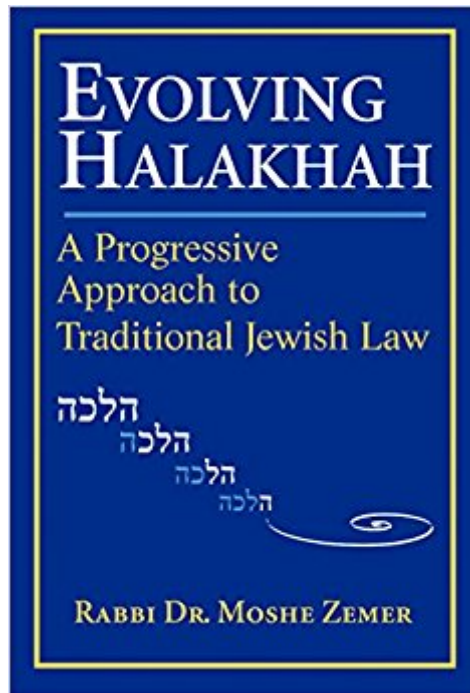


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Evolving Halakhah: A Progressive Approach To Traditional Jewish Law



Synopsis

An essential reference work for any thinking student of religion. Innovative and provocative, *Evolving Halakhah* affirms the system of traditional Jewish law, Halakhah, as a developing and moral structure, flexible enough to accommodate the changing realities of each generation. In this accessible analysis of Halakhah, Moshe Zemer issues a clarion call to follow the ancient and modern principles of evolving Halakhah, which demands ethical deeds, the discovery of holiness in the Commandments, a critical approach to the Tradition, and responsibility of the entire Community of Israel. These principles are viewed as the framework in which the other commandments are applied. To Jews who sometimes see no choices but those of fundamentalist rigidity on the one hand, or total rejection of tradition on the other, Zemer argues instead for awareness of the inherent flexibility of the halakhic system. Halakhah, he argues, has had many voices, and has changed to meet every generation's needs. Equipped with this view, liberal Jews can reclaim their tradition from a conservative rabbinic establishment that all too often "especially in Israel" has seen the voice of strictness as more authentic than the voice of lovingkindness. The product of Zemer's thirty-five years of work in the Israel Movement of Progressive Judaism, *Evolving Halakhah* includes chapters on matters ranging from personal status, especially marriage and conversion, through the "political" Halakhah of a response to the intifada. It shows that the traditional framework for understanding the Torah's commandments can be the living heart of Jewish life for all Jews—including Reform, Reconstructionist, Conservative and Modern Orthodox.

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Customer Reviews

Rabbi Zemer's *Evolving Halakhah: A Progressive Approach to Traditional Jewish Law*, takes a novel and I think very fruitful method and applies it to Jewish law. Rabbi Zemer is a progressive Rabbi in Israel (as the branch of Reform is called there) and is well versed in the vast literature of Halakhah, or Jewish law. As such, he does not simply play the Reform card by saying "Halakhah is no longer valid" and endorse a spiritual, cultural, or ethnic Judaism. Rather, he takes Halakhah on its own terms, using its very rules and precedents to show that in the past lenient, more humane rulings were far more common than today. As an Israeli rabbi, much of Rabbi Zemer's book applies to Jews living in Israel, where such matters as marriage, divorce, and 'who is a Jew' are handled by an established religious body. In America, things are much more fractured. Issues such as these come up, but are treated quietly within the confines of particular American communities and denominations. In a way, American Judaism is far more like the kind of Judaism that Zemer espouses: pluralistic, open to disagreement, fluid. Perhaps the meta-conclusion that this book shows, but which Rabbi Zemer never quite spells out enough, is that more often than not Halakhah is decided based on political considerations. When all Jews were observant (and largely poor) rabbis tried to take a lenient approach for the sake of compassion. There was nothing riding on allowing a couple to marry, for instance, rather than the pain or suffering caused by their inability to marry due to mamzer, or illegitimate issues. Today, strictness in Halakhah has become a way for the Orthodox to both differentiate themselves from secular Jews, and from other Orthodox groups.

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