Editor's Note

Anne Dublin

According to a recent article in Digital Book World (http://tinyurl.com/c8cuv7n), the top ten trends in children's books are:

1. Bullying
2. Science Fiction Fans
3. Intriguing Nonfiction
4. Novels-in-Cartoons
5. Kid Lit on the Screen
6. War
7. Tough Girls
8. Survival Stories
9. Spotlight on Diversity
10. Nature Runs Amok

As we try to interest our Jewish youth in reading Jewish books, it behooves us to think of these topics in relation to the Jewish books being published right here and right now. In this issue of AJL Reviews, you will find books about tough girls (Intentions and Brave Girl), bullying (Greenhorn), intriguing non-fiction (Bill the Boy Wonder: The Secret Co-Creator of Batman), war and survival (Rescuing the Children: The Story of the Kindertransport), and of course, our own Jewish diversity (No Baths at Camp and The Cats on Ben Yehuda Street).

You will read reviews of books written by new or experienced writers, published by companies who produce only a few books per year or many, and illustrated by artists who are beginning their careers or have achieved mastery of their craft.

The world of Jewish children’s literature is exciting and varied. It is up to us—librarians, parents, and grandparents—to encourage our youth to taste some of the delicious offerings available to them. We have come a long way since Sydney Taylor’s All of a Kind Family!

CONTENTS

Titles for Children & Teens p. 1
Editor’s Note p. 1
Spotlight p. 2
Bible Stories p. 3
Biographies p. 3
Board Books p. 4
Cookery p. 5
Fiction p. 5
God & Prayer p. 7

Holocaust and WWII p. 8
Jewish Life & Values p. 9
Picture Books p. 12
Shabbat and Holidays p. 13
DVD p. 16

Reviews of Nonfiction Titles for Adults p. 17
Reviews of Literature Titles for Adults p. 40
Reviews of Multimedia p. 43
Credits and Contact p. 44

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Rachel, Jake, and Adam are three Jewish teenagers who attend high school and confirmation class together. Rachel inadvertently overhears her much-revered rabbi having sex with a congregant on the bimah. This discovery affects Rachel’s behavior and that of other people around her. She questions everything she’s been taught and desperately searches for an anchor in her life. She starts to make risky choices and gets into trouble—with teachers, family, and friends—as she explores drugs, alcohol, and sex. Intertwined with the events are layers of Jewish ethics and liberal practice: sitting shiva, Shabbat dinners, the Oneg Shabbat at Friday night services, and Hebrew words like hamotzi, bima, and kavanah. Rachel’s strong voice tells us of her pain, confusion, and anger: “I’m sure from the outside it looks like I’m just a normal teenage girl sitting on the temple steps waiting for her mother to pick her up. From the inside it feels like I am a teenager in hell.” She grapples with issues of right and wrong, loyalty and betrayal, love and hate. And yet, Sparks of dark humor relieve some of the despair and anger that Rachel feels: “If that was sleep, then Cheez Whiz is cheese.” By the end of the book, she realizes that people are human and not the heroes she thought they were. She faces her problems with courage, takes responsibility for her actions, and thus finds a kind of resolution. But this is an almost-adult book. Life is messy. Not all problems can be solved.

*Intentions* is not a book for the faint of heart: The language is gritty; the events, gut-wrenching; the themes, troubling. Heiligman writes in language that is gutsy and current about issues that many teenagers are forced to face. *Intentions* is contemporary young adult fiction at its most powerful.

Anne Dublin, Toronto, Canada


Bruce Wayne and Dick Grayson battled bad guys while in disguise and never received public acclaim for their efforts. Likewise, Bill Finger, the co-creator of and main writer for Batman and Robin hid behind his pen for decades and remained virtually unknown except to a select few. In this graphic novel-style book, Nobleman strips away the mask of oblivion and tells the story of an identity uncovered and a wrong righted. Finger’s use of secret identities began early in his writing career when he needed to obscure his Jewish roots in order to get a job during the Great Depression, changing his first name from “Milton” to “Bill.” The cloak of secrecy remained in place following Finger’s initial collaboration with Bob Kane after brainstorming ideas and concepts for the new superhero, Batman. Kane pitched their comic book idea to an editor at the company which later became DC Comics. Their concept was accepted, yet Kane negotiated a deal which left Finger in the shadows, giving all the credit to Kane alone. As was typical for the time, Finger agreed to write the new series without getting a byline. Consequently, unlike Kane, Finger did not reap the huge financial rewards or accolades associated with being a co-creator of the wildly successful series. It was not until many years later that fellow comic book writers and dedicated comic book fans lobbied to recognize Finger’s intimate and ongoing contribution to the Dynamic Duo’s birth and longevity. Their efforts brought about the Bill Finger Awards for Excellence in Comic Book Writing given annually at the San Diego Comic-Con.

Thanks to Nobleman’s tireless research, the story has another happy ending. After finding Finger’s long-lost and only grandchild, Athena, he urged her to take her place as the rightful heir to Finger’s portion of the royalties. Templeton, a Canadian cartoonist who has written and drawn for *Batman* and other comic books, stayed true to the original style when creating the book’s illustrations. They are done on 30-lb. bond paper, inked with Faber-Castell artist pens, and colored in Photoshop. The day-to-day scenes favor muted tans, browns, and blues, while the imaginary world inhabited by the instantly recognizable comic book characters pop off the page in bold and vivid colors. A six-page author’s note details Nobleman’s exhaustive sleuthing done in order to bring the truth to light. The book includes a selected bibliography for further reading. *Bill the Boy Wonder* is a recommended read for Batman enthusiasts of all ages who enjoy stories about justice being served. The Caped Crusader would also approve. (Nobleman is the prolific writer of more than 70 children’s books including *Boys of Steel: The Creators of Superman.*)

Allison Marks, Temple Israel Library, Akron, OH
Reviews of Titles for Children and Teens

Edited by ANNE DUBLIN & RACHEL KAMIN

BIBLE STORIES


A comical retelling of the Noah’s Ark story brings to light many ethical dilemmas faced by two penguins and a dove when an invitation is extended to them to come aboard Noah’s ark. Most importantly, the penguins worry about whether to leave behind their little penguin friend, since only two of each animal are allowed on the ark. There is no specifically Jewish content. In fact, there are moments where G-d seems punitive. When a little penguin kills a butterfly, his friend says, “God... never forgets to punish a penguin who hasn’t stuck to the rules.” The little penguin also asks if “God’s letting all the other animals drown?” Even when framed in a playful context, these are worrying questions for pre-adolescents. The cartoon drawings add a bit of charm to the edgy humor. The font is a bit small and the writing dense for typical chapter book readers. Overall, the humor is not really age appropriate unless read aloud in a very jovial manner. Coupled with a lack of Jewish content, Meet at the Ark at Eight is not recommended for Jewish libraries.

We’re All in the Same Boat by Zachary Shapiro and Jack E. Davis is a playful picture book about Noah’s Ark that is more consistent with a Jewish perspective.

Barbara Bietz, Past Chair, Sydney Taylor Book Award Committee, Oak Park, CA

BIography


It is quite difficult for human beings to confront the atrocities of the Holocaust. Irena Sendler, who lived in Poland through World War II, chose to act against it. She helped the Polish Jews and rescued about 2,500 children from the Warsaw Ghetto. In this biography of Irena Sendler, Susan Brophy Down presents the history of the Holocaust in simple and direct words, accompanied by many authentic black and white photographs. Besides telling about Irena Sendler, Down briefly explains which European nations supported anti-Semitism, and which Resistance movements in Europe (specifically the Polish Zegota) fought against Nazi atrocities. She also introduces the reader to important individuals such as Hitler and Stalin, and to those who fought against the Nazis.

Jan Karski, Janusz Korczak, Sir Nicholas Winton, Jadwiga Piotrowska, Julian Grobelny, and Carl Lutz become alive with the stories of their brave lives. The author provides a chronology, glossary, index, and further information in a bibliography of books, videos, and websites. Irena Sendler is a role model for all humanity. She is recognized as such, and Down’s biography of her is a worthwhile addition to all collections of synagogue, day schools, public schools, and public libraries.

Nira Wolfe, Highland Park, IL


Brave Girl is a picture-book biography of Clara Lemlich, a poor Jewish immigrant girl who must go to work sewing in a factory in order to help support her family. Clara gets fed up with the way her fellow workers are being treated: “The sunless room is stuffy from all the bodies crammed inside. There are two filthy toilets, one sink, and three towels for three hundred girls to share.” Clara’s strong personality shines through in the deft details Markel weaves in her story: When Clara leads her fellow workers to strike, “the police arrest her seventeen times. They break six of her ribs, but they can’t break her spirit. It’s shatterproof.” Ultimately, Clara helps lead the largest walkout of women workers in United States history. The ILGWU strike leads to success. Workers in hundreds of shops are allowed to form unions, as well as getting a shorter workweek and a raise in salaries. The historical note at the end of the book explains that not all the companies agreed to negotiate. Tragically, one of these was the Triangle Shirtwaist Factory.

Melissa Sweet’s illustrations are fashioned in watercolor, gouache, and mixed media. Scraps of material and different stitches provide variety and a touch of whimsy to the background. Clara’s red hair ribbon and
skirt add color to a muted palette of mostly browns, greys, and blues. Different perspectives—from above, below, sideways, long shots, and close-ups—add interest to every page. The detailed bibliography of general and primary sources tells where to find more information about this fascinating subject. For those many Jewish children whose great-grandparents worked in the needle trades, Brave Girl is a terrific starting point for learning about the labor movement, women’s rights, and the immigrant experience in America.

Anne Dublin, Toronto, Canada

BOARD BOOKS


What Do You See? At School is part of Bracha Goetz’s What Do You See board book series that includes: At Home; On Sukkos; On Shabbos; On Pesach; and On Chanukah. “When you go to school you see,” is the refrain on each double page. The child pictured in a color photograph sees a car, a van, and a car seat. At school the child sees clothing, games, food and toys. The Jewish content consists of a boy wearing a kippah, some Jewish symbols on blocks, and crafts the child brings home. The text mentions brachos that the child says on yummy food at lunch. Recommended for the board book collection especially where the rest of the series is popular.

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


In this charming story, people of different ages, gender, and races plant and take care of trees and enjoy their bounty. The lively illustrations portray people enjoying various activities, like climbing trees, having a Tu B’shevat picnic, singing, dancing, recycling, and swinging from trees. The rhyming couplets and rhythms are simple, effective, and age-appropriate. Bright greens, blues, and reds dominate these sturdy pages in collage-type illustrations reminiscent of Eric Carle’s work. Thank You, Trees! is not appropriate for Orthodox children, due to the non-tznaiut (modest) clothing. A better choice for this audience might be Dear Tree: A Tu B’shevat Wish (Hachai, 2010).

Anne Dublin, Toronto, Canada


Anne Frank eloquently stated, “It only takes a moment to start to improve the world.” In this board book, Vivian Newman portrays a boy who has decided to perform acts of tikkun olam (fixing the world). Ted recycles bottles, makes art projects from what he finds in the trash, rakes leaves, walks dogs, waters plants in a garden, and feeds birds. He accomplishes a new act of tikkun olam each day of the week, and at the end rests on Shabbat. Newman’s text is a bit repetitious; however, Ted’s actions are important to emulate. Surprisingly, the author doesn’t show Ted caring for other humans. This omission may bother some readers as well as the weak, computer-generated illustrations. For example, Ted is drawn without a nose or eyebrows and his eyes are sometimes drawn as half circles. But if one goes past the faults in the illustrations and text, Tikkun Olam Ted may inspire some kids to do more acts of repairing this world.

Ben Pastcan, Librarian, Shalom School, Sacramento, CA


The rhyming text in this slightly oversized (8½ by 8½) concept board book reads: “In Torah, out Torah, dance all about, Torah! Torah big, Torah small, Torah, Torah, best of all! Letters black, parchment white, open wide, closed up tight. Torah up, Torah down, on goes the Torah’s crown! See it far; kiss it near, Torah, Torah, oh, so dear!” The opposite words are highlighted with a larger, bolder font. The colorful, appealing illustrations show adult men in tallitot and kippot lifting, holding, reading, and dancing with a large Torah while young boys in tzitzit and kippot hug, carry, and kiss smaller Torah scrolls. Hand motions and movements will come naturally making this a perfect read-aloud selection for the youngest preschoolers on Simchat Torah, Shavuot, Shabbat, and anytime. However, some readers may be disappointed by the absence of women and girls in the illustrations.

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


I don’t often think of cookbooks as energetic. But if ever a cookbook deserves that adjective with exuberant thrown in as well, it’s “Recipe Rachel” Harkham’s new cookbook, *Get Cooking!* Aimed at young people who are just beginning to cook, it covers cooking tips, kitchen safety, and kosher basics in the introductory pages. The recipes are arranged according to the Jewish calendar beginning with a full menu of Shabbat foods to Rosh Hashanah and through the entire year ending with Shavuot. What makes this book different from Jill Colella Bloomfield’s excellent *Jewish Holidays Cookbook* is the inclusion of recipes for secular holidays and gathering times such as Thanksgiving, New Year’s Eve, Football Sundays, April Fool’s Day and the Fourth of July. Each chapter contains a full complement of interesting recipes, clearly explained, that will stretch the palate of most children. These recipes look easy and delicious.

Two additional features make this cookbook unique. The authors include over 30 activities that expand a traditional cookbook format into something much more. The “Get Cooking Activities” run the gamut from arts and crafts to the spiritual. This is a fun and creative extension that raises the value of the book beyond recipes. And most engaging of all, a music CD accompanies the book. The 29 tracks by singer and composer Mama Doni are catchy and creative with just the right amount of silly thrown in. Whether you listen to the tunes as you cook or in the car, the whole family will enjoy this new Jewish music CD.

The graphic design of the text and photos has a more frenetic feel than Susie Fishbein’s elegant *Kosher by Design: Kids in the Kitchen*. Each page contains a busy charm that invites close reading. *Get Cooking* is sure to fly off the shelves!

*Rena Citrin, Bernard Zell Anshe Emet Day School, Chicago, IL*

FICtIoN - MIDDLE GRADES


*Kaytek the Wizard* is the episodic adventures of a Czech boy, about nine or ten years old. He seems older as he travels around the city and around the world independently, getting into trouble and out of it by magic. He explores and practices wizardry, his newly acquired skill. Sometimes compared to a Harry Potter story, this is quite different. Each chapter narrates a separate adventure, and there is no story line or character development. The reader or listener has the satisfaction of seeing the tables turned and witnessing a child controlling the adults around him. The book is handsomely illustrated by the well-known Israeli illustrator and cartoonist, Avi Katz, with full-page dramatic scenes in monochrome and a full-color cover showing Kaytek flying over the city.

Is there any Jewish content here? Neither Kaytek nor his parents or grandmother are described as Jewish. No Jewish holidays, history, or other Jewish subjects are mentioned. Ironically, the Jewish content consists in its absence. Such was the assimilated Judaism of many European Jews in 1934. All 200 of the Jewish orphans in Korczak’s school, who boarded the train in Warsaw, were murdered in Auschwitz, along with their teacher and defender Korczak. Neither assimilation nor education, neither humanism nor sacrifice of his life to stay with his children deterred the Nazis from murdering them solely because they were Jews. According to the book review guidelines of the *AJL Bulletin*, this is not a Jewish book. Nevertheless, it is a book by one of the outstanding Jewish educators and heroes of the Holocaust period, and as such it has Jewish resonance, meaning and importance.

There is a valuable afterward by the translator, Antonia Lloyd-Jones that gives readers historical information about Janusz Korczak and this book. The lack of plot and character development and the dated language may not appeal to today’s children but *Kaytek the Wizard* is recommended for libraries with Holocaust collections and other works by and about Janusz Korczak.

*Naomi Morse, independent reviewer, Silver Spring, MD*

Aaron, who stutters badly, narrates this short novel about Daniel, a young Holocaust survivor, who arrives at a yeshiva in Brooklyn in 1946. Daniel rarely speaks, and carries a small box with him wherever he goes. The boys form a cautious friendship, not least because they are both taunted by the other boys in the class. The mystery of what’s in Daniel’s box nags at them all. When one of the class bullies grabs the box and opens it, the boys are surprised to see that it contains a small lump that looks like a rock. The lump turns out to be soap made in a concentration camp, which Daniel carries because he thinks it might include remnants of his parents. The afterword explains that the novel is based on a true story, and that the adult Daniel eventually buried the box and the soap.

