

# Jewish Identity and American Acceptance: Welcoming a Firstborn Son in Two Classic Children's Books

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## INTRODUCTION

For many decades, Jewish American children's literature has featured works of fiction presenting the unique traditions that have historically characterized community practice and defined Jewish identity. While these books have often focused on the annual cycle of holidays, such recognizable ceremonies as bar mitzvah and marriage have also figured prominently; more recently, mourning customs have been acknowledged.<sup>1</sup> Yet the welcoming of a new baby to a Jewish family has been notably almost absent from literary works, ironically so, since family relationships form the very core of Jewish life. Two didactic books for young children, *Baby's Bris* by Louise Wilkowsky, and *Rosie & the Mole: The Story of a Bris*, by Judy Silverman and Philip L. Sherman, both appeared in 1999. As Leonard B. Glick briefly describes them in his comprehensive *Marked in Your Flesh: Circumcision from Ancient Judea to Modern America* (2005), each of these stories describe the frustration of girls observing the lavish celebration of their new brother's entry into the historic covenant of the Jewish people. Neither book explores its cultural setting in any detail, nor do they develop characters with whom readers can identify, outside of the superficial presentation of sibling jealousy. In *Baby's Bris*, the more religiously inclusive of the two books, Sophie is assured that she is as important as her brother, and even that her parents celebrated her birth as a *simcha* (festive occasion). In *Rosie's Mole*, the author attempts a bit of humor at Rosie's confusion of the terms *mohel* (officiant at the *bris*) with the animal that lives underground. (Given the fact that moles are famous for their extremely poor vision, the unintentional humor of this misunderstanding is actually frightening.) In a slight variation of the explanation provided to Sophie, Rosie's cousin asserts that girls don't "need" any ritual to be included in the covenant, converting an obvious example of female marginalization into a sign of superiority. *Baby's Bris* and *Rosie and the Mole* serve a specific purpose: inculcating normative values of traditional Judaism, and specifically preempting any suggestion that girls are considered less important than boys in Jewish life.

A more recent book on celebrating Jewish births is *Mazel Tov! It's a Boy/ Mazel Tov! It's a Girl*, written by Jamie Korngold and illustrated with photos by Jeff Finkelstein. Significantly, it can be opened from either side by turning the book upside down; this orientation equates the importance of ceremonies welcoming male and female children to Jewish families. One half of the story describes a *bris*, while the other half presents a naming ceremony for a female baby. Essentially, there is little difference between the two narratives because any allusion to circumcision is completely absent. Instead, a rabbi, "who is a mohel," gives the baby a name. One might expect

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1. See, for example, *Pearl's Marigolds for Grandpa*, written and illustrated by Jane Breskin Zalben, Simon and Schuster, 1997; *Stones for Grandpa*, written by Renee Londner, illustrated by Graciela Avilés, Kar-Ben Publishing, 2013; *French Toast Sunday*, written by Gloria Spielman, illustrated by Inbal Gigi Bousidan, Apples & Honey Press, 2018).

children to question why the rabbi is also a “mohel” and what that title means, but this detail is not addressed. The only hint of a physical procedure is that the *mohel* is gently touching the baby’s legs, but no child could possibly decipher this clue.

