There are numbers we associate with Pesach/Passover: three and four. There are three major items, *Pesach*, *Matza*, and *Maror*; three *matzot* on the Seder plate; three sections to the evening: pre-meal ritual/the meal/post-meal ritual; four questions; four “children/types”; four synonymous verbs for redemption, and so on. Three (possibly suspicious) deaths have taken place in the days leading up to Passover. Is a fourth to take place? Are these deaths connected or coincidental? Murder? Revenge? Will mid-fifties, congregational-Rabbi Aviva Cohen be next? Or will she find, if not the *afikomen*, then the answers to these deaths before she becomes the next sacrifice? Indeed, we might ask, why is this ___ different? Yet, in place of the word “night,” we might substitute “rabb.” *Unleavened Dead* is Ilene Schneider’s second Rabbi Aviva Cohen whodunit, a follow-up to her 2007 mystery novel, *Chanukah Guilt*. *Unleavened Dead* is a kind of feminine version of the highly successful Harry Kemelman Rabbi David Small mysteries (*Friday the Rabbi Slept Late* and eleven others); there is even a brief reference to that sleuth in this novel. There are some similar tropes: the reader learns about Jewish traditions and customs as part of the background exposition; a certain amount of time is spent on the nastiness of synagogue politics; and there is a good relationship between the rabbi and the local police leadership, although the equivalent of Chief Hugh Lanigan in the Kemelman series is Rabbi Cohen’s divorced husband. There are also serious contrasts between these novels. Rabbi Small was generally very serious, bordered on pedantic, happily married, and was physically of slight build. Rabbi Cohen is funny, often self-deprecatory, irreverent, twice divorced, and by her own frequent admission is seriously overweight. *Unleavened Dead* is very contemporary: cell phones, computers, the Internet, and hacking are interwoven into the story. Likewise modern-day issues such as lesbianism, same-sex parenting, sexual harassment, sexual abuse, and officiating at intermarriages form part of the plot.
This is a fast-paced, witty, and intriguing read. The chapters are short, the characters and the situations are largely credible, and there are good insights into the politics of the contemporary congregational rabbinate.

Women have been ordained as rabbis in the United States for over forty years since 1972, and since then in Europe and Israel. There are now probably close to a thousand women rabbis serving in a variety of positions: congregational, administration, education, chaplaincy, organizational, and in the military. Within a couple of decades of their ordination, it was patently clear that women approached the rabbinate in a different way than did their male colleagues. Women have changed how the community thinks of rabbis and how it thinks of Judaism. Women rabbis often focus on matters that include sexual harassment, abortion, and childcare. Women that serve as pulpit rabbis bring a different view to what is or should be the rabbi’s relationship with the congregation and the board, or the rabbi and her staff. Through their presence, women have changed the expectations of spirituality for women and for men alike. Women do continue to face gender issues that men do not, and this is noted in passing in the novel when a group of rabbis meet at a conference.

Novels about women rabbis are far and few between. Women, much less women rabbis, writing novels about women rabbis is a rare phenomenon.\(^1\) To date there are less than two dozen novels or short stories that feature women rabbis as a central or a major character. Although a number of male rabbis have penned novels/short stories about women rabbis, to the best of my knowledge Schneider is the first and only woman rabbi to have taken up this task.

The advantage of being an author is that one has control over the actions of the characters. Writers set the stage and express their understanding of the rabbi and the rabbi’s roles through the plot. Consequently, there are competent and caring rabbis, and there are those who are self-centered, ineffectual, or meddlesome. There are politically astute rabbis and those who stumble along from one pulpit to another. Writing and plotlines do not make a fictional rabbi believable, any more than words alone make a real rabbi credible. Fiction writing, and mystery writing all the more, by its very nature needs to limit events, and often to set characters in dramatic situations. Not infrequently, women rabbis – in fiction as in real life – are positioned within situations of maximum
pressure, which bring out traits that some segments of society still regard as negative for women. Many of those issues form part of the plotline of *Unleavened Dead*. Clearly, this is a niche market; Schneider makes an important and entertaining contribution to the genre.