The novella’s vocabulary, descriptions of children’s cruel behavior, and especially the very disturbing box and its contents make it unsuitable for young readers. Older readers, who are ready for the difficult subject matter, may be turned off by the brevity and illustrations. Even older children who read *Greenhorn* should have the opportunity to discuss it with caring adults.

Marci Lavine Bloch, D&R International, Silver Spring, MD and past member of the Sydney Taylor Book Award Committee [Editor’s note: Anna Olswanger is an AJL member. See more about her and her new book in the News issue].

**FICTION - TEEN**


*Island Eyes, Island Skies* is an unusual coming-of-age book for teen readers, with well-developed characters. The story, told in alternating first-person voices, shifts between the two major protagonists: D.C., a female tennis lover, and Rob, whom she calls Runner Boy. These two strong characters are very smart pre-teens who love seeing movies, exchanging texts that play with words, sports, and adventure. They are two “good kids” who show maturity beyond their twelve years of age. D.C., who has recently moved to their suburban town with her family, and Rob meet at D.C.’s cousin’s party, and instantly feel a connection. When school begins in the fall, they find themselves in classes together. Their relationship is forced to endure vicissitudes beyond what any twelve-year old should have to. D.C.’s mother suffers a miscarriage at about the same time as Rob’s beloved father succumbs to a fatal heart attack. Each picks up the pieces of their lives and seemingly maintains their normal activities, though at times their pain comes to the fore with great force.

The writing is powerful and well crafted, and keeps the reader engaged throughout. This reader found the normalcy and tranquility of the two friends’ lives jarringly broken when extreme tragedy strikes each one, and yet they seem able to move on. The losses are palpable, but until the final tragedy at the end, both cope unbelievably well while also helping parents and siblings. There is limited Jewish content though it is clear that Rob’s mother is Jewish, and the family is a member of the local JCC and celebrates Hanukkah together.

Shelly Feit, Moriah School Library, Englewood, NJ
Reviews of Titles for Children and Teens


At the beginning of this final installment of *The Boy Sherlock Holmes* series, Sherlock Holmes mourns his father’s death and still feels responsible for his mother’s death. He also faces the failing health of his mentor, Sigerson Bell. Sherlock reaches out to his only family member, his older brother, Mycroft who, despite being “a half-Jew”, has risen to a position in the British Treasury Department. While visiting Mycroft at the Treasury, Sherlock notices Grimsby, one of his enemy Malefactor’s cronies, going to work there. He then realizes that Malefactor has his grips in the government. With some investigation, Sherlock discovers that Malefactor is securing a place for Grimsby in the Treasury by threatening to expose a secret of the Governor. When Grimsby tries to profit for himself from the Governor, he ends up murdered. In order to trap Malefactor, Sherlock wants to prove to the police that Malefactor’s gigantic hit man, Crew, is responsible for Grimsby’s death. This goal leads Sherlock on a dangerous and at times stomach-turning pursuit of Crew. The surprise ending reveals that Sherlock himself is morally conflicted in his efforts to defeat the evil Malefactor.

Even though readers know that Sherlock Holmes will live to go on to the original series, *The Adventures of Sherlock Holmes* by Sir Arthur Conan Doyle, they will still be in suspense from the danger that Sherlock finds himself. This installment paves the way for Doyle’s series by revealing Malefactor’s true name as Moriarty and having him still alive and well. (Moriarty is Sherlock’s arch enemy in *The Adventures of Sherlock Holmes.*) Furthermore, Sherlock’s autonomous character in Doyle’s series is defined; he realizes that he must distance himself from his true love, Irene Doyle, for her own safety. In Peacock’s novel, Sherlock chooses to become anonymous and drop his background of growing up in the slums of London and having a father who is Jewish.

Readers do not need to read the other installments in *The Boy Sherlock Holmes* series to be able to follow the narrative in this book. Events in the other books are mentioned in order to explain Sherlock’s motivations. However, reading the other titles would make the storyline more poignant. Recommended for Jewish and public libraries.

Heather Lenson, Ratner Media & Technology Center, Jewish Education Center of Cleveland and editor of Jewish Valuesfinder, Cleveland, OH

**GOD & PRAYER**


In this colorful picture book, Joshua Buchin has adapted and translated the traditional traveler’s prayer. An English translation of one sentence of the prayer is quoted on each double page. However, it is difficult to determine what text and illustrations are meant to convey due to the lack of continuity. A timeline at the end of the book includes the expulsion of the Jews from Spain, Jews settling in England, and Jewish traders in India and China. The last few pages also provide the Hebrew text, and a line-by-line translation of the traveler’s prayer and Psalm 121, as well as a preachy review of the purpose of the traveler’s prayer. Two similarly formatted books, *The Bedtime Sh’ma* and *Modeh Ani* (both by Sarah Gershman and published by EKS Publishing), follow the traditional meaning and intent of the text; the illustrations augment and enhance the words; kindergartners and first graders can easily relate to the children in the pictures. These positive elements are missing from Buchin’s book. *Tefilat HaDerech* is therefore not recommended.

Ilka Gordon, Siegal College of Judaic Studies and Library Journal’s audio reviewer of the year, Cleveland, OH


Each of the berachos ha-shachar (morning blessings) has its own page complete with the text of the blessing in Hebrew and its English translation. Each is also accompanied by both a simple short poem discussing the blessing, and graphics to enhance it. A connection is made between a child’s daily activities, and the effects of the morning prayer and the merits of a religiously observant lifestyle. Illustrations are simple old-fashioned pictures, though there is one odd depiction of a soldier who appears to be a German. This picture book is well-intentioned as an explanation for young children of the daily prayers they recite. It is, however, not recommended for most libraries; it will only appeal to the niche market within the ultra-Orthodox community.

Shelly Feit, Moriah School Library, Englewood New Jersey

The Tribe is the youth movement of the United Synagogue of the United Kingdom, a modern Orthodox audience. The siddur (daily prayer book) has a very attractive layout that is clearly organized and color coded with differently shaped bullet points for a variety of informational notes. As Chief Rabbi Lord Jonathan Sacks mentions in his introduction: “This siddur is a…. demonstration of the integral link the Tribe now has with all young people across the community.” Since the Orthodox community in the US is different from that in Britain, it is important for each potential user of this siddur to evaluate how it might work in his/her particular setting. The text of the siddur is selective. For example, not all psalms of the Shacharit Pesukei d’Zimra are included. There is an informational note stating “You will find the complete Pesukei d’Zimra in a standard siddur.” The Tefillah throughout is not translated into English but rather a short précis or summary of the meaning of the prayer is included instead. In addition, because this book is produced under Orthodox auspices, it does not contain egalitarian language. While it may be a useful addition to a siddur collection in a school or synagogue library for reference and comparative purposes, or for home use where the family is learning about Jewish prayer practices, the rationale for including certain materials and not others is not completely clear. This is an additional purchase for most libraries outside the UK.

Marion M. Stein, retired librarian, The Abraham Heschel High School, Brooklyn, NY and past president of AJL-NYMA


There is a growing desire for children to take part in tikkun olam, including both group and individual projects. Dr. Ron Wolfson has put together a kid-friendly version of his adult book, God’s To-Do List: 103 Ways to Be an Angel and Do God’s Work on Earth, to connect both with the concepts and their religious background. Be Like God begins with the concept that everyone is made B’tzelem Elohim, in God’s image. Each of us, Wolfson says, can be a Superhero, acting for the good of the world by doing holy acts. Each of the book’s ten chapters identifies one activity that God performs: Create, Comfort, Repair, Forgive, etc. The section describes Biblical incidents of the trait, including Hebrew from the Torah and prayers. The author invites the reader to describe instances in his/her own life when the child can perform, or has already participated, in similar ways (visiting the sick, saying motzi, picking up litter, etc.). He also provides examples of mitzvah projects large and small that already are changing the world. The writing is accessible and engaging but the workbook format makes it more appropriate for use in the classroom, as part of a B’nai Mitzvah preparation kit, or in a teacher resource room rather than on the library shelf.

Fred Isaac, Temple Sinai, Oakland, CA

HOLOCAUST & WORLD WAR II


Rescuing the Children is an optimistic book about the good acts by which good humans can confront evil. The saving of about ten thousand Jewish children from the exterminating hands of the Nazis took place in Europe from December 1938 until May 1940. This mission was maneuvered by British Quakers and Jewish leaders. The children were rescued from Germany, Austria, Czechoslovakia, and Poland and transferred to Britain. Deborah Hodge focuses on nine children who were part of the Kindertransport (transfer of the children) and are still living. With personal anecdotes, original past and present photographs, expressive paintings of various experiences, and Kindertransport Memory Quilts, she presents an animated historical picture of liberation in the midst of human devastation.

The six girls and three boys, ages seven and a half to fourteen years old, have grown up to reflect and remember today about what has transpired. They all have names, faces, voices, and spirits. To the uninitiated reader, Hodge adds a glossary, map of the route of the Kindertransport, timeline, and helpful notes to parents and teachers. To the list of the websites, I would also add Israel’s official memorial to the Jewish victims of the Holocaust: www.yadvashem.org. This web site can be viewed in Hebrew, English, Russian, Spanish, Persian, and Arabic. Reality surpasses the imagination; however, adults should choose wisely when, where, and how to teach young people important historical lessons. Deborah Hodge has found one way to do it. Hopefully all readers will absorb the profound messages of this book, and will reconsider aspects of their lives and community.

Nira Wolfe, Highland Park, IL

The question, “Do young people find meaning in the Holocaust?” prompted a writing project in Canada, the United States, Australia, and Italy that generated responses from sixth, seventh, and eighth grade students, both Jewish and Gentile. In a collection of essays, stories, letters, poems, and drawings, they lend their voices in ways that go beyond expectations. For example, one essay by an Ontario eighth grader, tells of her experience with a boy sitting next to her in history class. His great-grandparents had been Holocaust survivors and he shared his story with her. In this way, the Holocaust became real and personal to her. In another entry—this one a short story—another Ontario eighth grader shares a project he undertook as part of his Bar Mitzvah preparation: He tells the story of boy in a cattle car on the way to a concentration camp. This collection of 90 entries in twelve chapters gives a well-rounded perspective, ranging from the beginning of the Holocaust and not knowing what was happening to receiving help from strangers. Each participating school in the writing project submitted its top five entries to editor, Kathy Kacer, who then worked with a panel of educators to select the stories for the book. The book can be difficult to read through as a whole. There are many redundancies, for example, multiple students wrote about Holocaust victim Anne Frank and Righteous Gentile, Irena Sendler. However, educators will find the collection useful in the classroom, perhaps to spark lessons and projects of their own. Recommended for all libraries.

*Barbara Krasner, Member, Sydney Taylor Book Award Committee, New Jersey*

[Editor’s note: For more about *We Are Their Voice*, listen to Anne Dublin’s interview with Kathy Kacer on an upcoming broadcast of the Book of Life podcast: http://jewishbooks.blogspot.ca/]

**JEWISH LIFE & VALUES**


With broom in hand, Grover joins his Rechov Sumsum friends Brosh, Avigail, and Mahboub in doing a *mitzvah* by cleaning up storm debris cluttering their playground. Working together, the amiable group picks up all the trash. Before applying a fresh coat of paint to the swings, slide, and teeter-totter, each Muppet takes turns reciting items they like which are red, yellow, blue, purple, green, or orange. In no time, the clean-up crew makes the playground a better place. When they take the trash to Moishe for disposal, even the grouchy oofnik performs a *mitzvah* by saving the rotten food and by putting the aluminum cans and glass bottles in the recycling bin. This book is the perfect teaching tool for introducing a young audience to the concepts of *tikkun olam*, doing a *mitzvah*, learning colors, and recycling. Leigh, a long-time illustrator of Sesame Street and Muppet books, brings these familiar characters to life. Tilda Balsley is the author of *Maccabee!: The Story of Hanukkah* (2010), *The Queen Who Saved Her People* (2011), and *Oh No, Jonah!* (2012). This is part of a new series of Shalom Sesame books published by Kar-Ben that includes *Count’s Hanukkah Countdown* and *Grover and Big Bird’s Passover Celebration*.

*Allison Marks, Temple Israel Library, Akron, OH*

Author Tehilla Deutsch tackles an important developmental challenge for children—how to learn to spend money wisely—in the picture book, *Dollar$ and $ense*. The title foreshadows the theme of this story; money is best spent in the service of *mitzvot* (good deeds). Eli Katz, the protagonist, earns five dollars from his neighbor, Mrs. Markowitz, for feeding her fish, watering her plants and taking in her mail while she is out of town. He first gives ten per cent of his earnings to *tzedakah* (charity) as he had learned, without prompting from an adult. The rest of the money, however, is “burning a hole” in his pocket. Told in rhyming couplets, Eli buys a cold drink, gum, and a yo-yo over the next few days. The food is consumed and the yo-yo breaks. He knows he needs to spend his remaining dollar in a useful way: “I had to keep searching; / I had to be clever, / And find that one thing / that could last me forever.” The opportunity soon arises to use the money wisely when Eli goes to the grocery store on an errand for his mother. While there he meets a younger neighbor, Yehuda Tzvi Fine, who was sent to the store for the very first time to buy a loaf of bread. Yehuda is dejected because he lost the dollar his mother gave him. Eli recognizes that this is his “chance to be clever / My chance to have something to last me forever.” Eli gives Yehuda Tzvi the last dollar he earned as he realizes that using money for a *mitzvah* has a meaningful, eternal quality that can never be used up.

This is a sweet book that borders on the didactic. The illustrations by Glenn Zimmer are engaging, colorful, full-page spreads that bleed to the edges of the pages. All of the characters are shown with exceedingly prominent eyes, a feature that makes one question if they share a thyroid condition. The book is sensibly printed on laminated paper that will extend its life. Eli Katz wears his *tzitzis* (ritual fringed garment) outside of his pants, attends school in a single sex classroom, and wears a big, black skullcap. This title will find a happy home in Orthodox homes and libraries.

Rena Citrin, Bernard Zell Anshe Emet Day School, Chicago, IL


On the third night of Chanukah, a baby named Lily is born in a house on 18th Avenue. Prior to her birth, the neighbors gave this poor family some of their own belongings—worn-out sheets, pajamas, sweaters, and mittens. The talented and resourceful mother recycled the items to sew curtains, diapers, and baby clothes for her family and for others in need. The textured, colorful illustrations depict a loving, contemporary Jewish family celebrating Passover, Shabbat, Rosh Hashanah, Simchat Torah, and Hanukkah. Edwards writes well about universal and Jewish themes of caring for neighbors and not being wasteful of resources. She also realistically portrays the older brother who is excited and nervous about the arrival of his new sister.

A PJ Library selection, Jewish librarians and educators may be disappointed by the lack of details about birth in the Jewish lifecycle and the Jewish holidays. But the book would pair nicely with *Something from Nothing* by Phoebe Gilman (Scholastic, 1992) as well as with *A Song for My Sister* by Lesley Simpson (Random House, 2012).

Ben Pastcan, Shalom School, Sacramento, CA


There is always a need for short books on Jewish topics for early readers, children who are just beyond picture books but not ready for chapters. Faye Gilbert and Leo Silva have created a small illustrated volume directed at this audience. Dana is a curious, even rambunctious, six-year-old who has been invited to her Aunt Eve’s wedding. The story contains several small images of the event told from her perspective. They include her being told about the event; the ceremony (under a *chuppah* in the synagogue, with a stained-glass window depicting Moses); Dana’s desire to take part in the celebration, including singing and dancing; her family; and the aftermath, when her mother shows her the photos. Each piece of the story includes an age-appropriate comment or action, indicating that the girl is trying to reconcile her understanding of the world with the reality.
she sees. She is full of questions, including “where is the Garden of Eden?” and “what is a family tree?”

It’s hard not to like this little girl, with her eagerness to be part of what is taking place. But the book is ultimately unsatisfactory. Though there is some Jewish content (all the men wear kippot), the book tells nothing substantively Jewish about the wedding itself—no breaking of the glass or the use of Hebrew vows—two major events that should fascinate Dana. More importantly, none of Dana’s questions, either the innocent ones or the Jewish ones, are answered by her parents. Despite its Jewish setting and challenging heroine, this story falls short of its target.

