

Evening Begins the Day

Jessica Brilliant Keener

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Two hurting families heal with the help of an ancient Jewish ritual in Jessica Brilliant Keener's affecting, hope-filled novel *Evening Begins the Day*.

After learning about her husband's emotional affair, Rachel is bereft. She flees to a rental in a Boston suburb, next door to Cynthia, a colleague who seems too perfect. Anxiety-ridden Cynthia, though, has her own struggles, including in her relationship with her daughter, Lauren. In her senior year, Lauren skips classes and goes to protests; she gets so run down while "staying up all night worrying about the planet" that Cynthia calls an ambulance. Lauren lands in a seventy-two-hour hold on a children's psychology wing; her family lands in deeper distress.

As part of Lauren's revised curriculum to graduate, she is assigned a Pesach-adjacent project by her English teacher: she is to count the omer, ending at Shavuot, thinking about twinned combinations of kabbalistic virtues each day and losing herself in poetry. At the same time, secular Rachel signs up for a women's retreat through Lauren's synagogue, heading to Vermont to learn about the practice of counting the omer herself. She joins four other women who have their own traumas to sort, each learning to "become conscious of what keeps us enslaved, emotionally, physically, and spiritually." For both Lauren and Rachel, it's a humbling experience. Meanwhile, Cynthia too grapples with the significance of humility and what it might mean in repairing her family's life.

Narrated with deep empathy and understanding for its multiperson cast, the novel troubles through contemporary ills with care, setting each in the context of Judaism's Passover story. In the Vermont mountains, the omer is paired with Eastern practices, including singing bowls and yoga; in Boston, it requires a fair amount of self-emptying among family members.

Secondary cast members, including Tracy, a rape survivor; Saffron, Lauren's activist friend; and Dr. Peterson, the exhausted head of Lauren's school, have their own angles and insights on healing and forgiveness, resulting in nuanced and affirming conversations. And though the book's Jewish characters sometimes speak as if from outside of their tradition, resulting in a few distractions, the novel's overall push toward triumph—not through perfection, but through mutual acceptance—is gratifying.

Two families come to counterintuitively freeing realizations about human fragility in *Evening Begins the Day*, a heartening novel about self-forgiveness and community healing.

MICHELLE ANNE SCHINGLER (July / August 2026)

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