the material from the first—revising about half of the articles, and adding bibliographic references to 75 percent.

The print version of the second edition is a hefty volume, with over 2500 entries on almost 960 pages. Supplementary information in the front matter includes the abbreviations, a Hebrew transliteration table, and the lengthy list (175+) of contributors. Eighty percent of the contributors are academics in religion or Jewish studies. Berlin notes that with this edition “the balance has shifted slightly from Israeli authors to North American authors” (viii). Other contributors are listed as “Historians,” and a number are “Independent Scholars.” There are several museum curators, philanthropic executives, rabbis, and the Senior Scholar of a synagogue congregation in suburban Chicago. One of my favorite contributor occupation listings is the curator of Jewish art at the Library of the Jewish Theological Seminary.

Entries are alphabetical and use the Oxford Press system where multiple-word entries are considered to be single words. Berlin and Grossman have tweaked the entry titles for contemporary users, moving away from what they termed a “strict transliteration of the Hebrew or Yiddish to a more conventional English” (viii). There are many cross references or “see also” entries leading the reader to deeper understanding. The *Dictionary* also notes multiple spellings when common, e.g., KIDDUSH, see QIDDUSH. One of the few drawbacks is the lack of illustrations, which would have broken the monotony of the two-column format of small text. Revised entries are signed, and a bibliography is included at the end of most entries. The 117-page index in the print version is alphabetical; main entries are indicated with boldface page numbers.

The online version is set up slightly differently with regard to the index and the metadata. A simple search on prayer brought twenty results. The first is “Prayer.” Other subtopics include prayer shawl; prayer of Manasseh; prayer book; travel, prayer for; silent prayer, along with other subtopics. These do not match the options listed

in the print version. The print version index shows a two-page general entry for Prayers, and fourteen subtopics (atonement through, commentary on, composed by Rav, ending with prayer for peace, infertility, and others). I am not sure why the subtopics aren't the same in both versions. Is the online version new and improved?

The *Dictionary* provides insight as to how multiple denominations and cultural contexts have affected the faith, concentrating on aspects of history and culture as they relate to religion. Jewish religion is defined as encompassing “not only beliefs and rituals, but also a legal system, communal structures and functions, the concept of Israel and the Diaspora, and much more....” This edition adds entries for religious leaders who have died since 1997 (there are no entries for current leaders). There are no strictly geographic entries. The focus on the Jewish religion means that you will find entries on the Sephardim and Ashkenazim but not on Persia, Germany, nor other countries.

The new entries and revisions address change in the Jewish religion in the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries, particularly in the areas of gender, sexuality, and interfaith relations. One example of differences between the first and second editions can be seen in the ways women are perceived and described within Judaism. New entries pertaining to women include “Rabbi and Rabbinite, Women,” which describes the differences found in Reform, Reconstructionist, and Conservative Orthodox communities. “Baby Naming” discusses how the lack of a ritual for naming girls, a counterpart to the requisite ceremony on the eighth day after birth for boys, has led to newly created ceremonies for Jewish families. “Education, Women’s” examines the options available to girls and women from ancient times to the present. The existence of formal, as well as informal, education for Jewish women is also noted. The entry on “Birth Control” expands upon the first edition, adding details about concerns for completion of education, genetically defective children, and women’s health in general, which may influence family planning practices among Conservative, Orthodox, and Reform Jews.

In order to include a Jewish perspective in this review, I spent some time with a learned friend, Rabbi Avram Etedgui of the Sharei Chesed congregation in Minneapolis. He viewed the *Dictionary* online and liked what he saw. A closer examination of the print version confirmed his impression. In the course of our lunch he explored entries on seminaries, Jewish law, famous Jewish leaders, prayers, “Hevrah Qaddisha” and modern funeral practices, and much more. It was fun to show him the entry on “Dance” written by Judith Brin Ingber, a member of his congregation. He believes the *Dictionary* is an excellent resource for everyone.

I prefer the online version. It is easy to follow the hot links to find out more about a topic. It appears as though more information is available from one entry with the rich array of “see also” references. There are more cross linkages and opportunities for discovery than one finds in the print index. The online version of the *Dictionary* uses the Oxford template and is easy to search. A citation is included at the bottom of each entry, a nice feature. I join Rabbi Etedgui in recommending the second edition. I recommend purchase of the online version, especially if you have distributed students. It would be a fine addition to any theological collection. It offers a wealth of concise information, reflecting the intricacies of the Jewish religion.

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