Fred Isaac, Temple Sinai, Oakland, CA


What colorful mitzvos come into your head when you think of yellow—or brown, blue, and red? These colors illustrate various Jewish special days and observances, such as yellow being the color “of the morning sun shining for Modeh Ani”, or “the velvety cover on a Torah” exemplifying good deeds colored in blue. The rhyming text would work well in a kindergarten or first grade environment; it would be an excellent connection to a classroom unit on colors. The magnificent illustrations, filled with color and much detail, will appeal to young children. Use of Hebrew terms abound in the book (there are 43), with a glossary at the end defining each one. This book would be an educational asset in the classroom and also as enrichment for children familiar with these expressions and an observant lifestyle. Laminated pages protect the book. Recommended for children in classrooms and in traditional homes.

Shelly Feit, Moriah School Library, Englewood, NJ


*Wordwatch* consists of 65 lessons on lashon hara, which the book defines as speaking badly about another Jew. Each two-page lesson is complemented by a simple pen and ink drawing of two girls who discuss the prohibition mentioned in the text and give an example of the particular negative speech. The book has received approbation from Rabbi Hillel Litwack. Sources for each lesson are provided in a separate section at the end of the book. The most often quoted source is the Chofetz Chaim’s *Hilchos Lashon Hara*. *Wordwatch* is recommended for girls’ schools where they learn Ashkenazit.

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


Grandpa Duke taught his young grandson many lessons, such as how to wish on a shooting star, tie Boy Scout knots, and be brave when catching a frog. However, the hardest lesson he passes on is how to accept a loved one’s death. When the little boy accompanies his parents to the unveiling of Grandpa Duke’s tombstone, he recalls the difficult first year of celebrating the holidays without his grandfather’s reassuring presence. He also remembers special times with Grandpa Duke as he looks through the keepsake box filled with Grandpa’s belongings and sits on his mother’s lap viewing family photographs. When the boy becomes scared that he may wake up one morning and forget his grandfather, his mother reassures him that “memories made of someone you love never get lost”. The idea of remembrance is reinforced as family members and friends gather at the cemetery to share stories about Grandpa Duke and to place stones on his monument. Aviles’ illustrations are done using acrylic paints on Italian paper and are rendered with a softness which echoes the text’s soothing tone. *Stones for Grandpa* is a gentle approach to a difficult topic and can be recommended to parents along with *Wishes for One More Day* by Melanie Joy Pastor (Flashlight Press, 2006) and *Where is Grandpa Dennis?* by Michelle Shapiro Abraham (URJ Press, 2009) as potential keys to unlock a child’s silent grieving and to promote a healing conversation.

Allison Marks, Temple Israel Library, Akron, OH


Gabriel, a young boy who wants to be a magician, is given a “time-out” for spilling water all over the counter and bothering his little sister. His mother tells him that real magicians do good deeds, mitzvot. Gabriel decides to follow his mother’s advice; he does mitzvah magic by cleaning up the kitchen, putting away his toys, and setting
up cookies for his mother, sister, and himself. He uses the “magic” words, “One wish, two wish, Jew-wish,” to show how he can do mitzvahs like magic. The idea of doing mitzvot is an important concept for young children. This book has a little bit of the “spoonful of sugar” philosophy to make doing good deeds palatable. The story is not very engaging, though, and the message is fairly heavy-handed. Optional purchase for most synagogues and schools.

Susan Dubin, Off-the-Shelf Library Services, Henderson, NV


Crabtree has published a wide range of short, simple volumes on holidays, in an attempt to introduce children to both their heritage and a variety of holidays and life cycle events. These range from Cinco de Mayo to Kwanzaa to St. Patrick’s Day. This one focuses on B’nai Mitzvah. Each two-page spread covers a different aspect of the event, from “What is a Bar Mitzvah/Bat Mitzvah?” to “The Sabbath,” and “The Hebrew Language”. The text and layout are appropriate for children who might be attending a neighbor or family friend’s event. The photographs are colorful and, for the most part, appropriate, but some of them raise questions. The text itself is simple, but there are numerous errors of fact, as well as confusions of focus. On page 5, for example, the caption reads “as part of a Bar Mitzvah, the young person must carry the Torah….” Page 16 says, “The Torah tells stories about the creation of the universe, the lives of Jewish prophets, and different mitzvoths….” There is room for a number of books introducing both young Jews and non-Jews to the B’nai Mitzvah experience. Because of its many errors of fact and judgment, this cannot be included among them. It is not recommended for any Judaica library. In addition, I would caution non-Jewish libraries (schools and public libraries) about obtaining copies. Contains glossary and index.

Fred Isaac, Temple Sinai, Oakland, CA

PICTURE BOOKS


Have a delicious romp through this amusing story filled with joy and Jewish content. Max does not wish to take his after-dinner bath. He counters his mother with information gleaned from his own experience that despite such grief at home, there are no baths at camp! He proceeds to outline his weekly activities at Jewish, summer, sleep-over camp, each one escalating in dirt and mess, each one not ruined by a bath at the end. The litany of sullied, not spoiled, comes from his age appropriate point of view. Meanwhile, the illustrations indicate the alternative cleaning methods, alternatives he does not register, from rustic spigots, through hoses, hand sanitizers, fresh water lakes, even water balloons, to showers that include hair washes. The picture book repeats these illustrations on the last two-page spread for readers who miss the joke. The tale is fun, to the point, and excellently explicit about Jewish cultural life (sometimes by text, sometimes by picture). In the warm hilarity, there is no feeling the little boy is duped; every age reader smiles. The art is cute, in keeping with the tone, mobile, colorful and age appropriate. One illustration gripe: an adult, the camp director yet, stands on a chair, a school no-no. It is so refreshing to find a genuinely funny Jewish story without moralizing or teaching. Recommended with glee, especially in paperback where two copies cost less than one hardback.

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


This sweet, but not particularly imaginative rhyming poem, is sort of an unsophisticated Jewish version of Mama, Do You Love Me? that aims for a target audience of families with very young children. The simple text should engage a toddler with the repetition of the words “a kiss on the keppie” while the soft illustrations give the context of a loving family bestowing kisses on a happy child. Mama begins the day with “A kiss on the keppie, a kiss on the head, as Mama wakes you in your warm little bed.” Then at breakfast, it is Papa’s turn, and later at the park, it is Dreidel the dog’s turn to give a kiss. The lack of sophistication in the meter and rhymes is evident in such lines as “A kiss on the keppie from Dreidel the pup, who spins in a circle while barking, ‘Get up!’—a line that appears after Papa and child land on the grass after sliding down the slide. Later in the day,
Bubbe and Zeyde appear with some babka that Bubbe has baked.

The illustrator has depicted the grandparents to be somewhere in their eighties although for a 2012 publication, it would be more likely that these represent great-grandparents. Just take a look at grey-haired Bubbe’s sensible shoes and hat and Zayde’s pinstripe jacket. The illustrations also imply that the story occurs during Hanukkah due to the décor (menorah, gelt, dreidel) in the child’s room, although there is no mention of this holiday. Other illustrations show the evidence of a Jewish home. They are rendered in pencil and watercolor and are pleasant but unexciting, and do not add that extra element that will entice a child to repeated readings. At the end of the day, the child’s loving world has come full circle: “A kiss on the keppie to tuck you in tight. A kiss on the keppie, gey schluffen, goodnight.” This book is a selection of the PJ Library.

Lisa Silverman, Sinai Temple Library, Los Angeles


Reader alert! This reviewer is very fond of cats; so, she was ready to like this book almost sight unseen. Luckily, this whimsical picture book is a delight. Ben Yehuda Street in Tel Aviv is full of cats of every shape, size, and color but Mr. Modiano, a grumpy fishmonger, dislikes cats. However, Mrs. Spiegel, his neighbor in the apartment building, loves cats, especially her little grey cat with a pink collar. Mrs. Spiegel wants to be friends with Mr. Modiano, but he always says, “Lo, lo, lo,” to every invitation for a cup of tea. One night, Mrs. Spiegel’s cat goes missing. Who saves the day? Mr. Modiano, of course! The book ends in a satisfying way that is sure to please children and adults alike. With its strong verbs and good humor, The Cats on Ben Yehuda Street presents a vibrant picture of life in present-day Israel.

Carabelli’s illustrations in pen, color pencils, and watercolor capture the personalities of the characters, both human and feline, as well as the lively streets of Tel Aviv. Most good picture books can be read on different levels. The Cats on Ben Yehuda Street is about more than cats. It’s about friendship, helping each other, and taking a chance. Recommended for home and school libraries, and especially for cat lovers.

Anne Dublin, Toronto, Canada

SHABBAT & HOLIDAYS


Stylish, mobile illustrations give flair to a book that is a laundry list rather than a plot. Jewish author/illustrator, Selina Alko, and her non-Jewish husband raise their children by integrating traditions from both their religious backgrounds. Their family practices inspired this well-intended picture book presenting the rich joy of a mixed winter holiday. The problem here is the point of view from family preparations which boils down to a nonstop list of chores. Each person works by doing customs from the other’s religion. For example, Daddy Christmas makes the latkes while Hanukkah Mama hangs the stockings. Santa and the Maccabees are mentioned by name without explanation; neither Jesus nor Judah come up. The Hanukkah story is the miracle of the oil; the Christmas story the animals in the manger (oops, in a recent book the Pope himself said there were none!). The traditional tales link the family: nice touch, less hackneyed than the customary songs from each persuasion. This picture book validates the customs of children from mixed marriage homes who celebrate both holidays; each happy custom arrives without judgment.

Mushy Red Stuff by Faye Alison Gilbert

It’s Passover. Eli doesn’t know it yet but this year Grandma and Grandpa’s Seder is going to be anything but boring. A bowl of Grandpa’s homemade horseradish will turn the evening into something extraordinary and Passover, for Eli, will never be the same again. It’s a tale with twist!

This book is a good idea to prop up insecure children from mixed marriages. Otherwise, it is a peep show of what goes on in the other’s holiday. But the lack of tension means a boring story. This slim volume is a mitzvah for those children in religious school who do not want to be embarrassed about combo celebrations; therefore it is recommended as a service provider rather than a good story.

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


Why is this book different from all other Passover picture books? For starters, a giant yellow bird finds the *afikomen*. But what else would you expect from a *seder* on Rechov Sumsum, the Israeli equivalent to Sesame Street? Big Bird and his pals serve as delightful *seder* hosts as they relate elements of the Passover story and introduce concepts such as freedom and performing good deeds. While heading to Brosh’s house for the *seder*, Big Bird captures a runaway puppy and rescues Grover from a flowering sticker bush. Each helps to carry bags of groceries to a woman’s house. Along their circuitous route, Grover explains to Big Bird the story of the Jews’ enslavement in Egypt, recites the first of the Four Questions, and tells how *matzah* came to be. When the helpful pair becomes lost, they implore Moishe Oofnik, who is passing by in his ramshackle truck, for a lift. Moishe initially declines but quickly changes his mind when promised a dinner which includes bitter herbs. All finally reach the *seder* and enjoy being with friends and eating the delicious food. Young readers will instantly recognize Leigh’s renditions of the familiar and loveable Sesame Street residents. Just as Big Bird finds the hidden *matzah*, children will find a great deal to like about this Shalom Sesame book. Tilda Balsley is the author of *Maccabee!: The Story of Hanukkah* (2010), *The Queen Who Saved Her People* (2011), and *Oh No, Jonah!* (2012). This is part of a new series of Shalom Sesame books published by Kar-Ben that includes *Count’s Hanukkah Countdown* and *It’s a Mitzvah, Grover*.

Allison Marks, Temple Israel Library, Akron, OH


Judaism has always had miracles and legends. In this picture book, Avraham Feder recounts three modern tales linking the holidays to modern Israel. They originated at Beth Tikvah synagogue in Toronto, but their relevance is more universal. In the first tale, Tzaki is an eleven-year-old in 1973. As the Yom Kippur War rages during Sukkot, he sleeps outside. One night the sukkah flies to the Negev, and Tzaki rescues a threatened Israeli patrol. The second adventure tells of the rescue of a naval crew, after it runs aground in Saudi Arabia, south of Eilat. The last story recounts how Tzaki and the sukkah guide several helicopters to Israel through a spring snowstorm. In each story, the ritual objects of the holiday—Sukkot, Hanukkah, and Pesach—become part of the story and help create the miracle that saves Israel. In addition, the Hebrew names of the ritual objects, for example, *sukkah*, *latkes*, and *seder* are printed in a different, vaguely Old German/Hebrew font, highlighting their importance in performing the *mitzvah*.

These stories raise conflicting emotions. On one side, they explore the idea that Jewish miracles are not all in the ancient past. They also remind children that heroes come in all shapes, sizes and ages. (The back cover identifies the real Tzaki and indicates that he served in the IDF.) On the other side, it is not entirely clear that these stories are appropriate for the intended age group. They all deal with the rescue of soldiers; while there are no bullets, the situations could be frightening for young children. Also, the illustrations are a bit eerie in tone. Finally, does the library want to combine miracles, festivals, and the Israeli military? With these thoughts in mind, the book is cautiously recommended for larger synagogue and school libraries.

Fred Isaac, Temple Sinai, Oakland, CA


Author Sue Hepker is clearly a *bubbe* who understands the joys and challenges of baking with grandchildren. Her new book, *This Is the Challah*, is a delightful cumulative tale that follows and repeats all the ingredients and steps that go into making challah. The narrator is the granddaughter who revels in adding each ingredient one by one. She is
thrilled to be helping her bubbe bake. However, the evocative illustrations by Amy Wummer add another storyline to the tale. Bubbe is babysitting her granddaughter AND her grandson who delightfully dumps his food from his high chair and makes a mess on the floor. Bubbe looks more harried as each new complication arises. Happily, all ends well. The challahs are baked, and the parents return home from work and shopping in time for Shabbat. The story ends with the family around the table set for Shabbat and about to say the blessing over the “challah that bubbe made.”

This is a fun read-aloud for the youngest listeners at home and at school. While the grandmother and granddaughter wear pants, the warmth and excitement conveyed makes this lovely book appropriate for most collections. Bubbe’s challah recipe is appended.

Rena Citrin, Bernard Zell Anshe Emet Day School, Chicago, IL


Putting a Judaic twist on familiar folk tales is Naomi Howland’s specialty. In Latkes, Latkes Good to Eat: A Chanukah Story (Clarion, 1999), it is a bewitched frying pan, not a magic cauldron, which keeps cranking out potato pancakes. In The Matzah Man: A Passover Story (Clarion, 2002), the naughty runaway protagonist is made of unleavened bread, not gingerbread. In her latest book, Howland takes The Little Red Hen story and tweaks it with hilarious results. Instead of a hard-working hen soliciting help from barnyard friends, Howland casts a little old lady asking her pets for assistance in making better-than-best hamantaschen. As expected, the cross-eyed cat, noisy parrot, and one-spotted dog all decline her repeated pleas. What the now exasperated little old lady does not realize is that her seemingly lazy pets are busy in the next room making decorations and preparing gifts to share at their Purim party. Howland’s brightly rendered illustrations, done in gouache and colored pencil, aptly capture the festive feelings associated with this fun and boisterous holiday. The book includes a one-page overview about Purim and a recipe for young readers to use when making their own better-than-best hamantaschen. (Adult supervision required. Pets’ assistance optional.) Similar to The Little Red Hen and The Passover Matzah by Leslie Kimmelman (Holiday House, 2010), this PJ Library selection is a tasty choice for all home and school collections.

Allison Marks, Temple Israel Library, Akron, OH


Cheesecake for Shavuot is the fourth in Allison Ofanansky’s nature/holiday series that includes Harvest of Light, What’s the Buzz, and Sukkot Treasure Hunt. The text is illustrated with beautiful color photographs. The class begins by planting wheat in the school garden. At Shavuot time, they harvest the wheat and learn about leaving the gleanings for the poor, as described in the book of Ruth. The class decides to give the gleanings to the goats at a petting zoo, where they get fresh goat cheese. The children then cut the wheat stalks, bundle them, thresh them, winnow and grind them into flour. Cheesecake for Shavuot is highly recommended for all libraries. It offers a unique slant on teaching about Shavuot. The reader learns not only about the holiday, but also how flour is made. The book also touches on the Jewish value of giving to the poor. Children and adults will enjoy learning about the process of how wheat becomes flour and enjoy the photos that demonstrate and greatly enhance the text.

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


While playing dress-up in the attic with her brother Sammy, Sophie discovers a crumpled piece of paper in an old apron pocket. Unable to read the strange words, Sophie and Sammy rush to Shalom House to ask Grandma Gert for a translation. The scribbles turn out to be an old family recipe for making challah written in Yiddish. What follows is a rollicking intergenerational baking lesson in the retirement home’s kitchen with flour flying, eggs cracking, and yeast rising. The end result is six loaves to share with family and friends on Shabbat. Told in simple, lilting rhymes and illustrated with wide-eyed, happy, and helpful characters, Rise & Shine is a sweet story about the joy of baking and a “challah-day tale” worth sharing. Includes a challah recipe. (Karen Ostrove has authored and illustrated Judaic children’s classics including Only Nine Chairs, Fins and Scales, The Modi’in Motel, and Poppy Seeds, Too.)

