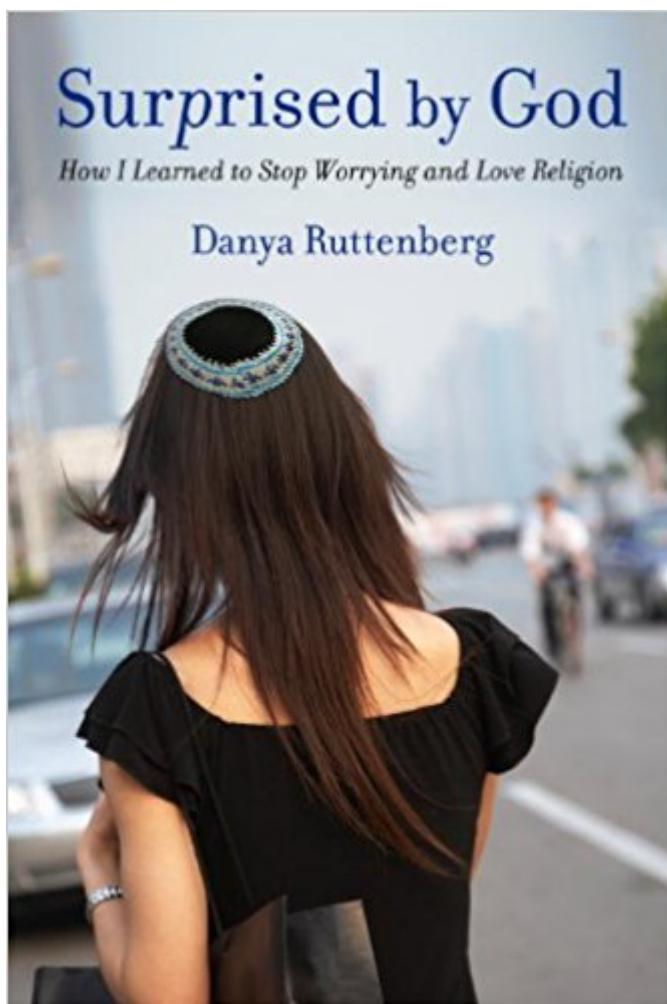


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# Surprised By God: How I Learned To Stop Worrying And Love Religion



## **Synopsis**

At thirteen, Danya Ruttenberg decided she was an atheist. As a young adult, she immersed herself in the rhinestone-bedazzled wonderland of late 1990s San Francisco-drinking smuggled absinthe with wealthy geeks and plotting the revolution with feminist zinemakers. But she found herself yearning for something she would eventually call God. *Surprised by God* is a memoir of a young woman's spiritual awakening and eventual path to the rabbinate, a story of integrating life on the edge of the twenty-first century into the discipline of traditional Judaism, without sacrificing either. It's also an unflinchingly honest guide to the kind of work that goes into developing a spiritual practice-and it shows why, perhaps, doing this in today's world requires more effort than ever.

## **Book Information**

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## **Customer Reviews**

Ruttenberg, who was recently ordained as a rabbi, decided at the age of 13 that she was an atheist. Then in the late 1990s, she experienced a spiritual awakening, taking what she describes as a winding, semi-reluctant path through traditional Jewish practice that eventually took me to the rabbinate. Ruttenberg writes that for her the work of the religious life has been about reconfiguration and reintegration, determining which parts she has outgrown and which could grow with her. The author, who lives in Los Angeles, lived for some time in Jerusalem. A tremendously satisfying memoir of spiritual awakening from the author of a variety of books and periodicals. --George Cohen

--This text refers to an out of print or unavailable edition of this title.

Compelling . . . illuminating . . . thought-provoking. "Jessica Jernigan, *Bitch*" [A] thoughtful and

articulate memoir . . . seeking a truth that transcends doctrine." "Laura Stokes, *Bust*"At every point, Ruttenberg is sharp in her insights about the world and about herself." "Tikkun"[Ruttenberg's] decription of her growing awareness of the power of ritual, the support of community, and religion as relationship will resonate with all sorts of spiritual seekers." "Publishers Weekly"You don't have to be religious to enjoy Ruttenberg's thoughts and words. Her discussions about feminism, community, spirituality, identity, and family are thoughts that can inspire and attract anyone. . . . Surprised by God is an honest memoir about a beautifully complex woman finding her own way through spiritual practice." "Chelsey Clammer, *Feminist Review*"Ruttenberg's memoir . . . is indicative of a whole generation of young, unaffiliated American Jews yearning to learn more about their Judaism, but apprehensive about compromising who they have come to be." "Matthew Wagner, *The Jerusalem Post*"[A] beautiful memoir . . . it's entirely relatable, which in my experience, is unusual for a religious text. It's young. It's hip. And it's still profoundly serious." "Courtney Martin, *feministing.com*"In *Surprised by God*, [Ruttenberg] narrates her own spiritual journey, in which feminism is a given and the value of self-expression a non-negotiable. . . . Gently, Ruttenberg lets the reader in on the surprising lesson of her journey: practicing a religion may change you-and this is not a bad thing!" "Ann Braude, *Women's Review of Books*"Ruttenberg's story shows the ways religious practice is complicated yet valuable for its complexity." "Mandy Van Deven, *Religion Dispatches*"[A] frank and well-written book . . . This remarkable odyssey of radical change is candidly described with extraordinary wit and noteworthy introspection. All readers will learn from this powerful book, regardless of whether or not they are religious." "Morton I. Teicher, *Jewish Journal*"A revealing and thought provoking glimpse inside the mind of a young seeker." "JP, *Jewish Book World*"Danya Ruttenberg's memoir . . . is really fantastic: well-written, engaging, skating that line between the personal and the universal with surprising grace." "Andrea Useem, *Religion Writer*"A tremendously satisfying memoir of spiritual awakening." "Booklist" Danya Ruttenberg shares the story of her journey toward embracing observant Judaism. What makes this story fascinating and urgent is that Ruttenberg never stops thinking and asking hard questions. She reminds us that loving religion is a matter of heart and soul-and brain. And that it something to which I say, Amen." "Leora Tanenbaum, author of *Taking Back God: American Women Rising Up for Religious Equality*"Danya Ruttenberg marshals beautiful writing and a prodigious intellect, and, leavening it all with a hefty dose of wit, tells a compelling story that has something to teach everyone who picks it up, regardless of how spiritual or religious (or not) they are." "Lisa Jervis, cofounder of *Bitch*"Ruttenberg's honesty, depth, wit, and eloquence light up every page." "Carol Lee Flinders, author of *Enduring Lives: Portraits of Women and Faith in Action*"The philosopher in

