

Values in Jewish Children's Literature*

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Introduction: My Bias

Shalom Uvrakhah to all of the participants in the conference. "Shalom Uvrakhah" means, of course, "peace and blessing," a highly appropriate way for Jews to greet each other.

I am pleased and honored to participate in the First International Symposium on Jewish Children's Literature here in Jerusalem, especially with such an illustrious and lovely group of people. When I first entered the world of books, I was told that there wasn't much money in the field, but that I would meet a lot of very wonderful people. I have found both parts of that statement to be true.

But before I begin, I have a confession to make. Writers are supposed to be broad-minded, liberal, objective, ecumenical people. Well, I admit that I am guilty of a very definite parochial prejudice. I happen to think that Jewish books—whether they are humorous and light, or grappling with serious matters—should have something Jewish to say to their readers. And to me, "something Jewish" means that, in some way, a book is plugged into the central nervous system of Jewish lore and knowledge, that it looks to Jewish sources for direction, and that it starts from the premise that the foundation of Jewish truth and wisdom—i.e., the Torah—is our unwavering focal point.

Identity and Values

There are many questions being asked today as to what constitutes Jewish values, Jewish wisdom—or even what constitutes the Jewish people. But most Jews, no mat-

ter what questions they ask, instinctively understand and believe that despite all of our differences, we are one people with a shared destiny and a vital message for ourselves and the world.

In addition to being one people, we also happen to be a maddening, obstinate, and superbly wonderful people. Not only have we persevered against tremendous odds for the past three thousand years or so, but we have prevailed. To this day, we continue to amaze both ourselves and everyone around us. Mark Twain described it one hundred years ago, and his description is as relevant now as it was then:

If the statistics are right, the Jews constitute but one quarter of one percent of the human race. It suggests a nebulous dim puff of stardust lost in the blaze of the Milky Way. Properly, the Jew ought hardly to be heard of; but he is heard of, has always been heard of. He is as prominent on the planet as any other people, and his importance is extravagantly out of proportion to the smallness of his bulk.

His contributions to the world's list of great names in literature, science, art, music, finance, medicine, and abstruse learning are very out of proportion to the weakness of his numbers. He has made a marvelous fight in this world in all ages; and has done it with his hands tied behind him. He could be vain of himself and be excused for it. The Egyptians, the Babylonians and the Persians rose, filled the planet with sound and splendor; then faded to dream-stuff and passed away; the Greeks and the Romans followed and made a vast noise, and they are gone; other peoples have sprung up and held their torch high for a time, but it burned out, and they sit in twilight now, or have vanished.

The Jew saw them all, survived them all, and is now what he always was, exhibit-

ing no decadence, no infirmities of age, no weakening of his parts, no slowing of his energies, no dulling of his alert and aggressive mind. All things are mortal but the Jew; all other forces pass, but he remains. What is the secret of his immortality?

(Twain, 1899)

The answer is the same now as it was then. The secret of our "immortality" is, of course, our immortal Torah—the observance of it and its study.

Knowledge Through the Generations

The commandment to learn is one of the cardinal commandments in the Torah. It is our way of sharing in Divine wisdom and of bringing light to the world. When the study of Torah wanes, Torah observance wanes as well and Judaism degenerates into a culture of "lox and bagels," which eventually fades away.

In the prayer Shema', our basic declaration of Jewish faith, we read *Ve-shinantam le-vanekha* = You shall teach and review them [the words of the Torah] with your children. During the Passover seder, one of the most important rituals in the Jewish year, the Hagadah tells us over and over again of the obligation to pass our heritage and tradition on, to teach our children: all of them—all "four sons" [i.e., types]—the wise and the wicked, the simple, and even those who are unable to ask.

But the learning experience need not be a didactic, classroom experience. The seder itself is based on *telling and reenacting* the story of the Exodus. (The word *hagadah* comes from the Hebrew *le-hagid* = to tell.) Even classroom teaching needs extra-curricular reinforcement. And this is where culture—music, art, theater, and especially literature—all have a part to play.

