
If the reader is familiar with Hungarian, this book will be a real treat. If, on the other hand, the reader knows little about Hungary and the history of its Jewish population, this book will be truly instructive. Through a series of interviews with some of Hungary’s Orthodox Jews, collected between 1990 and 1994, Bacskai, a Hungarian writer and photographer who specializes in documenting family histories, makes a powerful statement via an ethnographic study of a select group of Orthodox Hungarian Jews who, following the unusual fate of the country’s Jewish population during the Holocaust, return to their homes after the war, but now face not only a Communist controlled regime, but also a resurgence of antisemitism and anti-Zionist sentiment. As with other studies of Eastern European Jewish communities, the issue of assimilation is always close to the surface. The author thus notes the dilemma for Hungarian Jews: are they Hungarian or are they foreigners? This is a fine contribution for an understanding of Judaism as it has existed in Europe and a distinctive examination of how Jews have existed in Hungary.

*Sanford R. Silverburg, Catawba College, Salisbury, NC*

Germany came late to embracing the European imperial design and the benefits of colonization. But once it was shown to be useful, it came about with a horrific impact on its colonial territory in Southwest Africa. With a white, European appreciation of race surrounding non-European folk and the intent to bring civilization to ‘dark’ Africa, the Germans introduced genocide—even before the concept was introduced—into the twentieth century. During the period 1904 to 1907, the German authorities in their Southwest African colony intentionally sought to eradicate the Herero and Nama people. Baer, a research professor of English and African Studies at Gustavus Adolphus College, has made a serious contribution to the emergent discipline of genocide and post-colonial studies. Here also is a necessary chapter to an understanding of the Holocaust, occurring but a half century later. The author clearly shows how the racist attitudes of German settlers developed into a framework of dehumanization leading to the justification for the eventual destruction of one of the regions indigenous populations. Here is an important read in order to fully appreciate Nazi Germany’s racial policies.

Sanford R. Silverburg, Catawba College, Salisbury, NC


Every translation is essentially a commentary. The best translations do not feel like translations and the prose flows elegantly. However, when it comes to translating the Bible, a close translation, which is to say, one that closely hews to both the form and syntax of the original, is particularly critical. In previous translations, a variety of English words for the same Hebrew word have been used in order to make the story flow better. But by maintaining the same word, Bray and Hobbins, show the reader how the deliberate usage of the same Hebrew word was applied. The translators also nod toward tradition. When there is a so called ‘tie’ in how best to translate a word or phrase, the more traditional translation (the patriarchs “dwell” and “beget”) of the Tyndale Bible and King James version is chosen. The translators also take seriously the reception of Genesis as scripture and therefore take into consideration the “broader corpus of Scripture” and how that may impact a particular translation. Interestingly, the authors also consider how a particular text sounds when read aloud, which is a subtlety that makes some sense if you attempt to read aloud certain passages from more well-known Bible translations.

After the translation itself, the authors include detailed notes on the verses. After the notes, the translators have also included the following very helpful sections: dramatis personae, a glossary, additional readings, abbreviations, works cited, and indices. This translation of Genesis 1-11 is an excellent resource for the interested layman and scholar alike.

David Tesler, Yonkers, NY


In his provocative new work, Rabbi Nathan Lopes Cardozo proposes that rather than serving as a restrictive phenomenon, *halacha* is actually a force that liberates the Jew. Cardozo begins by exploring the question of whether any kind of structure need be imposed to deal with the body/soul conflict. He explains that whereas Christianity takes the pessimistic view that the soul cannot contend with the drives of the body, the Socratic, western view asserts that the soul/mind, if carefully trained, can indeed direct the actions of the body. Cardozo rejects the Socratic view as unrealistic, but he also does not agree that the soul is entirely defenseless in the face of bodily passions. He argues that while the body is an extremely powerful force with which to contend, it can be regulated through the disciplining of the soul. He notes however that “The task of training the body in the ways of the soul, of sanctifying the body and its desires, presents perhaps the most difficult challenge known to human beings.” And
yet, he assures us that it is not impossible; the pathway to disciplining the soul lay in the premise that physical actions could lead to spiritual change. The mitzvoth, if performed with appropriate kavanah (intentionality) could lead to spiritual enrichment. Through their observance, Cardozo claims it is possible to change one’s thinking, and elevate one’s spirit.

He takes exception however, to the dogmatic observance of mitzvoth without regard to the spirit which imbues them. He notes that members of the Haredi community are meticulous in their observance of mitzvoth, allowing them to direct every aspect of their lives. According to Cardozo, however, in their zealous focus on the mitzvoth themselves, they seem to lose sight of the spirituality that should accompany those mitzvoth. Cardozo asserts that one must look to halacha as a mechanism facilitating spiritual growth, rather than as an end in itself. If viewed in this way, it can liberate the Jew and bring him or her closer to God.

This book is so packed with ideas that it is hard to put down. It is a must for any Jewish library.

Randall C. and Anne-Marie Belinfante


On the face of it, Professor Cortest has a hard row to hoe as he can muster no evidence that either of the great mediaeval thinkers, Maimonides and Aquinas, were directly influenced by the Hellenistic Jewish philosopher Philo (ca. 20 BCE-ca. 50 CE). He is convinced, however, that Philo’s influence on religious philosophy was immense, even primary. He argues that Philo’s use of philosophical tools in interpreting the Bible provided the method followed by many subsequent Jewish and Christian theologians. Similarly, the issues Philo considered were also addressed by many subsequent thinkers including Aquinas and Maimonides: creation versus the eternity of the universe, natural law morality, divine attributes, prophecy, and divine providence. It is not that these three thinkers always agreed on these matters (they did not) but that they all believed in divine revelation and used philosophy in service to revelation by providing a more profound understanding of it. Ultimately, Professor Cortest makes a good case that Philo’s philosophical approach to religion was picked up by many early Christian theologians (notably John Philoponus) and that this created the intellectual ambience in which Maimonides’ and Aquinas’ thought developed.

Shmuel Ben-Gad, Gelman Library, George Washington University


The controversies about Israel and Zionism continue both within the walls of our Jewish homes and institutions and in the general community. As Rabbi Janet Liss notes in this book’s preface, Herzl’s statement—“If you will it, it is not a dream”—contains several questions. Not least of them is “What is the ‘it’ and ‘who is the ‘who’ in today’s context?” This volume attempts to establish some contemporary ground rules for the debate.

The book is divided into five parts. The first, “Zionist Theory and Zionist Politics,” tries to separate the truths in our story, from myths and lies. “In the Classroom and on Campus” contains background and an assessment of the situation in today’s academic world. It includes an essay by two HUC-JIR students who argue that Israel, while important, should not be the primary element in their congregational lives. “Conversations across Generations and Continents” broadens the discussion even more. One of its essays is a “Letter to my Rabbi...” from a Gen-X congregant expressing her concerns. The fourth section, “Zionism, Liturgy, and Theology,” discusses the place of the homeland in Reform prayer books and our larger theological thinking. Finally, “Zionism and Tikkun” asks about some real-world issues.

Rabbi Davids’ Prologue begins with an extended quote from sci-fi fantasy writer Neil Gaiman, noting that people are “scared to get things wrong... so they form villages in which they agree...but
there’s no interchange of ideas going on.” The dialogue about Zionism has always been “fragile.” The authors should be applauded for their commitment to analysis rather than argument. The result is extremely valuable. It should be read by rabbis and community leaders who are interested in speaking across the existing boundaries. The writing is learned, but not inaccessible. And to quote Rabbi Akiva, “If not now, when?”

Fred Isaac, Temple Sinai, Oakland, CA


Surviving time and space, the literary and musical artistic output of the Spanish Jews traveled with them to remote reaches of the world, preserving as a time capsule some of the language and forms from the medieval period. Lyrics of popular Judeo-Spanish traditions preserve much of the framework of those ancient forms, expressing values and beliefs of the people who sang them. Often, this is in the feminine voice, as poor women had remained illiterate in that culture, they carried with them oral traditions in a unique dialect in which “they talked with local expression understood only by them” being more removed than men from Hebrew language. This book selects songs from a variety of locations where Spanish Jews settled after the expulsion, tracing and analyzing numerous texts. The author shows how some lyrical features allow tracing due to poetic traditions that remained in place. The author also explains symbols from both the natural and supernatural worlds that recurred in many songs, and explains their meanings in the contexts of the various cultures. The book explores two main themes: lyrics in reference to nature, and those with attributes of women. For anyone interested in Sephardic songs, this book will prove useful for musical interpretations by allowing a better understanding of the meanings and context of those songs. A useful index of first lines of the songs covered in the book is included.

Judith S. Pinnolis, Berklee College of Music/Boston Conservatory at Berklee


In this brief study Drazin utilizes modern textual criticism with close reading of the text to distinguish two separate strands of narrative describing the life and character of David. In so doing he challenges a number of traditional conceptions held regarding this beloved biblical icon.

In the very first pages of the book Drazin questions the veracity of what is unquestionably the best known story involving the biblical David: his defeat of the Philistine giant Goliath. He demonstrates that in chapters 16 and 17 of the Book of Samuel two very different Davids emerge: one a forthright shepherd boy who knows nothing of war, but proves agile enough with a sling that he kills Goliath and wins the hand of King Saul’s daughter (I Sam. 17); and another David who is: “…skillful in playing [the harp], a mighty man of valor, a man of war…a comely person, and the lord is with him” (I Sam.16:18).

In subsequent chapters Drazin describes a number of similarly contrasting versions of the stories surrounding David. He notes that biblical scholars have identified eleven instances where events are described differently, suggesting that there were two traditions regarding David that had been passed down to later editors, and that these editors had chosen to include both in the biblical text. Drazin advances the solution that the various duplications might treat different events, but this is difficult to understand when one considers that whereas David is said to have killed Goliath in one story, Elhanan son of Jaare-Oregim is said to have killed Goliath in another (II Sam.21:19). Drazin concedes that some modern scholars argue that David and Elhanan were the same person. In his afterward, Drazin also advances the argument that none of the people in these stories, including Samuel, demonstrate an awareness of Torah, suggesting that the author of the book of Samuel was unfamiliar with Moses’ Torah.
Reviews of Nonfiction Titles for Adults

Each chapter is accompanied by footnotes and the book includes a short and somewhat eclectic listing of sources. It would provide a useful guide for a discussion group or a trigger for study and debate in an undergraduate setting.

Randall C. and Anne-Marie Belinfante


Rabbi Drazin examines closely the Books of Samuel and Kings to explain the life and times of King David and to reconcile multiple versions of the tale. Drazin’s study shows that King David was not the highly respected person usually portrayed in schools and synagogues. The reader is shown that people in the period of Judges and Kings, until the time of King Josiah, acted as if they did not understand the mandates of the Torah. Part of this could be explained away as a development over time, but some of the actions demonstrate a total ignorance of the laws of the Torah.

Some parts of the book are repetitious; some have very careful and rich footnotes, while other parts have limited citations. Similar to Drazin’s other books, The Tragedies of King David falls somewhere in between theological and academic writing. Nevertheless, the book is easy to read and will open the readers’ eyes to new viewpoints on familiar stories.

This book is suitable for all libraries, particularly those with patrons interested in an alternative understanding of familiar Davidic Biblical stories.

Daniel D. Stuhlman, Temple Sholom Library and City Colleges of Chicago, Chicago, IL


These studies edited by Simcha Fishbane and Eric Levine of Touro College examine religious continuity and change from a variety of academic perspectives, including sociology, history, the history of ideas, and rabbinics. Most of the articles deal with changes in practice in modern times.

The essays cover a rare variety of topics. The book opens with a survey of how organizations change, proceeding to compare the rise and fall of the Union for Traditional Conservative Judaism with the emergence of Open Orthodoxy. Next is a review of the opposition to and accommodation to Bat Mitzvah ceremonies in ultra-orthodox communities. The third article traces the effects of globalization and mobility in the modern period on religious practice and communal structure.

The second section presents historical studies on the rise of simple faith in the ultra-Orthodox community; religious debates over Jewish clergy wearing clerical robes; and unsuccessful attempts by French rabbis to solve the plight of agunahs. The last paper in this section is a bit of an outlier arguing that changes in economic and social structure led to halachic changes in marriage and mourning practices in the Mishnaic and Talmudic periods.

The third section opens with an overview of the opposing stances, faith based versus rationalist, of Jewish thought towards the medical and folk practices of the Talmudic rabbis. The final article combines current medical studies with a halachic analysis of when Jewish laws can be overridden to treat seriously ill patients.

The editors argue for the importance of academic case studies in understanding the forces for both stability and change in Jewish religious life. While somewhat uneven in style and writing, the range of the essays presented does achieve this goal. Recommended for academic libraries.

Harvey Sukenic, Hebrew College Library, Newton Centre, MA
Reviews of Nonfiction Titles for Adults

**Defying the Nazis: The Life of German Officer Wilm Hosenfeld, Young Readers Edition**
By Hermann Vinke

"I only see a person in front of me, and a boundless compassion overcomes me."

The man who saved Władysław Szpilman (*The Pianist*, film) and more than 60 other people from the Nazis, for which he was named by Yad Vashem as a **Righteous Among the Nations**.

After witnessing the Nazi regime’s inhumanity against Poles and Jews, Wilm Hosenfeld, a German officer, and initially an ardent admirer of Hitler, became a rescuer. A devoted Catholic, Hosenfeld followed the biblical commandment: You shall not follow a multitude to do evil. A story of courageous transformation, *Defying the Nazis* is the first biography of Wilm Hosenfeld available in English.

Hardcover: 978-1-59572-759-6 • $19.99 • 224 pages • 6” x 9” • Ages 12 and up

**Hidden Letters**
By Deborah Slier and Ian Shine

“This is the best Holocaust book I’ve read, and I’ve read them all.”
—Jack Polak, Anne Frank Center, USA

When an old house was demolished in Amsterdam in 1997, a bundle of letters was found. The letters were written by Philip "Flip" Slier, an eighteen-year-old sent to a Nazi labor camp in 1942. He wrote to his parents almost every day, detailing his days in the camp and never giving up hope.

This collection of 86 letters and over 250 primary source documents and photos give a detailed view of German-occupied Holland during WWII.

