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AJL Sydney Taylor Manuscript Award Competition, 1992

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Introduction by
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Shalom. I am sorry that Ralph Taylor could not be with us this evening. He always brings a unique personal touch to our award proceedings, and I miss him here.

When Ralph Taylor created the Sydney Taylor Manuscript Competition in 1985, I wonder if he really knew that there were so many people out there with dreams of becoming writers of children's stories. He must have known. I sure didn't. The seventh Sydney Taylor Manuscript Award competition has been the most intense and the most rewarding. I answered more than 300 requests for applications. The manuscripts that were submitted were of truly fine quality, placing this competition on a high, stimulating plane.

The Exodus story continues to be a magnet that captures us, reminding us and igniting our spirit with the yearning for freedom. When a writer chooses to retell the story, she takes a risk. And intending to reach readers aged 8 to 12 . . . this is a challenge indeed.

Our winner this year is Lois Roisman. Her story, Leaving Egypt, is filled with memorable characters and leaves the reader wanting more: So, what happens next? The theme of this story carries a young boy through a flight into the unknown in a search for freedom, a tale we read at Pesach, but one that knows no time frame.

Lois Roisman is a native of Texas, now living in Washington, D.C. Her professional career has concentrated on community service. She has served as executive director of the Oklahoma City Community Foundation, as Community Foundations Director of the Council on Foundations, and most recently as founding executive director of the Jewish Fund for Justice, a public charity that brings a Jewish presence to the alleviation of poverty in the United States. As a volunteer, she founded the Oklahoma Summer Arts Institute. She was recognized as the

**Remarks at the Banquet of the Association of Jewish Libraries' 27th Annual Convention, Los Angeles, CA, June 1992.*

Outstanding Woman of Oklahoma City by Theta Sigma Phi, the women's journalism society.

Ms. Roisman has published numerous articles in a variety of professional periodicals, but reports that she now devotes her life to writing fiction, a dream of hers for many years.

It is my pleasure to present the Association of Jewish Libraries' Seventh Annual Sydney Taylor Manuscript Competition Award to Lois Roisman, for her book, Leaving Egypt.

Acceptance Remarks by Lois Roisman

Thank you. This is such a sweet moment for me. Writing is such a lonely occupation. It's really wonderful to look up and find that you have hundreds of friends. It's quite special. Especially when the friends are you [AJL librarians]. I don't know when I've ever felt so comfortable in a group of strangers. Because you are family. And we probably shouldn't look it straight in the face because I don't want you to be self-conscious about what you are, but there's a spirit here . . . innocence isn't quite the word for it, because you might take that the wrong way . . . but there is a beautiful spirit about you that is very inspiring, and I'm proud to be part of it. You are the keepers of the books for the People of the Book, and I consider that a sacred occupation.

I'm a writer because I'm not a speaker, but there's been so much interest indicated in how and why I wrote this book that I will share that with you. I began writing *Leaving Egypt* in 1969 right after a very powerful Passover week. The blacks in America were showing us a new way to make an Exodus to a new kind of freedom, and we were all learning from that; on a more personal level, the women's movement was teaching me to look out for my own strength to make my own Exoduses out of my own "tight places." So all of that started converging on me, and it seemed important to me that my children start to understand the power of that metaphor for their own lives.

I began researching this book historically in every way I could, and became obsessed with it, in what I believe was a positive manner. I wrote the story of these two young people to try to bring it alive from off the page, from beyond the words that we hear over and over so that a child could say, "yes, I hear that"; so they could learn to recognize their own Egypts, and find the strength within them to make their own Exoduses. At every level.

So, I wrote this book, and a few years later, when I finished it, in the early '70s, I sent it off to a couple of Jewish publishing houses. They wrote me very polite letters—I thought at the time—praising the book, but saying that it was something called a "collateral reader." They couldn't afford to publish collateral readers; they could only afford to publish textbooks. But they wished me luck. Being a Southern woman, I thought, "Well, they're being very polite, but they're just telling me I haven't written a very good book." So, I put it on the shelf and went on to other vocations for 20 years, and even though other people gave me other titles, in my heart I still defined myself as a writer.

Last year, after having made a few exoduses myself and found some new free spaces, I decided to devote myself to writing again—to writing fiction—and I began a novel. One day I pulled out this old dusty manuscript that was calling to me. I read it and thought it still had some merit, and I realized that now I might bring some new richness to it from my experiences of the last 20 years. I played with it and I added parts, rewrote others, and sent it off to your lovely competition.

Your confirmation comes to me at a very good time in my life, when I am ready to hear it and ready to write stories that reach our Jewish children's spirit, stories that nourish their souls. I believe that to be a worthy way to spend my life, and your affirmation inspires me to pursue that goal with enthusiasm. What better footsteps to follow in than Sydney Taylor's? It's a great inspiration to have your confirmation, and I hope that my future writings will affirm your faith in my work. Thank you.