Statement of Solidarity

The Association of Jewish Libraries stands in solidarity with Israel and its people. We are profoundly shocked and horrified by the terrorist attacks that began on October 7. Our grief and sense of loss are deeply personal as so many of our colleagues have been directly affected by these heinous crimes. We mourn the loss of lives, wish healing for the injured, pray for the return of hostages, and hope for a swift end to this war. We are grateful to the international leaders who have voiced their unwavering support for the victims of Hamas’s brutality.

—Association of Jewish Libraries Board and Council, October 10, 2023

From the President

Dear Colleagues,

We’re still reeling from the horrific events in Israel on October 7, Simhat Torah, in Israel, and the weeks that have followed. Many of our members have been directly impacted, and we are doing our best to support them.

As an association and as Judaic Librarians, we can lean in to doing the work that we always do, especially around the sharing of accurate information. Disinformation began appearing almost immediately after the original attacks, and is continuing to be spread all over social media channels. We can teach about critical thinking, identifying vetted and accurate sources, and provide lists of books that are appropriate for teaching on the topic. As I’m writing this, our Love Your Neighbor list on Israel is already available, a list of works advising how to discuss the issues with children was shared to Hasafran, and a bibliography of sources has been shared with members. On the collecting side, we know that the National Library of Israel and the Berman Archive at Stanford are both collecting physical and digital materials relating to this time.

Here is a summary of information recently shared with members

Israel Updates for AJL Members

Membership Gala. We have decided to postpone our annual membership gala, originally scheduled for the fall. We had planned to partner with the National Library of Israel for a behind-the-scenes look at the new NLI building. The opening ceremony for the new NLI has been understandably postponed; we hope to reschedule the event with NLI when circumstances allow.

Town Halls. Two Member Only Town Halls were held the week of October 18. At the time of this writing, there are additional member-only town halls scheduled for October/November. Please check the AJL website for details.

Supporting Our Israeli Colleagues. After a request by an Israeli librarian for access to e-books for displaced Israelis, we reached out to Emily Drabinski at the American Library Association, who connected us to the staff at Overdrive. Overdrive has been providing free e-books to displaced Israelis, and we were happy to make some connections to colleagues there. Please be in touch if you would like more information about this, or if there are additional initiatives that we as librarians can support.

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Public Librarians Zoom. Public librarians were invited to meet and discuss challenges coming up around the current war in Israel on October 29.

Data Collection and Lists.
1. Love Your Neighbor Israel List: Part of the Love Your Neighbor series, which highlights books showcasing authentic experiences of Jewish life, this list is currently available for sharing.
2. Libguides: We are still looking for someone willing to pull together a “top three” libguide about Israel.
3. Book List: This list of readings aims to inform readers interested in learning about Israel, its history, and Israeli perspectives on the Israeli-Hamas conflict. It includes both academic and literary titles and does not claim to be exhaustive. It is a working document, and we appreciate feedback. Thanks especially to Katalin Rac, Rachel Greenblatt, Caroline Miller, and Sharon Benamou for their swift and productive work on this.
4. Archiving this moment:
   a. NLI: The National Library of Israel is collecting information about current events in Israel and abroad. See below.

   “During these difficult times, we in the National Library of Israel are working to locate and preserve online discussion involving the war. We are interested in any content that documents the events, including websites, forums, and social media accounts in Israel and any other country. We would be grateful to receive lists of relevant links via this google sheet template, or simply by email to webarchive@nli.org.il.”

   The NLI is also interested in collecting information from social media, so feel free to tag them on various platforms (there’s even a special archive account to tag on Twitter/X) or to send relevant accounts or links to the email above.
   b. Berman Archive. The Berman Archive at Stanford is collecting Jewish communal responses to this historical moment. Please send any emails bearing official institutional or organizational statements to thebermanarchive@gmail.com. More information is available on Hasafran.

   As always, please don’t hesitate to reach out to your AJL Board, Council, and fellow members.

   Michelle Margolis
   President, Association of Jewish Libraries

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After Making Aliyah, What I Learned about the Current State of Libraries in Israel

by Rachel Levitan, Design and Art Director, AJL

Following our Aliyah this summer I was searching for my local library. I found that Israel doesn’t have a public library system like the United States. I posted a message on a Nefesh b’Nefesh Facebook page to get information on libraries in Israel. The following interviews are from those contacts.

The National Library of Israel has a long history in the state of Israel, beginning in 1892, and continuing under different names up through today. In 1918 it was renamed the National and University Library and was under the auspices of Hebrew University and stayed there until 2007 when the Knesset passed the National Library Law moving it under the government.

The library is in the process of moving from the Hebrew University Campus to a new campus near the Knesset in Jerusalem on Jerusalem’s Museum Mile. In 2016 the new building was started and finally opened to the public in October 2023. Plans were underway for a big celebration for this event, but with the war that began October 7, those plans have been put on hold with only a “soft” opening happening.

Ahava Cohen, Head of Cataloguing Section of the National Library of Israel. Photo provided by Ahava Cohen

Ahava Cohen, Head of Cataloguing Section of the National Library of Israel, is responsible for the Arabic, foreign language/Russian, and Hebrew Cataloguing departments. Ahava made Aliyah in 1991. After losing her husband in 2010, she went back to school to become a librarian, specializing in cataloging. The books in the National Library of Israel (NLI) are organized using Exlibris Group’s ALMA system, which was founded at Hebrew University. This system supports documentation in both Hebrew and Arabic. The library has an extensive catalog of Jewish texts that are online, linking the system to over 130,000 books whose texts are on the internet, allowing researchers to find all hits of their searches on the internet. They also catalog books in other collections as well as books that are known to have been published but are no longer in existence.

The library’s collection is made up of books that have been published in Israel, Jewish, Israeli, and Islamic (humanist) classics and books with Jewish content donated to the library by authors. The library is different from American public libraries in that they do not weed titles. Two copies of every book are held in the library and do not go out into circulation.

With the move into the new building, there are new challenges for Ahava as she manages her staff.

“We have a multicultural staff, and we are working to keep it professional. Some of our staff has been called up and some of us are grandparents who are juggling our jobs and supporting our children when a parent has been called up.” To provide flexibility, staff work in the building two days a week and at home three

Continued on page 3
Innovative decor in the Matnas library is created on a shoestring budget.

Photo by Rachel Levitan

books, Corona 30,000 Israel support for

AJL ’ s Digital Conference 2023: A World of Possibilities was a huge success!

Kathleen Bloomfield, Immediate Past President, Association of Jewish Libraries

Our recent Association of Jewish Libraries (AJL) digital conference was held online June 19–22. Over 200 participants—librarians, archivists, educators, scholars, authors, illustrators, publishers, volunteers, and guests—gathered virtually to exchange ideas, learn, and network. The conference featured more than forty sessions by over one hundred thirty presenters.

Feedback from the conference attendees was tremendously positive:

ALL sessions received an overwhelming majority of 4 & 5 stars!
• 95% of conference participants plan to watch the recordings from the sessions they missed.
• 91% of conference participants gave the conference 4 or 5 stars overall.

• 9 out of 10 participants are likely or very likely to attend again in 2025.

Popular sessions included discussions by the winners and honorees of the Sydney Taylor Book Awards and the AJL Jewish Fiction Award; Highlighting Collections Around the World; Practical Suggestions for Addressing Provenance in Judaica Collections; the keynote address, “Etched in Time and Grooves: The Sounds of North African Jewish History,” by Dr. Christopher Silver of McGill University; the 2023 Feinstein Lecture by Dr. Malka Simkovich of the Catholic Theological Union, “Books, Letter-Writing, and the Written Word in Early Judaism”; and our closing program, a celebration of forty years of Judaica Librarianship, the Association of Jewish Libraries’ peer-reviewed journal.

Comments from those who filled in the post-conference survey attest to the value of attending and participating in the conference:

“As an MLSS grad student, I am glad to already have found a community that feels welcoming.”

“Consistently high quality.”

“Wonderful collaboration between librarians and scholars

Continued on page 4

AJL News and Reviews

September | October 2023
Rachel Leket-Mor Accepts Fanny Goldstein Merit Award at AJL Digital Conference 2023

As a chronically late-to-school student who consequently missed her first and only bibliographical instruction session at the Hebrew University’s Humanities library cons ago, I never envisioned myself as a librarian, let alone a 21st-century embodiment of the legendary Fanny Goldstein.

Thanks to AJL, I cannot see myself now but as a librarian, albeit an accidental one. I arrived in the United States in the late 1990s following my husband’s academic track just a few years before my first AJL Convention—as it was still called back then. I struggled to keep my own career as a freelance Hebrew language editor by using email to communicate with publishers—hardly a common practice in Israel at the time—while also teaching advanced Hebrew in the newly inaugurated Jewish high school in Scottsdale, Arizona. Then, due to immigration restrictions forced by our visa status, I was not allowed to work at all—so I took three graduate-level classes at Arizona State University as credit transfers to Tel Aviv University in fulfillment of my master’s degree, and then wrote my thesis. It was through one of those graduate seminars that I was introduced to Dr. Jack Kugelmass, a cultural anthropologist who turned out to be—to my sheer surprise—the ASU’s Jewish Studies Program Director at the time. At the end of the semester, he not only invited me to serve as the first Jewish Studies Bibliographer at ASU Library—and convinced the library to hire me without an MLS—but also introduced me to Zachary Baker, THE Zachary Baker, who brought me in AJL and unknowingly became my mentor.

Many of you did. Unknowingly. You, my AJL colleagues, became my teachers, my models, my heroes. Knowing nothing about Jewish Studies librarianship I learned from YOU how to process the large Zipperstein’s gift collection donated to my library, how to identify rare books, how to organize an exhibit, how to give a professional presentation—and ultimately, how to represent our community achievements in the association’s peer-reviewed journal.

During the years, I completed my MLIS, shifted positions at ASU Library, was awarded continuing appointment and then a full librarian rank, and joined other professional societies. Yet AJL is my home.

The current conference marks my twentieth AJL meeting. Not missing even one in twenty years, in spite of having to miss the birthdays of both my older sons, I kept coming not only for professional development. The life-long friendships I formed here have profoundly shaped my professional self and the person I am today. I will mention no names lest I forget anyone, I have so many friends among you.

I am proud of being involved in the shaping of AJL, either through committee work and Council positions, or by identifying new leaders for the organization. Most of all, I am grateful for being given the opportunity to edit Judaica Librarianship based on my previous editing experience and to—I quote from the AJL Mission here—"promote Jewish literacy and scholarship and provide a community for peer support and professional development."

I also thank my family for being patient with me. I may not have been the best mom or the most supportive wife while working on JL.

In celebration of Fanny Goldstein’s achievements, I would like to present here her trophy, made at the ASU Library MakerSpace. I will deliver it to the next awardee and hope they will pass it on to the following awardee, and so on.

In face of the challenges awaiting our profession in the age of Post-Truth, Artificial Intelligence, and rising antisemitism, my message to you all is long live the legacy of Fanny Goldstein! Long Live AJL!

Thank you.
Chapter Chatter and Member News

LIAJL CHAPTER

IAJL is pink!! Barbie Fever...Is Barbie Jewish? was our fall program, held October 24 at Temple Beth Torah. We hope you were able to attend this exciting and fun program. Our other October meeting was October’s lunch in the sukkah where we discussed highlighted new Jewish books from our AJL conference.

November’s programming will be held in Wendy’s synagogue for our annual librarian Shabbat. Remember we are people of the book.

December is our festive Hanukkah party. Discussion program will be who are the modern day Maccabees?

We’ll be highlighting books about Israel.

Wendy Marx

AJL-CANADA CHAPTER

In commemoration of Holocaust Remembrance Week, on Sunday November 19, 1 p.m., AJL-Canada will present a session titled “Bringing Stories to Life: How the Azrieli Foundation Preserves Holocaust History for Future Generations.”

Presenter Arielle Berger, Managing Editor of the Holocaust Survivor Memoirs Program, will tell the story of David Azrieli, and recount the origins of the Azrieli Foundation’s memoirs program.

She will outline how the Foundation has collected, fact-checked, and edited memoirs and diaries over the past eighteen years. She will touch upon the many educator offerings the memoirs program has prepared on a range of themes (hidden children, rescuers, the Warsaw Ghetto uprising, and more) and detail the academic conferences they have organized as well. This program will be followed by a Q&A.

Anne Dublin

New Member Benefit!

Thanks to the hard work of Katalin Rac and webmaster Sheryl Stahl, we now have an AJL Book Exchange available on the members-only section of the AJL website (hover over “Members only” and click “AJL resources”).

AJL members are invited to fill out this form to advertise and offer materials designated for de-accession in their institutions and collections. The information provided on the form will be accessible for members only. The AJL Book Exchange is a new initiative that relies on old traditions of salvaging books and other resources and finding them new homes, stewards, and readers. It aims to support collection development and management and the circulation of Jewish books by serving as an information forum and a platform to connect AJL members. It is not designed to advance commercial exchanges or exchanges for profit in any form or way.