Hardcover: 978-1-887734-88-2 • $35.00 • 200 pages • 10” x 11” • Ages 12 and up

**Lonek’s Journey: The True Story of a Boy’s Escape to Freedom**
By Dorit Bader Whiteman

In 1939, eleven-year-old Lonek escaped from Nazi-occupied Poland with his parents and young brother, but was then deported to a Soviet gulag. Lonek was among the 100,000 Poles who were released from the Russian gulags in 1941. He joined General Anderson on a march of thousands of miles, and finally made it to Israel with 1,000 other Jewish children.

144 pages • 6” x 9” • Ages 10-14

Hardcover: 978-1-59572-021-4 • $17.95
Paperback: 978-1-59572-327-7 • $12.95

This book is a careful history of American Christian Zionism. While he devotes very little space to its origins outside the country, the author traces the history of this set of ideas as it developed in the United States. What makes it such a rewarding read is that it shows its long history and the depth and breadth of its presence. Its depth is indicated by the role this movement has played in the country’s understanding of itself. Regarding breadth, some may find surprising the variety of outlooks within Christian Zionism as described by Dr. Goldman. For example, some believe in the modern Jewish state as a partial fulfillment of eschatological prophecy while others do not. Also, advocates have ranged from conservative evangelicals like Jerry Falwell to liberal Protestants such as Reinhold Niebuhr. The author describes himself in the introduction as “a minimally observant Jew who admires Israel but considers America his country” and disavows belief “in the literal fulfillment of prophecy.” While not in the least an apology for Christian Zionism, the book does confront distortions, and oversimplifications of it. This measured tome would be a good addition for collections on Zionism and Jewish-Christian relations.

Shmuel Ben-Gad, Gelman Library, George Washington University


This is a magisterial work. Unlike a traditional history of the Jewish people, Goodman writes a history of Judaism—an intellectual history of Jewish ideas that is complex and that takes into account the long span of Jewish history and ideas and their interaction with surrounding cultures and civilizations.

The book begins with Josephus and Greco Roman times but immediately looks backwards with a treatment of Israel’s interaction and relationship with the great powers of the Ancient Near East, formation of the bible, and classical modes of Jewish worship. These are all treated in Part I called Origins. Part II takes the reader on a journey through the critical years of 200 BCE to 70 CE when much of the myriad of strands of Judaism that exist and have existed begin to take shape. Part III focuses on the formation of Rabbinic Judaism that begins with the destruction of the second temple (70 CE) until the beginning of the pre-modern era (1500 CE). Part IV picks up at the dawn of modernity and the European Renaissance and continues through the formation and growth of Hasidut to the year 1800. Part V focuses on the challenges and reactions to the Enlightenment and the State of Israel and spans from 1750 to present times.

Goodman writes an instant classic and is as good as any one volume history of Judaism available on the market. It is a highly recommended read.

David Tesler, Yonkers, NY


This fascinating book covers five Hasidic dynasties (Munkács, Boyan/Kopyczynitz, Bobov, Satmar, and Lubavitch) that were rebuilt on American soil and the respective outcomes following the passing of their Rebbes. Chapters provide the origins of each dynasty and court— East European towns, founders, and descendants— where leadership was passed down from father to son, and sometimes son-in-law. Women played a role, as Rebbes’ wives or widows often wrangled for positions for male relatives, or even alongside them, as in the case of the Satmarer Rebbetzin. The original Rebbes, remnants of Nazi or Communist Europe, possessed traits such as scholarship, piety, lineage, and charisma, essential to the revival of their legacies. Problems with succession stemmed from extinct bloodlines (childlessness or heirs predeceased); lack of suitable candidates; or too many candidates, resulting in family feuds and sibling rivalries.

The author, whose research includes interviews with Rebbes and prominent disciples, admittedly tries to maintain respect without veering into hagiography, though at times seems cynical, pointing
out hypocrisy—e.g. rescue of anti-Zionist leaders by Zionists—or reading into actions. He narrates how some crises were resolved peacefully (Munkács, Boyan), while others heatedly led to separate courts (Satmar, Bobov) or no successor (Lubavitch). However, he ends optimistically by lauding the contemporary leaders, who have had to fill massive shoes, and their achievements—thanks to which he sees Hasidism as the growing face of ultra-Orthodoxy.

This book is worthwhile for insights into these insular societies; societies that many may find inspiring. Recommended for academic libraries with Judaica collections.

Hallie Cantor, Yeshiva University, New York, NY


Hezser examines forms of rabbinic non-verbal communication as a mode of “self-fashioning” in the context of Graeco-Roman and ancient Christian literary sources and in connection with the material culture of Roman and early Byzantine Palestine. The author considers how “rabbis fashioned themselves as similar to and, at the same time, different from Hellenistic, Roman, and Christian intellectuals.” In a comprehensive and systematic way, Hezser brings together and analyzes non-verbal communication in the Palestinian Rabbinic literature of late antiquity focusing on such things as posture, tone, gesticulation, and other physical movements. She demonstrates that a close examination of types of clothing, hair style, demeanor, gait, and manner of speech all shed light on social status, character, identity, and philosophic outlook. Certain types of non-verbal communication amongst particular religious and social strata of the rabbinic elite were deployed to enhance rabbinic individuality, power and authority, constituting a system of silent language.

This book can be viewed as a first step rather than a comprehensive treatment of rabbinic non-verbal communication. Future scholars may extend its scope to analyze symbolic actions in halakhic rituals, for instance keeping the right hand elevated over the left when giving the Birkhat Kohanim or holding the Kiddush cup in the palm of the hand when reciting Kiddush or havdala as significantly noted in Sefer HaZohar. Highly Recommended.

David B Levy, Touro College, NYC


Over the past decade, BDS (Boycott, Divestment, Sanction) has become part of our lives. This dense volume from Britain attempts to analyze and counteract it. David Hirsh is a sociologist from London’s Goldsmiths University. Over the past decade, he argues, the British intellectual Left has moved away from rational arguments and toward general antisemitism, frequently in the guise of opposition to Israeli policy. The book utilize both direct examples and theoretical analysis to expose the lies. Chapters 1-3 provide instances of growing antisemitism. They include the careers of Ken Livingstone, Jeremy Corbyn, and others who have masked their beliefs in the guise of support for Palestinian causes (and other issues); they argue that their actions are appropriate criticisms of Israel. Hirsh explores the rise of BDS in British academia, and demonstrates its ties to anti-colonial movements. He describes the 2012 court case accusing the University and College Union of antisemitism (in which he was a participant). Rather than condemn the hatred, the court completely vindicated the Union (using Ken Livingstone’s arguments). Chapter 7 analyzes the relationship between antizionism and antisemitism. In addition to the real-world discussion, Hirsh provides important philosophical discussion of contemporary antisemitism and analyzes the differences between antisemitism and appropriate disagreement. Finally, the author examines British Jewry’s views of Israel, and their current dilemma of belief, action, and commitment.

A book such as this one aimed at the American situation and current instances of antisemitism would be extremely useful. Because Hirsh is solely focused on Britain, his arguments are less relevant than they might
Reviews of Nonfiction Titles for Adults

be. In addition, the text is extremely dense. Despite the book’s important premise and persuasive argument, it is hard to justify its $145 price tag for any but the most complete academic or focused collections.

Fred Isaac, Temple Sinai, Oakland, CA


Karl Barth (1886-1968), a Swiss Calvinist, is one of the most influential Christian theologians of modern times. This book consists of five of the papers delivered at a conference, the transcript of a dialogue between two of the conference speakers, and four previously published essays (two of which do not mention Barth at all). Of the nine authors, two are Jewish (David Novak and Peter Ochs), six are Christian, and the religious identity of one is not evident. The reflections on Barth are mainly theological rather than biographical but we do learn some interesting things from the latter. For example, being too old to fight for Israel during the Six Day War, he sent money to the IDF instead. He also helped financially with the rescue of German Jews during the National Socialist period and was so outspokenly anti-Nazi that he was banished from Germany in 1935. We also learn from this book that, theologically, he regarded the divine covenant with Israel to be irrevocable thus rejecting the common Christian notion that the church has replaced Israel. All the same, he does express at times a typical Christian anti-Judaism. This two-fold element can be said of this book itself. The Christian authors do not advocate replacement theology but some of them sometimes devalue Judaism as compared to Christianity. This is to be expected, of course, especially in a volume such as this with an approach to Jewish-Christian relations that is generally intensely theological.

Shmuel Ben-Gad, Gelman Library, George Washington University


A powerfully instructive analysis of why Jews tend to exhibit attitudes and behaviors along a leftist or liberal dimension of the political spectrum. Jacobs, a political science professor at John Jay College and the Graduate Center of the City University of New York, has put together an outstanding collection of 17 prominent authors to examine Jewish political positions over time in different sets of conditions. There are the standard themes of reaction to antisemitism, socialism and its relationship to Zionism which is then connected to Israeli politics. Interspersed is an interesting discussion on the role of women in revolutionary Imperial Russia and with kibbutz life in Israel. Rich character studies are offered on Martin Buber, Gershon Scholem, and Gustav Landauer. This study concludes with a set of case studies on the Soviet Union’s policies during World War II as it affected Jews in New York, the establishment of the New School for Social Research and a portrayal of Isaac Deutscher. This is an in-depth study of an exceptional and worthwhile addition to a subject that has caused a great deal of concern for those trying to understand Jewish participation in political systems.

Sanford R. Silverburg, Catawba College, Salisbury, NC


This is a comprehensive bibliographic collection and an encyclopedia in one book, covering a specific topic, Jewish perspectives on the theme of conflict resolution. Kaminsky, a research fellow at the New York-based Pardes Center for Judaism and Conflict Resolution, knows the sources in multiple languages as displayed. There is a great deal of discussion that focuses on inter-personal relations that include conflict at various levels. The author begins his analysis setting out values and concepts that lead to conflicts and plans for refraining from conflict. Then comes the religious component with
Talmudic interpretations. Dialogue seems to be the effective manner for resolving conflictual situations. Also covered are matters of retaliation, resentment, and revenge. He culminates the examination with a general discussion of anger management. The substantive nature of the author’s treatment may be a limiting factor in audience attention, serving as a guide for the rabbinate.

Sanford R. Silverburg, Catawba College, Salisbury, NC


This book provides a close look at the breadth of Jewish religious life in the Netherlands, from the beginning of the early modern period until the current era. Based on a conference in 2011, the chapters in the volume are no less relevant today, and provide microhistories of nearly all aspects of Dutch Jewry. Both Sephardim and Ashkenazim are discussed at length (most notably for this reviewer in Tirtsah Levie Bernfeld’s fantastic piece on ex-converters and religious identity and Shlomo Berger’s posthumous chapter on piety, Torah study, and Yiddish). Chapters cover the situation for Jews in Dutch colonies like Suriname and Curacao, and flow into the modern era with discussions of the bat mitzva in the Netherlands and post-war Judaism. Art is not neglected, with chapters on the image of the phoenix in Dutch religious culture, as well as the view of religion through art. Simply put, this volume would be very useful for providing an overview on the depth of Jewish culture in the Netherlands through very specific cases, while intriguing the reader to continue studying onward to learn more about this incredibly diverse part of the Jewish world. Highly recommended.

Michelle Chesner, Columbia University


Medieval Midrash covers a very small part of Jewish literature. The genre was written after the close of the Talmud. The authors’ stated purpose in writing this book is to “explore the diverse views of Solomon as found in the Medieval Midrashim and to terrace the development of Medieval Midrash.” Mehlman and Limmer translated and wrote critical commentary on six Midrashic texts pertaining to the wisdom and life of King Solomon, including “The Throne and Hippodrome of King Solomon and “The Episode of the Ant.” The book explores the questions why were these midrashim created? Who created them? When were they created? What are the origins of these stories? How did the surrounding culture and literature influence the tales? Why were these Midrashism necessary? The book is academically challenging and difficult to read for anyone who is not well acquainted with classical midrash. It is important for the reader to be familiar with the six stories that are discussed in scholarly detail. Included is an extensive general bibliography and a bibliography of primary sources plus an index. Recommended as an alternative selection for academic libraries since the scope and subject matter of the book is very narrow.

Ilka Gordon, Beachwood, Ohio


Reflecting on a recent AJS conference, Norman Stillman comments that the study of Sephardi and Mizrahi Jews deserves far more attention than it seems to receive in modern scholarship. Seeking to address this apparent lack of research, a conference was held on the 10th anniversary of 9/11 at Sewelyn College in Cambridge. It yielded this multidisciplinary collection of eleven papers encompassing a diverse selection of topics exploring Jewish-Muslim relations through the lens of theology, music, cinema, and liturgy.

Among the contributors, Afsaruddin’s discusses Qur’anic views regarding the “upright community”
in reference to the “People of the book”. Reif compares the evolution of Jewish prayer in Christian Europe and in the Islamic world. Davis explores references to the Jewish past in modern Tunisian music and Dina Stillman discusses the state of Muslim-Jewish relations as reflected in popular French cinema.

Meri asserts that this research transcends the “Judaeo-Islamic tradition” once described by Bernard Lewis. Although acknowledging that a form of “Convivencia” did prevail throughout much of the Muslim-Jewish world, he proposes that it was more nuanced than previously recognized. Among the elements embraced by this concept he identifies “commensality,” denoting a “…coming together within clearly designed contexts and at particular points in time” and “sociability,” or “…the interactions of individuals and communities in various social, economic, political, intellectual and religious settings.” Additionally, Meri notes that although one cannot assume that anything resembling our modern concept of “tolerance” prevailed in the medieval world, there did exist a kind of “toleration”. Lowery describes this as “…a value in its own right, a means of securing peace in a mixed society or a useful expedient to trade.” Meri considers that these eleven papers seek to demonstrate how these three components were incorporated into the relations between Jews and Muslims over the past 500 years.

This is an invaluable collection of essays enhanced by numerous color illustrations. It is an excellent contribution to a hitherto little explored area of critical import to today’s historians.

