

# Reader's Guide

## *Making Meaning Out of Madness: A Jewish Journey*

by Miranda Portnoy



### Suggested Group Discussion Questions

- 1) How does the choice of title frame the story?
- 2) How does the cover complement the book?
- 3) What might the two epigraphs (quotations) that precede Miranda Portnoy's memoir mean to the author? What do they mean to you?
- 4) Before she embarks on her spiritual journey, Miranda paints a troubling portrait of the Jewish community, based on her experience with its members. What are the elements of this portrait? Do you think her portrait is fair? Why or why not?
- 5) Miranda made two startling discoveries in adult life. At thirty-two, she learned she had always had attention deficit disorder, and at thirty-three, she discovered there was a God in the world. What surprises have you discovered about yourself or the world that changed the course of your life? How did you come to discover them? What changes did you make as a result?
- 6) What do you think about Miranda's mystical experiences? Do you find them authentic? Or do you think she was simply mentally ill at the time? On what do you base your view?
- 7) At several points in the story, Miranda gives up things she desires and enjoys to refine herself spiritually. How do you view her choices? When have you sacrificed something you desired for a higher purpose? How did you do it? What was the outcome?
- 8) In Chapter 19, Miranda presents a synopsis of Jewish philosophy, providing an explanation for the suffering we bear as humans. What are the strengths and weaknesses of such a philosophy? Do you agree or disagree with it and why?
- 9) In chapter 21, Miranda examines the consequences of reduced responsibility in casual sex. What are your thoughts about her analysis? What do you notice about gender relations in your world? What are the pros and cons of acknowledging our duties to a Higher Power in the sexual realm?
- 10) What do you think Miranda owes her parents and brother? Was she right or wrong to sever her ties with them?
- 11) What do you think about the way Miranda handled the betrayal by the two women in charge of her first religious seminary in Israel? How would you have handled it and why?
- 12) What were the key decisions in Miranda's emancipation and healing?
- 13) What are some of the lessons in Miranda Portnoy's experience? What lessons might you apply to your own life, if any?
- 14) Where can individuality be found within a divinely ordained code of human behavior? What are the advantages and disadvantages of embracing such a code?
- 15) How did reading this book expand or change your perception of the subject matter?

## Questions on **Section Two: Behind the Madness**

- 16) What do you think of the evidence Miranda assembles for the truth of the Torah (with the implied existence of God)?
- 17) What do you think of the premise of the essay in the Appendix, *Smarter than Aristotle*? Is either the banishment of moral edicts or the release from ritual responsibilities a strong enough motive to persuade others to ignore or deny the existence of God?
- 18) “Solving the Jewish Mystery” and “Two Orthodox Jews, Three Opinions” explore two key arguments for the truth of the Torah. These are the acceptance by the biblical Jewish people of arduous commandments that issued out of historical events and the preservation by the nation of the record of these events in the Torah over the ages (events that never happened according to secular Jewish philosophy). What do you think of these particular arguments?
- 19) In “Two Orthodox Jews, Three Opinions” Miranda explains why she thinks those who do not believe in the divinity of the Torah make unreliable teachers of Torah. What do you think of her analysis? What are its implications?
- 20) What do you think of the concept of biblical Jewish chosenness? What does it say about the Jewish faith that it accepts a sincere convert from any race or religion who wishes to share in the arduous duties and spiritual rewards of chosenness? What is more, Judaism does not require those outside the faith to convert to Judaism in order to gain spiritual salvation. Rather, Judaism assures a blessed Afterlife for members of other faiths who keep the Seven Noahide laws encompassing basic morality.