AJL CAPITAL AREA CHAPTER

On Sunday afternoon, March 19, AJL/CAC, in partnership with Jewish Library of Baltimore and PJ Library, presented a program for the children in the community at the Jewish Library of Baltimore. The program included a reading of the book, a Q&A session, an art project, decorating picture frames, and an opportunity to purchase the book. Susan Kusel, author, and Shawn Rubin, illustrator, discussed their Sydney Taylor Book Award winning book, The Passover Guest, which won a Gold Medal in 2022. This beautifully illustrated children’s book, certain to become a classic, tells the story of a family who lacks money to buy necessities for the Jewish holiday of Passover. The date is 1933 during the depression with the unique setting of Washington, D.C. during the blooming of the magnificent cherry trees.

In their presentation, Kusel and Rubin spoke about their creative process and how they worked together to bring the story to life. Kusel discussed how she came up with the idea for the book and her research to ensure that the story was accurate. The program was a unique opportunity to hear the collaboration between an author and an illustrator. As they both explained, this does not happen often in today’s publishing world. Rubin spoke about his illustration process. He showed examples of his sketches and explained how he worked with Kusel to ensure that the illustrations reflected the story’s themes.

It was especially fascinating to see the preliminary sketches for the magician (actually Elijah) in the story. The children and parents were an enthusiastic audience and were eager to ask Kusel and Rubin about their favorite parts of the book, how long it took to create, and what advice they would give to aspiring writers and illustrators. Overall, the presentation was a wonderful opportunity for children to meet an author and illustrator and to be inspired by the message of The Passover Guest.

Kusel’s and Rubin’s collaboration serve as a powerful reminder of the importance of tzedakah, kindness and generosity, especially during times of celebration. Members of AJL/CAC worked hard to make this a successful program. A thank you goes to Rebecca Levitan, President of AJL/CAC, Ellen Share, Vice-President AJL/CAC, Jessica Fink, Executive Director of Jewish Library of Baltimore, Haim A. Gottschalk, and Gail Shirazi. A thank you also goes to Susan Kusel, author, and Sean Rubin, illustrator, who traveled from Virginia to give their presentation.

Ellen Share, Capital Area Chapter/AJL Vice-President
Seven Questions with… Bestselling Author Jean Meltzer

AJL News and Reviews’ Editor-in-Chief, Sally Stieglitz spoke with bestselling Jewish romance novelist Jean Meltzer about her books, life, and journeys.

Having earned a BFA from New York University, Tisch School of the Arts, Department of Dramatic Writing, Jean went on to serve as Creative Director of Tapestry International, an Oscar-winning television and film production company, where she oversaw the writing, development and production for over 250-hours of children’s television, and won numerous awards for her work. Jean subsequently moved to Israel to study for the rabbinate. She also became an outspoken advocate for the disease, Myalgic Encephalomyelitis/Chronic Fatigue Syndrome (ME/CFS). In 2012, Jean ended her rabbinical studies and spent many years homebound due to ME/CFS.

Jean is the author of the internationally bestselling book The Matzah Ball (MIRA, 2021), currently in development to be a feature film, and Mr. Perfect on Paper (MIRA, 2022). Her third book, Kissing Kosher (MIRA, August, 2023) was praised as “an unflinchingly honest romance” in a Kirkus starred review and “a winning recipe for contemporary romance grounded in real-world issues” by Publishers Weekly.

AJL: Jean, thank you for speaking with AJL News and Reviews! In books like The Matzah Ball, you tell stories about Jewish romance that both follow the genre of lighthearted contemporary American romantic fiction and are yet also fully representative of Jewish life, in its many iterations. How did you come to write these stories?

JM: My own personal journey to becoming an author of unapologetically joyous, super-Jewy and chronically-fabulous romantic comedies was both circuitous and unintentional. Even though I loved romance, and was a voracious reader, I hadn’t thought to pen a romance novel featuring Jews or chronically ill characters until I had an experience with my seven-year-old niece. She was sitting on my lap, and we were watching a movie, when she looked up at me with the sweetest and most innocent eyes and said, “Aunt Jeanie, you have a big nose. And big noses are ugly.”

Well, my heart just broke. Primarily because I love my nose. I have grown to love my nose. And when I look in the mirror, I see six-thousand years of my Ashkenazi history reflected at me. I also didn’t understand how my niece—a little girl raised by strong Jewish women, who went to Jewish Day School—had internalized this message that there was something wrong with the way we looked.

And so, I sat down to write a book for her. I sat down to write a Hanukkah rom-com, in the style of a Hallmark Christmas film, that would feature all the best of our Jewish community. I sat down to write a book where Jewish women never bemoaned the size of their nose, where the Jewish men were attractive and sexy, and where all the Jews in the story both survived and got their happy ending. And I called that book, “The Matzah Ball.”

The irony of this whole experience is that I never actually thought The Matzah Ball would sell to any publisher. Or go on to be such a big and buzzy book, adored by thousands, becoming an international bestseller, being optioned for film, published in multiple languages, including Hebrew. But it was in the aftermath of that success, receiving emails and letters from fans, that I realized how important telling stories that focus on Jewish joy—on Jews living life—are. Yes, I had written The Matzah Ball as a way to hold onto my joy, for myself and my niece, in order to give us a new type of story. But countless people needed this book.

AJL: Is finding that duality a challenge?

JM: The truth is, it’s very hard. In the broader world, I have to constantly make an argument for why Jewish romances are important, why we’re diverse books, why we deserve to be on lists and chosen as book club picks and placed in subscription boxes. But those same challenges also extend to the Jewish world, where I find myself constantly explaining why Jewish romances should be considered for Jewish awards, Jewish book clubs, and to be highlighted in Jewish magazines.

Personally, I think Jewish romance authors right now are doing some really excellent and revolutionary work in terms of shifting the landscape of our shelves. I also think our history of erudite Ashkenazi thinking, along with the literary tendency towards misogyny, hasn’t done romance authors, or the Jewish world, any favors. But I will tell you that on the ground, readers love our books. And, as more of these books begin lining our shelves, I hope both the broader world and the Jewish world will take notice.

AJL: In addition to bringing authentic Jewish representation to your romance novels, you also create characters living with chronic
illness. What kind of reception did you receive from editors and publishers about this? Was there pushback?

JM: I never received any pushback from either of my editors, or anyone at Mira, my publisher, regarding either the Jewishness or the chronic-illness aspect of my books. In fact, little known fact, my first editor—Emily Ohanjaniants—who edited The Matzah Ball asked me to go further in my description of chronic illness during developmental edits.

As for the Jewish aspects of my books, I’ve also never been asked to pull back. Beyond that, I think it’s quite remarkable that in terms of my covers, my publisher has never tried to hide the Jewishness of my novels. If it’s not obvious this is a Jewish romantic-comedy from the title, it’s obvious from the images—tiny stars of David and menorahs, a plate piled up high full of Babka, the long skirts and modest attire. I have also always felt very supported in terms of marketing, and publicity, and making my books a priority.

It does feel like I’m very lucky in this way. But I have always felt that my publisher and my editors, both past and present, trust me to understand my community, and how to write for my community. That includes both the chronically-disabled community and the Jewish community. And I guess what I have learned—and my publisher understands—is that authentic feeling stories can only come from authentic places.

AJL: What was your journey to becoming a writer?

JM: I’ve always been attracted to words. I can still remember learning my ABCs in preschool, and I remember writing my first story around kindergarten. However, I probably didn’t start thinking about storytelling as a career until the sixth grade. During that time, my English teacher saw something special in my writing and began having me read my short stories and humorous limericks in class. Seeing the reaction of my classmates—the way my schoolmates would laugh and holler at my tales, or cackle with excitement when I had a new piece of writing—essentially set my path. I knew I was going to spend the rest of my life telling stories.

AJL: Can you tell us about your experiences with libraries, both as a child and as a writer?

JM: As a child, my parents would often drop me and my siblings off at the local library after school. It was only a few blocks away from our house, but I would spend hours there, until my parents either came to get me for dinner or the library closed. What I remember specifically is that I would go through phases where I would only read one topic, author, or subject, taking out all the books on the matter. To this day, I still know the best place for fishing in a river, despite never having fished, and how to set a proper table if you are hosting a formal table!

I think there is really something special about getting lost in a library. It doesn’t matter whether it’s an academic library, like the one I used to visit at JTS, or perusing the romance section at my own local library—there is something about the smell, the spine of those books, discovering new authors—that just soothes my soul.

AJL: Readers love to discuss books with their authors. What conversations have you had with your fans? Are they influencing your writing in any way?

JM: I have received such overwhelmingly positive and beautiful feedback from my readers. Everything from how my books are the first time someone laughed in months, to how seeing a chronically-ill and disabled person on the page, being loved and valued, using a wheelchair, getting their happy ending, helped them to re-envision a better future for themselves.

Some people write me to tell me that my book has changed their relationship with Judaism, that it reminded them of the love they felt for their bubbe. Or, for the first time, they are seeing their own Judaism through the lens of a loving God and a beautiful connection. That my books have taught them to let go of guilt, and shame, and any feelings they had of not being “Jewish enough.” And some readers contact me to tell me that they never thought they would be a romance reader... until they picked up a Jewish romance!

I also get lots of messages from non-Jewish readers, too. People who are grateful for these access points and who see their own faith as divinely connected to ours. Or, they tell me stories about themselves, about a Jewish neighbor who was pivotal in their own non-Jewish youth. Or the way my book brought back memories of growing up in New York. Or, because of the trajectory of their own life, how they feel Jewish adjacent, part of our community, in some lovely way.

Truthfully, I am bombarded by messages. Not only via email, and social media, but hand-written letters.

I think after three books, I understand my reader. I think I understand what they have come to expect from a Jean Meltzer book. And it hasn’t changed all that much from what I did in The Matzah Ball. I write a story that is both high-concept but also personally challenging. I write to the goodness of the world, and the best of our Jewish community. I go to those difficult, but authentic places—because I live for my values—not my goals. And I educate, as well as entertain, because I have never seen education and entertainment in literature as mutually exclusive.

AJL: What’s next in your writing journey?

JM: I’m very pleased to tell you that my fourth book, Magical Meet Cute, will arrive August 2024.

Magical Meet Cute is about a proud Jewish woman and potter named Faye Kaplan, determined never to fall in love again after a string of bad relationships, who finds herself, and her community, the victim of an antisemitic incident. Desperate to reclaim her power (and after two bottles of wine), she heads to her pottery studio and crafts a man out of clay, etching all her desires for a guardian and protector, friend and lover, onto his skin, before burying the doll in her backyard. When a handsome and mysterious stranger arrives in town the very next day, and checks every box scribbled on her clay man’s belly—including the most esoteric ones—Faye is left wondering if she’s looking for reasons to avoid falling in love... or if she’s inadvertently summoned a golem.

I’m also thrilled to tell you that I am, once again, writing a Hanukkah romcom!!! While I can’t go into too many details just yet, my fifth book will publish in 2025, and will coincide with the five-year anniversary of The Matzah Ball. I’m so excited to bring Magical Meet Cute and another holiday romance into the world!

AJL: Thank you, Jean, for speaking with us! We can’t wait to read more of your books.
The best way to determine whether OPALS is a good fit for your library is to experience it in the familiar context of your library’s data.

- Request a demo: info@opalsinfo.net
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Lowest Total Cost of Ownership
Standards-Compatible
Experienced Support
Managed Updates
OPAC
Cataloging
Union Catalogs
ILL
Circulation
Inventory
Reports
E Book Management
Booking Feature
Equipment Management
Database Authentication Management
Digital Document Upload & Cataloging
Discovery Interface
From the Editor

My dear friends,

This is our first issue of 5784 and it cannot be published absent an acknowledgment of the horror and pain suffered by our communities in Israel, in the US, and elsewhere. On our first page, you can read the statement issued by AJL. Elsewhere in the issue, we are proud to share other news from the Jewish world of books, libraries, archives, and research. A highlight is a Seven Questions With... interview with best-selling romance author Jean Meltzer, that I hope brings back some Jewish joy into our lives. We also have member news, and of course, our mainstay, reviews of books for children, teens, and adults.

I want to thank our team of editors for their continuing dedication to this publication and to AJL.

Am Yisroel Chai.
Sally

REVIEWS OF TITLES FOR CHILDREN AND TEENS

IN THE SPOTLIGHT
EDITED BY REBECCA LEVITAN AND JUDY EHRENSTEIN


Review based on ARC.

It is 1943 in Lithuania. Vera is a Golem, but Her creator, Ezra is deeply bereaved by the murder of his daughter Chaya, who was fighting with the partisans. He uses kishuf (sorcery), forbidden by the Torah, and Vera is created not only from clay, but also with parts of Chaya—her eyes, her teeth, her tongue, her fingernails. She has bits of Chaya’s memories, something of a conscience, thoughts, and feelings. Vera’s mission is to exact revenge and kill Chaya’s murderers. Ezra has been hiding in the loft of a barn and creating Vera, consulting old books he salvaged from a genizah. When Vera senses that Ezra is gone, she leaves the barn. She enters the woods to look for Ezra and meets Akiva, Chaya’s fellow partisan and love interest. Vera’s mission is challenging as she can kill humans easily, but does not understand their behavior. “The abomination is you humans... You bring suffering and pain.” They learn of another golem in Lithuania, Mökkurkafli (from Norse mythology) who is devouring victims, and of the Nazis’ plans to create more. Vera finds their lab and destroys it, and in the riveting denouement of the book, Vera battles Mökkurkafli and helps to create another golem. High expectations for the 2022 winner of the Sydney Taylor Book Award in the Young Adult category (The City Beautiful) are met with a golem story set during the Holocaust that also recalls Frankenstein and Inglourious Basterds. Told from Vera’s perspective, the strong characters, vivid descriptions, and the sense of place and time in Holocaust-era Lithuania, all combine for an unforgettable tale. Some may be uncomfortable with the gruesomeness of Vera’s creation, the use of forbidden dark arts, or that the Lithuanians are portrayed as not only complicit, but active participants in the atrocities against the Jews, but this intricate tale of love and revenge is so compelling, so imaginative and so thought-provoking, it is not to be missed.

