Howard Schwartz and Kristina Swarner, author and illustrator of Gathering Sparks, Barry Deutsch, author and illustrator of Hereville: How Mirka Got Her Sword, and Dana Reinhardt, author of The Things a Brother Knows are the 2011 winners of the prestigious Sydney Taylor Book Award.

The Sydney Taylor Book Award honors new books for children and teens that exemplify the highest literary standards while authentically portraying the Jewish experience. The award memorializes Sydney Taylor, author of the classic All-of-a-Kind Family series. The winners will receive their awards at the Association of Jewish Libraries convention in Montreal this June.

Schwartz and Swarner will receive the 2011 gold medal in the Sydney Taylor Book Award’s Younger Readers Category for Gathering Sparks, published by Roaring Brook Press an imprint of Macmillan Children’s Publishing. Both are second time winners. Gathering Sparks is based on a sixteenth century teaching of “tikkun olam,” or “repairing the world.” Committee member Debbie Colodny commented, “Schwartz spins a calming tale that suggests that the way to bring peace and well-being to our world is by doing good deeds and loving one another… Swarner’s art and Schwartz’s poetic words interpret the concept of the vessel as a fleet of ships outlined in the night sky by millions of starry points of light.”

Deutsch will receive the 2011 gold medal in the Sydney Taylor Book Award’s Older Readers Category for Hereville: How Mirka Got Her Sword, published by Amulet Books, an imprint of Abrams Books. This is the first graphic novel to win the Award. Committee member Aimee Lurie noted, “Mirka is a clever, headstrong and imaginative heroine who will appeal to a wide audience. Teens who feel like they don’t fit in will have no trouble relating to her balancing what is best for her family versus her desire to fight dragons. Grounded in her religious beliefs, she is willing to put her fantasies aside to celebrate Shabbat. The illustrations strike the perfect balance of showing a realistic Orthodox community, while creating the perfect backdrop for a fairytale.”

Reinhardt will receive the 2011 gold medal in the Sydney Taylor Book Award’s Teen Readers Category for The Things a Brother Knows, published by Wendy Lamb Books, an imprint of Random House Children’s Books. Levi’s older brother Boaz is a military hero, and Levi has always lived in his shadow. Now Boaz is returning from war and it seems everyone thinks Levi is the luckiest boy in town. When Boaz refuses to engage with his family and barely leaves his room, Levi wonders if his brother will ever be normal. Committee member Rita Soltan said, “Reinhardt creates a moving portrayal of teen characters … She provides balance through Levi and Boaz’s Israeli grandfather, who served in Israel and has experienced war and suicide bombings. Realistic and subtle, her story unfolds with enough suspense, sardonic humor and pathos to keep readers focused until a conclusion that leaves room for pondering interpretation.”

Nine Sydney Taylor Honor Books were named for 2011. In addition to the medal-winners, the Award Committee designated twenty-seven Notable Books of Jewish Content for 2011: thirteen in the Younger Readers Category, seven in the Older Readers Category, and seven for Teens. Honor Books, Notable titles, and more information about the Sydney Taylor Book Award, may be found online at www.SydneyTaylorBookAward.org.

A blog tour, featuring interviews with winning authors and illustrators, took place in early February, with participation from a wide range of children’s literature, family interest, and Jewish blogs. The blog tour posts can be viewed on the Association of Jewish Libraries’ blog “People of the Books” at JewishLibraries.org/blog.
Dear AJL Reviews Readers,

This issue is our first digital issue of the newly created AJL Reviews. It replaces the reviews section of the printed edition of the AJL Newsletter. Although the format has changed, the content has not; in this issue you will find 73 adult reviews (fiction and non-fiction) and 21 children and teen reviews. You will notice that we now add images to our ‘in the spotlight’ reviews; some reviews include linking to other sources. Another new and exciting development is our new profile on Amazon, which allows us to increase visibility of the AJL Reviews (and the organization in general) by posting our reviews online for a wider readership. Only a few reviews from each issue are posted on Amazon after it is distributed to members. You can see our profile and reviews at [http://tinyurl.com/4vsw55v](http://tinyurl.com/4vsw55v).

I know that for some of you it will take some time to get used to the new format. Please don’t hesitate to email me with any comments or suggestions at general-editor@jewishlibraries.org.

Enjoy!

Uri Kolodney

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**Reviews of Titles for Children and Teens**

**FICTION**


Hayaat’s older sister is to be married soon and her parents bicker frequently. In these regards, she is similar to many thirteen-year-old American girls, but Hayaat’s family lives in the West Bank. Security curfews disrupt even their most basic daily routines, including going to school and the grocery store. Even looking in the mirror is difficult for Hayaat since her face was scarred by glass shattered by a rubber bullet when she and a friend were caught in the middle of a scuffle between Palestinian and Israeli soldiers. Throughout the narrative, various characters explain in great detail how the Israelis confiscated their homes and their land; the author never raises the possibility that the Palestinians have played any role but victim in the conflict. In an effort to surprise her ailing grandmother with a gift of soil from the yard of her old home, Hayaat and her friend Samy secretly set out for Jerusalem. Their ultimately partially successful adventure takes up about half the book, and their experiences with American peace activists, checkpoints, and other security measures emphasize the author’s point that the Israelis are oppressing the Palestinians. The unrelenting portrayal of the Palestinians as innocent victims makes this coming-of-age novel inappropriate for libraries, even those where a more balanced approach to this complicated subject might have been welcome.

*Marci Lavine Bloch, D&R International, Silver Spring, MD*
In The Spotlight


Kimmel’s latest reads the way a storyteller sounds. His solid holiday tale parallels Purim’s origins as recorded originally in Torah passages. His text is long, dense and colorful with rich vocabulary in the embroidered dialogues underlining biblical action. This length offers a good volume for third graders who often consider themselves readers too advanced for picture books. The serious, bordering on stern, words get a lift from Weber’s delightful illustrations which suggest humor and foreshadow the happy ending. Beauty pageant, murder plots, political jockeying, and manipulating feasts unroll in biblical order. Esther wins with natural beauty and few adornments which, though not part of Torah details, offer a lovely message to the would-be princess crowd. Readers discover the assimilated culture of Persia, the sad fate of Vashti, Esther’s dedication to her Judaism, Mordecai’s descent from Jewish captives in Babylonia, Haman’s use of dice and its connection to the holiday’s name. The book teaches much in a captivating way through exciting plot, beautiful women with strong moral fiber, daring Jewish heroes vanquishing an evil scoundrel and a big party to celebrate, not once but every year, a glorious victory. Well done, well recommended!

Ellen G. Cole, Temple Isaiah, Los Angeles, CA


With childlike enthusiasm, Gustave and his Boy Scout pals scour the streets of Paris in search of an elusive yellow feather, the last item needed to complete a scavenger hunt and win chocolate bars. These critical opening pages put the reader squarely in the mind of an eleven-year-old French Jewish boy, circa March 1940. We see a child filled with wonder and youthful vigor yet still aware of the ominous signposts cropping up at every turn: animals from the zoo being evacuated in case of bombings, shopkeepers being turned into soldiers, and the Eiffel Tower being cloaked in gray paint to camouflage it from enemy planes. Soon, the reality of war hits home, as Gustave and his family, fearing an imminent German invasion, flee to the French countryside in the hope of eventually finding passage to America. Using a map from his geography class, Gustave demarcates the Germans’ rapid progression by painting all Nazi-occupied countries in red. His innocence fades in increments with every harsh revelation—hearing about Jews being forced into prison camps, experiencing hunger for the first time during an aborted attempt to flee to Spain, and receiving an anti-Semitic note from the class bully. Meyer deftly weaves historical details with plenty of adventure in this fast-paced story, allowing her readers to identify with the young hero as he helps the French Resistance, bribes Nazi guards with black radishes, and helps his aunt and cousins escape to freedom. Maps of France and Europe help to illustrate Gustave’s journey. Drawing from stories told to her by family members, Meyer delivers a rich, well-written tale of lost innocence and newfound courage. An excellent novel to introduce the subjects of the Nazi occupation of France and the Holocaust to a young adult audience.

Allison Marks, Temple Israel Library, Akron, OH

*The Party in Room 403 and Other Stories* is a collection of twenty stories by Miriam Schonzeit, writer for *Yated Ne’eman: The Torah Newspaper for Our Times* and author of four other short story collections. Each story presents a moral or personal dilemma experienced by a middle school boy or girl. By the end of each tale, the main character has learned an ethical lesson that changes his or her behavior and attitude. The stories are peppered with Yiddish and Hebrew terms which are explained in a comprehensive glossary at the end of the book. There are a small number of grammatical errors which some readers might find objectionable, but this reader was able to overlook them since the number is so small. Recommended for children who are familiar with Hebrew and Yiddish terms.

Ilka Gordon, Siegel College of Judaic Studies, Cleveland, OH


A realistic teenager, so genuinely believable that children will adore her and adults will scream, rises from the pages of this eclectic debut novel. Amy epitomizes adolescent angst in self-absorbed, whining e-mails providing howls of laughter that do not disguise genuine pain. Amy’s best friend just moved to Kansas. The novel delivers Amy’s suffering reaction in first person format without narration; Amy vents her feelings of loss and abandonment in over top humorous e-mails and one-act plays.

Amy’s writings reveal the daily doings of a quirky character, a smart, observant, socially awkward, self-deprecating, Jewish, eighth grader in Manhattan. As the story progresses, Amy moves from pain to jealousy, resenting her friend’s acclimatization to her new life in the Midwest. As Amy hopes for her friend’s return, she delves into a school history project about a Jewish immigrant. The project takes her to sites in New York intertwined with her history there, and connects Amy to an elderly neighbor and the neighbor’s Orthodox nephew. The plot action is as wide ranging as a protected, urban, teenage life allows; Amy’s opinions range further. Amy is nasty about her family; hilarious about their Jewish practices. There is a point to the fun: Amy learns the meaning of friendship and the value of belonging to groups below the social radar. The novel comfortably incorporates positive Jewish identity, ever on view in locations, actions, dialogue. The writing style is fresh, breezy and age appropriate; the e-mails hold up; the plays decline in quality. Recommended for readers who hopefully will trust humor as a way to face and overcome pain.

Ellen G. Cole, Temple Isaiah, Los Angeles, CA


In the 1770s, Tova Bloom is an eleven-year-old with a gift for solving riddles. She lives in an Orthodox Jewish household with her mother, father and five older sisters in the colony of New York. The American Revolution is under way and the Jewish community is divided regarding their loyalties to Great Britain. However, Tova’s father is a patriot. He compares the injustices imposed on the American colonies by Great Britain to those that he encountered in Germany as a Jew. Still, tensions are rising as British soldiers suspect everyone as Patriot spies. In fact, the Blooms host a visiting rabbi from *Hebron* (Israel) whose possessions are confiscated by British soldiers because the soldiers are unable to understand his letters written in *Lashon Hakodesh* (the Holy Language, Hebrew). The rabbi teaches Tova and a few of her sisters *Gematria* (the study of the numerical values of the Hebrew alphabet). These lessons become valuable when Tova’s father is bewildered by an order for large quantities of peculiar items from his brother. Clever Tova realizes that the list is *Gematria* and it is encoded to say “The British are coming. Leave immediately. Immediately.” Readers unfamiliar with Hebrew and Yiddish phrases will find themselves continually flipping to the glossary. However, the soft-colored illustrations that depict colonial life such as characters’ clothing and interior of their houses and store add to the enjoyable and informative story. The title is recommended for all Jewish libraries.

Heather Lenson, Jewish Education Center, Cleveland, OH

Editor’s note: Other titles in the Jewish Girls around the World series are *Penina’s Adventure at Sea*, *Penina’s Plan*, and *Penina’s Doll Factory*.

**HOLIDAYS**


Jacob and Sarah’s first hint of a problem comes in the form of strange dreams and mysteriously changing Purim costumes. The intrepid children find a golden gragger that leads them to Purimville, where the hamentashes grow graggers, bake hamentashen, and make Purim costumes. There are indeed problems in Purimville. Gremlins are making trouble, ruining the hamentashen and the costumes. Sarah and Jacob develop a plan, and with the help of the hamentashes, they scare the gremlins away and save the holiday, returning home in plenty of time to celebrate Purim.

This charming story combines elements of mystery, fantasy, and adventure into a chapter book that will keep kids engrossed, and would be a great choice for reading aloud before Purim. Karen Fisman’s text maintains just enough suspense to make the story exciting, without ever scaring young readers, while Wendy Faust’s colorful watercolor and
ink illustrations help draw readers into the adventure. The story assumes readers already know about the holiday, so it’s most appropriate for children who have some relevant background. Recommended for public, synagogue, and school libraries.

Marci Lavine Bloch, D&R International, Silver Spring, MD


Here’s a perfect example of the problem with many non-fiction series books: They are authored by writers who clearly do not know their subjects, do not do adequate research, and therefore produce unacceptable books. This particular title misinforms readers with “facts” such as these:

- Israelis remember the Holocaust every year on December 2nd. (In fact, Holocaust Remembrance Day is observed on the 27th of the Hebrew month of Nisan, which puts it in April or May).
- Israel Independence Day is observed by children striking each other with plastic hammers.
- The Torah consists of five scrolls, called megillot. (The author has confused too many things to enumerate here, but a Torah is one single scroll, not five, and a megillah is not part of a Torah.)
- The menorah in the ancient Jerusalem temple had “seven candles.” (Oil, not candles, was used in ancient days.)

In addition to other errors of fact about holiday observance, the author could not resist the temptation to inject Middle East politics into the narrative. This led to more errors. For example, he writes that most Israelis are Jewish, and that “most of the other people living in Israel are Palestinians and other Arabs, and they practice a religion called Islam.” Actually, all Israeli citizens—Arab, Jew, and others—are Israelis. And many Arabs are not Muslims. Israel is the only country in the region where all religions are free and flourish—a fact worth noting if one felt the need to write about non-Jews in Israel. More politics: The section on Israel’s Memorial Day begins: “Not all Israel’s neighbors were happy to give up their land so that the Jews could have a country…” In fact, none of Israel’s neighbors gave up any land to create Israel. But that’s another story, irrelevant to a book on festivals and holidays. In the spirit of the book’s subject matter, this is a title to pass over.

Andrea Rapp, Wise Temple, Cincinnati, OH


A favorite story first published in 1991, with artwork by Erika Weihs, has been slightly shortened, illustrated anew, and stylistically softened to show more compassion for Hershel’s blindness. Mother’s voice especially is not so sharp and the muted colors, curved lines, and close-up perspectives of the pictures convey a sense of comfort.