Judaism’s primary ritual formalizing membership in the Jewish people is *brit milah* (*bris* in Ashkenazic pronunciation.) An eight-day-old male is circumcised and given his Jewish name, marking his entry into the biblical covenant with God and showing his parents’ commitment to Jewish continuity (Genesis 16: 12–14). The obvious challenge of presenting this custom has resulted in an almost automatic choice by children’s book authors to avert their gaze and look elsewhere when narrating the joys and demands of being a Jew. Yet two of the most foundational writers in the canon of Jewish children’s books took another path. Sydney Taylor (1904–1978), in *All-of-a-Kind Family Uptown* (1958), and Sadie Rose Weilerstein (1894–1983), in *Little New Angel* (1947), each crafted a chapter about the much less commonly observed *mitzvah* of *pidyon ha-ben*. Stories about the symbolic redemption of a firstborn son from Temple service become an implicit substitute in their books, allowing them to avoid describing a *bris*. Taylor’s and Weilerstein’s contributions to the overall field are truly definitive. Contemporary authors such as Jane Breskin Zalben and Leslie Kimmelman are examples of Taylor’s and Weilerstein’s lasting imprint. Zalben’s richly and allusively illustrated volumes about a family of Jewish bears and other animals, beginning with *Beni’s First Chanukah* (1988), and Kimmelman’s accessible *Sam and Charlie (and Sam Too)* (2013) and its sequels, both entertain and instruct through stories about Jewish values and observance. Their work may be viewed as a creative response to Taylor’s and Weilerstein’s legacy. By centering chapters in their work around a theologically and legally important ceremony for sons, albeit one much less frequent than a *bris*, both authors devised an innovative way to describe ritual and tradition. While including the celebration of a *bris* in a children’s book would involve explaining, even if circuitously, the actual procedure of circumcision, Taylor and Weilerstein creatively evaded this problem. Instead, they invited readers to view a different custom, one which also evokes pride in Jewish continuity and reflects fidelity to a patriarchal code. The *pidyon ha-ben* ceremony, featured in both authors’ books, is a joyful event in which the primacy of a son, in this case exclusively the first born, is affirmed. At the same time, all members of the family, including women and girls, comfortably participate, without the need to obfuscate any elements of the ceremony. The authors’ underrecognized literary ingenuity in effecting this substitution allowed them to achieve their goal.

## ALL-OF-A-KIND FAMILY UPTOWN

In the *All-of-a-Kind Family* series, middle-grade novels accompanied by the work of well-regarded illustrators, Taylor creates a fictional universe that is largely female. The family, whose last name is never mentioned, lives in New York City’s immigrant community, first on the Lower East Side and later in a more upwardly mobile Bronx neighborhood. There are five daughters, and a son is born to their family at the end of the first book. However, this male addition does not alter the essentially feminine core of the books. Published between 1951 and 1978, all of the books in the series assume traditional gender roles, yet the sisters’ lively independence and intense loyalty to one another undermine any sense of passivity as a feminine norm. Personal and

societal dilemmas are woven organically into the chapters, making the series more than a pretext for learning about Jewish festivals and ceremonies.

When Ella, Henny, Sarah, Charlotte, and Gertie learn that their hardworking and cheerful mother has given birth to a boy, Charlie, they are delighted, although Charlotte expresses reservations about the intrusion of a male into their circle: “I think boys are horrid, anyway—always wanting to fight and throw each other around.” She even expresses an intention to “have only girl babies” when she marries (Taylor 1951, 178). Charlotte’s expression of female superiority is in total contrast to her father’s feelings of resignation at the probable birth of another daughter, denying him the pride of attending synagogue with a boy who will carry on his name (182). His sadness is perplexing to Ella and Sarah; Sarah can only comment, “My ... Papa certainly wants a boy child, doesn’t he?” (182). When Charlie’s birth is announced, Papa seems almost overwhelmed, and weeps with joy (182–184). After this intense drama, the book ends with no mention of a *bris*, and the next book, *More All-of-a-Kind Family* (1954), opens with Charlie as a toddler having a tantrum. Readers who learn so many details about holidays, as well as living conditions, historical events, and the ethnicity of the family’s neighbors, might well think that the birth of a boy to Jews merits no special ceremony.<sup>2</sup>

Taylor herself, an educated woman who acted and danced professionally (Bloom 2009), was the daughter of immigrants. She recognized the accelerating pace of Jewish assimilation and sought to capture the past in her books.<sup>3</sup> Her obituary in *The New York Times* quotes the author’s poignant realization of a vanishing Jewish world: “As a link between the alien past and my daughter’s generation, how could I bring to life the lights and shadows of such a background? I took my daughter Jo down to the old neighborhood.... But the past was dead there; it lived only in me” (Anonymous 1978). Taylor and Weilerstein’s books provide many opportunities to compare changes and new interpretations of ritual observance that some segments of the Jewish community have instituted.

