Combating Antisemitism and Islamophobia with Multicultural Children’s Literature

By Emily Bergman, AJL Liaison to ALA
School, Synagogue Center, Public Library Division Vice-President


Heidi and Sadaf took different topics and suggested picture, middle grade, and young adult books. Heidi’s Love Your Neighbor book lists and Sadaf’s book, Muslims in Story: Expanding Multicultural Understanding through Children’s and Young Adult Literature, provide lists they mined as they shared specific concepts through children’s books. Heidi and Sadaf are both wonderful speakers and the images of the books enhanced the presentation.

This webinar was a long time coming and took many forms. Heidi and Sadaf co-wrote an article for the March 27, 2020 issue of The Horn Book, We Need Diverse Jewish and Muslim Books: A Conversation. I used that article as the basis for a program proposal at the 2020 ALA Annual Conference. The program was not accepted, but this was too good a program to let go. As the Chair of the EMIERT Jewish Information Committee, I was able to schedule a program separate from other avenues to ALA programming. It was to be presented on the Sunday that AJL was holding its Nosh and Schmooze. Everything could not be better planned…until the pandemic hit. The ALA Conference went virtual, programming was severely limited, and my program was cut. I was unable to talk my way into getting it added, so I just headed in another direction and asked EMIERT to sponsor the panel as a webinar. Heidi had been one of the speakers at the EMIERT President’s Program for the virtual conference, and she was amazing as always, so the EMIERT President and the ALA EMIERT Staff Liaison were familiar with Heidi. This was EMIERT’s first webinar, so I was able to convince the EMIERT folks to present it for free. This would allow AJL members to attend easily and would get the word out about AJL to ALA and beyond.

Sadaf and Heidi are continuing to work together, and I hope to get EMIERT to sponsor their next project, so stay tuned.
Winners of the annual Sydney Taylor Book Award were announced by the Association of Jewish Libraries on January 25th in a virtual livecast at the Youth Media Awards announcement at American Library Association Midwinter 2021. Named in memory of Sydney Taylor, author of the classic All-of-a-Kind Family series, the award recognizes books for children and teens that exemplify high literary standards while authentically portraying the Jewish experience.

**GOLD MEDALISTS**

*Welcoming Elijah: a Passover Tale with a Tail* by Lesléa Newman, illustrated by Susan Gal, published by Charlesbridge, is the winner in the picture book category. This warmly illustrated, poetic book parallels the experiences of a young boy at a Passover seder and a small white kitten outdoors. When the boy opens the door to welcome the prophet Elijah, he finds a furry friend instead. Simple text, diverse characters, and a timeless feel make this a story to be treasured.

*Turtle Boy* by M. Evan Wolkenstein, published by Delacorte Books for Young Readers, an imprint of Random House Children’s Books, a division of Penguin Random House, is the winner in the Middle Grade category. Will’s bar mitzvah service project helps him face challenges in his own life in this engaging story by a debut author. Bullied at school and a loner, turtle-loving Will completes a bucket list of milestone activities for a terminally ill boy and gains the strength to face his own upcoming surgery.

*Dancing at the Pity Party* by Tyler Feder, published by Dial Books for Young Readers, an imprint of Penguin Young Readers Group, a division of Penguin Random House, is the winner in the Young Adult category. This debut memoir in graphic form is a funny, sad, confidently illustrated meditation on grief. It’s both a tribute to Tyler’s wonderful mom, who died of breast cancer at the age of 47, and a guide to Jewish mourning practices. A singular achievement.

**SILVER MEDALISTS**

Six Sydney Taylor Honor Books were recognized.

For Picture Books, the Honor Books are *I Am the Tree of Life: My Jewish Yoga Book* by Mychal Copeland, illustrated by André Ceolin, published by Apples and Honey Press, an imprint of Behrman House, and *Miriam at the River* by Jane Yolen, illustrated by Khoa Le, published by Kar-Ben Publishing, a division of Lerner Publishing Group.

For Middle Grade, the Honor Books are *Anya and the Nightingale* by Sofiya Pasternack, published by Versify, an imprint of Houghton Mifflin Harcourt; *No Vacancy* by Tziporah Cohen, published by Groundwood Books; and *The Blackbird Girls* by Anne Blankman, published by Puffin Books, an imprint of Penguin Young Readers Group, a division of Penguin Random House.

For Young Adult, the Honor Book is *They Went Left* by Monica Hesse, published by Little, Brown Books for Young Readers, an imprint of Hachette Book Group.

In addition to the medal winners, the Award Committee designated eleven Notable Books of Jewish Content for 2021.

(Continued on page 3)

The Notable Middle Grade Books are *Beni's War* by Tammar Stein, published by Kar-Ben Publishers, a division of Lerner Publishing Group; *We Had to Be Brave: Escaping the Nazis on the Kindertransport* by Deborah Hopkinson, published by Scholastic Focus, an imprint of Scholastic; *A Place at the Table* by Saadia Faruqi and Laura Shovan, published by Clarion Books, an imprint of Houghton Mifflin Harcourt; and *Letters from Cuba* by Ruth Behar, published by Nancy Paulsen Books, an imprint of Penguin Young Readers Group, a division of Penguin Random House.


Winning authors and illustrators will receive their awards at the Annual Conference of the Association of Jewish Libraries, to be held virtually from June 27 to July 1, 2021. Gold and silver medalists will participate in a blog tour from February 8 to 12, 2021. For more information about the blog tour, please visit www.jewishlibraries.org.

Members of the 2021 Sydney Taylor Book Award committee are Chair Rebecca Levitan, Baltimore County Public Library, Baltimore, MD; Rena Citrin, Bernard Zell Anshe Emeth Day School Chicago, IL; Judy Ehrenstein, Montgomery County Public Libraries, Bethesda, MD; Toby Harris, Temple Beth Am, Seattle, WA; Marjorie Ingall, freelance writer, New York, NY; Aviva Rosenberg, Ridgefield Free Public Library, Ridgefield, NJ; and Martha Simpson, Stratford Library Stratford, CT.
2021 Sydney Taylor Manuscript Award Winner Chosen!

by Aileen Grossberg, Chair, Sydney Taylor Manuscript Award Competition

The Sydney Taylor Manuscript Award Committee has concluded its deliberations for the 2021 award. Meeting for the first time ever virtually by Zoom, the committee has selected Cats and Honey Cake by Sonja Spear as the winning manuscript. This middle grade novel tells the story of Abby Zipperstein and her chaotic family. Abby’s mother has turned the family’s living room into a car rescue facility; her stern, elderly great-aunt Gertrude has come for an extended visit; Abby struggles with friendships; and Abby’s father, though loving, is distant.

The story unravels some family history, shows growth in most of the characters and is infused with positive Jewish values including a love for honey cake, concern for animals, and joy in repeated Jewish rituals.

Although the story grew out of Ms. Spear’s memories of growing up in the 1980s, Cats and Honey Cake has a very contemporary feel to it. In addition to writing a book that today’s readers would enjoy, the author also sought to create a story where Jewish observance is both joyous and woven into daily life.

One of the committee members commented that Cats and Honey Cake “was full of heart, with the right amount of chaos, love and reality in all the right places. The Zipperstein family were a delight to meet, and the book is thoughtful, with all of the ends tied up. it was a delight to read.”

The author, who lives in Iowa City, Iowa, has a PhD in religious studies from Indiana University. She has received several teaching awards and has published articles in religion centered periodicals. Ms. Spear is currently the principal of Agudas Achim Religious School in Iowa City and has served on the Religious Studies faculty as several educational institutions.

The members of the Sydney Taylor Manuscript Committee are Debbie Steinberg, Heather Matthews, Heidi Rabinowitz, Rachel Simon, and Rebecca Fox. Debbie Steinberg will be completing her five year term. AJL members with an expertise in teaching awards and has published numerous essays written on the 55 library guides on behalf of Touro College.

Written and Oral Text as Resistance

by David B. Levy

Recently, I decided to venture from publishing in the written form to Youtube video spoken form presentations. (A selection may be found at Touro Scholar.) These Youtube videos are not really “new” as many of the ideas were thought through in high school and college decades ago, and some of the ideas can be found in other permutations on the numerous essays written on the 55 library guides on behalf of Touro College.

One problem, as with much of librarianship, is that people just don’t know these resources on the library guides or in my now published 13 books even EK-sist (see Gershom Sholem). Thus, the conscious decision to preserve these Youtube videos as a “message in the bottle” to speak from “beyond the veil.”

Jewish resistance via writing also hearkens back in history to all Jews who, as a mission, transmitted their ideas across generations despite discrimination, pogroms, expulsions, plagues, and pandemics. This mission as a way of life is more than leaving a legacy of an academic footprint. For Rambam the quest for intellectual-moral-spiritual virtue is a mission of a life redeemed. It is a way to serve the Jewish community, offer mussar, or a moral imperative to encourage student learning by sparking the synergy of lively connections that grip the young generations. We must find ways to engage next generations of Jews to hear eternal time tried and true messages. Engagement in learning to reach students “where they may be at” ergo becomes an imperative to connect to the next generations.

The lectures/shiurim attempt to plumb the depths, roots, and fathom some fundamental questions atypically in today’s age, found in our “social media generation” that would prefer to be “entertained” with glitzy images, sound bytes, fast food, quick fixes, sensationalism, and mistakenly believe that with the “ease of the click of the mouse” their assignment is done, when in reality (manash) deep thinking, critical analysis and getting to the roots and essence of problems, and asking important questions that matter for a life redeemed (or not)- has yet to begin. Woe to the generation that does not have the sitz fleisch for lifum zara agra, and negative tolerance for written text, and woe to a cult of technology as the panacea to all issues, for life is more than a “game” ultimately a question of a life redeemed or not, and technology poses as a post-modern idolatry.

Thus the 13 books and Youtube videos are a form of resistance as were the halakhic Responsa of Rabbi Efraim Oshry imprisoned in the Kovno Ghetto in post-modern idolatry. The Hasiduth authored by Rabbi Kolonymous Kalmon Shapiro imprisoned in the Warsaw Ghetto, the Ong Shabbos Ringelbaum Group of Yiddish archivists in the Vilna Ghetto, all who buried their writings (genres of halakhic, hasidic, historical documents) as a form of Resistance, as messages in the bottle to speak from
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Seven Questions with Author Ronald Balson

This issue’s “Seven Questions with...” features bestselling and acclaimed author Ronald Balson, known by many for his bestselling novel, Once We Were Brothers (2013), and which introduced readers to the fictional investigative team of Catherine Lockhart and Liam Taggart. Lockhart and Taggart appear in subsequent books as well: Saving Sophie (2015), Karolina’s Twins (2016), The Trust (2017), and The Girl From Berlin (2018). Balson was awarded the 2018 National Jewish Book Award for The Girl From Berlin. His most recent book is Eli’s Promise, historical fiction spanning decades and continents which was published by St. Martin’s Press in September 2020. Balson is also a trial attorney and an educator, residing in Chicago, Illinois.

AJL: We would love to learn more about how you came to be a novelist after a long career as an attorney. Was writing fiction always a part of your life?

RB: Writing has always been a part of my life. I was an editor of my high school and college newspapers. As a litigation attorney for the past forty-eight years, I have been writing briefs, appeals, memoranda, etc. There is a strong commonality between writing novels and writing briefs, as odd as that sounds. I served on a panel for the American Academy of Appellate Lawyers 2019 Conference and the topic of my session was “Storytelling.” The overriding theme was that the skills necessary for a strong novel are the same as for a compelling appeal. Two exceptions: 1) In a novel you can make stuff up — not so with an appeal. 2) To write a novel, you have to be passionate about the subject matter. That’s how I got started. My law practice took me to Poland in the mid-2000s and I wrote my first novel, Once We Were Brothers about a typical Polish family in an ordinary Polish town and what life would have been like during the Nazi occupation.

AJL: Your books are a mix of detective fiction and historical fiction, a terrifically appealing mix for readers. What are some of the challenges, though, of this genre?

RB: Research! No matter the subject, it takes a lot of background reading and research, sometimes months before I can start writing.

AJL: Most writers are also avid readers … can you tell us about any books or authors that were important to you growing up? Do you feel they influence your writing today?

RB: Most of my reading has been non-fiction, especially these days when I am writing historical fiction. Fiction writers whose work I have admired are Joan Didion, Herman Wouk and Leon Uris.

AJL: As librarians, we’re always interested in the role libraries play in the lives of writers, both as readers and as researchers. You must have had experiences in law libraries as well for your prior work. Could you share some stories of when libraries were impactful?

RB: You’re taking me back here. Way back. To the days and nights in the law libraries. Back then, we didn’t have computers and internet. We spent hours in the stacks, in library carrels reading case books and annotated statutes in order to write our briefs. Law offices, even the small ones, always had libraries with hundreds of books.

AJL: Many of your books focus on the Holocaust, on Jewish experiences. However, your books have a broad appeal beyond the Jewish community of readers. Do you find that some of your readers come to your books without a prior significant understanding of the topic? What feedback do you hear from them on this?

RB: Although I’ve read that present day readers, especially the younger ones, have limited knowledge of the Holocaust, I haven’t found that to be so. I think my readers are generally familiar with the history of World War II. In my research, I frequently come across information that is new to me, and I hope to pass that along to the readers as well. So, I frequently hear someone tell me they didn’t know some of the facts or events they read in my book and that they learned something new.

AJL: And to look at this question from the flip side, what feedback have you received from the Jewish community of readers, many of whom may find resonance of their own family stories in your books?

RB: There are always subjects that even the most informed Jewish readers may not know. In my most recent book, Eli’s Promise, part of the story takes place in a postwar displaced persons’ camp for the war’s survivors. Many readers have told me that although they knew about the existence of those camps, they didn’t really know much about life in the camps. I don’t know how many readers would have known about the history of Zamosc, Poland or how it was occupied, back and forth between the Nazis and the Russians. The Girl From Berlin focused on Jewish artists and musicians in Berlin and in Italy during the war. That was new information for many.

AJL: How do you develop topics for your future books? Do you stumble across a great story and keep it aside for the future? Or do you spend a great deal of time looking for a story to develop? If you don’t mind, could you take us inside the process? And also share what books we can look forward to in the future?

RB: That’s a good question and I don’t know the answer. I suppose I wait for it to come to me. Like Ben Solomon said in Once We Were Brothers, it was a divine inspiration. As to the future, I just finished my seventh novel, entitled Defending Britta Stein, which draws on the history of Denmark during the war and the effort of the Danish people to protect and rescue their Jewish brethren. It will be published in the fall of 2021.

AJL: Thank you for speaking with AJL News and Reviews. We greatly appreciate your time!
AJL: A Culture of Giving and Philanthropy
by Jerry Krautman, AJL Development Associate

My name is Jerry Krautman, and I am AJL’s Development Associate. My job is to assist AJL’s leadership and members in raising vital financial support for our essential work.

Since the beginning of my consultancy in August 2019, I have worked hard to demonstrate the importance of creating a culture of giving and philanthropy at AJL.

What does a culture of giving and philanthropy mean for you and AJL?
- It means that you are proud of your work on behalf of AJL and see it as a critical benefit.
- You want to tell family, friends, and associates about AJL’s important work.
- You know that your work is vital to the success of AJL and want to help.
- You derive joy from your association with AJL.
- AJL leaders understand that the financial support of AJL is everybody’s job and is at the organization’s heart.
- Everyone in AJL is pulling in the same direction. We are making decisions with an eye on how those decisions will impact the organization’s future.

In 2019, the leadership of AJL initiated its first Annual Campaign. An Annual Campaign is a fundraising activity over a defined amount of time with a specific financial goal. Thanks to our generous members and supporters, we met our last year’s development goal, and I am happy to say that we are doing the same this year.