The titular question is answered with clear color photographs and items identified by name. Starting with the construction of a sukkah, readers will learn about tools and the walls and roof (s’chach) of the temporary structure, as well as decorations, and the colorful leaves of the autumn season. Subsequent pages identify items on the table, including food and a Kiddush cup, the lulav (with all its parts) and the esrog, and what a child might see on a Chol Hamoed trip. Items seen on Simchas Torah, like Torahs and flags, can be identified on the last page. The Hebrew words are not translated, but their meanings are obvious from the photographs.

The book is consistent with the others in the series, with an adorable child in each spread and concepts, like colors and animals, related but outside the direct scope of holiday words. The words are printed clearly, and in most cases, directly on the items. The only pages that non-Orthodox readers may question are the ones depicting farm animals that would be seen on a day trip to the country (a popular excursion during the intermediate days of the holiday). An excellent choice for pre-readers, from birth to age three, this book should be seen in all Jewish libraries, whether completing the series or on its own.

Kathe Pinchuck, MTS, Clifton, NJ

THE PERFECT GIFT FOR PASSOVER!

Everybody wants to catch SHLEMIEL CROOKS by Anna Olswanger illustrations by Paula Goodman Koz

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Despite being sightless, Hershel’s imagination inspires him to create shapes out of cookie dough, winning him approval, the possibility of a productive future, and the ability to help his mother. A note at the end of the story adds information about Purim that the story lacks. In either version, this is essential for every Jewish holiday collection.

Linda R. Silver, Cleveland, OH


The meaning and traditions of Rosh Hashanah are woven into a story about a twin sister and brother whose family are Conservative Jews. A contemporary style and point of view that connect present-day pluralistic Judaism to the unbroken chain of Jewish beliefs and customs are at the story’s heart. The main characters of Ellie (YaYa) and Joel (YoYo) are portrayed as typical fifth graders whose interactions with each other, their parents and older brother, and their school friends are genuine, laced with humor and warmth. The somewhat repetitive plot concerns Ellie’s excitement over being invited to go with a friend to a sensational new waterslide park, and her disappointment to learn that the date for this excursion falls on the second day of Rosh Hashanah. Why does she have to observe both days? Ellie wonders. Isn’t one day of reflection and repentance enough? Guided and goaded by her brother’s greater attentiveness to what Rabbi Green has been teaching them about teshuvah in Hebrew school, Ellie begins to answer those question for herself. Her response leads to an affirmation of Jewish beliefs, traditions, and values.

A publisher’s note states that this is the first of a planned series of twelve books about YaYa and YoYo, each one focusing on a holiday, life cycle event, or other Jewish experience. Although the writing needs some tightening to quicken the pace, this first entry into the series is a good beginning.

Linda R. Silver, Cleveland, OH

HOLOCAUST and WORLD WAR II


Most AJL Reviews readers know that in Japanese-occupied China, Shanghai was a place of refuge for German Jews without visas who escaped during the Third Reich. But before that period, there was already a flourishing Jewish population in Shanghai. By 1937, 4,000 Jews lived in “Frenchtown”, Shanghai. Their ranks swelled to 20,000 as the refugee German Jews arrived to be housed in barely minimal housing and may have been surprised to learn of the wealthy Jewish population who already inhabited the wealthier part of the city. Learning what the established Jewish community’s life was like contributes to this compelling novel. There were two groups: the dominant wealthy Sassoons, originally traders from Iraq, who arrived first; and the Russian colony, Jews who fled Russia for Shanghai when Stalin came to power. Anya’s mother had been an opera star in Odessa and remained a non-singing diva in Shanghai, not by occupation, but by nature. Her father, a journalist, found similar employment in Shanghai, but her mother had to “rough” it in an elegant home with a Chinese domestic staff, complaining all the while; after all, Shanghai took some getting used to. Anya and her brother went to a private school and led the life of well-off expatriates, until Anya, on an errand dictated by the family’s sprightly young cook, rescues an infant girl placed in the gutter by her mother, probably compelled by the Chinese belief that girls were worthless and only boy babies of value; and secretly brings her home. The story revolves around protecting the infant and her destiny, family intrigues, including a love-interest (an Italian Crypto Jew) for Anya, the onset of World War II and Pearl Harbor, and a tragic accidental bombing of the city. Based on the author’s life, it is a book with history, drama, and good writing.

Marcia Weiss Posner, Holocaust Memorial and Tolerance Center of Nassau County


As the survivors of the Shoah dwindle in number, it is increasingly imperative that we hear as many of their stories as possible. While they are frequently similar, each is poignant in its own way. This one began fortuitously, when Sanford Batkin met Salomon Kook in Aruba over 30 years ago. Through a series of stages, Batkin and his collaborator, David Tabatsky, have recorded Salomon’s extraordinary life in hiding.

Salomon Kook’s saga unfolds in a series of vignettes. The first occurs in the summer of 1942, when he and his brother ride their bicycles out to the countryside from the family home in Amsterdam. It continues with his Bar Mitzvah, the day before the Nazis’ invasion in 1943. He recounts the indignities and dangers, large and small, that the family suffered in the year that followed. When life together becomes untenable they split up, and Sal spends the rest of the war in a series of homes, taking on false identities as the Nazis close in and endanger his and his hosts’ lives. The story ends after the war, when he returns to his old neighborhood and finds nothing of his old life remaining. The epilogue informs the reader that he was the only survivor among his immediate family.

As told here, Salomon Kook’s story resembles Anne Frank’s in some ways, and the fictionalized memoirs of Ida Vos in others. It is told in unadorned language, which will make it attractive to teenage boys. Also, because his thoughts are those of an ordinary teenager, they will resonate with readers. While this book is not a major addition, it is recommended to synagogue and middle school libraries that need books for boys, and for larger collections on the Holocaust.

Fred Isaac, Temple Sinai, Oakland, CA

In 1939 Warsaw, Simon is an athletic ten-year-old boy who comes from a comfortable Jewish family. His family is assimilated into the Polish community. They are not observant Jews and do not even speak Yiddish. The author draws a grim picture of how Simon’s father is forced to sign over his factory to the Nazi government. The family is then forced to leave their lavish apartment and move into a tiny apartment in the Warsaw Ghetto.

The author’s voice is authentic, for example in the scene when the father returns to his old apartment and finds his former employee, a Pole, residing there and acting smugly. The author does not romanticize the reality of non-Jewish Polish citizens’ actions and attitudes at the time. In the Warsaw ghetto, Simon’s family is given meager food rations—barely enough to sustain one person. Simon, being the agile boy that he is, joins other kids his age to sneak outside the ghetto and smuggle food through the black market. After Simon loses his family, he is sent by Mordechai Anielewicz to a righteous gentile woman who sends him to the country. Simon’s adventures are not over. He narrowly escapes being captured by the Gestapo and by Poles. He learns to live off the land and receives kindness from some Polish farmers until hiding him endangers them. He eventually meets other Jewish people hiding in the forest, including a friend from the ghetto. At the end, a Russian officer saves them both.

Pryor proves to be knowledgeable about the subject matter through her descriptions of life in Warsaw before the Holocaust and the deplorable conditions in the Warsaw ghetto. The end of the book features historical notes about the Warsaw Ghetto, resistance fighters, and the Holocaust. There are also some good recommendations of Holocaust titles and websites. Recommended.

Heather Lenson, Jewish Education Center, Cleveland, OH


Tomi Ungerer, the prolific author-illustrator of so many imaginative children’s books, (among them The Mellopps Go Flying, Flat Stanley, Crictor the Boa Constrictor, Moon Man, The Three Robbers) has based this war story partially on his own experiences growing up during the Nazi occupation of Alsace, France. Although its format looks like a simple picture book, it is actually an illustrated Holocaust story that can be used to introduce the subject of the Holocaust to grades four and up. Otto the teddy bear begins the story where he has been languishing unsold in an antique store window; we are then taken back to 1930s Germany. Otto was a birthday gift for a Jewish boy, David, who greatly enjoyed making mischief with Otto and his best friend, Oskar. When David, wearing a yellow star, was taken away with his family, he gave his beloved bear to Oskar. During a bombardment, Otto was tossed up into the air and became separated from Oskar. Then Otto’s body partially blocked a bullet aimed at an American G.I. who took him to New York after the war ended. After more mishaps, Oskar ended up in the antique shop. A nowelderly Oskar recognizes him in the window. David sees the newspaper headlines about their reunion and contacts Oskar. They relate their wartime experiences and family losses to each other, and then decide to live together with Otto. Otto comments that this makes life finally what it should be—“peacefully normal.” As the book ends, he is typing his life story.

The horrors of war are made effective through the contrast between the understated way Otto tells his story, and the disturbing watercolor and pencil illustrations of battles, destroyed buildings destroyed, guns, fires, and graphic portrayals of dead soldiers. Ungerer wants the reader to see that friendship has survived terrible events in the past. Perhaps their reunion is an unlikely coincidence, but it makes a hopeful ending. He has also said that he wants children to come away scared after they read this, and they will. Hopefully, they will realize the insanity of war, so that the Holocaust can never happen again. This is the first English edition of Otto, which was published in French in 1999. In 2011, Ungerer turns 80. An exhibition of his contributions to children’s literature in the United States will be displayed at the Eric Carle Museum in Amherst, Mass.

Andrea Davidson, The Temple-Tifereth Israel, Beachwood, OH

**ISRAEL**


Judaism in Israel focuses on nine-year-old Asher and his family’s daily life in Jerusalem, narrated by his grandfather. Through brief large-print text and excellent color photos, the reader follows Asher around the city—playing soccer with his friends, studying Torah at school, praying in synagogue, visiting the market, praying at the Western Wall, (where the authors note that women pray separately from the men), and observing his brother’s Bar Mitzvah, Shabbat and Passover with his family. Co-author Daniel Taub is a member of the community featured in this book, and it must be noted that the title is misleading, for what Judaism in Israel really does is focus on the life and practices of this particular Orthodox Jewish family in Jerusalem. The book is well organized with a table of contents, glossary and index. The section of “notes for parents and teachers” expands the basic concepts of Judaism presented and provides brief information about Shabbat, Passover and Hanukkah. Its primary value is in the photographs of contemporary Jerusalem and the positive portrayal of a normal Israeli child who plays soccer and is part of a loving family. There is no mention of the Palestinian-Israeli conflict. Other books in this series are Buddhism in Thailand,
FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

TYLER’S HILL

One Summer, Four Friends Learn That Their Shared Secrets and Fears Shape Their Friendships…Leading Them On A Journey of Self-Discovery…And New Beginnings

When a housing development is built on a piece of land sacred to a group of adolescent girls, they soon learn to accept the things they cannot change and how to grow in spite of it.

Sandy Lowenthal is a twelve-year-old girl in love with her life, one rich with friends, activities and beloved surroundings; it’s a life also on the edge of change as uncontrollable circumstances nudge her into new insights that stretch her toward young womanhood in the summer of 1966.

During summer vacations from school, Sandy often enjoys a private escape at the tranquil pond near Tyler’s Hill, the local meeting spot where she and her friends gather to ride their bikes and plan their carefree days. It is here, by the quiet water, where Sandy can be alone: wiggle her toes, catch tadpoles and simply think.

But this summer, a caravan of bulldozers rolls into town to clear the land for a new housing development, threatening her pond, and in turn, her peace of mind. She resents the new houses, even as she comes to know, through the wisdom of her loving father, that maturity means, in part, the ability to accept what one cannot change.

Tyler’s Hill delves, with clarity and depth, into the joys, fears and desires of a group of girls coming of age through the pain of loss, the understanding of friendship and the cultivation of determined action, which they learn can change the course of their collective lives.

The story has been inspired by true events.

Publisher’s Web site: www.strategicpublishinggroup.com/title/TylersHill.html

About the Author:
Susan B. Katz received a Master of Arts from the University of Chicago in Social Work that led to a career helping low-income people in Chicago and Philadelphia through social/educational program development, grass-roots advocacy, and progressive legislative initiatives. Katz has been writing plays and children’s stories for the past 20 years. Katz states, “My work as a social worker allows me to probe the depths of human experience and social conditions which, in turn, inspire my creative writing.” Tyler’s Hill is Ms. Katz’s first novel. She resides with her family in the greater Philadelphia area.

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Christianity in Mexico, Islam in Turkey, and Hinduism in Bali, books which are also meant to focus on “a family, a child, a celebration.”
Andrea Davidson, The Temple-Tifereth Israel, Beachwood, OH


Readers pressed for time need know nothing more about this book than that it has nothing to do with the Middle East peace process: no Oslo, no Tabo, no Camp David Accords or their violent aftermath. For those curious about what it actually is about and want to read further, it only gets worse. Nearly twenty per cent of the book is given over to a chapter premised on the idea that the conflict between Israel and its neighbors could lead to a nuclear war involving Iran. Since the Wikileaks documents appeared, we now know that this is a spurious assertion because it is the Arab states, not Israel, who have been lobbying for a war to stop Iran’s nuclear program.

Another problem with The Middle East Peace Process is the lack of historical context. How is one to judge opinions on the current state of the Arab-Israeli conflict if the readings discuss phenomena like Christian Zionism and accusations of atrocities in the 2008-09 Gaza War, but give not a hint of the actual origins or history of the conflict, which goes back many decades?

A third problem concerns the contributors: too many of them are described as “writers” or “journalists” or “authors” without evidence that they have actual knowledge and credentials on which to base their statements. Polemical screeds should have no place in a work such as this, yet included in its selections are charges of an alleged “ever-expanding agenda” of an “ethnic cleansing” campaign by Israel, which “throughout its history” has engaged in a “bloodletting project” for the “suppression or extermination” of its enemies; another charges that the Israeli “theft” of land goes on “round the clock.” Israeli acts of self-defense are simply pronounced “immoral” or “illegal.” Other entries contain similar inflammatory charges of genocide, of “Palestinian Gandhis”, and Israelis’ concern for their kidnapped soldier, Gilad Shalit, held for five years by Hamas without so much as a Red Cross visit, is labeled an “obsession” and even racist by one author. (Shalit is supposedly seen as “white” while Palestinians are not.)