The requirement to ritually circumcise one’s son was still, however, very much the norm both when Taylor was growing up and when she wrote the *All-of-a-Kind* series. Circumcision was not yet widely practiced by non-Jews; both the procedure itself and the permanent sign of identity that it created were viewed as alien by most Americans. On the other hand, the ritual of *pidyon ha-ben* was less common and would gradually almost disappear among non-Orthodox sectors of the Jewish community, despite attempts by the Conservative rabbinate to promote its relevance (see, for example, Klein 1979, 430–432). The ritual is restricted to a quite limited sector of boys:

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2. Traditional Judaism recognizes the birth of a daughter only by calling her father to the Torah, at which time the daughter’s name is announced, without any accompanying festive meal or celebration. Contemporary Jews, including many in the Orthodox community, have instituted the informal custom of marking the occasion with a later celebration.

3. *From Sarah to Sydney: The Woman Behind All-of-a-Kind Family*, a long-awaited biography of Taylor by the late June Cummins, completed by Alexandra Dunietz, was published recently by Yale University Press; see Schneider 2021 for a review and explanation.

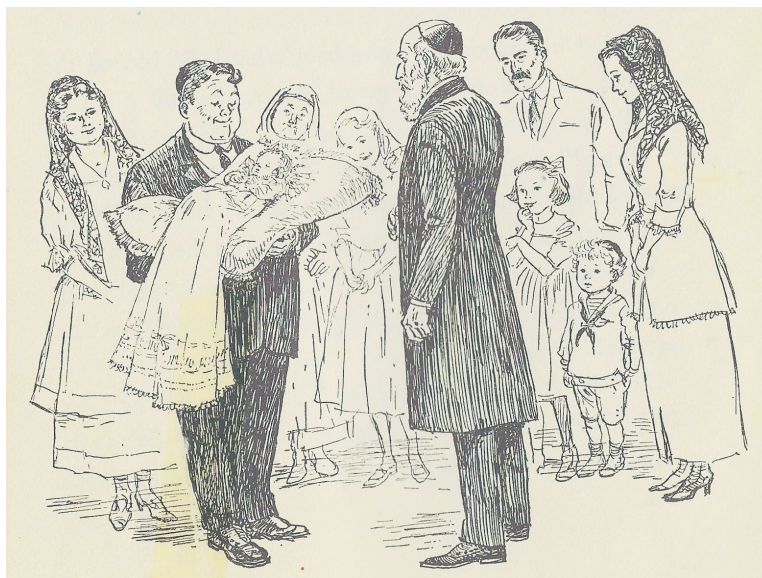
firstborn only, born to mothers who have not delivered by Caesarean section or experienced previous miscarriage or abortion, boys whose grandfathers are not descended from the Kohens or Levites who served in the Temple in Jerusalem. The ceremony involves a symbolic payment to the officiating Kohen in exchange for releasing the child from Temple service. While its origin would seem an archaic tribal custom to some Jews and most Christians, its description in a children's book does not entail the uncomfortable elements of the *bris* (Werblowsky and Wigoder 1997, 161, 255).

