



John Lennon and the Jews: A Philosophical Rampage

Ze'ev Maghen

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Humor, pop-culture references, and personal anecdotes turn this philosophical analysis of Judaism into a thoughtful, relatable critique.

Ze'ev Maghen's *John Lennon and the Jews: A Philosophical Rampage* covers a lot of philosophical territory and crafts arguments against universalism and rationalism and in defense of religion. This new edition serves as a conversational take on a range of religious and philosophical issues.

Despite the title, John Lennon is only the book's jumping-off point. Maghen considers the lyrics of Lennon's classic "Imagine" and its vision of utopia, a dangerous notion. Maghen compares the song with a conversation he had with a trio of Hare Krishnas, and he organizes his book around responses to specific points they raised. Ultimately, Maghen is arguing in favor of group identity rather than universalism, focusing specifically on the bonds that hold together the Jewish community. For example, he rejects the notion of loving everyone equally, arguing that it is the specificity of love that makes it important and earned. He isn't arguing for his religion or community above any other, but for taking a classic "salad bowl" approach, in which differences are important and worth celebrating.

Maghen writes well with casual style that makes use of devices like humor and pop-culture references to make the more ponderous philosophical musings feel less ponderous. The best parts of the book are his real-life anecdotes. Maghen is a natural storyteller, at his best when he's relating working overnight in a matzo factory and having to maintain the strict controls to keep the bread kosher, or experiences from his time in the Israel Defense Forces.

As for the philosophy, the book is more interesting than convincing, as Maghen explores a number of points in prose that often feels like a smart writer musing aloud. The book does sometimes have a tendency to get hung up on semantics; for example, a long section critiquing the word "Judaism" is based on its historical origins. The book often sets up straw men or ascribes assumptions to the reader. Still, Maghen is thoughtful and funny—the book is an enjoyable read.

JEFF FLEISCHER (Summer 2015)

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