The editor’s preface also includes errors, such as calling Israel’s presence in the territories illegal (it is legal, the result of a war imposed on, not by, Israel), and the false statement that the Palestinians’ ties to the area go back “thousands of years” as do those of Jews. In this book we have another poorly prepared, unbalanced juxtaposition of reading selections, as usual omitting discussion of the truly crucial elements in the conflict, such as the doctrine of jihad and the Hamas covenant (reaffirmed by Hamas as this piece is written) rejecting forever the notion of peace with Israel. Need it be stated that it is not recommended?
Andrea Rapp, Wise Temple, Cincinnati, OH


This collection of documents about the creation of Israel is different from others published so far. A reader will not find here a copy of the Balfour Declaration or of United Nations Resolution 181, calling for the partition of Palestine. Rather, this is a collection of “perspectives”. Its major section, titled “Controversies Surrounding the Creation of the State of Israel” offers personal perspectives on those documents by diplomats, writers, and citizens. These articles discuss: Was the Balfour Declaration just? Was the partition resolution a good idea? Was the creation of a Jewish state fair? The bad news is that of the more than one hundred nations created in the twentieth century, only Israel could be subject of such a book, which considers the country’s very existence a matter of controversy, its foundational ideas a subject for moral debate. While the editor may have sought even-handedness by presenting writings of some of Israel’s enthusiasts along with many of its opponents, she still violated rules of fairness: “No story is fair if it omits facts of major importance or significance. Fairness includes completeness.” (The Washington Post Code of Ethics).

Thus, it would have been fair to include the anti-Jewish charges by an Arab group headed by the Mufti Haj Amin al-Husayni if some significant facts about Haj Husayni were included. He was a rabid anti-Semite who spent most of World War II as Hitler’s guest in Germany, and made radio broadcasts for the Nazi regime, advocating massacre of Jews. He met with Hitler, Eichmann, and others to persuade them to extend the extermination of Jews to the Arab world.

It’s fair to include an entry mourning the loss of Arab communities, whose members fled what would become Israel in 1948, but only with recognition of the Jewish communities—some literally thousands of years old—that were uprooted and destroyed because they fell into Arab hands, outside Israel’s borders. These included the Jewish centers of Hebron, Kfar Etzion, Old City Jerusalem, and others.

The good news—if you can call it that—is that these documents include a rarity—an account of one David Rubinger, who fought in defense of Israel after its Declaration of Independence. His entry notes that a jihad was called by the Arabs of 1948, and he quotes Azzam Pasha of the Arab League, who declared, “This will be a war of extermination and a momentous massacre which will be spoken of like the Mongolian massacres and the Crusades.” This all-too-rare recognition that the Arab war(s) against Israel are part of their thousand-year history of jihad—of religious war—against non-Muslims deserves the spotlight. Because only by understanding the central role of jihad can we truly understand those “controversies surrounding the creation of the State of Israel”. A book about the Arab-Israeli conflict that ignores or downplays the role of that religious doctrine falls short of the goal of shedding light on the nature of the conflict.

Andrea Rapp, Wise Temple, Cincinnati, OH
JUDAISM


Just as adults begin their day by reciting special blessings in the Shacharit, the daily morning prayer service, so too can young listeners and readers take a few minutes to appreciate the start of a new day and the things in life they are blessed with, by sharing and enjoying this book about blessings. This is a sweet book, complete with a lovely message that shows thanks and appreciation to God for many things that young listeners can understand, starting with “Thank you for waking me from my sleep”. The child in the text also says thanks for a loving family, for a home, for the ability to learn and explore the world. Longer excerpts from the morning blessings follow the text, in both Hebrew and English. In addition, the author has prepared an ending note about the modeh ani prayer. EKS Publishers has successfully managed to create multiple English books for children, books that are replete with Hebrew content, everyday English language translations, and transliterations. There is a dreamy and calm quality to the pastel illustrations, which are age-appropriate. Though the text is a little pedantic in nature, this is a successful book both about the specifics of morning prayer and the concept of prayer as a way of saying thanks and showing appreciation.

Shelly Feit, Moriah School Library, Englewood New Jersey


Three previously published books (Judaica Press, 1999) have been combined to form a collection of stories about the ten children in the Cohen family. They learn how to deal with friends, neighbors, and each other. In the first section, about Chessed, there are ten stories about different Gemachim, or free-loan providers. The children have experiences with suppliers of such items as medicine, bottles, and chick peas (a customary food for Shalom Zachor celebrations). In the second section, the kids learn about being good neighbors and friends by helping others. The third section has slightly longer stories that deal with listening to parents and setting fair rules for games. Black and white illustrations are dispersed throughout the text. The phrase on the cover, “early readers for frum boys and girls”, rings true. The format of short vignettes with relatively large text size and illustrations is appropriate for the transitional reader. Because there is no glossary, no explanation of customs, and no subtlety as far as “valuable middos lessons”, non-Orthodox readers will not understand the language or context of most of the stories. This book is only appropriate for Orthodox readers between six and eight years old, both in terms of the content and the reading level.

Kathe Pinchuck, Clinton, NJ


It’s not an exaggeration to say that Laibels for Laibel, the story from which this board book was adapted, changed my perspective on picture books. Neither it nor this version are marked by the literary or artistic distinction that I once considered an absolute necessity for books presented to children. The text is a basic, sing-song rhyme, the plot is predictable to adult readers, and the illustrations are prosaic. But few stories I have ever read to children so captured the imaginations of the kindergartners and first graders at Congregation Beth Am in Cleveland as this one about two young Orthodox Jewish brothers who refuse to share and are shown the consequences by their parents. Every child with a sibling understood what Laibel and Yossi were doing because it was something they had either done or wanted to do. And the parents are models of what children would like their parents to be: they don’t scold, they don’t preach, they calmly show what happens when mother keeps the food to herself and father won’t share his car, and they set up a situation where the boys can make their own choice to do the right thing. As unlikely as the comparison may seem, the book resembles Where the Wild Things Are in showing children succumbing to their yetzer hara and then being guided by their yetzer tov to overcome them. Bruno Bettelheim has much to say about this quality of empowerment in folktales but it exists in original fiction, as well. Despite the telescoping that a board book version entails, the theme is still developed in a way that young children will find appealing and meaningful. And despite its dearth of literary or artistic merit, it continues by its honesty and understanding to reach into the heart of childhood experiences. Although Laibels for Laibel is the preferable version, this one is for a slightly younger audience and should not be overlooked.

Linda R. Silver, Cleveland, OH

PUBLISHING NEWS

Suddenly in the Depths of the Forest (Harcourt, 2011, 9780547551531) is a new book for the children written in Hebrew by the acclaimed Israeli writer, Amos Oz, and translated into English by Sondra Silverston. Since it has no Jewish content and is not set in Israel, it will not be reviewed in AJL Reviews. However, fans of Oz and admirers of his previous books for young people will want to take note of it.

The following titles, reviewed in the Adult Readers section, may be of interest to teenagers:

Jopek, Krysia. Maps and Shadows.
Padowicz, Julian. A Ship in the Harbor: Mother and Me, Part II.
NONFICTION


Rabbi Scott Aaron, community scholar for the Agency for Jewish Learning for Greater Pittsburgh, has written a guide to help new college students survive their first year on campus. He tells them how to enjoy life on campus while maintaining Jewish identity and how to establish ties with the Jewish community there. He discusses everything from getting along with a roommate to taking responsibility for all aspects of personal life to observing Jewish holidays away from home. He includes dealing with drugs, alcohol, and sexual issues in an ethical way, deciding whether to join a fraternity or sorority, and coping with bad news from home. Considering a summer break spent working on a social action issue, a semester or year in Israel, or whether to date a non-Jew are all parts of college life. Rabbi Aaron offers good, commonsense advice about all of them. Although he is a Reform rabbi, he includes information about all Jewish denominations and “just Jewish” in this book. He also includes Shabbat and holiday blessings and the Mourner’s Kaddish in Hebrew and transliteration along with a recipe for latkes and a list of Passover cookbooks. This is a useful paperback for students, who will want to take it with them when they leave for college. It would be useful in public and synagogue libraries as well.

*Barbara M. Bibel, Reference Librarian/Consumer Health Information Specialist, Oakland Public Library, Oakland, CA; Congregation Netivot Shalom, Berkeley, CA*


A revised translation of a controversial work of history by a leading Israeli historian of Hasidism, this book looks at little known or repressed events in Hasidic history in the 19th and early 20th centuries. The longest chapter deals with the conversion to Christianity in 1820 of Moshe, the son of Shneur Zalman of Lyadi, founder of Chabad. Assaf documents that Moshe had long been suffering from mental illness, his conversion was questioned by the Church, and he possibly died in a mental hospital. He traces the efforts of mitnagdic opponents to use the conversion as a weapon as well as the attempts at repression or a counter-story by Hasidic apologists. The next chapter deals with the Seer of Lublin, who fell out of his second story window on Simchat Torah. Was it a failed attempt to bring the messiah, as claimed by his disciples? Was he drunk, as maskilim charged? Or perhaps it was a suicide attempt as Assaf suggests. Assaf presents other lesser known cases including the persecution of Bratslaver Hasidim in the mid 19th century by Talner.

*Kathe Pinchuck, Clifton, NJ; Secretary, School Synagogue and Centers Division. AJL; Past Chair, Sydney Taylor Book Award Committee, AJL*

In The Spotlight


The titles in this guide are “a selection of Jewish books for children—from preschool through high school—written in or translated into English and published during the 20th and 21st centuries.” The chapters are arranged by subject and include Jewish customs, Bible stories, holidays, folklore, various aspects of Jewish history, biographies, “contemporary issues” and “Judaism and Other Religions.” Introductory remarks at the beginning of each chapter discuss the background and context of the subject matter and provide an interesting history of the development of Jewish children’s books. The annotation of each book includes the author, title, publisher, copyright date, page length and suggested age of readers. Some of the descriptions include related reading.

The latest addition to a growing series of topic references has all the hallmarks of excellence: the information is accurate and engaging, presented in clear dynamic prose with many book covers included to break up the text. The organization by subject provides easy access, which is further facilitated by lists by recommended reading levels and indexes by author, title and subject. It also includes the lists of winners of the National Jewish Book Awards and the Sydney Taylor Book Award. Ms. Silver is a known authority on the subject manner, and the depth and breadth of her knowledge is evident. A few key titles were not included or given brief mention. Many of the titles are out of print, and will take some effort to find. This volume is an essential purchase for every Jewish library.

*Editor’s Note: See Ellen Cole’s interview with Linda Silver in the February/March 2011 issue of *AJL News*.*

The field known as “Irano-Judaica,” has recently seen an upsurge in research. This book is a collection of articles by the few scholars that specialize in the Middle-Persian language, culture and history, to complement their scholarly knowledge of the Babylonian Talmud. The Babylonian Jews lived under Persian (Iranian) rule for six centuries, during two periods: under the Parthian empire, and after 224 C.E., under the Sassanians, who practiced Zoroastrianism.

The studies in the book focus on the interaction of the Iranian Jewry with Zoroastrianism. These intellectual articles are especially interesting as they demonstrate how knowledge of Persian history and culture can shed light on our reading of the Babylonian Talmud. The amalgamation of the study of Talmud and Middle-Persian studies is increasingly helpful in understanding the Babylonian Talmud from the cultural, legal, religious, and linguistic points of view.

Yoram Bitton, Hebrew Manuscript Cataloger, Columbia University, New York


Twenty contemporary scholars (including the editors) contributed to this ambitious work encompassing Jewish life from biblical times to the present. Indeed, the scope is so vast that the editors themselves admit that space limitations prevented them from including chapters on many important topics such as literature, music, the lively and fine arts, and specific studies on Jewish communities in various parts of the world. For these subjects the editors refer the readers to the companion volume The Cambridge Dictionary of Jewish History, Religion, and Culture (2011).

The Cambridge Guide to Jewish History, Religion, and Culture includes twenty-one illuminating essays. Each essay utilizes helpful footnotes and concludes with a list of bibliographical references. The book ends with useful glossary, timeline, and an index. Photographs, maps, tables, diagrams and appropriate illustrations are dispersed throughout the text, and contribute to the overall appealing character of this reference tool. Surprisingly, the timeline does not mention the Israel War of Independence though the event is included in the index.

As a whole, The Cambridge Guide is a serious book of reference geared towards laypersons of all backgrounds, as well as academician. Thanks to the editors, it provides interesting viewpoints on gender aspects of Judaism, Jewish philosophy, mysticism, and modern Jewish thought. Many readers will find this reference tool to be a very functional source of quick and well-organized information. It is a worthwhile addition for an academic, synagogue, or public library.

Nira G. Wolfe, Independent researcher, Highland Park, IL; Head Librarian Hebrew Theological College (retired), Skokie, IL


The outstanding classicist Elias Bickerman (1897-1981) is especially known for his views on the Hellenistic period. Alfred Baumgarten has written a detailed study of Bickerman based on the assumption that his life experiences and views of contemporary Jewish life were a major factor in his historical interpretations. Blaming extreme Jewish Hellenists for Antiochus’ decrees, he wrote: “The reform party wished to assimilate the Torah to Hellenism; the Maccabees wished to incorporate Hellenic culture in the Torah.” He also praised the Pharisees, who were willing to strengthen their traditional beliefs by absorbing some aspects of Hellenistic culture. Baumgarten tries to show that Bickerman’s attitudes toward modern Reform, maskilim and Jewish Communists influenced his views on Hellenistic Jews. Recommended for research libraries in Judaica or Classics.

Jim Rosenbloom, Judaica Librarian, Brandeis University, Waltham, MA; President, Association of Jewish Libraries


Jewish culture and Judaism itself have paid relatively little attention to Jewish magic, despite the growing interest in magic in the wider multi-cultural societies we live in, spurred in no small part by the success of the Harry Potter books, interest in New Age spirituality and the occult, as well as the increased study of kabbalah. Yet the publication in recent years of a number of works on Jewish magic attest to both scholarly and popular interest in the topic among the Jewish population.

The work at hand will be a welcome addition to this body of literature, although it is not strictly speaking a book of Jewish magic. Sefer Ko’ah Ha-Avanim is a medieval lapidary...

Jewish proselytizing and evangelizing activity in Palestine and the Graeco-Roman Diaspora is not particularly well-known in contemporary Jewish communities, hence the important contribution of this brief treatment. In a succinct fashion, but employing a wealth of existing ancient materials including the sacred Hebrew and Christian Bible, as well as a broad range of other ancient literature known to biblical scholars of the Second Temple Period, the author sets out an important component of the historical relationship of Jews to non-Jews.

Bird, a tutor in New Testament at the Scottish Highland Theological College, clearly places the concept of “mission” and “conversion” in the context of the ancient world and pre-Christian Judaism in particular. His concern is with Jewish missionary activity in Palestine and then in the Diaspora. Critical to Bird’s effort is the examination of early Christian literature which, he points out, represents the largest amount of source material dealing with Jewish proselytizing activities, primarily in Acts, Paul’s epistles, works attributed to John, the Apostolic Fathers, and the Apologists. He concludes in strong terms that Jews did, in fact, proselytize gentiles, although the form of Judaism evident during the Second Temple period was not a missionary religion.