If you joined our Annual Campaign, thank you very much; if not, there is still time to make a gift supporting AJL’s work. Please click here to support AJL and help us build a strong culture of giving and philanthropy so that we continue to be the leading authority on Judaic librarianship.

AJL-AJS Strengthen Partnership, Create Joint Membership Discount
By Michelle Chesner, AJL Vice President/President-Elect

For RAS members, AJL and the Association for Jewish Studies have always been natural partners. Many of our RAS members are members of both organizations, and AJL became an affiliate member of AJS a few years ago, and we have been working toward a closer partnership since that time. It is thus with great pleasure that I can announce that AJL and AJS have decided to create a formal partnership, working together on our shared goals and issues. We will appoint a liaison who is a member of both organizations to serve as the intermediary and primary point of contact.

In the short time since our discussions began, we have already agreed on a membership discount of $10 off membership for members of both organizations. AJS’ membership campaign began in January, so you can already take advantage of it! We have many more joint initiatives under discussion - please be in touch if you’d like to be involved in these conversations or have ideas you would like to share with us about this partnership.

For more information about the discount and the AJL-AJS connections, please contact Michelle Margolis Chesner at mc3395@columbia.edu
Abraham and Lillian Goldstein Judaica Collection at Touro Law Center

by Samuel J. Levine
Professor of Law & Director, Jewish Law Institute Touro Law Center

Among the various collections in Touro Law Center’s Gould Law Library, the Abraham and Lillian Goldstein Judaica Collection plays a unique role in promoting a key element of the mission of the school, educating students in a way that is consistent with Jewish tradition and committed to promoting social justice with compassion and integrity. More particularly, the Judaica Collection reflects the goals of Touro Law’s Jewish Law Institute, exploring the relevance of the Jewish legal tradition, and the Jewish legal experience, to American legal education, legal practice, and legal scholarship. Toward these goals, the Judaica Collection serves as a valuable resource for Touro Law students and faculty, as well as for the broader community of rabbis, scholars, and other individuals pursuing research in Jewish law, history, and culture.

The product of decades of work undertaken by numerous individuals, both within and outside of the Law Center, the Judaica Collection now stands as a comprehensive library encompassing the various fields of Jewish law and philosophy, Jewish history, the Holocaust, Israel and modern Israeli law, and American Jewish life and culture. In addition to housing encyclopedias, periodicals, and monographs from all of these fields, the collection focuses on specialized areas in Jewish law, Jewish ethics, Jewish philosophy, modern Israeli law, and the American Jewish experience.

The most extensive component of the Abraham Goldstein and Lillie Goldstein Judaica Collection consists of sources dedicated to Jewish law and philosophy. These sources include: numerous editions, in Hebrew as well as English translation, of the foundational sources of Jewish law: the Tanach and the Talmud; commentaries on the Torah and the Talmud; the work of Maimonides; the Shulchan Aruch and other codes of Jewish law; responsa; major works of Jewish philosophy; and contemporary scholarship, periodicals, and computer software in all areas of Jewish law. As such, the collection presents students and scholars alike with an ideal resource for study and scholarship.

Located on the third floor of the Touro Law Library, the inviting Judaica Room also provides a quiet and hospitable place for study and reflection, with a casual arrangement of comfortable couches and chairs near two banks of windows and numerous study tables adjacent to the stack area. Scholars and members of the broader community are welcome to use the collection during regular library hours and to access the books in the collection through interlibrary loans.

In addition to the permanent collection, Touro Law houses the Lillie Goldstein Traveling Judaica Collection. With its unique designation as a traveling library, the Lillie Goldstein Traveling Judaica Collection furthers another aspect of the Jewish Law Institute’s mission, to assist other universities and law schools that are interested in developing a curricular and scholarly Jewish law presence. The Traveling Judaica Collection of more than 420 titles in over 700 volumes in Hebrew and/or English includes many of the core materials on Jewish law found in the permanent collection, as well as other materials chosen to enrich the study of Jewish law.

The Lillie Goldstein Traveling Judaica Collection is offered as an interlibrary loan for a semester or for an academic year. The only obligation on the borrower is the return postage. Borrowers to date include: IIT-Chicago Kent College of Law, University of Utah School of Law, Boston College Law School, Nova Southeastern University Shepard Broad Law Center, University of Colorado School of Law, Pepperdine University School of Law, University of Tulsa College of Law, and American University, Washington College of Law.
From the President’s Desk

Dear Friends,

Thank you to everyone who supported our 2020 Annual Campaign. Your support does more than assist us financially. It also enables us to approach our major donors with the information that our membership supports AJL beyond their membership dues. This is a powerful and important statement. So, again, thank you for your support, and thank you for helping create a culture of giving within AJL. And if by chance you missed the opportunity to make your Annual Campaign contribution or you want to honor or memorialize someone, you can always donate at Annual Campaign.

Thank you also for making our 2020-21 Membership Drive extraordinarily successful. We have 76 more members in our organization than we had at this time last year. I encourage you to tell your friends to be part of AJL: The Leading Authority on Judaic Librarianship and direct them to our membership page.

The Board has decided that our 2021 Conference: Moving Forward will once again be a virtual conference, taking place Sunday, June 27 – July 1, 2021. As we come back together in what we hope will be a post-COVID-19 world, the Board felt that unclear vaccine distribution and tightened budgets made an in-person conference unlikely and wanted to get an early start on conference planning. A Conference Planning Committee is now actively putting together an extraordinary digital conference for all of us. Look for registration details in the coming months. Please note that arrangements are continuing for us to have an in-person conference in Philadelphia, PA in June 2022.

You may be surprised at how hard the AJL Board and Council work to make AJL the incredible organization that it is. Because we now have monthly Zoom meetings of the Board and Council, we are able to make decisions and take actions much more rapidly. Here are just a few of the big projects we are currently working on:

• Updating AJL’s Strategic Plan. (I hope you participated in the survey.)
• Building a new, upgraded website.
• Holding Bi-monthly Virtual Round Tables – members only events that explore topics of interest.
• Offering Monthly AJL Presents forums – open to the public and an opportunity to share the talents and skills of our members.
• Developing a variety of Judaic Librarianship certificate and continuing education programs for our members and others.
• Cultivating partnerships and affiliations with a literal alphabet soup of organizations who share our interest and goals.
• Reaching out to our international members through Round Tables and other virtual events.

This is a quick snapshot of what the AJL Board, Council and Committees are involved in, and there is so much more. We are always looking for volunteers to serve on our many committees. If you are interested, please contact Heidi Rabinowitz, our Member Relations Chair at BookofLifePodcast@gmail.com.

Finally, Purim begins on Thursday, February 25, 2021. I hope you will join me at AJL’s celebration on Monday, February 22 at 9:00 AM Pacific/12:00 PM Eastern with a discussion of The Book Of V by Anna Solomon. Rachel Kamin will lead the discussion and the author, Anna Solomon, will join us to give us her insights on writing this extraordinary book. This is not a members’ only event - friends are invited! So please ask anyone you know who might be interested in AJL to join us for a fun morning/afternoon/evening. I look forward to seeing you there.

Until then stay well,
Kathy B.

Editor’s Note

Shalom Safranim!

Thank you all for sending me your Yiddish/Ladino/diaspora language words to describe 2020! You all have a very colorful vocabulary. The winner, by popular acclaim is Oysgezoomt; you can read more about its etymology at The Times of Israel article on The Yiddish Word of 2020.

For fun, I visualized all your contributions into a word cloud image that expresses our feelings about 2020 quite well, I think.

As 2021 kicks off, we hope you will enjoy this fresh issue of AJL News and Reviews that features some great new content: an interview with author Ron Balson, author of Once We Were Brothers, a Jewish library profile of The Gitlin in Cape Town, and Chapter Chatter and Member News as well.

As always (and it bears repeating), thank you to our AJL News and Reviews team of editors and reviewers who work steadily behind the scenes and deserve our heartfelt thanks and appreciation. Thank you also to our contributors who make News and Reviews all the more worthwhile with their articles! If you would like to write for a future issue, or have other questions or thoughts you wish to share, please email me at generaleditor@jewishlibraries.org I look forward to hearing from you.

Wishing you all chag Purim sameach… I’m off to make the hamantaschen!

Sally
Chapter Chatter & Member News!

Judaica Library Network of Metropolitan Chicago
Submitted by Robbin Katzin, School Librarian

The Chicago chapter had a well attended Zoom meeting on September 10th. Our new officers were elected for the 2020-21 year, including Shelley Riskin as president. We had been very involved pre-COVID in planning the 2020 AJL conference here in Evanston, Illinois, and talked about how impressed we were with how the online conference worked out. From the lack of technical issues to the accessible registration fee to the large number of people who attended the well received sessions, it really was a success.

Robbin Katzin reported on the day school library survey she conducted on Hasafran prior to the start of the new school year, to find out how school libraries were adapting their practices due to COVID-19. There were nine responses, and all but one school planned to return in person, either full time or in hybrid mode. None planned to have library classes in the library; they would be conducted on Zoom or in the classroom. A variety of book selection methods would be employed - using carts to bring books to the classroom, filling out Google forms or sending emails with book requests, or reserving books using the library’s OPAC. One school is having students select books in the library itself, with self-checkout. We also discussed how long our local schools and synagogues are quarantining returned books.

LIAJL
Submitted by Wendy A. Marx, President

Happy New Year to all. We are thrilled to have this “fakok-toa kovid” year behind us.

Here on Long Island, we are not yet “oysgezoomt.” As I search through my Facebook groups, specifically any group with the title Jewish in it, I find that there are many Jewish children’s writers here on Long Island who’d like a platform to speak and get word of their publications. They may not be affiliated with big name publishers at all. So I was thinking, we of LIAJL will plan a Zoom session with these writers. It's a way for us to get our name, LIAJL, out there. Maybe even attract some new members, young ones too. At my age of 68, I bring the age of our membership down by 25 years. Youth seems terrific. We continue to partner with local Hadassah chapters and synagogues to actively engage our members to new and diverse programming. Here’s to a New Year, New Ideas and New partnerships.

Most important ... Marcia J Posner, former President of AJL and founder of LIAJL is well and soon to be moving to a new address. Anyone wanting such information, just let me know.

AJL New England Chapter
Submitted by Sarah Feldman, Library Media Specialist, Gann Academy

Announcing the revitalization of the AJL New England Chapter. We already have an eager group of librarians that represents school, community, and academic librarians. That’s quite a feat! We’ve had our first meeting and invite you to join us. Please contact Sarah Feldman for more information or to add your name to the group. sfeldman@gannacademy.org

Member News

David B Levy has offered a series of YouTube lectures at the invitation of Rabbi Dr. Moshe Pinchas Weisblum. Check them out and enjoy at https://www.youtube.com/playlist?list=PLPP_mgx1E4CFyrW1oPbcqh1pBjhgvEkE4

Librarian as Detective
by Aileen Grossberg
Chair, Sydney Taylor Manuscript Award Competition
Lampert Library, Congregation Shomrei Emunah, Montclair, NJ

I’m sure we’ve all had this experience: a patron is looking for a book read and loved long ago. Unfortunately, the patron doesn’t remember much about the book except that it has a cat in it and, oh yes, it had a bright yellow cover. You put on your librarian detective hat and ask a few probing questions and come up with a little more information like narrowing down a date range for the book. And, miracle of miracles, you find that long loved book and make a patron very happy.

Well, I recently received an email from a library patron looking for a book she’d read to her son at least thirty years ago. She wanted to read it to her grandson. Being a reporter, she has a good head for details: a little boy, a new baby, a tablecloth. She had failed to find the book. I put on my librarian detective hat. Knowing the age of her son, I was able to eliminate all picture books published after a certain date. What a help that clue was.

Since I couldn't recall a picture book fitting the other clues, after checking my library’s catalog and the local consortium’s, I turned to some resources most patrons would not be familiar with: WorldCat and CLCD. A bit of keyword searching, reading reviews and summaries of possible suspects found the book. It was Don’t Touch my Room by Patricia Lakin. And, indeed, it does have a tablecloth in it and the table, too. And we actually had it in the synagogue library in the section for our preschool. Result, one rediscovered library book, one happy grandmother, and one sale for Amazon used books since the book is currently out of print.
Library Spotlight:
The Jacob Gitlin Library - Cape Town, South Africa
by Jacqui Rodgers, Head Librarian, The Jacob Gitlin Library

For over 57 years, the Jacob Gitlin Library has played an extremely important role in Jewish life in Cape Town. It has specialised collections on the Holocaust and on the Jewish religion and, pre-Covid, hosted visits from schools, seniors’ groups, and booklovers.

The Jacob Gitlin Library aims to be a world-class, modern Jewish library in Cape Town that is accessible to all. Its mission is to be a Jewish library of excellence that provides access to the most important books, materials, journals, music, and documents from the Jewish world to all Jewish and broader communities. The Gitlin is a central library which holds copies of books which would otherwise have to be obtained from libraries outside the city or even the country, and its circulating collections serve the casual browser and focused scholar alike.

The Gitlin is a vibrant, dynamic, inclusive space with 3,785 members, the majority of whom come from diverse Jewish affiliations; approximately 15% are not Jewish. The professional staff is fully trained to assist and ensure that whoever walks through our doors leaves with suitable materials, be it resources about family histories, information for research, or a book of their choice. Before the outbreak of COVID-19, an invaluable team of volunteers came in daily to help provide informed service to our users.

Our mission is to serve the Jewish community and to make them aware that the world of knowledge and leisure reading is available free of charge, that the Gitlin is indeed theirs and for them. It provides regular services bringing books to residents living in Highlands House, the aged Jewish residential home.

A library of this calibre assists teachers and lecturers who require research materials and researchers, both local and international, who need access to materials in order to pursue serious research in Jewish studies or their family history. It also serves an astonishingly broad cross-section of the Cape Town community. It is the one place where adherents of Orthodox and Reform Judaism, Ashkenazim and Sephardim, and secular Zionists come together to read and engage in the issues of the Jewish world.

The Jacob Gitlin Library is also involved in communal literary events and collaborates with other organisations – often the SA Jewish Museum and Cape Town Holocaust & Genocide Centre – which promotes the services of the Jacob Gitlin Library to a wider audience. The Gitlin strives to follow new trends and improve our visibility in this ever-changing world through social media. We have a special collection of children’s books of note. This selection attracts both parents as well as grandparents.

The Gitlin library is also used by many non-Jews who wish to familiarise themselves with aspects of Jewish life and experience, or wish to know more about Judaism or the Holocaust. We commit ourselves to offering the best assistance to all who are interested in any aspect of Judaica.

The library collection has grown through donations by authors, gifts of major private collections, and ongoing acquisitions thanks to the financial contribution made by the friends of the Gitlin Library. Special occasions are marked by donations of books to the Library which are inscribed with the names of the donor and the persons honoured.

Editor’s Note: Library Spotlight is a new and occasional feature of News and Reviews. If you know of a library, archive, or collection that should be featured, kindly email Sally Stieglitz at generaleditor@jewishlibraries.org to propose an article contribution.

From Cradle to Cage: The Story of One Copy of the Sefer Mitsvot Gadol Held at the Library of Congress

By Haim A. Gottschalk

In my last article for AJL News and Reviews, I wrote about how each Hebrew incunabulum has a story to tell. Now ... the following is truly a fascinating story of book movement through time and space. Although we could start at the beginning of when this book was printed, we will start in the middle ... in 1963.