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

BIography


Set in the Soviet Union in 1951, Hidden is the story of an episode in the life of Reb Yitzchak Zilber when he was sent to a work camp and endeavored to keep Shabbos despite being expected to work seven days a week. Part of Hachai’s Junior Fun-to-Read Adventures and categorized as Level P on the F&P Text Level Gradient, the text is simple with only a few words that might be challenging to readers in third and fourth grade. The story is told simply with flat characters falling into stereotypes of righteous Jew and cruel non-Jew. Expressive illustrations with a variety of perspective shifts enhance the story. There are however several historical inaccuracies, including the labeling of the Soviet Union as “Communist Russia” and the depiction of characters in clothing more reminiscent of the early twentieth century than the 1950s. A foreword and afterword provide information about the protagonist’s life before and after the events of the story, though

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“A memoir and history like no other Holocaust story...Its eye-opening impact makes WHAT THEY DIDN'T BURN unparalleled, powerful, and essential reading that will ideally prompt debates and group studies about Holocaust survivors and Nazi experiences.”
—Diane Donovan, Sr. Reviewer, Midwest Book Review

“Dramatic, harrowing, and haunting"
-- The Jewish Book Council.

“A scrupulously researched and dramatic remembrance"
-- Kirkus Reviews
REVIEWS OF TITLES FOR CHILDREN AND TEENS

the historical significance of the protagonist is not made clear. The emphasis on keeping Shabbos by not working makes this book a good choice for libraries serving Orthodox children and a potential additional title for other children’s collections.

Dainy Bernstein, 
Postdoctoral Research Associate, 
University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign


The thirty-six brief biographies highlight extraordinary women, many of whom had to fight antisemitism and sexism while achieving their accomplishments. These women were selected because they also were inspired by the values of education, social justice, family, and community and "whose connection to Judaism was meaningful, palpable, or relevant."

The endpapers are covered in the adjectives that Merberg uses to describe each individual woman: “ambitious”; “notorious”; “subversive”; "radical"; "game-changing"; "resilient"; and other descriptors that let the reader know that these are not boring fact-filled biographies, but ones written to stir readers to action.

Merberg organized the biographies into the areas where the women achieved most success: activism, entertainment, writing, art, science, entrepreneurship, leadership, and justice. She then put them in order by birthdate, so that the reader can see the legacies that influenced the following inspirational women. The intent is to encourage the young people reading the many past achievements to want to continue in their footsteps.

At the end of the book there are lists of resources to learn more about the women in the book, as well as a “Jewish Geography” section with illustrated headshots of each woman and dotted lines showing the connections between them. This title is recommended for all libraries, and as a great companion to libraries that already hold Nadine Epstein’s *RBG’s Brave & Brilliant Women: 33 Jewish Women to Inspire Everyone* and Anne Dublin’s *She’s a Mensch! Ten Amazing Jewish Women.*

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


A middle grade novel-in-verse featuring 12-year-old Josh Kline, a new student who deals with having to publicly identify as Jewish after swastikas are spray painted on his rural Pennsylvania middle school. Along with Josh, there is also a new school principal, Dr. Harris, who is one of two non-white and non-Christian members of the faculty and staff. As a result of the hate, outside facilitators are brought in for a two week stand down with all of the students working in small groups.

Through the work in the small groups, Josh is finally able to tell others he is also Jewish and begins to stand up for others who face hatred and bullying. Josh also creates a new club at the school, the “Do More Club,” and begins to help empower other students to start making the world around them more diverse and accepting.

The facilitated group work and the activities completed by the Do More Club are described in detail and can be easily replicated by readers at their schools and communities. Kramaroff used many ideas from her work in the World of Difference Institute with the Anti-Defamation League and has been conducting random acts of kindness since she was in high school.

Kramaroff is a public school teacher in a rural community where she and her children are often the only Jews in the schools. Kramaroff uses many personal experiences in her story, including having had a past student who was very similar to the story’s antagonist, Gavin. The book is almost completely in lowercase and is extremely accessible. The new imprint, Rocky Pond Books, has a primary focus on mental health and social-emotional learning. *The Do More Club* is recommended for public libraries as well as other libraries serving public school students.

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


At the start of her seventh-grade school year, Al Schneider is forced to face her growing digestive problems. The pain has been getting worse and her bathroom trips are more frequent.

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Her mother makes an appointment for her to see a gastroenterologist, and Al hopes the doctor will be able to fix her so she can go back to hiding in the shadows with her best friend and neighbor, Leo. Al is an expert at keeping secrets; aside from her bathroom troubles, she’s managed to keep her attraction to girls a secret from everyone who loves her—her mother, Leo, and Leo’s mother, Beth. When Leo unexpectedly joins the drama club and their mothers start spending more time together, Al feels abandoned and joins an IBD support group almost out of spite. But that’s where she meets other middle schoolers who are perfectly comfortable talking about their bathroom habits and their queerness. After pushing away the people who love her in her attempt to keep her life compartmentalized, Al faces up to her mistakes and learns that letting others in and being honest about her emotions is a much better course of action. Despite the humorous title, this book is an intense emotional ride. There is very little bathroom humor, and the book instead brings life to the crushing embarrassment and fear of a middle school student just trying to be normal while dealing with situations like asking to go to the bathroom multiple times a day and soiling herself during gym class. Arlow expertly weaves together multiple storylines—about Al’s Crohn’s disease, her queerness, Leo’s desire to expand his friend group, Leo’s queerness, and their moms’ developing relationship—into a seamless whole about the angst of middle school, the comfort of family and found family, and the joy of being true to who you are. Several of the characters are Jewish, including the main characters, and they practice Judaism in a variety of ways, demonstrating the many ways that being Jewish interacts with other vectors of identity. This title is recommended for all Jewish children’s collections.

Dainy Bernstein, Postdoctoral Research Associate, University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign


Seventh grader Sasha suffers episodes of severe anxiety, what he calls “The Gray,” during which he will hyperventilate, cry, vomit, faint, or display any number of other symptoms. As a result, he is bullied by his classmates. During one particularly bad bout of teasing, he decides to “toughen up” and fight back as his dad advised him. Unfortunately, he seriously hurts Jeremy, a boy he has known since preschool, but who has become one of the bullies. Because his greatest joy is video gaming and coding with his friend Daniel, Sasha’s therapist thinks he is “overwhelmed with technology” and advises time away. His parents agree, and Sasha is sent unhappily to spend a month with his Aunt Ruthie who lives in the country with no Wi-Fi, no internet, no cable TV, and no video games.

Things do not start off well, as a group of townie kids immediately begin to pick on Sasha. But over time, he meets and makes friends with a couple of teens who are also “outsiders”: Izy, who wants to move to NYC to become a dancer, and Eli, a loner with a difficult past. He begins taking Krav Maga classes (Israeli martial arts) at the local synagogue (now community center). He works at a nearby ranch tending horses, one of which is weirdly nicknamed “the gray.” When a fight breaks out between Sasha, his friends, and the town bullies, “the gray” is frightened away and Eli chases after it. Everyone must put enmities aside to find Eli and the horse. Turns out Sasha’s issues are also a gift, enabling him to know what to do in this emergency.

This is a well written book, with fleshed-out characters, and an engaging story line that becomes so gripping it is difficult to put down. Sasha and his family are Jewish, and the Talmudic tale of Rabbi Akiva and the stone being worn away by water runs through the entire book, but Judaism is not the major focus of the story. Ultimately, this is a book about being comfortable in your own skin. Childhood and adolescent mental health issues are very much in today’s headlines. The Author’s Note in the back hopes that readers will gain insight into and empathy for people facing these challenges. It is wonderful to have a book with Jewish characters that addresses this subject. This book should be on the shelf of all Jewish and public libraries with a wide-ranging middle grade collection.

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


Twelve-year-old twins Sammy and Matty Puttermans come from an extended family of Houston Astros superfans, and their lives revolve around playing baseball and rooting for their team. When their home is tragically destroyed in Hurricane Harvey, the twins are forced to move in with their cousin Becky. The tragedy exposes fissures within the family: Matty is facing the fact that he might be gay and how that impacts his identity as an athlete, Sammy is mourning the loss of her home and the fractured closeness with her brother, and Becky feels estranged and unkindly toward her...
cousins and worries that baseball is overshadowing her upcoming bat mitzvah. But as the Astros advance to the World Series, each member of the Putterman family slowly repairs the schisms in their relationships and comes together to celebrate Becky’s bat mitzvah in awesome Putterman style. This story is told in alternating viewpoints, and each of the three teens have a clear and relatable voice. The book shines brightest when dealing with themes of trauma and change. Sammy’s anger and sadness about the loss of her home, Matty’s inner turmoil about his sexuality, and both twins’ struggle with finding independent identities feel authentic and poignant. Though the story is character driven, there is plenty of action. The many side plots, such as Becky’s cat-themed Instagram page, her struggle writing her bat mitzvah speech, Matty’s publicizing Sammy’s private journal, and the twin’s relationship with the head of security at the stadium, to cite a few, can be distracting from the book’s strong emotional center. Sadly, there is a need for realistic children’s fiction that deal with the shock of environmental disaster. This, as well as the engaging characters and strong Jewish representation, make The Puttermans are in the House a first pick for school, synagogue, and public libraries that cater to older elementary and tween readers.

Laurie Adler, Hewlett Woodmere Public Library, Woodmere, NY


Eleven-year-old Ellie loves Lukshen, her family’s kosher deli, so when she learns that it may need to be sold, she sets out to save it. This welcome, mostly light middle-grade novel shows a tween embracing her Jewish heritage and community, with ideas including hosting a nightly minyan at Lukshen. Friendship drama and concerns about her grandparents’ health round out the story. Ellie and her friends sometimes sound older than they are as they discuss a restaurant developer’s plan to revitalize their town; the novel does acknowledge Ellie’s tendency to talk on adult problems. Black-and-white illustrations are interspersed, as are excerpts from Ellie’s “goals journal” and, of course, recipes.

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


Natty, short for Natanya, and her father have moved in with her grandparents, and she’s starting a new middle school. Natty is relentlessly positive about everything, and she quickly decides the school needs a pep club and a pep rally. The mostly disaffected students think Natty and her ideas are strange, but several concede it’s fun to make up cheers. Natty has a frenetic, upbeat personality. Her reluctance to dwell on anything less than happy causes her two closest friends take her to task for barely listening to their problems and for offering only useless platitudes. It is revealed that her behavior is masking deep sorrow over her mother’s depression and separation, which Natty finally admits when her pep rally is canceled due to a teacher’s strike. It’s mentioned that she’s the only Jewish student in the school, and possibly hers is the only Jewish family left in the economically depressed town. Her grandmother states she’s looking for a synagogue in the area, so Natty can begin bat mitzvah plans, but nothing more comes of that. This well-meaning but not entirely believable story is best for larger public libraries.

Carla Kozak, Retired Children’s Librarian, San Francisco


Salman is a twelve-year-old boy from Baghdad in 1951. He swims in the River Tigris and dreams of winning Olympic gold for Iraq. So when his family and friends tell him that Iraq is no longer safe for Jews and they have to take the one-year window they’ve been given to leave Iraq, aided by the Zionists promising to deliver them to the Promised Land, Salman doesn’t feel happy or hopeful. He just feels miserable because he “couldn’t pack the river in his bag.” Their new home in Israel turns out to be an immigrant tent camp with no electricity, no

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furniture, no running water, and barely enough food (which is served by the Ashkenazi Jews in charge and is completely unfamiliar to the Arab Jews), but Salman’s parents are so obviously beaten down that he can’t even bring himself to say “I told you so.” Compelled to choose a new name, Shimon, and discouraged from speaking Arabic in favor of Hebrew, Salman struggles to maintain his identity while hustling every way he can to help bring food to his family. Even his identity as a swimmer is challenged when Zohar, the Ashkenazi boy who leads the others in the children’s club in their mocking and degrading of the Arab Jews, beats him at a race in the unfamiliar salty and choppy waves of the sea, so unlike Salman’s beloved Tigris. Eventually, Salman’s father manages to rent an apartment in Jaffa, where Salman feels at home among the many Arab residents, Jewish and Muslim. His new friend Musa coaches him in swimming in the sea, and to everyone’s delight, including the other Ashkenazi kids from the club who had grown tired of Zohar’s bigotry and genuinely like their new Arab Jewish friends, Salman beats Zohar in a race during a community event.

