My Trip to the Joint Conference of Librarians of Color

By Heidi Rabinowitz, AJL Member Relations Chair

The Joint Council of Librarians of Color (JCLC) is a nonprofit organization that advocates for and addresses the common needs of the American Library Association ethnic affiliates: the American Indian Library Association (AILA), the Asian/Pacific American Librarians Association (APALA), the Black Caucus of the American Library Association (BCALA), the Chinese American Librarians Association (CALA), and REFORMA: The National Association to Promote Library & Information Services to Latinos and the Spanish-speaking. JCLC’s purpose is “to promote librarianship within communities of color, support literacy and the preservation of history and cultural heritage, collaborate on common issues, and to host the Joint Conference of Librarians of Color every four to five years.”

In 2022, AJL suggested to JCLC that our organization be considered for membership in the joint council. Their board met to discuss the idea, and ultimately decided that they wanted to continue to represent only BIPOC populations. However, they welcomed us as allies and suggested that AJL members might like to attend their October 2022 conference in St. Pete Beach, Florida. As a Floridian and active AJL member, I immediately applied and was thrilled to be accepted as a presenter.

The conference was originally scheduled for October 5-9, 2022. Yom Kippur began on the evening of October 4 and ended on October 5, 2022, but the first day of the conference was just pre-conference events, so missing it didn’t matter to me. It became a moot point when Hurricane Ian arrived and the conference was postponed to February 2023, but the original dates actually became a talking point in my presentation.

My 20-minute talk took place during the first time slot after the opening general session. It was called “A Place at the Table: The Jewish Community Within the Library Diversity World” and my session was shared with two other speakers. Nancy Schuler from Eckerd College spoke on “Supporting Student Unity and Agency in Asian-Identified Students After the ‘China

Continued on page 2
I adult guide events. to racism, 2 March and instructors who have stepped up to train their current and programming with great success. Many thanks to the organizers in both the RAS and SSCPL divisions, and the response to the program, and I look forward to welcoming the 15 access to Judaica materials. We’ve had an overwhelmingly positive cide-related on and many thanks to the AJL’s student scholarships, chatted with ALA Graphics about creating a poster with art from Sydney Taylor Book Award winning illustrators, connected with ATLA reps and reopened the idea of joint AJL/ATLA conferences, and learned about Candid, a nonprofit that helps other nonprofits succeed.

A unique feature of the JCLC conference was the daily Call to Action session, scheduled with no opposing events and attended by most conference-goers. Leaders posed questions about equity, diversity, and inclusion efforts in the workplace, and in this safe space, people responded emotionally with their frustrations and hopes. The Florida setting made the topic feel even more urgent because of recent repressive actions by the governor such as the “Don’t Say Gay” law and the “Stop W.O.K.E. Act.” ALA Executive Director Tracie Hall gave a rousing message to the crowd when she said, “The darkness will not win. How do I know that? Because we’re here.”

My experience at JCLC was overwhelmingly positive and I felt very welcomed. I would suggest that AJL members apply to present at future JCLC conferences, and that AJL exhibit as well. Thank you so much to the AJL board for supporting my attendance at this conference. I hope this will be the beginning of continuing outreach to and collaboration with JCLC!

RELATED LINKS
- Joint Council of Librarians of Color (JCLC)
- American Indian Library Association (AILA)
- Asian/Pacific American Librarians Association (APALA)
- Black Caucus of the American Library Association (BCALA)
- Chinese American Librarians Association (CALA)
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From the President’s Desk
MARCH | APRIL 2023

Dear Colleagues,

I’m writing this dispatch with excitement - this week begins the first course (in partnership with the Jewish Theological Seminary of America) in a new certification program to train librarians in the unique skills needed for RAS libraries holding and providing access to Judaica materials. We’ve had an overwhelmingly positive response to the program, and I look forward to welcoming the 15 members of our first cohort. We’ve heard the need for training in both the RAS and SSCPL divisions, and the AJL Classroom program, which caters to our SSCPL members, is also ramping up programming with great success. Many thanks to the organizers and instructors who have stepped up to train their current and future peers in both of these programs.

In this issue, you’ll also learn about a new fund that we have established in memory of that great scholar, teacher, and librarian, Dr. Menahem Schmelzer, to support education for librarians in our field. I am very grateful to Haim Gottschalk for suggesting the fund and making the initial donation to get it started. You can donate to support your colleagues by selecting “Dr. Menahem Schmelzer Continuing Education Support Fund” in the dropdown menu under “Direct your gift” on the Donate page on the website. Many thanks to Jerry Krautman and Jackie Ben-Efrain for their wise counsel in setting this up!

AJL continues to partner externally with many organizations — AJL members represented the organization over the last few months at the Association of Jewish Studies conference, the American Library Association conference (STBAs and beignets!), and at the Joint Council of Librarians of Color. We look forward to continued partnership with other groups as we spread the word about Judaica Librarianship.

With best wishes,
Michelle Margolis
AJL President
2023 Digital Conference: “A World of Possibilities”

After the successful resumption of an in-person Annual Conference last year, AJL will hold its 2023 Annual Conference virtually, facilitating broad participation nationally and internationally. While AJL provides professional development opportunities and resources throughout the year, the Annual Conference offers members a special opportunity to network, to share knowledge informally, and to hear from experts and authors in the broader fields of Jewish children’s, teen/young adult, and adult literatures, Judaic and Hebraic studies, library, archival, and museum sciences, digital collections and humanities, Jewish education at all levels, Jewish languages and literature, Israel studies, and other relevant areas of academic and professional pursuit.

Conference presenters will include AJL’s own members, comprised of leading professionals in synagogue, school, center, and public library and research, archives, and special collections in the Americas, Europe, Israel, and beyond. Additionally, leading scholars, writers, and professionals in a variety of related fields will be joining us to share their expertise.

The theme of the 2023 Digital Conference is “A World of Possibilities,” and AJL is aiming for an array of presentations which highlight new ideas, programs, and systems that emerged from the challenges and adaptation of services in recent years, including:

- Digital humanities projects
- Long-term changes in library design
- New discoveries in the history of books and libraries
- New Judaica programming or collection areas in Jewish studies
- International collaborations possible in the virtual era

The Conference is scheduled for **Monday, June 19, 2023 through Thursday, June 22, 2023**. Please watch this page for details. Members, including students, are also invited to apply for conference support funding to help offset the cost of registration.

In addition, please see [https://jewishlibraries.org/membership/](https://jewishlibraries.org/membership/) for information about the subsidized MLIS student membership rate, and see [https://jewishlibraries.org/student-scholarship-award/](https://jewishlibraries.org/student-scholarship-award/) for information about student scholarships, which are available some years.

At a time when so many cherished books are under attack or being made inaccessible and when librarians find themselves at the front lines of the struggle to defend intellectual freedom and to defeat censorship, AJL believes that it is essential to come together to celebrate Jewish learning and libraries. We warmly invite you to join us, and we hope to see you there.

Kathy Bloomfield
Rachel Kamin
Co-Chairs, AJL Conference Committee

ALA Presidential Candidates Programs

by Sean Boyle, AJL Vice President, President-Elect

On February 1st and 15th, AJL hosted its second annual American Library Association (ALA)-Presidential Candidates Q&A program. As in the previous year, Emily Bergman and Sally Stieglitz each moderated an individual candidate’s session. Emily hosted Eric Suess, director of Marshall Public Library in Pocatello, ID. Sally was host to Cindy Hohl, director of policy analysis and operational support at Kansas City (MO) Public Library.

Suess is an active member of the Idaho Library Association, a chapter of ALA, where he previously chaired its Intellectual Freedom Committee. He was also a member of the ALA Council for more than 10 years and was involved in several Council committees.

Hohl is past president of the American Indian Library Association and an active member of other ALA affiliates. As a member of the Public Library Association (PLA), a division of ALA, she currently co-chairs the Membership Advisory Group and was a member of the PLA Strategic Plan Review Team.

Beyond telling us what books they are currently reading and why they became librarians, they both gave great details about why they are running for ALA President and what they hope to achieve in that role. It is recommended that all AJL members watch the two videos, which are linked on the AJL Website.

AJL Classroom — Year 2

By Haim A. Gottschalk, Chair, Librarianship and Education Committee

This year, the Librarianship and Education Committee has developed four courses for AJL: Introduction to Cataloging Principles; Outreach and Programming; Introduction to Library Management; Introduction to Synagogue Archives. The Committee developed these courses for SSCPL library staff as the target audience.

The Committee also recently began moving forward on exploring offering the courses with Continuing Education Units (CEU) for those individuals who need those for professional development.

Most excitingly, the Committee is working towards developing a Judaica librarianship certificate program for library staff who work in synagogues, Jewish day schools, and/or Jewish community centers. It is our hope to have everything in place by the end of summer 2023.

Lastly, I would like to mention that funding is available through the Menachem Schmelzer Continuing Education Student Support Fund, a new fund recently established in memory of Dr. Menachem Schmelzer to support those interested in Judaica librarianship.
Girl Scout Pens Booklet on Her Town’s Little-Known Jewish History

By Mollie Sebor, history research intern, Town of Islip, NY, Girl Scout Troop 2361, Suffolk County, NY

never thought history could come alive, until I saw it blossom off the page. People long ago forgotten, suddenly come back to life. Their stories and voices are heard once again. That was most certainly my favorite part of my Girl Scout Gold Award project.

Seeing as the Gold Award is the highest honor a Girl Scout can get, I knew this project could only be completed by working with something I had a genuine passion for, and a project that I could continuously put my heart and soul into. History was the answer. I’ve always had a deep love and a genuine interest in history, ever since I was young. I decided this path would be the best to take for my journey ahead. While early in the brainstorming stages, my mother came to me with the idea to GPS track gravestones into a database for family and friends to locate a specific grave site. While that was a contender, I had some other ideas kicking around. I reached out to Islip Town Historian George Munkenbeck to see if there was a way to make this project happen. To my surprise during our first meeting, I learned that little was known of Islip’s Jewish history. Being Jewish myself, this was a perfect way to learn more not only about my heritage but connect with these people of the past in a way I hadn’t done before. I was excited to see what I could uncover.

My first step was to the library. After hours of looking, I came up practically empty handed. A book or two here, maybe an article there, but nothing that would truly aid my research. So, I decided to start from the ground up. My next stop was to my local cemetery which contains a plot of land owned by the local Bay Shore Jewish Center. Respectfully, my parents and I walked up and down the gravestones calling out names and dates. I photographed each headstone and wrote down each inscription and date. Once home, I sorted through each one and picked out the ones that provided a good lead into more research. In the end, I finalized five names of which I began to research more thoroughly.

Once the names were collected, it was time to get to work. Ancestry.com and NYShistoricnewspapers.com were two websites that aided me greatly in my research. Ancestry was my best friend during this researching process. By simply knowing a name, location, and birthdate, I was able to piece together stories for each person. Enlistment and draft cards told me an individual’s height and weight, their hair and eye color, Census records showed me family and friends who lived with them while creating their own stories day by day. High School yearbooks allowed me to look into the past and see the person as a young adult no older than 1, and immigration records that showed a long voyage by sea in order to establish their own American dream. The names I found on a headstone were no longer just names. Life had been breathed into these individuals’ bit by bit as I began to see their own stories, each unique to them.

Although not all the names were collected in that way. Some names came to be by what I can only describe as fate. Two veterans of the World Wars were found in Islip Town’s World War I Effort Book and its sequel for World War II. The last two names were discovered online. My mother came to me with the name of an author who was admitted to the Central Islip State Hospital Psychiatric ward for her writings, and I discovered the Star of David on the headstone of the man who invented the demolition derby through findgrave.com.

One of my favorite parts of this project is that I was able to connect and meet with the family members of some of these people and hear their stories of loved ones. How they would light up talking about childhood and fond memories brought a smile to my face. One woman, the wife of a man who was a librarian and teacher and who once ran for political office, told me stories of her childhood growing up on a farm in Central Islip. She recalled the 70-acre property and how she could hear the crickets and feel the summer breeze through the windows, or the cows lowing in the distance as the dairy farm was covered with a coat of fresh snow. Little did the community know that their loyal consumerism of the farm’s products brought them face to face with a place that served as a refuge for Holocaust survivors from Auschwitz-Birkenau in Poland. At least four survivors we know of sought sanctuary at the dairy farm after their liberation from the camps. One of which was Sam Sitko who was just 16 when he experienced what no human ever should. He even had his own encounter with the doctor of death Dr. Josef Mengele, who sent his mother and youngest brother left, while he and his older brother were sent right. Sam never saw his mother again and upon asking a guard where his family was, the guard just stood and pointed at the smokestack billowing the remains into the dusty air. His testimony and others are available for viewing in the documentary “Paper Clips” named after the Dutch symbol of solidarity. After his release, he lived with the family in Central Islip for a time before starting his new life in America as did other survivors. Upon further investigation, I’ve managed to locate the plot of land on which the farm once stood. It now serves as a Catholic cemetery adjacent to Central Islip High School.

The sanctuary is not the only historic location I’ve managed to uncover in my research. You wouldn’t expect a firehouse to become a synagogue, but there it is. The Second Avenue Firehouse which still stands today in Bay Shore and is noted as a national historic landmark, was bought in 1919 as the first official meeting place of the Bay Shore United Hebrew Benevolent Cemetery Association, which was founded in 1897 as a way to own a plot of land in the local cemetery to host proper Jewish burials. It worked, and that

Continued on page 5
same plot was where my research first began.

One of the stories that touched me the most was the story of 19-year-old Saul Bernstein. An all-star athlete and regional track champion, Saul was 18 when he enlisted to join the fight in the Pacific theater of operation in World War Two. Through research, I managed to find an article written by him for the military magazine “Yank” distributed weekly to the soldiers to inform them about their comrades and keep morale high. His article, “Like Shooting Sitting Ducks,” is told through his perspective recalling the exhilarating flight of his life where he was positioned as a gunner on a B-17 and shot down his opponents in a dog fight. When I found that article, I couldn’t believe it. Those were his words. His experiences. It felt like he was there, and I was listening to his story. Then I saw the date. His work was published two days after his death in service. He never got to see his article hit the magazine. I sat at my computer as tears welled in my eyes. He was only a year older than I, with a wonderful gift for writing and a star member of the community. His story had a big impact on me.

I was surprised by how much people who are no longer with us can have such a big impact on the future and the lives we lead. This project as a whole has changed my life, my thinking, and my way of viewing history. No longer will I see history as letters and numbers on a page. Every person has a story. Every story is unique and even the most ordinary people can make the biggest differences. Some of the people mentioned in my booklet didn’t want the fame, or the recognition that came with what they were doing. They did it because it was their journey, their path, and what they felt was right in their own moral compass. Whether it was enlisting in the military, starting their own business, or speaking up for what they believed, it is those people who make this project come to life. Spending nine months and over 150 hours researching and writing, you begin to feel like you are speaking of an old friend. You feel for them, hurt for them, and you are proud to show off all their accomplishments. And while there were some challenges along the way, the biggest challenge of all, was doing justice to these people, and bringing them into the spotlight in the way they so deserve. Although my project only covers the biographies of nine individuals and a background on the historic community as a whole, there is so much more to be discovered. After all, history lurks where we don’t think to look. It is there in the shadows where the everyday heroes lie. I plan on expanding the borders of my research and including more editions of my booklet to explore and spotlight even more people who deserve to be remembered.

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Who Knows Four ...
Jackie Ben-Efraim!

Jackie Ben-Efraim is AJL’s Development Vice-President and a member of the Board.

Tell us about your best experience in AJL?

I love attending AJL conferences, I have learned so much about Judaica librarianship and Jewish history at the various sessions throughout the years. I also manage the conference exhibit hall where I always wear a site-specific hat. The funniest memory I have is from the 2014 Vegas conference when we played Librarians against Humanity (a kinder, smarter version of Cards Against Humanity) — and I won! Although I couldn’t enjoy in person camaraderie with my AJL colleagues and friends during the pandemic, AJL’s digital conferences saved my sanity.

What’s your favorite memory of Jewish libraries?

In 2012, back when AJL’s Board and Council had in person mid-winter meetings in NYC, Michelle Margolis took us on a private tour of her exhibit The People in the Books. There is nothing like having a tour given by the curator. I was also happy to see the space in Butler Library that had formerly been my office when I was on the Student Council for Columbia’s Library School was being put to better use exhibiting treasures from the Hebraica and Judaica collections.

What are your favorite toppings for matzah? Are we going sweet or savory?

Peanut butter! We follow Sephardic customs in our home so we can have kitniyot. Best part of this topping is that the peanut butter holds the matzah crumbs together.

Where do you envision AJL in the next year and in the next 10 years?

I believe that in 10 years, AJL will have a member at any library worldwide that holds a Judaica collection as well as many public libraries as well. I believe that AJL will expand its role as the leading authority on Judaic librarianship by providing education to ensure all of our members can receive education on topics that will enable them to work in the field or expand on their wealth of knowledge to enhance their collection. I believe that in 10 years AJL’s endowment will have grown enough to support these educational programs as well as the many awards we give each year at our conferences. If you would like to be part of that vision of giving, please reach out to me at ajladmanager@gmail.com
On the Passing of Dr. Menahem Schmelzer, May His Memory Be for a Blessing

By Michelle Margolis, President, AJL

AJL Establishes Memorial Fund

On December 10, 2022, we lost a giant in the world of Judaica librarianship. Dr. Menahem Schmelzer, former Librarian at the Jewish Theological Seminary was a major force in the Judaica world, and he will be sorely missed. In Dr. Schmelzer’s honor, AJL is proud to announce the new Dr. Menahem Schmelzer Continuing Education Support Fund, which will honor Dr. Schmelzer’s profound impact on Judaica librarianship by supporting the training of its future leaders. We are very grateful to Haim Gottschalk for suggesting the Fund, and for providing the founding donation, which will help support students in the new Judaica Librarianship Certification program. Further donations to the Fund will support AJL Classroom and our student scholarship program. Contributions to the Dr. Menahem Schmelzer Continuing Education Support Fund can be made on the Donations page on the AJL website.

