



Reading Group Gold

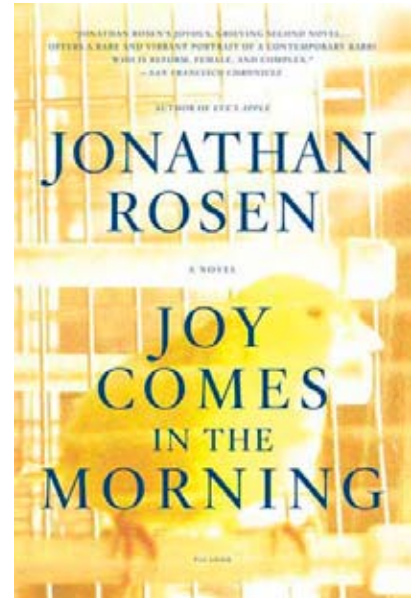
Joy Comes in the Morning

by Jonathan Rosen

Author of *The Talmud and the Internet* and *Eve's Apple*

“To enter Jonathan Rosen’s mind is to feel the meaning of civilization.”
—Cynthia Ozick

The questions that follow are designed to enhance your reading and discussion of *Joy Comes in the Morning*. We hope they will enrich your experience of this luminous novel.



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Introduction

Hailed for his tenderly crafted, powerful explorations of humanity, Jonathan Rosen turns his eye to the very nature of hope and love in his mesmerizing second novel, *Joy Comes in the Morning*. At the heart of the story is Deborah Green, a rabbi who craves goodness and surety while wrestling with her own doubts and desires. She has vowed not to emulate those rabbis “who lie around the synagogue like neutered housecats,” but her reputation for performing her duties with fervor and authenticity belies a growing restlessness. With each marriage ceremony she conducts, she wonders how much longer she will remain single. With each funeral, she contemplates the measure of her own life.

It is through someone even wearier that she begins to probe her fears in earnest. Tending to patients at a Manhattan hospital, she encounters Lev Friedman, a science reporter whose ailing father has attempted suicide. Lev’s grandparents were murdered in the Holocaust, and his family has always struggled with the question this raised: Can happiness ever return after such loss, or does the very wish profane the dead? Lev’s faith in himself and in relationships is also running low; he abandoned his fiancée at the altar and abruptly stopped sessions with his therapist. But as he and Deborah begin a fragile dance of piety and skepticism, they find themselves creating something sacred and comforting in the midst of modern-day chaos.

Questions for Discussion

1. What do the novel’s opening scenes reveal about Deborah’s approach to life, both in terms of the mundane and the magnificent? What joy does she find that morning?
2. Does Henry perceive his suicide attempt as an act of resignation or heroism? How does his understanding of the world compare to that of Helen and their children?



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3. As Deborah prepares to perform the marriage ceremony at Wave Hill, with the sparkling Hudson River as a backdrop, the groom's grandfather asserts that religion is foolish and irrational. What arguments can be made for and against this notion? How do Deborah and Lev embody various aspects of rational and irrational thought?
4. Is Lev the only character in the novel to rely on tranquilizers to soothe his fears? What other sources of anxiety are presented in *Joy Comes in the Morning*, and what coping strategies are presented?
5. What gives meaning to the ceremonies conducted by Deborah? Would you characterize her approach as perfunctory or simply realistic? What are the implications of Lev's limping through the funeral for Estelle Kalman's mother? Should a rabbi be viewed simply as a teacher, or is there a more essential role?
6. How would you characterize the sibling dynamics in each family? Do Deborah and Lev share similar roles in terms of their accomplishments? Do their siblings think of them as unconventional? What are your impressions of how parental affections are expressed in the novel?
7. Discuss the city of New York itself as a character in the novel, with burial grounds located in outer boroughs and Manhattan as the center of Deborah's frenetic life. What makes Yankee Stadium a suitable place for her first date with Lev? Would any other city have worked so well with this storyline?
8. In what way does the memory of Henry's parents shape his own relationship to his children? Does he ultimately, at the novel's close, view the tragedy of their death in a different way? Can humanity ever fully heal from such destruction?
9. How does Neal's mental illness shape the narrative? What does it indicate about the nature of pain and danger in the world? As Lev mourns the loss of his lifelong friend, what does he learn about his own road to adulthood?
10. Discuss the process of Lenora's conversion. Deborah silently believes that ancestry and cultural heritage are key components to Jewish identity, components she is powerless to bestow. Do you agree with her? What aspects of your identity were inherited through familial tradition and ritual, and what aspects were you awakened to through other means?
11. What does Deborah discover in her discussions with Mrs. Fink? How does she address Mrs. Fink's concern that death will actually be a sort of jilting, a disappointment that will deprive her of being in her husband's presence?
12. Do Deborah and Lev's previous relationships share any common qualities? Do their former lovers mirror their former selves in any way? What does Deborah's reunion with Reuben clarify for her?
13. Though Deborah accepts Reform tenets, she also cherishes many Orthodox traditions. How does she define "sacred"? What does she consider to be the world's defiling elements? Were you surprised when her contract at Temple Emunah was not renewed?



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14. Discuss the theme of healing and rehabilitation in the novel. To what extent are Henry's grandchildren part of this process? What limitations did Lev and Deborah help one another overcome? Who are the healers, and what are the healing rituals, in your life?
15. In the novel's closing scenes, Rosen includes a few details that remind us of ever-present ominous possibilities, including Jacob's job interview at a securities firm in the World Trade Center. We're also given the image of Henry's tallis being used as a chuppah rather than the shroud for which he intended it. How do you envision Deborah and Lev's future?
16. Rosen's previous novel, *Eve's Apple*, addressed literal and metaphoric hungers through a unique love story. *The Talmud and the Internet*, a work of nonfiction, draws parallels between contemporary and ancient life. What comparisons can be made among the author's works? What distinctions emerge from *Joy Comes in the Morning*?
17. Explore the novel's title in relation to Psalm 30 in its entirety. What does the psalmist say about the origins of the weeping that "may endure for a night"? What emotions do you experience while reading the psalm's repeated assurance that joy, in many forms, always follows lamentation?
18. *Joy Comes in the Morning* addresses many universal topics, such as the experience of faith in general, confronting mortality, and many manifestations of love. Is this a quintessential American novel? Is it a traditional Jewish novel? Does contemporary fiction often defy categorization altogether?

Early Praise for *Joy Comes in the Morning*

"Exquisitely attuned to the vagaries of the inner self and the richness of Jewish spirituality, Rosen has created a marvelously accessible and touching novel that is at once profoundly philosophical and simply radiant." —*Booklist*

"A welcoming and intelligent look at . . . contemporary Judaism." —*Publishers Weekly* (starred review)

"*Joy Comes in the Morning* is a warm, generous, and often funny meditation on family and faith. Even those of us who lack the latter will find much to ponder in this affecting and beautifully written book."
—Gary Shteyngart, author of *The Russian Debutante's Handbook*

About the Author

JONATHAN ROSEN is the author of *The Talmud and the Internet* and the novel *Eve's Apple*. His essays have appeared in *The New York Times* and *The New Yorker*, among other publications, and he serves as the editorial director of *Nextbook*, where he is the editor of a forthcoming series of short books on Jewish subjects. Rosen lives in New York City with his wife and daughters.