In 1963, Frederick Richmond Goff, who at this time was Chief of the Rare Book Division (today known as the Rare Book and Special Collections Division) at the Library of Congress and who had yet to publish his magnum opus Incunabula in American Libraries: A Third Census of Fifteenth-Century Books Recorded in North American Collections - a remarkable work that became the backbone of the Incunabula Short Title Catalog (ISTC) - inquired of Myron Weinstein of the Hebraic Section, which was in the Orientalia Division at the Library of Congress, about a particular note that was found in the back of Sefer Mitsvot Gadol (SMaG), a work that came in with the Otto Vollbehr Incunabula collection in 1930. Weinstein replied on July 22, 1963. John F. Kennedy was still president, Alfred Hitchcock’s The Birds was in movie theaters, Puff, the Magic Dragon by Peter, Paul, & Mary was on the airwaves, and MARC cataloging was not yet conceived. In his reply he said that this note was a bill of sale. Nay! It was THE bill of sale signed by Gershom Soncino himself and dated to December 29, 1488, 10 days after the book was printed. I can imagine the jubilation Weinstein and Goff must have felt knowing that this bill of sale survived nearly 500 years and was
signed by Gershom Soncino. With this, let’s rewind back to 1488.

*Sefer Mitzvot Gadol* was written by Moses ben Jacob of Coucy, who lived in France in the 13th century. He was a Tosafist and in *Sefer Mitzvot Gadol*, affectionately called the SMaG, he codifies Jewish Law. The work is divided into two parts, the positive commandments and the negative commandments, and he discusses each commandment individually. Gershom Soncino, who printed the very first Talmudic tractate, Masekhet Berakhot in 1484, completed the printing of the SMaG on December 9, 1488 in Soncino, Italy. Ten days later, on December 19, Soncino sold this very book, perhaps his first sale for this title, to Moshe Diena. The bill of sale stipulated that Diena could not sell this copy for the next two years.

We next see this book turn up in the hands of Luigi da Bologna of the order of Saint Dominic in the early 17th century. He worked for the Inquisition as a censor and he crossed out those passages that the Church deemed inappropriate and blasphemous. For several centuries, the Church had a history of censoring Hebrew books. Luigi da Bologna was a Jew who converted to Christianity and was active during the pontificates of Gregory XIII and Clement VIII. According to William Popper’s in his dissertation, the signatures of all censors were generally at the bottom of either the last page or penultimate page, as seen in our book. The ink used by censors wore off over time, revealing the actual crossed out text. (Please remember this for later in this story. It will play an important role in identifying this particular copy.)

Let’s skip ahead to December 2020. I am cataloging this book. I’ve been told about and shown the bill of sale by a few people. I noticed the censor’s signature and strike-outs. I saw Weinstein’s letter to Goff, which says that the Israelitisch-Theologische Lehranstalt of Vienna also owned the SMaG. Established in 1893, the Lehranstalt was a rabbinical seminary in Vienna, which closed its doors in 1938 after the Nazi occupation of Austria. In the two-page article, the author Arthur Zacharias Schwarz explicitly says “Sepher mitzvot gadol, Soncino 1488, das sichim Besitz der Israelitisch-Theologischen Lehranstalt in Wien befinden” on page 14. There is no mention of the Rosenthal catalog. Having pieced together the outside sources, here is what I think is the timeline:

The book turns up in Ludwig Rosenthal’s Antiquariaat’s 1912 auction catalog. Ludwig Rosenthal (1840-1928) was a book and print dealer in Munich, Germany. It is purchased by the Israelitisch-Theologische Lehranstalt in 1912, where it stays until 1926. The collector Otto H. F. Vollbehr of Berlin, Germany most probably heard about this article and decided to purchase the SMaG directly from the Israelitisch-Theologische Lehranstalt.

Vollbehr was a wealthy German industrialist, who was in a serious train accident which rattled him and made him nervous. His doctor recommended he take up a hobby and thus he started collecting incunabula. Between 1909 and 1929, he assembled a collection of over 3000 items. Vollbehr is now the owner of this book until 1929, when he announces in the *New York Times* on November 26, 1929 that he is placing his collection for sale. He starts peddling his collection of over 3000 items including the Gutenberg Bible, which has a very, very fascinating story of its own. On December 3, 1929, US Mississippi Representative Ross A. Collins introduces a bill in Congress to buy this collection. Strong arguments were made in favor of this purchase and on July 3, 1930, President Herbert Hoover approved and signed the bill for the purchase of the Vollbehr Collection of Incunabula. Today, this beautiful copy now rests safely in a vault at the Library of Congress in Washington, DC.

At the end of the entry for this book there is a description that says that the book was censored and that there are censor’s strike-outs but those passages are readable (remember I asked you to keep these strike-outs in mind earlier). That was the case with this book! This evidence added a new owner’s footprint into the timeline, right in between the rabbinical school and Vollbehr, as Vollbehr had other books from Rosenthal. Or so I thought...

The book was censored by Luigi da Bologna in 1602. Out of curiosity, I decided to learn more about the censors and read William Popper’s PhD 1899 dissertation for Columbia University on the censorship of Hebrew books. On page 105, he mentions that Luigi da Bologna was among the censors who was invited by Cesare d’Este (8 October 1562 – 11 December 1628) who was Duke of Modena and Reggio to his territory to censor books. Luigi da Bologna was in Modena before March 1602 and then he was in Reggio. Based on his name, I thought he censored the book in Bologna, but this evidence shows he would have been in Cesare d’Este’s territory, which is probably where our book is located.

Next, I reviewed Weinstein’s memo and decided to locate a copy of the article in the German bibliophilic journal *Soncino Blatter* (v.1, 1925-1926). Recall that Weinstein says this article mentions that the Israelitisch-Theologische Lehranstalt of Vienna owned the SMaG. Having pieced together the outside sources, here is what I think is the timeline:

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DON’T LET QUARANTINE LOCK YOU DOWN!
More access to more information, right at your fingertips

In “normal” times, we would have returned to school and resumed library services following proven procedures: updating calendars, uploading summer acquisitions, restarting student and teacher directories and organizing library facilities. The sudden March closings led to virtual learning, and now to diverse school and learning strategies. “Quarantine” blocked access to familiar “routes” we all frequently used to bring learning, cultural and recreational reading resources to the community members we serve. Quite suddenly, those wanting access to these resources were and might still be unable to come to us.

These developments prompted us to consult librarians and regional administrators, to help the OPALS community adapt to these changing circumstances.

New experiences and technological outcomes have been released incrementally this past summer and will continue to be released throughout the fall.

This release consists of several documents which can be found on our help page:
- School library services guide: facts, challenges & procedures for “new normal”
- Services quarantine management utility instructions
- Opals self-service requests & management updates

Please visit opalsinfo.net/covidhelp
“behind the veil.” The historian Simon Dubnow, author of WelteGeschichte des Judischen Volkes, who was shot and was lying dying in the ghetto in Riga in 1941, said as his famous last words, “Yidn, shreiht un farschreib,” “Write and record.” The last thing he wanted to say to the Jewish people before he died in the Holocaust was “Keep writing,” as if writing were our most sacred act, as if the witness of words was our legacy to the world.

The model of the deeply spiritual Dead Sea Scroll sect’s act of resistance to author texts (both copying biblical manuscripts) and authoring creatively their own esoteric and apocalyptic literature that is perhaps the most powerful model of “writing sacred text and commenting on sacred text” as a form of resistance before impending destruction of the Roman Hurban that provides a supreme paradigm of writing and thinking with a purpose that is a form of resistance. The Romans were famous for being great innovators, inventors, and users of technology and coupling this with a large bureaucracy giving rise to “techno-crazy” which today is again the idolatry of the masses ad captum vulgi.

Thus even if future reversion and regression to the caveman survival will have no tolerance for reading and learning written text (two different acts, one from the western intellectual Greek tradition the other from Rabbinic lomdus), perhaps in “the marketplace of ideas” we can reach some thoughtful listeners by the oral or spoken word, if not the written.

With the de-evolution to the caveman generation, where the best writing will be ignored as too long, boring, and taxing and speaking eclipses the written, where children are born with a cell phone in their hands, where the native e-generation, born digital, is acclimated to tolerating only cartoons and comic books, and has no sitz fleisch for a Bildungsroman, Bildungs Geschichte, much less philosophic, poetic, or religious written learned super commentaries, one must decide if they make a concession to resort to the “social media” of Youtube (when in Rome do as the Romans do?) as a form of resistance.

**REVIEWS OF TITLES FOR CHILDREN AND TEENS**

**In the Spotlight**

EDITED BY LISA SILVERMAN and ELLEN DRUCKER-ALBERT


Savit, 2017 Sydney Taylor Book Award Winner for Teens for *Anna and the Swallow Man*, presents a lyrical, emotional, theological, and fantastical novel—a finalist for the 2020 National Book Award for Young People’s Literature (and one of few such explicitly Jewish titles on that list in recent years). The story follows teens Bluma and Yehuda Leib, denizens of the (fictional) Eastern European shtetl of Tupik in the nineteenth century. Yehuda Leib and his mother are very poor, and the boy’s reputation is of wildness and violence. Bluma, the baker’s daughter, is considered a “good girl,” if a dreamer. On the day a stranger, the Dark Messenger or the Angel of Death, arrives in Tupik, Bluma is searching for her missing Bubbe while Yehuda Leib is poised to flee the village, his terrified mother having warned him of an evil man in pursuit. Each child has an unsettling encounter with the Dark Messenger before finding themselves, separately and on individual quests, in the Far Country of the demons’ realm. As their adventures progress, Savit ratchets up the stakes regarding the children’s own humanity—and humankind itself.

The story is steeped in Jewish theology, and dense with Talmudic themes and references: Jewish rites and observance; language, names, and cadence; and figures from the Bible, folklore, and mythology (Lilith and Belial, for example, play important roles). Savit revels in his luxuriously described, very creepy, details; for example, as Bluma flees the demons, “Gnashing teeth and grabbing hands, long, scraping claws, voices screaming, yelling, pushing, cursing—she had to keep going, she had to keep moving, running, and she dodged and leapt over headstones, and still they were grabbing on to her, touching her, and there were fingers in her hair pulling her back, and she wrenched forward, but there was no end to them, none, grabbing, their hands, and as soon as she had torn herself away, there were more, and there were more, and there were more...” This spine-tingling, thought-provoking work asks nothing less of its readers than deep contemplation of mortality—and morality—through a welcome (and somewhat rare for this genre) specifically Jewish lens.

Elissa Gershowitz,
The Horn Book, Inc., Boston, MA


Yiddishist Miriam Yudel presents a compendium of Yiddish children’s literature, carefully translated and arranged into chapters of Jewish holidays; Jewish history and heroes; folktales; fairy tales, wonder tales; wise fools; allegories, parables, and fables; school days; in life’s classroom;...
too uncomfortable to be stared at as the only adult in the classroom and too modest to call attention to his previous lack of education. One day, Rachel pointed out a donkey in the marketplace who carried a garden on his back. The donkey attracted attention from the passersby and was the target of stares, pointing, and whispers. But one day Akiva noticed, as Rachel had hoped he would, that repeated sightings of this unusual donkey were attracting less and less attention. Children were now enjoying the produce from the garden on its back and it was engendering interest and approval rather than curiosity and surprise. Akiva understood what Rachel in her creative way had been trying to teach him. He realized he would not be a novelty in the classroom forever and would, in time, become a natural part of school life. And so Akiva’s formal education began. Rabbi Akiva’s teachings are taught and treasured until today. The beautiful and universal lesson: it is never too late to begin to learn.

The art accompanying the clear and poignant text emphasizes Akiva’s size relative to the children in the class but then reflects his deep joy as education opens his world. The vibrant colors and strong lines evoke a time long ago and are filled with humorous touches certain to charm.

The Midrash which is the source of the story is presented in English translation at the end of the book, connecting today’s delightful picture book with the ancient but timeless Talmudic tale.

Continued on page 17

Bible Stories and Midrash


Talmudic tales have stood the test of time as they have much to teach us even today. The stories resonate throughout the generations and the messages can be clear enough for children to understand and internalize. This is the story of Rabbi Akiva, one of the most brilliant sages of all, one whose teachings speak to us daily and whose wisdom changes the world for the better every day. The story of Rabbi Akiva’s introduction to learning has been told and retold, but this version is both unusual and nuanced and has a comical sensibility which enhances its serious message.

Akiva was a shepherd who had no formal learning until he reached 40 years of age. His wife, Rachel, had great faith in him and knew he could achieve great things if only he would learn to read and write. Rachel encouraged her husband to join the local school children in classroom learning but he was reluctant; far
world is desperate for rain. What to do? Rabbi Hanina eventually realizes that he must forego his own creature comforts—at least temporarily—so that the parched earth can have rain and thus plants and animals will be revived. However, it is strange that Hanina came home to a fire in the fireplace and soup ready on the stove, without a single indication of Hanina’s wife or servant. The illustrations by Noa Kelner were created with ink and pencil, and later touched up in Photoshop. These expressive drawings use a varied palette and reflect the story accurately. Included at the end of A Rainy Day Story are the sentences about this incident from the Talmud in Hebrew and translated into English.

Anne Dublin, retired teacher-librarian, Holy Blossom Temple; author of the historical novel, Jacob and the Mandolin Adventure, Toronto


Sister Miriam narrates the story of her baby brother Moses. She describes how she and her mother made a basket for the baby and placed it in the Nile River, hoping to keep him safe from Pharaoh’s soldiers. Miriam follows the basket down the river until it reaches Pharaoh’s daughter and her attendants. When Pharaoh’s daughter takes the baby out of the water, Miriam offers to find a Hebrew wet nurse and fetches her mother. The lyrics for an original song, composed by the author, are interspersed into the text: “God will hide us in the shelter of a rock. God will shield with holy feathers, hide us ‘neath strong wings. A refuge from the storm, a shadow from the heat. God will hide us in the shelter of strong wings.” (Sheet music is appended). Detailed mixed media illustrations depict the story’s ancient Egyptian setting and appropriately complement the text. An author’s note provides additional details about the biblical story, but readers will need more background to place this episode within the larger narrative. Pair with Miriam in the Desert by Jacqueline Jules, illustrated by Natascia Ugliano (Kar-Ben, 2010), and Miriam’s Cup: A Passover Story by Fran Manushkin, illustrated by Bob Dacey (Scholastic, 1998), to add to, and continue, the story.

Rachel Kamin, North Suburban Synagogue Beth El, Highland Park, IL

Biography


The title, Emmy Noether: The Most Important Mathematician You’ve Never Heard Of is an accurate summary of this charming book. Emmy Noether “was born into a Jewish family in Erlangen Germany in 1882.” She was interested in mathematics, but in the nineteenth century the only occupation open to girls, no matter how brilliant, was teaching. Emmy was not allowed to enroll in university but she was determined to get a higher education, so she sat in on classes, but was not allowed to take tests or get a degree. Three years later women were allowed to enter university and Emmy received a PhD. Emmy and her family fled Nazi Germany in 1933 and came to the United States where Emmy taught physics at a women’s college. Emmy discovered two major theories that advanced the study of physics, but she never received credit for her ideas, because she was a woman. Emmy never gave up on her dreams. Her perseverance and determination is inspiring to all girls who want to enter a field dominated by men.

Kari Rust’s illustrations are delightful. Emmy is drawn as a powerful, sometimes serious and sometimes playful character. Especially amusing is the list of what girls in 1882 were supposed to do and in contrast the list of what Emmy was not interested in doing and the fact that she was “super terrific at puzzles and math (which no one took much notice of because she was a girl).” On the bottom of several pages are illustrations of supercilious men making snide comments about Emmy, because she is a woman. The author’s note has a photograph of Emmy Noether and explains her theories in more depth. There is also a list for further reading. Emmy Noether is a fascinating and inspiring Jewish woman. The text fits in well with the STEM curriculum. The format of the text and illustrations is extremely unique, creative and at times whimsical. Girls as well as boys will enjoy learning about Emmy Noether.