Memories and Tributes from Colleagues

Many necrologies have been written in Dr. Schmelzer’s honor (look out for one in the next issue of Judaica Librarianship!), so here we will share some reflections by librarians who worked with and were impacted by this great man.

“My memories of Dr. Menahem Schmelzer go back more than 45 years, when I was starting my first job as a librarian at the YIVO Institute for Jewish Research. Dr. Schmelzer and the late Edith Degani were the formidable team that ran the JTS Library in those days. He was a European gentleman with a rich, Hungarian-tinted bass voice — and was steeped in traditional Jewish texts as well as in the “meta”-texts that support the literature of scholarship: bibliographies, dictionaries, encyclopedias, etc. He led an evening course on Judaica bibliography, which I audited at the Seminary in 1977 (I still have my notes!). I am grateful to Dr. Schmelzer for the extraordinary example that he set for generations of Judaica librarians.”

—Zachary Baker
(former Reinhard Family Curator for Judaica and Hebrew Collections and Assistant University Librarian for Collection Development, Stanford University)

“During the 1980s Prof. Schmelzer spent a short period in Israel during which he acted as Director of Libraries at Bar Ilan University. At that time, I was a cataloger of Judaica in languages other than Hebrew. For some reason, he decided to reorganize the cataloging department and asked me to take over a new section that he was planning. For those of you who know of my history with AJL, you’ll understand that that decision jump started my career, and I ended up spending 18 years as the Director of Libraries at BI. I shall forever be thankful to him for the opportunity he opened up for me.”

—Yaakov Aronson
(former University Librarian, Bar Ilan University)

“Although I knew Professor Schmelzer during my time working at the Jewish Theological Seminary as a graduate student, it wasn’t until my attendance at his workshop on paratexts at Penn that I really got to know him. Dr. Schmelzer taught me of the importance of looking beyond the texts to learn about the people of the past, and it’s fair to say that that has significantly influenced the direction of my work. But more than that, he was the most kind and generous person that I have encountered in the field of Jewish Studies. Dr. Schmelzer always had time to talk, and I knew that his responses would teach me much — and it was such a joy to connect with him. My only regret is that I didn’t spend more time with him. תבלי על דב主业

—Michelle Margolis
(President, Association of Jewish Libraries, Norman E. Alexander Librarian for Jewish Studies, Columbia University)

“There are no words to express the profound loss that we feel at the JTS Library upon the passing of Dr. Menahem Schmelzer, z”l. The combined knowledge of the entire JTS Library staff could in no way reach the command of knowledge that Menahem Schmelzer had of all the intricacies of the different editions of rare books, provenance and history of manuscripts, inscriptions, details pertaining to archival collections, and so much more. His command of the entire world of Judaica collections and collecting was unsurpassed and irreplaceable. On a personal note, Dr. Schmelzer was an erudite and charming man with a sharp sense of humor. His presence in the Library, through its many iterations over the more recent years, was cherished by all who continued, until his final weeks, to turn to him for advice and counsel. May his memory be a blessing.”

—Librarians at the Jewish Theological Seminary Library

“I was a student of [Dr. Schmelzer] at JTSA in the late 1970s and early 1980s. I was so fond of him. He was such a fine person. I was a student in his class on Mahzor Yam Kippur and later had the pleasure of knowing him as a librarian myself. We in AJL (The Association of Jewish Libraries) heard many fascinating and informative talks that he gave to our professional librarians’ group at

Continued on page 7
their many meetings and conferences over the years. I worked at JTS in the music library from 1989-1993 and even though he was not the Seminary Librarian for all those later years, he was often there and I had occasions to chat with him. He was such a memorable person and I was so fortunate to have known him.”

—Marion Stein
(JTS Master in Jewish Studies, 1981 and Music Librarian, Retired)

“I encountered my first rare Hebrew books while working at Stanford University. I began learning about [the books] by reading several works on the topic. I emailed JTS for some additional information and I received a response via email, and then out of the blue, about a week later, I got a letter with a bibliography from Dr. Schmelzer, where he explained a little of the history of the Hebrew book and he wished me good luck on research. I was touched that he went out of his way.”

—Haim Gottschalk
(Hebraica and Judaica Cataloging Librarian, Library of Congress)

American Library Association Tribute
In late December 2022, Ray Pun, ALA Councilor at Large and Immediate Past President of the Asian/Pacific American Librarians Association (APALA), reached out to AJL to share a draft tribute to Dr. Schmelzer and to invite AJL as a cosignatory. The full text of the memorial resolution is shared below and is also available here.

2023 ALA LLX Meeting Memorial Resolution Honoring Menahem Schmelzer
Whereas the American Library Association (ALA) lost a valued colleague on December 10, 2022, with the death of Menahem Schmelzer; Whereas Schmelzer was born in 1934 in Keel Hungary; with his family, they survived the Holocaust in labor camps; In 1961, he immigrated to New York where he joined The Jewish Theological Seminary; Whereas Schmelzer graduated and received his academic trainings from the University of Budapest and The Jewish Theological Seminary of Hungary; Schmelzer earned his Master of Arts from Copenhagen University; and Library Diploma from the State Library School in Denmark (DHL); Schmelzer also attended the Spertus Institute of Jewish Studies; Whereas Schmelzer was the Albert B. and Bernice Cohen Professor Emeritus of Medieval Hebrew Literature and Jewish Bibliography at The Jewish Theological Seminary; Schmelzer served as a full time faculty member in The Jewish Theological Seminary in 1961; Whereas Schmelzer was librarian from 1964-1987 in The Jewish Theological Seminary; over two decades, he served many students and scholars; Schmelzer built and opened access to one of the world’s most important collections of Judaica; In 1966, Schmelzer was appointed head librarian; Schmelzer led the library’s recovery effort following a destructive fire in 1966; Schmelzer oversaw the renovation of the Library which opened in a new building in 1982; Whereas Schmelzer was a prolific and renowned scholar; he published 11 books and over 70 articles and reviews focusing on a variety of topics from liturgy and Hebrew poetry to Jewish book culture and history; Schmelzer was very knowledgeable, generous, and had a great sense of humor; Schmelzer influenced generations of scholars and librarians; now, therefore, be it Resolved, that the American Library Association (ALA) and the Association of Jewish Libraries (AJL), on behalf of its members:
1. recognizes the significant contributions and accomplishments of Menahem Schmelzer over the course of his career and mourns his death; and
2. extends its sincerest condolences to his friends and family.
Mover: Raymond Pun, ALA Councilor at Large Seconder: Tarida Anantachai, ALA Councilor at Large Endorsers: Michelle Margolis, Association of Jewish Libraries President

Seven Questions With...Comedian Ariel Elias

Ariel Elias is an acclaimed writer and comedian living in New York City, whose wry observational humor mines a childhood growing up Jewish in Kentucky. An accomplished stand up, Elias came to national attention for her cool demeanor when a New Jersey heckler threw a beer at her and Elias, without missing a beat, picked it up and calmly chugged it down. As the video went viral, Elias was lauded by fellow comics such as Whoopi Goldberg, Jimmy Kimmel, and Jim Gaffigan. AJL News and Reviews Editor in Chief Sally Stiegltz spoke with Elias about her childhood, her love of books, and about dealing with hecklers.

AJL: How did growing up Jewish in Kentucky inform your comedy and your writing? If you are performing for an audience that you think is more attuned to Jewish life and culture (or not), does that influence your set?

AE: Some of the first jokes I ever wrote were about being Jewish from Kentucky. Growing up, I felt like I often had to explain myself, like I was the spokesperson for Judaism. I would explain why I wasn’t in school for Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur, or why I couldn’t go to that dance with that guy because it fell on the first night of Passover. When you say the same stuff over and over again, you start to punch it up and entertain yourself.

With Jewish audiences, there’s just this unspoken understanding. The joke about my parents telling me I could date whoever

Continued on page 8
I wanted, the audience is already anticipating “as long as they’re Jewish.” There are so many subtleties to our anxieties that I don’t have to explain with a Jewish audience. Of course, there’s a downside to that, too. I have bits that are written to explain to a non-Jewish audience who we are. With them, those jokes work. To a Jewish audience, it just seems tedious.

A JL: What role, if any, did libraries play in your childhood? Any favorite books or writers you can recall?

A E: My dad is an English professor, so our whole home was a library — books shoved into every nook and cranny, bookshelves overflowing and straining to keep up. That, to me, is the picture of comfort. My brother was in community plays as a kid, and I remember spending a lot of time at Central Library in downtown Lexington, where he’d perform. There was a big globe there that I loved. As a kid, you’re always looking for hiding spots and places you can transform with your imagination. What’s better for that than stacks of books? Lois Lowry was a big author for me, between Number The Stars and The Giver. The Giver stood out to me a lot as a kid, the idea that in order to experience the joys of life, we also have to carry the pain. But the alternative is gray and dull, a world in which we don’t know where or who we come from. I’ve read that The Giver has been included in some of the recent book bans, which only reinforces its importance.

A JL: In your stand up, you include deeply personal and sometimes painful experiences. How does it work to take those experiences and not only make art, but also humor?

A E: It’s pretty simple: it makes me feel better. Laughing at the thing takes away its power to hurt you. It’s really helpful to have a time and a place where I can take out a wound, look at it, show it to everyone, and we can collectively laugh at it. It’s also a reminder that even the worst experiences usually have some absurdity to them that’s so ridiculous.

A JL: Because librarians have superpowers when it comes to research, we know that you were interviewed for the Jewish Kentucky Oral History Project in 2019 at the Louie B. Nunn Center for Oral History, University of Kentucky Libraries. Local history is an important focus for library collections. What led to you participating in this project?

A E: The interviewer was a student of a family friend.

A JL: And in your oral history, you mention that your grandmother was a librarian... can you tell us about her?

A E: My grandmother was an intensely complicated woman who loved me a lot. She was smarter than society wanted women to be at the time. I think because of that, she escaped into books, word puzzles, and her own imagination. She could finish a Saturday crossword puzzle before you’d even read the clues.

A JL: You’ve gotten a great deal of positive feedback on your humor and composure when recently heckled at a club and having a beer can thrown at you. As a Jewish woman, do you feel more vulnerable to this kind of hostility or is it par for the course for all comics?

A E: We all face a fair amount of drunk idiots, that’s definitely par for the course. But I do think it goes further with women. But take a look at any standup clip posted by a woman on social media and compare the comments that we get to that of any male comedian. You’ll see pretty clearly that there’s a lot more hostility directed at us.

A JL: Before you go, we never pass up an opportunity to ask, what are you reading?

A E: I just finished In The Time Of The Butterflies by Julia Alvarez. It’s based on the true story of a group of Dominican sisters who took on the Trujillo dictatorship. I also recently read The Immortal Life of Henrietta Lacks. Right now, I’m reading The Men In My Life: A Memoir of Love and Art in 1950s Manhattan by Patricia Bosworth, as well as House Of Leaves by Mark Z. Danielewski.

Editor’s Note: For more information about Ariel Elias’ upcoming shows, visit https://www.arielleiascomedy.com

From the Editor

Dear Safranim,

I’m so happy to share another issue of News and Reviews with you. In addition to our excellent reviews (thank you to our top-notch reviewers and section editors!), we have many articles in the News section, including two from student contributors, a Girl Scout who wrote a Jewish history of her hometown, and a middle grader who reviews books for his upcoming bar mitzvah project. Yasher koach to both!

Also featured in this issue, the exciting news of the Sydney Taylor Book Awards and the Jewish Fiction Award—mazel tov to all the winners and honorees, a “Who Knows Four with AJL’s own Jackie Ben-Efraim,” and a moving tribute to Dr. Menahem Schmelzer, of blessed memory.

I also want to add that, in January, I had the pleasure of meeting up with colleagues and at the AJL Schmooze at LibLearnX in New Orleans. We enjoyed coffee, beignets, and best of all, the companionship of friends, new and old. If you attend any of the ALA conferences, be sure to look for AJL’s shmooze in the event planner as it’s wonderful way to get to know each other.

Warmly,
Sally Stieglitz
Editor-in-Chief
Founded by Louis Littman in memory of his father to explore, explain, and perpetuate the Jewish heritage, the Littman Library of Jewish Civilization published its first book in 1965. The Littman E-Library was launched in March 2017. It gives readers access to the definitive scholarship and careful editing that characterize Littman books, but on a fully searchable digital platform.

Browse the entire E-Library here: https://www.liverpooluniversitypress.co.uk/topic/collections/the-littman-e-library

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**The Littman Library of Jewish Civilization**

*At Eden’s Door* details the extraordinary life of Leon Kellner, a lower-middle-class Orthodox Jew from the province of Galicia, who rose to become part of the intellectual and cultural elite of imperial Austria. His is a thoroughly Habsburg Jewish story, spanning east and west and shaped by the empire’s history, politics, and culture. That world has long been destroyed, but this biography recovers at least part of what was lost.


*Jewish Politics in Spinoza’s Amsterdam* untangles a web of ideas about politics, religion, exile, and community that emerged in the second half of the seventeenth century among the Spanish and Portuguese Jews of Amsterdam and analyses the first Jewish reckoning with modern western political concepts.


Chapter Chatter and Member News

JUDAICA LIBRARY NETWORK OF METROPOLITAN CHICAGO (JLNMC)

JLNMC has had a busy and successful 2022/23, from interesting programs to our first-ever newsletter, to expanding membership. Our update begins with our group’s programs.

**Booktalk at the Bookstall.** A fun and educational event, JLNMC’s first program of the year was presented by JLNMC and AJL members Rachel Kamin and Rena Citrin, who are on the ALA’s Sophie Brody Book Award Committee (Rachel) and AJL’s Fiction Award Committee (Rena). A variety of new and noteworthy Jewish fiction and non-fiction titles were featured. Attendees also participated in a raffle, winning new books and gift certificates. The Book Stall gave discounts to all attendees, along with discounts throughout the year for all members. It was a wonderful start to our programming year!

**Newberry Library Judaica: A Wealth of Treasures.** In February, 2023, Chicago’s Newberry Library librarians took JLNMC on a Zoom discovery tour of their Judaica materials, which are integrated into a number of their collections. The Newberry Library contains approximately 1.6 million books and 5 million manuscripts covering 6 centuries of human history. This was a special evening at one of the most impressive libraries in the country!

**Let’s Network! Sharing Our Expertise.** In JLNMC’s final program of the year, the Judaica Library Network of Metropolitan Chicago will focus on the networking part of our name. We’ll explore the group’s most pressing questions, from what to do with hundreds of donated books, to collection development, advocacy, fundraising, volunteers, working with clergy and/or administrators, and more. Our talented group will share their expertise and experience for the benefit of all!

**Newsletter.** In JLNMC’s debut Newsletter, members were treated to a colorful, succinct, informative and engaging look at a variety of interesting events and information, including JLNMC programs, a new JLNMC member interview, AJL’s origin and offerings, and how our group fits into AJL, fun trivia facts, and favorite new JLNMC books.

**Expansion of Membership.** Our group has been so pleased to welcome both new and renewing members this year. They are participating in committees, attending programs and meetings, and revitalizing JLNMC. We are happy to welcome new people with their fresh ideas and energy, along with the knowledge of our established members, and look forward to a great end of the year!

Submitted by Shelley Riskin, JLNMC President

Featured in Photos: Rachel Kamin, JLNMC President Shelley Riskin, and Rena Citrin with recommended books; Booktalk at the Bookstall presenters Rachel Kamin and Rena Citrin; Booktalk audience members.
AJL-CANADA
Past Program
On January 19, 2023, AJL-Canada and AJL co-sponsored a webinar on countering distortions and misinformation in children’s and YA books about Israel. “Recent Challenges in Advocating for Israel in Books for Young People,” moderated by AJL Vice-President Sean Boyle, featured Marjorie Gann (Toronto-based author of Five Thousand Years of Slavery) and Judy Petersen (library director at a Colorado synagogue). The speakers presented case studies that challenged problematic books on Israel.

Marjorie voiced concerns over the misuse of schools for “ideological indoctrination instead of education.” In May, 2020, during the Gaza conflict, an employee of the Toronto District School Board distributed anti-Israel propaganda (the “Teach Palestine” curriculum) to teachers. He recommended many inaccurate books, including Elizabeth Laird’s A Little Piece of Ground.

Judy then described her successful challenge of the above title. She highlighted multiple grounds for appeal, including the book’s demonization of Israelis, the absence of an Israeli perspective, and the omission of context for such Israeli actions as curfews and searches.

Judy surveyed the current availability of books about Israel, stressing the need for more titles that present Israel in an objective and authentic way.

Yasher koach to Marjorie and Judy for a passionate and articulate presentation on this timely topic!

FUTURE PROGRAM
Mark your calendar for Anne Dublin’s launch of her middle-grade (and up) collective biography, She’s a Mensch!: Ten Amazing Jewish Women (Toronto: Second Story Press). The hybrid launch will take place at Holy Blossom Temple (Toronto) on May 15, 2023, 7 p.m. ET, and will be sponsored by Women of Holy Blossom, Second Story Press, and AJL-Canada. For more information, go to: She’s a Mensch! Ten Amazing Jewish Women — Second Story Press.

