



The December Project: An Extraordinary Rabbi and a Skeptical Seeker Confront Life's Greatest Mystery

Sara Davidson

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A Jewish Book Award Finalist

In the tradition of *Tuesdays with Morrie* and *The Last Lecture*, *New York Times* bestselling author Sara Davidson met every Friday with 89-year-old Rabbi Zalman Shachter-Shalomi, the iconic founder of the Jewish Renewal movement, to discuss what he calls *The December Project*. "When you can feel in your cells that you're coming to the end of your tour of duty," he said, "what is the spiritual work of this time, and how do we prepare for the mystery?"

Davidson, who has a seeker's heart and a skeptic's mind, jumped at the chance to spend time with him. She'd long feared that death would be a complete annihilation, while Reb Zalman felt certain that "something continues." He said he didn't want to convince her of anything. "What I want is to loosen your mind." Through their talks, he wanted to help people "not freak out about dying," and enable them to have a more heightened and grateful life.

For two years, they met every week, and this is Davidson's memoir of what they learned and how they changed. Interspersed with their talks are sketches from Reb Zalman's extraordinary life. He barely escaped the Nazis, became an Orthodox rabbi in the US, was married four times and had eleven children, one from a sperm donation to a lesbian rabbi, and formed friendships with leaders of other faiths, such as Thomas Merton and the Dalai Lama. Breaking with the Orthodox, he founded the Jewish Renewal Movement to encourage people to have a direct experience of God.

During their time together, Davidson was nearly killed by a suicide bomb, and Reb Zalman struggled with a steep decline in health. Together they created strategies to deal with pain and memory loss, and found tools to cultivate simplicity, fearlessness, and joy—at any age. Davidson includes twelve exercises so that readers may experience what she did—a sea change in facing what we all must face: mortality.

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