Randall C. and Anne-Marie Belinfante


The obnoxious Nazi film “Jud Süss” had its origins with an eighteenth century character Joseph Süss Oppenheimer. Oppenheimer became a personal advisor and banker, thus the moniker Court Jew, to the Duke of Württemberg, Catholic Carl Alexander. When the Duke passed away in 1737, but four years since Oppenheimer’s appointment, he was arrested under a strange set of circumstances, tried, and ultimately executed. Mintzker, a history professor at Princeton University, has assumed the task of investigating the circumstances surrounding the personages involved in this story, the trial, and punishment of Oppenheimer. The trial, it is pointed out, was a peculiar inquisitional form. Doubting the completeness and accuracy of the sources that previous historians have employed to resurrect the background of Oppenheimer’s role at court, life, and trial, the author attempts to provide what he calls “a polyphonic history.” He thus focuses on the lives of four individuals whose experiences touched on the events surrounding Oppenheimer and his ultimate demise. This is an intriguing tale that touches on early antisemitism in medieval Germany that would serve the Nazis with an example to wrap up a propaganda theme.

Sanford R. Silverburg, Catawba College, Salisbury, NC


Copyright is a complex situation because before the printing press no one cared about protecting intellectual property or the commercial interests of writers. Copyright law affects us in every area of recorded knowledge. The development of Jewish law (halakha) and civil secular copyright laws developed along similar lines with regard to theories and motivations. Netanel has written many scholarly articles on copyright and Jewish law topics; his book is well researched and presents a fascinating story of copyright history. The author also attempts to answer questions such as, is copyright infringement considered theft, and does copyright protect property, ideas, or both?

While this is an academic book, it is highly recommended for all libraries that have readers interested in the confluence of Jewish law with secular law and contemporary challenges.

Daniel D. Stuhlman, City Colleges of Chicago and Temple Sholom of Chicago, Chicago, IL
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Raanan, Yoram and Meira. *Art of Revelation: A Visual Encounter with the Jewish Bible*. Jerusalem: Raanan Art Ltd., 2018. 235 pp. $120.00. (9789655725001).

Yoram Raanan is an Israeli artist whose vibrant acrylic works dazzle with color and energy, but at the same time, are nuanced and evoke a sense of Jewish spirituality. In November 2016, fires started by arsonists swept through Moshav Beit Meir and destroyed his art studio. More than the physical edifice that burned to the ground, 2,000 pieces of art, forty years of Raanan’s life work, was lost in the blaze. Part of this portfolio was 160 “Torah-related” paintings. As described in the introduction, Raanan was commissioned to provide a new painting every week that depicted an aspect of the weekly Torah reading, and “revealing the inner dimension and essence of the events, the people, the laws and stories of the biblical narrative.” Some were professionally photographed; most were shot with a hand held camera. Raanan’s wife Meira did extensive research and provides the “commentary and exploration.” Each painting is accompanied by a short description that explains the broad theme as well as some of the more subtle aspects of each work. For example, Noah’s Ark is depicted using a small black jewelry box (the Ark was covered in tar) suspended on a rope against a background of blues — the turbulent waters of The Flood.

The book is gorgeous, and the accompanying text is enough to understand the theme, but to also allow the reader to appreciate the art at his own level. The sheer heft of the book may mean it will have to sit on the coffee table; nevertheless, this beautiful volume is highly recommended for reviewing the weekly Torah reading, for enjoying art for art’s sake, and in any curriculum that includes Jewish art or the parsha. It also makes a lovely gift.

Chava Pinchuck, Ramat Beit Shemesh, Israel


This is the third episode of an autobiographical trilogy of a Galiciano who survived the Holocaust and immigrated to Israel. His brief but illustrative tale of life in the kibbutz Merhavia in the Jezreel Valley, followed by settling in the northern town of Afula, and his tour of service in the IDF (Israel Defence Force) is a memoir that will interest a wide ranging audience. Redlich is an author of numerous publications on Eastern European Jewry. Here he offers a portrait of his experience at acculturation into life on a kibbutz in the early years of Israeli statehood. This would be a pleasant read for youngsters yearning to learn about life in Israel.

Sanford R. Silverburg, Catawba College, Salisbury, NC


In 1940, the three most important Zionist leaders came to the United States separately. All three had supported the idea of the Jewish Legion which fought for the British in the First World War and all three favored the forming of a Jewish Army to fight for Britain against Hitler. This was despite the Peel White Paper adopted by the British government in 1939 which effectively would end the possibility of a Jewish state by limiting Jewish immigration to Mandatory Palestine to 15,000 per year for five years after which further Jewish immigration would need the approval of the Arab majority. These leaders represented different political parties. Chaim Weizmann, president of the Zionist Organization, was a General Zionist. David Ben-Gurion was a Labor Zionist and chairman of the Jewish Agency Executive. Ze’ev Jabotinsky was founder of Revisionist Zionism and leader of the New Zionist Organization. Weizmann was the most cautious, reluctant to discuss openly the Army proposal in a country with strong sentiment against becoming involved in the war. Ben-Gurion discussed the Army idea in smaller private meetings, at least mostly. Jabotinsky pushed for the Army openly and aggressively. The book is clearly written and well organized. It does a good job
Reviews of Nonfiction Titles for Adults

of describing the political and social situation the three men faced in trying to influence American Jewry and the differences in their approaches.

Shmuel Ben-Gad, Gelman Library, George Washington University


The history of basketball is gaining much interest at present. Douglas Stark’s *When Basketball was Jewish*, which appeared last year, is a published version of interviews with many of the great Jewish players from the 1920s to the ‘40s. Charlie Rosen’s book *The Chosen Game* tells the story of Jews’ involvement, but from a less personal perspective.

Rosen tells his saga more or less chronologically, and discusses many of the famous names in the sport’s history. There are chapters about the great players of the 1910s, now long forgotten; Nat Holman, a fine player but a better coach and promoter; and Eddie Gottlieb, the brains of the South Philadelphia Hebrew Association (SPHAs) team in the 1930s (which Rosen misspells as SPAHS). Abe Saperstein and the Harlem Globetrotters have a chapter, as does the long history of Jews in college basketball. The book includes a section on the 1951 NIT cheating scandal, which rocked the sport for a generation; and several parts discuss the Olympics, international events, and even the Maccabiah Games. In addition, every chapter has a profile of an important figure that many fans will recognize, from Omri Casspi to Nancy Lieberman to Dolph Schayes.

Readers (from teens to adults) who are interested in Jewish participation in sports will find this book worthwhile. *The Chosen Game* is an accessible, lively, and (mostly) accurate history, including both well-known stories and nuggets of esoteric information. Regrettably, there are no photos, and no index is provided; thus it loses reference value; nonetheless, a worthwhile overview at a reasonable price.

Fred Isaac, Temple Sinai, Oakland, CA


Like most “parsha books,” these tales follow a standard format. For each weekly Torah reading, there are four short stories, suitable for sharing at one of the Sabbath meals. Each is introduced by a phrase from the *parsha*, followed by the story. At the end of each of them, the phrase or verse is repeated with a quote from one of the commentaries or an insight from a rabbi. The book also includes several stories for both Tu B’Shevat and Purim, which fall out during the reading of the book of Exodus. Most of the stories are about Chassidic rabbis, with exceptions made for Rabbi Moshe Feinstein, zt”l, and Rabbi Meir Shapiro, zt”l. (An appendix with short biographies of those mentioned would have been helpful to put both the stories and personalities in context.) Many of the stories take place in the shtetls of Russia and deal with business disputes or interpersonal relations.

Published by an imprint affiliated with Chabad (Lubavitch), and with a cover depicting males wearing traditional Chasidic garb—father in fur hat and silk robe, boys sporting felt caps—the intended audience is clear. What is not evident is how the stories relate to the verses from the weekly Torah readings that introduce them, and oftentimes, the point of the story itself. For *Parshas Teruma*, a verse chosen is “according to all that I show you” (Exodus 25:9), which gives the instructions for building the *Mishkan*. The story is about a boy who charged butchers for discerning which animals were kosher and which had defects. A story for Purim tells of a rabbi whose son leaves yeshiva to learn in a secular institution. He laments to his rebbe, who offers him a cup of wine. “From then on... he became firm friends with the wine, not only on Purim...”. (Is the moral of the story to drown your sorrows in alcohol?). Using words and phrases like “litvishe porush” and “gvir” without including a glossary further amplifies that the book is best suited to Chasidic readers.

Chava Pinchuck, Ramat Beit Shemesh, Israel

During the nineteenth century nearly 85,000 Jews of the Pale converted to Christianity. Based on contemporary records and personal accounts, this demographic is presented as a natural outcome of the shifting political, legal, and cultural landscape. The word “confessions” refers to the modes of Christian worship—chiefly Orthodox, Catholic, and Lutheran—which co-existed under the Tsarist regime and sought to attract Jews. Until 1861, under the reign of Nicholas I, the church welcomed many Cantonists, Jewish conscripts who often acted under duress or desire to assimilate into the Russian military. Forcible conversions were outlawed under the liberal Alexander II; instead, they reflected the growing cosmopolitanism within the empire—particularly the tavern, “the missionary marketplace,” many of which were Jewishly run and provided opportunities to mingle with people of other backgrounds. Gender is also analyzed: women who abandoned Judaism risked destabilizing the family, creating conflicts in *halacha* and threatening patriarchal control. Although, contrary to the myth of being shunned or disowned, many apostates maintained contact with former community, some relatives violently protested, reinforcing Jewish separatism and loyalty. Many converts remained adrift in both worlds; the author discusses those who relapsed, returning to their former faith—decriminalized after 1906—or seeking self-expression in hybridized or underground sects.

Nuanced and well researched, with newly released material, this book strives to remain non-judgmental toward a painful subject in religious history, while raising issues of national identity. Recommended for academic libraries with Jewish or Russian Studies collections.

*Hallie Cantor, Yeshiva University, New York, NY*


Barry Schwartz is director of the Jewish Publication Society and a rabbi in New Jersey; he has also written *Judaism’s Great Debates* and *Jewish Heroes, Jewish Values*, among others. *Path of the Prophets* is divided into three parts, with each part dedicated to a specific biblical theme. The first part is dedicated to justice and includes reflections on Abraham, Moses, and Samuel; the second part is dedicated to mercy and includes reflections on Joseph, Ruth, and Jeremiah, and the last part is dedicated to humility and includes reflections on Miriam, Elijah, and Isaiah. Following the text is a glossary of prophetic terminology used in the book and a study guide that could be useful in pedagogy. This title would be a fine addition to any collection used by adult readers.

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


In this introductory work, Rabbi Shuchat draws on the commentaries on Abraham in Midrash Rabbah, specifically in the *parashot Lekh Lekha* and *Vayera*; he then selects the important themes within the Midrash for further exploration. After reproducing each section in English, Rabbi Shuchat provides what he calls “seed thoughts” and “additional commentary”.

Shuchat’s selected focus is a logical and natural outgrowth of his previous work on Genesis on Creation, The Garden of Eden, The Flood, and other sections leading up to *Lekh Lekaha*. Rabbi Shuchat notes that his particular focus in Genesis Rabbah not only centers on the personality of Abraham, but teaches the reader to see in Abraham, as the first Jew, the ideal representative of moral character and a source of blessing.

Shuchat’s work of interpretation and analysis makes these texts and such values easily accessible to laymen and clergy alike. The work may inspire readers to take the next step and tackle the text in the original Midrashic Hebrew as well as its various super commentaries. Recommended

*David B Levy, Touro College, NYC*

An English translation of a book published in 1997 by Bar-Ilan University where Dov Schwartz is on the faculty, this work is “an attempt to outline the basic characteristics of rationalist messianic approaches in the Middle Ages, and particularly the conceptual tensions between them. Specifically, it focuses on … two messianic approaches, the apocalyptic and the naturalistic.” The first one sees destruction and rebuilding of the cosmos, the second anticipates only minimal changes to the natural order when messianic times happen. The author reviews Jewish philosophers from the Geonic period until Isaac Abravanel. Very chronologically, he establishes along the way how each thinker fits into one of the two categories, the apocalyptic or the naturalistic.

Instead of focusing on one or two thinkers, this book claims to “describe currents of thought developing and resonating in the teachings of dozen of thinkers,” but concentrates on the Sephardic mysticism. Recommended only for large academic libraries.

Roger S. Kohn, Silver Spring, MD


The answer to the titular question is that, much like any group who were persecuted and discriminated against, it is often healthy and therapeutic to be able to laugh at oneself (in a way that others cannot). After a chapter that defines Jewish humor, and its historic part in dealing with persecution and anti-Semitism, a discussion of how and why the Holocaust is such an integral and ubiquitous part of Israeli culture follows, including the handing down of the trauma from survivors to their children, to grandchildren, and to the general population. Much of the humor and satire developed organically as a mechanism to deal with the pain. The book “analyzes alternative ceremonies, films, TV shows, art, books, poetry, jokes and internet videos and memes” and looks at them “through theories of humor, and of individual and collective post-trauma.” Steir-Livny brings examples from alternative Holocaust Remembrance Day ceremonies in Israel, satire, and parody to show that while the horrors of the Shoah are never diminished or made light of, the way they are memorialized or passed on to future generations is fertile ground for humor. The Holocaust has also played a prominent role in political conflicts between the left and the right, and in cultural differences between Ashkenazim and Sephardim.

The author has done a great deal of research, which is evidenced by detailed footnotes at the end of each chapter, and an extensive bibliography and succinct index at the end of the book. The material can get repetitive because the conclusion after analyzing all the different components of humor remains the same: that humor is a release, a defense mechanism, and a social commentary on or against conventional presentations of the Holocaust. A few trips in the language and style, but otherwise an engaging exploration of the subject and a solid choice for libraries with large Holocaust and/or humor collections.

Chava Pinchuck, Ramat Beit Shemesh, Israel


Though he was one of America’s most famous entertainers during the 1920s and ‘30s, Eddie Cantor has been practically forgotten. David Weinstein’s biography reminds readers how important Cantor was, both as an actor/comedian and in wider circles.

Cantor grew up on the streets of the Lower East Side. He began performing in Vaudeville, and worked for Ziegfeld (and the Schuberts). After starring on Broadway and touring the country through the 1920s, he became one of the biggest Hollywood talking movie stars. In the 30s he was one of the nation’s most successful radio hosts, using his broadcasts to promote optimism and recovery. In the early 1950s he headlined briefly on television, where he championed African American entertainers.
Alongside Cantor’s entertainment career, the book comments extensively on his involvement in social and political issues. This includes his participation in the labor movement (as an early leader of the Screen Actors Guild); his promotion of charitable causes (he helped launch the March of Dimes); his warnings about the evils of Nazi Germany during the 1930s and his later support for WWII efforts; his many activities in support of Jewish causes, especially Youth Aliyah, Hadassah, and the post-war Displaced Persons; and his support of Israel. Though his popularity waned after World War II, he continued to sponsor causes—particularly Jewish ones—that he believed in.