Submitted by Anne Dublin,
Membership Chair, AJL-Canada, Toronto

2023 Sydney Taylor Book Award Winners Announced
Winners of the annual Sydney Taylor Book Award were announced by the Association of Jewish Libraries today at the Youth Media Awards press conference during LibLearnX. Named in memory of Sydney Taylor, author of the classic All-of-a-Kind Family series, the award recognizes books for children and teens that exemplify high literary standards while authentically portraying the Jewish experience.

GOLD MEDALISTS:

Thirty-five years after Nazis destroyed her beloved shtetl of Eishyshok, Poland, Yaffa Eliach recovered thousands of precious photographs preserved by relatives and survivors to recreate her community at the US Holocaust Memorial Museum in Washington, DC. Susan Gal’s expressive illustrations bring to life this true story of love and remembrance.

Aviva vs. the Dybbuk by Mari Lowe, published by Arthur A. Levine, an imprint of Levine Querido, won the Sydney Taylor Book Award in the Middle Grade category.

Aviva and her widowed mother live next door to their synagogue in rooms above the mikvah, rumored to be haunted by a dybbuk. Only Aviva can see. This inside look at a close-knit Orthodox community explores changing friendships, antisemitic vandalism, and the many ways of dealing with grief.

When the Angels Left the Old Country by Sacha Lamb, published by Arthur A. Levine, an imprint of Levine Querido, won the Sydney Taylor Book Award in the Young Adult category.

Uriel the angel and Little Ash the demon have been Talmud study partners for centuries. When a shtetl girl goes missing, they journey to America to find her. Brimming with Yiddishkeit, this

Continued on page 12
brilliant, queer historical fantasy novel richly depicts the immigrant experience and tells an ageless tale of love, justice, and friendship.

**SILVER MEDALISTS**

Nine Sydney Taylor Honor Books were recognized for 2023.


For Middle Grade, the Honor Books are *Honey and Me* by Meira Drazin, published by Scholastic Press, an imprint of Scholastic Inc.; *Black Bird, Blue Road* by Sofiya Pasternack, published by Versify, an imprint of HarperCollins Publishers; and *Ellen Outside the Lines* by A. J. Sass, published by Little, Brown and Company, an imprint of Hachette Book Group, Inc.

For Young Adult, the Honor Books are *My Fine Fellow: A Delicious Entanglement* by Jennieke Cohen, published by HarperTeen, an imprint of HarperCollins Publishers; *Some Kind of Hate* by Sarah Darer Litman, published by Scholastic Press, an imprint of Scholastic Inc.; and *Eight Nights of Flirting* by Hannah Reynolds, published by Razorbill, an imprint of Penguin Random House LLC.

**NOTABLE BOOKS**

In addition to the medal winners, the Award Committee designated nine Notable Books of Jewish Content for 2023.


The Notable Young Adult Books are *Ethel’s Song: Ethel Rosenberg’s Life in Poems*, by Barbara Krasner, published by Calkins Creek, an imprint of Astra Books for Young Readers; and *The Ghosts of Rose Hill*, by R. M. Romero, published by Peachtree Teen, an imprint of Peachtree Publishing, Inc.

More information about the Sydney Taylor Book Award, a complete...
the publication of outstanding new books in the genre of Jewish children’s literature. The Sydney Taylor Manuscript Award Committee will make no award for 2023.

**EVENTS**


To hear an exclusive interview with the Sydney Taylor Book Award Committee Chair, please visit The Book of Life podcast at www.bookoflifepodcast.com.

Gold and silver medalists will participate in a blog tour February 6 to 10, 2023. For more information, please visit www.jewishlibraries.org.

**COMMITTEE**

Members of the 2023 Sydney Taylor Book Award Committee are Martha Simpson (Chair), Stratford Library, Stratford, Connecticut, retired; Debra S. Gold, Cuyahoga County Library, Cleveland, Ohio, retired; Carla Kozak, San Francisco Public Library, retired; Aviva Rosenberg, Ridgefield Free Public Library, Ridgefield, New Jersey; Talya Sokoll, Noble and Greenough School, Dedham, Massachusetts; Arielle Vishny, freelance writer, New York, New York; and Kay Weisman, Booklist, Vancouver, British Columbia.

annotated listing of the award winners and notables, and seals for purchase can be found at www.sydneytaylorbookawards.org.

**MANUSCRIPT AWARD**

The Sydney Taylor Manuscript Award was established to encourage
E Train Talks:
A Middle Schooler on Middle School Books

“E Train” is a kid middle school book reviewer, interviewer, and literacy advocate. He reviews middle grade books, interviews his favorite middle grade authors, book enthusiasts and kindness heroes on his E Train Talks Podcast! AJL News and Reviews invited E Train to share his story with the AJL community.

Thank you so much for including me in your wonderful newsletter, it’s truly an honor to share my book journey with your readers! My reading adventures have taken me to places I could never have imagined, and I’ve been able to live my wildest dreams.

My book journey began way before I started writing book reviews and interviewing authors; it all began thanks to my parents reading to me every day when I was little, from the day I was born. It was World Read Aloud Day recently, which reminded me that it was reading aloud that really sparked my love of books. I wouldn’t be where I am today without my family and their endless love of me and stories.

The thing that really kicked off my reading journey was my discovery of the world of fiction. Early on, I was a non-fiction reader, but when the Percy Jackson books by Rick Riordan appeared on my bookshelf, it was love at first read! After reading all of Riordan’s phenomenal fantasy series, I proceeded to devour fiction of all kinds. Mystery, science fiction, realistic fiction, historical, and lots more. Then, I received an assignment in school to review all the books I had read. I was only in 4th grade at the time, so my reviews were brief, but after I started reviewing books, I decided I didn’t want to stop. I loved sharing what I’d read with others.

When Covid hit and the world shut down, and stories kept me company. Thanks to my mom, who scoured the Internet searching for virtual middle-grade book clubs, I dove into novels that would later become some of my all-time favorites.

Through these virtual book clubs, I met other book lovers too, as well as wonderful librarians and teachers. These online chats introduced me to one librarian who would change my life forever. Her name is Nicole Johnson and the novel-in-verse we read and discussed was Starfish by Lisa Fipps. Nicole displayed my book review in her library, and later she even shared my review with the author, who ended up sharing it in her Instagram story. I was blown away and incredibly grateful!

That’s when it really hit me that books have the power to inspire minds and change lives. So, I started writing and sharing more book reviews through my YouTube channel, and through another zoom book club, I met the wonderful author Marthe Jocelyn who ended up posting my reviews on her Canadian kidlit website, “Bookflap.” Marthe inspired me to start my book podcast. Thus began my E Train Talks adventure! The next thing I knew I was interviewing the authors of the stories I’ve come to read and love. I’ve been reading and writing and sharing my love of books ever since.

My Jewishness plays a huge role in my podcast. For starters, throughout 2023 and leading up to my Bar Mitzvah, I’m spotlighting Jewish themed stories and Jewish authors each month, and I’m also leading a Bar Mitzvah book drive through GoFundMe. I hope to ensure all kids have access to books and the resources necessary to read. I’ve already been contacted by some Jewish authors about donating books to my cause and I’m hoping to share as many Jewish stories as possible. Some of my favorite books are full of Jewish themes, too. I really enjoy seeing bits of myself and my heritage in the novels I read, and it’s so wonderful to discover so much diversity in middle-grade now more than ever. I’ve also faced a lot of antisemitism from my peers in middle school, so I’m trying to do everything I can to shine a light on Jewish stories to help educate and bring about change.

continues on page 16
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- ILL
- Circulation
- Inventory
- Reports
- E Book Management
- Booking Feature
- Equipment
- Management
- Database Authentication Management
- Digital Document Upload & Cataloging
- Discovery Interface

**OPEN SOURCE AUTOMATED LIBRARY SYSTEM**
My other hobbies include playing video games with friends, reading (of course), watching sports with my dad, acting and singing. Books have played a huge role in my life, but I’ve become the person I am thanks to my other hobbies. I learned empathy from reading, I became confident in front of an audience from my singing. I’ve learned to keep my eyes active from video games, and I’ve grown more comfortable with adults talking about sports. I have so many hobbies besides book reviews and author interviews, but I love those too.

I’m often asked what my favorite book is, but honestly, I love so many books for so many reasons. However, Percy Jackson changed my view of fiction, and really changed my life in a huge way! The Framed books by James Ponti introduced me to the world of mystery, and Starfish by Lisa Fipps introduced me to novels in verse. Starfish is a book I’ve read over and over again! As for my favorite book, since I can never pick one, it’s always whatever I’m currently reading or just finished. I recently completed Maus by Art Spiegelman and Unbreakable, The Spies Who Cracked the Nazis’ Secret Code by Rebecca E.F. Barone. As I always say, my book journey is always leading me to the next book!

2023 Winners of the Jewish Fiction Award

Omer Friedlander is the winner of the Association of Jewish Libraries (AJL) Jewish Fiction Award for his short story collection The Man Who Sold Air in the Holy Land, published by Random House, an imprint and division of Penguin Random House LLC. The award includes a $1,000 cash prize and an invitation to attend the 2023 Digital Conference of the Association of Jewish Libraries, June 19–22. Two other honor books have been recognized: Atomic Anna by Rachel Barenbaum, published by Grand Central Publishing, a division of Hachette Book Group, Inc., and Thistlefoot by GennaRose Nethercott, published by Anchor Books, a division of Penguin Random House LLC. The Committee reviewed over 70 works of fiction originally written in English with significant Jewish thematic content published in the United States in 2022. Thanks to all those who submitted entries for consideration. The wide array of books published in 2022 is a testament to the vibrant state of contemporary Jewish fiction.

The eleven stories in The Man Who Sold Air in the Holy Land are remarkable for their intense originality and for Friedlander’s ability to portray the complexity and nuances of political conflict together with a deep understanding of a shared humanity that transcends borders—both geopolitical and metaphorical. In a series of vividly drawn cameos, Friedlander employs multiple literary forms to portray characters, historical events, and social conditions in contemporary Israel: surrealism in “High Heels,” where a young shoemaker scales cranes on construction sites in urban Tel Aviv; the picaresque in “Alte Sachen,” about a family of junk collectors in Tsfat; pathos in “Walking Shiv’ah,” when a mother and daughter trudge miles by foot to find out which of the two sons perished in war; black humor in “The Sephardi Survivor,” when two boys co-opt a stranger as a stand-in for their school Holocaust survivor project; and the gritty realism of “Jellyfish in Gaza,” where twin brothers try to cope with the reality and brutality of war and their father’s trauma doing army service. “The universal appeal of this collection reaches above and beyond the political as the stories highlight the kaleidoscope of human experience including insecurity, vulnerability, infatuation, loss, grief, love, compassion, and regret,” says committee member Sarah Feldman.

Combining historical fiction, magical realism, and science fiction, Rachel Barenbaum’s Atomic Anna skillfully weaves together the stories of three strong but flawed women who travel through time and between continents in an effort to prevent the 1986 Chernobyl nuclear disaster and the personal tragedies that follow. As the reactor melts down, Anna, the brilliant Jewish chief engineer, inexplicably travels forward to a mountaintop in 1992; an upsetting discovery there causes her to reconsider her past and seek to change the future with the assistance of her estranged daughter, comic book artist Molly, and granddaughter Raisa, a math and physics prodigy. “A sweeping generational saga and a unique exploration of the Jewish immigrant experience in the mid-twentieth century, the novel is a captivating portrayal of family struggle and one of the greatest disasters in modern history,” notes committee member Laura Schutzman.

In Thistlefoot, the restless Yaga siblings Bellatine and Isaac are reunited for the first time in years by a mysterious inheritance which has made its way to them by way of Kyiv: a fantastical house on chicken feet which Bellatine dubs “Thistlefoot.” With the house’s arrival on the shores of America, past and present crash into one another with electric and magical shock, and the Yaga siblings, together with their new home, embark on a country-wide tour to stage a puppet show. Yet danger lurks around the corner as they are stalked by the eerie Longshadow Man, a dangerous figure on an enigmatic and sinister mission to find Thistlefoot. Committee member Hannah Srour-Zackon notes that “in weaving Ashkenazi folkloric myth into the fabric of reality, Thistlefoot explores how the impact of long-forgotten ancestors may be greater than we think. GennaRose Nethercott’s prose is imaginative, underscored by dry wit; the result is spellbinding and a reminder of the pure joy that can be found in reading an enthralling story.”

The AJL Jewish Fiction Award Committee members are Paula Breger, Temple Emanu-El, Haverhill, Massachusetts; Rena Citrin, Bernard Zell Anshe Emeth Day School (retired), Chicago, Illinois; Sarah Feldman, Gann Academy, Waltham, Massachusetts; Laura Schutzman, Hebrew Academy of Nassau County, Uniondale, New York; and Hannah Srour-Zackon, Congregation Shaar Hashomayim, Montreal, Quebec.

The Association of Jewish Libraries gratefully acknowledges the generous support of Dan Wyman Books for underwriting the Award. Submissions for the 2024 AJL Fiction Award (titles published in 2023) are now being accepted. For more information, please visit http://www.jewishlibraries.org/jewish-fiction-award.
IN THE SPOTLIGHT

EDITED BY REBECCA LEVITAN AND JUDY EHRENSTEIN


Hoodie Rosen is a wry, witty 15-year-old Jew whose entire Orthodox community has recently moved to the fictional town of Tregaron (somewhere near Philadelphia). The locals are not welcoming, and the city council is deliberately putting up zoning roadblocks to stall the building of an apartment/condo building planned to house many Orthodox families within the community. The animosity between the two groups is palpable.

During halacha (Jewish law) class on Tu B’Av (a Jewish holiday of love), Hoodie looks out the classroom window and sees “the girl in white.” After school, Hoodie “stumbles upon” (he is looking for her) the girl walking her dog in the local cemetery. It turns out she is Anna-Marie Diaz-O’Leary, the daughter of the town’s mayor, Monica Diaz-O’Leary, who is campaigning to get this Orthodox Jewish community to leave her town.

Even though he knows he should not be hanging out with a girl, especially a girl who is not Jewish, Hoodie makes plans with Anna-Marie, to clean up two vandalized Jewish gravestones. His “crime” of hanging out with her is reported, and he is shunned by everyone he knows. Nevertheless, believing he has found his one true love, Hoodie continues to find ways to see Anna-Marie until his community, disgraced by his actions and believing he has become a heretic, puts him in herem (excommunication).

Hoodie imagines a plan — he and Anna-Marie will move to Manhattan. She will attend NYU, while he goes to Yeshiva University. She will convert to Judaism, and they will get married. As he explains all this to Anna-Marie, he discovers that she does not share his feelings, and his fantasy quickly crumbles. Storming out of her house, he seeks solace at the local Kosher market, at which antisemitic domestic terrorists begin shooting everyone. They leave four people dead, several people wounded — including Hoodie and Anna-Marie — before being shot by police. In the end, Hoodie recovers, is reinstated into his community, and rebuilds a friendship with Anna-Marie.

This is a well-written, timely, fast-paced novel, with an engaging narrator, who explores deep issues about God, Jewish law, self-awareness, community, and welcoming the stranger. Nevertheless, it desperately needed a sensitivity reader with deep knowledge of the Orthodox community, as it has so many harmful inaccuracies. Some are listed below:

- It is nearly impossible that Hoodie, a 15-year-old Yeshiva bochur, does not understand Yiddish and can barely read Hebrew.
- It is improbable that Hoodie’s Rebbe would come to him for a visit. Respect for their leader would demand that Hoodie go to him. In addition, the Rebbe only speaks Yiddish, and Hoodie does not understand it. In reality, even the oldest of rabbis who came to America around WWII were learned men who adopted English as one of their many languages.
- Orthodox women do not generally go to synagogue services on Friday evening; the men in the family do not usually wait around for candle lighting. Rather, the men walk to shul, say their prayers, come back home, and eat their Shabbat meal with the family.
- An orthodox community would not publicly yell at and shame a misbehaving child. Rather they would inform the parents and let them handle it.
- The idea that Hoodie “committed a sin” and the teachers “pray that God will forgive him” sounds more Christian than Jewish. That a 15-year-old boy could commit an act so grave that he would be put in herem is not possible. Also, there is virtually no use of herem in any Jewish community today.
- The discussion of pikuah nefesh (the saving of a life) being interpreted as only meaning saving a Jewish life is remarkably wrong. One of the most important commandments, it is widely interpreted as referring to ALL human life, not just Jewish human life.
- Hoodie’s father, portrayed as a narcissistic psychopath, is so ashamed by his son’s actions that he will not talk to him. The mother is basically hidden away working in her bedroom office leaving the household management to her oldest daughter. This is all highly unlikely.

Today’s children’s books are supposed to serve as mirrors for readers to see themselves in what they read, windows for others to peek through to understand the lives of others, and sliding glass doors welcoming readers to join the story. This book is more like a carnival fun house, distorting reality, blurred by falsehoods and misdirection. The author uses a number of antisemitic tropes in describing this fictional Orthodox community and his words do damage, perpetuating stereotypes that only feed into hatred and otherness. Therefore, this book is not recommended for any library, Jewish or not.

Kathy Bloomfield,
AJL Immediate Past President, Seal Beach, CA

Editor’s Note: The Life and Crimes of Hoodie Rosen recently won the 2023 ALA William C. Morris YA Debut Award and was longlisted for the National Book Awards 2022 for Young People’s Literature.

O n the first day of school, Milla and Honey’s sixth-grade teacher says, “So, sixth grade. It’s a big year. You’re all going to grow up a lot by June.” How true his words would turn out to be! Milla narrates this contemporary novel, which takes place somewhere in an American suburb. We follow these two girls as they navigate their friendship through its many ups and downs, various light-hearted escapades, as well as some serious crises. The Jewish calendar—from *Rosh Hashanah* to *Shavuot,* and always *Shabbat*—provides the scaffolding for these two girls, for they are firmly involved in and embraced by their modern Orthodox families, school, and community.