As the author notes, the story of Arab Jewish immigration to Israel in the early days of the newly-established Jewish State is not well known among Ashkenazi Jews of Israel and America. Through Salman’s child eyes, Halahmy illustrates some of the complexities experienced by these Arab Jews. She also provides context and a glimpse of other perspectives through secondary characters including Ilana, an Ashkenazi Jew who stands up to Zohar’s bigotry, Yizhak, an Ashkenazi Jew from Poland who survived the Holocaust and has a blue number on his arm, and Musa, the Palestinian boy who befriends Salman. No overt political statement is made in this book, and no one is a hero or villain. Instead, this book wonderfully and sensitively presents the lived experience of a child caught up in the effects of politics and trying to figure out how to hold onto joy and community amidst the hardships. A Boy from Baghdad is recommended for all Jewish children’s collections.

**Dainy Bernstein,**  
Postdoctoral Research Associate,  
University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign

Zippy (Zipporah Chava McConnell) is writing a book, which probably is the best way to describe everything that happens in the year she starts seventh grade, turns 13, has a bat mitzvah, and conjures an ibbur, a ghost. The bat mitzvah plan comes as a surprise to Zippy, who doesn’t like surprises; her loving but disorganized parents are minimally observant. It’s an interesting and important portrayal: b’nai mitzvah study for adolescents who don’t have a background in Hebrew or Shabbat services, thus are not sure of their connection to any part of it, and it’s handled beautifully by both Rabbi Dan, who welcomes her to be a part of the Jewish community, and by Zippy, who is sincerely interested in the traditions, especially the more she explores them.

More problematic is her parsha, Mishpatim, which isn’t favorable toward witchcraft. Zippy is serious about sorcery, and about the powers she’s had for some years. When she finds an old red book with blank pages and odd-looking Hebrew letters on a scrap of paper inside, she sounds out the words during Tashlich, and suddenly Miriam is there, in pain, and empty of memories. All of this works, as does Zippy’s suddenly complicated relationship with her best friend, how she feels about the High Holy Days, how she holds her parents to task about their assumptions about her while still loving them, and most of all, how she and Miriam explore their connection, which helps Zippy explore her own place in the world. The cover illustration, while attractive, makes Zippy look around 10, instead turning 13. This book deserves to find its readers; the cover and the title might lose some of those in the older range. This title is recommended for all libraries.

**Carla Kozak,**  
Retired Children’s Librarian,  
San Francisco


EARLY chapter books with Jewish themes are hard to find. This excellent historical fiction book about secret Jews in Portugal during Inquisition times is an appealing, well-told story for children who enjoy reading about history and far-away places. Young Felipe Alonso has both an “inside” and “outside” name. Felipe is the name he uses to navigate the world of anti-Jewish Lisbon in the early 16th century, while he and his family long to live freely in a more tolerant country. His mother tries not to use his outside name in general, and just whistles for him instead. His inside name is kept secret from the reader until their escape to Belgium, which is assisted by “La Senora” (aka the famous philanthropist, Dona Gracia Nasi). The author provides a real sense of place, of family, of the dangers of life as a Converso, and surprises regarding who is willing to help. The new vocabulary
words kids won’t know (like caravel, Inquisition, and Converso) are starred and footnoted at the bottom of the page. The bright, watercolor illustrations are a standout for an early chapter book and simply stunning in how they beautifully convey the historical era and the emotional heft of the narrative. Clearly the illustrator did intense research to accurately depict the clothing, architecture, and Iberian-Sephardic color palette of the 1500s. The pages depicting a map of the family’s escape should delight map-loving kids while also providing very good historical information. The historical note at the end of the book provides even more. In six, short, readable chapters, this exciting story is a notable success and will fill a much-needed gap in the Jewish historical fiction section of the library.

Lisa Silverman, Retired Director, Sperber Jewish Community Library

GOD AND PRAYER


The sh’ma is the foundational prayer of the Jewish people. It is the first prayer a child learns because it embodies the love and emotional attachment to G-d by every Jew on his own level. It is as accessible to the young child as it is to the adult. We are commanded to teach it to our children every day when we “lie down and rise up” so that it becomes a constant reminder of the absolute unity of G-d in our religion.

Rabbi Alyson Solomon cleverly introduces the sh’ma to children in her latest picture book, Listen Sh’ma. “Sh’ma” literally means “listen” or “hear.” Solomon stretches out the sounds of the sh’ma and links them to the sounds and feelings of familiar bedtime rituals. The first syllable “shhh” shows children over several pages splashing in a warm bath, zipping into fresh jammies, enjoying bedtime stories, and warm milk. “Mmmm” is the sound of belly breaths and hugs right before sleep. “Ahhh” is the sound of smiling joyfully, in bed at last and “stretching long legs under cozy covers.” Solomon invites the lap sit reader to both hear and feel this important prayer that has implicit in it “the sound of singing songs of love and prayers for peace.”

The beautiful illustrations by Bryony Clarkson were created using a combination of cut-paper collage, acrylic and watercolor paint, and color pencil. They perfectly complement the author’s message of calm, joy and love. The characters in each spread represent a cultural mix of humanity (including an adult in a wheelchair) that underscores the universality of the sh’ma.

Listen, Sh’ma can be paired with Rabbi Solomon’s previous picture book, Thank You: Modeh Ani. Both are essential purchases for all homes with young children and school and synagogue libraries.

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


Do you remember Junior High? Jordan Sonnenblick does. And to hear his stories, it was both hilarious and terrible! Moving into Sixth grade is tough. So many more kids to know, different teachers to remember, and puberty right around the corner. It’s a lot to take in, and Sonnenblick recalls all of it, in this fictional autobiography. From the friends (and enemies) to innumerable trips “to the office,” this book, a followup to The Boy Who Failed Show and Tell (Scholastic Press, 2021), is a memorable journey through the academic year. There’s even a first girl-friend who becomes a real friend (maybe). Jordan is bright and curious, accident-prone, a funny pre-teen with an eye for the odd-ball and a way to make the ironic tragic and the sad poignant. There are even a few specific markers, including John Lennon’s death (December 1980), for those who want them. Regrettably, there’s almost no Jewish content. Jordan is dragooned into Bar Mitzvah training, but there are only a couple of scenes there, and the process is not integrated into his everyday life. Jordan talks about his family in Jewish terms, but it’s intermittent and not always convincing.

As a novel for middle-schoolers, this one is a winner. It’s a fun read that boys should connect to. Regrettably, there’s not enough Jewish content to recommend highly. School and synagogue librarians should consider it, but don’t expect more than a few waves to Judaism.

Fred Isaac, Oakland, CA

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HOLOCAUST & WORLD WAR II


The impact of the Nazi regime on Jews of North Africa has long been under-studied. In a new book, Aomar Boum and Nadjim Berber provide a compelling and accessible approach to the topic in the form of a graphic novel. Black and white drawings illustrate the story of Hans Frank, a Jew of both Ashkenazic and Mizrahi background, who gets swept up in the Nazi invasion of France and the ripples throughout French colonial holdings. The story itself is fiction, but based on multiple true stories. In graphic detail, Berber’s drawings show the heat of the desert and the devastation of Jews and Muslims under French and Nazi control, bringing life to a little-known piece of the Holocaust. Given the many pieces of the story, the book would have benefited from a bibliography for those interested in learning more about the topic using primary and secondary sources, including Boum’s own The Holocaust and North Africa (with Sarah Abrevaya Stein), but overall is a very clear and impactful introduction to the topic through one man’s personal journey.

Michelle Margolis, Columbia University, New York, NY, AJL President


This Holocaust picture book, based on true stories, puts a twist on the hidden child memoir by letting wits dominate fear. Lower elementary readers follow Natalie, a girl their age, as she listens to adults, picks up clues, then saves herself and younger sister from imminent danger. The action jump starts when Jewish children from Paris, hiding in a French country barn, see Nazi soldiers. Natalie registers their arrival because she daily watches the town crossroads through a crack in the barn wall. She understands what the soldiers say because German is like Yiddish. The girls are warned never to let anyone know this as a French child in the countryside would not know German. When the girls venture to town, to the store for candy or the vet to cure a pet pig, they hear the adults lie when Nazis ask about them. A Nazi officer corners Natalie, who does not respond to his German; when he switches to French she repeats the adults’ lies. He then lets the girls go. At home, a jeep of soldiers with an American flag stops to give them chocolates. The girls know these are rescuing Americans because the grocer connected the U.S. flag to peppermint stripes.

The situation is scary, but showcasing quick thinking offers a less frightening presentation of this hard topic. Details of time and war are not included, but the vignette obviously takes place after D-Day 1944. Adults can compute these children have been hiding almost four years and are anxious to get out any chance they get. Realistic black and white illustrations lend calm as they parallel the matter of fact tone of the text. The author’s note provides family background and maps. The book is an additional purchase for the Holocaust picture book shelf in synagogue and religious school libraries.

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


Through Hood’s beautiful trademark literary style of writing in free verse, she relays the powerful true story of how Danish gentiles fought back against the Nazi occupiers during World War II, saving 94% of their Jewish citizens. While many countries were outraged when the Germans occupied their country, sadly, there was little substantial group resistance. Not true in Denmark! Over 30,000 everyday law-abiding citizens listened to their moral compass and were actively involved with hundreds of acts of sabotage in resistance to their German occupiers. This included intentionally sinking 32 of their warships rather than letting the Germans gain access. When the rumor of a round-up scheduled to take place on Rosh Hashanah in 1943 was leaked, many of the Danes, including the king, were determined not to let this happen to their fellow countrymen. The underground resistance pivoted their attention from sabotage to mobilizing safe houses and boats that would ferry Jews across to Sweden, which agreed to welcome the Jews. As a result, on the night of the round-up, very few of the 8750 Jews were home. Danes from all walks of life hid Jews,
A young boy has warm memories of past Sukkot celebrations with neighbors and sleeping in his yard underneath the stars. But he and his mother have just moved into a 17th floor city apartment, and his mood is as blue as his favorite blanket, still packed away or even worse, left behind at his old house. His mom is portrayed with gentle wisdom, distracting him with a walk through a city park, the trees ablaze with autumn colors. She shares tales of unusual sukkahs and the reminder that the Jewish people have always found inventive ways to keep their holidays, even in times of movement and displacement. Their ability to make new places feel like home resonates with the boy, who comes up with his own novel idea for a sukkah built with moving boxes, branches, imagination, and the comfort of the found blanket. Moving is always challenging, but this child’s sense of belonging to his religion, his mom, and a rich Jewish tradition promises to make for an easier transition.

Gloria Koster, Retired School Librarian – New Canaan, CT Public Schools
watching the pot as the ingredients get higher and higher. At the end of the book are several activities such as a crossword puzzle and a maze which are appropriate for older children who might read the book to their younger siblings. This title is recommended for libraries serving children familiar with traditional Orthodox dress, but accessible to all due to the warmth of the soup being made and the familiar refrain.

Ilka Gordon,
Beachwood, OH


Gil and Nuri’s Uncle Haim makes them a huge wooden dreidel with a secret compartment. The family debates what should be hidden in the dreidel, as Mitzi the cat curls up to take a nap on the sofa. Gil decides he will take it to his school Hanukkah party, and whoever has the best idea of what to hide will win a prize. Gil goes to school and tells everyone he has a surprise for the party, but when he returns home, he cannot find the dreidel. The family looks everywhere, but no dreidel. Just as Gil resigns himself to go to the party without the dreidel and goes to get his coat, the dreidel is found at the bottom of the coat closet.

And what is in the secret compartment? Mitzi’s four kittens! Gil goes to the party and tells his classmates about the extraordinary dreidel, and several of them go to Gil’s house to see Mitzi and her kittens, who are named Nun, Gimmel, Hay and Pes, after the letters on the dreidel (in Israel). Devorah Omer (1932-2013) wrote over one hundred books for children, garnering many awards including the 2006 Israel Prize for lifetime achievement. Aviel Basil has illustrated more than fifty children’s books. Omer’s text, which originally appeared in a compilation of stories (in Hebrew) tells a sweet story of family, Hanukkah, and surprises. Basil’s 50s-inspired illustrations, in shades of orange and green, give the pictures a funky, retro vibe, and the use of different perspectives and pages with no text add to the excitement of finding the dreidel with the adorable kittens inside. Despite the abundance of Hanukkah books, find a place on the shelf for this one that includes some Israel culture, a mystery, and best of all, kittens.

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


Through parallel stories, Ho explains the differences and the many similarities between how his family celebrates Rosh Hashanah and the Lunar New Year. The contrasts are displayed either split down the center of a page or on full left-right page spreads. Scurfield uses more white and blue colors in her illustrations representing Rosh Hashanah and reds and oranges for her Lunar New Year illustrations, with a mix of both when highlighting commonalities.

Ho’s “Author’s Note” highlights the universal ideas celebrated by Chinese and Jewish cultures and hopes that all readers can find themselves also relating the same ideals: family, community, hope, and renewal. There is also an eight page “Visual Glossary” giving much deeper details about the different aspects visually portrayed in the book, both Chinese and Jewish.

Ho converted to Judaism as an adult and modeled his book off the dual celebrations his children experience. Scurfield is half-Chinese, and her stepfamily is Jewish, and was excited to explore both aspects of her own family as well. Scurfield used cut paper overlaying vibrantly colorful illustrations. Great addition to any holiday picture book collection.

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


Fourth in the Kayla and Kugel holiday series, Kayla helps her family build and decorate their sukkah in the backyard. Kayla enthusiastically helps with the decorating and simple sentences describe what is occurring on each page. Kugel, her dog, often interferes and Kayla patiently explains to Kugel each part of the preparations of getting a sukkah ready for Sukkot.