Cantor has been overlooked over the half-century since his death. But this useful book restores him to prominence. The tone is positive, though there are indications of less-lovable traits. The story is sprinkled with wonderful photographs, and there are extensive notes with useful information. Regrettably, the index is woefully incomplete, with many significant topics missing. Overall, though, the book is recommended for all levels of Judaica library.

Fred Isaac, Temple Sinai, Oakland, CA


Postel, a French orientalist, mathematician, and mystic visionary, was unique among Christian Hebraists. While the 16th century is marked by Christian interest in Jewish mysticism, all these Christian Hebraists understood the importance of learning biblical and rabbinic Hebrew in their search for the meaning of the Hebrew Bible. Many of these Christian Hebraists had immense respect for Hebraic learning and were defenders of Hebrew books.

In 1547, in Venice, Guillaume Postel, purchased a Zohar manuscript from Daniel Bomberg. That copy was the one he studied together with Mother Johanna and the one he used as the source for his Latin translation of this treatise. Judith Weiss’ work makes a most positive contribution to the scholarly treatment of Postel’s work by focusing on Postel’s commentaries on the Zohar, which are presented in the original Latin together with her Hebrew translation. Weiss also provides introductions and notes, elucidating Postel’s unique perception of the Zohar and the mysticism. Postel’s Latin translation and commentary on the Zohar is within the context of his elaborate messianic theological understanding which he based on his interpretation of Kabbalistic concepts. Postel produced the first comprehensive though not complete Latin translation of the Zohar. Weiss had done an excellent job in bringing this work to the attention of the scholarly community. Highly recommended for all academic libraries, particularly classicist and theological collections.

David B Levy, Touro College, NYC


The Talmud, over 1500 years old, is the primary rabbinic text of Rabbinic Judaism and comprises both the Mishna and the Gemara. The Talmud consists of 63 individual books, or tractates and in standard print runs nearly 6,200 pages long. Although primarily a legal text, and to this very day the ultimate source of Jewish religious law, it contains so much more.

Wimpfheimer does a brilliant job telling the story of the Talmud and embraces a unique method of doing so, namely, writing a biography of a ‘book.’ As Wimpfheimer explains: “for as long as the Talmud has been a canonical work, it has served as a symbol of Judaism, Jewishness, and Jews. It is this Talmudic personification in the emblematic register that most entitles the Talmud to a biography.”

The Talmud: A Biography is divided into three conceptual categories: (i) Essential Talmud, (ii) Enhanced Talmud, and (iii) Emblematic Talmud. The essential Talmud (discussed in chapters 1 and 2) focuses on the history, creation, form, and structure of the Talmud. The enhanced Talmud (chapter 3) centers on how the Talmud became canonical and central as religious literature. The emblematic
Talmud (chapter 4) concentrates how different groups throughout history have responded to the Talmud. The final chapter explores the Talmud in the modern era. Excellent and highly recommended, this one-volume book on the Talmud provides its readers with an understanding of what the Talmud is and how it has been received. It is an equally beneficial read for the novice and well initiated alike.

David Tesler, Yonkers, NY


*A Torah Giant* is a Festschrift in honor of radical thinker and activist Rabbi, Dr. Yitz Greenberg. Rabbi Yitz, an Orthodox rabbi, believes in diversity and therefore accepts all denominations of the Jewish faith as legitimate. He believes Jesus was a failed messiah, not a false messiah, and espouses and participates in interfaith dialogue. One of his most controversial ideas is that after the Holocaust, since G-d did not intervene to save his people, the original covenant with G-d was broken and individuals have the right to accept or deny the covenant. These radical ideas caused a rift between Rabbi Yitz and the orthodox establishment. In personal and scholarly essays, eminent intellectuals such as, Dr. Erica Brown, Rabbi Dr. Seth Farber, Rabbi Asher Lopatin and Rabbi Nathan Lopes Cardozo discuss Rabbi Yitz’s philosophy and his influence on their thinking. The book is divided into five topics (Personal Tributes, Building Bridges, New Intellectual Paradigms, Ethics, Modern Orthodoxy & Halakhah and finally an essay by Rabbi Greenberg). Although the essays are academic and quote the Talmud and important sages and commentaries, they can be easily understood by the layman and patrons who do not have an extensive background in Judaic texts and philosophy. Anyone who wants an understanding of the beginnings of “Modern Orthodoxy” and the teachings and philosophy of Rabbi Yitz should read this book. Recommended for all synagogue and academic libraries.

Ilka Gordon, Beachwood, OH


Inspired by a course in “Reel Theology” that the author taught with Eugene Borowitz at Hebrew Union College-Jewish Institute of Religion (HUC-JIR), this scholarly work “looks at the Jewish engagement with film as a form in inverted midrash, in which film plays the role of mashal (parable) to the nimshal (moral) of Jewish text.” After Borowitz’s Foreword, Zierler analyzes twelve recent movies in depth, and compares and contrasts Jewish themes and history, drawing similarities between protagonists and biblical personalities. For example, Truman, from *The Truman Show*, is in the same position as Jonah — searching for the truth and trying to make sense of his corner of the world. *Magnolia*, despite or possibly because of the explicit language and dysfunctional characters, is a study in confession and repentance; while Woody Allen’s *Crimes and Misdemeanors* questions “how we see, how we are seen, and the meaning of our actions” in terms of sin. The first appendix contains the email exchanges between Borowitz and Zierler about the design of the “Reel Theology” course, and the second appendix includes short summaries of films that have been included in the course discussions. Extensive notes, a bibliography, and a detailed index are provided in the back matter.

Zierler is Sigmund Falk Professor of Modern Jewish Literature and Feminist Studies at HUC-JIR, and hopes this approach will “show other interested students of Judaism and religion how rich this material can be and how they themselves can carry on the conversation,” as *Magnolia* also explores coincidence (often noted as not coincidence, but *hashgacha pratis* (divine providence)). The volume is meticulously referenced, but as the author notes, is neither up-to-date nor comprehensive. The book is highly recommended for libraries that have large movie collections or that sponsor movie series, as it will give viewers insight into watching popular and/or current cinema with an eye for Jewish themes.

Chava Pinchuck, Ramat Beit Shemesh, Israel
Reviews of Nonfiction Titles for Adults

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Bruria is one of the few women mentioned in Jewish canons, and she is known for her wisdom and quick wit. Rabbi Meir is the other half of this ‘power couple’ and considered one of the greatest rabbinic sages of his generation, named because “he enlightened the eyes of scholars and students in Torah study.” But what of their relationship with each other? After a short introduction, Zion looks at two interactions between them. Chapter Six discusses the incident where Rabbi Meir wanted to pray for sinners to die and Bruria admonished that he should rather pray for them to repent and be free of sin, based on a verse in Psalms (Babylonian Talmud, Brakhot 10a). Chapter Seven is about the death of the couple’s twins on Shabbat, and how Bruria gently breaks the news to Rabbi Meir (Midrash on Proverbs). In each, Bruria uses certain phrases and questions in order to guide Rabbi Meir to the correct answers and actions. Subsequent chapters discuss marital trust and tests to fidelity. There are two sets of notes: those with Roman numerals at the bottoms of pages for quick clarification, and those with Hindu-Arabic numerals at the back of the book for citing references and longer explanatory passages. A Biographical timeline (drawn from Wikipedia) in the Appendix puts many of the personalities mentioned in historical context.

Noam Zion holds degrees from Columbia University and the Hebrew University in Jerusalem, and he has been a senior research fellow at the Hartman Institute since 1978. The pluralistic approach to Judaism espoused by the Institute is evident as Zion draws from Greek and Christian sources for his examination of Rabbi Meir and Bruria’s relationship. Without rabbinic approbation, many versed in Talmud will not read it. But this in-depth scholarly discourse is not for the dilettante, either. For those libraries whose patrons enjoy Talmudic analysis and learning about Jewish personalities, it is highly recommended, and the entire nine-volume set should be purchased. [Editor’s note: This volume is part of a nine-volume set titled *Talmudic marital dramas* (Cleveland, OH ; Jerusalem, Israel : Zion Holiday Publications, 2018)].

*Chava Pinchuck, Ramat Beit Shemesh, Israel*

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This historical novel tells the story of Mark Chagall in the artist’s voice. The story opens with his birth in Vitebsk in 1887 and his humble beginnings: his father was a herring *schlepper* at the fish market. Young Marc soon distinguished himself at the local art academy in a town full of young artists. He makes his way to Paris and moves into The Hive, an artist colony without electricity or running water, but bursting with young talent. Other well-known Jewish artists were there: Amodeo Modigliani, Osip Zadkine, and Chaim Soutine. The novel captures the color and energy of the era as these creative people painted and sculpted at all hours, enjoyed the cafés, and found love. Chagall married Bella and returned to Vitebsk to endure World War I and the 1917 revolution. He continued painting despite the Communist disdain for his art. Eventually, he and Bella returned to France, where World War II brought danger, but he survived. His career took him to many countries and his visions of the prophet Elijah inspired his work. Readers who enjoy art and history will appreciate this lively account of the Bohemian existence. It is a good choice for book groups as well. Public libraries and synagogue libraries collecting fiction should consider it.

*Barbara Bibel, Congregation Netivot Shalom, Berkeley, CA*

Set in the Jewish Quarter of Fez, Morocco, the novel opens as a dying woman gives her granddaughter a gold ring and a secret. Five hundred years later, Alma Ben-Ami, a young Sephardic woman in New York decides to explore her family history on a study-abroad program in Spain. Her Spanish is not very good, so she partners with Manuel Aguilar, a Catholic student from Spain who feels drawn to elements of Judaism despite his desire to consider entering the priesthood. The book moves back and forth through time as the students search archives in Spain and discover long-hidden secrets in both their families. This forces them to face truths about their identities, their religious beliefs, and their growing romantic attraction. Although the plot is rather trite, the historical details will interest readers and book groups will find many issues to discuss. Libraries that collect historical romances and material about the Sephardim will want to consider this book.

*Barbara Bibel, Congregation Netivot Shalom, Berkeley, CA*

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**Reviews of Multimedia**

**Darshan, Raza, Eden Pearlstein and Basya Schechter**, 2017 (music, cd) $15.00.

Excellently done, this album is a fresh take on the Friday night prayers. According to the album, “Raza is a radical reimagining of the traditional prayers and mystical poetry recited on Friday night to welcome the Sabbath bride…. Raza transforms this most beloved of Jewish liturgical rites into a genre-defying work of sacred pop art.”

This album can bring people who may not relate to the Friday night prayers to a new appreciation for them. Many styles of music are joined in these songs, with rap and Middle Eastern music being the most prominent. The cover art is arresting with its urban undertones and Middle Eastern desert hues and sandy textures, which also speak to the combination of musical styles that make up the music. This balance is impressive and hard to achieve. Rap provides a strength to the sound while a haunting beauty emanates from other parts of the music. This album lives up to the description on the cover. There will be many fans of this work.

*Debbie Feder, Director, Learning Commons, Ida Crown Jewish Academy*

**Guy Mendilow Ensemble, Music from the Forgotten Kingdom. Mendilusian Music, BMI, 2017 (music, cd) $15.00.**

Ancient Sephardi songs in Ladino are brought into the 21st century with this album by the Guy Mendilow Ensemble. The singing in Ladino is beautiful, and the artistry of the group is undeniable as they allow the sentiments and emotions behind the lyrics to come through. A haunting feeling arises from the ancient music yet, at the same time, this is a fresh album. Such a combination is not an easy feat, particularly as a few of the songs are quite long. The album is accompanied by a booklet which explains “These songs tell good stories. Not because they are Jewish... but because they present near universal themes that continue to captivate today... shifting identities due to migration, the evolution, and change of tradition, of resilience and struggle.” All that comes through and makes this album successful.

*Debbie Feder, Director, Learning Commons, Ida Crown Jewish Academy*

Righteous indignation; anger; social justice; bittersweetness. These are the overwhelming conditions expressed in this new CD by Daniel Kahn and his all-star musicians Christian Dawid, Michael Tuttle, Hampus Melin, Jake Shulman-Ment, Dan Blacksberg, Sasha Lurje, Sarah Gordon, Lorin Sklamberg, Michael Alpert, and Psoy Korolenko. Known for his intense Yiddish cultural and political affiliations as well as poetry and Yiddish translations, Kahn has gathered together English and Yiddish songs of struggle, many of them newly written. These themes of social justice have been around for a while, but they certainly resonate in today’s world. “The Butcher’s Sher,” (also a play on the word “share”), “You gotta give the butcher his share” builds awareness that everything we consume may have somehow been involved in an injustice somewhere in the world. “Freedom is a Verb” written by Kahn, is a call to action: “Freedom is a verb, something never finished never done”. Kahn gives us brilliant English lyrics for the Yiddish Vilna ghetto partisan song, “Silent Stars,” a standard in the Yiddish concert circle. A stand out selection is the 19th century labor song, “Arbeter Froyen” (Working Women), smoothly begun by Sarah Gordon. The easy vocals and harmonies move seamlessly between Yiddish and English. Not all is harsh and depressing— Kahn is thoughtful singing Joshua Davis and Ann DelMariani’s drash “Two Brothers.” Kahn’s gentler interpretive powers disappear, and are in stark contrast to vocals in “No One Survives” and the “99%.” After hearing these songs, one has to ask whether Kahn may be the up-and-coming ‘Yiddish Leonard Cohen’.

Judith S. Pinnolis, Berklee College of Music/Boston Conservatory at Berklee

Errata note

There was an error in Judith Pinnolis’s review of Di Tsaytmashin. Yiddish Baroque Music from the Book of the Rejoicing Soul (by Rabbi Elkhanan Kirchen. Brilliant Classics) in the AJL Reviews issue of May-June 2017 (page 29). Mistakenly, Shmuel Ben-Gad’s byline was added at the bottom of this review. To clarify, Judith is the only reviewer of this item. We apologize for any inconvenience this might had caused.