Milla’s expressive voice comes through loud and clear as she tries to understand people and events, as well as her sometimes conflicting emotions about Honey. The dialogue is lively and humorous, with effective use of figurative language, providing some relief when sad events occur. All the characters, including the adults, are well-developed and intriguing. They add different perspectives to Milla’s sometimes conflicting emotions, and always support her as she searches for her own identity and tries to understand her strengths and weaknesses.

Various conflicts between people occur, but they are all eventually resolved in an authentic way. The theme of “choices and freedom” is woven throughout this charming novel, which hopefully should appeal to both Jewish and non-Jewish readers. Hebrew and Yiddish words and phrases are seamlessly integrated in the dialogue, but Drazin has also included an extensive glossary and an author’s note for additional information. For more insight into the author’s process and motivation, see Deborah Kalb’s interview of December 15, 2022: Book Q&As with Deborah Kalb: Q&A with Meira Drazin (deborahkalbooks.blogspot.com).

Anne Dublin, Retired teacher-librarian, Holy Blossom Temple, Toronto, Canada

*Editor’s Note: Honey and Me was named as a 2023 Sydney Taylor Book Award Middle Grade Honor book.*


F rom an Eastern European shtetl so small it doesn’t even have a name, a demon and an angel who have spent centuries learning Talmud together and watching over the village set out on an adventure to find out what happened to one of their shtetl’s daughters. She had gone to America, but her family never received word from her, no letters assuring them of her safe arrival or informing them of her new life. Little Ash (short for Ashmedai, the same name as his demon father) and the angel travel from the shtetl to Warsaw, from there to Hamburg, and finally to America. Each one finds enough sin and holiness, respectively, to keep them happy on their journey, but they also meet ghosts, a dybbuk, and very evil humans. In America, they continue to watch out for their Shtetl’s people, saving them from a corrupt Jewish factory owner and reuniting families across the ocean.

Stylistically infused with hints of Talmudic argument, oral Jewish and Hasidic storytelling, and the greats of early twentieth century Yiddish American writers, this excellent book explores themes of humanity and divinity, good and evil, immigration, labor rights, queer love, and gender identity. The story is gripping and moves well, giving the reader insight from various perspectives including the demon, the angel, and the young woman they befriend on the journey to America. The historical setting is wonderfully accurate, never vilifying or glorifying anyone but instead providing nuanced depictions of the era’s complex issues of immigration and persecution while developing and questioning ideas of inherent goodness or badness. Teenage and adult readers alike can enjoy a great story while gaining knowledge and understanding of history and humanity.

Dainy Bernstein, Visiting Lecturer in Literature, University of Pittsburgh

*Editor’s Note: When the Angels Left the Old Country is the 2023 Sydney Taylor Winner for Young Adults*

**BIOGRAPHY**


B orn in New York in 1911, Ruth Gruber lived a life full of encouragement, opportunity, and adventure, something unusual for a woman of her generation. Exceptionally talented, she graduated high school at 15, attended college, and earned a Ph.D. at 20 from a German university. It was there she began to experience the rise of antisemitism. Gruber worked as a journalist for several New York papers before returning to Europe to write about life in the Soviet Arctic under Communism. This led to work for the U.S. government including accompanying refugees in 1943 through dangerous waters to safety in Oswego, NY.

Continued on page 19
The book ends there, when Gruber was in her 30s; she went on to report on Holocaust survivors traveling to Palestine in 1947, the birth of the State of Israel, and mass relocations of Jews from Yemen and Ethiopia to Israel. These are all mentioned in an author’s note and a timeline. The text is very upbeat and in admiration of Gruber and her “can-do” spirit, even when she encounters danger or uncertainty. Back matter includes a glossary, index, source notes and bibliography, although these latter two are mostly Gruber’s own books.

A Jewish American woman who deserves to be known for her concern for fellow Jews, this book would be a good choice for day schools or public libraries with large Jewish populations.

Judy Ehrenstein, Co-editor, Children’s & Teen Literature, AJL News & Reviews, Head of Children’s Services, Little Falls Branch, Montgomery County Public Libraries, Bethesda, MD


The Prisoner and the Writer is a poetic and powerful presentation of the historic Dreyfus Affair, and the response by the celebrated writer, Émile Zola, to Dreyfus’ wrongful conviction and sentence. Captain Alfred Dreyfus, accused of betraying France by selling military secrets, is exiled to the Devil’s Island prison in 1895. Zola, convinced of Dreyfus’ innocence, writes the famous letter, “J’Accuse...!” and sets in motion a series of events that will lead to Captain Dreyfus’ exoneriation, release, and recognition that his conviction was fueled by antisemitism. This book also marks the 125th anniversary of the publication of “J’Accuse...!”

This picture book, for ages 9 and older, masterfully captures the struggles of Captain Dreyfus in his suffering, the unjust imprisonment, and the severe consequences that Émile Zola faces after standing up for Dreyfus, and justice, through the open letter he pens to the President of France. This letter, published on the front page of a French newspaper, split a country and resulted in Zola fleeing France to escape imprisonment. The text is both informative and evocative of struggle and emotion, and the illustrations, oil pastel monoprints, with added soft pastel, complement the text in their stark and melancholic tones.

The back matter, including “Author’s Note” and “Power of the Press” articles, and photographs, add a further dimension to this work that would be an excellent teaching resource and talking points even for upper grades that address antisemitism, intolerance, the importance of standing up for justice for all, and how to spot, and the dangers of, “fake news.” The “Selected Sources” and “End notes” underscore the author’s success in weaving fact into poetic prose. This title would be an excellent purchase for school, public and synagogue libraries.

Ellen Drucker-Albert, Assistant Editor in Chief, AJL News & Reviews, Head of Reference & Collections, Lecturer in Law, Benjamin N. Cardozo School of Law, Yeshiva University


“N ever give up on your dreams!” The powerful message young Isaac Stern’s parents instilled in him provided his confidence to later save the National Historic Landmark, Carnegie Hall. After fleeing Europe ahead of the Holocaust, his Ukrainian Jewish parents prioritized the development of his musical talents, eventually leading to his stellar career as a renowned violinist.

Hickey’s digital art brings a musical flow to the pages adding anticipation to Hoyt’s suspenseful text. Two parallel tales meld into one. The first is the dynamically shared history of Carnegie Hall, its world-famous performers and speakers, and developer Robert Moses’ aim to raze the building as he steamrolled his vision of a redesigned New York. The second explores Isaac Stern’s career and highlights his successful efforts to save this cultural gem. Providing inspiration to young readers in political mobilization and behind the scenes persistence techniques is an extra bonus of this book.

Back matter about the author’s experience researching this event, Carnegie Hall, and Isaac Stern’s life add to the value of this book. Here, we learn that after his parents managed to leave Russia-controlled Ukraine, his entire remaining family was murdered in the Holocaust. Of the 15,000 Jewish members of his family’s hometown, only 14 survived the Holocaust. Stern’s legacy of saving Carnegie Hall as a unifying cultural institution reminds us of the power of a single person. A timeline, a copy of the petition Stern created to lobby New York City officials, and extensive sourcing

Continued on page 20

The focus of this beautifully illustrated biography of baseball legend Hank Greenberg is not so much a story of Greenberg as a great baseball player, as much as Greenberg as a great Jewish baseball player. Straathof’s magnificent artwork complements Krensky’s story with vibrant watercolor pages and a “naive” art style. The reader learns that Greenberg’s Yiddish-speaking parents wanted him to become a doctor or lawyer, but Greenberg’s love of baseball drove him to work hard to follow his dream to the major leagues, becoming the first Jewish baseball superstar.

At age 23, Greenberg was excited to be playing for the Detroit Tigers. However, his religion was essential to his identity, and he never wanted to alter who he was for the sake of others. He proved this repeatedly throughout his career. For instance, some Jewish players changed their last names to sound less ethnic, but Greenberg proudly kept his. When fans and players taunted him with anti-Semitic slurs, he never showed how much it hurt. Instead, he maintained his focus on playing his best, which helped lead the Tigers to a pennant race with the New York Yankees in 1934. As much as he loved baseball, he was more devoted to his Judaism and boldly decided to attend Yom Kippur services instead of playing in this crucial post-season game, much to the bitter disappointment of Tiger fans. When the Tigers lost, many blamed Greenberg, but playing baseball on Yom Kippur was not an option for him. Ultimately, most fans came to respect Greenberg for being true to himself.

Krensky begins the story with “Many people at the time saw Jews as different and treated them unfairly” but does not state the year, which may confuse young readers. Only as the reader gets to the middle of the book, does the author explain the year as 1934. Krensky offers a very brief biographical section in the end note, so to learn more about Greenberg’s incredible life and career, readers will need to read a more robust biography. Nevertheless, even with these minor oversights, this wonderful feel-good biography will have children cheering for “the Jewish Hammer.”

**Esther Schnaidman,**
Rosenbaum Yeshiva of North Jersey, Teaneck, NJ


Not much is known about Luis de Torres, the Converso Jew who was hired by Columbus to sail to the New World in 1492. He was selected by Columbus for his facility with languages, due to the explorer’s expectations that they would meet Jewish traders in the “Indies.” The historical record of that first voyage is intertwined with Jewish History in fascinating ways that tend to lead to many conjectures by writers and historians, some who even posit that Columbus himself was a Converso Jew. The exact date of the sailing fell on the date that the Jews were expelled from Spain, and it also coincided with *Tisha B’Av.* In other words, authors are free to invent intriguiging, but fictional, stories about the participants and what may have happened that fateful night.

In this story, Luis de Torres tries to convince “the commander” (Columbus’s name is only mentioned in the author’s note—an odd choice) that leaving on *Tisha B’Av* would be a bad omen. The commander ignores him, but a storm comes up, delays the trip anyway, and de Torres and the other Jews on the ship (who would not be allowed on Spanish soil due to the expulsion decree) get to observe the holiday and stay on their ship. The story is compelling and well-told and the illustrations appear accurate for the period. The storm sequences are especially gripping. The main question after reading historical fiction for children is whether the adult or librarian offering this book to a child would be knowledgeable enough to explain that only certain parts of the story can be verified by historians.

The title, “Luis de Torres Sails to Freedom” is an outstanding introduction to the Spanish Inquisition and the observance of *Tisha B’Av,* but we do not find out what happened to de Torres after the voyage. Yes, he was “sailing to freedom” but it is assumed he died a few months later when he chose to stay in the New World after Columbus returned to Spain. The fact that the Inquisition was law in all Spanish territories for another 400 years does tend to disprove the idea that Luis de Torres and the Jews who sailed there gained even a modicum of freedom of religion. If his ship had sailed for Turkey along with thousands of other co-religionists, he would have fared better. The book presents an important part of Jewish history for children to think about.

**Lisa Silverman,**
Retired director, Sperber Jewish Community Library

*Editor’s Note: Luis de Torres Sails to Freedom is a Spring 2023 Holiday Highlights Pick.*

Debbie Friedman, the late popular Jewish singer-songwriter, is lovingly portrayed in this picture book biography that follows the singer from her early childhood (~1957) through her concert at Carnegie Hall (1996). Even in her early years, music was special to Debbie, and she loved singing with her family. When she went away to summer camp, she became a song leader, teaching herself to play guitar. Returning from a six month visit to a Kibbutz in Israel, where community was everything, she felt a deep loneliness while sitting in the pews during Shabbat services, where instead of singing together, people sat “arms crossed, apart, silent.” Debbie decided to change that by writing music that was welcoming, inclusive, and respectful of every voice. Despite negative comments from some, she persisted in creating music that would create community. Today, her songs can be heard around the world in schools, synagogues, and camps representing every denomination of Judaism as well as other religions.

While it would be impossible for a picture book to cover all the significant milestones of Debbie’s life, this is an excellent overview, in child friendly language, about someone who had a huge impact on the world of Jewish music. The text is supported by beautiful digital art in muted tones with many pages connected by sweeping staffs of musical notes.

Back matter in the book includes “About Debbie,” a short synopsis of Debbie’s life; a “Glossary” of Hebrew and Yiddish words; and an “Author’s Note” describing the process of writing this story. Read this book not so much as a biography, but rather as a tribute to an individual having the courage and determination to follow her dreams. A must have for every school and library biography section — Jewish or not.

Kathy Bloomfield, AJL Immediate Past President, Seal Beach, CA


Martin Buber is an unlikely subject for a picture book, but this early exposure to a great philosopher works because the gentleman is introduced to young readers in the context of an amusing animal story with charming illustrations. When a cat named Ketem wishes to reside in Buber’s book-filled home on Hovevei Zion Street, other cats discourage him. They are well acquainted with the fact that cats are a distraction for Buber, and their presence prevents him from dispensing advice to human visitors. “He doesn’t want any cats living in his house,” they say. But Ketem sees a solution for himself and his fellow felines. If they all move in together, they’ll be companions to one another, allowing Buber to focus on his true calling.

Back matter explains Buber’s ties to Jewish mysticism and to Zionism, and reveals the fact that he did have nine cats. While not overtly a Jewish story, the cat who thinks through a problem mirrors the intellectual quality of Jewish scholarship along with the idea of seeking truth collaboratively or with the guidance of a wise individual.

Gloria Koster, Retired School Librarian — New Canaan, CT Public Schools


Marco and Isaac are best friends just starting 6th grade, each with a specific goal in mind for the year. Marco, who is half Mexican, half Jewish, is small in stature and excels academically. His parents are in the process of divorcing and Marco struggles for attention and affirmation from his father, who is already involved with another woman. Marco is determined to earn his father’s pride by becoming a skilled basketball player, as his father seems to respect athletic accomplishment more than academic accomplishment. Isaac is a star athlete but struggles in his schoolwork. Isaac’s parents are also divorcing and fight constantly, mainly due to his father’s struggles with alcoholism. Isaac, believing he must be the problem, sets his sights on improving his grades to save his parents’ marriage. Although the boys are opposites on paper, they complement each other beautifully, and through their genuine friendship, mutual admiration, and loyalty, they help each other achieve their goals. This wonderfully written story poignantly depicts the harsh and sweet realities of family life, middle school, working hard and overcoming challenges. Besides mentioning Marco’s father is Jewish, there is no Judaic content.

Martha McMahon, Sinai Akiba Academy, Los Angeles, CA

Continued on page 22
REVIEWS OF TITLES FOR CHILDREN AND TEENS


Based on the real-life Stermer family’s saga, the book opens in 1944 as the Nazis search the farm of Jakob and his family in rural Ukraine. Soon after, their neighbor Stepan assists them in moving to a cave in the woods. The remainder of the novel describes the year they spend underground. Their time alternates between routine life and dangers. We watch the family’s three children: 14-year-old Jakob, Rachel and Eli (10 and 5), and their parents spend their time improving the space and passing the days, and weeks, in study and games. On one night-time foray to a nearby farm, Jakob and Stepan rescue a girl, Lena, who has been left for dead. She becomes a member of the family, and Jakob’s companion in hunting for food and other goods. The family also searches for an escape exit, which the children discover by luck and a family ghost. The novel ends as the family emerges from hiding and begins the next stage of their struggle to survive.

The Hidden Room is competently written, and the family members are adequately depicted from Jakob’s perspective. The descriptions of life underground are quite moving, and the dangers are real but not too intense for the intended age group. The story ends with hope, though not without sorrow; their savior Stepan has not returned from the War and may be dead. The Hidden Room is a worthwhile but not necessary purchase.

Fred Isaac, Oakland, CA


Nolie is preparing to start sixth grade in a state of turmoil. Her favorite week of the summer at Grandma’s beach cottage ends abruptly when her older sister Linden insists on going back to the city for a ballet workshop. Nolie’s best friend returns from visiting her father in Los Angeles more sophisticated, decides to call her Magnolia instead of Nolie, has another close friend, and wants Nolie to be cooler. Although Nolie’s family is loving, Linden’s goal of playing Marie in The Nutcracker ballet at Lincoln Center occupies her parents’ attention. Nolie wonders why everything is changing and feels invisible at home and school. Only Nolie’s grandmother seems to care about her. Nolie is lonely and floundering. She begins “borrowing” items from others. When a new friend accepts Nolie for herself and Nolie realizes that Linden is not as perfect as she thought, Nolie confronts her stealing and seeks to make amends.

Judaism is central to the story in this realistic novel. Set in Manhattan in the autumn, the family celebrates Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur. Linden’s preparation for her Bat Mitzvah and other Jewish references are explained within the context of the story. Even in contemporary New York, family members experience subtle antisemitism. Middle grade readers will identify with Nolie and her struggles to try to fit in and find where she belongs. The book’s themes of family relationships, friendship, self-identity, and forgiveness are well developed in this engaging novel.

Evelyn B. Freeman, Professor Emerita, The Ohio State University, Columbus, OH


Set in Florida, The Jake Show introduces 12-year-old ‘TV fanatic Jake Lightman who is starting his first day at yet another new school, mid-year. Jake’s parents are divorced and his mother has become more observant while his father has grown more secular. Jake has taken on TV personas to help him cope with his new reality. With his father and gentle stepmother, he is Jacob who eats at fast food restaurants and is not overly religious. When he is with his mother and rabbi stepfather, he is “frum” Yaakov, who fully observes Judaism.