The *All-of-a-Kind* sisters' new brother would not qualify for *pidyon ha-ben*, but their new cousin would. In *More All-of-a-Kind Family*, Mama's brother, Hyman, marries a new immigrant, Lena, and in *All-of-a-Kind Family Uptown* she gives birth to a son, their first child. Uncle Hyman is ecstatic upon learning of the birth. Readers of the series will remember that his marriage almost did not take place. In a near-tragic episode, Lena is stricken with polio, and becomes severely depressed. Believing that Hyman would only marry her out of pity, she cancels their engagement, only to be persuaded by her sister-in-law that her fears of Hyman's motives are unfounded (Schneider 2020). Therefore, the child's birth has an almost miraculous quality. Hyman promises to host the "finest P'Idyon Ha-Ben a child could ever have!" and to invite everybody in the community, including Grace, a gentile friend of the family (Taylor 1958, 94). With her typical virtuosity, Taylor inserts an explanation of the ritual into her characters' conversation naturally, and employs Grace as a link between the Jewish community and the larger American world in which they live their daily lives. During the Hebrew-language ceremony, the girls' father provides Grace with a simultaneous translation, repeating the Kohen's words verbatim in English: "This, my first born, is the first born of his mother..." (97).

Mary Stevens's black-and-white line drawings enhance Taylor's text.<sup>4</sup> A smiling Uncle Hyman presents his son, dressed in an elaborate gown and resting on a pillow, to the Kohen (97). The rest of the family, including Lena, stand in the background, the women wearing lace veils and the children's faces showing solemn curiosity. The visual elements mirror the same effect of the text, presenting this unique ritual as both ancient and relevant, purely Jewish and yet accessible to the Christian guest. The Kohen officiating has a long white beard; his profile suggests a biblical patriarch. The women in the family, even the baby's mother, stand to the side. Only the men playing the principal roles have dark lines and crosshatching emphasizing their clothing; everyone else attending is a pale, white figure observing quietly. Yet Uncle Hyman, the father, has an almost comical smile on his face, negating some of the gravity in the scene. In addition, the baby's gown looks strikingly similar to ones that might be used at a Christian child's baptism, potentially offering a sense of similarity between the two faiths. Poor Charlie's confusion also balances the dignity of the scene with humor. Having expected to see "Benny the pigeon" at the ceremony, he is momentarily disappointed. As a further gesture to ecumenical understanding, Charlie asks his father if the Kohen is going to keep the father's payment of "five silver dollars" (98–99). Given the unspoken fact that Jews' alleged cheapness with money is one of the most pernicious antisemitic falsehoods, it is relevant that the chapter concludes with Papa's answer:

<sup>4</sup> The series has four different illustrators; In addition to Mary Stevens the other illustrators are Helen John, the wife-and-husband team of Beth and Joe Krush, and Gail Owens.

“Oh, no, Charlie.... The *P’Idyon Ha-Ben* money goes to charity” (99).



**Fig. 1.** Reproduced from *All-of-a-Kind Family Uptown* by Sydney Taylor, illustrated by Mary Stevens (Chicago: Follett Publishing Company)

## LITTLE NEW ANGEL

Sadie Rose Weilerstein, the author of the popular *K'ton Ton* series about the adventures of a miniature Jewish boy, also places girls at the center of *What the Moon Brought* (1942), and its sequel, *Little New Angel*.<sup>5</sup> In these episodic collections about the experiences of two Jewish sisters, Debby and Ruth, a boy also joins the family. When their brother is born in *Little New Angel*, Weilerstein follows the books' format of presenting an event in the present followed by a parallel piece of folklore or history that places it in context.<sup>6</sup> Mathilda Keller's black-and-white line drawings evoke both the daily realities of 1940s America, and fanciful visions of an ancient, spiritual past. Their brother Michael's birth is preceded by the sisters' wish for a new baby. So heartfelt is their family's singing at the Shabbat tale, that the proverbial "Sabbath Queen" herself appears in answer to their prayers. Interpreting the talmudic teaching that a baby boy knows all of the Torah before birth until an angel, touching him, removes his knowledge, Debby and Ruth's brother is pictured as undergoing this mystical experience (Weilerstein 1947, 7). While in practice, the boy's *bris* would follow, Weilerstein ends the chapter with the girls looking forward to Rosh ha-Shanah.