Sanford R. Silverburg, Professor, Department of History and Politics, Catawba College, Salisbury, NC


Many battles have been fought over the question of how Jewish law changes, if at all. The issues are usually fraught and the discussion is highly emotional and explosive. Publicists and historians use them as grist for their mills, but the legal scholar is left frustrated by the lack of dispassionate thought about the underlying issues. Michael Broyde, a professor of law and also an important Halakhic decisor, chose an innocuous aspect of Jewish law, and used it as a case study to investigate the general question of how innovation occurs in halakhah. His analysis focuses on Havinenu, an abridged version of the daily prayer described in the Mishnah and the Talmud. Today, this prayer is virtually unknown and almost universally unused, and Broyde asks why that is. Discussing this example allows him to demonstrate his general claim, that halakhah changes over time through the intensive process of learning, interpretation and re-interpretation. New interpretation – chiddush – is the vehicle for organic change.

This slim volume follows the history of interpretation of the talmudic sources methodically and carefully. It provides a rare opportunity to watch the thought process of a halakhist as he progresses from the primary sources, navigating the various and conflicting interpretations by medieval and early modern commentators, to practical conclusions about the present day. Most of the book consists of textual analysis of sources presented in Hebrew and in English translation, and the author makes an effort to explain these sources in an accessible way. Not light reading, but an opportunity for readers without a very strong background in Jewish law to study a topic in depth.

Pinchas Roth, graduate student in the Talmud Department at Hebrew University, Jerusalem.


Eleanor Rathbone, born in 1872 to a distinguished family in Liverpool, devoted her life to looking after the underdog. Active in the field of feminism, she worked for family allowances and devoted her time to the saving and care of refugees. This book describes her work for persecuted Jews during the period, 1933-1945.

The work is based on Dr. Cohen’s doctorate and the author has done a very thorough job in researching the available documents. It is primarily a book for specialists in Jewish history and the Holocaust. However, the general reader should find it heartening. Whoever reads this book begins to understand the meaning of the term “righteous gentile.”

Chaim Seymour, Director, Cataloging and Classification Department, Wurzweiler Library, Bar-Ilan University, Israel


This work includes 24 essays. The affiliation of each contributor is of course of interest. The large majority of the contributors are Reform. There are a number of
Conservative contributors, but the Orthodox contribution is negligible. This, to my mind, is natural considering the gulf between the Reform and the Orthodox approach. In her introduction, Carole Balin explains it beautifully with regard to an Orthodox friend, “Doing Jewish theology ... was utterly alien to her ... She was accustomed to speaking exclusively to, and not necessarily about, the Divine.” There is Orthodox Jewish theology but the approach is very different.

Most participants see themselves as liberal (not the movement but a personal philosophy) Jews. They encountered a number of common problems. As B. Sommer stated, it is hard to accept a hierarchical approach. Most of the Reform participants are looking for a dialog on equal terms and have a problem with God as king. Many of the writers in the first section take refuge in Pantheism, where Orthodoxy, throughout the ages, has tried to reconcile Pantheism and Transcendentalism. The second problem, which the Liberal Jew has to deal with, is the relationship with other religions. The fact that most of the participants feel free to work out their own theology can lead to arrogance. Who is man to judge God? The contributors are very much aware of this trap and try to meet the challenge. A very stimulating collection!

Chaim Seymour, Director, Cataloging and Classification Department, Wurzweiler Library, Bar-Ilan University, Israel


The author has produced a well-documented presentation of Christian anti-Semitism in the 20th century that facilitated the Shoah as well as the reform of anti-Jewish sentiment that took place after the death of Pope Pius XII. The book is divided into thirteen chapters that follow a chronological path of anti-Semitic statements by Catholic publications and bishops before the rise of the Third Reich, complicity in the policies of the Reich, and the compassion shown after the war toward perpetrators of Nazi crimes. The dilemma of Church authority between condemning Communism and remaining silent in the face of Nazi aggression, which was also anticommunist, is a common theme running through many of the chapters. The book concludes with a discussion of the acknowledgement by Pope John Paul II of the failure of Church authority during the Holocaust. This book is well suited for any library maintaining a collection including Holocaust studies.

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


Have you ever read Cool Jew by Lisa Alcalay Klug? (Reviewed in AJL Newsletter, 2009) Now imagine a book on relationships and self-help written in the same vein. Keep this all in mind while perusing Ms. Davis’ Life, Love, Lox. This is certainly no slam on Ms. Davis; rather, Ms. Davis is continuing this fantastic trend of reveling in Judaism. Ms. Davis is a writer and columnist for the Jewish Journal of Greater Los Angeles...and we readers benefit from her fun (occasionally irreverent!) writing style and her great love for her religion.

Readers will enjoy the inclusivity of Ms. Davis; she writes for those among us who are more observant and for those of us who are more “Jew-ish.” Whether you need a new kugel recipe or have no clue what a kugel is, Ms. Davis covers all the bases…and relates it all back to finding (or maybe keeping) that special someone. As an added bonus, (as if recipes and hair care advice aren’t enough!) Ms. Davis includes a “Heebonics” glossary of bandied about Hebrew and Yiddish terms.

Recommended for synagogue congregations with a young, hip feel to them. As always, due to the somewhat more risqué topics involved in modern relationship/dating books, librarians should have a good feel for whether this is acceptable to their patrons before purchasing.

Rachel Minkin, Reference and Instruction Librarian, Lansing Community College; Congregation Kehillat Israel, Lansing, MI


Don’t let the steamy picture on this paperback fool you. Elliot Dorff, co-editor of the first three volumes of Jewish Choices, Jewish Voices, and Danya Ruttenberg, esteemed author, editor and senior Jewish educator at Tufts University Hillel, have created an academic work worthy for inclusion in any academic or synagogue library.

Ethics, and in particular sexual ethics, tend to incite readers to nod their heads in asent: “Yes, I totally agree with the author” or to distance themselves: “I could never agree to that.” However, in Judaism, we base our ethics on the words and writing of those before us, and that base of knowledge informs our decisions today. In Sex and Intimacy, Dorff and Ruttenberg give readers four cases to read. Yet, in each case, they play with variables, asking readers to stretch their own views on sexual ethics before then supplying the traditionally consulted resources (such as Talmud), contemporary resources, and then responses from academics and professionals in the field of sexuality, ethics, gender studies, etc. As an example, Dorff provides a transcript to an interview he conducted with Ron Jeremy as a response to the chapter on “Sex Work and Pornography.” Enlightening!

Due to the content of this text, I would not recommend it to a more observant synagogue library; although traditional rabbinic resources are consulted, I think it would prove offensive to some members. However, I fully recommend this text to synagogues holding open and frank talks on ethics, as well as academic libraries collecting in ethics, sexuality, women’s studies, and gender studies.

Rachel Minkin, Reference and Instruction Librarian, Lansing Community College; Congregation Kehillat Israel, Lansing, MI

This groundbreaking collection addresses transgender and gender identity issues in Jewish law and community from diverse scholarly, religious and personal perspectives. Essays range from autobiographical to academic, including text studies and rituals. While diverse in nature, contributions share an emphasis on the struggle against binary notions and on the exploration of language, identity, and spirituality. Topics addressed include transition rituals, mikvah, mechitza, bris, chevra kadisha, halachah and gender categories. Balancing on the Mechitza provides essential texts on understanding transgender issues in a Jewish context, and does it in a very engaging way. I enjoyed the variety of contributions and found myself eager to keep reading. For those unfamiliar with Jewish terms and laws, definitions are provided. For the more learned, there is no shortage of detailed analyses of Jewish texts and halachah. Recommended for academic, synagogue and community libraries.

Amanda (Miryem-Khaye) Seigel, Librarian, Dorot Jewish Division, New York Public Library


With contributions by noted Yiddish scholars, Yiddish in the Weimar Berlin provides the reader with a window into Yiddish culture, civilization and literature with the cosmopolitan city of Berlin as the focus. A plethora of Jewish writers, thinkers and philosophers were living and working in Berlin until the rise of the Nazis to power in 1933 which changed everything. Shachar Pinskar writes that the 12 years that Shumel Yosef Agnon spent living in Berlin and Germany were productive and creative. In her chapter on Max Weinreich, Amy Blau describes him as “a prolific scholar, writer, and translator; in addition to completing his dissertation (in German) on the history of Yiddish scholarship in German, he published a number of works in Yiddish under his own name while in Germany…” Weinreich was a journalist who wrote about travel, politics, literature, and movies for the American audience of the Forverts. Barry Trachtenberg delves into historical bibliography by examining the publishing of encyclopedias in Yiddish. With the rise of the Nazis in Germany, Di Algemeyne Entsiklopedye (in Paris) continued to publish longer than the Encyclopaedia Judaica because “their audience, contributors, and supporters were located not primarily in Germany, but in Eastern Europe and the United States.” The series Studies in Yiddish is to be commended for keeping alive the names, literary output, and civilization of a Yiddish world that is lost forever. Yiddish in Weimar Berlin is scholarly and recommended for a university or special collection.

Included are an index, notes accompanying each chapter, and photographs.

Ellen Share, Librarian, Washington Hebrew Congregation, Washington, DC


The supervision and symbols that designate food as “conforming to acceptable standards” for those who keep kosher for religious reasons have become a marketing tool and a symbol of “higher authority” and better products for those who do not. Fishkoff traces the history and development of kosher supervision in the United States. Inherent in this chronicle are the politics, the internecine arguments about maintaining standards, and the motive for profit of both food producers and certifying agencies. The narrative then explores some of the finer points of kosher food: producing wine, checking produce for bugs, the Jewish deli, and preparing a kitchen for a kosher event. A chapter about production of kosher food in China gives the readers perspective on the enormity and prevalence of kosher production for a relatively small percentage of the population. The final chapters explore the 2008 scandal at the Agriprocessors kosher meat facilities, which involved illegal immigrants and bank fraud, and the demands of kosher consumers for foods that are not only kosher, but produced in an ethical and considerate manner. This includes Jewish agricultural cooperatives and small scale slaughter for specific events.

Fishkoff has done meticulous research, and she presents the information matter-of-factly, even when discussing the nefarious behavior of kosher supervisors and manufacturers. Interesting characters, like Rabbi Mordechai Grunberg, who inspects plants in China, and Rabbi Yaacov Luban, who checks the garbage to find kashrut infractions, demonstrate the devotion of those who feel they are on a holy mission. Both informative and entertaining, this book is highly recommended for all Jewish libraries.

Kathe Pinchuck, Clifton, NJ; Secretary, School Synagogue and Centers Division. AJL; Past Chair, Sydney Taylor Book Award Committee, AJL


The author, who was born in Vienna in 1937, fled with her family to Switzerland along with 25,000 other Jews, and later migrated to the United States then eventually Canada. It is rare to find any accounts of Jewish life in Switzerland during the Holocaust. Forman recalls her experiences as best she can aided by recent visits to refugee archives. While she is thankful for her family’s escape from the Nazi horrors, she is critical of Switzerland: “The history of Switzerland during the Second World War is complex and contradictory, and remains disputed...Its images of innocence and

Jean-Michel Frodon’s Cinema & the Shoah takes on an unbelievably complex and difficult subject – not to mention an emotionally draining one -- with intellectual force. For students of film, the iconic images and the annotated filmography will be incredibly useful. For students of Jewish or modern history, this work will help guide an understanding of the impact of representation of history through media. In six different sections, the book follows a path of explanation and awareness. First, there is an explanation of the overall project, and later in “Conversations at the Mill” are transcribed discussions of participants in this project, allowing the reader into their very insightful exchanges. The work includes chapters devoted to philosophical underpinnings and artistic criticisms. For those interested in courses on Jewish film, the cinema from three countries, the US, Israel and Germany, are considered. Finally “Tools for History” deals with important issues, such as filming of witnesses, including the Eichmann trial and the 52,000 testimonials in the archives of Survivors of the Shoah Visual History Foundation. For a world dominated by media and the visual, understanding the impact of film on history is important to master. This book helps to process viewing Shoah films.

Judith S. Pinillos, RIS Humanities Librarian, Goldfarb Library, Brandeis University, Waltham, MA


Dr. Green, who teaches at the University of Oxford, has written a definitive biographical study of Montefiore. Born in Italy, this political activist and unofficial diplomat was so financially independent that he was able to retire at the age of 40! President of the Board of Deputies, he used his family ties with the Rothschild family to do a great deal of good for many of his co-religionists. He travelled extensively throughout the world in order to intervene on behalf of his fellow Jews, who were often faced with crises and dilemmas only matched in our day by the Holocaust.

As presented by the author, a descendent of Montefiore on her mother’s side, we see the dramatic complexities of diplomatic intervention and what is now called political action during the 19th century. The book is a touching and thorough biography of a man who was an outstanding philanthropist aided by his remarkable wife, Lady Judith and an assistant/secretary, Louis Loewe. Many Jewish communities today in Europe and in the Middle East owe much to this complex and daring man. Perhaps the most interesting feature of the book are the illustrations and the maps, which serve to shed interesting light on the tone of Sir Moses’ life and career. This book should be in college, university and seminary libraries.

Morton J. Merowitz, Librarian and independent scholar, Buffalo, NY


The Dead Sea Scrolls have attracted a great deal of attention in the Western world since their discovery in the mid-20th century. The huge amount of scholarly writing about them is daunting. But it also offers a rare opportunity for scholars to reflect on what they have learned and how they learned it, allowing them to achieve a level of methodological self-awareness that is almost unheard of in academic Jewish studies today. Rediscovering the Dead Sea Scrolls is devoted to consideration of the methods used to study the scrolls. Some of the chapters describe and summarize the type of work that has been carried out by Scrolls scholars for years now – studying the fragments, piecing them together into larger pieces, reading them carefully. Other chapters describe methods that have been used only sparingly or sporadically. These new methods include the imaging technologies pioneered and described here by Bruce Zuckerman. A dynamic PDF version of his chapter, with animated images, can be found at http://iml.usc.edu/media/DS5v10a.pdf. Another fascinating chapter is James Davila’s suggested method of using “counterfactual history” (i.e., history as it did not happen) to pinpoint the questions that still need to be asked.

The articles excel in their clarity of language and structure, allowing non-specialists to benefit from their insights. The volume is an important component
in any collection on Bible or Dead Sea Scrolls, but its methodological value for other areas of the humanities is considerable.

Pinchas Roth, graduate student in the Talmud Department at Hebrew University, Jerusalem.


