

To Begin Again

reviewed by [Melinda B. Hanners](#) in the [August 11, 1999](#) issue

A fragment of a prayer—"Remind me of the person I used to be"—poignantly sums up the theme of Naomi Levy's book about finding one's way back to hope and strength after great grief. Levy was a member of the first class of women admitted to study for the rabbinate at the Jewish Theological Seminary of America, and the first Conservative woman rabbi to serve a west coast congregation. Her own struggle with grief began in her teens, when her father was murdered. Her desire to help others through the valley of the shadow of death is grounded on this experience.

Levy's book is divided into six sections, moving from "Pain and Its Aftermath" to "Coming Full Circle." As one who has herself struggled with tremendous grief during the past four years, I found Levy's chapters on "Fighting for Life" especially insightful and comforting. Each of the book's 33 short chapters ends with a prayer—a pastoral and personal aid that exudes compassion. "God, I have been running and hiding and am weary. Help me to face the awful truth that I can no longer deny. Remind me that ignoring my pain will never make it disappear. Give me the courage to confront what I have so feared, the strength to endure what I cannot escape," she writes.

Levy's rage, questions and ultimate gift of strength propelled her into seminary and gave her the wisdom to counsel congregants who have also suffered great losses. Yet time has distanced her from her own pain. This distance may make her book less helpful to those whose loss is recent and raw. She tells her story backwards—from her final realization of hope back to the beginning of her sadness. For one who has completed a similar journey, the book validates the realization that God is forever with us in the struggle. For one whose life has just been broken apart, the book may have to wait on the shelf for a few years.