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CELEBRATING 50 YEARS OF SYDNEY TAYLOR BOOK AWARD WINNERS

In celebration of the 50th anniversary of the Sydney Taylor Book Awards, AJL reviewers will revisit some of the past winners to determine their relevance for today’s readers. Are these classics timeless or do they feel dated? Will children today still relate to them? Was the book unique for its time? Was it a ‘pioneer’ in terms of subject matter, format, or illustrations? And, how does the book compare to other similar books that have been published since? In this issue, we reexamine winners from the 1980’s and 1990’s: Brothers: A Hebrew Legend by Florence B. Freedman, The Devil’s Arithmetic by Jane Yolen, When Zaydeh Danced on Eldridge Street by Elsa Okon Rael and Stones in Water by Donna Jo Napoli. Selections from subsequent decades will be highlighted in future issues.


The 1985 winner was perhaps the first retelling, in picture book format, of the story of two brothers who divide their harvest evenly. When a drought strikes, Dan, the unmarried brother, worries that his brother, Joel, who has a wife and children, will not have enough. In the middle of the night, Dan takes bundles of wheat and secretly brings them to Joel’s threshing floor. At the same time, Joel worries that Dan is all alone with no one to care for him. Secretly he brings bundles of wheat to his brother. When the brothers discover that they still have the same amount of wheat as before, they set out again. Eventually they meet in the middle, between their two homes, and they hear “a soft voice that came from everywhere and nowhere singing, ‘How good it is for brothers to live together in friendship.’” Years pass and the very spot where the two brothers met becomes the place in Jerusalem where King Solomon built the Holy Temple. The short, simple text complements the seven by eight inch trim size. Exquisite pen and watercolor illustrations by Caldecott medal winner Robert Andrew Parker, beautifully depict the landscape of Israel and the love between the two brothers.

Several other versions of this story have been published in the past 30 years. In The Two Brothers: A Legend of Jerusalem (Atheneum Books for Young Readers, 1997), a Sydney Taylor Notable book, author and illustrator Neil Waldman inserts King Solomon into the story as a spy who witnesses the whole interaction. Frances Harber presents a more playful version set in an eastern European shtetl in The Brothers Promise, with illustrations by Thor Wickstrom (Albert Whitman, 1998). In One City, Two Brothers (Barefoot Books, 2007), Chris Smith emphasizes that the folktale is shared by both Jews and Arabs. Coupled with Aurelia Fronty’s stunning acrylic illustrations, Smith writes in his afterward that he hopes the story can help bring about peace between the people of Israel and Palestine and that it will inspire readers to think more deeply about selflessness, brotherly love, and the power of individual acts of kindness. Similarly, Fawzia Gilani-Williams’s adaptation, Yaffa and Fatima Shalom, Salaam (Kar-Ben Publishing, 2017), a Sydney Taylor Honor Book, features two neighbors, one Jewish and one Muslim, who share their date harvest with each other. The pen and watercolor illustrations
by Chiara Fedele, in muted teal, maroon and brown tones, provide a beautiful portrayal of two women living in peace and friendship in “the Land of Milk and Honey.”

The story also appears in many compilations including *Angels, Prophets, Rabbis and Kings from the Stories of the Jewish People* by Jose Patterson, *The Classic Tales* by Ellen Frankel, *The Bird of Paradise* by Steven M. Rosman, and *Stories of King Solomon* by Lillian S. Freehof. Having all of these different versions on hand make for an instant library lesson where students can compare and contrast the retellings and the illustrations and discuss how the different characters and settings affect or change the message of the story. Students can also be encouraged to create their own version of the story.

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

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In this classic Holocaust novel, nearly thirteen-year-old Hannah Stern is tired of remembering. Reluctantly she attends the first Seder at her grandparents’ apartment in the Bronx. She relies on her great-aunt Eva. She walks to the front door to open it for the prophet Elijah and enters 1942 in Poland where her name is now Chaya, ‘life.’ Hannah feels like she is in a dream. She is somehow fluent in Yiddish. She attends a wedding of Chaya’s Uncle Shmuel in a nearby shtetl. But before the marriage takes place, they are all rounded up and deported to a concentration camp for ‘resettlement.’ There a young girl named Rivka, who has already lost all her family but a brother now a Sonderkommando, helps Chaya understand how to stay alive. But even those rules evaporate following a botched escape by some of the adults. Rivka is chosen for the chimneys and in a heroic act of selflessness, Chaya exchanges places with her. Chaya enters a darkness and emerges back in her grandparents’ apartment. She realizes now the importance of remembering and understands Aunt Eva is Rivka.

Yolen writes with great pathos. She simplifies the time travel and seamlessly integrates her research. She has purposely not named the concentration camp, as she explains in the back matter. There are some linguistic technical flaws with the Yiddish and the German. Since the novel’s publication, it has been made into a 1999 Showtime movie starring Kirsten Dunst and won the 1988 Sydney Taylor Book Award for Older Readers and the 1989 National Jewish Book Award for Children’s Literature. Thirty years later, *The Devil’s Arithmetic* has stood the test of time and remains a classic and a must-read for a new generation of middle-grade readers. Its strength lies in the way it establishes a multigenerational bridge and issues the call to always remember.

Barbara Krasner, former member, Sydney Taylor Book Award Committee, Somerset, NJ

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Torah, tradition, and family dance with joy, fear, and love in this delicious picture book. Distinctive personalities entice readers into a tense story that builds to a moving ending as it explains Simchat Torah, conveys passion for Torah, shares cultural history of the 1930’s, and bonds a bright little girl to her fearsome grandfather. Outstanding mobile illustrations by a Caldecott Honor winner capture the plot, the places, the era and the character’s expressive faces with stylized paintings in sophisticated jewel colors. The straightforward text with a strong vocabulary tells a multilayered story. Heroine Zessie must stay with her grandparents while her mother has a baby. Sweet Bubbeh cares for Zessie, sharing her personal treasures and ignoring
rules for children’s conduct. Zaydeh is not sweet; he does not like children: all the cousins are afraid of him. Zessie does not want to be alone with him, but she dare not refuse his invitation to go to the shul to celebrate Simchat Torah. Zaydeh’s shul is the historic Eldridge Street Synagogue. The joy of reading Torah is not lost on the worried Zessie who asks her Zaydeh what it means. Fearing he will yell at her for not knowing, she is swept up in his pride that she seeks more knowledge. The stern man of the story defines Torah as “a kiss from God to the Jewish people”. Suddenly somber Zaydeh is dancing, in the shul, down the street, carrying the Torah and leading other dancers. At home he announces happily how special Zessie is for asking about Torah. Zessie knows this is a perfect moment, because only Torah could make Zaydeh and the congregation dance, sing, laugh, and love. New baby? Nice grandfather? Zessie understands the scroll is the most precious wonder of all. Time has not dulled the immediacy of this warm, exuberant book whose old fashioned setting is as charming now as it was 21 years ago. Originally sought after to fill a hole in holiday stories, it goes beyond mere explanation of observance to reveal the human condition filtered through a brave little girl and her strict threatening grandfather: still a winner!

Ellen G. Cole, Temple Isaiah, Los Angeles, CA; Past Chair of the 1997 Sydney Taylor Award Committee


That Italians are the allies of Germany does not stop the Nazis from surprise kidnappings of youngsters for forced labor. Our protagonists, Roberto, a non-Jew, and Samuele, his observant Jewish pal, are the victims of one such raid when they sneak off to an American cowboy movie in Venice. Fear that Samuele’s identity will surface heightens the tension as the prisoners and slave laborers build air strips for Axis planes and holding pens for Jews in Germany and the Ukraine. The boys must survive their Nazi overseers, anti-Semitic fellow prisoners, hunger, and cold weather; they left Venice dressed for a hot day. Samuele dies in a fight over warm clothing, his identity still a secret despite his circumcision and keeping kosher. Roberto, now fully aware of the Holocaust designs of his own side in the war, determines to escape to save himself, to somehow aid penned up Jews and to honor the memory of his friend. He escapes the camp and finds his way home by geography learned in school, outwitting nature as well as man. In a thrilling climax Roberto is shot by a Roman army deserter, who then rescues him and enlists him into the Resistance as they finish the journey home to Italy. Although Samuele is a foil to hero Roberto, he too becomes a hero. With quiet dignity he embodies mitzvot and the sacredness of individual life which Roberto will internalize and act on. Roberto’s accurate journey home is startling geography to contemporary readers who see travel as an instantaneous, technologically supplied red line on a cell phone screen. Wits, war, and weather propel powerful action and cement a model friendship to deliver an indelible moral lesson and an incredible read. Fire in the Hills, the sequel published in 2006, continues Roberto’s contributions to the Resistance as the Italian underground fights the professional Nazi army, helping to liberate their homeland city by city.

Ellen G. Cole, Temple Isaiah, Los Angeles, CA. Chair of the 1998 Sydney Taylor Award Committee
In this addition to the All-of-a-Kind Family collection, readers are treated to a warm, loving, delicious picture book focused on Gertie, the youngest daughter of the family. At four years old, Gertie feels she is old enough to assist in the making of latkes for the family’s Hanukkah celebration. Unfortunately, Mama does not agree – the peeler and grater are too sharp, the oil is too hot. When told to go read her library book, Gertie has a full-blown tantrum! Sent to her room, she hides under her bed, encouraged that everyone will miss her when she proves lost. When Papa comes in to get her, he comically discovers her hiding place – with the help of ginger snaps! Understanding that she has had a hard day, he carries her to the living room where Gertie helps to light the first Hanukkah candle.

Capturing life in the Lower East Side, the winter setting and all the work that goes into preparing for a holiday before food processors, refrigeration, and vegetable oil entered our lives, the story charms the reader. Gertie’s emotional reactions to everything around her from snow, to climbing stairs, to being told no, are a joy to read. The wood-block style illustrations are gorgeous and complement the story. “Gertie’s boots make a racket on the kitchen floor,” and there is Gertie, hair flying and feet stomping in anger, while her Mama and sister stand mouths agape. “Gertie crawls under the bed…and lies on her tummy,” with an oh-so-sad face, sorrowfully wedged under her wrought-iron bed. More than a Hanukkah book, it is also a beautiful, rich story about family dynamics, Jewish history in America and the trials of growing up. A wonderful story time read aloud, and an essential acquisition.

Kathy Bloomfield, AJL Vice President/President-Elect, Seal Beach, CA


Max suffers an overwhelming loss when his mother dies of brain cancer. Through his magical thinking, the fifteen-year-old believes the tumor has entered his brain, “Calling me a wuss. Listening to loud music at all hours of the night. Throwing epic keg parties. Scratching off the wallpaper.” Although he used to be an A student, he can no longer concentrate at public school. Eventually, he transfers to the Baldwin School where he becomes friends with a group of talented misfits, including a pink-haired girl called Fish and a upperclassman called The Monk. He joins his friends in a steam-punk production of Hamlet, the powerful climax to this novel. How Max learns to trust other people (and himself) again — “ready to fall” into their waiting arms— is pivotal to his acceptance of his mother’s death.

Although the various twists and turns of the plot are intriguing, Ready to Fall is essentially a character-driven novel. From the opening chapter, when Max is telling the story in his five-year-old voice, the reader is caught up in this family’s suffering. All the characters, both major and minor, are unforgettable and written with compassion and insight. We watch as Max ever-so-slowly begins
to heal from this trauma through the help of loving family, friends, and teachers. Pixley’s language is filled with lyricism and evocative images: “All of them laying out their disappointments like paper boats in a river, hoping the current will be strong enough to carry them away.” However, just when the emotions get too intense, Pixley lightens the mood with sardonic humor and breathtaking action. Here is a grieving Jewish family trying to figure out how to carry on with daily life. Jewish rituals take a minor role; grief and healing are the main characters. Pixley’s *Without Tess* (reviewed in *AJL Reviews*, May/June 2012) is another heartbreaker.

Anne Dublin, author of *A Cage without Bars*, (Second Story Press, 2018), Toronto, Canada

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Teenage twin sisters both run the risk of inheriting Huntington’s, a degenerative neurological disease that destroys both the body and the mind, from their mother, whose health is declining before their very eyes. Both girls take a genetic test—one tests positive, one tests negative. This is a bare-bones summary of a noteworthy exploration of sibling and parental relationships, strained by differences in values, ambitions, and religious belief—all made even more fraught by issues of health and uncertain futures. Tova and Adina tell the story in alternating chapters, a structure that very effectively enhances the differences between the girls and the sources of their estrangement. After Adina is given the dreaded news that she will eventually get Huntington’s disease, both girls struggle to understand and cope with their future prospects and Adina contemplates suicide. How they approach their goals— one to become a surgeon and the other to become a concert musician— and how they relate to one another, their parents, their high school peers, Jewish practice, and their sexuality is portrayed with sensitivity and grace. Explicit sex scenes and a lot of swearing may put off some adults. The melding of a Conservative Jewish family’s commitment to their faith with clearly drawn, sympathetic characters gives the story’s Jewish content authenticity. The combination of an unusual subject with a gripping story results in an outstanding first novel.

*Linda R. Silver, retired librarian, Lyndhurst, OH; Past Chair, Sydney Taylor Book Award Committee*

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Imani is a twelve-year-old, black, adopted girl living in Baltimore with her Jewish family. She yearns to find out about her ‘real’ family and plans to ask her parents to tell her the truth as a bat mitzvah gift. However, before she can ask, her great-grandmother, Anna, passes away and the family go to Brooklyn for the funeral. In her will, Anna leaves all her books to Imani and among them, Imani finds Anna’s diary. The novel then continues in two streams: One is Anna’s diary entries; the other, Imani’s gradual reading of Anna’s story. Weissman has captured the voice of the two girls—one in 1941, the other in the present day. Suspense builds throughout the novel. What happened to Anna’s family who were left in Europe? How will Imani ask her parents for her heart’s desire? The two girls have much in common: In 1939, Anna must leave her loving,
extended family in Luxembourg as she undertakes the long ocean voyage alone. When she arrives in America, she is taken in and adopted by a kind couple who treat her like their own daughter. Anna’s anguish at leaving her family is palpable and heartrending. She writes: “It is as though our deepest minds are connected by an invisible yarn…. The string is all we have until the rest of you join me for a happy, safe life in America.” Anna ultimately finds a haven in America. However, as in most Holocaust stories, her family does not.

Through reading Anna’s diary and sharing the entries with her friends, Imani comes to accept and even embrace her place in her own family. By the end of the novel, she is no longer desperate to find her birth parents, although that might be an option in the future. The ending has a plot twist which is logical and heartwarming. The Length of a String is a skillfully written novel, filled with likeable and interesting characters, evocative details, and lots of humor.

