

Jewish Children's Book Publishing: A Quantum Leap*

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Reflections of a Reader

I was a war baby. When I was six months old, my father set sail for England, returning from the South Pacific three years later. My mother, my grandparents, and my aunts waited out the war by writing letters to my dad and uncles, and by reading to me. I was the most read-to child of the '40s. My favorite books were *The Pokey Little Puppy* and A.A. Milne's *When We Were Very Young*. But though Ktonton is older than I am (he was first published in 1935), and though the Jewish Publication Society published Ms. Weilerstein's *What the Moon Brought* the same year I was born, I don't remember either book. There were Jewish books in our home—Bibles, *siddurim*, biographies, Yiddish books, Joshua Loth Liebman's *Peace of Mind* (he was the Harold Kushner of his day). But those were grown-up books.

My first memory of a Jewish book for children was a text: it was red with white silhouettes, and from it I learned "*bah, baw, beh, bee, boo.*" Later, I recall "The Jewish People" series by Deborah Pessin, and still in my library I have our family copy of *Pathways Through the Bible*, in which my sister—not a fan of Sunday School—inscribed, "In case of fire, throw this in." There were other Jewish books for children—Morris Epstein's stories from *World Over*, Elma Levinger's poetry, and others. But they hadn't reached Cleveland, nor do I suspect that they were playing in Peoria.

Things had not changed much when my two sons were toddlers in the early '70s. I still read them *The Pokey Little Puppy* and *When We Were Very Young*, and added Richard Scarry, Dr. Seuss, and Jean de Brunhoff. But when it came to Jewish books, there were a few dreadful coloring books, *Habibi and Yow*, and the eternal Ktonton books, that could hardly compete with Babar for a young child's attention.

But we must not denigrate either Habibi's author, Althea Silverman, or Ktonton's cre-

ator, Sadie Rose Weilerstein. They were pioneers. They wrote and published Jewish stories in an era when no one else would dare. And they wrote as preservationists. The '40s and '50s, after all, were a time when Jews were fleeing a traditional lifestyle. And yet they wrote of baking challah and morning prayers and building sukkahs—perhaps in the hope that these traditions would be remembered.

Why wasn't there more? Many people—finding Ktonton and his contemporaries out of sync with their lifestyle—weren't buying. Publishers perceived no market and weren't publishing. As those of you who have read the story of Kar-Ben (in *Publishers Weekly*, Society of Children's Book Writers News, or *Judaica Book News*) know, when we tried to find a publisher for our children's Haggadah in 1974, all of the Jewish publishers told us, "No need . . . no market . . . no children."

A "Quantum Leap" In Publishing

What fueled what I call the "quantum leap?" Many things—simultaneously. The '60s gave birth to heightened ethnic awareness. Suddenly, parents wanted to pass on Jewish tradition to their kids, but they didn't know how—because *their* parents had neglected to hand down the tradition to them. So publishers began creating books for parents. *The Jewish Catalog*, published in 1973 by the Jewish Publication Society after having been rejected by several other publishers, was a seminal book for the Jewish community. It said, "Relax, you can be Jewish, don't be threatened, here are some instructions for baking challah and building a sukkah, here are the blessings you say on Shabbat and Chanukah, here are some reading lists." And once parents began buying books for themselves, they began to look for some for their children.

The market expanded slowly at first, and many of the books, especially those published by the trade houses, were Jewish folktales with broad appeal.

Barbara Cohen's *Carp in the Bathtub* was published in 1972, and two years later, Marilyn Hirsh (of blessed memory) retold the Yiddish folktale about the rabbi and the

cows and the goats in *Could Anything Be Worse?* I remember my surprise when my son's See Saw Bookclub included Marilyn's *The Rabbi and the 29 Witches* among its selections in 1976.

By 1980, Kar-Ben had 10 titles in print. The Union of American Hebrew Congregations (UAHC) had received an endowment to create a children's library. Feldheim had hired Yaffa Ganz to head a Young Reader's Division, and the trade houses were getting into the act. We reinforced each other and created a market niche that began to look beyond the Judaica shops to reach its readers. Enjoy-A-Book Club, the first book club for Jewish children's books, was founded. The late Doris Orenstein created *The Jewish Bookshelf*, a bibliographic review and acquisitions service for librarians. Maayan was founded specifically to organize Jewish bookfairs.

Over the last decade, Jewish children's book publishing has gone through several developmental stages.

First, publishers tried to make the books more modern and more readable. They raised the hemlines, changed the hairdos, added some color, and took away the heavy, didactic "moral of the story." As the market became more certain, we were able to take more risks. We began to do picture books designed just to amuse, and not necessarily to teach. Slowly, we began to tackle more controversial subject matter. One of Kar-Ben's earliest mistakes was rejecting the manuscript for *Bubbe, Me, and Memories* by the late Barbara Pomerantz. UAHC was more daring and published the book. It justly won awards [including one from AJL—Ed.]. It also proved that the market was ready to confront a subject such as death. UAHC published another book by Pomerantz, *Who Will Say Kid-dush?*, about a child in the midst of a divorce. Kar-Ben published a book about a woman rabbi, another about a boy in search of his Hebrew name. New at the 1989 AJL convention is *Grandma's Soup*, about the relationship between a little girl and her grandmother, who is suffering from Alzheimer's disease. The art came in today for *Mommy Never Went to Hebrew School*, a book about conversion.