Allison Marks, Temple Israel Library, Akron, OH
Reviews of Titles for Children and Teens


The illustrations in this lively story capture the quirky family life of a suburban Jewish family with five children and very permissive parents. The story follows the family through a week where they wade in a swamp, cook mud pies in the kitchen, sprinkle their clothes with tomato sauce and blueberries, bring earthworms into the house, put make-up on the dog, paint on the walls, add frogs to the sink, jump in cow pies—all with Mom looking on and even smiling. On Friday, the family members miraculously clean themselves and the house for Shabbat. The author sprinkles the story with Yiddish expressions that are defined at the beginning of the book in a tiny glossary. Although the plot is thin and the message a little heavy-handed, the book might delight young children who will find the antics of this crazy family funny and their observance of the Sabbath praiseworthy. An optional purchase for most synagogues and schools.

Susan Dubin, Off-the-Shelf Library Services, Henderson, NV

DVD


This documentary focuses on Leo Bretholz, an elderly Holocaust survivor who lives in a community of survivors in Baltimore. Leo is part of a program that asks survivors to relate his/her story to middle and high school students in an effort to pass on an understanding of how the Holocaust is different than any other genocide in history. This is a thought provoking film that raises several questions. One scene (between a survivor and her granddaughter) raises the question of who is a survivor. Another scene stresses the importance for the survivors to pass on their experiences. There is some interesting footage of students asking Mr. Bretholz questions and challenging his premise that the Holocaust was the worst of all the genocides. The viewer can see that it gets harder and harder for Leo to maintain calm and composure. It seems that doing this for years and years has taken a toll. It impresses upon the viewer how little time we have left with the survivors who are still alive. Over all, this is a worthwhile film that may trigger conversations amongst adults but it may not be effective or engaging for middle school or high school students. An additional purchase, especially with the high price tag.

Debbie Feder, Ida Crown Jewish Academy, Chicago, IL

Don’t Forget to Check Out AJL News!

The February/March 2013 issue of AJL News has Award Announcements, news from Midwinter and from our Chapters, 2013 Conference Registration Information and important reminders!

Keep Up to Date with Hasafran

Hasafran is the electronic discussion list of the Association of Jewish Libraries. It was created in 1991 to provide a forum for the discussion of Judaica librarianship. The list is moderated by Joseph (Yossi) Galron, Jewish studies librarian at The Ohio State University. The views expressed in the list are the opinions of the participants and not necessarily the views of the moderator or of AJL.

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A keyword-searchable archive of Hasafran messages posted since June 12, 2003 is now available.

This book examines the Jewish presence in international cinema since about 1990. The introduction sketches the previous history of the subject, and then the book itself is broken into eight areas of study: The Jew, the Jewess, sex, passivity, agency, religion, food, and bathrooms. The author begins with certain conceits about “Jewish stereotypes and self-images.” The primary stereotype, taken from writer Daniel Boyarin, is “Jewissance” described as “an extraordinary richness of experience and a powerful sense of being rooted somewhere in the world, a world of memory, intimacy, and connectedness.” The “New Jew” is a concept of writers Caryn Aviv and David Shneer, who define it as Jews who no longer regard themselves as “… ‘in diaspora’ but instead see themselves at home …” Using these two ideas, Abrams surveys almost every feature film of the last 20 years that has any Jewish presence. He delineates the changes in depictions of Jews matter-of-factly, without making value judgments about those changes. The only criterion for a film’s inclusion in the book is Jewish presence, not the quality of the film. The result is a depressing catalog of shallow, sophomoric or violent films in which the Jewish character is almost never admirable. This book is well-written and researched, and the interpretations are through British eyes, which can be both refreshing and incorrect in the case of American films. Each chapter explores its topic in depth and then offers a concluding paragraph. There is a filmography, a bibliography, and an index. Recommended for academic collections on film and literature.

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


Bar-On, who once was Moshe Dayan’s bureau chief and an MK, has blended the work of several Hebrew-language biographers into a most pleasant portrayal of an Israeli military and political figure. Dayan, it is pointed out was a controversial personality in Israeli military and political affairs. With his distinctive eye patch, earned from a military exploit for the British in French-controlled Syria during the Second World War, Dayan stood out in all of Israel’s wars with its Arab neighbors. While he had a largely stellar record in the military, his stint in the Israeli political scene was not as impressive. Similarly, his personal integrity was marred by several flings with women other than his wife, including one who became his second wife. We learn a great deal of behind-the-
scenes diplomacy, particularly the preparations for the 1956 Sinai campaign, the military decisions prior to both the 1967 and 1973 conflicts. Part of a series devoted to Jewish persons of note, this is a book that will appeal to young adults as well as others who might be aware of the subject.

Sanford R. Silverburg, Catawba College, Salisbury, NC


This book examines the intellectual, social and cultural history of Iraqi Jews in the 20th century, regarding them as “Arab Jews” based on their cultural identity and writings. Analyzing their literary and scholarly texts, Bashkin shows how their cultural world was shaped, how their political vision regarding Iraq as their homeland was developed, and how they came to view Arabic as their language, and in most cases rejecting Zionism. The study is based on extensive archival research, both British and Jewish (Zionist as well as Iraqi), the press, and numerous studies. Endnotes, a bibliography and an index are included. Among the main topics studied are the development of Iraqi and Arab identity among Iraqi Jews, the growth of secularism among them, and their relations with other elements of the Iraqi society, including the development of fascism and anti-Semitism. The causes and results of the Farhud — the anti-Jewish riots of June 1940 — are examined in detail as is the involvement of Jews in the Iraqi Communist Party. The book ends with an analysis of the political changes caused by the establishment of the state of Israel, resulting in the mass emigration from Iraq, which left only a small fraction of the community there. This is a major contribution to the study of Iraqi Jews in modern times, shedding light on Jewish involvement in Iraqi intellectual and political life as part of the Iraqi nation until regional politics forced an abrupt breach and the annihilation of the community. The book is recommended for academic libraries with collections on Middle Eastern, Jewish and minorities’ studies.

Rachel Simon. Princeton University, Princeton, NJ


As new Kindertransport autobiographical titles are slowing down, Baumel-Schwartz provides an excellent, very readable comprehensive overview of this important period of World War II history. Between late 1938 and 1939, almost 10,000 Central European children (mostly Jewish) were provided refuge in England. Originally created as a temporary solution for children facing bleak futures, it developed into a program of protecting these children through the duration of the war. Many Jewish and Christian organizations, as well as the British government, provided safe havens for these children, while other nations turned a deaf ear to the needs of the remaining children facing inevitable death at the hands of the Nazis. The Kindertransport organizational responsibilities did not end in 1945, since many of these children had no family survivors to reunite with. Eventually, about half of these children remained in Britain, while others immigrated to Israel, the U.S. and other countries, many of whom became professionals and raised families. This book is recommended for high-school to adult readers to gain a very good understanding of the Kindertransport program.

Martin Goldberg, Penn State University, Monaca, PA


Dolly Beil’s account of her childhood and adolescence in China gives readers a glimpse into the lives and tribulations of the Chinese Jewish community during the 20th century. This was a period in time when the country underwent radical changes, from the Japanese occupation, to the liberation by the American Army at the end of the Second World War, to the fight between Nationalist and Communist forces. Growing up in a wealthy family, Beil describes in great detail their life in different Chinese cities. Jews have lived in China since the eighth century C.E., beginning with the migration of Jewish merchants who came from Persia and India along the Silk Route and settled in the city of Kaifeng. In 1952, after 6 years of living under Communist rule, the author and her family immigrated to Canada. A colorful and thorough account, this book would be enjoyed by patrons curious about Jewish life in other countries. Recommended for communities and synagogue libraries.

Sonia Smith, McGill University, Montreal, Canada
The Hebrew language has one of the longest attested histories of any of the world’s languages, with records of its use from antiquity until modern times. Although it ceased to be a spoken language by the 2nd century C.E., Hebrew continued to be used and to develop in the form of a literary and liturgical language until its revival as a vernacular in the 20th century.

In a four volume set, complete with index, the Encyclopedia of Hebrew Language and Linguistics offers a systematic and comprehensive treatment of all aspects of the history and study of the Hebrew language from its earliest attested form to the present day. The encyclopedia contains overview articles that provide a readable synopsis of current knowledge of the major periods and varieties of the Hebrew language as well as thematically-organized entries which provide further information on individual topics, such as the Hebrew of various sources (texts, manuscripts, inscriptions, reading traditions), major grammatical features (phonology, morphology, and syntax), lexicon, script and paleography, theoretical linguistic approaches, and so forth. With over 950 entries and approximately 400 contributing scholars, the Encyclopedia of Hebrew Language and Linguistics is the authoritative reference work for students and researchers in the fields of Hebrew linguistics, general linguistics, Biblical studies, Hebrew and Jewish literature, and related fields.

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Encyclopedia of Hebrew Language and Linguistics Online

Edited by Geoffrey Khan

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This beautiful presentation (thanks largely to the art reproductions included and secured from many museums) is devoted to an understanding of Jewish King Solomon’s Holy Temple which now contains the Muslim Dome of the Rock within its ruined presence. Orthodox Jews are, of course, proscribed from entering the area surrounding this sacred site, the Haram ash-Sharif, considered by Jews as where the Holy of Holies was divinely located. Berger, a professor of art history and film at Boston College, knows her stuff and demonstrates it effusively as she examines the history of the Jewish Temple in a variety of sacred and historical texts. But what might be informative to a Jewish audience are the Christian and Muslim perspectives on the holy structure compared to what is understood from Jewish legends. Because the general focus of this work is an understanding of how Christians and Muslims have treated both the Temple and the Dome of the Rock in art, a great deal of effort went into a discussion of the architecture and imagery of both. Attention is brought to bear on these by examining Italian Renaissance portrayals from the 13th to the 15th centuries, excerpts from pilgrimage scrolls, and Jewish manuscripts, art, and printed books. The elegance of this work which marks its value, however, has to be balanced by its price.

Sanford R. Silverburg, Catawba College, Salisbury, NC


Raphael Lévy (1613-1670), a Jew from Boulay, was the victim of a blood libel in Metz (Eastern France). Birnbaum covers many aspects of the incident: the local juridical context, the prevalent Christian prejudices, the social and mental universe of the Jews in seventeenth-century Lorraine. As a distinguished historian of Third Republic France, Birnbaum judiciously exposes how the Lévy trial was used during the Dreyfus Affair. The book is marred by inaccurate bibliographic references and the propensity of the author not to give the page numbers for quoted articles. For academic libraries for undergraduate studies.

Roger S. Kohn, Silver Spring, MD.


The author, Daniel Boyarin, a recognized Talmudic scholar, offers a unique perspective on the history of the gospels within the Jewish context. The book contains four chapters preceded by an Introduction and completed with an Epilogue. The author begins by asserting that Jews and early Christians had more in common than is realized with regard to religious practices. The terms “son of God” and “son of man” are described, as well as the defense of Torah by Jesus of Nazareth and his recognition as Messiah by Christians. While the book is well-written and reflects serious scholarship, the content seems directed more towards the gospel reader than to a Jewish audience. For this reason, the book is not recommended for a Jewish library.

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


This is a unique exploration of “The Esther Mosaics” by Lilian Broca. It is divided into three sections. The first is written by the author and charts her journey in making these pieces of art. The reader learns about the techniques used in creating the mosaics as well as the emotional equity that went into them. There is also some background information on the artist. The second part, written by Sheila Campbell, is a historical piece that places Broca’s work into context of other works about Esther. The third is a more literary approach by Yosef Wosk and includes pieces of poems, essays, and narrative conversations. These are quite powerful coming just after the exploration of Broca’s work. The mosaics themselves are stunning, the commitment to place the characters in the correct historical context is wonderful, and the colors are breathtaking. There is also a grand scope to these pieces that feels quite regal. A beautiful Hebrew-English version of the book of Esther (the Megillah) is provided in the back, and there are notes at the end of each section. The book would have been even more effective if images of the mosaics had been isolated in the front of the book. This book would be appropriate for synagogue libraries; it is recommended for Jewish libraries.

Debbie Feder, Director, Library Resource Center, Ida Crown Jewish Academy, Chicago, IL

The Jewish calendar dictates specific periods in which to be happy, sad or contemplative. The days between Rosh Hashanah (Jewish New Year) and Yom Kippur (Day of Atonement), known as Aseret Yemei Teshuvah (Ten Days of Repentance or The Days of Awe) is one example. In the introduction, Brown tells the reader “we have these ten days…to pray, to cry, to improve, to change, to forgive, to apologize, to become what we’ve meant to become, to return, to come home, to build a sanctuary that is repentance.” In the chapters that follow, one for each day and an epilogue for the day after, she lays out the framework for these activities. Each chapter centers on a theme that is gleaned from the quintessential Yom Kippur Prayer, the Vidduy, or confession; for example, “day seven” focuses on “the sin we committed before You with impudence.” After a discussion of the topic, with quotes from varied sources that include the Talmud and the Midrash, there is “Life Homework” in the form of a question or exercise that helps the reader improve in this area. After this, there are passages for additional study from classic texts like The Path of the Just by Rabbi Moshe Haim Luzzatto and The Lights of Repentance by Rabbi Abraham Isaac Kook, with questions to think about while studying the text.

Dr. Brown is scholar-in-residence for the Jewish Federation of Greater Washington, DC and the author of several books. Her scholarship is evident in clear explanations of pertinent texts and sources, questions that go to the heart of recognizing where improvement can be made, and encouragement for those who view this period as an opportune time to re-evaluate their goals and methods. Do not resign this book to use only once a year: it can be used year-round as a rubric for character development, and it will be helpful to anyone working a 12-Step program. This book is very highly recommended for all Jewish libraries.

Kathe Pinchuck, Ramat Bet Shemesh, Israel


This book is a massive and sobering account of the four-year period following the Bolshevik revolution and the fall
Reviews of Nonfiction Titles for Adults

of the Czarist regime. Relying on recently released archives, the author, professor of history, argues that the Russian civil war, given the centrality of the “Jewish Question” and the dreadful outcome, was a prelude to the Holocaust.

Opening chapters provide a general history of the Russian Jews, with a helpful introduction and background. Over the nineteenth century, the Russian Jews grew diverse politically, economically, and religiously. Unfortunately, the general populace made no such distinction. The author observes, at times wryly, the long timeline of regional anti-Semitism, culminating in the emergence of the “Black Hundreds” and other reactionaries. The civil war was not only a tragedy in which Jews were perpetrators, pawns, and victims, but an utterly no-win situation: wherever they turned, the Jews were demonized.

The “Reds” - many of whom were secular or apostate Jews—despised the outmoded observances and “bourgeois” values of the shtetl dwellers. They tried to recruit the downtrodden with the lure of a better life under the Communist banner. Instead many ended up attacked and plundered by ragtag “people’s armies” or hardening Soviet decrees. The “Whites”—former officers in the Imperial army—exploited traditional prejudice; their propaganda, often featuring crude caricatures, was enough to convince the public of a Jewish conspiracy. With the help of Cossack bands, they instigated massive pogroms, especially in Ukraine, which neither liberals nor sympathetic Whites could halt, and the slaughter of some 50,000 to 200,000 Jews.

Included with extensive footnotes, are photos, some quite graphic, of leaders and victims. Depressing but excellent in its scope and depth, this book is highly recommended for academic libraries with Jewish or Russian Studies collections.

Hallie Cantor, Yeshiva University, New York, NY


This book is a compilation of articles prepared for the research project Inteleg: The Intellectual and Material Legacies of Late Medieval Sephardic Judaism. These in-depth articles cover both the secular influence of Sephardic literature on the literature of Christian writers in the Iberian Peninsula as well as religious writings that influenced biblical exegesis and liturgical texts. The works analyzed in this book are from the end of the Golden Age of Jewry in the Iberian Peninsula between the riots of 1391 and the expulsion of 1492. The texts are in English, supplemented with Hebrew and Spanish for presentation of the original source texts. The volume has a thorough index and several full color plates of manuscripts. The Hebrew Bible in Fifteenth-Century Spain is a fully annotated scholarly work intended for advanced study and would be appropriate for universities with Judaic studies programs, theology departments, Medieval studies and Spanish language departments.