Anne Dublin, author of A Cage without Bars, (Second Story Press, 2018), Toronto

BIBLE STORIES AND MIDRASH


Dardik presents a very God centered version of the bible story, which may not be appropriate for all Jewish families. The full color illustrations are vivid and very large. The many two-page spreads add depth to the simple storyline. The color selections and style are reminiscent of Ukrainian art. But there are significant deviations from the biblical text: a young girl appears recurrently as part of Noah’s family (the bible only mentions Noah, his wife, and three sons boarding the ark) and last page tells the reader to “remember how much God loves you when you see a rainbow,” rather than “it shall be a sign of the covenant between Me and the earth...that the water shall never again become a flood to destroy all flesh” (Genesis 9:12 and 17).

Ellen Tilman, Meyers Library, Reform Congregation Keneseth Israel, Elkins Park, PA; Past Chair, Sydney Taylor Book Award Committee


With a clever format, accessible language, and the emphasis on applying the lessons of the biblical story in daily life, the biblical tale of the prophet who tried to “run away from God” has too much Christian content to merit its inclusion in a Jewish library. With references to “His Kingdom” and “the Good News,” the tone is set. The book is presented in three sections. “Fact File,” gives key information about Jonah: that he lived in Israel just north of Nazareth and was active from 786 to 746 BC (sic) and that he was “called to share the gospel with his greatest enemy.” The Action File retells the story in simple, often repetitive language, rephrasing verses so that when Jonah “fell into a ‘deep sleep’” (1:5), it was not “just a light take-a-nap sleep.” The Clue Boxes that “help you keep track of your thoughts,” are conclusions like “God does give and He takes away, but He doesn’t change who He is or how much He loves us.” The Power File “is where you will find valuable information and memory verses to help you see how God is working in your life, too.” Rather than verses from the Book of Jonah, this section includes lines from both the Old and New Testament. The moral of the story: that “we are called to spread God’s truth. Jesus is the Way, the Truth, and the Life.” Based on this volume, the other books in the series from this Christian publisher about David, Daniel, and Esther should also be avoided.

Chava Pinchuck, Ramat Beit Shemesh, Israel; Past Chair, Sydney Taylor Book Award Committee

Rabbi Sandy Sasso and Amy-Jill Levine, both esteemed scholars and authors, have authored a picture book based on a parable by Jesus. *The Parable of the Mustard Seed* is found in the Gospels of Matthew, Mark, and Luke in the New Testament. The gist of the story is “from small beginnings come great things.” Over the centuries this story has been interpreted to mean everything from a little faith can move mountains to a reason to do away with Jewish dietary laws and much in between. The story is accessible and written in age-appropriate language, with illustrations that are multicultural, multigenerational as well as richly drawn and colored, but it has a couple of ideas that are incorrect. Most prominently is a misconception that a mustard seed can grow into a tree. While mustard seeds can grow into rather large (7-10 feet high) bushes, trees they are not. Yet the illustrations of the *Marvelous Mustard Seed* depict a tree larger than an oak or a cedar tree, even though the Gospels themselves only refer to the mustard seed growing into a large shrub. Also, the inclusion of the language: “The Kingdom of God is like a mustard seed in the garden outside our windows, growing from itsy-bitsy, teensy-weensy to colossal, from impossible to see to unable to miss,” has unmistakable Christian overtones. 

If this book had been published by a Jewish publishing house with Jewish editors reviewing the text, there would be less of a worry. Even the “Note to Parents and Teachers” that imagines the “audience, of Jewish people listening to a Jewish storyteller...” might dispel some unease. Yet, because Flyaway Books is a division of Westminster John Knox Press, the publishing arm of the Presbyterian Publishing Corporation, and uses the staff and resources of this historic publisher for its publications, there is reason for concern. Their books are edited through a Christian lens by a denomination that funds Messianic Jewish communities. This book introduces Jesus’ words into Jewish homes – a clear method of proselytizing.

*BIOGRAPHY*


It’s the one hundredth anniversary of the patriotic anthem “God Bless America”, so three children’s book publishers seized the moment to offer illustrated versions of Irving Berlin’s life story. The beloved Jewish composer was born 130 years ago, but he’s not exactly a popular kid’s hero, and the song isn’t a particular hit known by children. However, Berlin’s experience as an immigrant who made good, assimilated well, loved his country, and contributed mightily to American musical heritage clearly means a lot in this age of travel bans and immigrant bashing. In fact, two of the books focus significantly on his status as a young immigrant escaping persecution and dreaming of a better life in America.

All the books are good and it is interesting to compare them to see the choices authors make on what to add and what to leave out in regard to a person’s biography. Berlin came to America at age five in 1888, lived in crowded tenement housing; lost his father when Berlin was age thirteen; and sold his first song to Tin Pan Alley without ever knowing how to read music. His patriotic songs brought the country together during hard times, and his love for America was always evident in his work.

In *God Bless America: The Story of an Immigrant Named Irving Berlin*, Adah Nuchi uses rhythmic wording in italics interspersed among the narrative that may provide some fun when reading aloud. There are two mentions of Berlin’s Jewish background—when he was “chased out” of Russia, and when some people objected to an immigrant Jewish composer becoming so popular. More twentieth century history
is included here (which makes the read flow a bit more slowly), and more emphasis on the making of the song, “God Bless America”. The narrative stops around the 1970’s. Lots of black and brown faces are depicted as typical Americans among illustrations. There is an illustration of a burning shtetl, and a cantor (Berlin’s father) on the front cover, but these things are only mentioned in the author’s note at the end. More difficult vocabulary and the better source notes and timeline are appropriate for older readers, although the use of the rhythmic sounds skews it toward a younger crowd.

Nancy Churin’s text in *Irving Berlin: The Immigrant Boy Who Made America Sing* reads very well and the engaging illustrations by James Rey Sanchez feature a recurring red scarf that flows across the page in a sort of imitation of how sheet music is read. The illustrations turn darker when depicting Berlin’s life in the crowded Lower East Side, and brighten up as he escapes poverty and becomes famous. Churin has included words like “shtetl”, “Yiddish” and “shema”, but not the word “Jewish”, so it seems as if young readers will have to know that those other words serve to depict a Jewish identity. Also included is a strange and possibly apocryphal story (there is no source listed) about how the last three notes of “God Bless America” purposely mirror the last three notes of the shema prayer. The emotional, lovely ending states that when Berlin refused money for “God Bless America”, it was “his thank you to the country that opened its arms to countless people from all over the world, including a homeless boy who came to America with nothing but music in his heart.”

*Write On, Irving Berlin!* is the most easily read aloud to younger children, with the largest illustrations by David C. Gardner. One depicting Berlin in a bathtub dreaming and writing music is particularly fun. There are various font and art design changes and the narrative voice is more insistent, with one-line statements in large cursive font. Of the three, this is the only one that follows the composer until his death at age 101. As far as Jewish interests, it includes an illustration of his house burning down in a Russian pogrom, and information that his father was a cantor and that his first exposure to music was in a synagogue. For librarians looking to buy only one, perhaps story times would be livelier when using this version.

Lisa Silverman, Library Director, Burton Sperber Jewish Community Library, American Jewish University, Los Angeles, CA

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Popular non-fiction author Kathleen Krull begins her engaging story of Justice Ginsberg by calling her a “change-maker” and stating that she is a “fierce fighter for fairness and truth”. The illustrator has pictured her image along a continuum of important women: Ida B. Wells, Alice Paul, Virginia Woolf, and Susan B. Anthony. Krull begins by focusing on the influences Ruth’s highly intelligent mother had on her, especially the indignities suffered by these unsung women who could hardly advance past being homemakers. When her mother dies the night before Ruth’s high school graduation, Ruth becomes determined to go to college to carry out her mother’s dream. This thought-provoking book has more text, a higher page count, and a higher vocabulary than the two previous picture-book biographies - *I Dissent: Ruth Bader Ginsburg Makes Her Mark* (Simon & Schuster, 2016) and *Ruth Bader Ginsburg: The Case of R.B.G. vs. Inequality* (Abrams 2017) - and it includes a variety of historical and political events that 4th - 6th graders would find interesting. One personal tidbit tells of Ruth being invited to the law school dean’s house for dinner with the few other female law students, only to have to answer to misogynistic remarks from her host. In the age of MeToo, this particular incident will surely resonate with readers. Young people will also learn about the Women’s’ Rights Project championed by Ruth and some information about her important cases focusing on equal treatment for women. The addition of a final page of “The Top Ten Moments When Ruth Bader Ginsburg Fought for Fairness on the Supreme Court” is unusual due to the use of adult vocabulary, thus making it seemingly of interest only for parents. However, perhaps the whole point of this terrific book is that kids are smart, care about fairness, and have a high willingness to learn, especially when they are presented with such a remarkable story about a true life heroine.

Lisa Silverman, Library Director, Burton Sperber Jewish Community Library, American Jewish University, Los Angeles, CA
Reviews of Titles for Children and Teens


Although Harry Houdini is most often remembered as a consummate showman and escape artist, this book delves deeply into Houdini’s less known passion; he was determined to delegitimize the Spiritualists and psychics who claimed they could communicate with the dead and whose services were fashionable and sought after during Houdini’s lifetime. He devoted much time and energy to the debunking of apparent psychic phenomena, aiming to expose this eerie practice as fraud. The author briefly discusses Houdini’s show career and family life with several brief mentions of his Jewish background, but his quest to expose the Spiritualists and mediums of his day is the primary focus of the book.

The main text is accompanied by numerous sidebars of interest to the reader which help flesh out the temper of the time. There are many photographs in sepia tones which help the reader understand Houdini’s world. Backmatter includes extensive notes, a bibliography, a webliography, and an index. The author’s painstaking research is impressive and her clear but sophisticated writing style makes the retelling of Houdini’s story from this less often addressed perspective both fascinating and original.

Michal Hoschander Malen, retired day school librarian (NYC); library volunteer, Efrat, Israel; editor of children’s and YA book reviews for the Jewish Book Council


Aly Raisman considers much more than the title’s “myself”. Revisiting her hard won, deserved sport victories, Aly considers her family, her teammates, her coaches and the Jewish community. In direct, unvarnished style, she draws readers to her personal struggles, to the world of competitive sports at all levels, and to the daily grind of becoming a gymnast and a gold medal Olympian. The personality traits that made her team captain twice are evident. She recounts her fears, foods, endless workouts, missing out on youthful milestones, and pondering going pro with endorsements and magazine photo shoots. Readers interested in one topic will find themselves interested in others through her warm voice and honesty. Chapters are short and punchy; repetitive training includes other information that propels the narrative forward. The tension over winning competitions works despite her record being known, a tribute to her writing. Aly is proud of her Jewish identity; using *Hava Nagila* for the floor exercise music at Nationals -- this theme repeated in her London original music. Movingly she dedicates her London gold medal to the Israeli athletes murdered at the Munich Olympics in 1972. Team physician Larry Nassar’s abuse of Raisman and other female athletes is sensitively handled and appropriate for the reading audience. She clearly warns young girls not to shy away if something feels wrong and to tell someone, not suffer in silence. She examines her own life as she cheer leads young readers into believing in themselves, their bodies and their dreams. This is a dynamic role model read about a Jewish hero.

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

FICTION - MIDDLE GRADE


Writer Beth Ain has created a series of books in verse featuring protagonist Izzy Kline that explore a topic familiar to nearly every student: the search for affirmation and acceptance from your peers and your family. In the first book, *Izzy Kline Has Butterflies*, she is adjusting to the start of fourth grade, the end of two close friendships, her parents’ separation, and the possibility of new friends on the horizon. The follow-up, *The Cure for Cold Feet*, finds Izzy moving into sixth grade, dealing with an increasingly aloof and angry brother, witnessing her parents flourish in relationships with new people, navigating a school project paired with one of her biggest adversaries, and once again being caught in shifting friendships.
Reviews of Titles for Children and Teens

Judaic content is almost nonexistent in Izzy Kline, but appears more prominently in Cold Feet, where Izzy mentions learning Hebrew, celebrating Hanukkah, and a smattering of other Jewish terms and traditions. Readers might get the sense that the Klines may be more culturally Jewish than religious, but Izzy does seem invested in her Jewish identity, as shown when she reminisces about a time her former friends intentionally left her out of a group coordinated outfit by wearing Christmas apparel. Izzy doesn’t feel pressured to conform, just hurt by their cruelty. There are times when the brevity of the story-in-verse format leaves events and some characters only partially formed. Cold Feet is the stronger of the two in this area, allowing for more layers of the story to build and for the readers to get to know the characters better. Although nothing new is explored in these titles, Izzy is a steady, heartfelt narrator, whose thoughts and choices are grounded in the reality of a young person weathering a series of upheavals in her life. School libraries may consider this title and should connect it to readers who prefer realistic stories and/or poetry, as well as emerging readers that would benefit from a “quick” read and a tidy, happy ending.

Alex Quay, Lainer School, Los Angeles, CA


When her father dies suddenly and her mother becomes morbidly depressed, 13-year-old Briana reluctantly assumes the care of her younger autistic brother. Faced with these challenges, she rises to her full social potential and becomes a better, more caring person. During this emotional journey, she cherishes her father’s memory and listens to his advice, conveyed through the extra heart - her father’s heart - she believes resides in her stomach. This bizarre and in some ways laughable conceit is only one of several ill-conceived aspects of a predictable story about and for young teens. The Jewish content is slight but genuine, in contrast to exaggerated characters and what seems like an interminably drawn out plot.