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Koffsky provides the background story of Sukkot and uses two pages to provide a side-by-side comparison of an illustration of an ancient hut in the desert with Kayla's family sukkah. As in the previous Kayla and Kugel books, brightly colored illustrations help highlight the lively and lovely puppy that Kugel is. Koffsky also provides an endnote with more details about Sukkot and provides questions and suggestions for how to make Sukkot more enjoyable and meaningful to families. This title is recommended for libraries with holiday picture book collections.

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


A new holiday picture book, geared to young readers attached to fairy tales, presents a Yom Kippur story without once using the words Judaism, Jew, or Jewish. In the plot, Wolf sets out looking for someone to eat after services. He encounters recognizable literary characters from familiar secular tales. Wolf helps Red Riding Hood and her grandmother—nicely including the fact if you are ill you need not fast—and fixes the houses of the Three Little Pigs. Wolf gets a warm feeling in his heart when he realizes it is better to do good than eat good people; he loves that even a Big Bad Wolf can change for the better. This story universalizes this special day particular to Jews. General values are clearly delivered to targeted readers. Animals fast, go to synagogue, sing with the animal cantor, hear the animal rabbi talk about changing for the better, pray until the shofar sounds, ask each other for forgiveness, say sorry. Nowhere in this amusing story about changing for the better, pray until the shofar sounds, ask necessary definitions. The pages are laminated for little hands which might) explains t’shuva, another word not in the actual tale, as a “Jewish tradition.” It notes Yom Kippur is a “good opportunity” to promote this idea, but does not share that t’shuva is the theme of the High Holidays. The mobile art arrives in a wonderful palette; fall colors and turning leaves support the theme of people turning. The values are delivered as humane moral guides, when they should come across as Jewish precepts through and through. A charming story, but should be considered an optional purchase.

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


With rhyming text and lovely, engaging illustrations, the reader participates with a family celebrating the eight nights of Chanukah. Every night provides a different look at Chanukah traditions: telling the Macabee story and the miracle of the oil, dreidel spinning, latke making, Chanukah gelt giving, doughnut (sufganiyot) eating, celebrating with family, and receiving gifts. The repeating verse, “Hold the shamash tall and proud, Say the brachos clear and loud, Add another flame each night, Menorah twinkling, shining bright,” connects the nights together. The charming, true-to-life illustrations reflect an Orthodox family celebrating the various aspects of Chanukah. While the language is straightforward, there are words and phrases that may be unfamiliar to those not practicing traditional Judaism. Fortunately, a glossary at the back of the book provides all necessary definitions. The pages are laminated for little hands which will surely make the book last longer.

Probably most useful to Orthodox Jewish libraries, however, the joyful customs of celebrating Chanukah are lovingly displayed in a way that all Jews will appreciate.

Kathy Bloomfield, AJL Immediate Past President, Seal Beach, CA
AJL REVIEWS FOR ADULT LITERATURE
EDITED BY DANIEL SCHEIDI AND LAURA SCHUTZMAN

FICTION

Ain, Meryl. The Shadows We Carry. Tempe, AZ: SparkPress, 2023. 296 pp. $17.95 (9781684632008) PBK.

In this sequel to the author’s first novel, The Takeaway Men, Ain writes about the next phase in the characters’ lives. While the book is less than 300 pages, it spans the years from the late 1960s to 1983. The author not only includes references to household items from “pink princess phones” to popular TV shows of the day, but also to the political events happening in the world, including the assassinations of JFK, RFK, and the Vietnam War. Her characters experience firsthand: the Feminist movement, an out-of-marriage pregnancy, an extramarital affair, academic quotas, discrimination in the workforce, anti-war sentiments, and LGBTQ inclusion.

There are many storylines, but the book centers around Jojo and Bronka Lubinski, who are young adults at the beginning of the novel, attending Queens College. Jojo becomes pregnant with her wealthy boyfriend’s baby and his mother quickly arranges a small lavish wedding. While Jojo’s religious father is deeply bothered by the casual attitude toward the kosher food being served, he is hiding the fact that his very religious wife is actually not Jewish, never having undergone an Orthodox conversion process. While Bronka is on a search for what kind of man she wants in a husband, she dates various men over the years. She thinks she is interested in an Orthodox young man, but years later finds herself attracted to a kind priest. While covering a news story about a local Nazi group, she recognizes the leader to be one of her neighbors.

The author includes a brief description of all the characters in the book and their backstories so one need not have read the first book to understand the stories in The Shadows We Carry. However, while the book does stand on its own, it would be most appreciated by those who are familiar with The Takeaway Men. All of the Hebrew and Yiddish words are translated and religious situations are explained, so the book is appropriate for synagogue and public libraries.

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


The Golem of Venice Beach, a graphic novel for the adult reader, is the compilation of the work of at least ten artists in the graphic arts field. The book came about as a result of a prize in a graphic novel competition. The winner, Chanan Beizer, is the main writer, compiler, and developer of this book.

Living in Venice Beach in California, Adam, the golem, isn’t too different from others who live at the beach. He wears a military-style jacket with boots and has the physique of broad shoulders with a small head. Adam protects Jake, the protagonist, who becomes involved in a triangular relationship. The relationship becomes dangerous, and the golem comes to the rescue. The golem appears not only in the present, but the book depicts the golem being created in 1580 in Prague, and again in 1938 when the Germans invaded Czechoslovakia. The Jewish element is slim, but Jake’s uncle is the shammes (caretaker) at the synagogue. His character adds a Jewish element. The ending pages are a colorful depiction of the culture and characters of Venice Beach and bring to life the beach scene. The Golem of Venice Beach has a limited readership, but it would be a big hit with an enthusiastic reader of graphic novels.


The National Jewish Book Award winning author of The Unanswered Letter returns with another true narrative set during the Holocaust. This is the story of the Hess family, Karl, Ilse, and twins, Marion and Stefan, who risk everything to stay together despite the growing Nazi brutality. It begins in Germany as the Nazis come to power and ends in the United States, with the intermediate years taking place in Amsterdam, Westerbork, and Bergen-Belsen, or as the book’s tagline states: “From Amsterdam to America by way of Hell.”

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Even though they had money to hide themselves and their children during the war, Karl and Ilse decided early on that they would stay together as a family no matter what. Their courage, tenacity, stamina, and determination preserved their family while surviving the ruthlessness they encountered. It is difficult to read the chapters that follow the timeline of their journey, but extraordinary to see how they outlasted their enemies.

The depth of feeling the reader experiences creates a seesaw of emotions with anger, disappointment, anxiety, terror, and hunger fighting with love, compassion, and hope. This is the rare reading experience of feeling that you are living the same events as the people being written about. In the words of Ilse Hess that close the book, "People ask, 'How did you survive?' I do not know. It was not luck. It was not special treatment. It was not special food. I just think we survived to tell the tell." It is a blessing to us all that they did, and that Ms. Cassell put it all together.

The book was written using Karl's memoir, interviews and testimony by Ilse, conversations with Marion and Stefan (Steven), and hours of research. There is an extensive "Works Consulted" bibliography in the back. This title is highly recommended for all Jewish and public libraries.

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


Kantika is a fictionalized multi-generational account of a Sephardic family moving from Istanbul to Barcelona and finally ending up in New York. Graver’s main protagonist is her Grandmother Rebecca, and she starts each chapter with a photo with no caption, but the photo is used as the basis for the account of her family’s experiences.

The narrative begins in 1907, describing the elite status Rebecca’s family enjoyed in Istanbul and details the neighborhoods where the family worked, lived, and vacationed. After the collapse of the Ottoman Empire, Rebecca’s father, in ruin, accepts a position as the shammash (caretaker) in a small synagogue in Barcelona, and moves the family in 1925 as they continue their attempts to eventually settle in the United States.

A young widowed Rebecca is finally able to bring her sons to New York after she marries her childhood friend’s widower. Together they raise his special needs daughter, along with her sons, and have children of their own, including Graver’s mother. The book ends in 1950 with Rebecca’s stepdaughter and husband announcing their pregnancy.

Graver does extensive research including visiting sites she references in the story and uses journals and interviews with her family. Because she was asked to protect the privacy of some of her uncles and aunt, the last third of the book feels stunted compared to the flow of the sections only referencing her grandmother and great-grandparents. This title is an essential addition to libraries with Sephardic holdings and interest in Jewish life in Istanbul during the early 20th Century and recommended for public libraries and all Jewish libraries.

Sean Patrick Boyle, 
Librarian, Congregation Keneseth Israel, Allentown, PA


This fictionalized account of a young Bess Myerson, the first and only Jewish Miss America (1945) is based on true events and biographies written about her. Bess, the middle of three daughters, was born in the Bronx in 1924 to immigrant working-class parents who held their daughters to high educational expectations as a means to attain a more comfortable future. Because she grew so tall at a very young age, Bessie constantly felt unattractive and out of place. However, Bessie felt confident that she was both extremely musically talented and academically successful. She attended the newly created Fiorello H. LaGuardia High School of Music & Art and Performing Arts, where she honed her piano and flute skills. After graduating, she studied at Hunter College in their esteemed music department. During her junior year, she began to model, which eventually led her to the Miss America Pageant, and, years later, being invited to perform as a piano soloist at Carnegie Hall. While her parents were not supportive of her modeling, the $5000 Miss America scholarship prize was too tempting for Bess to pass up. Throughout the book, Kass describes horror transpiring in Europe and how anti-Semitic feelings were fueled throughout America. On a personal level, Bess encountered both nuanced and blatant acts of anti-Semitism starting when a pageant official suggested she change her name to something less Jewish sounding. Being raised with strong Jewish values and a social conscience, Bess was deeply motivated to use her public position to highlight and educate Americans about the dangers of anti-Semitism and racism. The story ends at this point in Bess’s life. In the Epilogue and Author’s note, Kass writes a bit more about Bess and her involvement in the Anti-Defamation League, and her many positions in New York politics. A light and enjoyable read.

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

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Inspired by the Supreme Court Justice Ruth Bader Ginsburg, Elizabeth Silver presents a fictionalized memoir as told by Sylvia Olin Bernstein, a brilliant and ambitious woman who despite numerous obstacles, eventually becomes a Supreme Court Justice. Silver does not miss the opportunity to give a nod to Justice Ginsburg’s moniker of the “Notorious RBG” by way of a story-line involving a contempt of court charge, Sylvia becomes the “Contemptuous S.O.B.”

Spanning a 50 year period, Silver begins Sylvia’s story as a young girl living in Brooklyn in an Orthodox Jewish household. Her cousin, Mariana, a survivor and victim of the horrific Mengele experiments, comes to live with Sylvia, whose story profoundly affects her. Sylvia’s mother dies, and she begins to question the rules of the world around her. She confronts the rabbi when she is not counted in the minyan for kaddish and is relentless in her pursuit of answers from him during which Mariana lends support. However, throughout Sylvia’s life, Mariana will be both her critic and a source of comfort.

As Sylvia navigates through her life she is faced with challenges at Harvard Law School where she learns she must balance her sense of justice with how to change a system that is exclusionary and unfair in terms of women’s rights. She falls in love with a fellow law student, marries, and has a child, Aviva, who brings a new layer of challenges to her life. How does one balance family and career as a civil rights attorney, in a world that is resistant to the idea of women in the workplace at all?

The plot includes a friendship with her roommate at Harvard, a Black woman, who is treated even more poorly than Sylvia at Harvard, ultimately leading her taking an alternate path, but continues to be a part of Sylvia’s professional journey. One of Sylvia’s professors, who starts as her mentor, eventually becomes her rival for the seat on the Supreme Court—and is not at all what he tries to appear to be.

The Jewish content in this novel is through the lens of a more secular viewpoint—Sylvia clearly does not have a positive experience within her Orthodox upbringing. Later on in the novel (1973), her daughter has a Bat Mitzvah, and wears a tallit and kippah, clearly indicating Judaism has still been a part of her life, but rejecting any Orthodox observances. Sadly, for Sylvia, secrets and other missteps in her relationship with her daughter have relegated her to an observer only in this milestone.

The novel captures the challenges that women faced in school, career, and life during the 1950′s- 1980′s. The legal issues of equal protection, pregnancy discrimination, and disability laws are touched on as part of the narrative in an accessible manner for the non-lawyers. The focus, however, is on a very personal level as we watch Sylvia struggle with the pressures of protecting others, while preserving her relationships with family and friends.

Ellen Drucker-Albert, Head of Reference & Faculty Services, Benjamin N. Cardozo Law School, New York

AJL News & Reviews, Assistant Editor in Chief

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Well-seasoned Los Angeles private detective Amos Parisman has just stumbled upon a fresh crime scene that pulls him out of retirement to once again work with police Lieutenant Bill Malloy to help the police solve this murder mystery. In this latest crime, five homeless people are found murdered and their bodies show up at the bottom of dumpsters, in alleyways, and on the streets. Are these murders related or random? Does anyone truly care about these homeless people? Amos teams up with his network of past friends and connections, especially his young protege, Omar, to aid in his investigation as they visit, question, and revisit, asking further questions from people who devote their lives working with the homeless. Amos is genuine, sensitive, clever, and very proud of his Jewish roots. The dialogue is sharp and fun to read, with a generous amount of expletives sprinkled throughout. Parisman is energized to be back doing what he does best. Finding meaning in his work helps distract him from a particularly difficult time in his personal life. Loretta, the love of his life and wife of many years, is suffering from Alzheimer’s Disease and is currently living in an assisted living facility. Although Amos visits Loretta frequently, he mourns the loss of the life they once shared. He is convinced, however, that Loretta would not want Amos to be alone. With this in mind, he begins to fall in love with Mara, whose elderly husband is sick and dying at the same facility as Loretta’s. This is the third in the Amos Parisman quartet. There is no need to read them in order. And dying at the same facility as Lorreta’s. This is the third in the Amos Parisman quartet. There is no need to read them in order.