Jacqueline Benefraim, Special Collections Librarian, Ostrow Library, American Jewish University, CA


Susan Derwin embarks on a fresh approach to the study of Holocaust memory, focusing on uncovering rage in the writings of survivors, Saul Friedlander, Imre Kertesz and Primo Levi and on Liliana Cavani’s film, The Night Porter. She also includes the work Fragments by Benjamin Wilkomirski which, in spite of her arguments in its favor, did not convince the reader of the value of using it when there are so many authentic literary works by survivors to choose from.

Any new attempt at understanding the plight of Holocaust survivors is a welcome development. This book offers much that is thought provoking and fodder for discussion and argument. Through her thorough analysis of hidden, suppressed rage, Derwin uncovers the long-term, cross-generational effects of the suffering experienced by survivors.

The book is well written and weaves into the text many citations from the works analyzed as evidence for the points made. It belongs in academic libraries with good Holocaust collections as well as in those that have works on the long term effects of trauma on survivors.

Michlean Lowy Amir, Reference Coordinator, Holocaust Survivors and Victims Resource Center, United States Holocaust Memorial Museum


In this study, Yaakov Deutsch produces a seminal work on Christian ethnographic descriptions of Jews and
Judaism in the early modern period (from the early sixteenth century through to the eighteenth century). In short, the book discusses what Christians wrote about Jews and Judaism. Deutsch centers his book on three examples of commonly addressed topics; Yom Kippur (Day of Atonement) customs and practices, Jewish circumcision and Jewish food related issues, each receiving a full chapter’s attention. Preceding these topics is an introductory chapter that surveys Christian ethnography of the Jews and Judaism.

Deutsch reaches many fascinating conclusions. Primarily, he admits that these ethnographic descriptions are almost always accurate, and have parallels in internal Jewish writings about customs and law. However, an examination of the topics on which Christian authors chose to concentrate informs much about Jewish Christian relations, not to mention internal Christian schisms such as the burgeoning Catholic and Protestant divide. Deutsch coins a term for this type of writing: “polemical ethnography” or ethnographic writing that is largely motivated by polemical considerations. For example, in describing Yom Kippur ceremonies, Christian authors may focus on a superstitious practice such as transferring sins from a Jew to a chicken via a ceremony known as “kapparot”. By denigrating such practices, a Protestant author could take a swipe at both Judaism and Catholicism for their perceived superstitious customs and laws. Another theme that runs throughout the book is the difference and similarities that Christian from birth authors bring to this genre as opposed to Jewish converts to Christianity who were able to bring personal experience to their works.

This book will be of interest to those interested in Jewish-Christian relations and early modern European Jewish history. It is written with clarity and although written for an academic audience, it’s quite accessible to the general reader.

David Tesler, Yonkers, NY


This book presents a description of pre-Holocaust Jewish life in a small village (Seduva) in Lithuania. It consists of a series of letters side by side in Yiddish and translated into English. They are written by a young man, a pharmacist, to his friend, a young girl who lived in the village, but who then left for America in 1937. There are extensive endnotes, as well as an epilogue with additional useful information. A listing of relevant websites and books is included. The collaborative mother and daughter project responsible for the publishing of the letters represents an important testament to a world lost but not forgotten. The book is a valuable addition to Judaica collections in academic, public and high school libraries. It is oversize and visually attractive, with clear, readable type and many black and white and color photographs, which enhance the book’s interest.

Susan Freiband, Retired Library Educator, Arlington, Virginia


The content of the Babylonian Talmud is often divided into two major categories, Halakhah and Aggadah. Halakhah deals with Jewish law and includes both legal discussions and stories about the rabbis, which illustrate the principles involved. Aggadah, however, is purely narrative. The stories are thought to be didactic, although there are cases where the aim
Reviews of Nonfiction Titles for Adults

of the story is not always clear. As an “addict” I tend to divide the Aggadah into two categories. The first category is “realistic”, whereas the second type may exaggerate or use witchcraft or “fairy tale” content which we find hard to accept.

Dr. Faust’s book is based upon a regular column in the newspaper, Makor Rishon. He takes an Aggadah from the Babylonian Talmud, which is usually a page long or less, translates it from the Aramaic into Hebrew, and then analyses it using literary methodology.

In the book, the stories are grouped by category, starting with Human qualities, through family, honor, faith and reactions to authority, concluding with the supernatural.

The author includes 50 Aggadot, many of them famous, and subjects them to a very sophisticated analysis. The author concentrates upon the character of the sages and the relations between them. As he points out, in some cases the “hero’s” behavior is reprehensible. The Talmud does not whitewash its heroes!

The genre is far from homogenous; a short example (my translation) will illustrate the compact style: “Rabbi Hanina ben Dosa was walking along the road. It began to rain. He said, Master of the World, all of the world is satisfied and Hanina suffers? The rain stopped. He arrived and said, Master of the World! The entire world is suffering and Hanina is satisfied? The rain returned.” (Babylonian Talmud, Tractate Ta’anit 24b). I derived a lot of pleasure from the book and recommend it to readers of Hebrew. I do hope that someone will translate it into English.

Chaim Seymour, Bar-Ilan University, Israel


Michael Feinstein worked for and was befriended by Ira Gershwin for six years near the end of Ira’s life. In that capacity he had access to Gershwin family documents and stories. This, coupled with a lifelong passion for Gershwin’s music gives the author a unique perspective to write about George and Ira Gershwin.

Feinstein loosely organizes his personal account of the brothers’ life and music around twelve Gershwin songs which he plays and sings on the accompanying CD. Richly illustrated with sheet music covers, photos, drawings, and reproductions of posters and letters, this book is best described as a coffee table book. It is meant to be enjoyed a little at a time, but not read from cover to cover. Less expensive eBook versions are readily available (Nook, Google, and Kindle).

Paul A. Miller, American Jewish University, Bel Air, California


The sudden and horrible events of Kristallnacht brought twenty-one German Jews from an agricultural school in Gross Breesen to a newly formed agricultural collective in Burkeville, Va. Financially supported by a successful Jewish retailer, William Thalheimer, the youths were transported to an abandoned farm with intentions to produce eggs for the commercial sector. This well written book relates the foot-dragging approach to immigration by State Department officials. By 1941, due to continued pressure with the students’ visas and the financial burden on Thalhimer, the school was disbanded, with some students joining the U.S. Armed Forces (and thereby granted citizenship), while others excelled in academia as well as the business world. This remarkable story is unique and is recommended for high school through adult readers.

Martin Goldberg, Penn State University, Monaca, PA


Jacques Mosseri was a small child in Cairo when Solomon Schechter arrived to acquire and cart off the Genizah of the Ben Ezra synagogue in that ancient city. As a young man, Mosseri collected his own trove of Genizah fragments by digging in the local Jewish cemetery and in the environs of the Ben Ezra synagogue. After his death, his collection was kept by his family and remained fairly inaccessible to scholars, until in 2006 it was loaned to Cambridge University Library, whose Genizah Research Unit is now engaged in preserving, digitizing and cataloguing the collection. Seride Teshuvot is devoted to a specific category of manuscript fragments in this collection—those containing Halakhic responsa. The criteria for choosing the fragments to include were quite expansive, with some manuscripts containing only the barest hint of a question or Halakhic content.
The catalogue as a whole is very generous with information, providing the richest information about the manuscripts it describes of any Hebrew manuscript catalogue in recent memory. Each entry includes a quality photograph and a full transcription of the fragment, along with physical descriptions and an English summary of the contents. The great majority of the responsa are medieval, including more than two dozen fragments of Geonic responsa. Later material from the early modern period, a category of Genizah material that has usually been ignored, is also included. The resources invested in this catalogue are impressive, and it is a welcome addition to the few existing catalogues of Genizah manuscripts.

Pinchas Roth, Tikvah Scholar at the NYU Tikvah Center.


The two editors of this ambitious work on the power of witnessing divided the 26 essays they gathered mainly on Holocaust trauma, into five parts. The first part is titled “A Triptych of the Power of Witnessing” in which a definition and a description are presented on how the power of witnessing works. In the “Reflections” part, four Holocaust survivors who were children describe how their thoughts on their war time experiences have continued to evolve over time. In the Reverberations section the theme is how Holocaust trauma is “transmitted across time and across generations.” In “Traces”, the writers focus on the horrors of the Holocaust as recognized in film, theater, poetry, needlework, and photography. In the last section, “Links,” the editors included “essays that bring the power of witnessing into other realms,” connecting the uniqueness of the Holocaust to other genocidal atrocities. There is great breadth and depth in the works included by these two very accomplished editors both of whom have worked in the fields of psychology and psychoanalysis with Holocaust survivors.

The essays in this book would be excellent resources for learning and teaching about the Holocaust. The book belongs in scholarly libraries with extensive collections on the psychological effects of trauma in general and specifically the trauma of Holocaust experiences.

Michlean Lowy Amir, Reference Coordinator, Holocaust Survivors and Victims Resource Center, United States Holocaust Memorial Museum


For the past fifteen years, Daniel Gordis has attempted to balance the power of Diaspora Jewish life with the importance of Israel, where he now lives. This is the latest in his series of analyses.

Gordis’s thesis is that, contrary to the political winds in academia, there is a vital place for the ethnic nation state in the world. Armenians, Tibetans, and Bosnians have unique cultural traits that make their national existence vital. The noble attempt to create a United Europe, in contrast, cannot succeed because its principle is flawed: the Poles are different from the Spanish, and each country needs to have a private, “personal” sphere in which its citizens can flourish. Gordis cites the story of the Tower of Babel and the creation of Esperanto as similar attempts to eliminate difference. Israel, he asserts, is a home for the Jews, a people who have been both oppressed and ignored for centuries. In defending Israel’s right to exist, the author points to its many accomplishments over the past 65 years, and contrasts it with the lack of progress exhibited by its neighbors. Neither the Arab States nor the Palestinians have engaged their peoples in advancing their cultural heritage or using their technical abilities to improve their lives. On these counts, and many others, Israel has manifestly justified its existence.

There are numerous volumes on the value and justice of Israel’s existence. This one provides a valuable perspective not grounded in the Shoah or in military defense. Whether the reader agrees with him or not, Gordis’s angle of vision is as important in its way as the more religiously-based analysis of Israeli society by David Hartman. The Promise of Israel should be considered by every Judaica library, from synagogue through academic and seminary collections.

Fred Isaac, Temple Sinai, Oakland, CA


The book examines the life, oeuvre, world-view, and the vast influence on Jewish culture of Rashi (eleventh-century Jewish scholar), probably the most important commentator of the Pentateuch and of most of the Talmud. The book is divided in three parts, Rashi and his world, the writings of Rashi, and Rashi’s world view. As
stated in the (translated) preface to the Hebrew edition, this book is not a “typical scholarly study; its scholarly apparatus is very limited, many subjects are discussed only briefly.” Nevertheless, Grossman draws heavily from the current Israeli scholarship on Rashi, including his own scholarly works to present a well-rounded picture of Rashi. It is a work of synthesis; explicating clearly more arcane studies. Grossman is a very good teacher, making his arguments clearly and using examples which clarify his own even further. He is especially helpful to explain Rashi’s relationship with the midrashic literature whether in the commentary of the Torah or elsewhere. Recommended for libraries with comprehensive undergraduate programs and any large synagogue library.

Roger S. Kohn, Silver Spring, MD.


In the last two decades the works of many Israeli authors have been translated into English, thus affording those unable to read the works in the original language a window into the world of Israeli literature. This is an excellent opportunity to learn about Israeli society through reading the books of some of its most famous authors.

Karen Grumberg uses the works of five very different Israeli authors, Amos Oz, Orly Castel-Bloom, Sayed Kashua, Yoel Hoffmann and Ronit Matalon in her analysis of place and ideology in Israeli literature. This is a highly sensitive topic which touches upon political issues of the Middle East—among them the place of Israel vis-a-vis its neighbors. The gradual change in approaches to the subject is illustrated in the works of these authors and Grumberg’s analyses provide an in-depth look at works which might otherwise be read only superficially.

Grumberg’s writing is very sophisticated and complex. She summarizes the main philosophical thread of her work in the book’s conclusion as follows: “Literature continues to contribute prolifically to the discourse of identity by depicting the places of Israelis’ lives and demonstrating the breadth of their spacial experience. The interplay of these diverse places with the nation, an interaction imagined sometimes harmoniously and sometimes destructively, demonstrates that from the intimate recesses of the most private spaces to the ordinary sights of mundane domestic routines to lands far beyond Israel’s contested borders, the poetics of vernacular place emerge as transformative and potentially empowering agents of identity.”

This dense work belongs in academic libraries with large collections of Israeli literary works in translation. Readers of this book would need to refer to the works mentioned in order to understand the author’s analyses of contemporary Israeli literature.

Michlean Lowy Amir, Reference Coordinator, Holocaust Survivors and Victims Resource Center, United States Holocaust Memorial Museum


The Hebrew word *korban* (sacrifice) has three distinct meanings. The first type of sacrifice, enacted by giving a gift or making an offering, is a common concept in all ancient languages. A second meaning which emerged later in history and is notably absent from the Bible is to “sacrifice for”. This involves giving up some sort of vital interest for a higher cause. For example, someone can sacrifice life, property or even comfort for a cause. This usage can be found in later Rabbinic writing and in some European languages. The third meaning connotes being a victim, such as being a victim of violence. Halbertal’s primary goal is to analyze the first two meanings of the word “sacrifice” and how occasionally it can descend into the third definition in its confrontation with violence. In the first section of the book (“sacrificing to”) Halbertal focuses on the distinction between a “gift” and an “offering” and the role that rejection or potential rejection of that sacrifice works within this dynamic. By exploring this distinction, Halbertal touches upon ritual and violence, both essential concepts of “sacrificing to”. The second part of the book, “sacrificing for” involves two different spheres – the political and the moral. Halbertal draws on Kantian philosophy and shows the myriad ways in which misguided self-transcendence (so integral to the concept of “sacrificing to”) has the potential to lead to great violence. A common example of this phenomenon is the sacrifice of life during war for the benefit of state or country.

This book is a work of philosophy that touches upon various disciplines such sociology of religion, psychoanalysis, anthropology, evolutionary biology, comparative religion and cultural studies. This is a fascinating book on a critical religious concept, but one that is best suited to the academic or philosophically trained reader.

Though she died almost 40 years ago, Hannah Arendt remains a much discussed figure in both the Jewish world and the academic community. This is a small collection of essays by Professor Horowitz covering a number of topics relating to Arendt, her writing and her legacy.

The nine articles in the book come from a number of periodicals previously published between the 1970s (soon after Arendt’s death in 1975) and 2010. The intended reader is expected to know about Arendt, her life, and her legacy as a public intellectual during the post-War era. In one telling sentence near the beginning, Horowitz defines his message: “I have come to see her, fairly or otherwise, as a special case... who came through the fires of hell called Nazi Germany with [her] conscience intact.” Some of the essays are defenses of Arendt and her wide-ranging philosophies regarding totalitarianism and the development of Fascist/Nazi theories. Others are attacks on those who would change her message, as Horowitz sees it. Most of the chapters are book reviews, though a few are original articles. They include an extensive analysis of her relationship with Heidegger, and an analysis of her political philosophy (in fact a book review).

While interest in Arendt remains strong, this book will have a limited audience. It will be of most interest to academic libraries with a strong commitment to political philosophy and to Arendt herself. While Horowitz refers to Arendt’s Judaism throughout the text, that is not a primary topic. Nor is there a heavy emphasis on the Holocaust per se, though several of the articles deal with it.

Fred Isaac, Temple Sinai, Oakland, CA


It is a rare occasion in the reading life of this reviewer when this realization sets in: that the chapter about the methodology used in the research leading to this fascinating book is by far the most telling about its topic. The painstaking details about the author’s own background and its impact on the attitudes of the interviewees, the careful framing of topics and the areas driving the questions, and the choice of six central sites where Orthodox Jewish women are attempting to improve women’s status within the boundaries of halakhic communities, are part of the story of identity formation and religious change in Israel.

The book examines the standing of women within Modern Orthodox Judaism: in the synagogue, in ritual practices, in access to legal presence and representation, and in the rabbinate. It traces trends leading toward a hybrid and pluralistic orthodoxy, and it offers an overview and possible trajectories of such changes in the final chapter. Recommended for academic libraries.