Linda R. Silver, retired librarian, Lyndhurst, OH; Past Chair, Sydney Taylor Book Award Committee


Fifteen-year-old Moshe Levi boards a ship in Amsterdam in 1650 hoping to import cork from Africa for his family’s business. Not long into his journey, a violent storm strikes and after clinging to a wood beam and praying to Hashem to be saved, he is washed ashore in Spain. A kind family takes him in, but he quickly learns that Spain is not a safe place for Jews. While he keeps his Jewish identity a secret, he finds clever ways to keep Shabbat and eat kosher food. But how will he observe Pesach? Again his prayers are answered when he discovers Carlos Romanus, the richest, most powerful man in town, purchasing bitter herbs in the marketplace. When Moshe confronts him, Carlos denies that he is a Jew, but Moshe persists and Carlos leads him to a secret basement cellar where his family will celebrate the Seder. Their knowledge of the prayers and customs is incomplete, and convinced that he has been sent by Hashem, Moshe offers to teach the young Romanus children about Torah and mitzvot. At the end of Tishrei, a merchant ship arrives and Moshe is finally able to return home and reunite with his family. Through the years he continues to pray for the Romanus family. Will they escape Spain and find freedom? Will Moshe ever see his friend again? Too many coincidences stretch the story’s plausibility and the characters are all too perfect. Moshe never has an unkind or dishonest thought and never veers off the derech (path) despite difficulty and life-threatening danger. And, the conditions for Jews during Inquisition-era Spain are glossed over. Simple black and white drawings are adequately interspersed throughout the text. Despite a glossary of Hebrew terms, the story will likely only be accessible to Orthodox children. This series of beginning chapter books promises to be “packed with historical adventure, memorable characters, and all the positive middos [traits] and mitzvos [commandments] that discriminating parents and teachers have come to expect from Hachai Publishing.” However, “all the positive middos and mitzvos” weigh down the story making it too preachy, predictable, and didactic.

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

Young Hanna Farber can’t seem to do anything right. She can’t sew a straight line, and she always gets her clothes dirty. As her family moves from Plymouth to Manchester and then “up the hill” so her mother can breathe better, hard times are hitting the region. The American Civil War has created the Cotton Famine, and the mills of Victorian England are slowing down and closing. The Farbers are still doing all right, so they find ways to help others by giving charity and sewing. They help a non-Jewish family, befriend a Polish family from the other side of town, and welcome a new family to the neighborhood. They are very concerned that the Jewish school is not serving the needs of many in the community, as more secular studies are introduced and girls are forced to use English names. At last Hanna’s talents are found and utilized: her acute hearing leads to the capture of “coiners” who are counterfeiting money at night at a button stamping factory. Ultimately, the family decides to move back to Plymouth.

Although the publisher promotes this as a “teen read,” it is doubtful whether this age group will pick up a book about a girl below bat mitzvah age. The details of Victorian Manchester have been researched well, but it is questionable whether young readers’ attention will be held by the subject matter and themes of different customs in different Jewish communities and levels of Jewish observance. Even with a glossary, the constant saying of Tehillim (Psalms), and lines like “HaKodoush Boruch Hu should be the most important thing in our lives, and every action, every thought, should be directed to remembering all the wonderful things He does for us, and thanking and praising Him for them,” mean that *Hanna’s Harvest* will be reaped by very Orthodox readers.

Chava Pinchuck, Ramat Beit Shemesh Israel, Past Chair, Sydney Taylor Book Award Committee


History and fiction are intertwined in a graphic novel about the sinking of the Titanic and the life of Moshe Wallas, who came from a poor, observant, Jewish family and grows up to become a wildly successful businessman. While his parents and siblings continuously remind him to study Torah and Gemara, all Moshe wants is to be rich, and he builds diverse businesses. He learns about the maiden voyage of a new ship and quickly books the most expensive cabin available. While enjoying the cruise to New York, he learns that his Italian business partner has declared bankruptcy, and Moshe is now poorer than he was when he left his family and the village. When the Titanic hits an iceberg and starts to sink, Moshe is not allowed to get on one of the few lifeboats; he is stranded on a piece of floating debris in the sea with an elderly non-Jewish man. As they await rescue, Moshe prays to Ribbono shel Olam/Master of the World, promising a complete teshuvah/return. It turns out that the gentle man is extremely wealthy, is dying and has no heirs. Hearing Moshe’s powerful prayers moves him to provide Moshe with the information necessary to obtain all of his wealth from the Swiss bank where it is saved. He exacts a promise that Moshe will use the money for good. A rescue boat arrives, Moshe is saved, and he goes to Switzerland to retrieve his inheritance. Wealthy once again, he returns to his family and his village where he spends the rest of his life supporting his family, building schools, and establishing facilities to assist the poor.

The story is interesting and well told, weaving fact and fiction seamlessly. The artwork, while cartoonish, is colorful and engaging. The only women in the book are Moshe’s mother and sister; and everyone aboard the Titanic appears to be male. In addition, the language tends toward the pedantic, for example: crediting the sinking of the Titanic to man’s forgetting his Creator, and constant references to the middah (virtue) of gaavah (pride). The use of Hebrew with no translation and the many references to middos with little if any definition will make this a difficult read for any child lacking a yeshiva education.

Kathy Bloomfield, AJL Vice President/President-Elect, Seal Beach, CA

Katie and Ana, both in fifth grade become friends when Katie moves to Boston from Salt Lake. Each girl has secrets she is reluctant to share: Katie is adopted and yearns to find out more about her birth parents. In addition, she had heart transplant surgery years ago, but she wants to do what the other children do, even though it might put her health in danger. Ana’s hockey-player father has left the family and her mother has sunk into depression and is no longer taking care of her and her younger brother, Mikey. Ana has quit playing hockey to take care of the family, but she yearns to play the game again. Each girl wants to confide in her friend; each girl is afraid to divulge her secrets. The story is told in third-person and alternates between the two girls. Vickers keeps the events flowing and the suspense building. Secondary characters, like Katie’s parents and Ana’s brother and grandmother are deftly drawn, demonstrating their all-too-human foibles, worries, and obsessions.

Other literary techniques are not quite so successful. Stories within stories, like “The Snow Child” and “Baba Yaga”, are sketchily told, although they have some connection to the novel’s themes. Several coincidences, such as a mix-up with pocket watches and the Russian background of the girls seem rather forced. Finally, the Jewish content is scant. Ana is Jewish but, apart from lighting Hanukkah candles, eating latkes, and occasionally going to synagogue, her Jewishness is barely noticeable. Katie is Christian and much is made about Christmas decorations, the nativity scene, and the exchange of presents. The themes of trust, honesty, and friendship are interconnected in *Paper Chains*, and the final chapters end on a satisfying note where the girls have cleared up misunderstandings and repaired their friendship.

Anne Dublin, author of *A Cage Without Bars* (Second Story Press, 2018), Toronto

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**FICTION - TEEN**


Suzette’s older brother Lionel has been diagnosed with bipolar disorder during Suzette’s first summer home from boarding school. She (Little) cares deeply for her brother, but when he makes a drastic choice about his treatment Suzette wrestles between what is best for him and not betraying his choices. All the while, she is exploring her feelings for her neighbor Emil, and her coworker Rafaela, made more complex by Lion’s attraction to Rafaela as well. The book stands out for its authenticity and empathy.

This would be a nice optional purchase for a school with a young adult collection or a synagogue or center looking to add books with LGBTQ characters to their collection. While Judaism is not the main focus of the book, Lion and his father are Jewish, and Suzette and her mother have converted. They celebrate Shabbat, and Suzette talks about how she felt inauthentic by not participating in Jewish activities at boarding school, as well as the challenges she faces as a Jew of Color.

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

[Editors’ Note: *Little and Lion* is the co-winner of the American Library Association GLBT Round Table’s 2018 Stonewall Book Award.]


Aden is a teenage girl with body insecurity, who falls in love with the magnetizing Tate, a fellow student who needs her help with calculus. Tate, who has a girlfriend, occasionally expresses reciprocal feelings for Aden, but remains with his girlfriend without explanation and is a frustratingly elusive character overall. Judaism is woven lightly into the story with Tate newly wearing a kippah because of a recent, transformative trip to Israel. Aden also explores her spirituality and, in the pursuit to learn more about her Jewish mother who died of cancer years prior, discovers her own reasons to engage in Judaism. In addition to her confusing relationship with Tate, feeling overweight, and coping with...
the loss of her mother, Aden is grappling with an abundance of other issues: an unpredictably volatile father, a drug-using brother, and a sexual assault after an overconsumption of alcohol. Additionally, her best friend has an emotionally abusive mother, an absent father and a subsequent lack of self-esteem that propels her to be sexually promiscuous, ultimately having an affair with a teacher and an unplanned pregnancy. While these issues are all deserving of examination, their gravity is neither adequately addressed nor duly resolved. There are no consequences for the teacher, and it seems arrangements will be easily made for Aden’s best friend to keep her baby, get a job, and attend college. As for Aden, she begins to feel stronger and healthier after dedicating herself to exercising at a local gym, but instantly becomes enamored with a boy she meets there. That Aden can’t feel self-confident independently without involving the affirmation of another boy is unfortunate. Filled with drama, Aden’s story is compelling and easy to read and should appeal mainly to girls who identify with the varied challenges teen years can bring.

Martha McMahon, Lainer School, Los Angeles, CA


Father Zbigniew Mzlateslavski has planned his revenge since childhood, when he stole a valise and was caught, punished, and humiliated. Changing his name and pretending to be a distant relation of a powerful family, he gets a letter of recommendation and enters a monastery to study for the priesthood. He is assigned to the parish of a village, and soon his plan unfolds. The valise belonged to the rabbi, Mendel, and the priest arranges the kidnapping of his three-year-old son when the family is traveling to Krakow. Shloime’s parents grieve for their missing son, who unbeknownst to them is brought up in the church. Years later, a debate that will decide the fate of the Jews of Krakow is arranged. The participants will be Gregor Tal and Rabbi Mendel, with Father Zbigniew moderating. To learn more about his opponent, Gregor Tal, disguised as a Jewish merchant, goes to Pulichev to observe. He is drawn to Rabbi Mendel, and reacts emotionally when he hears the Yom Kippur prayers. As he talks to Rabbi Mendel, they realize that they are father and son. They foil Zbigniew’s plans, and Gregor starts his new life as Shloime.

The book was originally written in 1983 as part of a fund-raising campaign for a New Jersey girls’ high school, and was the first in a series that has spanned historical periods and attracted readers of all ages. The revised version has been greatly expanded with almost twice the chapters. Historical details and the sense of place in late sixteenth to early seventeenth century Poland enhance the telling. There is a lot going on, but all the threads are knotted together at the end. It makes the story hard to summarize, but one that will hold the reader’s attention. The characters are somewhat one dimensional, but it is a tale of the triumph of good over evil, with a little twist that will satisfy, and, of course, a happy ending.

Chava Pinchuck, Ramat Beit Shemesh, Israel; Past Chair, Sydney Taylor Book Award Committee


Tanner’s family has moved from liberal California to a conservative area of Utah. Though his parents are fine with his bisexuality, they encourage him to stay in the closet in Utah so as not to attract unwanted attention until he goes off to college out of state. This is all well and good until Tanner starts the Seminar, a four month class in which the students are required to write a book. There he meets Sebastian Brother, the very attractive, very Mormon teaching assistant. What ensues is a navigation of religion, family expectations, friendships, heartache, and hope.

Though Tanner is the self-described “half Jewish queer kid in a straight and Mormon town” his Judaism has very little to do with the book. His Bubbe is mentioned a few times along with her brisket and Matzo Ball soup, but it feels as though the author made Tanner’s father Jewish and his mother
Reviews of Titles for Children and Teens

an ex-Mormon in order to illustrate the challenges of an interfaith marriage. While a fun read and an interesting look at an interfaith family, the Jewish content may be too minimal for most synagogue and day school collections.

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

FOLKTALES


In his introduction to this collection of Yiddish stories for children, Stromberg states his aim is to help “young people become aware of something they are often made to forget: their own powers”. These tales by men or women, such as Leon Elbe and Rachel Shabad, appear in English for the first time. The translations have adequately captured the voice and cadence of the originals.

“Nu?” you ask. “What about the stories themselves?” They are grouped by four core principles or themes: bravery, rebellion, justice, and wonder. They are at times scary or whimsical, sad or funny, bizarre or magical. The main characters are ordinary people or royalty, wise people or fools; animals (ants, squirrels, crickets); plants (mushrooms, leaves); celestial beings (the moon). Stromberg is to be commended for bringing these long-lost children’s stories from the early and mid-twentieth century to light. However, they seem to be overly didactic for our times. The overriding concern is whether children nowadays will read these tales and be able to relate to them. Sadly, probably not.

Anne Dublin, author of A Cage without Bars (Second Story Press, 2018), Toronto

HOLOCAUST AND WORLD WAR II


With the front cover of muted colors depicting camp gates and “Arbeit Macht Frei” behind the clasped hands of two sisters, we get an immediate feel for the contents, and it is not for young children. This is personal for the two authors, close cousins who were told this moving survival story by each of their mothers. Rachel and Toby are left orphaned by the Nazis and sent to a concentration camp to work as slaves; daily building and then dismantling a stone wall. Before their father was taken away, he had given the girls three gold coins to hide and use only when absolutely necessary. The authors employ short declarative sentences to describe the horrors of camp life, including menacing dogs, sickness, cold, hunger, intense fear, and a whipping. But the bravery of the young girls (their ages are not specified, but clearly they were teenagers) is emphasized, and when Rachel takes sick and is removed from the barracks, Toby overcomes her fright and uses her hidden treasure to reunite them until they are finally liberated. The back matter explains that the story is true and that the sisters remained devoted to each other and best friends for 50 years. The illustrations here are quite unusual and are described as “digital collage”. The artist uses mostly Victorian era photos, along with various images of textures to overlay onto her figures, which creates a rather unsettling feeling for the reader. This uncommon technique actually works well for the disturbing themes of the story. This book provides a newer perspective when presenting how surviving in a camp may have felt to inmates. The book serves as a thought-provoking addition to others in the genre, but probably best for older readers or to be discussed in a classroom setting.

Lisa Silverman, Library Director, Burton Sperber Jewish Community Library, Los Angeles, CA

In October 1942, fifteen-year-old, blond-haired Chaya Lindner carries a backpack and an identification card attesting she is Helena Nowak, a Pole. Her job is to serve as courier to Jews trapped in various ghettos throughout Poland, bringing them food and supplies and smuggling out children. She works for the former scouting now resistance group, Akiva. Ousted early from the Krakow Ghetto, she manages to sneak in to see her parents, who have already accepted their fate. One younger sister and one younger brother have already been on selection lists and deported. Chaya soon is partnered against her will with meek, frail Esther Karolinsky. After the Akiva group in Krakow is ambushed in their bunker following a café attack they instigated, Chaya and Esther are on the run north, first to Lodz and then on to Warsaw. In Lodz they face the reality of doomed fate for Jews in the ghetto and in Warsaw, they help Mordechai Anielewicz in the April 1943 Warsaw Ghetto Uprising. There Chaya reunites with her brother and Esther shows remarkable courage.