Ilka Gordon, Beachwood, OH
REVIEWS OF TITLES FOR CHILDREN AND TEENS


Natan Sharansky: Freedom Fighter for Soviet Jews is a chapter graphic novel which follows the life and struggle of a deeply committed refusenik and human rights activist who was born in 1948 to a Jewish family in the Ukraine when it was unsafe to be Jew. Originally named Anatoly, he was a good student and loved chess, eventually beating many adults. His mother taught him that chess gives you the “freedom to think,” a concept which would help him tolerate and overcome many difficult situations and punishments throughout his life. He was an excellent student and enjoyed Russian culture, but soon could not deny his Jewish heritage. The Six Day War inspired him to learn about Israel, Jewish history, Hebrew language, and Bible. He began to use his great-grandfather’s name “Natan.” As his activism and work on behalf of social injustice and the Jews became more pronounced and public, the KGB put him under constant surveillance, and Natan was arrested on March 15, 1977. The book follows the work of his wife Avital who brought the refuseniks’ plight to international attention. The reader follows Natan’s harsh life in prison and labor camps, but always feels his determination and commitment to justice, freedom, and human rights.

This is an excellent recounting of a struggle which was won against all odds. The book includes explanations and additional facts on many pages which add to the historical context and provide clarity of Natan’s life and the difficult times he experienced. The language is easy to understand and the illustrations are colorful and clear, although sometimes the characters are a bit exaggerated. There were a few instances where background and facts seem to be missing. There is no mention of his wife Avital at all until Natan is found with their wedding picture when brought to prison. Details about his eventual release at the bridge between West Berlin and East Germany and being reunited with his wife are presented differently than the story has been told. There is a glossary, timeline of events, bibliography, and webography.

Rachel Glasser, retired librarian, Yavneh Academy, Teaneck, NJ


In this graphic memoir, Moroccan-born artist Kantorovitz recalls growing up in France in the 1960s and 1970s after her family settled there when she was five years old. Sylvie’s and her family’s Jewish identity crops up periodically and ties in with their other feelings about themselves and their relationship to the rest of the world. Sylvie’s demanding mother’s concern with what others think of her family is a major element of the story, and some of that concern is connected to a fear that they’ll “bring shame on all Jews”; she sends mixed signals about whether to even reveal that they are Jewish. Between these messages and some antisemitic comments she faces from others, it feels natural that, along with other insecurities, Sylvie often tries to hide her Jewishness (though a resolution to her worries near the end feels a bit abrupt). The creative use of varied panel sizes and structures in Kantorovitz’s muted, thick-lined illustrations keep pages turning quickly, and young Sylvie is, overall, a sympathetic protagonist trying to figure out where she fits in.

Shoshana Flax, The Horn Book, Inc., Boston, MA


Anne Frank is one of the most iconic figures of children’s Holocaust literature. The focus of this particular picture book among the plethora of picture book biographies of Anne Frank is on Frank’s need to use her voice and her desire to be heard. Prolific picture book author Linda Elovitz Marshall portrays Frank using her voice in school and at home. Then she demonstrates the differences...
once Frank receives her beloved diary, “Kitty,” and the family’s retreat into hiding in the secret annex. The diary, of course, becomes a confidante to receive Frank’s thoughts at a time when it was not safe to speak aloud.

Marshall's prose simplifies Frank's story but keeps the essence of Frank as a young, exuberant girl who cannot hide her opinions and observations. However, the language vacillates between simple and sophisticated. Lewis’s illustrations maintain the integrity of time and place, including well-placed maps for context. Key takeaways from this biography include the importance of self-expression through crisis and the importance of writing through crisis as historical documentation.

The publisher views this book for grades 1-3. However, due to the Holocaust content, it is more appropriate for a slightly older audience. Backmatter includes an author’s note, a brief bio about Frank, a timeline, and suggestions for further reading and websites.

Barbara Krasner, former member, Sydney Taylor Book Award Committee; Director, Mercer County Holocaust, Genocide, & Human Rights Center, Somerset, NJ

Sarah Bernhardt remains a French icon, almost a century after her death. Catherine Reef’s biography captures her amazing life in this biography for middle-schoolers. Bernhardt was born into Paris’ underworld. Her mother was a courtesan with many lovers in high places. Sarah’s childhood was unhappy until she went to a convent school, where she found her first mentor.

Sarah’s entry into the theater was unsuccessful until she found several supporters who helped her become a star. The book contains sections on her shows in Paris, as well as her extensive tours in England and around the world. In addition to her long and illustrious stage career, she was a heroine in both the Franco-Prussian War and Commune period (1870-1871) and World War I; her exploits are described in some detail here. Reef also explores Bernhardt’s personal life in some detail, including her elaborate lifestyle and often-tragic family situation.

In many ways this book is exemplary. The text is well-written (though there are a few typos), and the over 65 well-chosen photographs show both the subject’s life and the times she lived in. That said, there are some issues. The lack of dates makes the chronological thread a bit difficult to follow, however, there is a detailed timeline of Bernhardt’s life in the back of the book. The Parisian “demimonde” is a critical part of Bernhardt’s background, and while nothing is graphic, there are numerous references to prostitution and drugs. The vivid descriptions will be confusing and perhaps inappropriate) for the intended age group. Finally, there is very little Jewish content. Bernhardt’s background is ambiguous (she was baptized while in school) and her assertions of Jewish heritage were inconsistent. Her support for Dreyfus was one of the few times she expressed direct Jewish connections. In the end, this may be a better option for public libraries than synagogues or Day Schools.

Fred Isaac, Temple Sinai, Oakland, CA


Yet another book about Anne Frank, but this one fills a need not often addressed: a very mild introduction to the person and the time, for those who have reached middle school but not yet explored the subject. From the publisher’s Extraordinary Lives series focusing on inspirational historical and modern figures, this slim book offers an approachable, illustrated narrative of Anne Frank’s life. With maps, quotations from the actual diary, a timeline, information bubbles, and explanations of unfamiliar vocabulary, it gives the reader an understanding of Anne Frank’s childhood, achievements, teen years, and her emotional journey during World War II. It serves as an introduction to antisemitism and the Holocaust and, through the many references to Anne’s diary, reveals why she became such an inspiration.

With the traditional plaid cover, readers become familiar with the look of the diary. It’s unfortunate that a flower motif and shades of lilac and purple are used throughout because the book will probably appeal visually more to girls than to boys. The content, however, offers information for those not ready to read the actual diary. Important words and concepts are printed in bold font throughout the book. Unfamiliar words are explained. Illustrations are simple drawings typical of a clip-art look.

This book summarizes the diary by focusing on parts of it that would especially interest youth: how the family escaped without detection; where they slept, cooked, bathed and ate;
One of WWII’s BEST KEPT SECRETS is now an Award-Winning Book

The incredible story of the underground prisoner resistance organization at Auschwitz

“The definitive study of the topic.”
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“The best-documented and also the most extensive description of the heroic effort...at Auschwitz.”
— Dr. ADAM CYRA
Senior Curator, Dept. of Historical Research, Auschwitz-Birkenau Memorial and Museum

Companion book also available!

THE AUSCHWITZ VOLUNTEER: BEYOND BRAVERY

“A historical document of the greatest importance.”
— THE NEW YORK TIMES, Editors’ Choice

One of the “Five Best” books on wartime secret missions.
— WALL STREET JOURNAL

Available at fine bookstores, online retailers and major wholesalers. Distributed to the trade by National Book Network, www.nbnbooks.com.
how a typical day would pass; as one of her favorite gifts for her 13th birthday, she treated the diary like a friend, naming it “Kitty;” the necessity to maintain absolute silence (so no flushing the toilet); her desk, where she put down her secret thoughts, fears and dreams as a typical teenager; her nickname “chatterbox” because she talked so much at school; and the discovery of the hidden annex.

The author distills the diary into a factual summary, save one misleading statement: (After liberation) “When he (the father) discovered Anne’s diary he was amazed by her words.” In fact, one of the helpers, Miep Gies, hid the diary and saved it for the father.


Jewish inventor Ralph Baer was committed to making life easier, more fun and exciting while using his imagination, his knowledge of electronics and technology, and his fierce determination to make the world take notice. His family fled the persecution of the Jews in Cologne, Germany in 1938 arriving in New York during difficult times. His childhood fascination with a construction set and his intense curiosity paved the way for his study and work on radios, televisions, military electronic equipment, transmitters, and games. Ralph faced rejection and cynicism throughout his career and met it with determination and resolve. He reconfigured and reimagined everyday objects eventually being named “The Father of Video Games.” It is said that his innovative “Brown Box” paved the way for interactive systems such as Wii and PlayStation. Some of his work is displayed in the Smithsonian Museum, and he is in the National Inventors Hall of Fame.

This positive uplifting picture biography includes bright illustrations and quick progression through Ralph’s life, challenges, and inventions. While presented as a picture book, the topic and concepts are more appropriate for a somewhat older audience. The only Jewish connection is the family’s escape from Nazi persecution in Germany, but there is no reference to any Jewish life after that. The background of what was taking place in Germany and how it affected children is a simple, but solid introduction to the realities of the Holocaust. Ralph’s passion and creativity are evident along with the positive message of hard work, determination, and effort. Included is a list of additional readings on video games and a selected bibliography.

Rachel Glasser,
retired librarian, Yavneh Academy,
Teaneck, NJ

Board Books


An introduction to the diverse people and foods of Israel for preschoolers, each page shows a headshot of a child eating. A red-headed boy eats hummus on bread; a girl of color enjoys mujadara, a classic Middle Eastern lentil and rice dish; another girl looks through the hole of a bagel, while another has just bitten into a falafel ball. Then there’s a boy with peyos (sidelocks) eating a boreka, a popular pastry usually filled with potato or cheese, a girl anxious to eat pashtida (kind of like a crustless quiche), and a baby being fed shakshuka (an egg and tomato dish). Finally, someone is eating malawach (Yemenite flatbread) and a boy is eating schnitzel (breaded chicken cutlet).

The short rhymes (“It’s a pitzel of a schnitzel! Crispy chicken, finger lickin’) and the bright illustrations will make this a favorite, and it can be used with older kids for story time with themes of food and/or Israel. Biete-avon (healthy appetite)!

Chava Pinchuck,
Past chair, Sydney Taylor Book Award Committee;
Editor, Jewish Values Finder,
Ramat Beit Shemesh, Israel

Rhyming verses and bouncy rhythm create a playful structure for this sweet celebration of Tu B’Shevat, as three diverse children go through the process of planting a tree together. They dig a hole, plant the tree, pat the ground, water the tree and, after watching the tree change throughout the year, the threesome gets to wish the tree a happy birthday and enjoy its spring blossoms. Cheery, simple, and delightfully readable, this board book will engage the youngest readers in the positive message of Tu B’Shevat.

Martha McMahon, Sinai Akiba Academy, Los Angeles, CA

**Fiction - Middle Grade**


Fifth grader Avery Green likes *Star Wars,* science, and football. He does not like Hebrew School, nor does he understand why he has to attend, which precludes his participation in the East Bay Football League. A change in the football schedule allows Avery to join the league, but his teammates include Damon, the school bully, and “weird” Gideon from Hebrew School, the shlemiel (spilling everything) on Avery (the shlemazel). At Hebrew School, Rabbi Lipschtick has retired, and Rabbi Bob is the interim rabbi. He shares Avery’s love of *Star Wars.* As the year progresses, Avery and Rabbi Bob develop a relationship, and Avery gets to try Rabbi Bob’s lightsaber. Avery sees Damon bullying Gideon, but he is hesitant to defend his friend. Damon fractures his ankle during a football game, and Gideon sustains a concussion. As they wait in the hospital, they learn that Damon does not have a mother. Gideon explains that he is still friendly because it is likely no one else is nice to Damon. Rabbi Bob is replaced by Rabbi Estévez, but he stays to help her. They institute “Lightsaber Torah,” where the Hebrew School students battle out their ideas and questions about the *Torah* lessons.

This charming story of appreciating Judaism and other people gets an additional kick of humor from over-the-top characters like Little Bash at Hebrew School; Gideon’s Hungarian, pirate, cigar-smoking grandfather; and Morah Neetza, the Hebrew School teacher with a strong Israeli accent and attitude. The *Star Wars* trivia works well – highlighting a fan’s obsession without overwhelming non-fans. The Jewish elements are integrated seamlessly, with bikkur cholim (the *mitzvah* of visiting the sick) and insightful questions about the *Torah,* except for a mention of Shemini Atzeret with nothing about *Sukkot* and the silly naming of “Rabbi Lipschtick.” Textual sources for the notes at the end would have enhanced them. Entertaining and enlightening, *Going Rogue* works on many levels and would make a great book club selection.

Chava Pinchuck, *Past Chair, Sydney Taylor Book Award Committee; Editor, Jewish Values Finder, Ramat Beit Shemesh, Israel*


Based on a true story, Jacob lives in an orphanage in Mezritsh, Poland. Despite the many hardships, he finds comfort in taking part in the orphanage’s mandolin orchestra, soon becoming a star performer. One day, an American gentleman arrives at the orphanage with a generous gift. A select group of orphans will be given the chance to leave Poland to be educated at a Canadian Jewish Farm School outside of Toronto. In addition, he promises that the mandolin players will be given the opportunity to play at Carnegie Hall in New York City. Jacob quickly accepts the offer to start a new life.

The children and their chaperones travel hours by train and weeks by ship, to arrive at their destination. While the journey is exciting, it is not without its perils: Jacob along with many of his friends suffer from motion or sea sickness; and a friend, who did not qualify for the trip, stows away but develops tetanus—a deadly disease in the 1920s. A shipboard concert by the children exposes them to an American couple’s anti-Semitism. Arriving in Canada and adapting to life at the Farm School is an arduous yet joyful experience. The story ends with the promised trip to New York to play at Carnegie Hall. Throughout their journey, they are supported by friendship, mandolins, and the thrill of the adventure.

Historical Notes at the back of the book provide additional information about Mezritsh, the Mezritsh Orphanage, and biographies of the real people mentioned in the book. A listing of the sources consulted is also provided.

Continued on page 23
REVIEWS OF TITLES FOR CHILDREN AND TEENS

For every Jew who left Europe before WWII, there is a deeply personal and often amazing story about how they managed to avoid the horrific experiences and terrible fate of those who remained. Anne Dublin has discovered one of those remarkable stories and deftly retells it in an engaging and adventurous manner that brings to life 1920s Poland and the events that ultimately saved the lives of a select group of orphans. While not a Holocaust story, per se, those dark times will shadow the reader with thoughts of what might have happened had these children not left Poland. A well-written historical novel about a unique event in Jewish history that belongs in any library collection.

Kathy Bloomfield, 
Ajl President, Blogger at forwards books.com
Seal Beach, CA


Seventh grader Abby Braverman is facing a nightmare of a year. Her best (and only) friend and next door neighbor, Cat, has moved to Israel and her adored brother, Paul, has been diagnosed with testicular cancer and is facing a difficult course of surgery and chemotherapy, with all the physical and psychological changes the disease entails. Abby has some issues with social anxiety and does not easily make new friends at school. On the plus side, Abby has a loving and supportive family consisting of two moms and a pair of caring, involved grandparents, her beloved Bubbe and Zeyde. Also on the plus side, Cat’s empty house has a new tenant, a thoughtful, friendly young man only a bit older than Abby.

A gentle, Jewish sensibility pervades the story; one of the moms is Jewish and Abby and Paul are Jewish, as well. The family doesn’t attend synagogue but home-based Jewish holiday observances are important and meaningful in their lives.