Dr. Yaffa Weisman, The Frances-Henry Library, HUC-JIR, Los Angeles


This is the fourteenth volume of Guggenheimer’s edition of the Jerusalem Talmud. He presents a very useful vocalized Hebrew and Aramaic text, based on the edition published by the Academy of the Hebrew Language. The translation is a clear and close rendering of the original. Footnotes help the reader to understand the flow of the discussion. In involved discussions, the notes help to clarify which arguments a particular rabbi accepts or refutes. There are references to historical circumstances and to the Greek words from which some terms are derived. There are references to other texts in the Jerusalem and Babylonian Talmuds, as well as Tosefta.

The notes also give technical information, for example when the text discusses the size of a cup and of a log the note discusses ancient measures of volume at some length (p. 311). The translation seems accurate to me. The very helpful notes are critical to an understanding of the text.

There is only one other full English translation of the Yerushalmi. The ongoing Guggenheimer edition (now available in electronic format) is thus a very important tool for anyone trying to understand the text. Any school in which rabbinic literature, classical Judaism or ancient Jewish history is studied should definitely own this set. Unfortunately, my one very serious criticism is the substantial cost, which will keep many libraries from acquiring the volumes.

Jim Rosenbloom, Brandeis University and Past President of AJL

*An Illustrated History of the Jewish People* is a book that has something in it for everyone. It is broad but not deep and still it will entertain and educate most readers.

The book opens with a short introduction and a useful chronological time line from the patriarch Abraham 2000BC to the first Passover Seder in the White House, Washington DC 2009. After defining Jewish Traditions and Festivals, the Shabbat, and Life Events, Joffe divides his album into eleven main chapters. He surveys Jewish history concisely with facts, anecdotes, pictures, photos, maps, and with examples of illustrious Jewish figures in all areas of life and culture. The album is colorful, easy to browse through, and enjoy. An index helps guide the reader within the maze of information.

*An Illustrated History of the Jewish People* is an attractive book presented in a colorful and visually stimulating format. It will get a lot of attention as a coffee-table album of Jewish life and history. The fact that the book was printed in the UAE (United Arab Emirate) might serve as a first subject for discussion prompted by the book’s presence on the coffee table.

Nira Glily Wolfe, Highland Park, IL


Comparisons to the *Artscroll Talmud*, the only other English translation of the Talmud of recent vintage are inevitable. Yet, whereas the *Artscroll Talmud* remains wholly based on the Vilna edition of the Talmud, in the Steinsaltz edition the content is placed side by side next to the English and follows more of a topical and conceptual approach. If the reader is interested in referring to the standard Vilna Shas format, he or she can access it in the back of the volume. Because of the departure, Talmudic arguments in the *Steinsaltz Talmud* become easier and more natural to follow than they do in the *Artscroll Talmud*. Another noticeable difference is the transliteration that follows a modern, academic approach.

Koren’s Hebrew fonts are clear and easy to read and will be familiar to readers of other Koren books. The *Steinsaltz Talmud* is replete with beautiful pictures that illuminate the Talmudic discussion. The notes at the side of each page offer helpful insights into the discussion, pointing out parallel topics in the Talmud, historical insights, linguistic comparisons and subsequent and practical halakhic (Jewish law) legal developments. The edition opens with several haskamot (approbations) from well-known Orthodox Rabbis, some of them dating from the 60s and 70s, that were written for the initial Hebrew-only version of the *Steinsaltz Talmud*. This edition includes an excellent introduction that focuses not only on the tractate at hand but also discusses the Talmudic endeavor as a whole.

The new Steinsaltz English Talmud is a welcome addition to the Jewish library and any student of the Talmud who is willing to depart from the standard Vilna Talmud format will find the layout easy to follow and helpful in elucidating the often complex Talmudic texts. Those that find the philosophical worldview of Artscroll alien will find the *Steinsaltz Talmud* more open and inviting.

David Tesler, Yonkers, NY


This is a standard prayer book for the Day of Atonement with an English translation and commentary. Although I speak Hebrew, I still use a mahzor with an English translation on the High Holy Days as the ritual for both the New Year and the Day of Atonement includes many thousand-year-old piyyutim (religious poems) with arcane vocabulary.

The “musaf” prayer on Yom Kippur includes a poetic rendering of the temple ritual for the day. There are two different versions; the version used in Hasidic circles is placed in an appendix, allowing the mahzor to be used in any Ashkenazi synagogue.

Rabbi Sacks has a fairly long introduction, and his commentary to the service is concise. He explains words and concepts but also describes the meaning of the day, discussing our regret for our sins and requests for forgiveness.

His treatment of two poems is of special interest. I have always paid special attention to the piyyut “Like clay in the potter’s hands.” Its seven stanzas each deal with a different craftsman. God is the craftsman who shapes us. Rabbi
Sacks’ approach is very different from previous insights: since God shaped us, Sacks explains, He is responsible for all our sins and we have no share in the blame. This, of course, contradicts the purpose of Yom Kippur which requires repentance. Sacks’ answer is that we are dealing with special pleading by a “good lawyer.”

One of the high points of the day is “Untaneh Tokef” which describes the heavenly court sitting in judgment. It ends with a cry for “repentance prayer and charity,” which is more appropriate to the day. In his commentary Sacks points out: “We can change. That is the radical proposition at the heart of teshuva. It has been denied in many ages in many ways.” This is the true message of the day. Here there is no need for excuses!

A lot of effort has been invested in the physical appearance of the book. The text is presented in verse form and printed on Bible paper so that its 1400 pages are not uncomfortable to use. I would recommend this book for anybody who wants to pray seriously on the next Day of Atonement.

Chaim Seymour, Bar-Ilan University, Israel


The author, a Canadian who made aliyah in 1993, is a financial planner, who brings his personal and professional expertise to assist anyone contemplating moving their residence to Israel. Unless one is financially independent with no threat of interruption, this “financial guide” is an absolute weapon for self-protection and an easier integration into everyday life in Israel. He first instructs the user to develop a financial plan along with some advice on how to do so. He engages in such important matters as what to do with your home (assuming you have one), purchasing a house in Israel, practical matters as insurance, and the all-important employment picture in Israel today. Financial questions are taken up with chapters dealing with asset management, retirement and estate planning, and the uniqueness of the Israeli banking system. Essentially, the author covers a wide range of practical living issues that potential immigrants have either thought about or at least should. This slim and affordable guide belongs in any synagogue library or, in lieu of such, a public library in a community where there is a substantial Jewish presence.

Sanford R. Silverburg, Catawba College, Salisbury, NC

This book examines the life and work of 12 Jewish women writers in the Soviet era. 11 wrote poetry, and one was a memoirist. The author worked with a team of Russian, Yiddish, and Hebrew translators. The examples of the poetry presented in English suffer from the common difficulty of translating poetry, the more so because the goal here was to translate the meaning of the poems rather than their beauty. In addition, the author refers to poems not included in this work, and her literary analysis is repetitive and fairly obvious. Many of the poems contain an obtrusive elliptical device: [...] , implying that text is missing, but with no explanation as to why, and the English text contains typos, misspellings, and incorrect word usage. Despite all these problems, this is a very worthwhile book. The author provides thorough biographical information about each woman, including her Jewish background and practice. In the process, readers learn about the Jewish transition to Soviet identity. It’s fascinating to read how these women remained aware of Judaism through exposure to parents and grandparents, how some dedicated themselves to Yiddish culture in the interwar period while others embraced classic Russian literature with its different fads and schools of thought, and still others threw themselves wholeheartedly into Communist doctrine. In a way, the background of these women is more interesting than their poetry, at least in this presentation, and they are rarely given a voice in other settings, either as women or as poets. In addition to detailed and exhaustive notes, there is an extensive, multi-lingual bibliography and an index. Recommended for academic collections specializing in Russian Jewish history and literature, and for feminist collections as well.

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


Choosing one’s frame of reference is crucial for deciding whether a given event, phenomenon or historical figure is significant or meaningless, remarkable or routine. When Hayim Lapin frames the Rabbis of Palestine—those responsible for the Mishnah, the Palestinian Talmud and the classic Midrashim—as inhabitants of the periphery of the late-antique Roman Empire, this seems at first to be a move calculated to minimize their significance. However, as he soon explains, rabbinic literature provides a rare window into the self-perception of Roman provincials, in a way that classical sources do not. Hence Lapin emphasizes the value of his investigation for historians of Late Antiquity who would not normally look to Jewish sources for information. For students of rabbincics, *Rabbis as Romans* provides a lucid guide to the historiographical aspects and context of rabbincic literature. Lapin analyzes some types of material—courts cases mentioned in the literature, and citations of rabbis by later generations—with statistical tools, allowing him to draw conclusions from a large but thin sample of data that more literary methods would be hard put to utilize. Another welcome innovation is the chronological scope of the book, from the early hints of the Rabbinic movement, through the Mishnah and the Palestinian Talmud until the 8th century and the post-Talmudic period. *Rabbis as Romans* would be an important addition to any rabbincics collection, as well as more general Jewish history libraries.

Pinchas Roth, Tikvah Scholar at the NYU Tikvah Center.


Winner of the AJS 2012 Jordan Schnitzer Book Award in Cultural Studies and Media Studies, *Messianism, Secrecy and Mysticism* is an innovative study of the material and religious life of the Jews in the New World in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries.

Laura Leibman, professor of English and Humanities at Reed College, synthesizes research on the port communities of Suriname, Curaçao, Jamaica, and Barbados as well as early Newport, and their ties to Amsterdam and London. The book focuses on religious objects such as mikvahs, synagogues, cemeteries, kosher food, as well as the role of itinerant rabbis and preachers. Her chapters on the style and use of mikvahs and on the mystical sermons of Hayyim Carigal in Newport are highly original. She shows the interrelation of communities in the procurement of kosher food as well as cemetery stones. She explores the boundaries of Jewish community, as the communities were mainly Sephardic with many having Converso roots and ties to family still in Christian Europe. One chapter presents the complex relations between Jewish plantation owners and their slaves.

Leibmann argues that messianic beliefs were widespread in the post-Shabbatian period and informed the names
and designs of synagogues, modeled after images of the second temple. She examines messianic and kabbalistic images in cemetery tombstone art. She sees secrecy as important in these communities, based on their Converso past and kabbalistic beliefs. Secrecy played a role in fraternal organizations such as the Masons and in stories of Jewish spies.

A companion website contains photographs and documents of material culture from throughout the Jewish Atlantic world. Leibmann overreaches in her thesis on the role of messianism and secrecy and especially in seeing kabbalah everywhere in regular religious practices. With this criticism the book is recommended for academic libraries.

Harvey Sukenic, Hebrew College Library, Newton Centre, MA


This facsimile volume of the “American Antiquarian Cookbook Collection” provides a fascinating look at Jewish life in the United States in the late 1800s. As the title so eloquently states, this is much more than just a cookbook. It includes everything that Levy thinks will help a young woman run a household. She offers encouragement to newly married women that they can, with practice, become accomplished cooks and housekeepers.

The introductory material includes the need for a mezuzah (though not referred to by its name), the bare basics of kosher meat, and preparations of the house for Passover. Levi also includes a long section on how to set the table for each meal of the day and how to serve each course of the meal.

The recipes are all written in narrative form, without any lists of ingredients, cooking temperatures, or baking times, although many of them include suggestions for serving and garnishing the dish. The recipes use a wide variety of herbs, spices, and condiments. The sections on meat and poultry begin with hints for picking the freshest choices for each type of meat. Levi even instructs the young housewife on how to fatten poultry (feed them rice cooked in milk with a little sugar added). Those with a sweet-tooth will enjoy the chapters on cakes, puddings, pastries, and preserves. Other helpful sections include food for invalids, medicinal recipes, cleaning hints, sample menus, and a calendar of seasonal foods.

Even if you never plan on trying any of the recipes, this book is full of fascinating tidbits. Highly recommended.

Sheryl Stahl, Senior Associate Librarian, Frances-Henry Library, HUC-JIR


The number of Holocaust memoirs, diaries and novels published since the war is enormous and the range of literary quality varies with each work. But every publication adds to the “evidence” that has been piling up in libraries and archives with vivid descriptions of the horrors of that period in history. Interviews with survivors have also provided a great deal of very important information for scholarly research.

Crossing the Borders of Time is a thoroughly researched and documented family saga written by a former New York Times investigative reporter about her own family. It is difficult to put the book down once one starts reading it. Included are photographs, a bibliography, family trees and a map to help the reader follow the family’s trials and tribulations. And though written by a daughter, the author makes every effort to ensure historical accuracy and veracity while making the story flow and be interesting and readable. One is grateful for a Holocaust book in which the difficult stories are sprinkled with positive and upbeat experiences, not to mention an unwavering love story. Members of the family lived in pre-war Germany, in occupied France, in a Cuban detention camp and eventually in New York. These places are vividly described, giving the reader a sense of what living there must have been like.

This book belongs in synagogue libraries where it would be a good candidate for book group discussions.

Michlean Lowy Amir, Reference Coordinator, Holocaust Survivors and Victims Resource Center, United States Holocaust Memorial Museum


The title of this book is very intriguing and reading its contents was intellectually challenging and rather
thought provoking. Yet, I felt that I had to resist some of the ideas and comparisons offered. Kafka may have worried about the future of the Jewish people, but no one could have had premonitions of anything even close to Auschwitz. At present, many years after Auschwitz, and with all the evidence available about its horrific existence, what took place there is still unfathomable by most human beings.

Perhaps Hillis played it safe by discussing “fiction” rather than “literature” because the examples he uses would not really qualify in the second category. For instance, Schindler’s List may be good reporting, or interesting fiction, but it does not belong in the category of literature of the Holocaust. One could argue the same about Spiegelman’s Maus.

In spite of his efforts to show similarities in Morrison’s Beloved to Holocaust issues, it seems extremely far-fetched to compare these two worlds. Both genres deal with human suffering but certainly in very different places and times.

In some senses, the writing is politicized by the numerous references to the American treatment of prisoners at Guantanamo Bay. The references are Hillis’ way of showing that human beings have not improved or changed since Auschwitz. However, the idea seems completely inappropriate in this context (interestingly, the detailed index does not include an entry for Guantanamo Bay).

In spite of the above criticism, the book merits placement in academic libraries with good collections of Holocaust materials. There it could be used for discussions on Holocaust fiction and generally on fiction relevant to the topic of man’s cruelty to man.

Michlean Lowy Amir, Reference Coordinator, Holocaust Survivors and Victims Resource Center, United States Holocaust Memorial Museum


Until recently, Alice Herz-Sommer, at 108 the world’s oldest Holocaust survivor, ate the same thing every day: for breakfast, toast and feta cheese; for both lunch and dinner, a rich, home-made chicken soup. In fact, Alice’s recipe for her chicken soup is reproduced in Stoessinger’s slim biography. This kind of homey detail provides a comforting counterpoint to the grim historical context of her life.

The book is slow going at first, bogged down by name-dropping. But what names! Franz Kafka, Golda Meir, Leonard Bernstein, Pablo Casals. A brilliant Czech concert pianist, Herz-Sommer was part of a highly educated, cultured, talented community of secular Jews, most of whom were murdered in the camps. Her musical gift helped her and her young son survive Theresienstadt, and continued to enrich her émigré life in Haifa and London. For many years, she refused to discuss her experience in the camp, believing that the greater challenge would be to live in the present without bitterness or hatred. Accordingly, this is not really a Holocaust memoir.

The Müller book, on the other hand, which bills itself as “the only authorized biography” of Herz-Sommer, does provide extraordinary detail about daily life in Theresienstadt, and especially about the practice and preparation for the musical performances that gave her hope, even with the awareness that the shows were part of the Nazi propaganda designed to give the impression that Jews were well-treated in this “model” camp. Particularly moving are the sections on Herz-Sommer’s years in post-liberation Prague, where life for Jewish survivors was made unbearably difficult by a bureaucracy steeped in anti-Semitism. Originally published in 2006 as Ein Garten Eden immitten del Hölle, the book was translated from the German, which may account for the somewhat choppy style. These books are excellent companion pieces, suitable for academic and public libraries.