Chaya T. Halberstam seeks to demonstrate that the rabbis do not share the Bible’s confidence that legal decisions made by humans can be accurate and fair. She examines several major areas of halakhah: menstrual purity, proof of ownership for lost items, and capital punishment. The Bible clearly states that one must return a lost item to its owner. The rabbis, not confident that they can fairly administer this law, require the presumed owner to produce evidence that the object was originally his, perhaps even undermining the original intent of the Biblical law. “Deuteronomy appears to rely upon personal knowledge and intuitive experience for claims of ownership while the Mishnah turns external signs into basic requirements for ownership.” She also uses examples from Aggadah, including questions of judicial proof in the book of Genesis relating to the story of Tamar and Judah (proof that Judah is the father of Tamar’s child) and the story of Joseph (the cloak left in the hands of Potiphar’s wife, and the divining cup planted in Benjamin’s bag). Although Halberstam’s case studies are fascinating, she will have to do more to convince others of her overall thesis. Highly recommended for academic libraries with a Judaica research collection.

Jim Rosenbloom, Judaica Librarian, Brandeis University, Waltham, MA; President, Association of Jewish Libraries


Rashi is the acknowledged leading commentator on both the Bible and the Babylonian Talmud. Although his commentary was written almost 1000 years ago, he is still the main commentator for many Orthodox students. There are at least two good translations of his commentary on the Pentateuch into English. The present text, based on Rashi’s commentary on the Pentateuch, is divided according to the weekly Torah readings and includes a series of questions about Rashi’s comments on the weekly portion, together with his answers. Rashi’s text is presented in both Hebrew and English. The author, who teaches in a religious Israeli secondary school, demonstrates considerable experience of children’s learning habits. The book reflects the author’s investment of effort and is recommended for the Jewish parent who wants to test and stimulate his or her children.

Chaim Seymour, Director, Cataloging and Classification Department, Wurzweiler Library, Bar-Ilan University, Israel


“Frequent reading of novels is poison...is the same as eating opium, the same as intoxication from drinking brandy.” The hyperbolic quote from the Jüdisches Volksblatt, (a literary supplement to the Allgemeine Zeitung des Judentums), was carefully crafted to allow Ludwig Philippson to pursue his ultimate goal of providing a wide readership with a ‘higher’ quality fiction. His publications would both command respect, be instructive yet entertaining -- and were meant to promote Jewish identity among the masses through leisure reading. In a highly readable and fascinating account, Jonathan Hess leads us through various genres of Jewish literature in Germany, from early tales, often written by rabbis, of horror and heroics based on the Spanish Inquisition; to tales of the ghetto that exposed readers to stories of traditional Jewish life; to historical fiction and serialized literature; to secular Jewish fiction that promulgated Jewish fantasies of love and marriage between Jews. While Jewish belles lettres were not able to compare to standards set during the time of Goethe, they nevertheless provided a wide audience with popular reading that was widely bought, discussed, reprinted and reviewed. This book opens a door on the every day reading lives of German Jews, lending insight not only to the purposes of the writers, but the interests and imaginations of the average reader. Literature became a powerful vehicle to deliver the messages the German-

Old Jews Telling Jokes is a by-product of the free website: www.OldJewsTellingJokes.com. Many of the jokes the readers have already heard, some are daring (there is no censorship), and Jewish stereotypes are abundant.

Following “A Note of Introduction,” the jokes in the book are categorized according to twelve core subjects. A unique aspect of this book is that each category is introduced with background information about the societal conditions that provided the environment that provoked the jokes. The structure of the book includes a photo and description of almost every joke-teller – a total of eighty-six! The reason for this presentation is unclear considering the fact that the reader is most likely only interested in the content of the jokes and not in the tellers of the jokes. The reader might suspect that the reason for the material about the supposed joke-teller (there is no verifiable basis to connect the joke-teller with the joke-creator) is in order to fluff-up the size of the book since only 155 pages of the book contain jokes. Another explanation is that the book is a derivative of the web site where one can actually see the animated and very entertaining delivery of the jokes by the tellers. Old Jews Telling Jokes is a book that will give the reader a chuckle and a laugh. The book does not handle sufficiently the serious subject of Jewish Humor to qualify as a worthy acquisition for a Jewish library other than as an addition to a collection of “fun” books where many readers will definitely enjoy it.

Nira G. Wolfe, Independent researcher, Highland Park, IL; Head Librarian Hebrew Theological College (retired), Skokie, IL


Elie Kaunfer knows what’s ailing American Jewry and he has the cure. Kaunfer, a dynamic young rabbi, named in 2009 to Newsweek’s list of 50 most influential rabbis in the US, is co-founder of several successful ventures in Jewish living, beginning with Minyan Hadar in 2000. What he calls “Empowered Judaism,” could also be termed engaged or serious Judaism, a Judaism whose practitioners are fluent in Hebrew and conversant in the Tanakh, the Talmud and the other sources of the Jewish tradition and are able to study them and draw upon them on a daily basis for their own personal growth and the benefit of their communities. The lack of such individuals has been a serious weakness of the non-Orthodox movements for generations and Kaunfer and his visionary cohort of teachers and rabbinic leaders have undertaken to address this deficiency in American Jewish life. The book under review begins with Kaunfer’s personal spiritual quest, but centers mainly on his involvement with Minyan Hadar and Yeshivat Hadar. Minyan Hadar is an extraordinarily successful independent minyan that meets weekly on the Upper West Side in Manhattan. Totally egalitarian and featuring a full traditional davening, it has succeeded and runs services marked by spirited singing and a consistently high level of quality in prayer leading and Torah reading. Kaunfer offers an account of how this was achieved and his group’s experiences are instructive and worthy of study and emulation. There have been many spinoffs in the last decade and his latest venture is Yeshivat Hadar, the first fully egalitarian Yeshiva in North America. The yeshiva and its talented staff model Judaism at its best—dedicated to serious worship, study, and action, in an open, non-judgmental, environment dedicated to free enquiry and embracing the findings of academic scholarship in a fully egalitarian setting. Kaunfer’s book belongs in every Jewish synagogue, school and JCC library and should be read by every rabbi and Federation leader. Its message is timely and deserves to be widely disseminated.

Barry Dow Walfish, Judaica Specialist, University of Toronto Libraries, Toronto, Canada


This book describes Raoul Wallenberg’s mission to Hungary to save Jews from the Final Solution. The final part of the book deals with his arrest by the Russians and his disappearance. The narrative is very readable with a lot of excitement and we do receive a convincing portrait of a very special person who saved thousands of Jews. The notes are extensive and extremely rich in bibliographical sources. I still found the book disappointing for a number of reasons. Firstly, I did not find any great revelations to justify a new book on the subject. Secondly, I have my reservations as to the scope of the book. The author’s expressed intention was to demonstrate that in saving one human life, Wallenberg also saved that person’s children, grandchildren, etc. To make his point, the author traced a number of the survivors’ lives in considerable detail. This was superfluous.

The author also felt the need to relate Eichmann’s story after the war, how he escaped to Argentina, his capture and trial. There are a number of excellent books about Eichmann and I was sorry that Mr. Kershaw felt the need to sully his pages with more about Eichmann than was strictly necessary. This is recommended reading for anybody who has not yet encountered the Wallenberg story.

Chaim Seymour, Director, Cataloging and Classification

Judah Magnes was one of the most significant American Jewish leaders between 1900 and 1920. But because he then emigrated to Israel and became the first President of the Hebrew University, his role as leader of the New York Kehilla and other achievements has been nearly forgotten. This new biography should revive his reputation.

The book starts with Magnes’ background as a Californian, his time at Hebrew Union College as a graduate student in Germany, and his introduction to the new Zionist movement. His time in New York, both as a congregational rabbi at Temple Emav-EI and as a community leader, including his intimate involvement in the Kehilla and the American Jewish Congress are covered in several chapters. Kotzin portrays Magnes as an “adversarial personality,” a strong-willed man who believed passionately and acted on his ideas. The second half of the book discusses his 25 years in Palestine, including his role as President of the Hebrew University, his numerous activities in support of Zionism, the development of the two-state solution, and his shifting relationships with Weizmann, Ben-Gurion and others.

This is the first full-length study of Judah Magnes in many years. For that reason alone it should be in all academic Judaica collections. The book should also be considered by larger synagogue and Center libraries, though it is expensive. The text is dense, though, and there is an expectation that the reader knows the many people and organizations that are mentioned. The bibliography and index are wonderfully complete. Possibly there will be a more affordable paperback edition soon. Because Magnes is such an important transitional figure, it should be made available.

Fred Isaac, Temple Sinai, Oakland, CA


In honor of its 250th anniversary, Raphael Langham has written a history of the Board of Deputies, the representative body of British Jewry. Most of the deputies participating represent synagogues. The body has a strong connection with the Orthodox chief rabbinate which has led to more than one dispute with other streams in Judaism.

The Board has been active on internal matters concerning British Jewry, being involved, for example, in legislation concerning shechita (kosher slaughter), opening businesses on Sunday, etc. The Board has also been involved in trying to help Jews outside England, trying to mobilize the British government to intervene. Historically, the board usually prefers quiet diplomacy. In many cases, their approach has angered their own constituents. Langham feels it necessary to conclude the book by asking: “Has the board been good for the Jews?” His conclusion is positive. Recommended for readers interested in Jewish history.

Chaim Seymour, Director, Cataloging and Classification Department, Wurzweiler Library, Bar-Ilan University, Israel


Two Cents Plain begins where Lemelman’s previous biography, Mendel’s Daughter, left off, briefly highlighting the events of that book. It feels less like a memoir and more like family members reminiscing about “the old days” around the kitchen table. Lemelman easily alternates between the various narrative voices, an effect enhanced by the changes in grammar, English approximations (e.g. “bested” for “bastard”), and insertion of Yiddish (always translated for us). He draws with a realistic but relaxed style, occasionally adding authenticity by inserting photographs and documents.

At times, Lemelman’s tales seems archetypal of any American boy growing up in the city in the 1950’s and 60s. However, there are several instances where we are reminded of his Jewishness (e.g. his mother’s insistence on moving to Brooklyn to be in a Jewish neighborhood, his bris, his bar mitzvah, his attending yeshiva). Lemelman recalls...
such joys as growing up in a candy store and discovering a love for painting, but there are dark moments too – the rats and cockroaches in his home, his parents’ constant arguments, being beaten up by anti-Semitic bullies. Towards the end, the family is driven out of Brownsville, mirroring how Lemelman’s parents fled their homes during the Holocaust.

_Two Cents Plain_ is a bittersweet graphic memoir which ultimately reminds us not to lose hope in desperate times and that the history of the Jews is partly a history of learning to adapt and start over. Recommended for the biography and graphic novel sections of public, school, and synagogue collections.

_Steven M. Bergson, [http://jewishcomics.blogspot.com](http://jewishcomics.blogspot.com), Toronto, ON, Canada_


Single people everywhere, alert! If you’re ready to get married (and stay married), you need only follow Chana Levitan’s ten question check sheet. Now, I do NOT mean to minimize the questions Ms. Levitan asks; these are the tough questions we all should ask (or should have asked) ourselves prior to entering any relationship. Questions like number ten: “If the person you are dating never changes, would you still want to get married?” are probing and need to be honestly answered. However, this book doesn’t seem too different from any other book on dating and relationships that one might pick up in a bookstore or the library.

Although written by a Jewish woman living in Jerusalem, a sprinkling of quotes from different rabbis and a brief mention or two of the _Pirkei Avot_, there is nothing that identifies this book as Jewish. That is, this book is first and foremost a book on how to find the right spouse, whether you are an observant Jew or not. Even the promotional blurbs on the back of the book are secular: my very own Governor Jennifer M. Granholm has her endorsement, but none from a rabbi.

I don’t doubt the information in this book and I do think it would make an interesting addition to a public library collecting in pop psychology. I recommend this text for that collection. The price is certainly affordable for even a small synagogue to purchase, but without any real Jewish point of view in this text, I am not recommending it.

_Rachel Minkin, Reference and Instruction Librarian, Lansing Community College; Congregation Kehillat Israel, Lansing, MI_

**Ma’oz, Moshe, ed. _Muslim Attitudes to Jews and Israel: the Ambivalences of Rejection, Antagonism, Tolerance and Cooperation_. Brighton: Sussex Academic Press, 2010. 326 pp. $65.00 (9781845193225).**

“Children of Abraham: Trialogue of Civilizations,” the research project sponsored in 2007 by the Weatherhead Center for International Relations at Harvard University has produced several publications; this is the second. Following an introduction by the editor, it is divided into four parts and fifteen papers; notes and an index are included. The first part, “Anti-Semitism in the Arab and Muslim World: Myth and Reality” includes two papers examining modern myths regarding Muslim anti-Semitism and the image of the Jew/Zionist/Israel in the Arab World. This is followed by “Ambivalent Attitudes in Muslim-Arab Countries” with five papers dealing with specific phenomena regarding Jordan, Egypt, Saudi Arabia, Morocco and Iraq. The five papers in the third part “Non-Arab Muslim Countries/Communities in Asia” deal with Azerbaijan, Turkey, Pakistan, India and Indonesia. The last part examines “Muslim Communities in Africa, Europe and the USA.” Contributors, from the countries discussed and from Israel, include veteran scholars in the field as well as novices, resulting in papers of unequal quality. Thus, all papers add to readers’ understanding and knowledge, but some serve more as source material. In addition, while much data is provided regarding some non-Arab Muslim countries one usually hears less about, it is not clear why a major player like Iran is not included.

_Rachel Simon, Princeton University Library, Princeton, NJ_

**Marks, Gil. _Encyclopedia of Jewish Food_. Hoboken, NJ: John Wiley & Sons, Inc., 2010. 636 pp. $40.00 (9780470391303)._**

_Encyclopedia of Jewish Food_ is a highly enjoyable read, especially for people who love anecdotes and trivia. Jewish foods from eastern Europe, the Middle East and North Africa are well-represented, but I was surprised and pleased to discover many entries on, for example, Indian and Ethiopian foods as well. Marks often includes recipes within an entry, which is another plus. My singular complaint is that this 636-page work is sourced by one-page bibliography, and a one-page listing of cookbooks for further consideration. There are few in-text and no end-of-article citations. Accordingly, I don’t recommend that _Encyclopedia of Jewish Food_ be added as a reference book, but I do recommend it be added to all circulating collections.

