

The Jew in the Lotus

By [Jodi Eichler-Levine](#)

August 20, 2014

In our "Books Change" series, historians of religion consider books that have changed us or have themselves been changed.

In August 1994, I was an introspective, brainy 16-year-old, fresh from a summer in Israel with a busload of other 16-year-olds. On my last morning in Jerusalem, I had watched the sun rise: cool breezes over ancient golden stones. I heard church bells ring and the Muslim call to prayer, whispering my own Hebrew dreams into fuzzy pink air. As a Jewish teen who went (reluctantly) to Israel for the Roman ruins but stayed for the prayers, when we chanted under desert stars I was suspended somewhere in between Reform Jewish teenagerhood and a future as a religious studies professor—plus my always evolving, complex relationship with Jewish adulthood.

This was when I first encountered Rodger Kamenetz's *The Jew in the Lotus: A Poet's Rediscovery of Jewish Identity in Buddhist India*. It was published in that same year: 1994. I sat in the black recliner in my bedroom, learning about a different spiritual pilgrimage: a delegation of Jewish leaders going to visit the Dalai Lama in India. They wanted to learn more about Buddhism and its strong appeal to so many American Jews. He wanted to learn more about survival in diaspora. Kamenetz, a poet and professor at Louisiana State University, came along for the ride, and wrote a deeply meditative book about an extraordinary moment in Jewish and Buddhist history.

The Jew in the Lotus is one of many books that set me on my academic path. It had Jewish debate, mysticism, philosophy, history; terms in Sanskrit and Hebrew and Tibetan. It gave voice to my nascent longing for thinking about religion comparatively and historically.

A few years ago, I taught it in an introductory religious studies course. It was the most popular text that semester. Perhaps this is because of its intimate style. Perhaps this is because of Americans' ongoing fascination with the exoticized "mystic East." Or it might be for the same reasons that I first loved it: for the hope of change through encountering others openly, with difficult questions and ethical quandaries, but also hope.

Near the end of the book, Kamenetz discusses the need for renewal in American Judaism. In the 1990s, some Jewish leaders feared that rallying around Israel would no longer keep American Jews together; perhaps new spiritual practices would. When peace seemed within reach, this was our ironic crisis: if Israel didn't need us, then what were we?

Sadly, that moment has long since passed. It was already gone in 2007, when Kamenetz wrote an afterword for the latest edition of the book. He looked back nostalgically at the walls that seemed to be crumbling in the mid-1990s, at hopes for "the highest dreams of humanity."

"We all know what happened next," he writes. Oh, how we do. Explosive tensions in Israel and Palestine since 2000. September 11 and its endless geopolitical aftermath. Continued repression in Tibet.

And then, more quietly, there was another loss this summer. I've been thinking of *The Jew and the Lotus* because of the recent death of Rabbi Zalman Schachter-Shalomi, the primary founder of the Jewish renewal movement. He was a man of peace—so much so that he hyphenated his birth name, *schachter*, which means *slaughterer*, with *shalomi*, from the Hebrew for *peace*. Nothing that I write here can do him justice, so I'll leave

that to [Professor Shaul Magid](#) and [Rabbi Rachel Barenblatt](#). It was heartbreaking to lose his voice for the earth, for peace, and for the power of interreligious encounter at a time when we need those things so deeply.

Sometimes, I want it to be 1994 again. I want a real peace process. Sometimes I want it to be 1998, when the Dalai Lama visited Brandeis and my future husband and I stood on a wall, watching him emerge from a car for a special mandala ceremony; when I heard him speak to a crowd of thousands in our gym. What do I remember most from that speech? His laughter.

But I also remember one of the lessons of those mandalas: impermanence. Ironically, on Facebook, my fellow peaceniks keep hoping, wishing, and praying instead for a kind of permanence: for a ceasefire to stick.

Books can help us to be “unstuck in time,” like Billy Pilgrim in *Slaughterhouse-Five*. *The Jew in the Lotus* unsticks me. It helps me glide between that morning in Jerusalem, 20 years ago almost to the day, and this one.

Our weekly feature Then and Now harnesses the expertise of American religious historians who care about the cities of God and the cities of humans. It's edited by [Edward J. Blum](#) and [Kate Bowler](#).