

INTRODUCTION

To Jews everywhere, the number eighteen resonates deeply—as does every multiple of eighteen—for they all mean life. And the Hebrew word for alive or living is *chai*. For those unfamiliar with Hebrew, this is not the spicy tea drink so popular these days. The “ch” in this *chai* is pronounced not as the “ch” in cheese, but as though you are clearing your throat. Think of the traditional toast “*L’chaim!*” (“To life!”) and you have both the sound and the meaning.

The story behind this book and its title is a story of my struggle to find a way to celebrate life at a time when a series of health crises left me feeling lost, angry, sad, and—in spite of tremendous support from my loving family and amazing friends—very much alone. In truth, I also felt abandoned and even betrayed: where was God? To try to find answers, I did something new for me. I began to pray—nothing formal, but always heartfelt. Some days I prayed for help. Other days I asked for strength or guidance or healing. I prayed for the pain to stop; I prayed for patience; I prayed for quality of life. The months wore on. I switched doctors. I got new opinions. I received new treatments. Finally, finally, I began to feel better. As I recovered, I found myself anxious to make up for lost time. Being a journalist and author, I especially wanted to get back to my writing, but I wasn’t yet well enough to undertake a major work on my own. Inspiration came one day after my morning prayer, when I was struck with the idea for this book—I would collect rabbis’ favorite stories. You know the kind: the stories rabbis tell before they get to the explanation of the Torah portion, the ones that hook you and make the point. Sometimes they make you chuckle, sometimes they inspire, and occasionally they can even prompt a few tears—you know, the *good* stories!

Collecting and editing these stories quickly became a true blessing, uplifting my spirit to match the growing strength in my body. So I suppose, in some regard, my prayers were answered—although certainly not in the way I had expected.

To get the stories for this book I contacted rabbis, most of whom live in the United States, but some from outside our borders. Some are well known; others are just out of school. Most are pulpit rabbis, but I also sought out rabbis who serve the Jewish community in other ways. I gave them all a great deal of leeway. I told them their stories could be folktales; they could be midrash (stories based on Torah); the stories, I said, didn't even have to be Jewish in origin. The only criterion was this: each story had to be a favorite and in some way it had to be about what it is to be Jewish or how to lead a Jewish life, or in some way reflect a Jewish ideal. Some of the stories the rabbis chose to share have been passed along orally from one generation to the next. Some have come from older or deceased rabbis, or from persons unknown. Other stories are based on previously published works but have been retold, modified, or recast by the rabbis who chose them. Some of the rabbis I've spoken to don't even know where their stories originated—they just know them. In all, I found fifty-four rabbis with fifty-four stories: three times eighteen, *chai*, a triple helping of life's blessings.

You need not be religious to appreciate what these stories have to say. They remind us that we can all be better, kinder, and more charitable human beings. They give us hope by reminding us that there is a power within each of us to make positive, lasting changes in ourselves and that we can indeed make the world a better place, not just today, but for our children and our grandchildren.

At the conclusion of each story, I give the name of the rabbi who chose it, with a notation indicating the movement by which he or she was ordained: Reform, Conservative, Orthodox, and Reconstructionist. I have also included a brief explanation about why each rabbi particularly likes the story he or she decided to share. While I have edited all of the rabbis' stories, I've tried my best to keep the individual speaking style of the rabbis intact, allowing their unique rhythms and personalities to shine through.

Over the course of the year that I've spent working on this project, my body has mended and my spirit continues to soar. Without question, my life has been enhanced because of these rabbis and their stories and I am grateful to all who participated. It is my hope that your life will also be enriched—three times over—by the reading of these inspirational tales.

L'chaim!