



# Murder at the Minyan

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## DISCUSSION GUIDE

This cozy mystery – meaning that it has no sex or profanity, very little violence, and it ends well – follows a Conservative pulpit rabbi and his daily obligations. He doesn't realize that a congregant, who has an obligation to say Kaddish for his mother, has decided on murder as a solution to inadequate shul attendance.

Aside from personal interactions between the rabbi and his family and congregants, the story touches on societal and cultural challenges facing many Jews today including Shabbat observance, kashrut, Jewish education, tefilah, tzedakah, marriage, conversion, Brit Milah, honoring parents, visiting the sick, burying the dead and the treasure of Jewish unity.

## Themes

### **Intermovement relations**

The tapestry of the Jewish people as presented in this book marks distinctions between observances this way:

- The Orthodox maintain separate seating (men and women sit separately) and are suspicious of any deviations from tradition that they observe.
- The Conservative are committed to Jewish institutions but want to make their own rules about ritual observance.
- The Reform focus on relations between people rather than the rules of ritual observance.

But all Jews come together when a tragedy strikes.

Is this how it must be? Can they get along without putting each other down?

Do Jews act in unison only during bad times?

Are these definitions fair or accurate?

## **Interfaith suspicions**

In this book, the relations between Judaism and other religions is examined.

Is an interfaith Thanksgiving event fruitful or does being in the others' place of worship only intensify the differences?

What is difficult about living in America in December? (Carols and Crèches at the Mall, public school programs and the pressure to give gifts are mentioned in the book. Have you experienced other pressures?)

Have you ever been the object of anti-Semitism or witnessed it?

Should conversion to Judaism be encouraged?

Is the depiction of mutual suspicion fair or accurate?

## **A rabbi's life and life-cycle events**

Some of the tensions a rabbi must live with are described in this story.

Should a rabbi have his/her own family life or, like the image of a priest, should that life have the needs of its flock as the top priority?

Should the rabbi's spouse or children feel they live in a fishbowl or accept their responsibility of setting a good example for the congregants?

The rabbi's children in this story live a distance from other observant Jews and have a hard time with the seclusion that Shabbat and holidays demand of them. Is there anything the family can do to make observance less of a burden?

When a rabbi feels put down or stressed, to whom should he turn?

Do you think this rabbi will leave the country, leave the rabbinate, leave this pulpit or stay with the traumatized congregation?

How much of synagogue prayer is understood and inspiring; how much is rote and comforting only because it is familiar, and how much is downright boring and/or too long and likely to alienate individuals who must attend?

## **Israel**

In the book, synagogue leaders discuss where tzedakah (charity) funds should be spent. Should the success of Israel be a priority for American Jews?

What should the relationship between Israel and American Jews be?

In religious matters (such as the conversion in this story), should Israel's rabbis' opinions be worth more than those outside of the Promised Land?

Should nonobservant Israelis know more about Jewish history and religious traditions or is living in Israel enough to anchor their identity as Jews? Should American Jewish youngsters learn more about the roles of ritual or of Israel in their history?

## **Mitzvot**

Several mitzvot are mentioned in the book, so it's clear that they are more than the "good deeds" their translation renders them to be.

What do Shabbat observance, kosher food, tzedakah (charity), honoring parents, visiting the sick and burying the dead have in common?

Is saying Kaddish for a deceased close relative a mitzvah? Is it more important than other mitzvot? Why does the act command so much devotion?

## **Honoring parents**

In this story, some parents seem worthy of respect and others don't.

Is there a limit to honoring one's parents or, because it is one of the Ten Commandments, is it limitless and eternal?

The Talmud discusses the case of a marriage pageant and a funeral procession arriving at an intersection at the same time, asking which must yield to let the other pass first? In other words, which is more important, honoring the living, such as a wedding couple, or remembering the dead, such as a parent?

## **Egalitarian worship**

In this book, the ultimate judgment seems to be made by a woman.

Does religious life need an update to conform with modern life or is there more value to honoring traditional roles? In the modern day, should the old rules still apply, that women are not responsible for time-specific mitzvot? Or should "Mr. Mom" men have roles reversed in the religious sphere, too?

Should the tradition be changed so that the mother be mentioned (along with the father) at their son's bris or the bar/bat mitzvah of their children?

## **Homosexuality**

Same-sex unions are mentioned as possibly being legal from a secular standpoint but not a religious one. It's likened to meat that is legal but not kosher.

What position should Jewish law take on this issue? Would it be possible to accept such inclinations from congregants but not from clergy?