Helen Laurence, Technical Services Librarian, Florida Atlantic University Libraries, Boca Raton, FL


Born in Amsterdam, Holland, and descended from a family of conversos, Baruch (Bento) de Spinoza (1632-1677) lived in an increasingly open society in which traditional values were coming under growing scrutiny. Young Spinoza evidenced little, if any, interest in the thriving family business and, instead, opted for a life of reflection and contemplation. He lived a rather solitary life, never marrying and working as an optician while using his spare time to write philosophical works.
In 1653, the States of Holland decreed that books deemed “irreligious” were not to be printed and disseminated. Spinoza penned a work entitled *Theological-Political Treatise* and published it anonymously in January 1670. Three years later it was condemned by the Synod of Dordrecht, and in 1674 it was banned. In a society still dominated by the Calvinist church, the movers and shakers of the day didn’t want to ruffle any feathers. Spinoza had few supporters: another free spirit, Uriel de Costa, had already been excommunicated, and Menasheh Ben Israel—who might have intervened on young Spinoza’s behalf—was in England at the time.

Steven Nadler, professor of philosophy at the University of Wisconsin–Madison has written a thoroughly engaging study of a book which, not only controversial in its day, may be said to have moved Biblical studies into a modern terminology and thrust. It will be a welcome addition to seminary and university libraries.

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


In this fascinating work, Jordan Paper not only explores the intricacies of Chinese Jewish theology, but also the meaning of being a Jew. Long a student of comparative theology and the phenomenon of the Chinese Jews, Paper details the development of Chinese Jewish theology and considers how this theology was impacted by the surrounding culture.

The book begins with an account of the harsh circumstances under which Jews lived in Moslem and Christian lands and depicts the free and convivial home in Kaifeng, to which they were invited in the 10th Century C.E. In China, the land was ruled over by an emperor and his court, which was made up mainly of eunuchs. However, everyday life was administered by a well-established, well-regulated civil service. The Jewish merchants who settled there in the 10th century C.E. were comfortably at home. Indeed, there was significant assimilation, though the Jews maintained their faith as well.

Paper asserts that over the next nine centuries, the Jews of China proceeded to combine their Jewish theology with elements of the Buddhism and Taoism that surrounded them. This resulted in a special veneration of ancestors and a unique set of concepts regarding monotheism and creation that are reflected in evidence from the Kaifeng synagogue’s stelae and plaques. Although this suggests a certain degree of assimilation, the resulting theology also reflects a distinctive religious culture that clearly distinguished the Jews from those around them.

The book concludes with the destruction of the Kaifeng synagogue and the apparent demise of the Chinese Jewish community. For those who challenge the idea that the Chinese Jews were in fact Jewish, Paper wrestles with the whole concept of who is a Jew. Supported with the assertions of Rabbi Anson Laytner, Paper comes to the conclusion that these were indeed Jews from whom western Jews can learn a great deal.

*Randall C. Belinfante, American Sephardi Federation*


This well-written book raises questions about the ethical foundation of a human world-as-it-ought-to-be governed, and challenges Deuteronomic theology, which holds that if one follows the *mitzvot* one will avoid suffering. Although the text notes that Job is perfect and upright, fears God and turns away from evil, he undergoes a test where he loses his children,
health, and wealth because of a wager by ha-satan (the prosecuting attorney,) who is filled with jealousy and covetousness, and who asks in God’s court whether Job’s service of God is contingent on a reward. Job demands a trial. In chapter 38, God shows up in the whirlwind, with humbling questions such as “Where were you when I laid the foundations of the earth? (38:4).” A God “who is just and perfect in all his ways” (Psalms 18:30; 145:17; 2 Sam. 22:31) over whose creation “all the morning stars and heavenly beings (38:7) sang for joy” out of wonder for a Being who asks, “Have you caused the dawn to know its place?” (38:12). Pelham asks tough questions regarding suffering in the world. Wrestling with the Book of Job hopefully allows us to arrive at an awareness of our inability to really know “All” because God is a transcendent Being whose unlimited wisdom cannot be put in a box.

A weakness of Pelham’s book is that it fails to cite the panoply of medieval rabbinic sources, i.e. Rabbis Samuel ibn Tibbon, Zerahiah Hen, Gersonides, Simon ben Zemah Duran, etc., who are discussed in Robert Eisen’s The Book of Job in Medieval Jewish Thought. Nevertheless, Pelham within her scope has written a well-organized book that is a “must read.” It is not just a good modern commentary, but is also about the hermeneutics of reading, whereby the reader is transformed into a writer.

This thought-provoking book is recommended for those interested in biblical exegesis, ethics, and hermeneutics. It includes bibliographical references and an index.

David B Levy, Touro College


In what one might think would be another book on the “December Dilemma” which interfaith couples often experience, this well-written, well-researched book examines the history of Christmas and Hanukkah in America. In the 1880s, German Jews often adopted the non-religious observance of Christmas (which some rabbis even encouraged) as they became more assimilated into American culture. The massive wave of Jewish immigrants from Eastern European who viewed and experienced Christmas as well as Easter as a time to stay indoors lest they be attacked by Christians, were for the most part, non-observers of Christmas. As the U.S. became more diverse, Jews felt more confident in their choice of religious observances, including Christmas. Plaut presents delightful insights into how Christmas Eve, Jews and Chinese food went mainstream as well as community volunteerism on Christmas Day. This book is recommended for all synagogue, public and academic libraries.

Martin Goldberg, Penn State University


Having devoted his doctoral research to Samuel ibn Tibbon’s commentary on Ecclesiastes, James Robinson has now embarked on the ambitious project of producing a massive history of medieval Jewish commentaries on that enigmatic biblical book. In this first installment, he presents a critical edition of Salmon ben Yeroham’s Judeo-Arabic commentary, with facing English translation and with a comprehensive introduction. Salmon was a central figure in the 10th century Jerusalem School of Karaite thought and biblical interpretation.

Robinson’s edition is exemplary. The first part of the introduction places Salmon’s commentary in the larger context of Karaite exegesis, and then moves to a consideration of Salmon’s hermeneutics and philosophy. The second part provides detailed descriptions of the fourteen Judeo-Arabic manuscripts utilized for the edition, grouped into three textual families. The edition itself provides a critical source-text in the original Judeo-Arabic with textual variants at the bottom of the page, and an articulate English translation on the facing page. This volume is an important addition to any collection of Karaite, medieval Jewish biblical exegesis and Judeo-Arabic studies.

Pinchas Roth, Tikvah Scholar at the NYU Tikvah Center.


This tightly written and well-researched book traces the intellectual paths that led to the junction where Zionism, as a practice and a culture, encountered psychoanalysis, as theory and a practice, at the end of the nineteenth and the beginning of the twentieth centuries. The result was a “lovers’ quarrel” where both driving powers claimed and rejected each other’s attempts to define the modern Jewish persona at the same time. In
the words of the author, who is a historian and a practicing psychiatrist in Israel: “Even if the introduction of Freudian theory in the Yishuv involved a certain measure of selectivity, of over-simplification, or of vulgarization, the most critical possible account of psychoanalytic practice in the Zionist milieu must recognize that above and beyond the rational justification for its implementation as a theory, the rapid acceptance of Freudian theory conflated both a psychological need and a national political agenda.” Recommended for academic libraries collecting in the areas of Jewish intellectual history, Zionism, and Freudian theory.

Dr. Yaffa Weisman, Frances-Henry Library, HUC-JIR, Los Angeles


The Van Leer Jerusalem Institute is “a leading intellectual center for the interdisciplinary study and discussion of issues related to philosophy, society, culture and education.” The Institute offers a lecture series on the weekly Torah portion with a different theme each year. This volume is a product of this project, and includes one entry for each of the portions. All the contributors hold academic posts at various institutions of higher learning in Israel or the United States.

Some of the studies draw on classical interpretations of the text from such luminaries as Maimonides, Nachmonides, Abravanel, Kli Yakar, and Nehama Leibowitz. Others draw on the works of Spinoza, A.I. Kook or Chasidic masters. Some of the most interesting pieces are the ones that draw on unlikely sources: an analysis of the figure of Nimrod comparing Nehama Leibowitz’s textual interpretation and that of sculptor Yitzhak Danziger; “The Fate of Rape Victims in the Bible and in the Poetry of Dalia Rabikovitz” (by Rachel Elior for Parshat Ki Teze); and “The Desert as a Formative Memory in the Thought of Rabbi Hayim of Volozhin” (by Yoske Achituv for Parshat Shelah Lekha). A list of biographies, as well as the authors’ credentials, adds context to the collection.

Some of the essays are quite scholarly and range far from the actual text of the Torah portion. Others focus on very specific subjects, e.g., “Holiness as Ethics in Light of the Philosophy of Emmanuel Levinas” (by Shmuel Wygoda for Parshat Vayikra), that may not be of interest to some readers. But taken as a whole, the book serves as a model for innovative thinking about the Torah and illustrates Ben Bag Bag’s instruction to “Turn it over and turn it over, for everything is in it. Look deeply into it, and grow old with it, and spend time over it…” (Avot 5:22). For this reason, Wisdom by the Week is suggested for most Jewish libraries.

Kathe Pinchuck, Ramat Bet Shemesh, Israel


Sand is an Israeli history professor who should be included in the New Historian coterie. Sand’s previous book questioned the origin of the notion of Jewish peoplehood; now, in a similarly controversial fashion, he focuses on the historical continuum of ancient Israel to its current geographical and cultural configuration. If any Jewish community or audience needs a source for discussion—which could be heated—here is the answer for the search. In a spectacularly researched approach, Sand makes the argument, evading the development of the modern nation-state system in the middle of the 17th century, that the connection between Canaan, Jews, and Israel was not a singularly, linear temporal development, but a collection of events that coincidentally were connected. This series of historical occurrences then became the basis of a cultural myth bound together in the Hebrew Bible and then later exploited by Zionist and Israeli historians. The contemporary and popular vision of Israel as so widely portrayed is, in reality according to the author, a version of colonial historiography. This book requires a careful consideration for inclusion into a Jewish institutional collection.

Sanford R. Silverburg, Catawba College, Salisbury, NC


Neither Baruch (Benedictus) Spinoza (1632-1677) nor the intricacies of his philosophy and writings constitute the subject of this book. But rather it is his reception by Jews throughout the 340 years since his birth which forms this author’s focus. According to Schwartz, Spinoza has been regarded as “the quintessential ‘non-Jewish
Jew’ and as Judaism’s best ambassador for the monotheistic idea, as a prototype of assimilation and a prophet of political Zionism, as a consummate rationalist and a closet Kabbalist, as a ‘reforming Jew’ and a radical secularist.” The Jewish reception of Spinoza, claims Schwartz, serves as “a prism for viewing the intellectual history of European Jews from the seventeenth to the twentieth century.” As such, this book may offer a way of organizing a study of modern Jewish history in the West from political, philosophical and artistic/literary points of view. Indeed, many influential Jewish personalities over the course of this period have opened a window onto their respective time periods by way of their responses to Spinoza.

Moses Mendelssohn, the 18th century seminal German Jewish thinker, for example, left “a legacy of both reclamation and resistance” to Spinoza. In addition, Mendelssohn’s writings had a strong influence on the political and civil status of Jews in that period.

In the mid-19th century, Spinoza re-entered Jewish consciousness with the publication of a laudatory article in the reform-oriented German Jewish journal, Sulamith in 1832, the bicentenary of Spinoza’s birth. Another pivotal event was the translation of Spinoza’s oeuvre into German from the original Latin by Berthold Auerbach, a popular and acclaimed author of the period.

An important response to Spinoza came from the Zionists who viewed Spinoza as an advocate of the re-establishment of Jewish sovereignty in Israel. Joseph Klausner and David Ben Gurion were among the leading Zionists who championed Spinoza as the spiritual father of their cause.

The main function of this finely crafted and expansive study of the Jewish reception of Spinoza is to bring to the reader’s attention the pervasiveness of this heretic/modern Jew’s influence on so many aspects of Western civilization and especially the Jewish role in it. With extensive and helpful notes, an index and a bibliography, this work is highly recommended for all academic collections that deal with Jews and Judaism in the modern age.

Marion M. Stein, retired librarian


The analysis is meticulous and the result is a highly professional, scholarly work. Shapiro uses diverse sources to reflect the historical, political, cultural and economic elements of the miraculous realization of the Zionist dream. Each chapter is supported by detailed documentation and notes, including English and Hebrew bibliography, and suggestions for additional reading. (The book provides plates and an index which were not included in the advanced copy.)

Shapira’s firsthand knowledge of contemporary Israel provides an exciting perspective to this work. She describes the rift between the liberal-left and the more observant-right factions of the society, as well as the failure of the peace process, the bursts of Arab-Palestinian violence, and the impact of recent Jewish immigration (Aliyah), from Ethiopia and Russia and its multicultural influence on the country. Shapiro references contemporary memoirs, diaries and literature from Israel, adding a poetic perspective and mood to her history telling. Only a researcher of her stature can conclude her thesis appreciating the great Zionist adventure of Israel’s existence, while at the same time recognizing that it has not brought about an end to anti-Semitism, nor guaranteed the existence of the Jewish people.

Israel: A History is a very readable book for both the academic and layperson. It will enhance understanding of the contemporary Middle East by providing a clear historical and structural perspective. The book is a worthy addition for university libraries, as well as high school and public collections.

Nira Glily Wolfe, Highland Park, IL


This collaboration between father and son focuses on writing as a spiritual practice. The ideas and exercises, theories and practices, are based on the authors’ experience leading a weekend retreat, Path and Pen, now in its
seventh year. There are two separate prefaces, presenting the perspective of each author, as well as a note on collaboration and on structure. The book is based on the five world model of life, interlinking dimensions or levels of consciousness: body, heart, mind, soul and spirit. Each part of the book considers writing as a means of opening up one of these dimensions. There are many practical exercises included in each chapter, and a list of suggestions for further reading. The authors are well-qualified teachers, and have collaborated in a unique and interesting way to share their expertise. The result is a work with broad appeal for a wide audience. It will be a valuable resource for academic, school and public library collections.

Susan Freiband, Retired Library Educator, Arlington, Virginia


As in her previous book on Bereishis (Feldheim, 2010), Rebbetzin Smiles takes several key points in the weekly Torah reading and puts them under in-depth focus. Drawing from many commentaries, she creates a tapestry of different ideas and points which, brought together, furnishes a deep understanding of the text. Once the text is clear, Smiles goes on to demonstrate why the thought is important, and how it applies in “real life situations.” For example, the subtitle for Parashat Va’ei ra is “Learning to Appreciate.” Most who study the weekly readings are familiar with the commentary that Aaron had to take the staff and hit the water to initiate the plague of blood because if Moses did, it would show a lack of appreciation for the water that saved him from Pharaoh’s edict as a baby. Delving further into this idea, we learn how meticulous Moses was in his appreciation (and how unappreciative Pharaoh was); the extent of appreciation; that even if someone does something with ulterior motives we should still appreciate it, and that you never know where an act of kindness or an expression of appreciation may lead. Smiles’ interpretation is supported by a myriad of quoted (and referenced) sources. The book includes a bibliography of these sources as well as a glossary, though the definitions of Hebrew and Aramaic words are included in parentheses within the text.

Rebbetzin Smiles teaches at several seminaries in Israel and is a popular lecturer. Her writing style is similar to her presentation style of posing a number of questions, offering several commentaries, and then finding the applicable life instruction. While it is helpful to be familiar with the Torah text and the rabbinic commentaries, the explanations are clear, and there is much to be gained from following Smiles’ reasoning as well as the content. Her book is highly recommended for all Jewish libraries.

Kathe Pinchuck, Ramat Bet Shemesh, Israel


Franz Kafka’s writing is a gift to the world which keeps on giving. Much has been written about his very complex works, which continue to be interpreted and re-interpreted many years after the author’s untimely death 90 years ago. His legacy would have been lost had his executor, Max Brod, followed Kafka’s instructions to destroy all of his unpublished works. Thankfully Brod did not obey Kafka’s orders and the world has been so much the richer for it.

Ironically, David Suchoff’s book was published in 2012, the same year in which, after long litigations, an Israeli court ruled that Max Brod’s heirs in Israel must give Kafka’s papers and unpublished works to the National Library of Israel. The intensity of Kafka’s Jewish identity (whether personally felt by him or not) may have contributed to the court’s decision that this part of his legacy belongs in the Jewish State.

Kafka’s Jewishness is a topic that has been argued for many years, and Suchoff attempts to show that indeed Jewish languages can be found wherever one looks in many of Kafka’s works. This thorough scholarly, well referenced book belongs in every academic library that includes works by and about Kafka. Though rather dense, it is a very readable and interesting work especially for those familiar with the Kafka books Suchoff uses in his analyses.

Michlean Lowy Amir, Reference Coordinator, Holocaust Survivors and Victims Resource Center, United States Holocaust Memorial Museum


The catchy, somewhat misleading, title draws you into the journey of a woman who at forty years old discovered the beauty of Judaism at her local Chabad house in Montreal, Canada. The first section of the book describes her
“It’s totally blown the dust off the books and made them come alive with its strong visuals, comprehensive database and interactive style.”

