

A Brief Interview with JPS Author Rabbi Jeffrey Salkin



About his next book:

The Gods Are Broken! Abraham and the Hidden Legacy of Judaism, by Rabbi Jeffrey Salkin, was published by JPS in 2013. This book explores Judaism's most famous non-biblical story – Abraham's shattering of his father's gods – and describes how this story has become a template for how Jews view the world. By examining the legend and understanding its implications, Salkin offers a radical view of Jewish existence. Abraham's idol shattering was not a one-time occurrence. It has happened in every generation, and it has helped the Jews to develop a unique identity. *The Gods Are Broken* combines biblical text, archeology, rabbinic insights, Hasidic texts (some

never before translated), philosophy, history, poetry, contemporary Jewish thought and sociology and popular culture – a journey through two thousand years of Jewish life and intellectual endeavor.

In the words of another JPS author, Rabbi David Wolpe...

Can a single story unfold the history of a nation and some of the deepest truths of tradition? Yes, if that story is the Rabbis' tale of Abraham and its interpreter is Rabbi Salkin. There is much to learn in this absorbing, important book.

About Rabbi Jeffrey Salkin:

The Gods Are Broken! is Rabbi Jeffrey Salkin's ninth book on Jewish life and spirituality. An accomplished author, rabbi and community leader, Rabbi Salkin has served congregations in Florida, New York, Pennsylvania and Georgia, and he founded Kol Echad, a trans-denominational adult learning center in Atlanta. He was ordained in 1981 by Hebrew Union College-Jewish Institute of Religion and was one of the first Jews to receive the Doctor of Ministry degree from Princeton Theological Seminary, in 1991. Rabbi Salkin is currently Director of the Anti-Defamation League's New Jersey office.

JPS: What does JPS mean to you?

Salkin: *JPS has published the most important books in the history of the American Jewish community, and it is a part of my personal and professional life. My first Tanakh came from JPS on the occasion of my confirmation. JPS books are indispensable to me and to my colleagues. They occupy a significant amount of real estate on my bookshelf. I am happy to be a part of it.*

JPS: How does your new book connect to your most well known book, *Putting God on the Guest List*?

Salkin: *The Gods Are Broken!* is its first cousin. *Putting God on the Guest List* brought attention to today's worship of the bar mitzvah ceremony, which borders on idolatry. *The Gods Are Broken!* is based on Judaism's famous story of Abraham shattering his father's

idols. This important event happened when Abraham was 13 years old and it took place in a commercial venue, his father's idol store. On the brink of adulthood, Abraham acted courageously and made a loud statement about commercialism, religion and the culture in which he lived. His action didn't just affect him, it has shaped all of Jewish consciousness, right up to today. The Gods Are Broken! is an extended meditation on Jewish thought and history through the lens of what it means to be a true iconoclast.

JPS: What inspired you to write *The Gods Are Broken!*?

Salkin: *I define my rabbinate as activism in the cause of Jewish ideas. I believe Jews must continue to reject ideas that are unjust, even though critiquing our culture has not won us any popularity contests. In one of my more outrageous chapters, I argue that this trend is one of the causes of anti-Semitism. But risky as it might be, I believe critiquing contemporary culture and social trends is critical.*

JPS: What impact do you hope this book will have on readers?

Salkin: *I hope it will entice Jews to look at our tradition through different eyes. I have written widely on the subject of spirituality, which is often understood as being analogous to comfort food – something that will make us feel good and help us cope with life's challenges. I would like to do the opposite with this book. As it is written in Amos 6:1, "Woe to those who are at ease in Zion." We are called the people of Israel, translated as "one who wrestles with God."*

As I explore in the book, the Jews have developed a finely honed talent for saying "no." "No" to the worship of the body and of aesthetics; "no" to the worship of the state, the Reich, the race, and the social class. When necessary, Jews have rebelled against the world's values and sought to change them. Judaism stands for that which is more than simply easy and convenient. It is not the Jewish goal to make the world Jewish, but it is the Jewish goal to make the world a better place.