A teacher who wants to emphasize that answering questions on a test is not the end of classroom learning will tell the students that the final exam comes after you graduate when someone comes to you with an important question and you either know the answer or where to find it. Rabbi Berman, who is the president of Yeshiva University (YU), explores this same kind of idea based on the YU mission and philosophy of education. He begins with a quote from the Talmud (*Shabbat* 31a). Rava says there is one final exam after living in this world. We will stand before God and explain how we spent our time on earth. The most important grade for the final exam is the fulfillment of our life’s purpose to serve God and his people. The core values of Yeshiva University include the seeking of truth and wisdom in *Torah* and world learning. This is expressed in their motto *Torah U-Madda* (Jewish knowledge and worldly wisdom). The educational philosophy of a university education and YU in particular is to get a solid understanding of the past while learning the thinking tools to embrace modernity enabling us to face the future. The world view includes seeking the truth, dignity of
the inhabitants and compassion. You will have to read the book for the details.

The format of the book is a series of letters to the graduating students imitating Samson R.

Hirsh’s 19 Letters. The ideas will resonate with anyone has one foot in the Jewish world and the other in the general world. This book was easy to read and engaging.

This book is highly recommended for all libraries and personal collections.

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

Biale, David, Jewish Culture Between Cannon and Heresy, Stanford: Stanford UP, 2023. 296 pp. $90.00 (9781503634336) HC; $30.00 (9781503634343) PBK.

J ewish Culture Between Cannon and Heresy is a collection of fifteen previously written essays by David Biale, a long-time professor of Jewish History at the University of California. Biale is a writer of what he calls “counter history,” by which he means that Jewish tradition and Judaism is not defined by an “essence” and is not reducible to simply a “religion.” Throughout the essays in this compilation, Biale traces diverse voices that some might call counter-canonical or even “heretical,” or as Biale puts it, “feature inversions of convention or hidden traditions that challenge the canon.”

Chapters in this book cover a range of topics throughout the long span of Jewish history, such as the “The God with Breasts—El Shaddai in the Bible,” Jewish polemics against Christianity in Sefer Toldot Yisroel, Rabbi Nachman of Bratslav’s depression, the Kabbalah in Nachman Krochmal’s philosophy of history, Shabbat Tzvi and Orientalism, and Hannah Arendt’s take on the trial of Adolf Eichmann.

It also includes an epilogue containing an autobiographical essay that had previously only appeared in Hebrew, but in many respects belongs in the beginning of the book where Biale describes himself as both activist and historian. That self-representation provides insight into the author’s general historical approach. For those familiar with Jewish history, these essays provide interesting perspectives and alternative views, but for those seeking to learn about these topics for the first time, it would not be a recommended place to begin.

David Tesler, Efrat, Israel


T his memoir was written in the first-person during Rabbi Boteach’s year of saying Kaddish and honoring his father who died during COVID in New York City, but who is buried on the Mount of Olives in Jerusalem. Rabbi Boteach walks us through his father’s death, his travel to Israel, burial, and how he manages to not miss saying Kaddish while quarantined in his family’s apartment near the Kotel. He recalls having to stop people on the street outside of his apartment to say Kaddish with a minyan, as he could not go to a synagogue. He left Israel as soon as possible, returning to New York so that he could make sure not to miss saying Kaddish even once.

While providing background about the Kaddish, the story is very personal and specific to his situation. Although the issues and concerns described are common to anyone who is saying Kaddish as one’s life radically changes and now revolves around three times a day getting a group of ten men together to say Kaddish. He related a story about having to travel far and wide to gather a minyan, even going to Crown Heights on Christmas Eve to locate people at 3 AM in the morning at Chabad headquarters who had not said the evening prayers.

The author shares a great deal about growing up, his parents’ divorce, and his evolving and complicated relationship with his father. He uses this opportunity to make observations about prominent issues in raising his own children and the impossibility of other than siblings to really understand the depth of the mourning for one’s parents.

Rabbi Boteach does point out the real legacy is the good deeds performed and the love/devotion of one’s children. “Family is everything and it is the criteria to find purpose in your life.”

Overall, a well-written personal account, but one that really does not add much new or unique to the large body of other first-person accounts of a parent’s loss and their year of saying Kaddish.

Nathan Aaron Rosen, Law Research Institute New York, NY

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This book is a strong message about the power of memory and human resilience. Because of books like Lost Bread, the story of the Holocaust will never be forgotten. Bruck’s memoir offers a detailed and harrowing account of day-to-day life in and after the war—the starvation rations prisoners were fed, the freezing barracks in which they slept, the days spent as slave laborers, and the constant brutality of the guards and even fellow prisoners and more in the aftermath. The message is lucid: there will be suffering—it’s how we react to suffering that counts and we always retain the ability to choose our attitude.”

Rabbi Dr. Moshe P. Weisblum, Faculty, Washington University of Science and Technology


The Mishnah is the first Rabbinic book, an expansive anthology of Jewish ritual law composed around 200CE. In January 2021, the Center for Jewish Studies at Harvard University and the Program on Jewish and Israeli Law at Harvard Law School co-sponsored a conference on the theme of “What is the Mishnah?” The Covid era zoom conference brought together leading scholars of the Mishnah to present papers on all aspects of this topic.

The book is subdivided into five sections with a series of essays in each section. Part I tackles the question of the Mishnah and its legal predecessors, including chapters detailing antecedents of the Bible, Ancient Near Eastern Law, the Dead Sea Scrolls and the Tosefta (a compilation of Jewish oral law). Part II contains chapters contextualizing the Mishnah with then current Roman Law. Part III details different topics, styles and ways of reading the Mishnah, such as its rhetorical style, relationship to Halacha (Jewish law), attitude towards holiness or the Mishnah’s philosophically “utopian” vision. Part IV focuses on the presentation of different groups discussed in the Mishnah, such as women, Priests, Gentiles and heretics. Part V turns to the reception and transmission of the Mishnah.

This is a must read for any scholars and students of the Mishnah. It contains twenty-two articles by respected academics within the field.

David Tesler, Efrat, Israel

Fox, Sandra. The Jews of Summer: Summer Camp and Jewish Culture in Postwar America. Stanford: Stanford UP, 2023. 304 pp.$28.00 (9781503633889) PBK.

Postwar America saw the rise of Jewish suburbia and the synagogue as a community center. The role of the summer camps is examined in this interesting book. Beginning with the roots in the early Protestant and Progressive movements, such as the Fresh Air reformers and the Boy Scouts, which advocated for the countryside to build strong, healthy city kids, the author asks, what made Jewish camps unique?
Originally comprised of immigrants barred from Gentile counterparts, they developed into microsystems fueled by rabbis, educators, lay leaders, and journalists, sheltered and structured with sports, recreation, and socialization, and, above all, supported by parents ambivalent about affluence and anxious over assimilation and intermarriage.

To the author, these camps reflected a “child-centered Judaism,” an extension of synagogue youth groups, sisterhoods, and nursery schools that tried to bolster religious and ethnic loyalty. Ashkenazim and their liberal movements (Reform, Conservative, Yiddishist, Zionist, Hebraist, Socialist), are the focus, although mention is made of the Modern Orthodox camps of Yeshiva University or Bnei Akiva, which integrated Torah law and practice into their activities. (Ultra-Orthodox and Sephardic camps are also mentioned, however briefly.) Each stream pushed its own ideology, and its own form of “positive” or “authentic” Judaism; some camps, stressing the emergent State of Israel, even simulated kibbutzim, although egalitarianism among the adolescent counselors heightened commitment to Western democracy. The Sabbath was acknowledged, if not fully observed; Tisha B’Av, the summer holiday, was commemorated through Holocaust or Temple imagery. The author also discusses coed dynamics, resulting in some romantic liaisons or awakenings.

But how successful were these camps in stemming the tide of secularization? The record here is ambivalent; attempts to impart heritage through Hebrew or Yiddish language immersion largely failed or faded, as did East European tradition. Despite attempts to reinforce Jewish identity, for example, importing Israeli counselors, Americanization became the norm. The author discusses the transformations following the radical trends of the 1960s onward (#MeToo, LGBT, and BDS) and the political shift toward Diaspora, instead of Zionist, activism. Well- researched, with some wry photos (e.g., counselor dressed up as David Ben Gurion), this book offers a nostalgic glimpse into a part of American-Jewish history. This title is suitable for synagogue and academic libraries with Judaic collections.

Hallie Cantor, Yeshiva University, New York, NY


Professor Fram’s project in this book is clear with the very first sentence of his introduction: “in the mid-sixteenth century, three rabbis, one living in the Land of Israel, another in Poland, and a third in Lithuania, were independently trying to do what few had ever succeeded in doing: establish a single code of Jewish law.” For Fram, Yosef Caro (1488-1575), the Rabbi living in the Land of Israel, showed “prodigious learning and organizational strengths” in a previous work (the Bet Yosef) where he gathered the pertinent legal material, discussed it and our author under

review came to this conclusion: the Bet Yosef “established Caro’s reputation and accelerated acceptance of his Shulḥan Arukh.” In the next two chapters, Fram turns to Solomon ben Jehiel Luria (1510-1573 or 1574, the “Maharshal” from Poznan, Poland) and his “magnus opus,” the Yam shel Shemoloh. Luria never fully engaged with the Shulḥan Arukh “even though he saw at least one part late in his life.” Unlike for Caro, for Luria, the reputation of a Rabbi was not “a basis for deciding the law … the legal merits of arguments determined their valence, not someone’s name.”

Fully part of Fram’s presentation is the history of the printing and diffusion of the works of all three rabbis, who published where and why, when was a work written, and when it was published, and where and when it could have been seen by the other two. The third Rabbi, Moses ben Israel Isserles (approximately 1525-1572, the “Rema”) followed the same methodology as Caro of evaluating the valence of a past rabbinal authority; he showed great respect for Ashkenazi customs and the teachings of medieval Franco-Ashkenazi rabbis. Fram also notes that he had a “proclivity to stringency” in his decisions. For this reviewer, the hero of the book is Luria, qualified by Fram as “a legal maverick who engaged with the past and charted his own way forward.” The Codification of Jewish law on the Cusp of Modernity is well written, thoroughly researched, and has a serious prospect to become a classic on the topic in the English language.

Roger S. Kohn, Silver Spring, MD

Friedman, Shuki. Being a Nation State in the Twenty-First Century: Between State and Synagogue in Modern Israel. Boston: Academic Studies Press, 2023, Judaism and Jewish Life Series. 117 pp. $129.00 (9798887190891) HC.

To the vast literature on the relationship of religion and state in Israel, Shuki Friedman adds a slim volume examining the changes in the “Status Quo” agreements on the relationship between religion and state, first formulated between Ben Gurion and the religious parties in 1948. The “Status Quo” stipulated that the framework of observance of the Sabbath, personal status in the areas of marriage, divorce, and conversion, and public standards of kashrut would be regulated by the rabbinate.

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Friedman (a rabbi and the vice president of the Jewish People Policy Institute and law lecturer at the Peres Academic Center), in a heavily foot-noted book, argues that over the seventy-five years of the existence of the state, the religious “Status Quo” has eroded, through a combination of societal change, court decisions, and the growth of independent religious and civil organizations.

Friedman first presents the background of the original arguments then traces the revisions. Public transportation on the Sabbath spread to secular areas of Israel, with even private vans operating in Jerusalem. Commercial activities in food services, entertainment, and even shopping on the Sabbath spread. The hold of the Chief Rabbinate on personal status loosened through groups like Tzohar offering marriages; the courts recognizing citizenship of non-Orthodox converts; and Israelis going abroad to marry or marrying without the rabbinate.

Friedman concludes with an optimistic chapter spelling out a proposal to allow for the state to remain involved in personal status issues, but to privatize religious services. He urges balancing private rights over religious control. He concludes that “only a broad coalition of leading politicians and the Israeli public itself can institute such agreements and redeem Israeli society from the fierce struggle that has plagued it since the establishment of the state.” This title is recommended for academic libraries with Israel studies collections.

Harvey Sukenic, Hebrew College Library, Newton, MA


T his is not just another book on the laws of mourning or one person’s journal of their year of saying Kaddish. The editor collects an excellent selection of meaningful poetry and prayer selections. She organizes the book into units which begin with a song, a kavanah, a question, and text with guiding questions for study. The book’s premise is based upon musical expression in melody, rhythm, tone, and text, as the third step in Heschel’s ways to mourn, cry, be silent, and then turn sorrow into song.

The book is organized by editor Lisa D. Grant’s seven stages or steps, each made up of seven weekly activities, including pain, brokenness, sadness, comfort, resilience, acceptance, and gratitude. The premise is that while mourning is personal for the soul to rebuild, one needs to construct scaffolding such as prayer, melodies, meditations and rituals.