Resistance is a page-turning, action-packed adventure. But it is also the story of an unlikely friendship between two young women and demonstration of youth’s fighting spirit against injustice. Still, there are missed opportunities for reinforcing Jewish values, such as tikkun olam. The narrative also suffers from technical flaws. For instance, Nielsen does not recognize that Chaya would know Esther came from the north because of her Yiddish dialect. It is debatable whether a Jewish girl would claim Adam Mickiewicz as her national poet. Nielsen’s research appears in clumps and the plot is contrived and predictable in places. Back matter detailing her research would have been most welcome.

Barbara Krasner, former member, Sydney Taylor Book Award Committee, Somerset, NJ


Born Sura Gitla (“Gucia”) Gomolinska in southeastern Poland, this daughter of a butcher weaves a tale of her school years, her first love, her years at university, and the Nazi invasion. Eventually, the Nazis create a ghetto into which her home already fits. After her beloved mother dies of typhus in 1941, her family encourages her to escape the ghetto and pass, with her blond hair, as a Gentile. Her first attempt fails and she returns to her family. But when she learns about the deportations, she accepts her fate to leave her family. Throughout the rest of the war she successfully passes as a Polish-Catholic girl named Basia. She visits a few resort towns in southern Poland and eventually finds a job as a maid in a hotel in Germany along with her friend Sabine. After the war, she learns her father and one of her sisters has died in the concentration camps. Her other siblings have survived and she reunites with them. She lives in Munich and meets up with Leon Reichmann from her town. They marry and move to the United States.

Reichmann’s memory here is remarkable as Price (and Reichmann’s daughter, Helen) tell the story in vivid detail. This is not the typical death-camp narrative and readers may be surprised that “Basia” decided the best place for her to hide was in plain sight in Germany, already “Judenrein,” free of Jews. There are pages that delve into detail about Jewish practices, but the real beauty of this story is the description of Jewish life in prewar Poland. Although published for teens, it can also be used in adult Holocaust memoir collections. A list of people at the beginning of the narrative explains relationships and a list of their fates at the back rounds out the story. A photographic insert adds the human touch.

Barbara Krasner, former member, Sydney Taylor Book Award Committee, Somerset, NJ
ISRAEL


Visitors can have a true adventure in Jerusalem looking for clues, learning about history and culture, and being active participants in their tour. After a brief history of Israel’s capital city, there are instructions about how to use the book, and the five roles that participants can play: Tour Guide, reading about the stations; Mission Manager, reading and writing answers to the mission questions; Prophet, reading quotes and other important source material; Navigator, holding the map and leading the group to the different stations; and Detective, finding and taking photographs. Five “missions” are included in the spiral-bound volume, and each section is color-coded for easy reference. One can choose the Old City, Mishkenot Sha’ananim/Yemin Moshe, the First Station, the Machane Yehuda market, or the Har Herzl National Cemetery. Each adventure begins with a brief introduction, preparation for the route and how to get there. Then the adventure begins! There are clear color photos of all the sites (and black and white archival photos of what some of the places used to look like) with their history, as well as questions to answer, things to think about, suggested photographs to take with the group, even a crossword puzzle to solve. At the back of the book is a section of “Jerusalem Fun & Games” with quizzes and challenges, and the back pocket holds three supplemental items: a map book (for the Navigator to use), the “Train Game” to play at the First Station, and a “Picture Pack,” with which the group finds the matches and takes photographs of themselves at the locations.

Tarlow came to the tourism industry from the world of education, having been a teacher, curriculum developer and informal educator for around 20 years before she founded Israel ScaVentures. The book can be used in family or groups, and while appropriate for all ages, planning and executing any of the “missions” would be an amazing experience for a bar or bat mitzvah trip. If one is not able to visit in person, it is an invaluable resource for teaching and learning about Jerusalem in an innovative and exciting way.

Chava Pinchuck, Ramat Beit Shemesh, Israel; Past Chair, Sydney Taylor Book Award Committee

JEWS VALUES


Ellie (YaYa) and Joel (YoYo) Silver are fifth grade twins whose previous adventures included *Sliding into the New Year* (2011) and *Shaking in the Shack* (2013). In this third volume, Aunt Rachel is getting married and she asks the twins to be the *huppah* holders at her wedding. The book explains the details and customs of a traditional Jewish wedding with a few modern innovations (both the bride and groom circling each other; wearing a white kippah and talit instead of a kittel, etc.) It has a great deal of middle school humor and amazement; many puns; and a series of misadventures both imagined and real.

The plot is definitely secondary to the information on Jewish weddings, often seeming more like nonfiction. It can serve as a resource for a class on Jewish Life Cycles or to educate students who have upcoming family weddings and is well suited to middle-grade readers who have graduated from other Jewish wedding books like *Don’t Sneeze at the Wedding* (Kar-Ben, 2013) and *The Flower Girl Wore Celery* (Kar-Ben, 2016).

Ellen Tilman, Meyers Library, Reform Congregation Keneseth Israel, Elkins Park, PA; Past Chair, Sydney Taylor Book Award Committee
NONFICTION


Authors Cohen and Alter present a workbook-style guide to the discovery of Jewish ancestors, intended for young teens. Early in the text they introduce the metaphor of detective work but never use that metaphor as an organizing or narrative principle. The title is misleading as there is little that is child-friendly in this book, from the small trim size to the illogical arrangement of topics. Most genealogy guides begin with what the researcher knows best: the researcher and the researcher’s immediate family. Instead, this book launches into unfamiliar terms such as descendant and ancestor charts before the researcher would even know how to fill one out.

In 1983, Behrman House published a workbook-style guide for youngsters - My Generations, a Course in Jewish Family History by one of the fathers of Jewish genealogy, Arthur Kurzweil. This book by Cohen and Alter is not the successor. A much better choice for teens is Gary Mokotoff’s Getting Started in Jewish Genealogy, 2018 Edition (Avotaynu, Inc.).

Barbara Krasner, former member, Sydney Taylor Book Award Committee, Somerset, NJ

SHABBAT AND HOLIDAYS


Colorful, inclusive illustrations and rhyming text punctuated by the refrain, “Rosh Hashanah is on its way,” introduce young readers to the Jewish New Year. A contemporary family prepares to celebrate by picking apples, buying pomegranates, making New Year’s cards, and hearing the shofar blast during the month of Elul, and then attends synagogue and gathers with family to enjoy a festive meal complete with candles, wine, challah, apples, and honey. “When so many people visit that there’s no place left to sit / And our living room is crowded, but no one cares a bit… / When Nana’s lit the candles and blessings have been said / And Mom calls, ‘Let’s eat this brisket before it’s time for bed!’ / Rosh Hashanah is here!” There is little explanation of the holiday beyond the simple descriptions of the season and customs (e.g., without background, one might wonder what it means to “do a mitzvah for each of the seeds inside” a pomegranate), but that is a minor criticism of this sweet addition to books for the High Holidays.

Marcie Eskin, Beth Hillel Bnai Emunah, Wilmette, IL


Bright colors, fun animals, and cumulative rhymes carry this entertaining Sukkot book. Auntie Sanyu, an African woman in a beautiful headwrap, is getting ready for Sukkot. On each day of the holiday, Warthog, Lion, Parrot, Camel, Giraffe, and Rhino visit Auntie Sanyu’s sukkah. Each animal wants to shake the lulav and hold the etrog, but Warthog refuses to share. When Auntie Sanyu’s niece Sara comes for Shemini Atzeret, she manages to convince Warthog to share with all of his friends and then rewards him by giving him the etrog to take home at the end of the holiday. This unique holiday picture book, with playful digital and mixed media illustrations, includes a brief glossary, as well as a short history of the Jews of Uganda. The book highlights an important holiday and a Jewish community not typically represented in children’s books, as well as the importance of sharing with friends.

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

Edgar is a taxi driver who works long, lonely hours in a big city far away from his family in Tel Aviv. It’s winter time and the city is decorated for the holidays. One evening Edgar discovers a hamster in his taxi, apparently left by a customer. In the hopes of finding the animal’s owner, Edgar reports it to the company lost and found. But in the meantime, he takes the hamster home and cares for it lovingly, naming it Chickpea after one of his homeland foods. Edgar sends photos of Chickpea to his family in Israel and regales Chickpea with stories of Tel Aviv. The hamster’s original owner is finally located, but realizing Edgar and Chickpea have formed a special bond, she allows Edgar to keep his new companion. With warm, comforting illustrations depicting a diversity of characters, this touching tale conveys messages of kindness, friendship, and family in the context of the Hanukkah spirit. Of course, the appeal of an adorable hamster also cannot be denied.

*Martha McMahon, Lainer School, Los Angeles, CA*


Like the other titles in this series — *How it’s Made: Torah Scroll* and *How It’s Made: Matzah* — *How It’s Made: Hanukkah Menorah* is a bright, clear and completely engaging nonfiction book. In an overabundance of Hanukkah books for children, Ofanansky’s work stands out for its modernity and beauty. The holiday is explained clearly and simply in a way that is accessible for children across the religious spectrum. From why and when we light the menorah to what a menorah is prefaces several fascinating examples of how to make one. Master craftsmen are shown making menorahs out of brass, glass, and wood. Instructions are included on how to make your own menorah and candles. Blessings and customs are also covered. Gorgeous photography by Eliyahu Alpern complements Ofanansky’s succinct text. The overall design perfectly melds these two elements into an inviting book.

*Rena Citrin, Library Director, Bernard Zell Anshe Emet Day School, Chicago; Member, Sydney Taylor Book Award Committee*


Guess who celebrates Hanukkah on Sesame Street? Grover and Grover’s mommy! On the first night of Hanukkah, Elmo and Abby visit. They light the menorah and mommy tells them (an abbreviated version of) the story of King Antiochus, Judah Maccabee, and the oil that lasted for eight days. On the second night, Cookie Monster arrives for some potato latkes. On subsequent night, more Sesame Street friends visit. Oscar and Slimey learn how to play dreidel, Prairie Dawn sings “I Have A Little Dreidel,” the Bear family brings gifts, and Bert and Ernie join Grover for “tzedakah night” where they all volunteer at a food pantry. Finally, on the eighth night everybody comes to Grover’s house – including Big Bird and the Count – for a big Hanukkah party. While there’s nothing particularly original here, all of the important elements of the holiday are covered. Hanukkah gift tags, stickers, and a poster with pieces for a “Pin-the-Candle-On-The Menorah” game are included, making this 8x8 inch paperback more suitable for gift giving than library circulation. Pair with *The Count’s Hanukkah Countdown* by Tilda Balsley and Ellen Fischer (Kar-Ben, 2012) and *Elmo’s Little Dreidel* by Naomi Kleinberg (Random House, 2011) to please the youngest Sesame Street fans.

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

As in Tracy Newman’s *Shabbat Hiccups* (Albert Whitman, 2016), author Shanna Silva attempts to enliven education by tossing amusement via non-stop hiccups into components of the holiday. As each ceremony arrives, young protagonist Hannah suffers an attack which various family members, friends, and multicultural neighbors try to stop. As the family shares menorah lightings, dreidel games, songs, and latkes, good natured adults suggest cures. As the eight nights come and go, Hannah worries about her solo in the religious school program, adding viable tension to an otherwise light plot. Hannah is determined to star in the school play hiccups or no hiccups and devises an inventive ploy to both sing her solo and hide her hiccups. We get the feel of the length of the holiday as Hannah suffers stoically, buoyed by her doctor and supportive family who insist they will end. They do! But not until we have enjoyed her personality and gleaned disjointed, hiccup-ish information about a popular winter holiday. There is no thorough explanation of Hanukkah, no history background, nor Hebrew or prayers associated with this particular family’s celebration. Children who know about Hanukkah will enjoy the picture book. Children who know from hiccups will enjoy it more. Everyone will engage in the fun. Hannah and her brother Henry arrive in sprightly text and silly drawings in a light hearted, well meaning, humorous story slightly coated with holiday observance for young readers.

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


While all around the world, people ring in the New Year on January 1, it is not the only day that the New Year is celebrated. Short poems by Marilyn Singer describe and explain celebrations in China, Iran, Thailand, and India along with religious traditions from the Jewish, Muslim, and Hindu communities. The exquisite, vibrant, and detailed collage illustrations by Susan Roth, created from papers collected from all over the world, beautifully complement the text making this an impressive and handsome book that opens horizontally. The focus for Rosh Hashanah is on *tashlich* and the short poem “Casting Away Sins” appropriately describes the ritual and also mentions the shofar and apples dipped in honey. However, it is identified as a tradition from the United States. New Year’s greetings in various languages are appended, with their country of origin but the Hebrew greeting of “L’Shanah Tovah” is identified as from the United States. Furthermore, in the more detailed descriptions about the celebrations, also appended, the text states that “Jews all over the world celebrate Rosh Hashanah” but again only lists the United States as the country of origin. The poem about the Ethiopian festival of Enkutash reads “Many years ago the Queen of Sheeba gave gold to King Solomon. When she returned from Jerusalem, she was welcomed home with jewels.” But the glossary merely describes Jerusalem as a “holy city in the Middle East sacred to Jews, Christians, and Muslims.” It’s as if the author or publisher went out of their way not to include the word Israel! Additionally, the world map labeling all of the countries covered in the book does not identify Israel. Chinese communities in America observe the Chinese New Year and Hindu communities in America observe Diwali but these celebrations are correctly identified as being from China and India respectively. Labelling Rosh Hashanah traditions as American, just like the midnight ball drop in New York City, is misleading and implying that Hebrew is a language spoken only in the United States is inexcusable. It is unfortunate that these errors discredit an otherwise attractive and comprehensive volume produced by Lee & Low who claims to be the multicultural children’s book publisher “about everyone” and “for everyone.”

Rachel Kamin, North Suburban Synagogue Beth El, Highland Park, IL
The AJL Newsletter (Irene Levin-Wixman z”l, founding editor) was published in print from 1979 to 2010 by the Association of Jewish Libraries to inform members about AJL activities and issues related to Judaica libraries. As of January 2011 it is split into two separate electronic publications – the AJL News and the AJL Reviews. Receipt of these publications is one of the benefits of membership. Please see the AJL website at http://www.jewishlibraries.org for membership rates.

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Please send adult books for review to D. Scheide

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