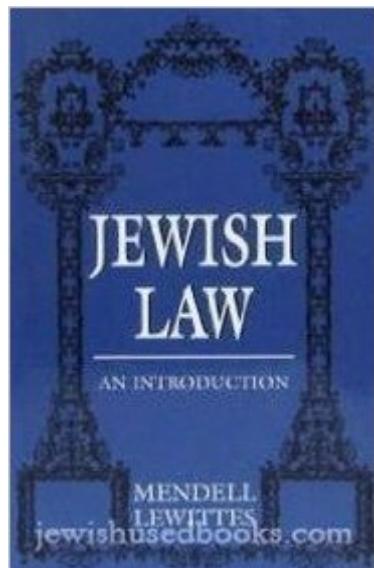


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Jewish Law: An Introduction



Synopsis

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Customer Reviews

Mendell Lewittes, a member of Yeshiva University's very first graduating class (1932) and a rabbi who served, it seems, all over North America for 35 years, here provides an excellent introductory overview of the history and development of Halakha. Beginning at the beginning (the creation of man), Rabbi Lewittes places the foundation of Jewish law firmly on the giving of divine commandments (mitzvot). The development of Jewish law itself essentially begins at Sinai (though with the recognition that some specifically Jewish mitzvot had been given prior to this time); the meaning of Halakha is discussed and its integration with human life expounded. The reader is then led carefully through the Written Torah and the Oral Torah, the eventual redaction of the Talmud, and the history of Halakha up to and including the Shulchan Aruch. Four closing chapters deftly analyze four modern "challenges" to Halakha: Hasidism; Reform; modern science and medical practice; and Zionism. An epilogue presents a few views of Rabbi Lewittes's own about the direction Halakha should take from here, arguing among other things that the Modern Orthodox approach is capable of both remaining true to Tradition and adapting it to modern needs. Throughout his exposition, Rabbi Lewittes maintains a firmly Maimonidean-rationalist outlook, striking just the right balance between "The mitzvot _do_ make rational sense" and "Jews are required to keep them anyway (when possible), even though they may not make sense _to us_ right at the moment."

Mendell Lewittes, a RIETS ordained Modern Orthodox Rabbi, has written a concise book on the development of halakhah ("Jewish law"), covering everything from the Torah to the Tanya, from the Zohar to Zionism. The book starts with the traditional view of Abraham, Moses, and the revelation by God to Moses at Mount Sinai. The rationale for accepting the mitzvot as binding, and as the source for all Jewish law, is discussed in depth, and illuminated by generous, albeit uncritical, quoting from our tradition's greatest sages. The importance of the Oral Law as well as the Written law is given a clear treatment, and is illustrated by demonstrating the development of early schisms in Judaism - the split between the Pharisees (progenitors of rabbinic Jews) and Sadducees (who rejected the Oral law). From here, the book moves into the era of the Tannaim and the Mishnah, and the development of the Talmud. Further topics include the development of the Gezerah, the Takkahah ("legal ordinance"), and Minhag ("custom"). From the Rishonim to the Acharonim, Lewittes tells the story of Ashkenazi and Sephardi rabbis who worked to reconcile Talmudic law with their changing world, and shows us the development of the many codes of Jewish law, particularly the Shulchan Aruch. Perhaps the most interesting part of this work lies in the discussion of the development of the Chasidic movement, and the response of the mainstream Jewish community to the Chassids. Covering the most controversial part of Jewish history, we are then exposed to the effects of the Emancipation and Haskalah (Enlightenment movement), which set the stage for the development of the modern Jewish denominations, Orthodox, Conservative, and Reform Judaism.

Mendell Lewittes, a member of Yeshiva University's very first graduating class (1932) and a rabbi who served, it seems, all over North America for 35 years, here provides an excellent introductory overview of the history and development of Halakha. Beginning at the beginning (the creation of man), Rabbi Lewittes places the foundation of Jewish law firmly on the giving of divine commandments (mitzvot). The development of Jewish law itself essentially begins at Sinai (though with the recognition that some specifically Jewish mitzvot had been given prior to this time); the meaning of Halakha is discussed and its integration with human life expounded. The reader is then led carefully through the Written Torah and the Oral Torah, the eventual redaction of the Talmud, and the history of Halakha up to and including the Shulchan Aruch. Four closing chapters deftly analyze four modern "challenges" to Halakha: Hasidism; Reform; modern science and medical practice; and Zionism. An epilogue presents a few views of Rabbi Lewittes's own about the direction Halakha should take from here, arguing among other things that the Modern Orthodox approach is capable of both remaining true to Tradition and adapting it to modern needs. Throughout his exposition, Rabbi Lewittes maintains a firmly Maimonidean-rationalist outlook, striking just the right

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