

A barmitzvah gift for adults too ...

TORAH FOR TEENS - GROWING UP SPIRITUALLY WITH THE WEEKLY SIDRAH

By Jeffrey M Cohen

Vallentine Mitchell £25 and £14.95 (pb)

REVIEWED BY CLIVE LAWTON

JEFFREY COHEN'S book, *Torah for Teens*, put me in mind of when I used to do *Thought for the Day* on Radio 4. How does one deliver a pithy and pertinent idea in very few words? We were expected to use the news to find our theme. Sometimes the association was tenuous, to say the least.

Cohen uses the time-honoured strategy of hanging each short essay on the weekly sidrah, but often the link is fairly loose - which does not matter, because what he says is usually worthwhile anyway. His voice is thoughtful, humane, caring, passionate, contemporary but with a comfortable mastery of Jewish tradition.

As I read, I found myself thinking how fortunate Stanmore was to have him as their rabbi, and how much we need more rabbis like him. Even though he is unimpeachably Orthodox, I did not detect anything that would not make fine reading for Jews of any stripe.



“Engaging”: Rabbi Dr Jeffrey Cohen

But, of course, I am not a teen. And what's more, I am not a more-or-less-not-very-interested teen. How would this book work for one of those? So let us imagine ... Would teenagers open such a book in the first place? Some would, for sure. Teenagers are nowhere near as apathetic as some despairing parents and teachers think. The writing is easy to digest. Few essays are more than two pages, the type is easy to read, the language is comfortable, the themes comprehensible.

A significant proportion of teens who might open the book - not that the cover design will tempt them - will finish at least one essay and draw something beneficial from it. If the book were lying around in shuls, a teenager might well dip into it during one of the longueurs of a Shabbat service. It could contribute to youth services and provide readings for school assemblies. It is not deep but it is mostly engaging. The form is casual, even though the style is not; but neither statement need be a criticism.

But for some unaccountable reason, most of the material is not aimed at teens after all.

Its regular references to employment and working environments make it more properly *Torah For(Young?)Adults*. He often mentions "the workplace" but rarely "school". And I doubt many teens identify with the *OK!* and *Hello!* culture.

His dilemma is that he wants to Say something more lasting than simply what speaks to the few years of adolescence, even if that is when they might be induced to read, or at least receive, the book. It certainly would make a good bar- or batmitzvah gift, but like so many books given at that time, it might be more fruitfully read a few years down the line. So buy it for your teens. But you might end up reading it yourself.

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