As usual with his TV show, Jake has grown more secular. Jake has taken on TV personas to help him cope with his new reality. With his father and gentle stepmother, he is Jacob who eats at fast food restaurants and is not overly religious. When he is with his mother and rabbi stepfather, he is “frum” Yaakov, who fully observes Judaism. Additionally, the stepparents are portrayed as defenders of Jake when his parents become critical of each other and how the other one is raising Yaakov/Jacob. As Jake continues to try to maintain his fake lives, Caleb, Tehilla, and his stepparents all try to support him in maintaining his deceptions to his parents, but they also try to convince him that his parents will accept who he is as Jake. A reader does wonder which will last

Continued on page 23
lovers, Jake's continuous deceptions at attempting shalom bayit or his friends and stepparents' support. Overall, it is a great book about the meaning of friendships and love of families.

Sean Patrick Boyle, Vice President, President-elect, Association of Jewish Libraries, Librarian, Congregation Keneseth Israel, Allentown, PA


This book is the second in a series by these three authors, who represent three different faiths. Three young girls representing different religions discover that the bridge to a popular park is in disrepair and they make a series of plans to solve the problem and save the bridge. The girls are differentiated by their necklaces — one wears a Star of David, one has a Christian cross, and one has Arabic writing in a medallion. The Moslem girl has darker skin tones. The park is called “Peace Park” and upon their first visit, the authors note: “Peace Park bloomed. Peace, Salaam, Shalom.” When the bridge is considered unsafe and needs repair, the mayor, the architect, and the engineer all need to raise the funds and must close the bridge. The girls band together and come up with various schemes to make money, such as selling friendship bracelets, foods made by their grandparents, singing in a concert, and getting all their classmates to put on a school-wide fundraising effort, called “Building Bridges Day.” Eventually all the funding is raised and the community saves their park by working together.

The authors offer “Connection Questions” at the end, such as “How can you build bridges in your communities among people who may be similar or different from you?” They explain how the girls use STEM skills as well as helping adults solve problems and try again and again until they succeed. It is a nice lesson in general and the telling is fun and enjoyable, not didactic. The illustrations present quite a diverse group, but there is no mention of religions, per se. Each girl's house does contain an item that could identify it (Arabic writing, a cross on the wall, and what appears to possibly be a dreidel and maybe a kiddish cup that looks like a chalice). Overall, an entertaining story that would be appropriate for Jewish libraries.

Lisa Silverman, Retired director, Speirer Jewish Community Library


Joey Goodman isn’t confident of his place in his family of four boys. He knows he’s not as cool as his teenage brothers or as talented as his younger brother, already headed for an acting career. In addition, his recent Bar Mitzvah has left him with more questions than answers about his faith. During the summer of 1975, Joey grapples with his self-doubt, as he tries to navigate a set of unforeseen circumstances in the increasingly dangerous environment of Atlantic City, NJ. His grandparents’ boardwalk hotel has always been a comforting place with guests who return year after year and familiar tasks that Joey can easily perform. But just as the casino business is encroaching on the old beachfront establishments, Joey’s own routines are upended after a chance encounter with Artie Bishop — the so-called King of Steel Pier. Artie is quick to welcome Joey into his “family,” an arrangement that initially offers Joey the much needed boost of confidence. It’s only when Artie demands a favor that Joey’s inner voice reminds him of his own morality and his devotion to his own loving family.

The author skilfully weaves in the themes of Joey’s favorite book, The Once and Future King, in this fast-paced adventure that will deliver excitement and reassurance to a middle school audience. Readers of all backgrounds will relate to Joey, with Jewish readers able to personally relate to traditions and the warm synagogue scene that is authentically represented. An original storyline, memorable characters, and a whole lot of heart make this book a welcome addition to Jewish-themed literature for kids.

Gloria Koster, Retired School Librarian, New Canaan, CT Public Schools

Editor’s Note: The Prince of Steel Pier is a 2023 Sydney Taylor Notable book and the 2022 Winner of the National Jewish Book Award for Middle Grade Literature.


It is 1964 in a small, poor suburb of Ramat Gan. Twelve-year-old Motti’s father has just returned from the hospital for a mental health reset and the family is currently in a fragile state. While Motti’s Holocaust survivor parents are loving, Dad is too emotionally weak to hold a job and his mom is taking lots of napping

Continued on page 24

AJL News and Reviews

March | April 2023

23
The Lost Spy and the Green Dress


Here's to Us is the sequel to What If It's Us by Becky Albertalli and Adam Silvera. The book takes place two summers after protagonists Ben Alejo and Arthur Seuss first met and fell in love. Both are now nineteen and in relationships with new young men. Ben is in college, still living at home in New York City, and still working on his epic fantasy novel. He is dating and completely enamored with Mario, a writing partner in school, even though Mario keeps Ben at arm's length. Arthur is finishing up his first year at Wesleyan College in Connecticut and plans to spend his summer with his boyfriend Mikey in Boston when a dream job in New York City opens up. He finds himself back at his uncle's Upper West Side apartment. Both Ben and Arthur find the city holds memories of their epic summer romance and the two follow each other on social media but lose touch until May and once again they become part of the other's orbit. Characters from the first books come back and celebrate milestones. Ben and Arthur have a frazzled relationship, and both can't decide if their story includes the other. Readers looking for their "Happily Ever After" will find it here and enjoy many callbacks to the first book of the series.

As opposed to What If It's Us, Here's to Us has some more Jewish content. Arthur is still the stereotypical neurotic Jew and even comments while drinking with friends "I'm pretty sure it's my first taste of alcohol not preceded by old people saying 'Borei pri hagafen.'" There is a paragraph about explaining Yom Kippur to Ben over the phone. And for most secular teens, this feels authentic. Fans of Albertalli, Silvera, New York City, musicals, fantasy novels, and male friendships will devour this story quickly and happily.

Dina Herbert, Alexandria, VA

FINANCIAL - TEEN READERS


Camp Alpine Lake, set in what should be bucolic Vermont, is usually eight weeks packed with fun activities and friendship for Goldie Easton and her long-time campmates and now fellow counselors, Ava and Imogen. However, this murder mystery/thriller is anything but peaceful. In alternating chapters of “Now” and “Then,” Goldie slowly reveals past events that segue into the present. Suspense builds as to why and how a teen ends up dead in the lake one night, and who committed the crime.

Conflict fills the pages: “townees” vs. camp staff, friend vs. friend, Goldie vs. her schoolmates. Loyalty is tested; trust is broken; friendships are strained. The author portrays Goldie’s inner turmoil effectively, but this main character has a limited perspective, for she understands events only from her own point of view.

The novel is a page-turner until the surprise ending and satisfying conclusion. A book for older teens, it contains sexual situations and language not suitable for younger readers. Jewish content is minimal, limited to a brief mention of jelly doughnuts at Hanukkah, bagels, lox, and “shmear” at breakfast, and Chinese takeout and movies at Christmastime.

Anne Dublin, Retired teacher-librarian, Holy Blossom Temple, Toronto, Canada

Continued on page 25

24 March | April 2023

AJL News and Reviews
Sixteen-year-old Hannah used to think the biggest concerns she had were keeping her mother from moving the family before she finished high school and how she would cope when her brother Gabe left for college that fall. Everything else in her life was going to plan and she was in complete control. That all changed on her 17th birthday when she woke up to having golden eyes with horizontal knife-slit pupils, followed by more mutations each day. As Hannah and Gabe continue to freak out over the mutations, their mother apologizes for not telling them more about her past and says she needs to leave and find help. After several weeks of being holed up in their apartment, they begin to fear that their mother may not return.

Hannah’s father died when she was young and while she knew her father’s parents in Canada, little is known about their mother’s family, or her history. After being sent a death notice in the mail for their previously unknown grandmother, Hannah and Gabe travel to meet their aunts and uncles and hope to find out what happened to their mother and why Hannah’s body continues to mutate daily.

The queer historical-fiction fantasy Jewish folklore tale really accelerates when Hannah meets her mother’s side of the family and starts to learn about her past including the sudden disappearance from her hometown when she turned 18. As Hannah learns about her family’s history, the story bounces from the present to 1990 with her mother falling in love with a transient man working on her family’s farm, to her grandmother as a young woman leaving her family at the start of WWII in Prague, and to a second-world described in the fairy-tale called “The Underwater Palace” until the past comes and collides with the present.

Lambda Literary Award-winner Podos says this is her “gayest book yet” and is the first time that she felt confident to write about her Jewish experiences, although Hannah’s family is more observant than Podos’ was when she was growing up.

Sean Patrick Boyle, 
Vice President, President-elect, Association of Jewish Libraries, Librarian, Congregation Keneseth Israel, Allentown, PA


Fans of Rom-Coms and the growing class of Hanukkah love stories will enjoy the story of Shira Barbanel in Eight Nights of Flirting. Set over the holiday on the snowy New England island of Nantucket, this story is what we have come to expect from Hanukkah teen romances. Shira is a high school senior stuck in her head: her closest cousin is off at college, she hasn’t many friends, and she has never been successful at flirting and has never had a boyfriend. Her family descends on the family mansion in Nantucket for Hanukkah and this year, Shira is determined to flirt with her crush, Isaac. Isaac, a college student at Columbia, works for her great-uncle’s media conglomerate, and is everything Shira wants in a potential mate. Or is he? Her childhood crush and neighbor Tyler Nelson is on the island at the same time, forcing Shira to remember why she loved him in her tween years and immediately hated him after he turned her down.

Romance lovers will find many of the classic tropes in this book: enemies-to-lovers, an exchange involving flirting lessons, a snowstorm forcing Shira and Tyler together, meddling family members, a picturesque small town, and so on. Tyler and Shira also uncover a family secret, taking them to the Nantucket Whaling Museum and historical research. The story is just what a reader wants and weaves in facts about Hanukkah not seen in so many other Hanukkah romances. The younger cousins put on a play about Judith and Holofernes; Shira must explain to her best friend Olivia and to Tyler some of the nuances of the holiday. She knows Hanukkah isn’t an important holiday, but family is important to Shira.

Shira is a great protagonist; she is at a crossroads in her life as her senior year begins to close. She has given up piano playing and ice skating after she couldn’t be perfect. There are cracks in her grandparent’s marriage. Tyler helps her not only with flirting but also with being a better friend and more open with others. Teens who love smart but shy women will enjoy this book.

Dina Herbert, Alexandria, VA
different way: Rae throws herself into baking and cooking; Deenie becomes more frum (observant); Ellie sees the “ghost” of Danny in her imagination. As the novel unfolds, the reader slowly begins to understand why each girl harbors a secret guilt, and how these secrets create rifts in their friendship. Through flashbacks, Danny’s jokes and antics provide a balance to the sadness and confusion of the characters who wrestle with the meaning of these events, and with their faith in God. All the characters are fully realized, including the adults: parents, rabbi, and therapist. Through evocative prose, Scheier builds the suspense until the heartbreaking climax.

Themes of friendship, guilt, forgiveness, and faith are interwoven in this engrossing novel that scarcely gives the reader a chance to take a breath. Hebrew vocabulary is skillfully interwoven in the narrative; usually, a word is explained in context. However, a helpful glossary is provided, as well as a Q &A with the author. Because this is a young adult novel, sexual scenes and revelations are integral to the plot but are not distasteful or gratuitous. The Last Words We Said, a 2022 Sydney Taylor Young Adult Honor Book is a multi-layered novel that provides both a mirror and a window into the lives of Orthodox teens.

Anne Dublin,
Retired teacher-librarian, Holy Blossom Temple,
Toronto, Canada


Sydney Taylor Award winner (What the Night Sings) Vesper Stamper returns to Germany in her latest book, Berliners. Once again interspersed with her beautiful illustrations, this book tells the story of fraternal twin brothers Rudi and Peter, who live in East Berlin in 1961, on the cusp of turning 16. Peter is blonde, easygoing and interested in becoming an actor, especially after discovering an underground cabaret. Rudi has dark hair, is a devoted follower of the socialist party that rules East Germany, and is interested in photography. Life changes rapidly for this family. Mother Ilse is spending more and more nights out partying and drinking; Father Rudolf, a piano tuner, is told he can no longer work across the border in West Berlin. They befriend a Black American GI, Charles, who is there to help guard the border, but his presence upsets Ilse. The family reaches a breaking point when Rudolf and Ilse decide to split up, and split the boys up as well. Rudolf takes Rudi and crosses into West Berlin, essentially turning them into refugees when the border is closed. Things continue to deteriorate as Ilse has a psychotic break and ends up in a psychiatric hospital. Then Oma, Peter and Rudi’s grandmother, leaves East Berlin with nothing but the clothes on her back, abandoning Peter alone in their apartment. Meanwhile Rudi is trying to navigate his relationship with his Jewish girlfriend while feeling like he’s in the wrong territory. Ilse escapes from the hospital and Rudolf attempts suicide after years of living with guilt: both were Nazis. Ultimately Peter needs to get out of East Berlin and be reunited with his family, and this rather lengthy story culminates with Peter’s escape into West Berlin.

While this story might lead readers to doing more research on the Berlin Wall and the split between East and West, the Jewish characters are secondary to the story, only serving to show how the socialist party responded to Jewish people, rather than their actual experience as Jews in divided Berlin. Having the former Nazi parents attempt suicide and have a psychotic break seems rather like a call for forgiveness for their past behavior, since this is the eventual result. Ambitious in scope, length, and illustration, this dual point-of-view is a good starting point, though an unsatisfying story of the beginning of the Berlin Wall and the Cold War.

Rebecca Levitan,
Co-editor, Children’s and Teen Literature, AJL News and Reviews,
President, AJL SSCPL Division,
Librarian III, Baltimore County Public Library,
Pikesville Branch

FOLKTALES

Smith, Shoham.. Seven Good Years: A Yiddish Folktale. Illustrated by Eitan Eloa. Translated by Ilana Kurshan, Moosic, PA: Kalaniot Books, 2023. 32 pp. $ 19.99 (9798986396521) HC. Kindergarten — Gr.3. Reviewed from an ARC

This charming book is an adaptation of an I.L. Peretz (1852-1915) folktale. Tuvia and his family are very poor. To make a living, Tuvia works as a porter in the marketplace. He carries beams, logs, bundles of hay, and even a smiling colorfully spotted cow. Tuvia’s business soon dries up. People do not need him to carry anything. As Tuvia and his goat forlornly sit on a log in despair, a white bearded bright-eyed man in a green hat with a large blue feather appears. The man promises Tuvia seven rich years, but the man warns that after the seven years the riches

Continued on page 27
will disappear and Tuvia will again be poor. Tuvia and his family enjoy the new riches. He can now afford to give his children a quality education. In the whimsical illustrations, one son happily plays the violin while another rows a boat. Even the skinny goat becomes fat. After seven years the old man returns as promised. In the interim Tuvia has not changed his lifestyle. He still works as a porter and wears his old, tattered clothes. As the man follows Tuvia home he sees the pile of gold he had given Tuvia seven years ago. Sorka, Tuvia’s wife, explains that they only used the gold for what they needed to live and educate their sons. The story illustrates the Pirkei Avot (Ethics of the Fathers) proverb: “Who is rich? One who is happy with what he has.” Children and adults will enjoy reading and rereading this Jewish folktale that illuminates Jewish values.

Ilka Gordon, Beachwood, OH

BIBLE STORIES & MIDRASH


Bible stories are always a source of wonder. Presented here are new versions of some well-known tales and expansions on short set-pieces. The book starts in Genesis with Eve’s thoughts in the Garden of Eden. We see Rachel and Leah fool Laban (a reversal of the traditional version); Joseph stops at the pit on the return to Canaan with Jacob’s body. In Exodus, we learn more about the midwives; the crossing of the Sea and the giving of Torah (told by a boy in a wheelchair); and a girl who would not contribute to the Golden Calf. Later tales include a new understanding of Miriam’s affliction; Caleb’s version of what the spies saw in the Promised Land; the thoughts of Balaam’s ass; and the daughters of Zelophechad. The final chapter is the Midrash of Moses in the academy of Akiva. The book concludes with a “Discussion Guide,” two or three questions on each chapter. There is also an index of “Values and Sources,” identifying the sources and mitzvot in each tale.

“What if” stories can be told to all ages. These are creative and adaptable drashot that can be widely used. While the book is meant for middle grades, it could be used by rabbis for sermons, and might be jumping-off points for discussions at all levels, used as an alternative to Rabbi Gellman’s tales and as an addition to the many resources for B’nai Mitzvah students.

Fred Isaac, Oakland, CA


There is a midrash (Shemot Rabbah 2:2) that tells the story of Moses following a runaway lamb to a stream where the lamb is drinking water and carries it gently back to the flock on his shoulders. Due to the compassion God witnesses, it is at this moment that God chooses Moses to lead his people. It is a simple midrash, but a perfect one to adapt and share with young children. Jacqueline Jules adds to her successful Jewish literary tales oeuvre with this lovely and uplifting story of Moses when he was just a teenage shepherd. The illustrations are rather spare, with hues that suggest the desert environment, but of particular interest is the depiction of Moses as he could have looked as a very young man. Forget the long white beard and Caucasian features, this Moses has dark olive skin with an apparent black close-curl beard and afro, and it all seems quite authentic. The baby goat is a cutie. She runs to her mother after Moses returns her to the flock and then he realizes that “every animal in his flock was important to him.” A nice message for children who are learning about their Jewish heritage.

Lisa Silverman, Retired director, Sperber Jewish Community Library


Deborah’s leadership as a prophetess and judge is described in the fourth and fifth chapters of the Book of Judges. Yolen’s modern midrash begins with Deborah as a baby, already under a palm tree, receiving a blessing from her mother. As Deborah grows up, her connection to the date palm gets stronger, and she begins to see into the future: visions of a war with chariots. Soon she is married to Lapidot, and she sits under a date palm. She summons Barak to lead an army against the Canaanite, the one she had seen in her visions of chariots, and Deborah is credited with the victory.