me loves the unfettered and deep intellectual challenges to which Ruttenberg subjects religion in general and Judaism in particular. The rabbi in me appreciates how she wrestles with Judaism in as intense a way as Jacob wrestled with the angel. The person in me loves her unmitigated integrity and honesty. All in all, Surprised by God is truly a treat!" Rabbi Elliot Dorff, Ph.D., author of *Knowing God: Jewish Journeys to the Unknowable*"[Surprised by God] is refreshingly mature in a world of religious fundamentalism and extremism. Ruttenberg's search for meaning in an often superficial American culture should inspire readers to embark on their own spiritual paths, and Ruttenberg herself is living proof that discovering God and even religion does not necessarily mean losing one's inner core." Rabbi Haviva Ner-David, Ph.D., author of *Life on the Fringes: A Feminist Journey Toward Traditional Rabbinic Ordination*

I'm probably not being fair to Ms. Ruttenberg; my standard for religious autobiography is Anne Lamott. And Thomas Merton's "Seven Story Mountain". She writes a decent book but plunges through the decades with only a good glance at all that occurred. I hoped she would expand on her family, as it sounded like their dysfunction had much to do with hers. Religion is lived on two levels: the intellectual, received in seminary, and the fierce discussions about the meaning of laws. The other level is the raw, unfinished world. Watching someone die in the hospital. Following someone in the congregation for a few decades, then preaching their memorial after you've walked the whole way with them. A greater revelation of personal struggles and encounters with what Jack Kerouac called "Naked Lunch" It was an OK read and I would recommend it to others.

This book is a very good book to start you thinking about how to balance Jewish teaching with a secular life. The author went from being an atheist to an observant Jew. It was a journey with a lot of bounces. It was done for the right reasons, to meet a passion to be a better person. It is entertaining and thought provoking. I enjoy seeing some my home town Chicago area bars listed, but I enjoyed more the journey to be an observant Jew even though I myself will not meet that criteria. It helped me think about my journey along that route.

I absolutely devoured this book. I'm someone who is converting to Judaism after a long religious search myself, so this book really spoke to me. Additionally, however, it's incredibly well-written, thought-provoking, and deep. Ruttenberg manages to seamlessly integrate philosophic and religious critique with mystical texts alongside teenage angst and adult reflections and experiences. It's a wonderful read, not only for Jewish people, but for anyone who has been on a religious

journey. Mazel Tov Rabbi Ruttenberg!

Look very new

Quick read. I enjoyed it since I was able to relate to how she felt a little displaced with her social circle as she started practicing her Judaism. I only wish she would explain more about why and how she felt more spiritual as she explored her religion besides using meditation.

Danya Ruttenberg's latest book is a very moving memoir of a young woman's spiritual development. This is more than a biography, it's a guide to developing one's own spiritual path. Rabbi Ruttenberg brings stories and sources from various faith traditions which add to her gripping narrative. I truly couldn't put this book down. I highly recommend it.

This little memoir is the story of an atheist hipster who, after her mother's premature death, becomes interested in God and gradually turns into a pretty observant Conservative Jew (and, at the end of the book, applies to rabbinical school). If you share the author's enthusiasms for moderately traditional religion and leftish politics, this could be an inspirational book.. If not, probably not so much. Here are a few lines I liked: "The only archetypes [of God] that I encountered in my upbringing and in the wider culture were of God as fascist dictator, or, maybe, God as the Big Buddy who makes everything okay." "it was extremely daunting to do such a private, precious thing [as pray] in public..[so in her first visits to synagogue] I never spoke to anyone ... I wanted - needed- to pretend that I was somehow alone at this." I could identify with this- when I first started going to synagogues I mostly wanted to be left alone. It was only after I developed a certain degree of "ritual mastery" (as she puts it) that I felt more of a need to be welcomed. "[in travel] Rather than holding on to the same identity... as is easy to do amid the comforts of home - we shift and change and become new in every moment." I identified with this because I have found that I have made the most drastic religious shifts only after moving to a new city. [a rabbi] "instructed me to embrace [feelings of failure] until I got to the place where my failures merged with everybody else's failures .... The next day was Tisha'b'Av- the anniversary of the destruction of the Jerusalem Temple, a holiday about confronting suffering and disintegration." As the rabbi in question (Alan Lew) has written elsewhere, Tisha'b'Av is part of a cycle, beginning with the recognition of failure on Tisha'b'Av, moving towards repentance and reconciliation during the High Holy Days.

I wanted to review analyses of a personal change from nonbeliever to believer and finally rabbi. It is a brilliant work, systematic, educational, mystic and challenging. I loved it, and kept saving pages and postponing ending. Well. New woman, person and rabbi was born. World has become a better place, including me a little.

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