Abby navigates her difficult year with overall grace despite moments of panic and despair. She grows and stretches, learning to handle social challenges and she begins to develop self-confidence and poise.

A detailed author’s note is appended. Gephart discusses her own battle with ovarian cancer and provides information about testicular cancer, noting that she chose to focus her story around the latter as it is not unusual for the age group and early detection and treatment are often successful. She wants young people to be familiar with the terminology and aware of the signs and symptoms. She presents a list of helpful tips designed to guide them through difficult moments when friends or family members have been diagnosed with the disease.

In this portrait of a maturing young girl with a loving family, readers will identify, care, and come away with an increased sensitivity to handling some of the more difficult issues in life.

Michal Hoschander Malen, 
retired librarian; current library volunteer in Efrat, Israel; 
Editor of children’s and young adult book reviews for the Jewish Book Council


Batya and her family live in a Russian shtetl. Her father is a skilled woodcarver and works in a Jewish owned woodcarving factory. Batya longs to be a woodcarver and loves to go to the factory and watch her father work, but she is told that girls cannot become woodcarvers. In spite of this Batya finds pieces of leftover wood and carves beautiful wooden animals for her younger sister Sarah. Following a brutal pogrom in the village and the destruction of the Jewish factory, the family escapes to America. McDonough describes the difficult sea journey in detail and how the officer on Ellis Island changes the family name from Breittelmann to Bright. Batya and her family settle on the lower east side of Manhattan. McDonough describes the lively sights and smells in the crowded streets of the city. Batya has not given up her dream of becoming a woodcarver. Although even in America girls are not allowed to enroll in shop classes at school Batya convinces her teacher to allow her to join the class. Batya skips school and discovers a woodcarving factory at the last stop on the subway line, Coney Island. Batya’s father gets a job working in the factory and after much persistence the factory owners recognize Batya’s talents and ask her to be an apprentice.

The Woodcarver’s Daughter introduces children to a period of contemporary Jewish history in a well-written, entertaining and detailed way. It begins with the story of ordinary shtetl life which is soon interrupted by a pogrom. The family endures a harrowing ship voyage and then must adjust to a new life. Batya, the main character, is persistent and overcomes the obstacles put before her.

Ilka Gordon, 
Beachwood, OH

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Fiction - Teen Readers


What could be a more perfect example of Jewish “kidlit” than a story about a Jewish girl who actually works in a bookstore?

Shoshana Greenberg lives with her two moms, has two loyal best friends, a very used car she has affectionately nicknamed Barbra Streisand, and a wonderful part time job which has become something of a passion: working in her local mall’s independent bookstore, a delightful place called Once Upon. She is friends with the other employees, has a warm and affectionate relationship with the owner, and adores sharing her love of reading with any customer who moseys through the shop’s door. It sounds perfect. Unfortunately, life rarely is. Her moms have been fighting and might be splitting up, Barbra Streisand needs an expensive repair she cannot afford, and the equilibrium of the bookstore staff has been shaken by the hiring of a new employee, who is handsome, appealing, and even reassuringly Jewish, but he and Shoshana do not click. To add further complication to her life, Shoshana has upset her friends by a well-meant but thoughtless action and the bookstore she loves may be on the verge of closing its doors for good.

This engrossing read is about Shoshana’s attempts to become a mature, balanced person who can roll with the many punches life has in store. The reader joins her on her lively ride as she makes mistakes, learns from them, and figures out how to navigate her life with less impetuous behavior and with more attention and thought while still paying attention to the needs of those around her.

Shoshana’s Jewish identity is integral to her daily life. While not observant, she integrates Jewish holidays, customs, and a uniquely Jewish point of view seamlessly into her life. There are one or two tiny Jewish missteps, for example, at her Christmas day lunch at a local Chinese restaurant, she notices “a lot of …kippahs” which is unlikely unless this is a kosher Chinese restaurant which would probably have been mentioned. Nevertheless, these small missteps do not detract from the book’s Jewish sensibility and atmosphere; Shoshana presents throughout as a caring and comfortably identified Jew.

Shoshana matures as the story progresses. She finds creative solutions to the dilemmas she can solve and finds ways to accept the ones she can’t change. This is a satisfying rom-com with many touches of humor, a charmingly romantic conclusion, and has potential for discussion if read in a group setting.

Michal Hoschander Malen, retired librarian; current library volunteer in Efrat, Israel; Editor of children’s and young adult book reviews for the Jewish Book Council


With her third book, Sydney Taylor Honor winner (for You’ll Miss Me When I’m Gone) Rachel Lynn Solomon has really hit her stride. This delightful enemies-to-lovers YA is a love letter to Seattle and an homage to being an unabashed fan of your favorite books, complete with a delicious Shabbat dinner.

Rowan Roth and Neil McNair have spent their entire high school careers trying to beat each other academically, all the while taunting and teasing each other about it. When Neil is announced as the valedictorian, Rowan decides that the senior class game, a combination of a scavenger hunt and “Assassin,” will be the one last chance she has to beat Neil at something before graduation. What she doesn’t count on though, is overhearing some anti-Semitic remarks from another classmate, leading her to team up with Neil to try and win the game. Over the course of one night, they travel all over Seattle, while making stops that include attending Shabbat dinner at Rowan’s house where Neil “fanboys” over her parents, his favorite Middle Grade book authors. Additionally Rowan meets her favorite romance novel author, and the two of them go to the zoo while high among other adventures, discovering, during the hours playing the game, that maybe they don’t hate each other as much as they thought.

There is frank discussion of sex, poverty, and other issues that come up over the course of the night. Brisk pacing is peppered with flashbacks of text messages and other epistolary glimpses into Rowan and Neil’s past helping to round out their slow burn romance that is an endearing read that is not all fluff and has some real meat to it.

Rebecca Levitan, Librarian II, Baltimore County Public Library, Pikesville Branch

As the town readies for Passover, a magician dressed in rags attracts everyone’s attention as he pulls yards of ribbon from his mouth and produces coins by tapping his shoe. Jonah and Rebecca do not have the money to buy matzah and other essentials for Passover. Unable to make their own Seder, they are about to go to a neighbor when the magician arrives at their door, asking to join them. He soon conjures golden candlesticks and a linen tablecloth. Then three chairs appear and turn into comfortable red velvet armchairs. Next come the Seder plate, matzah, wine, and all the food for the meal. Jonah and Rebecca cannot believe what is happening, and they ask their rabbi for guidance. The rabbit tells them, “if you can crumble the matzah and pour the wine, if the pillows are soft to the touch, then you will know this is all a gift from heaven.” They return home. The magician is gone, but everything is as they left it. The matzah crumbled, the wine poured, and the chairs were soft. They realized their Seder was a gift from heaven, brought to them by Elijah the prophet.

Based on the classic Yiddish story by Isaac Leib Peretz (1852-1915), Goldini’s 1993 retelling (Viking Juvenile) has been updated with luminous pastel illustrations that seem to flow and expose shadow, literally making the magic come alive. Great for story time for younger readers. For older readers, compare and contrast with Susan Kusel’s *The Passover Guest* (Neal Porter Books, 1991), Phoebe Gilman’s *Joseph Had a Little Overcoat* (Viking Juvenile), and Jim Aylesworth’s *My Grandfather’s Coat*, illustrated by Barbara McClintock.

It’s a delightful reverse-cumulative tale that invites new versions and imaginative illustrations. Miguel Gouveia’s retelling, *Benji’s Blanket*, has a more contemporary feel to it than the other three books. When Benji is born, his grandad, a tailor, sews him a blanket that he “loved more than anything his grandad could have ever imagined … He was never seen without his grandad’s gift.” As in the other versions, there is some resonant repetition in this telling (“Grandad started to measure, cut, and sew, measure, cut, and sew, measure, cut, and sew”), which captures young Benji’s delight in his treasured blanket in natural language (“Now it’s my cape, and I need it to fly! Here I go!”).

When Phoebe Gilman was working on *Something from Nothing*, she studied Roman Vishniac’s poignant black-and-white photographs of Eastern Europe, taken from 1935 to 1939; having “dipped her toe into that pool” (her words), she imbued her retelling with a Jewish way of life that was obliterated by 1945, through warm-toned, humorous paintings of Joseph’s doting Bubbie and Zaydie. Aylesworth transports those shtetl Jews to an assimilating America, but they still wear a tie, a button and a story, has been retold in many configurations, including the Yiddish folk song “Hob Ich Mir a Mantl” (“I Had a Little Overcoat”) and three wonderful picture books, Simms Taback’s *Joseph Had a Little Overcoat*, Phoebe Gilman’s *Something from Nothing*, and Jim Aylesworth’s *My Grandfather’s Coat*, illustrated by Barbara McClintock.

*Continued on page 26*
History


The ordeal of Syria’s persecuted Jews, forbidden to leave from 1960 to 1992, deserves to be better known. Happily, Menucha Publishers’ Escape series includes the story of a daring flight from Syria in their growing list.

Escape from Syria recounts how, in the aftermath of the Six-Day War, Zaki (Yitzchak) Farhi and his friend Ezra elude Syria’s dreaded secret police as they make their way across the Syrian border into Lebanon, and on into Israel.

Their plan is fraught with danger; capture could plunge them into the black hole of Syria’s brutal prison system. Disguised as Arab peasants, the boys move from one danger to the next. In one gripping scene, the two non-swimmers venture into a river: “Step after cautious step, the boys made their way further out into the river. The water was getting deeper and deeper, the force of the flowing water was getting stronger, and soon the water was almost up to their necks and they could barely keep their balance. Suddenly, Ezra let out a desperate cry — and vanished under the water!”

Yet, despite its qualities as a page-turner, Escape from Syria reads less as a novel than as a report. Classic Jewish refugee novels, like Sonia Levitin’s Journey to America, shape lived reality into novelistic form by immersing the reader in one character’s perspective. Djalilmand tells Zaki’s story, instead, from the outside, engaging only curiosity, not emotion.

By the end, the book betrays a distinct religious bias. The Syrian escapees are escorted by their Israel Defense Forces (IDF) rescuers to a nearby secular kibbutz, which has no Shabbat timers. “Zaki decided he wasn’t staying in such a place a minute longer. . . He didn’t come all the way from Syria to desecrate Shabbat in Israel!” Though the yeshivah he later enrolls in “took good care of them” with money and Shabbat meals, no gratitude is expressed to the IDF or the secular kibbutz for their help.

A timeline helpfully points to key events in twentieth-century Syrian-Jewish history, and photographs and maps clarify where everything happened. A glossary of mostly Hebrew words is there for young readers from less observant backgrounds, but begs the question: If secular readers are indeed a target audience, why cast secular Israelis in a less than positive light?

Fred Isaac,
Temple Sinai, Oakland, CA

Holocaust and World War II


As the age of Communism recedes, it is important to have first-hand accounts of that era available for middle-school readers. This book from the “Escape” series provides such a view.

Unlike other books in Menucha’s series, the escape is only a small part of this narrative. Instead, the story is divided into several inter-woven lines. One is the history of Hungary in the mid-20th century. It provides an overview of the nation, including World War II and the years of Communist rule from 1946 until 1956. The second story follows the lives of Gyuri Orosz and his family. Gyuri was born in 1942; his father was killed in the War soon after. The book tells several stories of his family’s life in the Budapest Ghetto, their nearly being sent to the camps, and his own near death as a small child. The book then recounts the history of Hungary after the War, including its short period of freedom followed by Communist government after 1948. Chapters 7 and 8 contain vignettes of the month-long Revolution in October and November of 1956 as 14-year-old Gyuri saw it. After the Soviet invasion in November, the family decided to escape to Austria. Their journey, which took several days, is vividly described here. The family continued from the Eisenstadt refugee center to England and on to Canada, where Gyuri spent his adulthood before making Aliyah.

Gyuri’s life is well-described here. The description of his family’s personal travails makes this entry in the series resonate. The photos, timeline and glossary will help readers connect to their concerns. Gyuri’s story and the history of Hungary will be of value for school and synagogue libraries.

Marjorie Gann,
retired teacher, co-author (with Janet Willen) of
*Five Thousand Years of Slavery and Speak a Word for Freedom: Women Against Slavery*, (Tundra), Toronto, Canada
There are many valuable historical references and facts presented within this story. Also included are poignant family photographs and a short bibliography.

Rachel Glasser, retired librarian, Yavneh Academy, Teaneck, NJ


In 1942, fifteen-year-old Mira Weiss learns to call the Warsaw Ghetto home. Her physician father’s suicide renders her mother less than capable of taking care of Mira and her younger sister, Hannah. Mira takes on the mantle, taking risks to steal through a cemetery to pass through to the Polish side in order to smuggle food to bring back to sell for much-needed money. When a group of Polish bounty hunters are about to turn Mira in, a blond-haired male stranger intervenes to save her. Mira is in love with Daniel, a teen orphan who helps Janusz Korczak, but she can’t stop thinking about the young man who saved her. She learns his name is Amos and he is part of the underground resistance. After confronting the deaths of the rest of her family, Mira joins up, building upon Hannah’s storytelling skills to keep her close in memory and to shelter her own thoughts. Mira becomes a fighter in the April 1943 Warsaw Ghetto Uprising.

David Safier, whose bestselling 2014 book in Europe has been translated into English from the original German, puts the reader squarely into the life of the Warsaw Ghetto, its risks, its liquidation, its ghosts, fears, and uprising. He has clearly done his homework, although the research sometimes appears too didactic. Readers will feel the emotionally wrenching decisions Mira must make as she continually asks herself what kind of person she wants to be, her worldview expanding from her nuclear family to others. While other YA books about the Warsaw Ghetto uprising exist (e.g., Jennifer Nielsen’s Resistance), Safier provides a narrative that is rich in imagery and pathos.