Continued on page 28
Kawa’s stylized, jewel-toned illustrations are the perfect complement to Yolen's text with images that capture Deborah’s ethereal visions and the beauty of the Land of Israel. Yolen, the author of over 400 books and the most recent Sydney Taylor Body-of-Work Award (2022) recipient, has captured the multi-faceted Deborah as both decisive and sensitive. The pre-battle interaction between Deborah and Barak is a little drawn out, where some of Deborah and Barak’s victory song (Judges, 5) could have been included. Otherwise, destined to be a classic.

Chava Pinchuck,
Editor, Jewish Values Finder,
Ramat Beit Shemesh, Israel

HOLOCAUST & WORLD WAR II

SIlberstein is the daughter of Holocaust survivors and a Jewish women’s studies and Holocaust history scholar. She states in the introduction that this book tells the story of “nine unsung brave, resilient women” from a feminist perspective and provides “a new definition for what it means to be heroic.”

Among the nine women include the author’s mother and aunt, as well Regina Jonas, the first female rabbi, two non-Jews recognized by Yad Vashem as Righteous Among the Nations, and women who worked as, or with, spies, or were able to evade the Nazis and live amongst them. The writing is direct and detailed, offering a view into how women were often more able to pass as non-Jewish than men, what they did for others and how documenting the atrocities was taken as a serious task by many. Except for Jonas, the other eight survived the war and the chapters conclude with information about their lives post WWII, where each often hid the contributions made in saving the lives of others. Details include the reality that rape and relationships with Nazis were part of some of these women’s lives, making this more suitable for older readers.

While there is an extensive glossary, a selected timeline, and a single map, the lack of an index and sources, particularly for the numerous quotes, along with a Suggested Reading list that includes materials not available in English, lessen the usefulness for student research. Still, an engrossing and important read.

Judy Ehrenstein,
Co-editor, Children’s & Teen Literature, AJL News & Reviews,
Head of Children’s Services, Little Falls Branch,
Montgomery County Public Libraries, Bethesda, MD


Sisters Talula and Rhea enjoy their visits to Grandma Dot, who collects feathers (and is depicted as quite independent at ninety-nine). The feathers figure prominently into their last visit, and Grandma Dot explains that they make her think of her late parents watching over her. The text also implies connections with a beloved chicken whose death Talula is grieving. Soon, Grandma Dot dies. As the children process their feelings, more feathers appear in their lives and provide comfort. Jewish funeral traditions, and later a yabrezait candle, are touched upon briefly, both from the point of view of a child unfamiliar with the concepts; an author’s note provides a bit more information. The text is gentle but lengthy and might work best as a discussion-starter with some adult mediation, as some conclusions are left for readers to draw themselves. Illustrations in ink, watercolor, and colored pencils effectively use a soft, muted palette.

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

PICTURE


Ella Kvellephant and her little brother, Eli, are off to the beach with their grandparents, Bubbe and Zeyde Kvellephant, for a day of fun. Soon everyone is shvitzing and enjoying a nosh after their long shlep to the shore. Bubbe sprinkles her speech with Yiddish words, and although she no longer speaks the language of her childhood fluently, she says that each word is “like a treasure” to her. Ella makes a pirate ship out of sand and declares that she will hunt for the lost treasure of Bubbe’s Yiddish words. By the end of a day of sun and waves, Ella has learned a long list of Yiddish words that have found their

Continued on page 29
way into everyday English usage. AND Ella starts to learn Yiddish so that Bubbe’s treasure “never gets lost again.”

Author and illustrator Jen Kostman introduces the origin of Yiddish through words that have become part of American English. The glossary defines and transliterates the 13 Yiddish words in the story and writes them in both English and Hebrew letters. The illustrations are particularly charming. The anthropomorphized elephant family and their world are warmly depicted in a pastel color palette. All children, in both Jewish and secular settings, can enjoy this unique picture book. It is klug (smart) and batam (cute).

Rena Citrin, Retired School Librarian, Current Member of the AJL Fiction Award Committee


This sweet, simply told story starts in Brooklyn in what appears to be the 1940s, where a young girl, Sarah, accidentally breaks her grandmother’s beautiful, blue glass bowl. Her Bubbe comforts her, saying, “I can replace the bowl. I can’t replace you.” After the clean-up, Sarah is amazed to find a heart-shaped shard of glass from the bowl left behind. She plans to keep it, but on an outing to the beach, it’s swept away in a crash of waves. Thus begins the oceanic adventures behind. She plans to keep it, but on an outing to the beach, it’s swept away in a crash of waves. Thus begins the oceanic adventures behind. She plans to keep it, but on an outing to the beach, it’s swept away in a crash of waves. Thus begins the oceanic adventures behind. She plans to keep it, but on an outing to the beach, it’s swept away in a crash of waves. Thus begins the oceanic adventures behind. She plans to keep it, but on an outing to the beach, it’s swept away in a crash of waves. 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SHABBAT & HOLIDAYS


Spare text and playful illustrations make this Hanukkah story a delightful introduction to Sephardic traditions. When the usual shipment of oranges fails to arrive one December, a little girl and her sister are perplexed. But the mystery is soon resolved when they are plucked from their beds one night for a car ride along I-95 and a reunion with Nonna and Nonno, the grandparents who live in Florida. For eight days the children revel in the warmth of family and the grandmother’s homemade treats. While these include latkes, there is ample space provided for less familiar foods like buñuelos, the almond doughnuts filled with guava jelly. The Ladino terms that are sprinkled throughout the story will undoubtedly provide a first taste of Sephardic culture to many young readers. There is no explanation for the name “Little Havana” and the reason for the large Cuban population in Miami. This would have been a welcome addition to the author’s note.

Gloria Koster, Retired School Librarian — New Canaan, CT Public Schools

Editor’s Note: Hanukkah in Little Havana is a Fall 2022 Holiday Highlights pick.


Ruby Celebrates is a series celebrating Jewish holidays for the very young. Its approach is family oriented, turning custom into a happy event rather than required ritual, here focusing on working to observe Passover at home. Ruby introduces readers to Seder preparations. These are from a child’s perspective: writing and mailing invitations, cleaning house, and finding plague toys as opposed to adult concerns of recipes, marketing lists and Haggadah parts. The word Haggadah, however, is not in the story; it appears only in the explanatory note. The plot

Continued on page 30
arises because Bubbe has a broken leg which prevents her from inviting everyone as usual. The family wants to cheer her up by hosting the perfect Seder: Goal on; so is the pressure. The story line employs the tired trope of a little brother messing up everything accomplished by a hard-working older sister who melts down consistently. The children realize they can make Bubbe happy just doing their best. With Dad’s help they pull Seder together for the extended family. Everyone enjoys despite mishaps. Giggles arise when the dog eats the afikomen and little brother produces a real frog. Bubbe notes there has never been so much laughter; she enlists the children to help her produce a Not-Quite-Perfect Seder next year.

The story is fun for those educated about Seder; the uninitiated will be bewildered. Story action indicates a Seder is a meal. The only mention of when the holiday occurs, what it commemorates, or what Seder foods symbolize is outside the text in an excellent endnote, not a page that children usually read. The hosting family has no mother in text or picture. Readers close the book thinking: gosh this family has fun meals! There is only one hint — from stars on the wine glasses — that Seder is a Jewish custom.

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


A young boy and his mother spend the night in their sukkah braving the cold, dark and rain. But the fun outweighs the discomforts with story time, snuggling and laughter. Together they remember how Jews were protected by their sukkahs as they traveled the desert for 40 years and have faith their sukkah will protect them from the storm. As they say the Shema, the rain ends, bugs sing a lullaby, stars come out and sleep comes, bringing elements of nature into this harvest festival celebration.

Fedele’s soothing, flowing art is a perfect match for Halpern’s clear text, moving the story along at a smooth gentle pace. This is a lovely bedtime story as well as perfect for group listening during the Sukkot season. Back matter includes information about the holiday and the Shema as a bedtime custom.

Suzanne Grossman, MLS, Librarian, Retired, Morris Public Schools, NJ

Editor’s Note: *The Stars Will Be My Nightlight* is a Fall 2022 Holiday Highlights pick.


Elsie Rose-Miller’s favorite holiday is Purim, and every year her synagogue holds a costume party for the entire congregation. This year, she is going as “the fierce and smart Queen Esther.” Her Abba is a costume designer creating a very special dress for her. Elsie’s best friend, Grace, a black Christian girl who shares Elsie’s love of thrift store shopping, would like to join Elsie at Purim, but the party is only open to Temple members.

It turns out, however, that there may not be a Purim party after all. The synagogue is in deep financial trouble and Elsie’s Dad, the Board Treasurer, worrying that they cannot pay the bills, feels the party would put too much of a strain on the Temple budget. Elsie (being fierce and smart) comes up with a plan to open the Purim party up to the entire community by selling tickets to support the event. The Rabbi is delighted, Grace is thrilled (she will be attending), and Elsie’s dads are proud.

Elsie and Grace encounter the first sign of trouble when a bigoted and angry man screams at them while they sell tickets to the neighbors in their Grandparent’s apartment complex. His intolerant language scares the girls away, but they keep the experience to themselves.

When the big day arrives, Elsie and her dads appear at the synagogue to pick up the Mishloach Manot (Gifts of Food) baskets for delivery and find the rabbi in the parking lot surrounded by six police officers. The Temple has been vandalized — swastikas painted on the walls inside and out. Purim decorations torn down, prayer books ripped up, the Torahs desecrated. The Rabbi declares that the party will have to be canceled, but when a news reporter (Grace’s aunt) shows up to film a segment about the party and sees the damage, she puts out a call to the community for help. People pour in to assist with clean-up, bringing food, and basically putting the building back together. While there is no Purim costume party, the Rabbi reads the Book of Esther for everyone in attendance. Because they had not “let the hate into their hearts,” the Temple was saved.

Pulled from today’s headlines, bigotry and antisemitism play important roles in this story, but the support of the entire community — Jewish and not Jewish — in doing the right thing gives hope to everyone. In addition, there is so much love and respect between Elsie and her two dads, Elsie and her grandparents, and

Continued on page 31
the rabbi and everyone in the community, that it is no wonder things turn out okay. A Hamantaschen recipe is included in the back of the book.

One item of note, this is part of Orca Publishing’s “Ultra-Readable” booklist. These books have a larger trim size, a more readable font, and are printed on cream paper to minimize contrast, allowing readers to focus more easily on the text. This combined with an engaging, fast-paced story, will grab even the most reluctant reader’s attention. A definite must have for the Purim shelf of all libraries.

Kathy Bloomfield, 
AJL Immediate Past President, Seal Beach, CA

Editor’s Note: The Book of Elsie is a Spring 2023 Holiday Highlights pick.


Ester and Hester are sisters who live next door to each other with their pets Lester (a dog) and Chester (a cat). They love each other very much. That is until a new neighbor moves into the house across the street, and each young woman decides to bring the new neighbor a babka for Shabbat because “I bake the best babka in the world.” Thus begins the great Babka Bake-Off!

Both women and their pets show up at their new neighbor’s door with their babkas. They are greeted by Sylvester who agrees to be their babka tester. But who’s babka is the best? “Ester!...Your shvester (sister), Hester makes the best CHOCOLATE babka in the world.” “Hester!...Your shvester (sister), Esther makes the best CINNAMON babka in the world.” With that resolved, they all sit down to a lovely Shabbat dinner.

As they start to leave, Sylvester stops them to ask, “Which of you makes the best KUGEL in the world?” They both do, of course, and the Great Kugel Bake-Off begins.

This is a thoroughly enjoyable story by a master storyteller. Ms. Newman’s use of synonymous words, “Ester gathered and mixed” while “Hester assembled and stirred,” “Ester cut” while “Hester sliced,” throughout the story to describe the action, makes for a delightful tale destined to be a hilarious story-time read-aloud. Setting it during Shabbat with a new neighbor provides a valuable introduction to “welcoming the stranger.” The colorful illustrations reflect the range of emotions experienced by the characters from delight to frustration, joy to fear, pride to humility, the artistic Bobokhidze sisters do this story justice.

Back matter includes a detailed recipe for making both chocolate and cinnamon babka, including pictures of how to spread the fillings and twist the dough. There is also a short glossary. A welcome and unique Shabbat story that deserves a place on every library shelf.

Kathy Bloomfield, 
AJL Immediate Past President, Seal Beach, CA


Sukkot is coming to the small Ugandan Abayudaya Jewish community where Shoshi and her brothers live with their loving grandparents. We share the fun with super competitive Shoshi and her siblings as they build their own sukkah hoping to win the annual village competition for the very best sukkah. When a wild storm comes through it damages all the huts, totally destroying the opposing front runner’s sukkah. The whole village rallies, helping to rebuild this one, which wins the contest. But Shoshi doesn’t mind losing, as her grandmother tells her she’s already won since she’s made the best sukkah she could. Her competitive streak has mellowed as she learns, “Everyone wins when neighbors work together.”

Yogevo’s not-to-be-missed vibrant linoleum cut artwork combines seamlessly with the text, bringing readers into the village to experience the natural environment and day to day lives of the people. Exemplifying the power of the picture book, cultural differences are bridged thanks to the clear and engaging illustrations. The author is a member of the Ugandan Abayudaya Jewish community and is able to bring to life this diverse Jewish community accurately in a way children can easily relate to. The writing is clear and appropriate for the target audience in a smooth style that makes unfamiliar elements familiar. We learn about Shabbat traditions unique to this community such as baking “kalo” bread with cassava and millet flour and enjoying kiddush under the stars. For extra fun Shoshi’s pet goat accompanies her through the pages.

Generous backmatter includes a history of the Abayudaya Jewish community, a glossary of Luganda words used in the text and the lovely bonus of the Luganda text of Hinei Ma Tov. The community rabbi’s teaching about the lulav, with its three different types of branches laced together, much as people are joined together in a community, is a wonderful message of hope for our world.

Suzanne Grossman, MLS, 
Librarian, Retired, Morris Public Schools, NJ

Editor’s Note: The Very Best Sukkah: A Story from Uganda is a 2023 Sydney Taylor Honor book, the 2022 National Jewish Book Award winner for Children’s Picture Book, and a Fall 2022 Holiday Highlights pick.

Continued on page 32

AJL News and Reviews

March | April 2023

31

Hannah's extended family is not able to come to her house for seder this year and only Hannah, her parents and Mitzi (their cockapoo) will be there, so Hannah decides to invite her diverse friends to celebrate with them. Hannah's mom suggests that Hannah tell her friends that Passover is a celebration of spring, hope for the future, and a reminder of our history. Hannah's colorful and attractive invitations look as if they were drawn by a child which adds to the ability of children to relate to the book. Each attendee contributes to the seder in some way: Hannah's father believes Passover is about great food. Sammy, her best friend from India arrives first and brings a kite to symbolize spring. Ha-Joon from Korea brings kimchi, a spicy bitter vegetable, which Hannah uses as the bitter herb. Monique, her African-American friend, contributes song sheets of the spiritual "Go Down Moses." Rina, whose mother grew up in Moscow, brings homemade matza which her family used to bake in secret, because the Russian government did not allow Jews to celebrate Passover. Once the guests are assembled at the accurately drawn seder table, Hannah reflects on what each guest brought and how the gift relates to Passover.

The end matter includes the story of Passover and a glossary. The illustrations of happy families add a feeling of joy to the text. As a special bonus, interesting childlike drawings which illustrate parts of the Haggadah are interspersed throughout the book.

*Ilka Gordon,*
Beachwood, OH

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A pirate crew prepares their ship for the first night of Passover, cleaning the rails, getting rid of chametz, and setting up the seder plate. When a surprise storm moves in, they watch their matzah balls slip off the deck and sink into the ocean. The ship runs aground, but the captain finds a home that is about to celebrate their Seder. The pirate crew is welcomed to the Passover table, “The candles were lit. The kiddush was said. / The karpas was dipped. The hagaddah [sic] was read.” With the seder complete and the storm cleared, the crew goes back to their ship and sets sail.

Simple, lyrical, rhyming text makes this book suitable for even the youngest child and perfect for a Pre-Passover read-aloud. The soft toned, digital illustrations of wide-eyed, innocent looking pirates preclude any fear of buccaneers attending a seder — no looting, rowdy behavior, or “Aargh, Matey” to be found. While not essential, this charming story of an almost disastrous Passover seder should find a spot on the Passover bookshelf.

*Kathy Bloomfield,*
AJL Immediate Past President, Seal Beach, CA


In this enjoyable read aloud, Mendel is always messing things up. For example, when he makes latkes, instead of grating five potatoes and one onion, he does the opposite. Another time Mendel exchanges the Hanukkah candles in the menorah with sparklers, but Rabbi Klein has faith in Mendel, and asks Mendel to drive the Mitzvah Mobile with the giant menorah on its roof. Mendel is overjoyed to be given such an honor, but his happiness does not last long when he drives the Mitzvah Mobile under a low bridge and gets stuck. What happens next is a surprising Hanukkah miracle.

The colorful illustrations enhance the story and aptly show each character's emotions. Mendel is amusing and likable. Laws and customs of Hanukkah are subtly integrated into the book. Mendel and the readers learn the important Jewish value that it is in everyone's power to make a difference. Back matter includes a brief history of Hanukkah, how to play dreidel and a glossary of Hebrew and Yiddish terms.

*Ilka Gordon,*
Beachwood, OH

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*Editor's Note: An Invitation to Passover is a Spring 2023 Holiday Highlights pick.*

Continued on page 33

Very small children will be introduced to the Purim holiday by a bevy of cats making hamantashen and mishloach manot, dressing up, performing a Purim play, and going to a carnival. The rhyming text has a nice rhythm, the illustrations and typeface are large and inviting for a toddler story hour. The kittens are cute but sometimes the illustrations take on a bit of other animals in their features, such as a raccoon or an otter or something other than a recognizable cat. Despite this, the book should prove to be a popular Purim choice for cat-loving children and their parents.