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Art for the Sake of Torah

The Torah has very definite opinions concerning culture. In the Book of Genesis, when Noah blesses his three sons—Shem, who will carry forth the message of G-d to the world; Ham, the symbol of physical force and strength; and Yefet, the creator of beauty—Noah says:

Yaft Elokim le-Yefet, ve-yishkon be-ohole Shem. G-d has given the gift of beauty to Yefet [whose name also means "beautiful"]; he shall dwell in the tents of Shem.

(Genesis 9:27)

In other words, Yefet's creative abilities are not an end in themselves. They are to be used to help Shem propagate the Divine message which he is destined to teach.

But if the proper place for art is in the service of G-d, then a religious writer, artist, musician is under certain restrictions and limitations—not necessarily of topics, for the Torah has something to say about every possible situation. But we are expected to try and analyze each situation, and to evaluate it through the eyes of the Torah.

This is a heavy burden for a Jewish artist to carry. But Judaism views man as a partner in the ongoing process of creation and, as such, the artist is responsible both for his product and for its effect on civilization.

While art expresses the individual artist's human creativity, it also gives physical form to society's values and beliefs. It can portray all that is good, holy, and beautiful in the human spirit; or all that is ugly, base, and profane. As Jews, it is our duty to give voice and form to that which is positive and holy. It is one of the ways we reach towards G-d, perfect our world, and hallow our existence.

The tools we bring to our task are many: a sense of wonder, curiosity, observation and aesthetics; a sense of humor, spontaneity, *simha* (joy); the gift of laughter; and for a writer, of course, the gift of language. Animals can communicate, but we can speak, and the rabbis tell us that it is language which differentiates man from the animals. In the Torah we read:

Va-yipah be-apav nishmat hayim, va-yehi ha-Adam le-nefesh hayah.

And He [G-d] blew the breath of life into his [Adam's] nostrils, and Adam became a living spirit.

(Genesis 2:7)

Rashi and Onkelos, those two giants of Biblical commentary, both explain that *nefesh hayah*—a living spirit—is the gift of speech.

It is the challenge of the Jewish artist and writer to find ways to incorporate all of these G-d-given qualities and utilize them towards the furtherance of Jewish values and living.

Israel and the Diaspora

As an American-born Jew who has spent half of her life in Israel, I feel that I am in a unique position to relate to Jewish issues on both sides of the ocean and to appreciate the many problematic and conflicting forces at work in the Jewish community around the world:

(a) Yeshivot, Jewish schools, and the study of Torah are blossoming, while assimilation is rampant and ignorance of things Jewish has never been so widespread.

(b) Jewry has never seemed so wealthy and secure, while antisemitism seems to have surfaced again with renewed vigor.

(c) The newest miraculous chapter in Jewish history is taking place before our very eyes, as Russian Jewry pours into the Land of Israel. On the other hand, miracles can be very difficult affairs, and Israel, despite years and years of waiting for this very moment, is sorely unprepared for her present miracle.

These are only a few of the issues and reasons it is so important for Jews in Israel and the Diaspora to speak to each other, to listen to each other, and to learn from each other; to work together to build bridges of Jewish understanding, and to forge bonds of mutual, Jewish support.

But perhaps the most important item on the Jewish juvenile literary agenda today, both in the Diaspora and in Israel, is to find ways to help disseminate Jewish knowledge so that we can raise an *'Am yode'a sefer*—a nation which is Jewishly learned, as the Jews have always been—and not a nation liberally educated in western civilization, but abysmally ignorant of its own heritage. This, for me, is the prime purpose of a Jewish book.

And just for the record, the possibilities for good stories and plots which can incorporate Jewish knowledge and values in a

concrete and compelling manner are endless. All we need is an abundance of good, knowledgeable Jewish authors!

My Job

If the story of the Jew is the story of man grappling with the Divine and, through the gift of the Torah, bringing a measure of G-dliness to the world, then I see my task as attempting to unveil some small bit of the vast wealth, wisdom, and beauty of the Torah to Jewish children. I try to do it in an enjoyable, undidactic way, and in a manner kids can relate to.

