Aahhhhhhh, the holidays!
The changing of the seasons, each one bringing its own distinctive holidays with their particular smells, tastes, prayers, activities, and emotions.

Beginning with Rosh Hashanah, the New Year…. no, that’s not right. Rosh Hashanah falls in the seventh month of the Jewish calendar (Tishrei) – the first month (Nissan) falls in the spring. The New Year at Nissan is, in fact, one of the four new years of the Jewish calendar; it is the New Year for the year itself. Confusing? Yes! But the calendar itself is confusing – based on the moon, there are 12 months of 29 or 30 days each. But following this system would cause the holidays to shift season, and the spring festivals would sometimes be celebrated in winter, sometimes in autumn, sometimes in summer. So the rabbis devised a system whereby every so often (seven out of 19 years), an additional 13th month is added to the calendar…a second Adar (and, because the holiday of Purim falls in that month, those years also celebrate a second, “smaller” Purim).

Agreed, the Jewish calendar and its associated holiday cycle are complicated. And so, a guide is very helpful. But there are already many guides out there. Do we need another one? What does this new book by Paul Steinberg bring to the already crowded bookshelf? Should we make room for it?
The answer is yes. Steinberg has combined, in one place, much information about each of the holidays, providing a handy reference book that is both informative and interesting and can be used to look up particular items or read from beginning to end, a worthwhile challenger to Wikipedia and the rest of the World Wide Web. Especially so, since this book will be useful for a variety of audiences: novices and practiced practitioners; those new to the practices and celebration of Jewish holidays and those for whom they are second nature; those who want the short simple answer and those who want lots of information complete with bibliographic references. It is a book that is inclusive in its audience as well as its content.
A follow up to his earlier books on the holidays of fall and winter, this new volume covers those of spring and summer: Passover, the Omer, Shavuot, and Tisha b’Av. By limiting the number of festivals included in any one book, Steinberg manages to give us a great deal of information about each one without producing an intimidatingly large and unwieldy tome. Although the texts are primarily drawn from the more traditional writings, he does include some that are more contemporary and non-mainstream so that, along with the ancient, rabbinical, and Ashkenazi, we also find the “alternative”, Sephardi, mystical, and even environmentalist. The extensive footnotes ensure that the serious scholar can follow up on any particular item, while the more casual reader can follow the flow without impediment.

For instance, the section on Passover, a commemoration of the Exodus and the biblical ancestors’ journey from slavery to freedom, starts by explaining the holiday in general terms. It gives an overview of the themes, the more obvious along with the more symbolic interpretations. Biblical references provide the original mandate on how to observe the holiday and narrate the historical events, which are commemorated; this is followed by explanations and quotes from the ancient rabbis who converted the Temple harvest festival into the home seder ritual still practiced today. Medieval interpreters who elaborated on the earlier commentaries contributed further levels of symbolic meanings and, in some cases, modified the previous practices as changing conditions made the earlier observances impractical. For example, the question of whether to eat kitniyot (rice, corn, legumes, etc) during Passover was an issue of major significance to medieval authorities. It was during this time that Ashkenazi leaders prohibited these foods – expanding the protective fence so that nobody would accidentally eat the forbidden hametz (leavened foods); to this day, the acceptability of rice remains a key distinction between Sephardi and Ashkenazi practice. Along with medieval texts discussing the issue, Steinberg presents earlier relevant writings, such as the mishnaic discussion permitting these foods (because they are not grains) and references two Babylonian rabbis who even placed rice on their Seder’s plates, although, unfortunately, Steinberg does not tell us why they did this. Perhaps their intention was similar to that of Susannah Heschel when, in the 1980s, she placed an orange on her own Seder plate to draw attention to a group of people marginalized by the community. In Heschel’s case, the people in question were gays and lesbians; if the Babylonian rabbis had a similar desire to spotlight an invisible or unfamiliar people, place, or thing, there is no indication of this in Steinberg’s book.
Steinberg does not mention the orange on the Seder plate, but he does include another new symbolic item created by Jewish feminists of the same period. Miriam’s Cup is a twentieth-century innovation that highlights the role of women in the Exodus story and, by extension, the significance of women within the Jewish tradition. However, Steinberg’s brief section does not mention feminists, feminism, or the fact that this new practice was created consciously and intentionally by Jewish women who felt they had been excluded from mainstream Jewish practices and relegated to a secondary place within the Jewish tradition, and who hoped to use the Cup to counteract that status.

Unfortunately, Steinberg also perpetuates this exclusion of women by drawing overwhelmingly on texts written by men. While this is unavoidable for historical writings, there are many interesting and appropriate texts written by contemporary women that could have been included. This omission perpetuates the male dominance of biblical scholarship and interpretation when it can no longer be justified based on necessity or ability.

A book this size cannot possibly include all the texts relevant to each holiday and Steinberg’s selections, as mentioned previously, do cover a variety of types. Perhaps it is this very variety that will whet the reader’s appetite and inspire her/him to delve further. One fascinating avenue for exploration not mentioned in this book is the collection of illuminated manuscripts from the medieval period that portray in graphic and visual form some of the ways holidays were actually practiced (examples can be found online on the website of the British Library). Another interesting genre is the responsa literature: questions posed by practitioners and answers supplied by authoritative rabbis. It is in this body of writings, for instance, that we find a reference to all-women Seders taking place in the ancient rabbinic period, although these seem to have been a consequence of circumstances rather than acts of volition: they were performed by women who were widowed or divorced and had no men with whom to celebrate the ritual (see Moshe Zvi Polin, “A Seder on the night of Passover by women together: prohibited or permitted, long or not long?” [Hebrew], Hadarom 66–67 (Elul 5758), 29–38.) The fact that this book can stimulate a desire for further knowledge is an indication of its usefulness. Overall, this is an interesting and welcome book. Steinberg is obviously imbued with a profound love for the Jewish holidays and tradition, and this love shines through unequivocally in this text.