Lisa Silverman,
Retired director, Sperber Jewish Community Library


Based on a tale from the life of Rabbi Yohanan ben Torta, this is a midrash (story) about how a simple animal taught the Rabbi the joys of Shabbat. Shoshi is a young ox that works with farmer Simon plowing fields all week long, except on Shabbat when Shoshi and Farmer Simon’s family rest and play during the Sabbath. When Farmer Simon decides to retire, he sells Shoshi to his neighbor, Yohanan. Yohanan is not Jewish and does not understand the traditions of his Jewish neighbors.

Yohanan thought that perhaps she was not feeling well, but the next morning, she was ready to go. Again, Shoshi plowed the fields for six days, but on the seventh day, no matter what Yohanan tried, she would not budge. Frustrated, Yonahan looked around and saw his neighbor, Simon, walking in the fields with his family. Realizing that it was Shabbat, he wondered if Shoshi was resting as well. He thought, “I am a clever man... she is a simple ox. Yet I work seven days a week, with no day to rest, no day to give thanks. Perhaps Shoshi is the clever one.”

After that, Shoshi and all the farm animals, along with Yohanan and his family, spend every Shabbat relaxing and enjoying the world around them. Yohanan eventually converts to Judaism.

Delightfully told using kid-friendly language, story time crowds will delight in Shoshi’s stubbornness as she “teaches” Yohanan how to observe the Sabbath. The charming, acrylic illustrations are very expressive as Yohanan frets and pulls his ox, while Shoshi stubbornly stays put, rolling her eyes, and digging in to communicate her intentions. An “Author’s Note” at the back of the book provides information about the story’s origins. It is always wonderful for librarians and families to have a new Shabbat book to read.

Kathy Bloomfield,
AJL Immediate Past President, Seal Beach, CA

Editor’s Note: Shoshi’s Shabbat is a Fall 2022 Holiday Highlights pick.

**REVIEWS OF TITLES FOR ADULTS**

Edited by Daniel Scheide and Laura Schutzman

**FICTION**


Love was originally published in Hebrew and translated by the author into English. This book is provocative, a quick read, and not for the faint of heart. Libby, the narrator and main character, is a sex worker in Israel, who talks in first person, second person singular, and second person plural. There is a narrative arch to her story of short vignettes between other sex workers, pimps, and clients. This narrative is interspersed between questions that force the reader in and out of Libby’s story and into larger questions of sex work, drugs, orthodoxy, honesty, and choices we must make. *Love* will be a quick read that will cause the reader to contemplate its subject long after finishing.

The book takes place somewhere in Israel — or is it everywhere? Libby is not a reliable narrator causing the reader to question if she is telling the truth and why she makes certain choices. But the

Continued on page 34
prose, which borders on poetry, is so lovely and thought provoking, it almost does not matter.

This book is not for everyone. Institutions with large collections of Israeli fiction will benefit from multiple copies, but book groups may find the topic too salacious. Fans of feminist fiction will enjoy the text as will those who enjoy learning about the rougher edges in Israel.

Dina Herbert, Alexandria, VA

Editor’s Note: Love was the 2022 National Jewish Book Award winner for Hebrew fiction in translation


A Castle in Brooklyn begins in 1944 with two boys hiding from the Nazis in Poland. Zalman, son of an architect, is talkative and craves connection; Jacob, son of a teacher, is pensive and dislikes the questions from the slightly younger Zalman. They become as close as brothers, and after the Holocaust, both immigrate to the United States and keep in touch. Zalman finds himself on a farm, while Jacob works in a factory in Brooklyn. Jacob meets and weds the American Esther and becomes part of her family's real estate business. During their wedding, Zalman comes to New York and stays with the newlyweds. What is supposed to be a temporary arrangement, lasts longer as Zalman helps Jacob design his dream house on a parcel of land in Brooklyn. Zalman both inserts himself into the family when a son, Gary, is born to the couple, and is encouraged to be part of the family.

But, as is always the case, life is never that simple or easy. After a family tragedy, Zalman leaves New York and Esther and Jacob's relationship is never quite the same. The stories are connected over fifty years with the Brooklyn House as its linchpin. Readers will find the tale interesting and intriguing, especially those who want to delve into what life as a survivor is like. The Jewish content is on the thin side; some of the supporting characters seem stereotypical and perhaps unnecessary. Reading groups will enjoy uncovering the layers of the story and this book would be welcome in synagogues and center libraries.

Dina Herbert, Alexandria, VA


Fans of Sarit Yishai-Levi's first novel, The Beauty Queen of Jerusalem, will adore The Woman Beyond the Sea. Set primarily in Israel, it tells the story of Eliya, the only daughter of a Sephardi father and an orphaned mother, Lily. The story weaves back and forth in time after Eliya's chaotic marriage and subsequent divorce, a breakdown, and a new love finding her way as a newly single woman. Eliya and Lily have never gotten along and their relationship is further strained after Eliya's divorce. Lily has no knowledge of her birth family; she was left at a Catholic orphanage in Jerusalem on Christmas Day and was raised by the nuns before running away to a Jewish boarding school. She both wants to learn about her past and is afraid of it. Lily marries her husband, Shaul, after school and never gets along with his Sephardi parents.

The main story is set in the chaotic aftermath of the Yom Kippur War. Eliya finds herself in therapy with a psychologist who works with traumatized soldiers. As she learns about herself and uncovers her mother's secrets, she also reconnects with her Sephardi grandparents and their heritage and loss during the Holocaust.

Fans of sweeping family stories will enjoy the book, alternating between first and third person narration. Book clubs will appreciate the conversations that will accompany the reading.

Dina Herbert, Alexandria, VA

NON-FICTION


This important work of social history investigates when the laws of the Torah became authoritative. Unlike an intellectual history, the author does not focus on when these laws and practices were first conceptualized, but instead, when they became widely practiced. Adler accomplishes this with a data-driven approach that demonstrates that “we possess no compelling evidence dating to any time prior

Dina Herbert, Alexandria, VA

Continued on page 35
to the middle of the second century BCE which suggests that the Judean masses knew of the Torah and were observing its laws in practice."

The text discusses dietary laws, ritual purity, figural art, tefillin and mezuzah, circumcision, Shabbat prohibitions, Passover sacrifices and rituals, fasting on Yom Kippur, Sukkot rituals and the lighting of the menorah in the Temple. In each of these examples, Adler provides evidence that the earliest time that these laws were unquestionably, and widely, observed was in the first century CE. Adler then goes back in time, seeking historical and archeological evidence determining when these practices could have possibly emerged. In each of these instances, the second century BCE is the time period with the earliest available evidence. This title also focuses on the Synagogue in the first century CE and how it was instrumental to the dissemination of Torah and its widespread adoption. The text concludes with an excellent summary of the book and after surveying the Persian and Hellenistic eras, explains why the second century BCE provides the most likely era for the emergence of what we would today recognize as traditional Jewish practice.

Although a scholarly work, Yonatan Adler writes extremely clearly and the book is well organized and summarized throughout. Therefore, this book is highly recommended for the beginner and the scholar alike.

David Tesler, Efrat, Israel


This volume, by the now deceased European-born Eliezer Berkovits, ordained at the Hildesheimer Rabbinical Seminary in Berlin and holder of a doctorate in philosophy from the University of Berlin, brings together scholarship and extensive reading in both Jewish rabbinic sources and classical secular sources. Rabbi Dr. Berkovits, born in Transylvania (contemporary Romania) in 1908, lived in England, Australia, and the United States, as well as in Israel. His experiences in these varied settings influenced his approach to interpreting Biblical and Talmudic writings and commentaries across the centuries by Jewish rabbinical authorities.

Rabbi Berkovits views Torah teaching through a framework of Torah-tolerant as contrasted to Torah-taught teachings. Torah-tolerant directives responded to social, cultural, and economic conditions of the cultures surrounding Jewish people and framed social prescriptions according to prevailing norms. In contrast, Torah-taught teachings, set forth directives with a much more profound regard for the personhood, personality and dignity of people, most particularly, women. Dr. Berkovits strongly promotes the view of the Torah as an evolving, and changing entity, Torat Hayyim, the Living Torah, to be interpreted and understood in the light of changing times.

Rabbi Berkovits applies his understanding to an ever-evolving Torah and its teaching to the status of women and considers Torah and rabbinic directives and prescriptions regarding the role of women in diverse contexts in this volume, the last of his nineteen books. He spends considerable time discussing issues related to marriage and divorce, encompassing the Ketubah or marriage contract, the get, or Jewish divorce, the status of the agunah (a woman unable to gain a divorce and hence unable to remarry).

Dr. Berkovits reviews the conflicting approaches of the Talmudic authorities and later commentators on both the obligations and the desirability of women reading the Torah, holding women’s prayer services, and saying birchat hamazon (grace after meals). His discussion of a number of these issues can be rather lengthy, and the level of detail he presents will not be of interest to all readers. On the other hand, the reader following the discussion along will gain an invaluable immersion in the nature of Talmudic and post-Talmudic interpretation and disputation; arguments set forth and countered, sources presented and dismissed.

Mindy C Reiser, Ph.D., Vice President, Jewish Study Center, Washington, DC

Kateřina Čapková and Kamil Kijek, editors. Jewish Lives Under Communism: New Perspectives. New Brunswick: Rutgers UP, 2022. 280 pp. $120.00 (9781978830806) HC; $44.95 (9781978830790) PBK.

This compilation of essays by historians, anthropologists, and scholars examines the forty-year period of Jewish life behind the former Iron Curtain. Chapters are listed thematically, according to the ways in which Jews of postwar Eastern Europe dealt with transnational loyalties, marginalization, and disidence, and show that not all the remnants — Holocaust survivors and their descendants — simply assimilated or emigrated to Israel or the West; rather, they creatively forged new identities.

The secular slant of these essays is apparent; there is no acknowledgment of the rabbis who worked underground to disseminate Torah, let alone the risks at promoting anything...
“counter-revolutionary.” While some religious practice was permitted in certain countries, and some charitable resources provided, such as prayer services, and kosher food, most communal life centered around Yiddish language, song, and theater, considered “progressive” enough not to oppose atheistic policies. Most of the local Jews had long harbored liberal leanings, even before the war. Nevertheless, while largely integrated into general society (as well as intermarried), they faced tensions: antisemitism and economic hardship in Poland; Nazi legacy in East Germany; and potential erasure of tradition.

The USSR, home to the largest Jewish population, was a sort of separate entity with unique challenges, including Stalin’s Doctors’ Plot of 1953, anti-Zionism, and a subculture of Moscow professionals. Birobidzhan is addressed, along with its futile attempts at autonomy. Also discussed are attempts at emigration by exploiting Jewish status. These essays point to many contradictions within that region and era.

Heavily researched and footnoted, this book is chiefly for academic libraries.

**Hallie Cantor,**
*Acquisitions Associate, Yeshiva University, NY*

Dalin, David G. Forward by Jonathan D. Sarna. *Jews and American Public Life: Essays on American Jewish History and Politics (North American Jewish Studies).* Boston: Academic Studies, 2022. 320 pp. $139.00 (9781644698815) HC.

For the past four decades, Rabbi Dalin has contributed to the genre of American Jewish history. This volume collects some of his wide-ranging scholarly articles and essays on participation in government and public discourse.

The book begins with the Founders’ relationship to the Jewish community (Washington, Hamilton, Adams, and Jefferson are analyzed), and Jews’ participation in the Executive Branch from the mid-19th century to 2020 (the original 2001 essay has been expanded to include the Trump and Biden years). Other essays discuss important individuals (Mayer Sulzberger, Cyrus Adler, Julius Rosenwald, and Louis Marshall), significant events (the appointment of Brandeis to the Supreme Court, the separation of Church and State, and the Nazi march in Skokie), and retrospective analyses of Will Herberg and Hannah Arendt. The collection concludes with short appreciations of Hank Greenberg and Sandy Koufax, both as players and as Jews who prized religious observance over the World Series. Dalin is especially insightful in his assessment of the roles of Mayer Sulzberger and Cyrus Adler, two giants of the period from 1890 to 1930. Their contributions to American Jewish life, particularly the growth of the Jewish Theological Seminary and the interactions of Zionists with the non-Zionist faction, have been unfairly neglected.

This important book describes the significant role Jewish leaders have played in American government and civil discourse, both in public settings and behind the scenes, over the past century and a half. The writing is scholarly but not overly dense. There is no bibliography, but the footnotes are extensive. It could be used by college and graduate students, and should be considered by large academic libraries. Regrettably, the price puts it out of range for general readers and smaller institutions.

Fred Isaac, 
Oakland, CA


This is a selection of writings from the pro-Israel website “The Elder of Ziyon.” It is vigorous and straightforward in its defense of Zionism and Israel and not without humor. For example, after providing an extensive section of a paper by an anti-Israel academic, written in opaque postmodern prose, Elder of Ziyon writes, “Did you get that? Neither did anyone else.” He covers a wide range of subjects, including, in part, the legal status of Jewish settlements in Judea and Samaria, the relationship of anti-Zionism to antisemitism, the intellectual shallowness and dishonesty of many academic anti-Zionists, and the hostility to Israel of certain NGOs. He does not hesitate to call hatred hatred, and thinks that the hatred of Israel, the notion that Israel is uniquely or supremely wicked country, and Jews do not deserve to be equal to other nations in having self-determination in their homeland, is irrational and causes anti-Zionists to see the world in a distorted way. This book is about a depressing subject but its strong, energetic defense of Israel is a tonic.

Shmuel Ben-Gad, 
Gelman Library, George Washington University, Washington, DC


The worst outbreak of plague since the Black Death struck Northern Italy in 1630-31, severely affecting Christian and Jewish communities, killing at least one-third of the
population. In Mantua and Padua, about half of the Jewish community perished. Milan expelled its Jewish population. Jewish rabbis, who were also intellectuals and communal officials, authored a variety of literary responses to the events, including chronicles, poetry, memorial prayers, sermons, eulogies, and tombstone epitaphs.

Susan Einbinder, Professor of Hebrew and Judaic Studies and Comparative Literature at the University of Connecticut, studies these mainly Hebrew works as a group for the first time. Einbinder, writing with the current pandemic as background, explores how individuals and communities were affected by the plague and expulsions, and what they chose to memorialize.

With a close literary reading of the texts along with historical reflections, Einbinder demonstrates that the authors of these memorials were not trying to chronicle “what happened.” They constructed these texts using traditional Jewish and Christian tropes of memorializing, at the same time reflecting their current scientific knowledge of medicine and disease. Einbinder argues that the early modern period had different views of individualism and community. In their writings, she demonstrates that these authors were conscious of both their public responsibilities and their self-images as communal leaders. At the same time, personal and family tragedy broke through their accounts at times to humanize their accounts. Through a reconstruction of sermons from the ghetto of Padua, she also describes how one rabbi treated the theology of plague and survival.

Studying the same events through different forms of presentation, Einbinder examines both what is included and left out in the reconstructions of the events, and briefly theorizes on why these works were forgotten. This title is highly recommended for academic libraries.

Harvey Sukenic, Hebrew College Library, Newton, MA

The second code is found in the book of Deuteronomy and the author traces it to the reign of the Judean king Hezekiah at the time the Assyrians conquered the northern kingdom and the subsequent exile and disappearance of the ten tribes comprising it (though there is evidence of some immigration to Judea from the defeated northern kingdom). Deuteronomy builds upon the Covenant Code but also teaches that the God of Israel cannot be seen, and is more powerful than other deities, eventually engendering monotheistic belief in a transcendent God.

The third code is found in portions of Leviticus and Numbers and is known as the Holiness Code. It emphasizes the inner life and the cultivation of a holy character. The three codes have much in common and the differences, perhaps, have more to do with emphasis and tone than content. Rabbi Feld’s consideration of each of the codes and their legacy is both sober and interesting. In his concluding chapter, “Final Thoughts,” he interprets the codes in a way consonant with the religious pluralism advocated by the liberal branches of Judaism.

Shmuel Ben-Gad, Gelman Library, George Washington University, Washington, DC


The conventional approach to law and religion is that each one is a separate domain that often competes and at times clashes with one another. This way of looking at law and religion animates scholarship and public discourse on matters of religion and state, freedom of religion, and freedom from religion. The essays that comprise this volume detail a less bifurcated approach to law and religion. Instead, an emerging view in this field is that law and religion could be viewed as overlapping frameworks in both the lives of individuals and society in general. Not only do law and religion share similar characteristics, they can even have a symbiotic relationship with one another.

The fifteen essays in this volume are highly technical and are not recommended for the layperson. This book is intended for scholars in the field of “Law and Religion.”

David Tesler, Efrat, Israel

Continued on page 38

Shannon Gonyou’s readable memoir tells a compelling story that is remarkable in its simplicity. It is not a story of a passionate, stormy transformation. Nor is it a story of conversion propelled by marriage or family pressure. Instead, it relates a gradual process which begins with dissatisfaction with the Catholic upbringing, a deeply rooted and fundamental attraction to Judaism, followed by a slow, cautious process of adopting recent practice through a formal conversion. There is no crisis, tragedy, miracle, that requires radical change, but rather an ever growing sense that God, Torah, and Jewish living speak to her. A “typical” middle class young woman comes to appreciate how Judaism attracts her, and she is willing to make changes in her life because of how God, Torah, and Jewish living speak to her.