Individuals looking for inspiration and guided exercises will find this book of interest and use; while synagogue libraries might find the book worthwhile to share with their congregants.

Nathan Aaron Rosen, Law Research Institute, New York

Greenspahn, Frederick E. Judaism and Its Bible: A People and Their Book, Lincoln: JPS, 2023, 294 pp. $29.95 (9780827615106) PBK.

D espite the obvious centrality of the Bible to Judaism, Greenspahn’s book explores this historical and complex relationship by addressing the “reality of the Bible’s place in Judaism” and “how it came to be, how it is used and how it has
been understood.” Greenspahn adopts a “behavioralist approach” and focuses on the connection between the Jewish people and the Bible, and how more often than not, despite the Bible’s centrality, it is not the Bible itself that dictates Jewish law, custom and behavior.

Greenspahn discusses different ways in which Jews have related to the physical Bible and the Bible’s role in the synagogue and liturgy and even within a magical context in the form of amulets and protective scrolls. He also centers around the writing of the books that comprise the Bible and the biblical canon and sets forth different approaches to how the Bible has been viewed theologically. The concept of the Oral Law is introduced and how that concept historically has been connected to the Bible/Written Law and how the academic study of the Bible and Zionism have impacted the Bible. The text describes the historically and conceptually broad and diverse interpretive landscape involved in studying the Bible and how the Bible has been made accessible throughout history by listing important translations and their impact on the reader.

_Judaism and Its Bible_ is a well written introductory work about the Bible and its relationship to the Jewish people and Judaism. This title is recommended for all libraries.

**David Tesler, Efrat, Israel**


One might wonder why a book about a banker would be relevant to Jewish Studies (other than for stereotypical reasons). However, Daniel Gross’s sweeping study of the life of Edmond J. Safra is a wonderful description of a man who lived, worked, and breathed as a Jew. The uniqueness of Safra’s banking style and success came from a very specific Lebanese Jewish experience, which is vibrantly depicted in the book. While covering the seven decades of Safra’s life, Gross describes the diaspora of Lebanese Jewry in the second half of the 20th century, deep antisemitism within the banking industry via the American Express affair, and ultimately, the story of a remarkable life. The author’s sources come from interviews with many of his subject’s closest friends and family as well as archival sources. A compelling and fascinating read, this book is highly recommended for all libraries.

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

**Korman, Gerd. This Was America, 1865-1965: Unequal Citizens in the Segregated Republic.** Boston: Academic Studies Press. 2022. 340 pp. $149.00 (9781644696378) HC.

There are several volumes that link the Jewish experience in America with that of African Americans. Gerd Korman, here, summarizes and attempts to synthesize the two narratives.

Part one explores the concept of ethnicity (“ethnicking”) in 19th century America, focusing on life in the South. Korman describes slave life and the post-Civil War southern world, using quotes from Frederick Douglass, W.E.B. DuBois and others, to elaborate on the continued “other-ing” of Blacks after emancipation. He likens them to Chinese immigrants, who were denied citizenship.

Part two provides a social history of the wave of Eastern European Jews who arrived between 1885 and 1914. Here, Korman presents a variety of situations faced by the immigrants. He covers the Labor movement—specifically the New York Garment unions during the Interwar period—as well as health and welfare issues, language, and education.

Part three carries the story through the 1950s and ’60s, when the Civil Rights movement emerged and support for Israel became an alternative for Jews seeking a cause to support. The book concludes with short profiles of mid-century academics and intellectuals—Schlesinger, Handlin, Higham—who struggled with identity issues in the midst of social turmoil.

The premise of _This was America_ is interesting. But its content is unhelpful. The text is dense and without topical subheadings. The author assumes readers to be conversant with a wide range of historical, social science and religious topics. Names and concepts—Marcus Garvey, Horace Kallen, Simon Wolf (misspelled “Wolfe”), “neo-Lamarckianism”, the Dunning School of Reconstruction, for example, are introduced without adequate explanation or context. There are no appendices or bibliography (though the footnotes are extensive) and the index is regrettably short. As the intended audience is unclear, this book cannot be easily recommended for any specific type of collection.

**Fred Isaac, Oakland, CA**


In _Israel and the Nations_, the orthodox scholar and rabbi Eugene Korn presents nine essays exploring the issues confronting those seeking Jewish-Gentile dialogue. Korn asserts that the biblical
declaration that Jews should be “a blessing for all the families of the earth” indicates a requirement for Jewish engagement with gentiles.

His first five essays address questions arising from such an involvement with gentiles in general. How does the idea of a particularistic covenant factor into a relationship with gentiles? What actions should advance the role of being a blessing? How should idolatry be defined in the modern age? In the biblical and rabbinic texts, idolatry was among the more significant obstacles to associating with the “other.”

In the post-talmudic period, Christians were often considered idolators. From the Christian side, the complaint that Jews had killed Christ and their claim that their “new” covenant had superseded the Jewish berit intensified hostilities and Jewish feelings of “otherness.” The remaining essays specifically address interactions between Jews and Christians in contemporary society.

Over the past sixty years, Jews have enjoyed an improved relationship with many of their gentile neighbors. Pope John XXIII denounced claims that Jews had killed Jesus. Korn notes that Pope John Paul II referred to Catholics’ “shared spiritual patrimony with Judaism.”

From the Jewish perspective, Korn examines the position of Rabbi Joseph Soloveitchik, who set four conditions for dialogue, including mutual respect and the “acknowledgment of the Jewish people as a vital faith community.” Korn notes that the way forward requires care but suggests that the lonely man of faith can find solace and peace only through mutual communication.

This is an informative volume that traces the evolution of Jewish-Gentile relations and posits a path forward. It would be a valuable resource for those interested in interfaith dialogue.

C. and Anne-Marie Belinfante, Herkimer, NY


Jewish Literary Eros: Between Poetry and Prose in the Medieval Mediterranean is the first lengthy study of medieval Jewish literature in prose and poetry, integrating the medieval-literature canon in Hebrew, Arabic, and the romance languages. After discussing the relative merits of poetry and prose in general terms, Levy goes to the core of her materials in a chapter called “The Medieval Jewish prosimetric poet-lover.” The reader needs to know that “prosimetric” is the adjective for the noun “prosimetrum” a “mixed form combining poetry and prose.” Prosimetric is a very technical term which explains why Indiana University Press did not use it in the title of the published book for the dissertation titled The Poetics of Love in

Prosimetra across the Mediterranean (Ph. D., Harvard University, 2014).

Levy presents the prosimetric genre from the twelfth through the fourteenth centuries and explores the nature of secular love. She wants to distinguish between “influence and innovation” among such authors as Jacob ben Eleazar (1170-1233) in his Sefer Ha-meshalim), Shelomoh Ibn Tsakbel (in his Ne‘um Asher ben Yehudah), Yosef Ibn Sahel, and Immanuel of Rome (approximately 1265-1330, with his Mahberot ‘Imanu‘el). Copious citations of their works are given in footnotes but not in the Hebrew original but rather in Latin characters according to an idiosyncratic transliteration scheme which makes the deciphering difficult.

This title is recommended only to large academic libraries with strong departments in comparative and/or romance literature.

Roger S. Kohn, Silver Spring, MD


Building Communities is a short scholarly work that covers the building of four early North American eruv: St Louis, the Lower East Side in Manhattan, Toronto, and Manhattan. The introduction covers the basics of what an eruv is and its role in Jewish life. Each chapter then goes into the history of a specific community eruv and talks not only about the Halakhic concerns, but the social and communal concerns as well.

This book is rather accessible given the topic’s dense legal history. It is not so long a book that reading it becomes a chore. Mintz does an excellent job of going through the history of eruvin, what concerns different communities had, and how those communities did or did not tackle those issues. A chapter about eruvin in Brooklyn would have been a welcome addition to this title. This is briefly discussed in the conclusion, which is interesting in its own right, but it is a large enough topic to have deserved its own chapter.

The laws of eruv are too often relegated to Hebrew Halakhic texts, that Building Communities has merit in possessing even if it were not as accessible as it is. Any academic and synagogue library would likely enjoy having a copy, while public and school libraries are unlikely to have the audience for such a niche topic.

Andrew Lillien, AJL Treasurer
Alan Mintz, for whom Hebrew language and culture, joined by Jewish history and traditions, were a foundational life component, would surely have been delighted to have been given the title, American Hebraist. In this volume, the late Professor Mintz, who at his death in May 2017 held the title, Chana Kekst Professor of Hebrew Literature at the Jewish Theological Seminary (JTS) in New York, is remembered for his lifetime engagement in and devotion to study, interpretation and celebration of the broad world of Hebrew language and letters and the wider Jewish universe.

Professor David Stern, colleague and friend of Mintz, as well as Harry Starr Professor of Classical and Modern Jewish and Hebrew Literature and Professor of Comparative Literature at Harvard University, and Dr. Beverly Bailis, a doctoral student of Mintz at JTS when he died, joined forces in editing a volume setting out an overview of Mintz’s life and work, including a wide-ranging assessment and appreciation by Professor Stern of Dr. Mintz’s careers and accomplishments.

In American Hebraist: Essays on Agnon and Modern Jewish Literature, Bailis and Stern have brought together some fifteen essays, articles, and book chapters authored by Professor Mintz over a span of some thirty-six years and appearing in an array of publications. The book concludes with an epilogue by Dr. Bailis—a moving personal account of “Packing Up an Office: The Work of Mourning and the Creation of an Archive.”

The author/co-editor of a number of books and many published articles, Mintz’s areas of interest were wide-ranging embracing Hebrew poets who wrote in America between World Wars I and II, and the reception of contemporary Hebrew literature in America to loss of faith and Hebrew autobiography and responses to catastrophe in Hebrew literature.

American Hebraist: Essays on Agnon and Modern Jewish Literature would be a valuable addition to the collection of a research library.

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


It is no surprise that a book by a highly respected historian about his beloved, accomplished grandmother is as beautifully and lovingly written as this biography of Zelda Popkin. The work is a scholarly presentation by a professor of history, who had wanted to write it and the pandemic allowed him the time to conduct more thorough research into the life and times of his famous grandmother and to complete this work. The book includes over fifty pages of Notes, Sources and Bibliography, as well as a lengthy Index, all evidence of the extensive and intensive research Jeremy Popkin conducted.

The rich life of Zelda Popkin, a journalist, public relations pioneer, novelist, wife, mother, and grandmother, makes this book very readable in spite of its in depth scholarship. Though she was one of the earliest writers of fiction about the Holocaust and about the new State of Israel, her work, unfortunately, is not well known at present. It is hoped that this book will renew interest in her extraordinary life and in her writing.

The book is divided into seven chapters titled: An American Jewish Childhood; Zelda Popkin: Modern American Woman; Politics, Murder and War: A Career in Popular Culture; Facing Personal Loss and Jewish Catastrophe; Zelda Popkin and the Women of Israel; Left Behind in the Golden Age; “Yes, There is a Second Chance.” These are quoted because they give a sense of the breadth and depth of this work which covers the long and prolific life of Zelda Popkin.

This is a very important book on Jewish life in America, in general, during a large part of the 20th Century, and particularly that of Jewish women.

Though the book focuses on the life and times of one important individual, it definitely belongs to every academic library with collections on Jewish life in America. Synagogue and high school libraries would benefit from this rich contribution to the understanding of the evolution of Jewish life in the United States in the 20th Century as well.

Michlean Lowy Amir,
United States Holocaust Memorial Museum (Retired)

Based on the Hebrew edition published in 1940 by Aaron Z. Aescole (1901-1948), this English translation prepared by Professor Verskin presents an intriguing person who claimed to be the ambassador of a Jewish kingdom deep in Arabia and who went on meeting the powerful rulers of Europe. The purported mission of Reubeni was to ask for weapons to fight the Ottoman Empire to restore a Jewish state in the Holy Land. Reubeni earned early support from Italian Jewish community leaders, some who hailed him as a messiah and arranged for him to meet with the Pope Clement VII. The Pope gave him an audience and sent him to the King of Portugal to get ships and weapons. Reubeni’s presence in Portugal raised such a turmoil among the recently Jewish converts to Christianity (Conversos) that he was escorted out of the Kingdom and placed on a ship to promptly leave. Beside the recording of negotiations, the Reubeni’s diary is replete with details on his ordinary life, his clothes, and his servants who get into brawls and steal from him. Reubeni’s ship out of Portugal required entry to a Spanish port (where no Jews were allowed since the Expulsion) and he was arrested, not once, but twice. This is where the diary ends. Verskin’s solid introduction allows the reader to fully appreciate how unique this diary is for the history of modern Jewish history. This title includes bibliographical references and index.

*Diary of a Black Jewish Messiah* is recommended to all libraries.

Roger S. Kohn, 
*Silver Spring, MD*


This ambitious book is a clarion call for what the author labels as “Open Judaism” or “Big Tent Judaism.” The author defines the concept broadly, not only to include all different kinds of Jews within the Jewish “tent” which he breaks down (sometimes simplistically) into three categories—believers, agnostics, and atheists—but also for the existence of many kinds of “Judaism(s)” to accommodate these different Jews.