_Daniel Scheide, Librarian, Wimberly Library, Florida Atlantic University, Boca Raton, FL; RAS Vice President, AJL; Chair, Bibliography and Reference Book Award, AJL_


The Orthodox Forum Series aims “to create and disseminate a new and vibrant Torah literature addressing the critical issues facing Jewry today.” This volume contains 13 essays by leading figures in the Orthodox world who have first-hand experience interacting with Jews of other ideologies in schools and other institutional settings. The writers include Jonathan D. Sarna, whose essay speaks to the historical perspective of the topic. Ahuva Halberstam, founding Head of School of the pluralistic Abraham Joshua Heschel High School, writes eloquently, accurately
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Rabbi Jill Jacobs  
HC, 11 x 8.5, 32 pp  

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and in great detail about the program of the school and the successful interaction of Jews from many differing backgrounds. This reviewer served for six years under her leadership as founding librarian of the school. Other writers include Marc D. Stern who describes the Orthodox professional in non-Orthodox communal organizations. He brings up the question of how professionals within an organization deal with the lay boards that often include many non-Orthodox Jews who may have different priorities from the professional staff. An article by Sylvia Barack Fishman discusses the impact of the Birthright Israel program and the effect of the encounters between Orthodox Jews and others on Jewish Peoplehood.

This book is a must for all academic collections and for synagogue libraries that have an interest in this subject. It should probably be in all Judaica collections since it is very well written by experts in their respective fields, and it deals with the intersection of all quarters of the Jewish community.


In her follow-up to The Blessing of a Skinned Knee, Wendy Mogel, a clinical psychologist and parent, weaves together information from her family education practice with her parenting experience and traditional Jewish teachings to help parents navigate their children’s transition from childhood to adulthood. As this reviewer knows well, living with teenagers can be challenging (and that’s on the good days).

Mogel discusses the biological and psychological basis for many teen behaviors and how to navigate each one. Topics include living with rudeness, mitigating your teen’s sense of entitlement, and letting teens learn from their mistakes. She gives examples from her family and her practice and offers suggestions on how to deal with each situation. The author steers the reader to focus on character and moral development and not on grades and activities that might look good on a college application. Mogel also acknowledges that much of parenting teens is about waiting for the teens to sort out their own lives and identities. She discusses the importance of parents not focusing all their energies on their children, but rather needing to fortify their own spiritual reserves and keeping up with their own interests.

While the book could have been strengthened by checking the Jewish citations a little more carefully, it is highly recommended for parenting collections.

Sheryl Stahl, Librarian, Frances-Henry Library, HUC-JIR, Los Angeles


In 1948, Jacob Rader Marcus founded the American Jewish Archives in Cincinnati. In 1998 he retired and Gary Zola succeeded him. In the past decade, the Archives has remained a leader in the field.

This volume may be considered an institutional Festschrift, a collection in honor of the sixtieth anniversary of the Archives and Gary Zola’s tenth year as its director. Its editors, three eminent scholars, have gathered a stellar group of academic researchers, and have compiled a collection of 22 essays that spans Jewish history from the arrival of the first settlers in 1654 to Barbra Streisand’s Yentl. The topics are diverse and the analysis is deep. There is a biography of Jonas pp. Levy, brother of Commodore Uriah pp. Levy. Eric Friedland has contributed a major analysis of Rabbi Isaac Moses’ version of the Union Prayerbook (which was rejected by Einhorn advocates and replaced with an alternative version). Jeffrey Gurock has written a thought-provoking history of non-observance among the Orthodox that revises our understanding of the role of tradition in contemporary American life. Shuly Rubin Schwartz explores the myth-making process surrounding Henrietta Szold, and her enshrinement in the National Women’s Hall of Fame. The book is filled with filled with fascinating insights and important re-examination of the American Jewish story and includes notes and an index.

With all of its important information, this book should be in every academic library with a Judaica program. Also, though its cost is high and the essays are scholarly, larger synagogue libraries should consider it.

Fred Isaac, Temple Sinai, Oakland, CA


This riveting memoir opens as the author, a very young schoolgirl in Budapest in 1944, is at a birthday party. She learns of the Nazi’s reign of terror from another schoolmate who recently fled with her family from Poland to Hungary. Born to a prosperous family (her father owned a pharmacy), her family, like most of the Jews in Budapest, was shielded from the Nazi atrocities while Jews in the countryside were not so fortunate. By the fall of 1944, the violent fascist Arrow Cross Party rounded up countless Jews forcing them into death marches, camps and ghettos. Due to the heroic efforts of the author’s former nanny, a gentile, the family is hidden and fed. The book describes how the author, hiding in a bombed-out building, watched Jews shot and thrown into the Danube. Budapest was liberated in January 1945 by the Russian army, following the tragic death of over a half-million Hungarian Jews. The author is the Chair of Holocaust Studies and Literature at the University of Texas. This well written, short autobiography is recommended for high school to adult readers with an interest in the Holocaust in Hungary.

Martin Goldberg, Head Librarian, Penn State University, Monaca, PA

Rabbi Parkoff’s book, which is “packed with wonderful tales and anecdotes, sound advice, and Torah wisdom,” is a primer in many senses of the word. It is an elementary book of elementary principles. It also has great relevance and draws on the council of rabbis of the highest eminence: Rabbi Chaim Pinchas Scheinberg and Rabbi Zeidel Epstein, with whom Rabbi Parkoff developed close relationships at Yeshiva Torah Ore in Jerusalem. Chizuk has been defined as inspiration, encouragement or giving strength, and the stories and advice draw on biblical and talmudic sources, as well as the rabbis’ experience. Topics include dealing with tests or challenges, faith, and coping. The last sections include three articles by Rav Epstein and an appendix of classical commentaries on the subject matter.

There are several gems, including “The Carrot, the Egg and the Coffee Bean,” which shows how different people react to adversity (boiling water), but many of the stories are geared to those who are going to yeshiva full time, replete with references to talmudic and other commentaries with which the average reader will be unfamiliar. Without an index or a glossary, it is a challenge to access the material. Rabbi Parkoff’s weekly chizuk is available online at http://www.shemayisrael.com/parsha/parkoff/, and these small doses may be useful for discussions at the Shabbos table or to refer to for inspiration. The book is best suited to libraries serving the Orthodox community, for which it is a worthwhile addition.

*Kathe Pinchuck, Clifton, NJ; Secretary, School Synagogue and Centers Division. AJL; Past Chair, Sydney Taylor Book Award Committee, AJL*


Based on numerous interviews with key figures from both sides, as well as declassified archival material and published sources, this book examines the secret relations between Israel and the Republic of South Africa until its collapse following the RSA democratic elections in 1994. That election, and the transition to majority rule, meant the end of the apartheid regime. Photographs, maps, notes, bibliography, list of abbreviations, and index are included. The author shows how economic, military and at times ideological reasons were at play in creating and keeping these relations alive, benefiting both sides, while at the same time making sure these contacts be kept secret due to the RSA status in the world arena. The book includes much new data on the mutual economic and military relations, presented in clear and absorbing narrative. The notes, too, provide much relevant information and analysis. Thus, the bulk of the book is ground breaking and clearly presented. The epilogue, though, does not provide a final synthesis of the book’s main topic but focuses on the author’s views regarding whether Israel is an apartheid state and the fate it might reach if it fully simulates RSA policy of apartheid with regards to the West Bank.

*Rachel Simon, Princeton University Library, Princeton, NJ*


The history of the Jews in Poland and Russia occupies a remarkable place in the history of the Jewish people and the development of Jewish religious traditions in the Diaspora. Most American Jews trace their ancestry to Poland or Russia, and the leaders of the Jewish homeland in Palestine and during the first decades of the State of Israel were born in these regions. According to Polonsky, Jews shared a strong sense of common character with only regional differences. Volume 1 “deals with Jewish life in pre-modern Poland Lithuania and with the attempts of the governments of the region from the middle of the 18th century to transform the Jews from members of a transnational community united by faith and culture into subjects or citizens of the countries in which they lived, and the Jewish response.” Polonsky studies in detail the legislations passed by the governments of the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth, Prussia, Galicia, the Duchy of Warsaw and Kingdom of Poland, and the Tsarist Empire. The author is very conscious of firmly grounding the events affecting the Jewish population in the broader general history. The book includes a limited number of footnotes, along with maps and some illustrations, and would be an excellent textbook for college courses if it were published in a more affordable format (paperback). Polonsky offers a good summary of recent scholarship on Eastern European Jewry and provides an excellent short conclusion at the end of each of the dozen chapters in this volume.

Highly recommended for all academic libraries with a Jewish studies program.

*Roger S. Kohn, Independent scholar, Silver Spring, MD*


A good example of an attempt to straddle the fence between impressive scholarly work and a book that would appeal to a broader readership, this exploration of ethnic identity in Georgian Britain presents the results of the government’s controversial attempts to merge different ethnic and national groups through the 1707 Act of Union with Scotland, the Jewish Naturalization Bill of 1753, and the Act of Union with Ireland of 1800. This examination of both the theatrical and the literary representations of Jews, Scots, and Irish citizens is extensively annotated, although too sparsely illustrated. The wealth of historical, literary and cultural references sometimes works against a fluent reading of the book. Deconstruction of plays and novels as a tool for identity studies offers a different perspective from the traditional study of stereotyping, and brings a
modern perspective into a previously well researched area. Regrettably, however, the book is a good example of a work that requires sifting through too many details to find the occasional gold nugget.

Academic libraries collecting in the areas of Jewish identity and Jews in Britain should probably own the book for the use of very dedicated and patient researchers. Definitely not for the lay reader.

Dr. Yaffa Weisman, Librarian, The Frances-Henry Library, Hebrew Union College-Jewish Institute of Religion, Los Angeles


As one who likes food and early rabbinic texts, I found this work, which combines the two, very engaging and appealing. The author uses Jewish studies, food studies and anthropology to view how the Tannaim (Rabbis) constructed identity through culinary and commensal practices. The book demonstrates how early Rabbinic Judaism built identity by legislating what, how and with whom one eats. By regulating dietary law, the Rabbis aimed to distinguish between “Us,” who can eat together (Jews), and “Them,” with whom one cannot eat (non-Jews). This very readable book is enjoyable and interesting.

Yoram Bitton, Hebrew Manuscript Cataloger, Columbia University, New York


Rachel Rubinstein examines the place of the Native American in the imaginations of Jewish writers, adventurers, and intellectuals from the early 19th century through the early 21st. Beginning with Mordechai Noah, a writer in New York, and Solomon Nunes Carvalho in the West, Rubinstein reads the works of her (Jewish) subjects as informed by the Jewish experience while reflective of the American Indian experience, asserting that the two are of the same kind. Rubinstein finds that these early American Jews, consciously or not, found common cause in the Native American experience and identified with them through a shared sense of dislocation, while denying a special relationship between the two groups.

Rubinstein’s 200-year overview includes analysis of notable writers from the 20th century and of Yiddish literary journals. Her work progresses from the Yiddish literary milieu through the Modernist movement to radical left-wing politics referencing Hiawatha and the Kalevala, Henry Ford’s Greenfield Village, Chicago’s The Romance of a People, Henry Roth, and the television program Northern Exposure, among many others, ending with a reading of Michael Chabon’s Yiddish Policeman’s Union.

In her own words, Rubinstein’s epilogue states that her work is predicated on “certain convergences of critical vocabularies across Native and Jewish studies scholarship.” She does not argue for parallels between Jewish and Native American experiences, but rather a relationship of common experience; her purpose was to “lay bare the processes through which such relationships... are imaginatively produced...” I find it somewhat problematic that the author should need to explain in an epilogue the aim of the scholarship at hand. This work should be found in academic libraries with strong collections in Jewish Studies, including Jewish American literature, Yiddish literary studies, and the Jewish experience in 19th century America.

James LaForest, Independent scholar, London, UK


Vines Intertwined is an encyclopedic history of the ancient Hebrews from 640 BCE up to the period of 640 CE and covers the interaction of Jews and Christians. The text is supplemented with a host of appendices covering a listing of Jewish high priests, the Ptolemies, the Seleucids, Roman emperors, Parthian kings, Sasanian kings, principal rabbinic sages, Jewish patriarchs and exarchs, bishops and patriarchs of major Roman cities (excluding Damascus), and ancient historians. The material is broken down into six parts, segmented usefully in chronological order, taking the reader from Josiah and the subjugation of Jerusalem down to the emergence and expansion of Islam. This is an impressive piece of scholarship that can easily serve as a useful referent in a number of settings. Additionally there is an extensive bibliography, but best of all is the attached CD with the text in a searchable PDF format.

Sanford R. Silverburg, Department of History and Politics, Catawba College, Salisbury, NC


This absorbing book, winner of a 2010 Jewish Book Award, describes the birth of the Balfour Declaration, which established a Jewish homeland in Palestine in 1917. Drawing on new material, the author discusses the web of intrigues and competing interests behind its creation—the center of the web being Britain, which tried to accommodate both Arab and Zionist aspirations, while planning at the same time with France to divvy up the Levantine area. Finally aiding, or complicating, this juggling act was World War One, as Britain courted the Arab world to undermine the Turks, Germany’s allies. The author brings to light the influence of the British Jews who, though largely assimilated, used their connections (often through marriage) to further the Zionist cause and the British Arabist/Islamist sympathizers, including Britain’s large Muslim colonial population. Ultimately the vague wording of the Balfour Declaration and faulty translation into Arabic provided a loophole in the Jews’ favor.

The writing is dispassionate but never dry, and the author, without painting horns or halos, brings to life the
key players, who range from the ardent Zionist Chaim Weizmann to the British officer T.E. Lawrence, aka “Lawrence of Arabia.” (There are wry references to that famous film.) Apparently the nationalism of that era, laced with opportunism, was the greatest catalyst, and the author soberly concludes that the end result was profound distrust among all the nationalities involved, which would have ramifications in the days to come. This book is vital for all adult Jewish libraries and Middle East collections.

Haltie Cantor, Acquisitions, Hedi Steinberg Library, Stern College for Women, Yeshiva University, New York


For the past sixty years, Rabbi Harold Schulweis has been a leader, both within the Conservative movement and for the larger Jewish community. Among his gifts has been his willingness to seek out and work with potential Jews by Choice.

This short book from KTAV is divided in two parts. The first section, "Why I am a Jew," contains 56 statements on both the process of conversion and what it means to the seekers. Most of the short essays are from the converts themselves. They talk about their personal paths to Judaism, and the importance Judaism has in their current lives. There are also several comments from those associated with them. These contributions are by spouses and children, non-Jewish parents and others. They provide their own points of view and some surprising insights into their loved ones. The second section includes thoughts from Rabbi Schulweis and other leaders about the people who choose Judaism and their role in contemporary Jewish life. The book is also interspersed with five short, powerful poems on the process and its importance, written by Rabbi Schulweis.

Schulweis highlights the position of Maimonides, who states that in disagreements between sages, where there are no practical ramifications but rather issues of faith/belief, we are not obligated to believe one tradition over another. He states that in disagreements between sages, where there are no practical ramifications but rather issues of faith/belief, we are not obligated to believe one tradition over another. He concludes that our tradition preserved different approaches to dealing with suffering and injustices so the individual can choose the most suitable position to answer certain questions one way and other questions another way.

