

## Book Review

*Sex, God, Christmas & Jews* (Gil Mann)  
Leo & Sons Publishing, 2006

By Rabbi Jason A. Miller

### **Jewish Advice Column for the 21<sup>st</sup> Century**

In the old days – meaning pre-Internet – when someone had a question about Judaism or Jewish practice they would inquire of their rabbi either in person or in written form. Of course, sometimes the rabbi did not respond (or at least not in a timely fashion) and sometimes the rabbi did not know the answer and would have to send correspondence to another sage. Furthermore, many questions may have been too embarrassing or personal to pose to the rabbi. Many non-Jews may not have had the resources to have their questions answered. Many questions may have been too controversial to raise. All of this changed because of the Web and the anonymity of the e-mail message.

While there are several “Ask the Rabbi” sites on the Web, the most popular is hosted by a layman – just a regular guy (albeit a synagogue leader) named Gil Mann. Several years ago Mann began answering a range of queries on an America Online forum about Judaism. This led to thousands of questions pouring in via e-mail sent to Mann at his *BeingJewish.org* website. While not a rabbi, Mann serves as something of a cross between an advice columnist and a sage for the everyman. He defines himself as an “open-minded committed Jew” and explains that the e-mail messages he was receiving became part of a “personal evolution” in his post-business world life. Mann is also the author of *How to Get More Out of Being Jewish Even If...* and the publisher/editor of “Being Jewish” newsletter.

In *Sex, God, Christmas & Jews*, the best e-mail questions are compiled into three broad sections – ethics, spirituality, and peoplehood – serving as Mann’s “trinity” of the Jewish faith. He fields questions ranging from the serious (“Can Jews donate their organs” and “Why does Judaism discriminate against woman”) to the downright silly (“Do the Orthodox have sex through a hole in a sheet?”). Whether serious or silly however, these are the questions that are on people’s minds and Mann has provided the forum to answer the inquisitive and the spiritually seeking. At the end of each chapter are a couple pages titled “Concluding Thoughts to Copy,

Cut, Paste, and Save” serving as a summary of the discussions, as well as directions where one may turn for further information and resources.

In the introduction, Mann opens with a candid, intimate letter from a distraught woman whom he terms “a female Job.” This missive serves to show that Mann is more than just posing as the Jewish Ask-Jeeves on the Web. Average people have sought him out as a patient listener although he is not a spiritual leader or psychologist. This is the magic of Cyberspace. Indeed, Mann has created a virtual community with passionate conversations taking place.

One subject in the book that raises much heated discussion is about whether it is humane for Jews to ritually circumcise their sons. While the controversy surrounding this topic is no stranger to the Web, Mann successfully contains it in a considerate, thought-provoking manner (although I’m sure some of the less respectful messages were edited out). Following his response, and that of others, to the Jewish man not willing to circumcise his [hypothetical] son, Mann includes information from a leading Orthodox rabbi, Yitz Greenberg, for clarification and a rabbinic perspective. The author is very careful to give fair and accurate responses to his inquirers, and it is evident that he has a long list of rabbis and scholars to consult before weighing in with his responses.

This book might best be characterized as *The Jewish Book of Why* packaged with feedback and virtual discussions for each question raised. The topics – from theological doubt and interfaith relations to morality and anti-Semitism – serve as great fodder for book discussion groups and introduction to Judaism classes. Mann succeeds at making Judaism relevant to the masses. With this book, he has proclaimed himself to be the guy to answer those questions everyone has about Judaism and Jews but were afraid to ask.

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