

# BOOK WEEK FOR COUCH POTATOES

Most of the Jewish Book Week 2011 sessions are now available to listen to via podcast. Here are a few suggestions

## Jerusalem: The biography

Simon Sebag Montefiore is a great storyteller. However, if you decide to listen to his talk, you might like to fast forward to about halfway as after a long-winded introduction, his talk is a great appetiser for reading the book, which is a history of the Holy City told through stories of its people. Montefiore speaks in evocative detail about the destruction of Jerusalem by the Romans. Be prepared for a gory story.

## Guilt and Happiness

Pascal Bruckner with Clive James, two incredibly clever people in conversation, a joy to listen to. They talk about France, politics, religious extremism and antisemitism. French philosopher Bruckner also introduces his new book, *Perpetual*

*Euphoria*, which discusses the current Western obsession with happiness. People tell me Clive James was only a shadow of his old self. All I can say is that he was brilliant. **AGI ERDOS**

## Eat, Write, Love

English author Charlotte Mendelson interviews American fiction author Allegra Goodman and Israeli cookery writer Yotam Ottolenghi. All three know each other's work well and a lively, articulate and interesting discussion on cookery and the stories behind their books ensues. The story behind Yotam's move from academic to successful chef and writer is fascinating. **DAVID RUBIN**

## Flavours of Babylon

Bea Lewkowicz took up themes of her Sephardi Voices film *Moments and Memories* (well worth viewing) in an interview with Linda Dangoor on her new cookbook. When asked whether her recipes were Iraqi or Jewish or Iraqi Jewish, Linda replied "All three" and spoke about the

adaptation of Iraqi recipes to conform with Jewish practice. Linda spoke movingly and with love of her attempts to produce the tastes of her childhood in Iraq and the memories these evoked. **DIANE LUKEMAN**

## Tel Aviv Stories

The engaging Shira Geffen talks about her film *Jellyfish*, a sweet yet sad film which focuses on the lives of three women in Tel Aviv. In the conversation with Linda Grant, different layers of the film were revealed, such as the symbolism of jellyfish and of the sea, and of the difficulties of communication on an emotional level. Some audience questions are inaudible, but go on listening – the answers still make a lot of sense. **MIMI ROLBANT**

Other highly recommended sessions are Norman Lebrecht on Gustav Mahler; the readings by Henry Goodman, with musical accompaniment, of Stefan Zweig's writings and *Last Word* with Howard Jacobson and Jonathan Freedland.

Go to [www.jewishbookweek.com](http://www.jewishbookweek.com) Note that the podcasts take several minutes to download.

earliest days through Chasidism to contemporary practice, no one before him has dedicated an entire book, accessible to the general public, to the subject. Some of the greatest scholars have explored this Sufi influence, reflected in Jewish mystical ideas, spiritual practices and liturgical texts. However, the topic has remained obscure and marginalised until now.

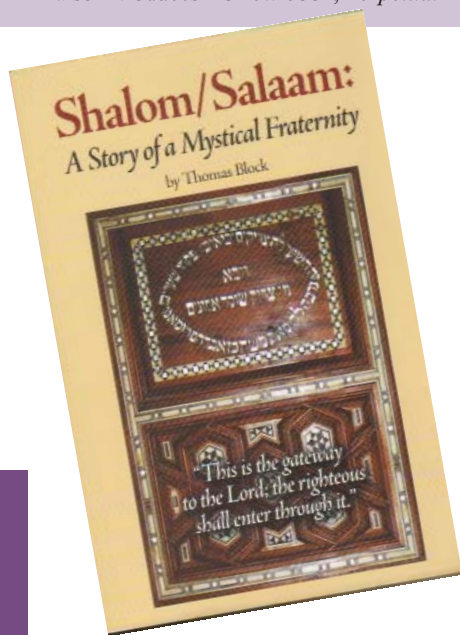
Block was driven to write his book by the conviction that, in response to the political conflict in the Middle East today, as well as the common misconception that Jews and Muslims "were long-time enemies", a book highlighting the rich spiritual relationship between the two traditions was urgently needed. Block, who calls himself "a Jew interested in [his] own spiritual roots", devoted more than ten years of his life to researching this subject. The result is a thorough, detailed, though at places tedious account of the interaction between Sufi and Jewish mysticism throughout history.

The Sufi-Jewish 'mystical fraternity' begins with medieval scholars such as Maimonides' descendants in Egypt, and Spanish thinkers including Solomon Ibn Gabirol and Abraham Abulafia. It continues in the development of kabbalah, and later in Chasidism. Much of the thought of the above-mentioned scholars and trends was deeply

influenced by the central Sufi concepts of equanimity, the annihilation of the ego or the emptying of oneself in order to know God. Kabbalistic and Chasidic practices such as the combination of Hebrew letters as a form of meditation, *hitbodedut* (secluding oneself) or *devekut* (clinging to God), also bear the mark of Sufism. Numerous Jewish hymns, some of which are in our siddur, for example, 'Adon Olam' or parts of the Yom Kippur service, contain Sufi ideas.

Although Block acknowledges that the influence was mutual between the two traditions, the book one-sidedly focuses on the penetration of Sufi elements into the Jewish mystical tradition. It would have been a more balanced account – and the book's main message would not have been in any way overshadowed – had he placed more emphasis on the aspect of cross-insemination between the two cultures.

Unfortunately Block doesn't look at any primary sources in the original Arabic or Hebrew but relies exclusively on secondary literature. Even though this does not diminish the validity of the point he is making, it certainly makes his argument less convincing. Nevertheless, the book fills an important gap and draws our attention to an interesting historical relationship that was little known before.



## SHALOM/SALAAM: A STORY OF A MYSTICAL FRATERNITY

THOMAS BLOCK

Fons Vitae, 2010, pb, 245pp, £21

## Reviewed by Agi Erdos

What an interesting choice of subject. Although Thomas Block is not the first to claim that Sufism, a mystical tradition within Islam, has been a formative influence on the development of Jewish mysticism from the