The substance of the book takes three foundational concepts within Judaism, God, Torah and Israel, and explores how believers, agnostics and atheists have a long and continuous history relating to these foundational concepts that is steeped in Jewish history and thought. In particular, the nine chapters of the book correspond to nine concepts where the author deftly examines how each “type” of Jew has related, and continues to relate to each concept—all with sufficient Jewish pedigree.

Rabbi Schwartz’s ambitious book succeeds in pointing out how divergent opinions, dissent and debate have shaped Jewish thought. Furthermore, Rabbi Schwartz demonstrates the vast pluralism within Jewish tradition and argues persuasively that such pluralism strengthens Judaism rather than weakens it. This ethical, humanist, and inclusive book is highly recommended for those seeking to understand different, and yet authentic, approaches to Judaism.

David Tesler,  
*Efrat, Israel*


The lens of architecture is not a concept usually applied to interpretation of the weekly Torah portions, but this book skillfully examines the perspectives of art, design, construction, and logistics in understanding Torah. Skarf uses sources from rabbinic literature, as well as sources in building, architecture, science and history. For example, Joseph built granaries to store grain during the seven years of plenty. Skarf tells us about moisture, mold, and infestation control needed for up to seven years of storage. Grain has an optimum moisture content for long-term storage. Another example is the removal of obstacles for those who are disabled. The *halacha* tells us not to put stumbling blocks in front of the blind.

The Americans with Disabilities Act of 1990 codifies what kinds of barriers need to be removed.

The book has several short chapters for each *parsha* (Torah reading) making it easy to digest. This is a scholarly book with many footnotes with cited sources and explanations, recommended for anyone who is interested in expanding their knowledge of the connection between Torah and the physical world. It would be a welcome addition to personal, synagogue and academic collections.

Daniel D. Stuhlman,  
*Temple Sholom of Chicago, Chicago, IL*

In Rabbi Michael Strassfeld’s latest book, he provides gateways for readers to find meaning in Judaism and in participating in Jewish life within the openness of the 21st century. He outlines eleven core principles that offer a framework, and contemporary or “disrupted” ideas, through which individuals can choose to cultivate a spiritual connection with Judaism, with or without any previous knowledge of Jewish ritual or texts. Among these core principles are: all humans are created in the image of God; striving for awareness; engaging in social justice; finding holiness everywhere; caring for our planet; wrestling with God; working on our inner qualities; being a lifelong learner; and living within our open society. Strassfeld’s easy-to-comprehend text provides a descriptive background on each topic, including quotes and references to Biblical, Rabbinic, Talmudic, and often Hasidic texts to delve further. For each point, he presents his own challenges, intellectual insights, and spiritual journey, having grown up in a Modern Orthodox environment, being an early leader of the *Havurah* movement, and choosing a career path as a Reconstructionist Rabbi. He reinterprets concepts of prayer, ritual, *Torah* study, etc. for the 21st century, illuminating and expanding on these traditional aspects to create accessible and meaningful spiritual practices as stepping stones for connection to Judaism and the communities we live in, now and in the future.

Strassfeld has created a study guide to accompany the text and encourages use for classes and study partners, at sefaria.org. Strassfeld is one of the editors of *The Jewish Catalog* (1973), authored *The Jewish Holidays* (1985) and co-authored *A Night of Questions: A Passover Haggadah* (1999).

This book is recommended for synagogue, school, public, and academic libraries.

Debra Rand, Hofstra University, NY


Steinsaltz offers a monumental work of brilliant scholarship that provides the original Hebrew *Tanya* text, an English translation, and a running commentary. Only a giant scholar like Rabbi Steinsaltz can teach us in this unique way and lead us into better understanding of this classic in *hasiduth* by Rabbi Shneur Zalman of Liadi (ztsl).

The insights of this seminal commentary were adapted from weekly lectures on the *Tanya* that Rabbi Steinsaltz delivered to a small group of Jerusalemites from 1977 to 1980, as well as classes broadcast on Israeli radio station Kol Yisrael. Those teachings were later transcribed, edited, and published as a commentary to the *Tanya* in Hebrew. The commentary was well received and has since been revised, and reprinted. This series, the Steinsaltz commentary on the *Tanya*, will ultimately consist of six volumes spanning the five sections that comprise the *Tanya*. The first section of the *Tanya, Likkutei Amarim*, has been divided into two volumes.

This classic of *Hasiduth* teaches many things that Steinsaltz illuminates by originally and authentically drawing on modes of explanation such as philosophical logic, textual exegesis, science, symbolism, psychology, and parable. The commentary provides a running elucidation of the *Tanya* text along with a supplemental companion section of additional insights found in gray boxes that run across the bottom of the pages. The supplement provides a broader context and elucidated look at concepts presented in the upstairs main body of the *pirush* that draw on Hasidic teachings, tangents, analogies, and hasidic stories.

At the end of each section, an outline is provided that summarizes the flow. The unpunctuated unvocalized 1900 Vilna edition of the *Tanya* is at the end of the book. To make the *Tanya* more accessible to the modern reader, a vocalized and punctuated version of the Hebrew text is provided alongside the English translation. The text also contains a glossary.

David B. Levy, Independent scholar, NY


Susan Rubin Suleiman is a professor emerita of French and Comparative Literature at Harvard University, but this book does not include the story of her professional rise to prominence in her field. It is about her young years living in Budapest as a child, in relative safety with her parents, during the war. Then she describes their long trek escaping from Communist Hungary in a very circuitous

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way with many stops to eventually arrive in the United States. The story of her life during those years, until attending college, is beautifully written and very engaging. The photographs that are included are part of her story and they add a personal, warm dimension to this part of the biography. Hopefully she will write more about her life as a daughter, wife, mother, and scholar in the very interesting way in which she described the first twenty years of her life. With great tenderness she manages to describe her parents and her relationship with them and between them.

This is a very interesting book which is very readable and its description of life in Hungary during the Holocaust and the long way to real freedom is an important addition to the works that explain the very difficult post Holocaust life of survivors.

This title is recommended for every library as it is informative and a pleasure to read.

Michlean Lowy Amir, United States Holocaust Memorial Museum (Retired)


The title of this book, State of Halakha, is a wonderfully clever introduction to the broad sweep and historical scan of this work, literally calling upon Jewish teachings of the ages to provide guidance in determining appropriate actions to be taken to manage the modern state of Israel in keeping with Torah and rabbinic precepts and teachings.

In keeping with the direction and spirit of Jewish teachings and traditions (the Halakha, or literally, the Way) in response to contemporary concerns before Israeli governmental authorities, Rabbi Aviad Tabory, author of this volume, could not be better suited to weighing in on these important issues.

Rabbi Tabory explored the concerns set forth in this book while he was teaching at Yeshivat Eretz Hatzvi in Jerusalem and at Camp Stone in Sugar Grove, Pennsylvania. He is, himself, the son of a distinguished rabbi, Rabbi Binyamin Tabory, head of several yeshivot, who was a student of the renowned scholar and teacher, Rabbi Chaim Soloveitchik.

What are the questions addressed by Rabbi Tabory for which guidance from the widest reaches of Jewish rabbinical teachings are sought? Many issues concern appropriate conduct under conditions of war—from acts permitted on Shabbat, to who is exempt for going to war, to moral responsibility of an army for atrocities committed by its allies. Rabbi Tabory discussions range from consideration of “Who is a Jew” and the Halakhic status of the Ethiopian Jewish community, to the status of burial at sea, and how does conversion change with Kibbutz Galuyot—the Ingathering of the Exiles?

In considering Rabbi Tabory’s reflections on these and other questions, readers will find themselves guided on an excursion through centuries of relevant Jewish thought and disputation—from Torah directives and Talmudic argumentation to medieval rabbinic decisions and 20th century rabbinic pronouncements.

The State of Halakha, while dealing with matters of the greatest import, is a pleasure to read and should find a home in both the research library and the synagogue and Jewish Community Center library. Librarians should encourage readers to borrow the book and encourage adult education instructors to feature discussion of the volume in their classes.

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


Magda Teter, history professor and Shvidler Chair in Judaic Studies at Fordham University, weaves the prejudices of antisemitism and racism inherent in Christian thought beginning with the writings of Paul and the early church fathers through to the twenty-first century. Demonstrating how tenets such as the replacement belief that God now favored the Christian Church as the chosen people, with such examples as the interpretation of “the elder shall serve the younger” to mean that Jews were “born to slavery” and meant to be subservient to their non-Jewish European neighbors in all social, civil, and economic matters. Teter then details how “a distinct brand of European Christian supremacy found expression in the legally sanctioned enslavement and exploitation of people of color” at the dawn of European colonialism. The eleven chapters are rich with scholarly attributions and sources, and the author makes a convincing argument. Slavery naturally reflects a belief of superiority by the slaveholders and occurred in all cultures throughout history, including some still today. Social stratification according to darkness of skin was born millennia before European colonialism—for example in India’s caste system. Examples of antisemitism can be found in pre-Christian and non-Christian societies as well. Teter focuses specifically on the roots of racism and antisemitism that grew from Christian theological ideals implanted deep within the European/American

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REVIEWS OF TITLES FOR ADULTS

psyche and with which we are still grappling today.
This work is academic and will be most appreciated by scholars with at least a fundamental understanding of European and U.S. history. This title is recommended for public and academic libraries.

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


What comprises a national collection in the State of Israel? The answer, as described in the new 101 Treasures from the National Library of Israel, is far broader than one might expect.

The book is divided thematically, in topics like “Community,” “Technology,” “Journeys,” but each topical section features items from across the four divisions of the National Library: Judaica, Israel, Islam/Middle East, and Humanities, with variety of items in each topic from each collecting area. Contributors come from across the library and beyond, including curators, catalogers, reference librarians, project managers, former staff, and academic faculty. Introductory texts emphasize the importance of the collection within a Zionist and Israeli context. Beautiful color illustrations grace nearly every page, and each item is cited by its call number to allow readers to follow up and learn more about the various collections.

This title is recommended for all libraries that focus on Judaica collections.

Michelle Margolis,
Columbia University, New York, NY
AJL President


This is a book of one hundred beautiful photographs, intended to be more than that—a portrayal of Holocaust survivors who were not the typical “bunch of aging miseries...” but “joyous luminous people...who were Invited to Life.” The photos are showing the reader present-day comfortably situated people, who created families of their own and live without fear, in democracies. These are not guilt-ridden survivors; they look forward not backward.

Invited to Life is a beautifully wrought book in its photography and artistic presentation and would be an interesting addition to a coffee table or libraries with Holocaust collections.

Michele Lowy Amir,
United States Holocaust Memorial Museum (Retired)


How did the Rabbis and early commentators see the Bible in Talmudic and medieval times? Rebecca Wollenberg explores this deep question from several perspectives.

Wollenberg’s intent is to re-shape our understanding of the Rabbis’ interaction with Torah in both physical and intellectual terms. The concept of multiple iterations of Torah, including the possibility of a new text created by Ezra is discussed. Instances of death in the holy text (including the Sotah ritual) and a variety of Talmudic stories (the martyrdom of sages) are included. Ways of mis-reading and the dangers of improperly reading the Bible, both from translations and directly from text, and the differences between written versions and oral repetition of Tanakh are included. A fundamental difference between the written word (K’tiv) and read (K’ri) text is proposed and the author contends that transmission through oral recitation is a “third Torah.” Wollenberg asserts that the Sages viewed the Torah as a physical body in a variety of ways, as evidenced by the mezuzah and tefillin.

Rebecca Wollenberg has woven a very complicated argument. The Closed Book combines several important and fascinating issues, using a wide array of ancient texts and contemporary scholarly resources. Her discussion is dense and the writing is intricate. The audience is Talmud scholars and students interested in innovative inquiries into Rabbincic thought. There are extensive footnotes and an index, but no bibliography.

As a result, The Closed Book is recommended only for large academic libraries.

Fred Isaac,
Oakland, CA

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A collection of almost one hundred and eighty Jewish stories and jokes have been turned into accessible short poems that capture the essence of the Jewish experience from the past through the present day. Zeitlin pulls from traditional stories and jokes, as well as from well-known Jewish storytellers, rabbis, writers, and comedians. Each poem is followed by an attribution, and almost all have a commentary that either provides a historical account of the original work or a personalized anecdote. Master storyteller and Professor Emerita of Speech and Drama at Yeshiva University, Peninnah Schram provides most of the commentaries.

The poems are divided into ten chapters such as “From the Old Country,” “In Jokes,” “Shaped by the Holocaust,” “In Conversations with God” and others. There are, at the end, “Questions for Discussion” with seven or more questions for each chapter, “Notes,” “Bibliography,” “Commentator Biographies,” and an index. Perfect addition to any poetry collections as well as collections with Jewish story and or joke anthologies.

Sean Patrick Boyle, Librarian, Congregation Keneseth Israel, Allentown, PA Vice President, President-elect, Association of Jewish Libraries
The AJL Newsletter (Irene Levin-Wixman z”l, founding editor) was published in print from 1979 to 2010 by the Association of Jewish Libraries to inform members about AJL activities and issues related to Judaica libraries. From January 2011 through August 2019 it was split into two separate electronic publications — the AJL News and the AJL Reviews. As of September 2019 it is published digitally as AJL News and Reviews. Receipt of this publication is one of the benefits of membership. Please see the AJL website at https://jewishlibraries.org/ for membership rates.

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