It is also a story that takes for granted the embeddedness of religious commitments within interpersonal relations, friendships, and community. Lest we fall into the trap of thinking of spirituality as an individual’s relationship to God, Gonyou’s story reminds us commitments are shaped by senses of belonging. This book would make excellent reading for anybody contemplating conversion, those involved in teaching and assisting those who want to understand how someone born an outsider becomes an insider.

Yoel Finkelman, Ramat Beit Shemesh, Israel


The preservation of the Jews is really one of the most single and illustrious acts of divine providence...” (Bishop Thomas Newton, 1704-1782). Thus begins Hurwitz’s treatment of the Jewish people’s unique survival throughout the ages. Each chapter contains observations by non-Jewish thinkers such as Mark Twain, Blaise Pascal, Jean-Paul Sartre, Frederick Nietzsche and others, on the eternity of the Jewish people, their disproportionate contributions to humanity, and their perseverance and survival in the face of a continual history of persecutions and genocide.

Hurwitz introduces a model of the “ABC’s” of Judaism: A—Recognition of the Creator of the Universe, “There has to be an Infinite Being,” B— the Being loves Its creation and imbued it with...
an ultimate purpose to life, C- the Torah is the roadmap given to the creation, “the means’ for every human being’s ultimate success.” Into this model he weaves Jewish concepts of action, (“Hands-on Judaism”), “Chosenness,” Mashiach, Kabalistic ideals, Jewish Feminism, Identity, and other ideas. The work covers many topics using a brief and colloquial style. He teases with just enough discussion to spark the reader’s curiosity but does not enter the depths that a thorough understanding of each topic demands.

The author is a former American and former attorney who has since completed his rabbinic studies and currently lives in Jerusalem. The addendums include quotes from leading scientists questioning Darwinism and arguing for belief in a Creator of the universe, statistics of antisemitism throughout history, achievements of leading Jewish thinkers and artists, a detailed bibliography, and references for more learning opportunities.

The work is well cited but not academic and is recommended for Jewish high schools, community, and synagogue libraries.

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


There are conflicts in every religious person’s thoughts. Why does evil exist? Why do the righteous suffer? Why don’t we live forever? Does science conflict with religious beliefs? This book attempts to answer these questions. The author comes from a traditional, observant background, but explains the challenges in Genesis for everyone, Jew or non-Jew, religious or non-religious. Genesis is the story of creation, as well as the story of the beginnings of people, Jews, and Judaism. The author presents theological challenges to universal relationships, not just Jewish practices and beliefs.

For example, creation teaches us free will, reward, and punishment. While other books of Torah teach us laws and practices, Genesis teaches us what God expects of people. Many of Jaffe’s thoughts revolve around the seven Noahide laws. These laws of relationships, proper behavior, and justice are for everyone. This universalism based on Jewish concepts makes this book valuable for everyone. The book is very readable, and everyone can learn from it.

This book is highly recommended for all kinds of libraries, synagogue, high school, academic, and personal.

Daniel D. Stuhlman, Temple Sholom Library, Chicago, IL

Kleinberg, Ethan. Emmanuel Levinas’s Talmudic Turn: Philosophy and Jewish Thought. Stanford: Stanford UP, 2021. 248 pp. $90.00 (9781503629448) HC. $28.00 (9781503629592) PBK.

Emmanuel Levinas was a Jewish philosopher, Talmud student, the president of the Alliance Israélite Universelle in Paris, and a Holocaust survivor. He studied world philosophy with Martin Heidegger, whose ideas surfaced in Levinas’ Talmudic lectures. However, when Heidegger joined the Nazi Party in 1934, Levinas broke away from him. Levinas was able to combine his study of Western philosophy, Enlightenment Universalism, with the study of Talmud in the Lithuanian tradition. He gave Talmudic lectures and Torah lectures.

Kleinberg uses a double column presentation. One side has Kleinberg’s comments and interpretations of the background and ideas of Levinas. On the other column, Levinas’s ideas are present, based on his Talmudic lectures. The ideas are made available to a new generation of scholars who did not know of his work in France. The reader learns there are alternative ways to think about intellectual history and Jewish tradition.

This is a well written book, but the audience is limited to scholars and intellectuals who are interested in Levinas and Jewish philosophy. This text is recommended for academic collections and other libraries with intellectual readers.

Daniel D. Stuhlman, Temple Sholom Library, Chicago, IL


In this book, Krummel utilizes manuscripts such as the Psalms, texts by Josephus, the Mainz Anonymous, texts by the Venerable Bede, The Siege of Jerusalem, and many others to illustrate how Christian temporality was violently enforced on the Jews, as opposed to the use of the Jewish calendar. She ties all these martyrological episodes in Jewish history of the medieval period to the need for Christians to divorce the two calendars from each other, especially as it relates to Easter being tied to Passover as
Jesus was a Jew who celebrated Passover. The two temporalities clashed many times in the medieval period, even when Jews were not present such as in England after the expulsion of the Jews from that country. All these episodes are a result of the triumphalist narrative that claimed that Christianity had superseded Judaism and that the Jews had to be rescued from their blindness of this fact by force if necessary.

Krummel makes a convincing case using these and other sources that Anno Domini time still silences minority temporalities, even when it appears not to be doing so as the other calendars are allowed to be observed, such as in our modern era. This is, as she rightly points out, the CE system is essentially the Anno Domini under a different guise that is claimed to be shared by all, even though it is still tied to the Christian religion. She posits in the end that it may eventually be possible to create a universal sacred calendar, although how this would be accomplished remains to be seen.

This book is recommended for academic libraries which are looking to increase their holdings on medieval Jewish and Christian history, manuscript studies, and other related subjects.

Eli Lieberman, Assistant Librarian, Hebrew Union College – Jewish Institute of Religion, NY


During World War Two, thousands of care packages were sent to Jews trapped inside Europe. This diverse and scholarly compilation of essays covers the wide range of humanitarian efforts, proving that “packages provided a bridge between Jews under Nazi occupation, in the USSR, and around the world, thereby demonstrating ongoing networks of association, despite the war.” The essays, arranged by regions and regimes, discuss the arrangement of shipments to the ghettos and camps, as well as the enormous obstacle course rescuers had to navigate: bureaucracy, corrupt or anti-Semitic governments, inefficient systems and infrastructure, and constant terror. Lacking global basis or cohesiveness, actions were chiefly conducted through private individuals, like Michael Wichert, who negotiated directly with Nazi officials; and charities and organizations, predominantly Jewish ones like the Joint, but also non-denominational organizations, such as the Red Cross, which in 1944 was treated to a sham tour of Theresienstadt. Often the recipient was no longer alive; many packages that did successfully arrive ended up pilfered. Efforts were further impeded by Allied embargos: the U.S. government, following December 1941, preferred economic sanctions on Germany over saving lives. Tragically, the Jews, as “civilians,” did not fall under the rubric of protection granted to soldiers under the Geneva Convention. Nevertheless, although they failed to stem the Nazi policy of starvation, the packages, and their senders, provided psychological uplift and empowerment. Access to imported items affected class status within the camps and ghettos, enabling trade and bartering. Noted are the participation of neutral nations, particularly Sweden, which served as a major conduit, and the solidarity of families and communities who provided food, medicine, and clothing to the Transnistria camp in Romania, or to Jewish inmates in Vichy, France. Some essays describe the postwar aftermath including distributions to refugee or DP camps. Fascinating and insightful, this book manages to draw on a seemingly mundane item to reveal much about that dreadful era. This is an essential purchase for Holocaust collections.

Hallie Cantor, Acquisitions Associate, Yeshiva University, NY


In The Sages, Volume V, Binyamin Lau continues where he left off in Volume IV. Doing a massive historic sweep of Rabbis of yore, Lau gets into the little details of the lives based on where and how they are quoted in the Talmud. Rather than go in a strict birth order, or order of appearance in the Talmud, Lau has chosen to go with a very neat geographical order. Starting with Southern Babylonia, visiting the sages of Northern Babylonia, and ending with the sages in the land of Israel.

The book is a relatively easy read, something that can be read in long stretches or in short bursts. Not requiring that the reader had read the first four volumes makes it even more accessible. At times, it is a bit heavy on the quote blocks, but the casual tone of the book makes it a joy. When diving into each sage, Lau makes them approachable and so eminently human.

For any library with the first four volumes, this latest volume is an easy addition. For libraries without any volumes of The Sages, this newest volume makes a compelling case to buy the entire set. Perhaps a bit on the lighter side for the most serious historians, it could fit well in any school, synagogue, personal, or academic library.

Andrew Lillian, AJL Treasurer

Continued on page 41

As documented in Matthias Lehmann’s new book, Maurice de Hirsch was a prominent banker, railway maker, philanthropist, and Jew. That last, of course, kept him out of the top echelons of elite culture. This book is divided into four parts, documenting his life and family, his railway projects, his general philanthropy, and his attempts to set up an agricultural colony in Argentina in order to “solve” the issue of Jews being expelled from Russia and other areas. In many ways, Hirsch’s actions highlight the view from the “top” of Jewish society, but also from the upper class more broadly, as far as the situation for the Jews in Eastern Europe. The first two parts are more biographical, whereas the latter two have more of a global historical focus and will be of great value to scholars studying Jews, class, and migration during the 19th century. This title is recommended for research libraries.

Michelle Margolis, *AJL* President, Columbia University, NY


The participation of Jewish soldiers in the armies of ancient foreign lands, especially Rome, may seem culturally incongruent, given the repression, as well as bloody wars and confrontations. But this interesting book reveals the presence of Jews who did serve, and in many functions, local or regional militias, police, mercenary or auxiliary forces, frontier guards, and actual combat, during the post-Biblical era.

Chapters chronologically cover the Roman Republic (1st century BCE) to the time of Justinian (6th century CE), and the emergence of Diaspora Jews as a large and visible population among indigenous and military settlers. The author draws on contemporary sources, including Josephus, Roman law and literature, funerary inscriptions, Egyptian papyri, Christian and Rabbinic authors, and provides photos of archaeological sites and tombs with epigraphic tributes to the deceased’s achievements. Avoiding over-idealization of Jewish history, he offers some explanation as to why young males were willing or able to enlist: Hellenization, economic opportunity, slavery, or recruitment as a form of manumission. The Senate in fact, created a unit for Jewish freedmen. (There were even Jewish gladiators.) In addition, the lack of rabbinic authority, which had not yet crystallized, diluted adherence to *Torah* law. Nevertheless, religious accommodations were often made, for example, to allow the observance of kashrut and Shabbat, although conflicts arose over paganism and polytheism, and many Jews who distanced themselves from the mainstream in their host countries sought or gained exemption.

This book is readable and intensely researched; however, the one big frustration is the number of footnotes that appear in Greek or Latin. Clearly this book is intended for scholars of antiquity rather than average readers; for that reason, it is suitable chiefly for academic libraries.

Hallie Cantor, *Acquisitions Associate, Yeshiva University, NY*


Despite its contemporary association with Disney, the story of *Bambi* was always so much more than a children’s story. In this new translation, Jack Zipes, a noted scholar of fairy tales, contextualizes the story within Salten’s early twentieth-century Jewish, Austrian, political, and environmental experiences. In his introduction, Zipes critiques the American cultural misappropriation of *Bambi* as a story of sentimentality and male elitism. Taking the reader through the many complex twists and turns of Salten’s life, Zipes argues that the story is, at its heart, an autobiographical statement about the power wielded by oppressors over the innocent.

The story is influenced by Salten’s navigation of the challenges to his identity as a proud Austrian when his status as a Jew became more important in the shifting political sphere. Salten was a champion of animal rights, while also engaging in hunting for sport, a contradiction which Zipes explores as a fascinating glimpse into the complexity and nuance of human belief and behavior. The translation itself is lyrical and unsettling in equal measure, which, if Zipes’ introduction is any indication, Salten would have approved of. Reading the text after the introduction infuses the story itself with the feeling of an anguished cry about so many
in this elegantly written collection of fifteen essays, Rabbi Zachary Truboff addresses themes in the writings of two of his most beloved teachers, Rabbi Abraham Isaac Kook (Chief Rabbi of Palestine in the pre-State era) and the late Rav Shimon Gershon Rosenberg (or Rav Shagar, as he was referred to using an acronym). Both share a deep and profound commitment to traditional Judaism and Orthodox religious practice, while simultaneously drawing on trends in general philosophy and contemporary thinking. They are both thinkers who have profound influence on religious Zionist intellectual and cultural life in Israel, and on the country more broadly.

The most influential contemporary followers of Rav Kook emphasize his particularism, land centeredness, and nationalism, and they tend to downplay his universalism. Truboff, in contrast, focuses on the more universalistic themes in his writings, ideas that get less emphasis in contemporary discourse. In a particularly striking essay, suggestively entitled “Smashing the Idols of Orthodoxy,” Truboff focuses on passages where Rav Kook emphasizes the need to challenge, question, and even undermine established dogma, based on the theological claim that no particular doctrinal language or institutionalized patterns of behavior can adequately articulate our relationship with God and Torah. This leads to openness to people and ideas normally viewed outside of the canon.

When addressing Rav Shagar, we meet a teacher who has had a profound impact on Truboff directly. Shagar, who died in 2007, is a figure under-appreciated outside of religious Zionist circles in Israel. He is known for trying to articulate a commitment to a faith, observance, and religiosity in the face of “postmodern” indeterminacy. In an intellectual and cultural environment where it is difficult to arrive at absolute, unconditional, intellectual and spiritual commitments, Rav Shagar argues for a sophisticated and self-aware faith, one strengthened ironically by an awareness of diversity and the social construction of discourse. Truboff focuses on Shagar’s analogy to language and home. We are fully aware that our first languages and our families are to a degree arbitrary, and yet our commitments to them are not vary, in part because they make us who we are and we could not be anything else. For Rav Shagar, faith operates in a parallel way, grounding us and making our lives and interactions possible, even as we know that they could be different.
Torah Goes Forth from Zion offers an excellent introduction to the thinking of these two figures for English-speaking readers, who might find them otherwise inaccessible.

Yoel Finkelman, Ramat Beit Shemesh, Israel


In the foreword, Rabbi Laura Geller emphasizes that this commentary on an ancient text “is a book about contemporary life, a book about the Torah of our own lives as well as the Torah of tradition, a book that nourishes and challenges us by offering new ways of thinking about the questions we wrestle with as modern people.” For each of the thirty-one chapters of Proverbs, there is a double spread with the English translation on the left page and the Hebrew on the right, with plenty of white space for easy reading. This is followed by one or more essays, each based on a particular verse.

Rabbi Dr. Yanklowitz draws on diverse sources. In the chapter “The Creation and Application of Wisdom,” based on Proverbs 3:19 (“God founded the earth by wisdom and established the heavens by understanding”), he quotes the Tanya (a work of Hasidic philosophy, by Rabbi Shneur Zalman of Liadi, the founder of Chabad Hasidism), Craig E. Johnson, Rabbi Joseph B. Soloveitchik, Lawrence Kushner, Maimonides, Sogyal Rinpoche, Rabbi Jonathan Sacks, Anaïs Nin, Erich Fromm, Agnes De Mille (quoting Martha Graham), and Marianne Williamson. There are chapters about respecting parents, caring for the elderly, on righteousness and justice, refugees, and commitment to family and community. A reflection on Proverbs, Chapter Twelve, Verse 11, “He who tills his land shall have food in plenty...” touches on hunger and climate change. The back matter includes a glossary and the chapter notes. An index of the social issues would facilitate the book’s use for both reference and social action.

Rabbi Dr. Yanklowitz asserts that even though “God is mentioned here and there...the Book of Proverbs is spiritual but not religious.” He reminds the reader that “our task in the world is to navigate each situation with great care, morality, and spiritual integrity, in dialogue with, but not blindly obeying, tradition.” Excellent as both a resource and for group study, the book is highly recommended for libraries with Social Action/Social Justice collections.

Chava Pinchuck, Editor, Jewish Values Finder, Ramat Beit Shemesh, Israel


In this new work, A Targumist interprets the Torah, Iosif Zhakevich compares and contrasts the text found in the Hebrew (Vorlage) Torah with that found in the Aramaic Targum Pseudo-Jonathan TgPsJ. TgPsJ sought to provide an Aramaic translation (for those whose lingua franca was Aramaic) while elaborating on the original Hebrew text. Zhakevich’s investigation focuses on two approaches. He seeks first to evaluate specific similarities and differences between the Hebrew Torah (Vorlage) text and that found in the TgPsJ (the “vertical dimension”).

His second objective is to identify instances of consistency or, more importantly, incongruity within the TgPsJ itself (the “horizontal dimension”). He asserts that the underpinning basis for the study is both evaluative and analytic. To this end, he seeks “…to articulate the specific details in the various passages that suggest logical inconsistency in the text ... and then to draw conclusions about the concepts and processes that were in effect during the production of the particular portion of the narrative.”

Recognizing the enormity of the corpus, Zhakevich focuses primarily upon aggadic passages in the Torah and the TgPsJ text, rather than on the halakhic issues, which he recognizes are much more numerous. The first portion of the book deals with Genesis 19:33, the story of Lot and his daughters. Here, Zhakevich examines several versions of TgPsJ, and discusses rationale and the mechanisms of derivation for the divergences in translation of the text in question.

The latter portion of the book explores what Zhakevich describes as congruities and contradictions within the text of the TgPsJ. He discusses for example, variances in numbers, for example, the number of plagues in Exodus were 10 or 250), contradictions concerning actions such as the presentation of Joseph’s bloodied coat to his father Jacob, and incongruities surrounding characters (whether Esau was righteous or wicked). Zhakevich concludes that the contradictions found in the TgPsJ can be understood by considering them within the larger context of biblical and Jewish tradition.

With an extensive collection of indexes and a comprehensive bibliography, this volume would be an excellent addition to graduate libraries focusing on biblical and rabbinc research.

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