Barbara Krasner, former member, Sydney Taylor Book Award Committee, New Jersey Director, Mercer County Holocaust, Genocide, & Human Rights Center, Somerset, NJ

Israel


Bubbe shops at the Carmel Market in Tel Aviv every Friday. Armed with her list and her shopping cart, she gets everything she needs: challah, Shabbat candles, chicken, and fruits and vegetables. As she loads the cart with its items, a cat jumps in. “Oy, My cart is growing full,’ Bubbe said with a push and a pull.” She repeats this as she buys more things and more cats appear in her bags, so as she checks off her list, she also gets a pull.” She repeats this as she buys more things and more cats appear in her bags, so as she checks off her list, she also gets a pull.” She repeats this as she buys more things and more cats appear in her bags, so as she checks off her list, she also gets a pull.” She repeats this as she buys more things and more cats appear in her bags, so as she checks off her list, she also gets a pull.” She repeats this as she buys more things and more cats appear in her bags, so as she checks off her list, she also gets a pull.” She repeats this as she buys more things and more cats appear in her bags, so as she checks off her list, she also gets a pull.” She repeats this as she buys more things and more cats appear in her bags, so as she checks off her list, she also gets a pull.” She repeats this as she buys more things and more cats appear in her bags, so as she checks off her list, she also gets a pull.” She repeats this as she buys more things and more cats appear in her bags, so as she checks off her list, she also gets a pull.” She repeats this as she buys more things and more cats appear in her bags, so as she checks off her list, she also gets a pull.” She repeats this as she buys more things and more cats appear in her bags, so as she checks off her list, she also gets a pull.” She repeats this as she buys more things and more cats appear in her bags, so as she checks off her list, she also gets a pull.” She repeats this as she buys more things and more cats appear in her bags, so as she checks off her list, she also gets a pull.” She repeats this as she buys more things and more cats appear in her bags, so as she checks off her list, she also gets a pull.” She repeats this as she buys more things and more cats appear in her bags, so as she checks off her list, she also gets a pull.” She repeats this as she buys more things and more cats appear in her bags, so as she checks off her list, she also gets a pull.” She repeats this as she buys more things and more cats appear in her bags, so as she checks off her list, she also gets a pull.” She repeats this as she buys more things and more cats appear in her bags, so as she checks off her list, she also gets a pull.” She repeats this as she buys more things and more cats appear in her bags, so as she checks off her list, she also gets a pull.” She repeats this as she buys more things and more cats appear in her bags, so as she checks off her list, she also gets a pull.” She repeats this as she buys more things and more cats appear in her bags, so as she checks off her list, she also gets a pull.” She repeats this as she buys more things and more cats appear in her bags, so as she checks off her list, she also gets a pull.” She repeats this as she buys more things and more cats appear in her bags, so as she checks off her list, she also gets a pull.” She repeats this as she buys more things and more cats appear in her bags, so as she checks off her list, she also gets a pull.” She repeats this as she buys more things and more cats appear in her bags, so as she checks off her list, she also gets a pull.” She repeats this as she buys more things and more cats appear in her bags, so as she checks off her list, she also gets a pull.” She repeats this as she buys more things and more cats appear in her bags, so as she checks off her list, she also gets a pull.” She repeats this as she buys more things and more cats appear in her bags, so as she checks off her list, she also gets a pull.” She repeats this as she buys more things and more cats appear in her bags, so as she checks off her list, she also gets a pull.” She repeats this as she buys more things and more cats appear in her bags, so as she checks off her list, she also gets a pull.” She repeats this as she buys more things and more cats appear in her bags, so as she checks off her list, she also gets a pull.” She repeats this as she buys more things and more cats appear in her bags, so as she checks off her list, she also gets a pull.” She repeats this as she buys more things and more cats appear in her bags, so as she checks off her list, she also gets a pull.” She repeats this as she buys more things and more cats appear in her bags, so as she checks off her list, she also gets a pull.” She repeats this as she buys more things and more cats appear in her bags, so as she checks off her list, she also gets a pull.” She repeats this as she buys more things and more cats appear in her bags, so as she checks off her list, she also gets

Dabi loves to play in dirt, unearth worms, and model clay figures from mud. She doesn’t mind getting dirty, but her parents object. When the family visits the grandparents in Israel, Dabi nucks about in the dirt outside the house, getting filthy in the process. Her mother chastises her, “We didn’t fly all the way to Israel for you to play in the dirt.” “… put on one of your new dresses and show everyone what a beautiful little lady you are,” adds her dad. Only her aunt, who loved getting dirty as a kid, is fine with Dabi’s enthusiasm. So the next day, Dodi Gili takes Dabi to the Beit Guvrin National Park, where an archeological site is open to visitors. Dabi digs right in, unearth a ring which, to her disappointment, she must leave behind. Two weeks later, though, the archeologist shows up at her grandmother’s house with a certificate recognizing Dabi’s discovery of a 3,500-year-old artifact. Properly chastened, Dabi’s parents are proud of her achievement.

This book is a throwback to the 1970s, when its feminist message was indeed necessary. But does anyone today really expect girls to stay any cleaner than boys?

The book looks and reads like a K-2 picture book, with its short sentences and word play:

“Scoop, plop, scoop, plop.
Dabi dug and dumped dirt.
She found a squooshy worm and scooped it up.
It wiggled and waggled, swayed and swung, twisted and tumbled.”

But the girl in the digitally-rendered, caricaturish illustrations looks about nine, and the subject matter (Israeli archeology) is just right for middle graders who, unlike kindergartners, can grasp what 3,500 years old means. Yet even in the brief author’s note, Hechter doesn’t exploit the possibilities of teaching something about archeology to young readers. Still, a book about Israel that focuses on something positive is always welcome.

Chava Pinchuck,
Past chair, Sydney Taylor Book Award Committee; Editor, Jewish Values Finder, Ramat Beit Shemesh, Israel


Daniel’s class is going to visit the Prime Minister’s office, and he needs to be on his best behavior, which will be a challenge. He likes to do things backwards and upside down, including wearing shoes on his hands, “eating soup for breakfast and cereal for dinner,” and saying “Boker tov, ima” (Good morning, mother) when he goes to sleep at night. His parents and teacher remind him not to do these things on the trip, and Daniel tries his best. He does fine on the bus and in the front hall of the Prime Minister’s residence, even when hearing from an assistant about the prime minister’s job duties. But when a coin bounces out of the assistant’s pocket, Daniel bends down to pick it up, and since he is so close to the ground…he does a handstand. The teacher and his class are horrified, but the assistant shares more interesting information. The first prime minister of Israel, David Ben-Gurion, liked to do headstands. There is a famous picture of him on the beach standing on his head (included in an author’s note). Soon the assistant does a headstand and joins Daniel. Then the class is treated to pineapple upside-down cake. (They never actually meet the current prime minister.) Mandell has crafted a cute story about a boy who does things differently. He does not seem to be ostracized or teased because of his antics, but it is nice to get affirmation from someone as important as a prime minister that doing a headstand is okay. Sadly, it lacks the feel of Israel. Scenes in Daniel’s classroom, besides the distorted Israeli flag, could be anywhere. There is no sense of Jerusalem in the outdoor pictures, and little context, with no dates for Ben Gurion (1886-1973). Librarians can pair this with Shelly Johannes’ Beatrice Zinker, Upside Down Thinker (Little Brown, 2017) to illustrate looking at things from a different perspective.

Chava Pinchuck,
Past chair, Sydney Taylor Book Award Committee; Editor, Jewish Values Finder, Ramat Beit Shemesh, Israel

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The Lemon Tree is the story of a house in Ramla, Israel, and the ways in which its inhabitants’ paths cross and diverge over time. Bashir, son of the original Palestinian builder, and Dalia, the daughter of subsequent Jewish residents, represent the two sides of the Arab-Israeli conflict as their personal stories intertwine with the political events over more than forty years. They build an awkward, on-and-off friendship as time goes by, which serves to highlight the ups and downs of the “situation.” This is an adaptation of an adult book, aimed at middle and high school students. The publisher lists this title’s suggested age range as 4th to 6th, but based on the interest level and politically complex content, it seems more suited to young adult audiences.

This book shines light on a place and situations that are murky and confusing to most, but that people are certainly curious about. Facts and information are presented coherently, if somewhat wordily. The connection between two “frenemies” with irreconcilable differences who still manage to find common ground and behave civilly is a lesson on how to establish personal relationships without giving up on one’s own beliefs or principles. Many of the events presented are not well known and it is important to shed light on what happened to the Arab residents of the land and how they came to be where and how they are now.

But there is a lack of nuance and background given to the Jewish reasons for wanting to settle in Israel. Vague mentions of the Holocaust aren’t enough, especially since Dalia’s own family was able to escape the camps or other severe consequences. There is no description of biblical/historical connections, the history of Zionism, etc.: this makes the Jewish settlers’ and government’s behavior seem baffling, arbitrary, and unnecessarily cruel. As a result, the book comes off as one-sided or having an ending, will be lost on the target audience. With so much activity — the kiddush, the talking Torah, the journey with Nachman and its challenges, and the words of wisdom, Esther forgets about “ready for anything,” and she is ready to move ahead.

Depending on one’s reference point, the book is reminiscent of the Beatles’ album of similar name, Alice in Wonderland going down the rabbit hole, or delving into The Matrix. Jessica Tamar Deutsch’s (The Illustrated Pirke Avot) colorful, funky illustrations capture Esther’s fantastic excursion perfectly. But the pithy philosophy captured in one-liners, “Sometimes we need to go down the rabbit hole, or delving into The Matrix. Jessica Tamar Deutsch’s (The Illustrated Pirke Avot) colorful, funky illustrations capture Esther’s fantastic excursion perfectly. But the pithy philosophy captured in one-liners, “Sometimes we need to go down so we can up,” “All ends are beginnings and all beginnings are ends,” will be lost on the target audience. With so much activity — the kiddush, the talking Torah, the journey with Nachman and its challenges, and the words of wisdom, Esther forgets about her apprehensions about moving, but the reader may also lose track of the story. While traditionalists may object to a magical, talking Torah, it is a cute story and a primer on Breslov philosophy. It will attract the attention of parents and grandparents, but young readers will need their direction to understand the book.

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Aviva Rosenberg,
Children’s Librarian,
Ridgefield Public Library, Ridgefield, NJ

Picture Book


Esther is not happy that her family is moving to San Francisco from Brooklyn and away from her friends and beloved shul. On her family’s last Shabbat in town, there is a “good-bye kiddush,” but Esther doesn’t want to “celebrate my worst nightmare,” so she goes and hides in the sanctuary. She hears a voice coming from the bimah; it is a Torah in the back of the Aron Kodesh that is now used infrequently. It asks Esther to walk around with it, and she obliges. When she goes to return the delighted Torah to the ark, she sees a door. She opens it and proceeds down a dark hallway that has three more doors. Behind the third door, she encounters Nachman, the rabbi of the forest. He leads her through the forest, over a (narrow) bridge, through a wall, and finally back to the shul. Esther’s journey has made her “ready for anything,” and she is ready to move ahead.

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Chava Pinchuck,
Past chair, Sydney Taylor Book Award Committee; Editor, Jewish Values Finder, Ramat Beit Shemesh, Israel
REVIEWS OF TITLES FOR CHILDREN AND TEENS


The author/illustrator of this creatively designed travelogue picture book is an artist who spent her childhood in both New York City and Rome. Anna, a Jewish girl living in Rome with her giant sheepdog, goes on a quest to locate the special sketchbook of glamorous Zia Dinah, her artist aunt who died before she was born. She joins forces with her friend Luca, who does not speak, and they careen joyfully on their bicycles throughout a fancifully-drawn Rome, shouting various Italian phrases as they visit the Pantheon, Campo dei Fiori, the Fontana Di Trevi, the Spanish Steps, her family’s elegant store, and the Jewish Quarter. After their search for the sketchbook comes to naught, she finds the elusive item behind a drawing room oil painting of her aunt. There is no Jewish content, per se, but the author states in an endnote that her family “managed to carve out a unique niche in Rome’s fashion world” after surviving the Holocaust. She says her book is a “tribute to the post-war Dolce Vita and to rediscovering joy.” The colorful pencil-drawn illustrations of Rome and the elegance of the interior scenes are reminiscent of Kay Thomson’s drawings for *Eloise*, in particular the women’s 1960’s style fashions.

Lisa Silverman,
Co-editor, Children’s and Teen Literature, AJL News and Reviews

Shabbat and Holidays


In an email to Santa Claus, Anna writes: “My new dad and step brother celebrate Christmas so you’re coming to my house for the very first time. And I think you must be REALLY tired of cookies. I’m going to leave you the best Santa treat ever.” But, what could Anna leave for Santa that would be even better than cookies? Bubbie Sadie’s matzo ball soup will be too messy for Santa to eat while driving his sleigh. Aunt Bea’s noodle kugel isn’t exactly a grab-and-go snack and Santa

Ellen Drucker-Albert,
Co-editor, Children’s and Teen Literature, AJL News and Reviews; Manager, Adult & Information Services, Cold Spring Harbor Library & Environmental Center, Cold Spring Harbor, NY


In an email to Santa Claus, Anna writes: “My new dad and step brother celebrate Christmas so you’re coming to my house for the very first time. And I think you must be REALLY tired of cookies. I’m going to leave you the best Santa treat ever.” But, what could Anna leave for Santa that would be even better than cookies? Bubbie Sadie’s matzo ball soup will be too messy for Santa to eat while driving his sleigh. Aunt Bea’s noodle kugel isn’t exactly a grab-and-go snack and Santa

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can’t eat Aunt Sarah’s tzimmes with his fingers. Finally, after much deliberation, Anna decides that latkes would be perfect for Santa. She adds four to her stepbrother Michael’s plate of cookies. On Christmas morning, Anna and Michael are surprised to see the cookies and the latkes are all gone. Anna also receives an e-mail response from Santa: “I loved your latkes. So did Mrs. Claus. Can you please send her the recipe to add to her cookbook? I can’t wait to see what special treat you leave me next year!” Anna immediately starts to brainstorm ideas: Grandma Linda’s lemon jello? Latke brownies?

The animated pen and ink illustrations show a fully lit hanukkiyah on the fireplace mantel along with stockings, Christmas lights and a tree. The end papers are decorated with colorful menorahs, dreidels, Jewish stars, Christmas trees, presents, candy canes, and mistletoe. However, while Anna and Michael play dreidel, the holiday of Hanukkah is never mentioned or explained in the text; neither is Christmas for that matter. A recipe for Grandma Sylvia’s Potato Latkes, as well as Michael’s cookies, are appended, but the connection between latkes and Hanukkah is never made. Anna never identifies herself, or her family, as Jewish – her mom and stepfather never make an appearance. While multi-faith families might be able to relate to this fun, festive story, Jewish readers may wonder why it never occurs to Anna to leave chocolate gelt or sufganiyot for Santa. Certainly a child who’s familiar with matzo ball soup, kugel, and tzimmes, would also know about these other two significant Jewish holiday foods, both of which would have been perfect for Santa.

Rachel Kamin,
North Suburban Synagogue Beth El,
Highland Park, IL


When a dragon threatens to upend the celebration on the last night of Hanukkah, Lady Sadie knows what to do. This female ruler is not the only important girl in the kingdom, as her trusty band of eight knights includes Sir Isabella, Sir Margaret and Sir Lily, not to mention a character named Rosie who puts to rest the widespread panic about a supposed dastardly creature named Dreadful. When Sadie dispatches the knights, each one helps quell the mounting panic in a unique way, though the acts of kindness all relate to Hanukkah. One comforts a child by replacing a dreidel damaged by fire, while another assists a “damsel in distress” whose potato peeling helpers have left in fear. Apples are skillfully removed from treetops to prevent more from being singed, and a “helpeth wanted” sign in the bakery beckons Margaret who works tirelessly to replace the sufganiyot that have been gobbled up. Not all Hanukkah mitzvot require overt acts of bravery; Sir Henry actually turns his horse around, venturing back to the castle, where he’s comfortable doing domestic chores. Engaging, comical illustrations along with illuminated lettering, wordplay, and a smattering of Old English expressions set the pitch perfect tone. The rollicking holiday adventure concludes with the much-anticipated Hanukkah merrymaking. And where do the guests gather?—at the Round Table, of course!

Gloria Koster,
Children’s Librarian and author; retired from New Canaan (Connecticut) Public Schools


An elementary school with assorted multicultural children is the setting for this rhyming story of sharing traditional foods with your friends. Unfortunately, it was published during a worldwide pandemic when sharing your lunch is now quite frowned upon. Even before present times, schools generally discourage trading lunch items in the cafeteria due to any variety of reasons, but this tale certainly encourages the practice. Young Noa, a Jewish girl among many classmates who represent different cultures, brings a lunch of matzah and cream cheese during Passover and retells an abridged story of Passover to them, including why she eats differently this week and refuses to trade her lunch. The following day, Noa brings matzah and cream cheese sandwiches to pass out to all her friends. The rhyme here is: “Mmmm”, her friends say, as they munch, “Matzah has a tasty crunch!” The illustrations show the children wide-eyed with glee upon tasting it. Apparently, each day after that Noa brings in a different matzah treat to distribute, and her classmates are delighted. The simple story can be useful for children in public schools who may feel “different” if they are following Passover food laws, but it does make quite a leap of imagination that a second or third grader would bring trays of matzah brie, matzah pizza, and matzah ball soup to school and hand it out to friends on her own at school lunch hour.

