

Jeffrey M Cohen's *500 Questions & Answers on Chanukah*

Many tributes will be paid to our retiring Rabbi Dr Jeffrey Cohen but it may not be emphasised enough what an outstanding scholar he is. His latest book entitled *500 Questions and Answers on Chanukah* is fascinating reading. It is a book for all. Whether you are a teacher, student of Hebraica or an ordinary layman or woman, it is a very good read with a masterful and thoroughly gripping review of the historical background to this most popular of Jewish festivals. There are many original and fascinating ideas in it, and it is almost encyclopaedic in its explanations of every aspect of the festival, even of its links, if any, to the non-Jewish festival celebrated around the same period.

It is humorous at unexpected times and always reflects the Rabbi's tolerant attitude to all aspects of Judaism. Questions are posed and then answered in interesting detail. Some of our Rabbi's strongly-held beliefs are evidenced by just one small extract from the book where he deals with the Question, "Is there any special message underlying the recommendation that each person should light his own Chanukah light, something which is not required with Shabbat lights?"

The reply is as follows:

I believe that there is a profound message in this. Sabbath observance presupposes and demands faith in a Creator and commitment to His Exacting laws. The fraternity that is so committed is comparatively small. Chanukah, on the other hand, and the privilege of celebrating its miracle, is the legacy of the entire generation of Jews whose victory secured it. The victory was secured by an impressive coalition and demonstration of unity on the part of Jews whose religious affiliation covered every shade of the spectrum: pietistic Chasidism, mainstream observant and less observant Jews, nationalistic Jews, modernising assimilating and Hellenized Jews. The message is that when the chips are down none of them should be written off.

This book is also for every shade of the Jewish spectrum and should grace the bookshelves of every Jew as well as many non-Jews who will learn a great deal about us by reading it. Try it and see.

Clive Boxer