5. Her 1961 novel, *Ten and a Kid*, boldly raises issues of sexism in an Eastern European *shtetl* community; see Schneider 2019.

6. Weilerstein was married to a Conservative rabbi and was active in Jewish communal life and education; see Kogen 2009.

What follows Michael's birth is an extremely inventive way to present an alternative *mitzvah* to the more difficult *bris*. Michael cannot have a *pidyon ha-ben* ceremony, and there is no conveniently available cousin to receive that honor. Instead, the author creates a productive misunderstanding in the chapter called, "A Big Mistake." Ruth and Debby's cousin Judith, who is rather sure of herself, convinces the girls that their new brother may disappear, as he will have to be bought back from a Cohen (the spelling used in this book). Although Judith's brother, Danny, explains that the *pidyon ha-ben* ceremony will be delightfully fun, the girls become worried that Mr. Cohen, their neighbor, may refuse to surrender the baby. An anxious Debby even underplays her feelings of attachment to her new brother when speaking to Mrs. Cohen, afraid that she might encourage the elderly couple to refuse payment in exchange for the baby (76–77).

Ruth and Debby's father, when he learns of the girls' fears, makes the most of this "teachable moment." First, he explains that the ceremony is purely a symbolic reenactment, emphasizing fidelity to Jewish tradition. He colorfully narrates the origins of the custom, while Keller's dramatic scene of a redemption in the Temple enables children to picture the contrast, as well as the continuity, between past and present (76–77).



**Fig. 2.** Reproduced from *Little New Angel* by Sadie Rose Weilerstein, illustrated by Mathilda Keller, by permission of the University of Nebraska Press. Copyright 1947 by The Jewish Publication Society of America

Then their father reveals the second mistake. Since Michael is not the firstborn, he will not need to be redeemed from Temple service. Not only does he allay Debby's fears, but he affirms her special status, although it is not recognized in Jewish law: "Michael is the first son, but he isn't the first-born. *You* are the first-born in the family, Debby." Following this comforting dialogue, Weilerstein devises a kind of alternative ceremony, *pidyon ha-ben* for those who do not need one. The family takes Michael to visit Mr. and Mrs. Cohen, the neighborhood's resident representatives of a priestly past. Keller's illustration looks like a formal ceremony, with the family members elegantly dressed, surrounding the baby in a circle. In one deliberate departure from

the norm, it is Debby and Ruth's mother, not their father, who presents the baby (79). Mr. Cohen makes the traditional priestly blessing over the baby, as if in compensation for the missing *pidyon ha-ben*, but also for the *bris*, which welcomes all Jewish male children, except in the world of children's books.

## CONCLUSION

Authorial choices in books for children about Jewish life reflect both individual preferences and societal norms. Absence of a practice may be as revealing as its presence, an observation which would be difficult to ignore in the case of both Sydney Taylor's and Sadie Rose Weilerstein's avoidance of ritual circumcision in their classic works. In offering their readers a richly-detailed account of a much less common life cycle event, *pidyon ha-ben* for firstborn sons, they present a fruitful compromise in the delicate balance between preserving core Jewish identity and portraying Jewish American life accessibly for young readers. Without even mentioning the *bris*, a universally practiced ceremony demanded of all Jewish males, Taylor and Weilerstein construct a more acceptable alternative for the specific sphere of illustrated children's books. Their emotionally rich and colorful depictions of *pidyon ha-ben* as an inclusive family event do not negate the importance of the *bris*, which is never mentioned in their books and falls outside of their fictional world. Specifically commanded in the Torah, and faithfully practiced by Jews for thousands of years, the surgical procedure required by *brit milah* renders it difficult to incorporate in a story for children. By substituting *pidyon ha-ben*'s symbolic redemption, Taylor and Weilerstein communicate the excitement and pride of a family in an emotionally accessible form, while also preserving a practice inextricably connected to Judaism's ancient, but still relevant, past.

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