Lisa Silverman,
Co-editor, Children’s and Teen Literature,
AJL News and Reviews

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REVIEWS OF TITLES FOR CHILDREN AND TEENS


Set in depression-era Washington D.C., this is a re-telling of I.L. Peretz’s 1904 Yiddish tale and inspired by the author’s love of a previous picture book version, Uri Shulevitz’s *The Magician*. Kusel’s adaptation preserves the wonder of a holiday that always captivates children who yearn to lay eyes on Elijah or at least witness a sign that he has indeed visited during their Passover Seder. For Muriel, the main character in this story, there is little hope of any Seder at all in 1933, when her parents and their Jewish neighbors haven’t a speck of food for the celebration. But when a juggler on the steps of the Lincoln Memorial takes her penny, we have our first hint of his true identity. Despite their bare table, Muriel’s family welcomes him when he comes to the door, rewarded in turn with a feast that’s enough for the entire community. Recognizable national landmarks ground us in the real world while the rich Chagall-inspired illustrations convey a mysterious, magical quality perfectly suited to this fantasy. From the springtime cherry blossoms depicted in the beginning to the sumptuous Passover spread at the end, this is a wonderful story about hope. Background information and notes on the holiday are included.

Gloria Koster, *Children’s Librarian and author; retired from New Canaan (Connecticut) Public Schools*


Esther and Ezra bake challah each week in their bakery. Their delivery boy, Jacob, takes Soosie the horse through the streets of Jerusalem, with a wagon piled high with loaves, every Friday morning so that everyone has a challah for Shabbat. “Clip-Clop, Clip-Clop” go the horse’s hooves and “Clink-Clang, Clink-Clang” go the coins in the tin bank as Soosie neighs and Jacob clicks his tongue up and down Jerusalem Road, Zion Street and Hillel Street. When Jacob falls ill one Friday, Esther and Ezra are forced to send the horse out alone to make the challah deliveries. But, Soosie knows the way and returns several hours later with an empty wagon and a tin bank full of coins. Colorful, layered, cartoon illustrations depict the diversity of earlier 20th century Israel and a detailed author’s note provides information about Angel Bakery, which inspired the tale, Shabbat, and the people of Jerusalem. This is a wonderful Shabbat story, set in Israel, which also illustrates the Jewish value of *tzar ba’alei hayim* (the prohibition against causing animals unnecessary suffering), where even animals deserve a day of rest.

Rachel Kamin, *North Suburban Synagogue Beth El, Highland Park, IL*


*The Great Passover Escape* is an adorable story about three animal friends who live in the Biblical Zoo in Jerusalem and are planning to escape so they can experience a Passover seder. Chimp, who has lived in the zoo since his birth and shows great caution in his actions, has learned all about the customs of Passover from his friend, zookeeper Shmulik. Ellie the Elephant and Kangaroo insist that they know all about the holiday and finally convince Chimp to join them on their adventure. However, their limited knowledge includes word plays and puns which add to the fun while creating a light atmosphere of holiday excitement and friendly cooperation.

The bright, colorful illustrations portray a tale of determination, friendship, freedom, and holiday spirit. This book presents an excellent introduction to the Biblical Zoo in Jerusalem, a wonderful place for children of all ages to learn about animals mentioned in the Bible as well as endangered species. Young children, whether or not they have any Jewish educational background, will be exposed to basic information about Passover including its history and festive customs from seeing the animals’ participate in the celebration and can enjoy the anticipation of a seder which will eventually include everyone just as the *Haggadah* tells us!

Rachel Glasser, *retired librarian, Yavneh Academy, Teaneck, NJ*
REVIEWS OF TITLES FOR CHILDREN AND TEENS


Queen Esther is no Cinderella and this book is no fairy tale; this is made clear from the first page of this engaging retelling of the Purim story from Queen Esther’s perspective. Esther, an orphan girl, has to hide her true identity, has no desire to be queen, and this king is no “Prince Charming.” Esther has neither magic nor fairy godmother to assist her during times of crisis. Esther must rely on her inner strength, in the face of her fear, to achieve her happy ending and save her people and herself.

Esther narrates her story, in a conversational way, incorporating salient portions of *Megillat Esther*, while conveying her emotions and responses to what is happening around her. She begins with being forced to leave her quiet life with her cousin Mordechai behind, after successfully hiding from the king’s edict for 3 years (4 years according to Midrash). Although she is told to keep her religion a secret, she continues to observe certain rituals during her time in the palace. When called upon to save her people from destruction, she overcomes her fears, and constructs a plan to confront the king with Haman’s treachery.

Perhaps to emphasize Esther’s sense of justice the author strays from the Megillah and midrash stating that Esther’s first order as queen was to release the other women (servants) in the “special chambers” who were “primped, prettied and perfumed,” (as opposed to midrash noting she had at least 7 attendants for herself).

The illustrations, colorful and animated, consist of characters with light brown skin and dark hair identifiable in a Middle Eastern biblical setting and dress.

The back matter includes a “Note to Families” that discusses the story of Purim and how, like Esther, none of us know how our own stories will evolve and may experience unexpected and unwanted events as life runs its course. Discussion questions relating to doing what is right, overcoming fears, and receiving support from others are included.

Juxtaposed with the Cinderella tale, this is an account of empowerment and self-determination. Esther may not have dreamt of being queen, but exemplifies how in the face of challenges, with the encouragement of loved ones, and finding our inner strength to face our fears, we can do what is right and celebrate our accomplishments creating our own “happily ever after.”

Ellen Drucker-Albert, Co-editor, Children’s and Teen Literature, AJL News and Reviews; Manager, Adult & Information Services, Cold Spring Harbor Library & Environmental Center, Cold Spring Harbor, NY

REVIEWS OF TITLES FOR ADULTS

Reviews of Titles for Adults
EDITED BY DANIEL SCHEIDE and DR. REBECCA JEFFERSON

Non-Fiction


Despite his renown as a prolific parshah (commentator), an advisor to kings, and being well-versed in the ways of the world, the full range of Don Yitzchak Abravanel’s exegetical work has never been fully translated into English. Most translations have focused on select commentaries, such as the editions produced by Israel Lazar, Hal Miller, Avner Tomaschoff, and Pinchas Kasnett. This volume, the fifth so far in the series by Zev Bar Eitan, covers the second part of the book of Leviticus. It focuses on the service of Yom Kippur, the overarching commandment to be Holy (and all that entails) and other topics that appear in Leviticus such as sacrifices and the true purpose of the Second Temple. Within this topic area, Abravanel also explored the Jewish calendar and he produced essays on the Sabbath and Yovel (the Jubilee year).

Abravanel did not write running commentary focusing on specific words and phrases; rather, he formulated key questions to which he provided lengthy answers in an essay format, which at times may be difficult for the reader to follow. To make Abravanel’s commentary more accessible, Bar Eitan has used a structured method to divide each sidra (Torah portion) up according to its aliya (ascents). He highlights a specific topic when it is being discussed and from time to time introduces a line-by-line commentary. Abravanel was well acquainted with the commentaries that preceded him. When he disagrees with other Biblical commentators, Bar Eitan designates a section for each one so that it is clear with whose position Abravanel agrees or disagrees. The work is not a direct translation of Abravanel’s...
commentary, rather a distillation of that commentary in a way that is readable and enlightening.

This volume is recommended for collections where English translations of Biblical commentary are sought after and used.

Beverly Geller, 
The Frisch School, 
Paramus, NJ


It is rare that a leading scholar of anthropology and psychology has the opportunity to witness and record the formation and development of a new religion in an intimate manner. Rabbi Menachem Mendel Schneerson, the revered ‘Rebbe’ of the Chabad-Lubavitch Hasidic sect, passed away in 1994. Bilu spent nearly twenty years with his followers and respectfully reports how a fringe group not only denies the Rebbe’s passing but is convinced, through their interpretations of classical Jewish and Hasidic texts, that the Rebbe is the living Messiah. These ‘Meshichistim’ developed rituals to communicate with the Rebbe using visual and physical iconophilia, and they report regularly on the resulting miracles. Bilu discusses the antagonisms between this sect and the majority of mainstream Chabad, and their similarities and differences with Christians, Sabbateans, Bratslav Hasidim, and cults surrounding heroes of popular culture. Readers should have some knowledge in Jewish and Hasidic thought to fully appreciate this work.

Bilu’s ethnographic methodology and reporting is rigorous and compelling, and Haim Watzman’s translation of the original Hebrew is very readable. Footnotes, annotations and an extensive bibliography provide guides to further sources and information. Recommended for academic libraries supporting Jewish or religious studies, and adult readers in synagogue libraries.

Diane Mizrachi, PhD., 
Charles E. Young Research Library, University of California Los Angeles


Conveying the depth and sweetness of Chassidus to a generation thirsting for divrei Torah, in addition to providing down to earth practical advice, while making this act of translation of sublime timeless teachings relevant, is not an easy job. Yet Boshnack has done it again: just as he pulled off with his work on the Rebbe of Ger, he now makes more accessible the Chassidus of the Izbitza-Radzin Hasidic dynasty. His book draws on the teachings of the Mei Ha-Shiloach (Rabbi Mordechia Yosef Leiner) as written down and interpreted by subsequent generations of Izbitza-Radzin Hasidic tzadikim.

The translation enables the reader to gain access to all the wonderful secret knowledge contained within, such as the mystery of the Tetragrammaton, as well as the true gems of Chassidic teachings, like their profound ahavas Hashem, elevation of kedusha (holiness), and tikkunim (repair) by gathering and elevating the sparks of godliness, to name but a few. This work provides the original writings allowing the reader access to both. Highly recommended for public, outreach, and college campus libraries.

David Levy, 
Lander College for Women, NY


The editors of this volume had two primary goals with regard to the “off the Derech” (OTD) movement: “to bring together a diverse array of voices to address the growing and understudied phenomenon of off-the-derech,” and “to bring together and to recognize the diverse makeup of the OTD community and to present, collectively, an array of scholarship and perspectives that have been essential to defining this developing
movement.” In this they have succeeded. The first section (Literature) includes memoirs, interviews, and personal essays by authors who identify as OTD. The quality of writing is notable – sensitive and intelligent. Highlights include Naomi Seidman’s touching tribute to her late father, Hillel Seidman, “My Father, Myself,” which describes the love and respect she maintained for him, despite, or perhaps because, she broke from ultra-Orthodoxy; and Frieda Vizel’s “How I Lost My Innocence” which consists of ten humorous illustrations with descriptions of “this First Cause that made me see the light.”

The second section offers several different kinds of analysis: literary, sociological, statistical, linguistic, and an evaluation of the efficacy of Footsteps, an organization which helps OTD men and women with counseling, housing, and other social services. In the final piece, “Off the Derech and into the Wild,” editor Ezra Cappell presents a kind of synthesis of both sections – a memoir of his experience in yeshiva when a close friend died, as well as an analysis of several Jewish texts about following “the path” and “hating the heretic” and how these sources have dictated the negative attitude to those who leave Orthodoxy. The back matter includes short biographies of the contributors and an index. An essential acquisition for those who deal with the subjects and the subject matter, especially academic libraries, and Jewish Family Services resource centers.

Chava Pinchuck, Ramat Beit Shemesh, Israel


Although one of the world’s smallest countries, Israel has had a profound influence on the world, due to the concept of “Tikkun Olam”—repairing the world. COVID-19 has had an effect on every human being in one way or another. This book attempts to show what Israel has done to try to mitigate the spread and protect its citizens, creating medicines to treat the disease and helping develop a vaccine. This book was written in June, so clearly it is missing some of the more recent developments. The book does discuss in great depth the unique position Israel is in terms of science and technology. Multiple specialists and new technologies are making Israel at the forefront of these new advances in fighting the disease.

This book is recommended to synagogue libraries and public libraries, but it is too sparse for an academic institution. At 125 pages, a more extensive examination of the facts needs to be done in order to make this work of academic caliber.

Laura Schutzman, AJL Jewish Fiction Award Committee Chair; AJL Publications Chair; Hebrew Academy of Nassau County, Uniondale, NY


Estraikh’s detailed study of the longstanding Yiddish newspaper, the Forverts, draws on many primary and secondary sources. He examines in depth its ideological development under the editorial leadership of flamboyant personalities such as Abraham Cahan, Moyshe Olgin, David Eynhorn, and David Bergelson. The book is well written and captivating, particularly in the way it dramatically weaves stories and anecdotes relating to the paper’s editors and contributors. Most importantly, it reveals how the Forverts was a mirror to the acculturation and assimilation process of many Yiddish speaking Jewish Americans. In chronicling the Forverts from World War I through the 1950s, this study focuses on the paper’s wide spectrum of views towards political movements such as the Soviet Union and communism, Palestine/Israel and Zionism, Germany and the rise of Nazism, and it highlights the paper’s championing of the creative spirit of the Yiddish language. This work will be a benchmark for future studies not only on the history of the Forverts and its editors, but also on the history of the Jewish left and Jewish intellectual ideas, as well as a standard for studying the evolution from Jewish affiliation with secular socialism to Zionist religiosity. This complex evolution is encapsulated by a lifelong reader of the Forverts.
who told the author somewhat ironically of his own family’s ideological voyage: “My father was a Socialist and freethinker, I am a liberal and belong to a Reform congregation, and my son is an Orthodox.” Recommended.

David Levy, Lander College for Women, NY


This engrossing part of Zionist history covers the exploits of four young immigrants from Arab lands, who in 1948 became spies for the fledgling State of Israel. These men were selected by the Palmach to mingle among the Arab populace, both at home and the Levantine, to gather military intelligence. They were later absorbed into the Mossad and other branches of Israeli security. Through insightful interviews with these men, now retired, the author vividly recreates the charged atmosphere during the War of Independence. It was a time when, as one spy put it, “Israel was a wish, not a fact.”

With all the fast-paced prose of a spy novel, minus the glamor, the author paints espionage as a lonely business, akin to acting. The “Ones Who Become Like Arabs” had to learn to think like Arabs. They read the Quran. They carried fake Arab names, and even had Arab wives. Blending required not only proficiency in Arabic, but in local dialects — and knowledge of local customs in a highly diverse region. These selfless heroes were true citizens of the world—or rather, of no place. “If they disappeared,” the spy continued, “they’d be gone. No one might find them. No one might even look. The future was blank. And still they set out into those treacherous times, alone.”

Their patriotism is ironic, given their frequent mistreatment or marginalization back then by the Ashkenazic elite. Here the author painfully points to the second-class status of Sephardim and Mizrahim, who ended up the majority following their expulsion from Arab lands. These men experienced prejudice in both worlds: they understood, far better than their European-bred brethren, the Arab mind, which viewed proudly secular Sabras not as “Israeli” but as Jews. A real page-turner, this book is recommended for public or synagogue libraries, or those with Middle East collections.

Hallie Cantor, Acquisitions Associate, Yeshiva University, New York, NY


In this third book in his series on Jewish theology in the modern age, Gellman, Professor Emeritus of Philosophy at Ben-Gurion University, continues the adaptations of traditional Jewish responses to the questions surrounding Jewish theology. This book deals with the issue of whether God can be fully “good” given the objections to Biblical texts which portray actions by God that are today held to be immoral. This also brings up the age-old problem of evil and its explanations. Gellman states that his purpose is to help traditional Jews with the challenges presented by modern conceptions of morality. He accomplishes this by tracing the long history of texts and arguments around this issue of perfect goodness and challenges to it.