“We moved to OPALS a year ago and have been very pleased with service, response, options, usability, everything has been a plus.”

“Great product. The vendor is extremely responsive to our needs and questions.”

Reviews of Literature titles for Adults
“Journey to Observance” with some very personal details and descriptions of Jewish holidays. In “Lessons in Life and Death,” the second section, Tansky shares her feelings about prayer and death. The third part of the book chronicles travels to Chabad houses in Victoria, British Columbia; Sacramento, Alaska, Russia, Munich and outside of Durban, South Africa and offers praise for all the emissaries stationed in remote locations. She also details a trip to Israel. The last two sections, “The Rebbe’s Reach” and “Ripples” are short reflections. A glossary is included.

Because the book is a collection of writings that includes journal entries, travel descriptions and observations, the only unifying theme is Lubavitch Hassidism, which will attract some readers and dissuade others. While some entries are dated, the “travels” are not, which makes it hard to put visits to Germany, Russia and Israel in context of world events. Short biographies of Shlomo Carlebach and of the Lubavitch Rebbes (with a timeline) would have been helpful to those unfamiliar with these personalities. This book is suggested as a strong optional purchase for libraries that collect books about women and Judaism.

Kathe Pinchuck, Ramat Bet Shemesh, Israel


The Folkist Party was an also-ran among the numerous parties vying for support in the fractious political environment of the Polish Jewish community. Inspired by the historian Simon Dubnow’s concept of Diaspora nationalism, Folkists advocated collective political rights for Polish Jewry and the official recognition of Yiddish as their national language. The party elected representatives to the Sejm (Polish parliament) before succumbing to internal splits and competition with Zionist parties, the orthodox Agudat Israel, and the socialist Bund. Its leading parliamentarian was the lawyer, journalist, and linguist Noah Prylucki (Noyekh Prilutski), a talented, egocentric, and polarizing figure. Born in Berdichev in 1882, raised in the Volhynian town of Kremenets, Prylucki was educated at St. Petersburg University, and settled in Warsaw (1909), where he became a regular contributor to Yiddish newspapers that his father Tsevi Prylucki helped to found. The apex of Noah Prylucki’s political influence came during the German occupation of 1915-1918; his sway waned following the establishment of the Polish nation-state in November 1918. In September 1939 Prylucki fled to Lithuania, where he briefly held the Chair of Yiddish Studies at Vilnius University; he was executed in August 1941, shortly after Nazi Germany invaded the Soviet Union. This thorough study, which is based on the author’s doctoral dissertation, stresses Prylucki’s participation in the political milieu; future research will, one hopes, focus on his contributions in the cultural and scholarly realms. It is an important work of scholarship on 20th-century Polish Jewry and is recommended for research libraries.

Zachary M. Baker, Stanford University Libraries


The format of this Haggadah is very attractive. What more could one ask for than illustrations by Mark Podwal (one of this reviewer’s favorite artists). The sidebars throughout the text are also extremely informative and helpful. That said, this text is missing many of the essential parts of the Haggadah. For example, the entire traditional “Maggid” section has been eliminated along with “B’chol dor v’dor”, the “Sh’foch chamatcha” when the door is opened for Elijah, and the Hallel texts.

For this reviewer, this Haggadah is so watered down and sanitized that it has turned our seminal Jewish cultural story into an undifferentiated freedom tale. As a result, the Seder loses its dramatic intensity in an effort to reduce its length. Instead of enriching the experience, it saps it of all ta’am. This reader also objects to the forced efforts to make it relevant to the present. These insertions are unnecessary since the relevancies are so obvious that any Seder leader would easily arrive at them on his/her own.

Instead of eliminating so many essential aspects of the traditional Haggadah, one could instead infer the universality of the story as so many communities around the world have done over the millennia from the details in the original. For this reader’s taste, it would have been much better to enrich the story instead of diluting it beyond recognition. This Haggadah is sadly not recommended.

Marion Stein, retired librarian


The focus of this impressive volume is the Arabic translation and commentary on the Abraham stories
(Genesis 11-25) created by the prolific medieval Karaite exegete Yefet ben ‘Eli, one of the most outstanding commentators of the 10th century—the Karaite “Golden Era”. As Zawanowska explains in her introduction, the Karaites viewed the Bible as the sole source of information regarding God’s will. For Yefet, biblical exegesis and its dissemination to his Karaite compatriots was of paramount importance.

In the first section of the book, Zawanowska places Yefet’s work in its medieval context. She explores how Christian and Jewish commentators—in particular the rabbis—viewed the biblical text. She also examines Yefet’s views on the authorship of the Bible, the hermeneutics he used to evaluate the text, the literary aspects of his exegesis, and the polemical nuances manifested in his commentary.

A guide to the critical edition including a description of the manuscripts consulted and an extensive bibliography is provided in the second part of the book. Then in the third and final section a critical edition of the text of Yefet’s translation and commentary is presented. In her introduction Zawanowska notes that the commentary usually begins with the biblical text, and is followed by its Arabic translation based on a straightforward explanation of its structure and meaning. Yefet then adds his own commentary, providing his interpretation of the text and often concluding by placing the interpreted verse back into its broader context. Yefet also gathers other opinions regarding the text, discussing their merits or otherwise. His commentary thus becomes something of a treasure trove of Karaite exegesis. This is a serious academic work which will find its place in research collections supporting biblical and Judaica scholarship.

Randall C. Belinfante, American Sephardi Federation


This is an Israeli novel written in English. It concerns three women from the same village in northern Israel, focusing on their years in the Israel Defense Forces. The prose is highly stylized in a somewhat bizarre way which fits the nature of the story itself. All three women are somewhat off kilter. None of them seem solidly grounded in worthwhile values but instead one or another falls into depression, writes pornography, or wanders aimlessly around the globe. One might be tempted to see the novel as perhaps questioning the value of the IDF or Israeli society in general, but near the end we are told the tale of one of the women’s mothers whose own service in the IDF during the Entebbe rescue operation turned her from a party girl into a woman of compassion. For fiction collections which cater to those with a taste for the surreal.

Shmuel Ben-Gad, Gelman Library, George Washington University


The prolific writer Franz Fuhmann (1922-1984) considered this a cycle of stories rather than a memoir or novel. It is at least partly autobiographical, beginning shortly before the ascension of Hitler to power and ending with the founding of the communist East German state. The first person narrator grows up in a Catholic but pro-national socialist household in the Sudetenland part of Czechoslovakia. He eventually joins the SA and fights on the eastern front during the Second World War. Captured by the Soviet army at the end of the war, he eventually embraces communism. From the translator’s afterword, we learn two further important biographical points: that Fuhmann took part in Kristallnacht and eventually broke with communism. The stories are effective but more descriptive than analytical. Aside from the first story (from which the book derives its name) that deals with anti-Semitism, there is almost no Jewish-related content. For comprehensive collections of fiction dealing with anti-Semitism.

Shmuel Ben-Gad, Gelman Library, George Washington University


Readers who enjoyed Grossman’s first novel, The Sleepwalkers, will find out about the events leading up to it in this prequel. Willi Kraus is a detective in the Berlin police department in 1929. He is a World War I hero and a fast-rising star in the department. While highly respected, Kraus is disliked because he is a Jew. The Germans want to forget the troubles brought on by the war, the bad economy, and the revolution and enjoy life, but the stock market
crashes in New York, and an unspeakable crime emerges at home. A burlap bag surfaces when the sewer system floods. Inside, Willi finds children’s bones with teeth marks on them along with a Bible and the phrase “Children of Wrath” circled in red. As more bones appear, Willi works to find the killer, now dubbed the “Kinderfresser” while battling the growing anti-Semitism that comes with the rise of the Nazis. The horrific case, filled with action and grotesque scenes, may be a bit much for some readers, but the look at Berlin society and the Jews place in it just before the Nazi menace took hold is fascinating. Book groups will find a great deal to discuss here.

Barbara M. Bibel, Oakland Public Library, Oakland, CA; Congregation Netivot Shalom, Berkeley, CA


Modernity reigns in these short, smart, strange, cruel, crass, cynical vignettes. Etgar Keret’s latest collection of 35 short stories, emphasis on short most being four to six pages, empathetically shares the messiness of contemporary life. Scenes and characters operate above an undertow of pain and suspected violence. Relationships without romance crowd the anthology. A weak God slips in. Yet, hope never ceases and dreams ever soar. Loneliness is the biggest enemy no matter the locale: Israel, US, Europe, Global. Rejected lovers, seeking singles, sad children, divorcees, widowers, and failures enter our consciousness through tight language laced with humor and insightful description of the character, the moment, the action. The moment dominates. The edginess draws you in. All persona are “everyman”. Of the varied situations, readers identify with many, and shiver before they nod or smile. Keret’s most mystical story about talking fish clarifies our wild dreams, causing them to rewind, do over. The author’s collection of pocket contents highlights our desire to connect. Do we lie well? Do we care more than we show? Do we feel guilty? Ashamed? Loving? Or just provoked, then nervous, when the light dawns? How can AJL members resist a book opening with the reader holding the writer hostage, then a later story revealing a man dreaming about his librarian love? Keret is original, visionary, dark and absurd. His tales abound with a sadness that illuminates and radiates compassion. This collection rests not on his past laurels, but on energetic, controlled writing with the power to transform. Highly recommended for all libraries and all readers.

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


This is a collection of stories about word play and sex. The characters and plots have more or less Jewish context, but they are background material for the author’s games and conceits, his musings on academia, Holocaust stereotypes, clichéd plotlines about Jewish-American assimilation, and fiction itself, all tied together with plays on words, double-meanings, and the rich sound of Yiddish, with its denotations and connotations. It’s a clever and masterful exercise, but it has no substance beyond the words themselves. The subject of the book is Jewish language—English, Yiddish, and Hebrew—in a global, modern Jewish setting. Perhaps to keep the game interesting to the author, each story has one or more, mostly passive, women with large breasts whose conquest or contemplation by a male protagonist drives the story. For an esteemed author like Leviant, this is rather an odd addition to a respectable oeuvre, almost a suggestion of dotage. Recommended for libraries collecting all of Leviant’s work.

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


Since the discovery by one of Irene Nemirovsky’s daughters of the manuscript for her book, Suite Française, and its publication in 2006, the well-known and highly-respected French author, who wrote in pre-war France to great acclaim, has become posthumously a best-selling writer. The book first became very popular in France where Nemirovsky had been arrested during the war and then deported to her death in Auschwitz. It has since been published in numerous languages, and many of the author’s works are now available to English readers. With the publication of The Wine of Solitude last year, English readers have Nemirovsky’s most autobiographical work available to them. The author’s difficult childhood in pre-revolutionary Russia is described sensitively and powerfully through the life of the girl, Helene. One gets an in-depth analytical look into the life of a wealthy Russian, marginally Jewish family of the period. The heroine of the book, a girl who is brought up by a French governess, learns languages and much about the world through travel and her beloved teacher. Emotionally she lacks basic, normal parental love and caring for which she must have yearned, but which also may have contributed to her maturing into a strong-willed, determined young woman.

Just ahead of the Revolution, the family escaped to Finland and finally to permanence in France. The pain and joy of adjusting to new circumstances is well-described. As in other Nemirovsky’s other works, the portrait
of the mother is not a pretty one. She is depicted as an extremely egocentric woman with no time or love for her daughter whom she rejects on every level. She is much too busy trying to keep herself young-looking and attractive to gentlemen near and far.

This remarkable and very readable novel is highly recommended for book clubs as it allows for discussion on family matters and the human condition. The book also enables conversations on the topic of the Jewishness of assimilated, wealthy Russians, as well as on Nemirovsky’s attitudes towards Jews and Judaism. It should be housed in synagogue libraries as well as in academic libraries with extensive literary collections on World War II.

Michlean Lowy Amir, Reference Coordinator, Holocaust Survivors and Victims Resource Center, United States Holocaust Memorial Museum


Rosett’s collection of short stories features a loosely connected group of people who belong to the same Reform congregation in Hollywood. While the themes of the stories are familiar ones of death, divorce, addiction, child-rearing and loss, Rosett adds a Jewish element to each. She shows how Jewish rituals and values have a place in contemporary Jewish life. A get (divorce), an unveiling, the mikvah (ritual bath), and the holidays all make appearances, but most conspicuous is the importance of being present for each other: from the women who rushed to pick up her daughter who had just gotten her first period to the rabbi’s wife who visited a troubled teacher and just sat silently with her. The author’s style is accessible and relatable with dashes of humor, whimsy and mysticism. Recommended.

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


Forty-four-year-old Drew Silver is Jonathan Tropper’s latest protagonist in One Last Thing Before I Go. Like many of Tropper’s books, the main character has made a mess of his life and makes bad decision after bad decision alienating all those who are close to him. Silver is a musician, a former one hit wonder, seven years divorced and
with a semi-estranged eighteen year old daughter. His ex-wife is on the cusp of remarrying a solid man who is everything Silver isn’t. Without giving away the plot of the novel, something happens to Silver that makes him reconsider his life, although not in the straight, linear path that the reader would necessarily expect.

Tropper is his typically funny and raunchy self, writing with great insight into the life of a single, divorced man who hates his life and lives in a perpetual state of regret.

Although there were some character inconsistencies in the advance reviewer’s copy of this book (a character described as dead re-appears without resort to science fiction toward the end of book), it is a quick, fun read. Recommended for adults only due to the graphic language and sexually explicit material.

David Tesler, Yonkers, NY


Young Christine is happy with her life in Germany. She has a good family, a job, and even a boy who returns her romantic feelings. Her life gets turned upside down by the start of World War II. Everything she knows changes. Suddenly, she finds herself having to make life-altering decisions. How far is he willing to go for what she believes is right? Is she willing to risk her own or her family’s safety? Standing up for what is right has serious consequences for her, and she is sent to Dachau. This is a well-crafted story of the horrible effects of war, and readers will be engaged by the pace, setting, and the development of the protagonist. There is little Jewish content in this book outside of the fact that Christine’s love interest is Jewish. First time author, Ellen Marie Wiseman has done a wonderful job on this book. This book is recommended for libraries that collect World War II fiction.

Debbie Feder, Director, Library Resource Center, Ida Crown Jewish Academy, Chicago, IL


The Law in These Parts, a Best Documentary Award winner at the Jerusalem International Film Festival, presents the history of the Israeli military legal framework in the Palestinian territories. The film is shaped by interviewing nine retired military judges, prosecutors and legal advisors who created the laws in Gaza and the West Bank after Israel took control of these areas during the 1967 Six-Day War. In the director words: “this film is not about those who broke the law but about those entrusted with the law.” With historical footage as a background, this film presents some very interesting questions about order, justice and security. The Israeli Supreme Court was the first court in history to contend with the challenge of doing justice, not just with the citizens of the state, but also with the people that the state holds under military occupation. The Court needed to deal also with the challenge of defending the rights of the residents of the occupied territories, while faced with the army’s demands to carry out activities for security reasons. This film is highly recommended for all libraries and will serve as an excellent starting point to further explore issues of democracy, security and human rights.

Sonia Smith, McGill University, Montreal, Canada

Wolf, Konrad, Sterne (Stars), Amherst, MA: DEFA Film Library at the University of Massachusetts, Amherst, 2011. 88 min. Public libraries, High Schools: $24.95; Educational Use and Academic Libraries: $100.00.

Set in a Bulgarian village during World War II, this is the story of a Wehrmacht soldier named Walter. Walter is an artist and really does not want to be part of the war at all. He struggles to balance his naturally kind and pacifistic tendencies with the fact that he has to maintain a good “reputation” and relationship with the German officer he works with. He takes pity on a Jewish woman in labor and makes sure a doctor comes to the temporary ghetto the Jews are being held in while they await transportation to Auschwitz. One of the Greek Jewish women takes notice of his kindness and a comradeship of sorts develops. A romance is out of the question, but they both fill a void for each other. At least, that is, for a short time. This is a beautiful movie. Originally produced in 1959, the gritty black and white of the film gives it character and makes it feel authentic to the time period. The film is hauntingly beautiful in its artistic aspects, and it is thought-provoking and philosophical. While it is honest to the harsh realities of WWII, it is not very bloody or gory. Its contents will serve as a discussion starter. A good purchase for synagogues and recommended for Jewish libraries.

Debbie Feder, Director, Library Resource Center, Ida Crown Jewish Academy, Chicago, IL
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