Rabbi Schwartz spent more than twenty years searching within Judaism for answers to help him cope with suffering and death, having been an only child who was orphaned at an early age. He is an American Orthodox Rabbi who lives in Israel and is the Director of Curriculum Development at the Florence Melton Adult mini-school at the Hebrew University.

This is a must read book for everyone and is absolutely critical for anyone who has occasion to counsel people.

Nathan Aaron Rosen, New York, NY


A truly unique book which should be owned by every synagogue library and any person who struggles with their perception of the “Jewish” tradition regarding suffering and death. I have read nearly every English language Jewish book published on death, dying and mourning and this volume unmistakably stands out. It is not intended to replace a traditional “how to” guide nor the many stories of individuals coping with mourning. Rabbi Schwartz’s book opens the layperson, and even the educated professional, the truly wide range of Jewish viewpoints. Many people grew up with relatively simplistic interpretations of the Jewish views of death and suffering which can lead people into challenging (or even rejecting) faith.

Schwartz highlights various alternative ways to look at these serious topics and provides individual options that do not require the person either to reject Judaism or be placed in a psychologically uncomfortable position.

Schwartz highlights the position of Maimonides, who states that in disagreements between sages, where there are no practical ramifications but rather issues of faith/belief, we are not obligated to believe one tradition over another. He concludes that our tradition preserved different approaches to dealing with suffering and injustice so that each individual can use the widest variety of positions to answer certain questions one way and other questions another way.

Rabbi Schwartz spent more than twenty years searching within Judaism for answers to help him cope with suffering and death, having been an only child who was orphaned at an early age. He is an American Orthodox Rabbi who lives in Israel and is the Director of Curriculum Development at the Florence Melton Adult mini-school at the Hebrew University.

This is a must read book for everyone and is absolutely critical for anyone who has occasion to counsel people.

Nathan Aaron Rosen, New York, NY


This story of an Orthodox Hungarian-Polish woman, from a wealthy Jewish family who miraculously survived the Holocaust makes for fascinating reading. It covers the period from 1938 when Lola was 15 years old to 1946 when her first child was born. During most of this time she and her husband experienced the evil and horrors of the Nazi killing machine and lost most of their families. They fled from hiding place to hiding place several times, barely escaping capture. After her husband was arrested, Lola worked tirelessly to free him from prison. Her strong faith sustained her through many trials. They were able to emigrate to the United States in 1947. Today Lola’s growing family includes her three children, twelve grandchildren and thirty-six great grandchildren. She is a successful artist, and some of her work is included in the book, along with family photographs and charts, and a glossary of Yiddish and Hebrew terms. The book is an important contribution to Holocaust memoirs and is recommended for Holocaust collections in synagogue, high school, academic and public libraries.

Susan Freiband, Library Educator (retired), Arlington, VA


It is always a challenge for the kosher cook to find a luscious cake recipe for the grand finale after a holiday meal. Most of the recipes include butter, milk or sour cream, making it unfit to eat after a meat-based meal. But now this book offers a wonderful range of recipes that will delight both new and experienced bakers. The book contains over
160 recipes, all of which are parve (dairy-free), making them good options to serve after any kind of meal. The recipes are divided into three groups: first, desserts that can be ready in 15 minutes. Next, two-steps desserts, that takes 15 to 30 minutes preparation time and finally, multiple-step desserts and breads that require more than 30 minutes preparation. This innovative way of grouping the recipes, allows all bakers, from beginners to “so you think you are a great balabuste (great homemaker),” to have easy access to wonderful desserts. Also included are Passover recipes and sugarless desserts. The steps are clear and easy to follow and there are photos of some challenging instructions. With comments and tips for many recipes, this book will be well used by the library patrons. I would have liked to see a picture for each recipe, but other than that, this book is a wonderful addition for the cookbook shelf for all community, public and synagogue’s libraries.

Sonia Smith, Jewish Studies Liaison Librarian, McGill University, Montreal, Canada


“The key to understanding Nahman’s view of music is his concept of the ‘good points,’ expounded mainly in Liqutei Moharan I, 546 and 282, which focus on loving-kindness as the source of music and its transformative force.” The author delves into the subject, starting with a presentation of philosophical ideas about creation, divine symbolism, kabbalistic sources, and the purpose of letters, vowels and cantillation. She then considers the evil inclination, imagination, and how music and its effect on the soul “serves as a metaphor for spiritual processes that cannot be expressed in any other way – both as a method of serving God and a metaphor for it.” The tzadik, or righteous person, is the one who can “gather the good points” and compose original melodies and there is a lengthy discussion of his qualities. Smith asserts that music and ‘good points’ weigh heavily in the messianic process.

Although the text is less than 200 pages, it is replete with footnotes, some of which are longer than the ideas being referenced. The book includes a glossary, a bibliography, and a detailed index. While thoroughly researched and full of information, it is an academic approach to something that is more spiritual and emotional to the followers of Rabbi Nachman. I Will Sing! Azamra! (Breslov Institute) highlights those aspects. Jewish libraries that collect books about music and/or Chassidus may want this in their collections, but the hefty price makes this an optional purchase for most libraries.

Kathe Pinchuck, Clifton, NJ; Secretary, School Synagogue and Centers Division. AJL; Past Chair, Sydney Taylor Book Award Committee, AJL


The Candle of God is a selection of Rabbi Steinsaltz’s talks on the writings of Rabbi Schneur Zalman of Liadi, the founder of the Chabad movement, and of his grandson, Rabbi Menahem Mendel (Tsemah Tzedek). Yehuda Hanegbi titled the five main sections presented in this volume: Hidden Aspects of Shabbat; The Way of the Soul and Torah: Essence and Structure; Sanctity and Restraint; The Trials of Life; Implications of the Menora. Rabbi Steinsaltz converses about the essence of Jewish spirituality and tradition. Following the Hasidic viewpoint that “The soul of man is the candle of God,” he elucidates on the foundations of Jewish thought, provoking the reader to respond actively with his own insights and experience.

In his discourses, Rabbi Steinsaltz directs his own thoughts towards both scholars and laypersons. His language and the translation are clear, simple, and easy to follow. However, an index, glossary (especially of kabbalistic terms), and a diagrammatic description of the Sefirot would have facilitated better understanding of these concepts by a broader range of readers.


This book takes a novel look at the Haskalah through the approaches various maskilim took to the work of Lord Byron, one of the premier nineteenth-century romantic poets in England. Though he was not particularly philo-semitic, Byron wrote Hebrew Melodies, a biblically-inspired collection of poems which includes perhaps his most famous work, “She Walks in Beauty,” partly so that they could be set to music by Isaac Nathan. This collection encouraged a variety of responses in maskilim, including translations into biblical Hebrew and Yiddish. The author explores the implications of translating this very English poet into these two Jewish languages by retranslating the Hebrew and Yiddish versions into English that is closer to their actual meaning. She also examines the allegorical sympathies to Judaism that the maskilim saw in Hebrew Melodies, as well as other works by Byron. These range from a rejection of Christian orthodoxy to proto-Zionism. The writers who engaged themselves with Byron form a cross-section of Enlightenment thought, and this book offers a very unusual look at their work, especially regarding the question of which language was best for Jews in the modern era. All of the relevant Hebrew and Yiddish translations are included, and there are thorough notes, a comprehensive bibliography, and an index. Recommended for academic collections.

Beth Duoskin, Catalog Librarian, Proquest; Chair, Library Committee, Beth Israel Congregation, Ann Arbor, MI
The Candle of God is a worthy acquisition to collections of Jewish thought and philosophy in academic, synagogue, and public libraries.

Nira G. Wolfe, Independent researcher, Highland Park, IL; Head Librarian Hebrew Theological College (retired), Skokie, IL


A rich and exciting display of Jewish art that refutes the idea that “the Second Commonwealth’s injunction against graven images had prevented Jews from producing figurative art.” (from the Forward by Julia Weiner).

The author carefully selected a diverse group of paintings, drawings and sculptures that reflect how the Jewish identity of the artists fed into their alliterations of the human figure. The text accompanying the art selections offers a delightful read about Jewish art, and is enriched by references to Jewish history, philosophy and religion.

Highly recommended for libraries collecting in the areas of Jewish art and identity.

Dr. Yaffa Weisman, Librarian, The Frances-Henry Library, Hebrew Union College-Jewish Institute of Religion, Los Angeles


A comprehensive description of practically every British Jewish serviceman’s record during the Second World War against Nazi Germany is included in this volume. Of particular interest to military historians is the listing of Jews in the Auxiliary Services of Civil Defense, a long neglected subject. Similarly the discussion of the Palestinian Jewish volunteers who augmented the British defensive line in North Africa and the Middle East are very important. A major problem in this work is the random organization and lack of consistency from chapter to chapter which reduces the utility considerably. This must be balanced, however, against the narrative of Jews aiding in the fight against the Nazis and Japanese during World War II as well as their participation in the Spanish Civil War and the Korean conflict. While there is a rich source of information here; it varies greatly for individuals and for organizations, but provides the spark for further studies.

In the end, Sugarmann’s effort is important, not only for the actual listing of Jewish contributions to the military, but also to offset the stereotype of the passive nature of Jews in a democracy.

Sanford R. Silverburg, Department of History and Politics, Catawba College, Salisbury, NC.


Including more than 80 original commentaries from Polish citizens describing their experiences during the destruction of Polish Jewry during World War II, this...
Reviews of Nonfiction Titles for Adults


Tanhum ben Joseph ha-Yerushalmi was a scholar and littérateur who lived in Jerusalem for most of his life and died in Fustat (Old Cairo) in 1291. He is the last known biblical exegete of the Rationalistic School, followers of Maimonides, to have written in Judeo-Arabic. Two of his works have survived: Kitab al-Bayan (the Book of Elucidation), consisting of commentaries on the books of the Prophets and Writings and al-Murshid al-kafi (The Sufficient Guide), a lexicon of difficult words in the Mishneh Torah of Maimonides. In the book reviewed here, Michael G. Wechsler has provided an edition, translation and supercommentary of Tanhum’s commentaries on Ruth and Esther, along with a substantial introduction which treats of Tanhum’s exegetical methodology and puts him in his historical and exegetical context. It should be noted that this is the first monographic treatment of Tanhum and translation of his work in the English language and thus, this book is a most welcome addition to the scholarship on this relatively unknown biblical exegete. As Wechsler demonstrates convincingly in his introduction, Tanhum was not a mere compiler and anthologizer of previous biblical scholarship, but a serious exegete in his own right. Of particular importance is the influence on his work of the exegesis of the great Karaite commentator, Yefet ben Eli, and the recognition that Tanhum gives to the role of mudawwin or editor in the compositional process. The book is thoroughly indexed and is further enhanced by an inventory of extant Judeo-Arabic commentaries on Ruth and Esther, as well as a glossary of Tanhum’s exegetical and grammatical terminology. An important work of scholarship, this book is recommended for university and seminary libraries and any other library with an interest in biblical studies.

Sanford R. Silverburg, Professor Department of History and Politics, Catawba College, Salisbury, NC


In The Mind of the Mourner, Dr. Joel Wolowelsky, Dean of Faculty at Yeshiva of Flatbush and associate editor of Tradition, analyzes the psychological, emotional and philosophical aspects of Jewish mourning rituals. The book is not a guide to practical observance, but an in depth explanation of laws and rituals. After reading the book, the reader gains a fuller understanding and greater appreciation for the wisdom behind Jewish mourning rituals. Dr. Wolowelsky discusses difficult topics such as: the responsibility of the child of an abusive parent to sit shiva or not, the expected behavior of those visiting the mourner, and the differences between national and individual mourning. Included in the book are numerous quotes from Rabbi Joseph Soloveitchik and discussions of Rabbi Soloveitchik’s profound insights on grief. In The Mind of the Mourner is highly recommended for synagogue and academic libraries. Its exploration of personal feelings will help to comfort those who are grieving.

Ilka Gordon, Librarian, Siegal College of Judaic Studies, Cleveland, OH


The Zohar is one of those books that it is next to impossible to comprehend without a teacher. However, a manual such as this one, could come close to filling the bill. Wolski’s structure is as simple and straightforward as the material allows. He offers the reader ten separate selections from the Zohar, together with his own translations, based in part on those in Daniel Matt’s and Isaiah Tishby’s works, and accompanying commentary. His explanations draw on the standard academic works on the Zohar and on kabbalistic works in general. He also offers a brief glossary, bibliography, and index.

Wolski has selected sections that illustrate the variety of types of narrative in the Zohar. While the body of the Zohar is structured as a commentary on the individual parashot of the Pentateuch, it has been described variously as a novel and as a biography of God. As most scholars today hold, the text of the Zohar is a compilation of individual narratives composed by a variety of kabbalistic rabbis in Spain in the thirteenth century. It presents itself however as the adventures of a circle of itinerant rabbis whose head is Rabbi Shimon bar Yohai. They ply the highways and byways of second century Land of Israel having fascinating encounters with folk who are usually not what they seem.
Watch out! They may seem to be encountering a child or a common donkey driver, but in fact they are meeting with learned kabbalists who always offer more than they receive.

I highly recommend this book for all academic libraries with collections in Jewish mysticism, as well as for select congregational and community libraries.

Daniel J. Retberg, Librarian, Klaud Library, Hebrew Union College-Jewish Institute of Religion, Cincinnati, OH

LITERATURE: FICTION, POETRY AND LITERARY CRITICISM


Attempting a large sweeping novel capturing the time (1980-2005) and place (upstate New York), and lives of a group of women united by their relationship to Joel, the author struggles mightily to bring her disparate cast of characters to life. There’s Celeste, a repressed slim Catholic obsessed with the macro-biotic way of life; Sylvia, Joel’s “Yiddishe mama;” Lucy, a zaftig black lesbian who falls for the rabbi Melinda; along with Tanya, a free spirit from California; Max, Joel’s baker father; various children and siblings, and of course Joel himself, dying of lung cancer. The short chapters, neatly labeled by character name, and often by time frame, make it easy to keep track of story development, but the characters are cardboard or, especially in the character of Sylvia, cliché. There’s plenty of Jewish flavor, particularly in the chapters centering on Joel’s parents, Holocaust survivors living above their bakery in New York city, and plenty of some-what heavy-handed lessons on the benefits of racial and interfaith amity and the dangers of secrets. The dialog is frequently awkward and the prose sometimes purple but it’s an easy read for someone looking for a little entertainment with a Jewish flavor and not too many tears.