His marshaling of answers includes the idea of humility in the sense that since God is ultimately transcendent, humans can never understand why events take place the way they do, and to attempt to state that we can do so is an act of hubris. He also uses many Hasidic texts and ideas around this issue, holding that Hasidism contains at least partial answers to this question in that the relationship between Jews and their God should not be one of fear or anxiety, but rather one of love, joy, and radical acceptance. Another idea is that there is a portion of God in every Jewish soul, let alone in every person. Gellman also states that an answer to this question is the transformation of God from the God of the Jews, to a Jewish God in that Jewish texts, emotions and opinions must be used to reconfigure the relationship to underscore the Divine love and attention to the Jews.

This book is highly recommended mainly for academic libraries with collections that seek to collect books on Jewish theology, philosophy and ethics.

Eli Lieberman, Assistant Librarian, Hebrew Union College, NY

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REVIEWS OF TITLES FOR ADULTS


This book tackles the thorny but important issue of "Religious Truth," namely, what "truth means to contemporary Jewish thought and consequently to a contemporary Jewish theology of religions." The editor describes the problem perfectly in his introduction when he states, "There is something imprecise in how we use ‘truth’ in religious discourse." This volume examines these ideas in depth over the course of six different chapters, each with an introduction and a conclusion that provides an important and useful summary of positions by the editor.

Chapter 1 is written by Yehuda Gellman who seeks to provide a philosophical analysis of religious truth. In Chapter 2, Stanislaw Krajewski examines the fascinating question of what happens when a religious tradition makes historical truth claims that do not hold up under scrutiny. Chapter 3 has Cass Fisher tackling the problem of religious truth through an analysis of rabbinic writings / midrash. Arthur Green approaches the issue of truth from a "subjective and cognitive" Hasidic perspective in Chapter 4. Goshen-Gottenstein similarly engages Hasidut in Chapter 5, focusing specifically on Breslov Hasidut and the impossibility of obtaining "truth." The last chapter has Tamar Ross elucidating the problem of religious truth from a broader theological perspective utilizing the philosophy of Rav Kook.

This book is highly technical and not recommended for a general audience. Prior knowledge of philosophical language and concepts would be helpful for a full engagement with the work.

David Tesler, Efrat, Israel


Vladimir Ze’ev Jabotinsky (1880-1940) was the founder of Revisionist Zionism and the main opposition figure to David Ben-Gurion and Chaim Weizmann within the Zionist movement. He has a continuing influence through his writings, the Betar youth movement, and the Likud political party founded by his disciple, Menachem Begin. Dr. Horowitz’s book is an analysis of the adult Russian period of his life, lasting from his return to Russia after attending university in Italy and the founding of the Revisionist Zionist political party, during which he established himself as a journalist and playwright in his home town of Odessa and subsequently became one of the major figures of the Zionist movement. The book focuses on the rather mysterious evolution of his Zionism from a youth characterized by nihilistic aestheticism. This is a rich book on a fascinating, complicated, and important person. Recommended for collections on Zionism.

Shmuel Ben-Gad, Gelman Library, George Washington University


From the 1890s to the 1930s, Argentina was the “third choice” of immigration for East European Ashkenazic Jews. The author explores this influx of eventually 280,000 who created a hybrid subculture rooted in both the “Alte Heim” and in Argentinian nationalism. Through contemporary media and correspondence, the author shows how the South American nation carried enormous romantic appeal. Travel writers were quite popular, and newspaper ads for ship cruises to the New World promised glamor and excitement.

Initially notorious for its trafficking of Jewish women, Argentina became a rival magnet to the U.S. and Palestine for the oppressed seeking freedom and economic opportunities. “Jewish gauchos” settled in rural areas and took up farming. Most immigrants moved to Buenos Aires, where poverty, disease, exploitation, and anti-Semitism resulted in mass disillusionment. The author compares the early newcomers, who struggled for survival and pined for their homeland, with the later, post-World War I demographic, who maintained networks with interwar Polish-Jewish communities and transplanted European trends onto Argentinian soil. All immigrants retained ethnic links through the Yiddish language, and by the

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REVIEWS OF TITLES FOR ADULTS

1930s a literary culture flourished, much akin to New York or Warsaw. Nevertheless, the author describes “the social and cultural consequences” of immigration. In spite of the efforts of Yiddishist schools and Landsmannschaften to impart their heritage, the younger generation ended up largely assimilated, becoming Spanish-speaking professionals. A fascinating study of a prominent people in the Diaspora, this book is essential for academic libraries with Jewish or Latin American collections.

Hallie Cantor, Yeshiva University, New York, NY


Between 1873 and 1914, hundreds of Jewish girls and young women ran away from their homes in Habsburg Galicia. Manekin examines this phenomenon in great detail. During this time women were considered minors until they reached the age of 24. As such, there were very few ways to leave home because their parents could still claim legal custody of them. The main way available to them was to hide at one of the convents and convert to Christianity since the local authorities did not want to anger the Church searching premises or demanding the return of the girls.

The young women left for many reasons. Some left out of a genuine desire to convert; others left for love of a local Catholic; and yet others left to pursue higher studies than their parents would allow. The author does an in-depth examination of a case of one woman from each of these groups. She examines the civil records at the town and province level, the court documents, coverage in the local newspapers both Jewish and secular, as well as church records. She followed these young women as far as she could to determine the outcome of their case.

Manekin devotes a chapter to how these young women were portrayed in the literature of the time. In the last chapter, the author examines the role of new orthodox schools for girls in keeping girls from running away. The hope was that without exposure to Catholicism and Catholic friends in the public schools that the girls would be less tempted to convert.

Written with copious notes, bibliography, and index for the scholars, the text is readable to the layperson. The volume would have been improved by the inclusion of a map. Highly recommended for academic libraries.

Sheryl Stahl, Director, Frances-Henry Library, Hebrew Union College-Jewish Institute of Religion, Los Angeles


In this slim volume Mónica Manrique examines a short, but significant, period in Spanish Jewish history. She recounts how the Spanish revolution of 1868 (La Septembrina), with its new call for greater religious tolerance, aroused nostalgia among many Jews. A few of them were led to contemplate the possible restoration of the Jewish community in the Iberian Peninsula. The Spanish Inquisition that had prevailed for more than 300 years had been abolished in 1834.

Nevertheless, Jews had remained cautious, uncertain of the disposition of the Iberian population. In the wake of the revolution the viability of a return to Sepharad was reinforced in the minds of some Jews. For many the idea was but a nostalgic dream, but for a few, such as Haim Guedalla, the re-establishment of a Jewish community in Spain seemed a very real possibility. Guedalla spearheaded a new “Sepharad Project” which sought to bring Judaism back to Spain. The “Project” saw the introduction of two Sefer Torahs to Madrid. There is also some evidence that plans were drawn up for the construction of a synagogue in the city. It is reported that formal religious services were arranged, though there often seems to have been insufficient men to make up minyanim. According to Manrique, Guedalla recruited a number of supporters to the cause, including his own wife who embroidered the mantles for the Torah Scrolls. Yet, despite Guedalla’s perseverance, no synagogue was constructed in Madrid until 1917. Indeed, from her research in the archives, Manrique determined that no such plans were ever authorized by the city authorities. She also notes that a section of the Jewish press, though it had pressed for rescinding the “Edict of Expulsion,” was skeptical regarding the idea of a return.

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When, in 1881, Guedalla endeavored to revive the “Project,” he was still unable to arouse much enthusiasm.

Manrique’s work is the product of several years of intensive archival research. She has illuminated a nearly forgotten incident in Jewish-Spanish history which has become a contemporary concern. In doing so she has produced a detailed analysis of the attitudes and roles of the Jewish press and the Jewish community. Highly accessible, it would be an important addition for any Judaica library.

Randall C. and Anne-Marie Belinfante,
New York, AJL members

Ronen Neuwirth portrays Halacha as the “narrow bridge” between the eternal Torah and the shifting reality, but in need of change to meet the challenges of postmodern society. Neuwirth served as a pulpit rabbi in Israel, rabbi of Bnai Akiva in the US, and founded Beit Hillel, an organization building bridges between religious and secular Israelis. His audience is a modern Orthodox lay readership. In his introduction, he presents those elements of contemporary society which challenge the acceptance of halacha. He follows with seven chapters tracing the development of the halachic process and an extensive treatment of the basic principles of rabbinic decision making, with over a thousand sources.

Neuwirth traces the “narrow bridge” that halachic interpreters travel between leniency and stringency, between absolute truth and rulings acceptable to the community, between rule by great rabbis versus democratic consensus, between adherence to tradition and innovation. He shifts in later chapters to the changes brought by modernity, drawing heavily on the decisions of rabbis Moshe Feinstein, Yaakov Yehiel Weinberg, Joseph Soloveitchik, and Aharon Lichtenstein.

In the last section of the book, Neuwirth argues that revival of Jewish life in the State of Israel calls for a revived halacha, centered on life in the Jewish state rather than the diaspora. Heavily influenced by Avraham Yitzhak Kook, Neuwirth sees in the current time a convergence between postmodern democratic trends and pre-messianic times, requiring a boldness in halachic decision making. In the final chapter he addresses several controversial issues in halacha, including civil marriage in Israel, attitudes towards LGBT Jews, the role of women, and the agunah problem. While his solutions will not be acceptable to all, Neuwirth lays out a methodology for deciding along the “narrow bridge” of Halacha.

This book is highly recommended for libraries with collections on modern Orthodox thought.

Harvey Sukenic,
Hebrew College Library,
Newton Centre, MA


Teaching Jewish American literature is a heavy burden for any professor to tackle, whether in a Jewish or secular institution. Finding a curriculum that contains all the key points, can be a challenge. Teaching Jewish American Literature brings together a variety of different syllabi to fill this void. Containing a very detailed bibliography, extensive notes and sources, the book can be used to create a unique curriculum for any educator to follow.

Rosenberg and Rubinstein’s Teaching about Jewish American Literature deals with many components of the subject. For example, the traditional curriculum deals with the Ashkenazi perspective primarily, neglecting the rich Sephardic history. This book helps to rectify this oversight, listing specific resources to teach American Sephardic history. Also teaching about the Holocaust can sometimes be seen as a substitute to teaching American Jewish literature. The authors aim to redress this imbalance by clarifying the importance of including general Jewish literature in any literature curriculum. Additional concepts that this book includes are the LGBTQ experience, teaching young adult and children’s literature, and the role of theater in teaching Jewish literature.

Highly recommended for academic libraries and any institutions that teach Jewish American literature.

Laura Schutzman,
AJL Jewish Fiction Award Committee Chair; AJL Publications Chair; Hebrew Academy of Nassau County, Uniondale, NY

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REVIEWS OF TITLES FOR ADULTS


*Never Alone* is a deeply personal and political account of Natan Sharansky’s life and accomplishments so far. In 1967 the six day war influenced him to embrace his Jewishness and seek freedom. Natan was imprisoned by the KGB in 1977 for being an outspoken Soviet dissident, human rights activist and Refusenik. He spent nine years in the Gulag, much of it in solitary confinement. Before his activism he was a doublethinker, a patriotic Soviet citizen on the outside and a fearful individual trying to survive the extremely competitive Soviet system on the inside. His jailers told him that no one cared about him and that he would die alone in prison, but Sharansky believed that he was not alone. He correctly believed that his wife, Avital, and his people, the Jewish people, all over the world were fighting for his release.

Part II describes Sharansky’s nine years in Israeli politics. He, along with other Soviet dissidents who made aliyah, founded the Soviet Jewry Zionist Forum, “to push our concerns onto Israel’s agenda.” He later founded the Yisrael B’Aliyah party originally funded by American philanthropists which won seven seats in the Knesset. In his nine year political career, he fought for immigrant rights and personally connected with Jewish communities all over the world. For many idealistic reasons mentioned in the book, he no longer wanted to be involved in politics. After serving nine years, he left the government.

His nine years as chairman of the Jewish Agency comprise Part III. Sharansky’s focus in the Jewish Agency was, “improving Israel-Diaspora relations.” *Never Alone* is an insightful and important behind the scenes look at contemporary Israeli history through the eyes of a prominent Jewish idealist. The many people who admire and revere Natan Sharansky will be especially eager to read this book. The final printing will include an index and photographs.

Ilka Gordon, Beachwood, OH


Yanklowitz, a writer and rabbi, presents the prophet Jonah as an example of taking up responsibility. The book is divided into 25 brief chapters, an introduction in the beginning and conclusion at the end. Each of the chapters is a reflection on some aspect of the message of Jonah, including choosing to follow the Lord’s call, easing the suffering of others, tolerance of differences, and the relationship of humans to the natural world.

The person of Jonah is also analyzed as rebellious at moments, compassionate, prayerful, and complex. While reluctant to accept his mission, he rises to the task with the Lord’s help. While the subtitle calls this a social justice commentary, it seems more a spiritual reflection. This would be an appropriate title for any Jewish library for an adult or teen audience.

Arthur G. Quinn, St. Vincent de Paul Seminary, Boynton Beach, FL


Rellying on the tools of New Historicism—contemporary letters, customs, travel diaries, and folklore—the author tries to “identify the ‘human voice’” behind the legends surrounding the town of Safed during its golden age. His inspiration was Solomon Schechter, whose 1908 essay portrayed a near-paradise in 16th century Ottoman Palestine where scholarship and mysticism flourished and where rabbis, saints, Kabbalists, and legalists dwelled in harmony. Sidestepping the concrete factors behind

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REVIEWS OF TITLES FOR ADULTS

He founding of the Hasmonean kingdom by the Maccabees, was a very dramatic event in Jewish history. This multi-generational historical novel takes place from 135-63 BCE, from the reign of Shimon, the last survivor of the sons of Mattityahu, who began the revolt against Selucid Syria, to the Roman conquest of Judea that turned it from an independent state to a vassal state of Rome. The struggle of Judea to be an independent and thriving state is the overarching narrative. The book presents a rather large cast of characters, some vividly drawn, mostly from the religious, political, and economic elites. Generally speaking, the novel is an exciting one even though it often deals with the clash of ideas (e.g., Sadducees versus Pharisees). Happily, Degani mostly avoids anachronism, although one character talking about “secular” culture is the exception that proves the rule. This book would be a good addition for most any Judaica collection that includes (or at least does not exclude) historical fiction. This might also be a good choice for book discussion groups.

Shmuel Ben-Gad,
Gelman Library,
George Washington University

Fiction

The town’s religious and cultural prominence—e.g. Spanish expulsion, liberal tax laws—the author instead focuses on the dreams, visions, and narratives of its most famous inhabitants, notably Isaac Luria and his disciple Hayyim Vital. Some of these inhabitants could have been accorded greater reverence. Nevertheless, through analysis of the components—i.e. sex, sinners, reincarnation, animism—the author shows these people’s heightened sensitivities and the tension between the material and the spiritual.

Luria is viewed as “a man of intellect, but not of action” who, rather than changed the physical world, “changed ways of seeing things.” The portrayal of Vital, viewed here as a “sacred fellowship,” was a town rife with factionalism and rivalries among sects and individuals. However skeptically, these “miracle stories” did enhance its mystique and reputation for piety, asceticism, prayer, pilgrimages, and Torah study. The author parallels its messianic yearnings with the general utopian trends of the era (as well as today). Local photos accompanied by quotes attest to the town’s otherworldliness, which probably attracted, and produced, special souls. Primarily for academic libraries.

Hallie Cantor,
Acquisitions Associate,
Yeshiva University, NY
The AJL Newsletter (Irene Levin-Wixman z”l, founding editor) was published in print from 1979 to 2010 by the Association of Jewish Libraries to inform members about AJL activities and issues related to Judaica libraries. From January 2011 through August 2019 it was split into two separate electronic publications — the AJL News and the AJL Reviews. As of September 2019 it is published digitally as AJL News and Reviews. Receipt of this publication is one of the benefits of membership. Please see the AJL website at http://www.jewishlibraries.org for membership rates.

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