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Public Reaction

Librarians, educators, and parents are somewhat schizophrenic about this new breed of Jewish children's books. For example, many have told us they resist reading Eileen Sherman's book *The Odd Potato* to children, because the protagonist is trying to figure out how to celebrate Hanukkah, in view of her mother's death during the preceding year. "It's a sad story," they say. But sometimes life is sad, sometimes life is not fair, sometimes life is confusing. And there are Jewish contexts to sadness and confusion.

On the other hand, in secular books, we are more relaxed about humor and imagination. We don't seem to have trouble with parents who leave their children alone to the wiles of *The Cat in the Hat*, but some reviewers were very unhappy that in our book, *Dayenu*, when Uncle Murray and Aunt Helene invite their nine nieces and nephews to their Passover seder, we don't account for the whereabouts of the children's parents. And while non-Jews seem comfortable with whimsical stories about the Easter Bunny, Santa Claus, and *The Grinch Who Stole Christmas*, Jewish educators are uptight because in *It Happened In Shushan*, the wonderful rebus version of the Purim story, author Harriet Feder speculates about Esther really wanting to be a doctor, not a queen.

Yaffa Ganz, in an interview in the Spring 1989 issue of *Judaica Book News*, discusses this from the perspective of an editor in an Orthodox Jewish house.

While whimsy, humor, and flights of imagination are usually taken for granted in children's books, they are approached with caution in the ultra-Orthodox community. Religion is serious and there is constant concern that laughter and humor do not cross the thin line and turn into flippancy or irreverence. Yet we have to remember that laughter is a gift. It is part of the joy of living; it is part and parcel of being human.

What we at Kar-Ben find most frustrating (and amusing) is that when we finally find and publish the perfect story, one that conveys the feeling tone of a Jewish holiday celebration without being didactic—*Tamar's Sukkah* for example, or *The Passover Parrot*—reviewers complain that "there is no information about the holiday itself except for a brief introduction." That, ladies and gentlemen, is precisely the point.

Response to Increased Demand

In the last couple of years, two children's specialty bookstores—Eeyore's in Manhattan, and Once Upon A Time in New Rochelle—have published mail order catalogs of Jewish children's books. The Eeyore's catalog contains more than 300 books, tapes, and records, arranged by subject and age range. The categories show us the breadth of the field: Alphabet and Number Books, Bible, Folktales, Holidays, Religion, The Old Country, Emigration and the New Country, Holocaust, Israel, Biography, Reference Books, Songbooks, and Crafts. There are toddler board books, pop-up and fabric books, floating bathtub books, and choose-your-own adventure books.

Virtually all 300 titles have been published in the last 10 years.

As the supply of good Jewish books for children increases, so does the demand. It is being helped along by a rising Jewish birthrate, and by Jewish parents who are better educated and more affluent. Many are graduates of the growing Jewish Day School movement, alumni of Camps Ramah and Massad, or people who got their surge of Jewish identity from a summer in Israel. They don't especially want didactic, resource books to help them teach their kids about Jewish life. They want happy books, lighthearted books—above all, well-written, colorful, contemporary Jewish books.

The community has responded in a variety of ways to get the books to the consumer.

Jewish school and synagogue libraries are having bookfairs for children. Community bookfairs are including children's programming as a focal point of their Jewish Book Month celebrations. The Washington Jewish Community Center had a second bookfair in the Spring of 1989—a children's-only bookfair. The Jewish Book Council has had several conferences focused on the children's book market. The specialty children's book stores—there are 300 of them across the country—are reaching out to the Jewish community, especially around holiday time, with author appearances and storytelling. Even Dalton and Waldenbooks (the names cause accounting and marketing nightmares to small publishers) are beginning to feature Jewish children's titles. And Scholastic always has a Jewish title or two in its bookclub newsletters. In Winter 1989-90, two Kar-Ben titles will be featured.

Until recently, children's books in general were the stepchildren of the publishing industry. The books that were published in hardcover relied primarily on the library market to sustain them. The advent of the paperback has brought children's books into the home to stay.

By 1985, children's books were a hot topic in the industry. At the American Bookseller's Association convention that year (and since), booksellers were mobbing the children's displays, reading and buying books. Pre-conference sessions on children's book sales were standing room only. At one session, I made a comment on Jewish children's books, and after the session I was deluged with inquiries. In 1989, people lined up to get autographs not only of John LeCarré, but of Stan and Jan Berenstain, Tomie DePaola, Mr. Rogers, and Bob from Sesame Street. Among fall titles, every house had at least one Jewish title. Many were Chanukah books, but there were also folktales, life-cycle books, and history books.

Children's books are now the fastest growing sales sector in book publishing. Consumers are projected to buy \$2.3 billion dollars worth of children's hardcover and paperback books in 1992. Jewish families are bookbuyers and book readers. The trade knows this. (One of Random House's featured Fall 1989 titles for adults is Adin Steinsaltz's translation of the Talmud.)

This spring, a Jewish children's book, Lynn Sharon Schwartz's *The Four Questions*, with a fanciful animal seder created by Ori Sherman, made *Publishers Weekly's* Children's Bestseller List . . . right alongside *Pat the Bunny*, *Good Night Moon*, and *Where's Waldo?* If the next decade of Jewish children's book publishing is as productive as the last, a few years from now, even that won't seem very remarkable.

Judye Groner is president of Kar-Ben Copies Publishing Company, which she founded with partner Madeline Wikler in 1975 to produce their first title, My Very Own Haggadah. Today, Kar-Ben publishes more than 70 titles on Jewish themes for young children and their families. Mrs. Groner received the 1988 Bookie award of the Women's National Book Association, and was cited for her contribution to children's publishing by the Association of Jewish Libraries in 1989.