

Sydney Taylor Manuscript Award Presentation Remarks
by Aileen Grossberg, Chairperson

I would like to welcome you all, especially our guests from Israel who have come to celebrate and recognize a new talent.

Thank you to everyone who is here to recognize outstanding writing. Special thanks go to the members of the Sydney Taylor Manuscript Award Committee who are here tonight: Shelly Feit from Teaneck, New Jersey; Laurie Haas from Columbus, Ohio and Barbara Silverman from Corpus Christi, Texas. I would like to recognize Laurie, who is retiring from the Committee, for her years of service.

Unfortunately committee members Sandy Gottesman Breger from Lake Worth, Florida and Barbara Sutton from San Diego, California are unable to join us.

Rachel Glasser, immediate past chair of the committee, whose advice during this past year was invaluable as new issues and questions arose, deserves a special thanks.

And a word of appreciation goes to Barbara Silverman who is delivering these remarks as I am unable to be here this evening.

These women truly represent AJL. Hailing from diverse sections of the country, they have brought sound judgment and a wealth of experience from a variety of library settings to the committee's deliberations. Their thoughtful comments and cogent arguments helped to bring about this evening's wonderful celebration.

Sydney Taylor has left a living legacy. This pioneer in Jewish children's literature never knew how far flung her influence was, but I am sure that she would be pleased. The competition named in her honor and funded by her family has attracted entries from around the world and has changed lives.

As this year's winning author says. "This honor has already changed my life in terms of my status as a writer in the orthodox publishing world, and in the way that I view myself and my ability to write. I feel that it is a seed that will enable me to grow in ways that I may not have had the confidence to try before."

Since 1985, AJL has been offering an award for an outstanding fiction manuscript suitable for readers ages 8 to 11. The author may not have published for this age group before. This award comes with high standards. NO award has been given for the last two years because NONE met our standards. In addition to the usual literary mandates: writing style, use of language, plot development, Judaic content and so forth, the award recognizes that the book should be of universal interest. It should cross borders to the general community with its subject matter and appeal not just to the young Jewish reader.

This year 16 manuscripts from the United States, Canada, England, France and Israel met the committee's criteria for consideration for the award.

Authors are among the most creative of beings. We read stories about the death of parents, grandparents and friends; about moving away from familiar surroundings; about trying to fit in; about an overactive toddler and the havoc he causes; about a mitzvah contest; about the power of friendship on many levels; about a Rabbi and a synagogue mouse; about a group of boys who invent a new Jewish holiday; about kids rising to the occasion; about all kinds of families including the Seagull family which is.....a seagull family.

In the end, these stories are really about what concerns readers the most--- people and how they react, change and grow even if they are seagulls or mice standing in for people.

While we were only able to select one winning manuscript, we were impressed by the effort that went into the creation of each of the 16 entries. Each was unique and an obvious melding of love and strenuous work.

The love of writing recognizes no physical borders. The author of the winning manuscript comes to us from Beitar Illit near Efrat, south of Jerusalem. Yael Mermelstein was born in Belgium and grew up in New York where she attended college and graduate school.

Yael met her husband at a camp for special children. After their marriage, Yael and her husband Rabbi Yehuda Mermelstein moved to Israel where Yael taught at a post high school institute for American girls. She retired from teaching after the birth of her fifth child, Chana, who has the privilege this evening of seeing her mother receive her first major writing award.

Yael has always wanted to write. To prepare for her writing career she has read voraciously using the Newbery Award books as models as well as childhood favorites like Sydney Taylor's **All of a Kind Family**. She also writes articles for Jewish publications. In her spare time Yael enjoys writing and performing plays, musicals, dramas and comedies. She sings and loves to make people laugh.

Reading about Yael is like reading about Superwoman. As you just heard, Yael is a teacher, writer, actor, singer, journalist, wife, mother..... The only thing she doesn't seem to do is leap tall buildings in a single bound. That's probably because there ARE none where she lives.

Partially out of her camp experience where she worked with Down Syndrome children came "Getting Rid of Jeremy," the Committee's choice for this year's Sydney Taylor Manuscript Award. The story focuses on Randi, a young girl who is ashamed and embarrassed by her younger brother who has Down

Syndrome. She also resents the attention that Jeremy receives. With the help of a new friend Shifra from the Orthodox community, Randi makes plans to place her brother in an institution and attempt to win back her life. The resolution requires Randi to face reality and the family to make some changes. Through her friendship with Shifra, Randi also develops an appreciation for a Jewish lifestyle different from her own.

The committee was impressed with the quality of writing, the vivid descriptions, and the integration of Jewish content and realistic Orthodox lifestyle into this story which is ultimately heartwarming and uplifting.

It is our hope that "Getting Rid of Jeremy" will find its publisher as have many of the previous Sydney Taylor Manuscript Award winners and will soon be on library and bookshop shelves.

It is a real pleasure to present The 2007 Sydney Taylor Manuscript Award to reader turned writer Yael Mermelstein who has, I believe, traveled the farthest of any previous award winner.