Gil Mann ran the syndicated *Jewish Email of the Week* column on American On-Line’s Judaism section for a number of years, and *Sex, God, Christmas, and Jews* is a culmination of the various e-mails he received. Mann’s background is in journalism – he has no academic or seminary experience with Judaism, though he is a devout and practicing Jew. For the purposes of his column, this perhaps made him more approachable to people on the Internet who had questions about Judaism or their own faith. Mann wasn’t a rabbi – he wasn’t a scholar, he was just someone willing to listen and respond, or arbitrate between the writer and a more appropriate source (like a Rabbi, Scholar, or Organization). While not a scholarly book, it could make good conversation and thinking points for clergy and Sunday school instructors, as well as casual readers interested in some of the issues facing modern Judaism today.

The book is a collection of emails tied into three broad categories (Ethics, Spirituality, and Peoplehood), and further organized into chapters within each section. Each chapter begins with an email sent to Mann, his response, and then the responses of readers of his column. In this sense, the book reads more like an online discussion forum, and one often wishes for a bit more analysis of the issues being discussed. Mann pops in at the beginning of each chapter to set up the question, and then at the end of each chapter with a quick conclusion, but he’s more of an editor than an author. It is not until the conclusion that Mann begins to discuss some of the issues that are truly on his mind, like the idea of “Freedom Judaism”, his term for the current paradigm shift in Judaism as no longer traditional Rabbinic Judaism, but a religion people come to by choice, picking and choosing aspects of Jewish ritual and thought that fits best with their lives. The final part of the conclusion is an open letter to Jewish Leadership with Mann’s ideas on how to make Judaism relevant in a modern world. This seems to be Mann’s true passion.

Only a very short chapter, “Why Does Judaism Discriminate Against Women? “(161), addresses the issue of women in Judaism directly. A reader writes in wanting to know why women are treated like “2nd Class Citizens” in Judaism, and finds that some of the prohibitions of Orthodox services offensive and demeaning. Mann replies with two answers, “One: most of Jewish law and Jewish text are the product of men…Two…the intention was and is to honor women and Judaism… (161). He discusses how, due to women’s importance in traditional roles as wives and mothers, they are “released” from other religious duties, and that it is concerned by many Orthodox women to be a sign of honor and respect. Several readers write in with their comments, their responses ranging from liberal to traditional. The chapter only skims the surface of a large and important issue in Judaism and is really not recommended reading for people with...
interest in gender and Judaism. It would have been nice if Mann pointed out some book sources for people wishing to learn more about his topics, rather than just pointing them to websites.

In the Introduction, Mann says his intentions with this books are threefold: to encourage people to ask their own questions; to better acquaint clergy and professionals with some of the questions that people are struggling with not only within Judaism, but also both on the outside and periphery of their faith; and finally, for the book to serve as a bridge between Jews and non-Jews (6). In terms of those three goals, he has succeeded. Seeing how open and personal people get with their emails, and the safe environment which Mann provides for their questions to be asked, will hopefully encourage readers of Mann’s book to seek out their own answers – either on the Internet or with their Rabbi/Pastor. The book will definitely serve as a good touchstone for clergy who may wonder what questions and struggles non-practicing Jews are dealing with. In fact, the marketing of Judaism to those on the periphery is an issue Mann is quite passionate about. Finally, the accessibility of the book makes it very easy for non-Jews to find out more about some of their own misconceptions or questions they might have about Judaism, as well as providing information on organizations which try to bring together Jews and Gentiles. While not a scholarly work, and not recommended for those looking for serious analysis of some of the big issues being dealt with within Judaism, it is a good for letting people know that if they’ve ever wondered if Jews can have Christmas trees, or if tattoos prohibit burial within a Jewish cemetery, they’re not the only ones.