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## My Year Of Reading Books

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Special To The Jewish Week

I've just finished Binyamin Cohen's book, "My Jesus Year." Cohen, the son of a rabbi, spent a year of Sundays and holidays visiting churches and Evangelical gatherings in search of ways to revitalize his Judaism. Whether or not it worked is hard to say but he, like so many authors today, picked the arbitrary time period of a year for a personal experiment resulting in a book.

A.J. Jacobs lived biblically for a year, sharing photos of his developing beard while throwing a pebble at an adulterer in Central Park to participate in the biblical act of stoning a sinner. David Plotz spent a year reading the Bible without the mediation of commentaries. Bruce Feiler walked the Bible. Ari Goldman shares the pain of losing his father in "Living a Year of Kaddish," a ritual that occasions close to a year of commitment.

Some authors, like Goldman, have a strong background and handle Jewish matters with expertise and confidence. Several of these authors, however, happily admit in their introductions that they had little or no knowledge of the subject when they started their projects. We readers are meant to be brought into the freshness instead of being surprised at the chutzpah. Judaism and the Bible itself have been around for thousands of years; for these authors, however, it's been safely encapsulated and understood after only a year of experience. And if you're starting to burn out of one year of Judaism, don't worry. You can always pick up "My Year Inside Radical Islam" at your local bookstore.

Call me a skeptic, but I, for one, don't buy it. Cohen, Jacobs and others did not make up the year-long-get-a-book-deal project. In the past years, we've had the famous "Eat, Pray, Love" and "Julie and Julia," but we've also had the more obscure, "Dated," about a woman who says "yes" to every man who asked her out for a year. We've been exposed to "A Devil to Play," about a man who survives a year of midlife crisis by playing a French horn, and "Not Buying It," about a woman's year without shopping.

There is the writer who wrote a book about her year of living by Oprah's advice, and the couple who spent a year touring with their cat throughout Europe and lived to tell the "tale." A family spent a year boycotting goods from China, and two women took a year of photos every morning while 3,000 miles apart. My personal favorite in the "why would I care" category is "A Year Without Underwear." Not sure that will make it to my Amazon shopping cart.

Obviously, with a choice of topics that are not necessarily compelling, such books rise and fall on the quality of the writing, the depth of "mastery" achieved in the 12 months allotted or on their amusement quotient. While I laughed in places, I was not really convinced that Cohen's wanderings in the world of

gospel, Black Hebrews and the language of tongues was anything more than a journalist's meanderings and a clever way to get a large Christian audience to buy your book.

The philosopher Thomas Nagel once wrote an article entitled "What It is Like to Be a Bat." You can wear black, hang from the rafters of your attic at night and hang out in caves during the day, but you will never know what it is like to be anything more than a person pretending to be a bat. In the same vein, you will never know what it is like to be a gourmet chef by spending several months in a hot, restaurant kitchen, waiting for a promising table of contents to surface. You will not know terrorism by strapping explosives to your waist for a year of make-believe. You will not know Judaism by dressing like a chasid for a few months and living in Williamsburg. You will not be more than a dilettante scrounging around for your next book idea.

These writers are making a living embracing approximation. Sadly and ironically, there is something that all these books miss: the ideology, the theology, the interiority, the subtlety, the realness of what it means to occupy a universe, not just to stand on the outside and ape it for a limited time.

So what is the real appeal of this genre, and why do we keep buying these books? Readers struggling with unemployment might seek comfort in "The Year of No Money in Tokyo," about an American struggling during Japan's recession, and those fighting depression may find hope in "The Happiness Project," one woman's attempt to lighten her load for at least 365 days. But, for the most part, books like these just feed the hungry monster that is our entertainment society, offering us only the most superficial of glimpses of the other.

This year, I'll be staying clear of "My Year as a Madoff Victim," "Reading Kabbalah in Jersey," and "Twelve Months of Gefilte Fish" (not their real titles). Instead, I'll be on the lookout for books that reflect a lifetime of genuine commitment. From a Jewish perspective, at least, we're a little too perennial for all these annuals.

*Erica Brown is the director of adult education for the Partnership for Jewish Life and Learning. Her most recent book is "Spiritual Boredom."*

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