Merrily Hart, Ann Arbor MI; Librarian, Siegal College, Cleveland, OH (retired)


Young David Arbus, an aspiring photographer about to graduate from high school, must negotiate the difficult path between his parents. His mother, a ba’alat teshuvah who has joined an ultra-Orthodox Hasidic sect, wants him to follow suit. His younger sister has already done so. His father, the owner of a Times Square burlesque theatre, wants him to join the family business. David goes with his father, but finds that he misses his sister and his mother. His father, who refuses to modernize his theater by installing peep shows in the lobby and producing in-house porn movies, is orthodox in his own way. When David goes to visit his mother on a holiday, he finds himself looking into the room where the women are celebrating from his side of the mechitzah, another kind of peep show. This novel is both funny and sad, a coming-of-age tale that points out the unwitting selfishness of parents and the price of rigid lifestyles. It is an excellent choice for book group discussions.

Joshua Bratt (The Unthinkable Thoughts of Jacob Green) offers a sensitive look at a very dysfunctional family.

Barbara M. Bibel, Reference Librarian/Consumer Health Information Specialist, Oakland Public Library, Oakland, CA; Congregation Netivot Shalom, Berkeley, CA


In Something Red the main characters are Jewish and their Jewish background strengthens the plot, but Jewishness is not central to the story. The theme is political activism as it affects a family during the waning months of the Carter administration. The father, Dennis, comes from a left-wing upbringing and hates the fact that, as an official of the Department of Agriculture, he has to accept the grain embargo imposed on Russia after it invaded Afghanistan. The mother, Sharon, is trying to reconcile her life as a suburban mother and caterer with her activist ideals from the sixties. Their bulimic daughter, Vanessa, wants to find purity and honesty in punk music, but can’t help seeing through it. Their son, Ben, is a jock until he goes to Brandeis and embraces the hippie culture of the Grateful Dead. This book suffers from very poor editing. There are repetitious passages of Vanessa’s opinions regarding punk rock, band by band. The author attempts to evoke the era with iconic figures and brand names—Donna Summer, American Beauty, Herbal Essence. These names might resonate with readers who recall the late seventies or care about punk music or shampoo, but they will be lost on others. The whole book is written in the clumsy past perfect tense—“Dennis had told,” “before her father had gone,” “the doctors had been relieved.” Libraries that are prone to complaints should be warned that this book contains a fair amount of profanity and frank depictions of sex. An optional purchase except where it has been requested.

Beth Dooskin, Catalog Librarian, Proquest; Chair, Library Committee, Beth Israel Congregation, Ann Arbor, MI


This collection of autobiographical poems won the Old Seventy Creek Poetry Prize in 2009. The poet mainly addresses members of his family, primarily his wife. The poems are detailed memoirs, filled with names of relatives and friends, places, and events, and they are mostly written in the present tense. They include complicated analyses of his daughters’ moods, family dynamics, and recollections of good and bad times that never really come alive for the reader. Though the poems are laid out in stanzas they read like prose, and one of the most successful works in the collection is pure prose: “My Father, the Swimmer.” In
this work, Horn offers a straightforward, simple, affecting remembrance of his father’s life as seen through his son’s eyes, particularly his love of swimming in the Atlantic Ocean. This memoir contains sparkling, tactile imagery that makes it stirring: the father’s white skin in the moonlight, the naugahyde hospital chair Horn sits in after his father’s stroke, “the soul of your language shattered to atoms by the stroke.” The six poems that make up the first section of the book, “The Smell of Time,” are more successful than the rest, particularly “The Tel,” in which the poet’s dream of a tel gradually transforms into a woman’s face, with both objects timeless in their beauty and mystery. Many of the poems are set in Israel or refer to Israeli family members and the Jewish identity of the poet and his family informs the work. For comprehensive collections of Jewish poetry.

Beth Dwoskin, Catalog Librarian, Proquest; Chair, Library Committee, Beth Israel Congregation, Ann Arbor, MI


The author, a poet, narrates a fictionalized biography of her family as her mother, father, and two siblings tell of their journey in war-time Poland. The story begins on a supposed idyllic family farm in pre-war Poland, surrounded by Ukrainian villages. Once Germany invades Poland from the West, Russia, by agreement with Germany, invades from the East. The Russians then round up Poles in their occupied areas and “resettle” them in what were essentially slave labor camps in Siberia. Through an agreement reached through British intervention, Polish slave laborers are released and the father joins the Polish army in exile in Palestine. The family, left behind, travels first to Tanganyika, then are finally transferred to a refugee camp in England. The family is reunited and as Polish DP’s (displaced persons) find ultimate refuge in the United States. Disguised as a novel the story plays on the heartstrings, but does replicate the history of so many Poles, who were first subjugated by the Germans and then degraded by the Russian Communists. Accompanying the tale is a reading guide offered as a supplement, hence adding to the value as a teaching tool. Overall, this memorial, slimly characterized as a novel, is a terrifying experience given a very human face.

Sanford R. Silverburg, Professor Department of History and Politics, Catawba College, Salisbury, NC


These 31 very short stories, many really an anecdote or character sketch rather than a story, provide pleasant reading for a Shabbat afternoon. The brevity, rich Jewish flavor and polished prose explain the appearance of Mr. Kaufman’s stories in publications such as Forward and Moment Magazine. The narrative voice seems to be Mr. Kaufman’s, usually looking back at his youth or relating his father’s tales of the shtetl with nostalgia, with only a few stories set in the recent past. He has filled his sketches with lively fully-realized characters from long-ago: Herr Schmidt, who taught the narrator violin, briefly and unsuccessfully; Miller the shammes, who hated children; a Civil War veteran who had shaken Abraham Lincoln’s hand; Simcha Youssel Kaplan, the most upright man in his father’s shtetl, but who turned out to be a fake Kohane (member of the priestly class). Catchy titles such as “The Passing of Bubbeleh” (a pet guinea pig) or “Don’t Blame it on Greta Garbo” attract the reader. With two books of short stories published, the author, a nonagenarian, former journalist and retired fund raiser for the Jewish Theological Seminary, has developed another career in his sunset years. A glossary of Yiddish and Hebrew terms is included.

Merrily Hart, Ann Arbor MI; Librarian, Siegal College, Cleveland, OH (retired)


Lecture Six in The B.G. Rudolph Lectures in Judaic Studies, given at Syracuse University, this book is “an edited transcript based on Etgar Keret’s improvised comments and four of his short pieces.” It also includes a preface, and the introduction of Keret that was given at the lecture. Keret’s focus at this lecture was on his experience as the child of Holocaust survivors and that is also the concern of the four stories. In the lecture, he spoke about how his parents survived, their optimism, attitudes in Israel about the Holocaust when he was growing up, and his popularity in Poland and Germany. His ideas about post-war responses to the Holocaust are honest, fresh, and logical, yet deeply felt. Miriam Schlesinger translated the stories “Asthma Attack,” “Shoes,” and “A Foreign Language,” while “Siren” was translated by Anthony Berris. The translations are excellent and capture the spare, direct style of Hebrew, along with the modesty and irony that characterizes Etgar Keret’s work. All these stories have been previously published. “Asthma Attack” appears in The Girl on the Fridge and “Shoes” and “Siren” appear in The Bus Driver Who Wanted to be God & Other Stories. “A Foreign Language” appears in Missing Kissinger, which was published in England. Libraries that don’t already have these works by Keret will definitely want to purchase this book, which represents some of the finest modern Israeli literature.

Beth Dwoskin, Catalog Librarian, Proquest; Chair, Library Committee, Beth Israel Congregation, Ann Arbor, MI


The Pop Lit Book Club Series focuses on popular authors whose works are often chosen for book clubs. This book is a comprehensive treatment of every aspect of Chabon’s
life and work. It contains biographical information, plot, character, and theme summaries for all his books, discussion of themes that recur throughout his work, and even the history of his presence on the Internet and in other media. The book also includes a bibliography and index. The writing is clear and engaging, but the most impressive feature of this book is its thoroughness. If readers can’t find an answer to a question about Chabon in this book, they will find it in one of the references the book provides. The only aspect of this book that might not always be successful is the discussion questions the author supplies at the end of each chapter, which are meant to stimulate book club debate. The author is a college professor, and some of the questions sound like essay assignments. Also, some are so vague as to be unanswerable, although others are more explicit and should provoke lively conversations. This book is highly recommended for synagogue collections that include Chabon’s work, as well as for academic collections.

Beth Dwoskin, Catalog Librarian, Proquest; Chair, Library Committee, Beth Israel Congregation, Ann Arbor, MI


Written as a sequel to Mother and Me: Escape from Warsaw 1939, this engaging semi-fictional memoir is fast reading and keeps your interest throughout. The author (who was eight years old at the time) relates his escape along with his socialite mother from Warsaw as the city is being bombed. Following a dangerous journey through the Carpathian Mountains, they settle in Hungary. Always on the move, they go from one friend to another, avoiding any suspicion. The author relates events through his recollection, and is often torn between being born Jewish and raised by his Catholic governess, resulting in a very observant Catholic who is at odds with his mother over religion, relationships, values and life in general. Both memoirs are recommended for large Holocaust collections, for high school to adult.

Martin Goldberg, Head Librarian, Penn State University, Monaca, PA


Promised Lands, edited by Eric Rubin is a collection of twenty-three previously unpublished short stories by contemporary Jewish American writers, written especially for this anthology. Authors, Elisa Albert, Melvin Jules Bukiet, Nessa Rapoport, Tova Mirvis, Steve Stern and Dara Horn are included in this varied and interesting collection. Each story deftly explores the Jewish immigrant experience. Some of the characters are able to adjust to their new homeland while others feel alienated from the new land. The stories are interesting, thought provoking, bizarre and strike an emotional response in the reader. Recommended for all libraries who collect important twenty-first century Jewish fiction.

Ilka Gordon, Librarian, Siegal College of Judaic Studies, Cleveland, OH


This charming first novel tells the story of Jack and Sadie Rosenblum who leave Berlin, Germany, at the onset of World War II, for London, England. The book chronicles their life as immigrants in their adopted country, as Jack struggles to be accepted as an Englishman. He becomes a successful businessman, and then realizes his dream to feel fully British by belonging to a golf club. In order to do this, he moves his family to the country and builds his own golf course, since he has been denied membership in existing clubs because he is a Jew. His trials and tribulations, triumphs and despairs make absorbing reading. The book was inspired in part by the author’s memories of her grandparents’ experience. It is well written, funny, and provides a memorable description of post war country life in England. It is recommended for fiction collections in all types of Jewish libraries.

Susan Freiband, Library Educator (retired), Arlington, VA

Don’t forget to read your AJL News!

February/March 2011
Vol 1, Issue 1

for Convention Information and Registration Form,
Chapter Chatter,
a fascinating interview with Linda Silver, and more!
**SOUND RECORDINGS**


With a nod to John Zorn “for being the inspirational source” (and executive producer) and a quote from Gandhi printed in the liner notes, the listener would correctly anticipate an eclectic mix, often in the same composition. The eight tracks included average about five minutes each, and while all of them were composed by Daphna Sadeh, there is a definite influence of traditional Jewish melodies, obviously on “Avinu” and with more subtlety on the other tracks. The music is also reminiscent of Leonard Cohen, a fusion of klezmer and jazz with its soft discordance and playful cadences.

These pleasant instrumentals provide excellent background music. “Queen of Sheba” kicks off the album with a snappy oom-pah beat. “Kill’s” lively improvisation is followed by the more sorrowful tune of “Kadish,” which showcases Stewart Curtis’ skills on wind instruments. “What Else Is There” is based on a traditional Yemenite song, providing a change up from the “Ashkenazi” sound of the brass and clarinet. A good introduction to experimental Jewish music, this CD is recommended to those Jewish libraries that collect music and whose patrons appreciate a slight deviation from the norm.

*Kathe Pinchuck, Clifton, NJ; Secretary, School Synagogue and Centers Division. AJL; Past Chair, Sydney Taylor Book Award Committee, AJL*


Shir is a group of four London-based musicians who recorded the 16 tracks on this CD with the assistance of several side-players. The title of the CD reflects the mixture of Ashkenazic and Sephardic melodies among the tracks. Actually, only five of the tracks are straightforward Sephardic tunes, with medleys of Sephardic and/or Israeli with Ashkenazic tunes on three others. These musicians chose well-known songs for this effort, and listeners will recognize most, if not all of them. The singing is unexceptional, but the playing is lovely—highly skilled, but not showy. The arrangements are simple and fresh, revealing a folk beauty that inspires repeated listening. The minimal orchestration lets the traditional flavor of the music shine, but the sensibility is modern, with very professional production. It’s an ensemble sound—no one musician stands out. The main weakness of this CD is the liner notes. There is a reproduction of a beautiful antique map of Israel on the cover, but almost no information about the music. English translations are given for the five Sephardic tracks (presumably because they are the only vocal tracks except for a Hebrew piece in one medley), but there are no other notes on any of the tracks. Notes about the history and provenance of the songs is especially desirable in a CD of folk tunes. This CD is recommended for all libraries that are collecting Jewish music CD’s, and especially those that receive requests for Jewish dance and party music.

*Beth Dwoskin, Catalog Librarian, Proquest; Chair, Library Committee, Beth Israel Congregation, Ann Arbor, MI*

**VIDEO RECORDINGS**


Kate Feiffer, the daughter of cartoonist Jules Feiffer and his wife, Judy, has given us a film about the dilemma of Jewish identity in America today for secular Jews. The first question addressed is defining what ‘secular’ means and its effect on Jewish continuity.

Interviewees include Kate’s parents, family members, Deborah Newitz, a good friend from childhood, Mike Wallace, Rabbi Ephraim Buchwald, Daphne Merkin and Alan Dershowitz. Kate explains that growing up, the fact that she is Jewish was never even mentioned because of the secular nature of her parents’ mind set. The entire movie delves into the question of Jewish identity, the differing views of those interviewed, and the importance it has in their lives. Mike Wallace, for example, says that he is definitely Jewish and the ethical and moral values by which he lives are his personal form of Judaism. One family has a Christmas tree even though both members of the family are Jewish. The mother states that growing up her daughter thought that ‘Hanukkah’ was Yiddish for Santa Claus.

On the whole, this movie presents a picture of Jewish life in America today with all its bumps and warts in terms of Jewish survival. Rabbi Buchwald clearly states that the organization with which he is connected, The National Jewish Outreach Program, is reaching some of these secular Jews who are interested in learning more about their tradition. But he says that ‘feeling Jewish’ is not enough to ensure our survival as a people. The movie is well done but too long. It could have made its point in 35-40 minutes just as well. Appropriate for large Jewish media collections.

*Marion M. Stein, Founding Librarian, the Abraham Joshua Heschel High School, (retired) New York*