Although I am an Orthodox writer and many of my readers are Orthodox, I do not see myself as writing for Orthodox children, but for *all* Jewish children. All Jews are one family—the seed of Avraham Avinu, and the Torah is our common heritage. A good Jewish writer, like a good teacher, must find a way to make this heritage relevant and vital to all Jews. And so I try to integrate and unite, to find the common denominator for as many stripes and colors of the spectrum as I possibly can. And it's difficult! Among the feedback I have received:

—Objections from the Hasidic community to the use of the Sephardic idiom in some of my books; objections from Conservative and Reform schools to the use of the Ashkenazic idiom in other books.

—Requests for only black *kipot* (skullcaps) on boys; for only knitted *kipot*; and for no *kipot* at all!

—An objection by a prominent reviewer for having defined a *minyán* as a quorum of ten men; and an objection from another reviewer for associating the number nine with a pregnant woman.

—The criticism that some of my characters are too good (this particular reviewer liked her kids wild), while others complained that my heroes were disrespectful and disobedient.

Nonetheless, there is a common denominator uniting all Jews. The author just has to find it. In the old Scottish folksong, the "high road" and the "low road" both lead to Scotland, but to get to Jerusalem one must find the Rambam's *shevil ha-zahav*—the golden, middle road—and it's a very narrow road to navigate!

My Books

As far as my own books are concerned (see Bibliography), I tend to divide them into five compartments:

(a) *Stories with a Message*, where, although the message is serious, the story definitely is not. These include:

The three Mimmy and Simmy books; *Shuki's Upside Down Dream*; *Yedidya and the Esrog Tree*; *The Gift that Grew*; *The Terrible Wonderful Day*; *Where are You Hashem?*; *Tali's Slippers*, *Tova's Shoes*; and *The Little Old Lady Who Couldn't Fall Asleep*.

(b) *Picture Worlds of Knowledge*, heavily illustrated books with a lot of Jewish information tucked neatly away between the pictures:

Who Knows One: A Book of Jewish Numbers; *From Head to Toe: A Book About You*; *Alef to Tav*; *The Wonderful World We Live In*; *Fins, Feet, Wings, and Other Animal Things*; and *Me and My Bubby, My Zeidy and Me*.

(c) *Books for Fun Reading*:

The four Savta Simcha books; *The Adventures of Jeremy Levi*; *Hello Heddy Levi*.

(d) "Unclassified" Favorites:

Teasers, Twisters, Stumpers: A Bookful of Tricky Torah-Riddles, and *The Jewish Factfinder: A Bookful of Important Torah Facts and Handy Jewish Information*.

(e) *Holiday Series*:

An eight-volume series of illustrated holiday books featuring Bina, Benny, and Chaggai the Holiday Dove.

I hope that each book provides some measure of humor, entertainment, warmth, and fun, and leaves the reader a tiny bit richer in Jewish life and lore.

Last but not least . . . our rabbis taught us that *Kol Yisra'el 'arevin zeh ba-zeh*—all Jews are responsible for and involved with each other (Tractate *Shevuot* 39A). We are one people, one family. Although we still live in many lands and speak many languages, we are indisputably one nation with one destiny. May it continue to be a

glorious one, filled with great books for Jewish kids, and with wonderful Jewish librarians who will help the kids discover the books.

Reference

Twain, Mark. "Concerning the Jews," *Harper's Magazine*, vol. 99 (Sept. 1899), pp. 525–535. Reprinted as a separate: New York: Harper, 1934; Philadelphia, PA: Running Press, c1985.

Bibliography: Books By Yaffa Ganz

I. Books in English

[Arranged by publisher and date of publication]

Artscroll—Mesorah (New York)

Fiction

The Little Old Lady Who Couldn't Fall Asleep, 1989.

Tali's Slippers, Tova's Shoes, 1989.

Where Are You, Hashem?, 1989.

The Very Good Fisherman, 1991.

Nonfiction

The Wonderful World We Live In, 1989.

Alef to Tav, 1989.

All Things Considered—From a Woman's Point of View, 1990.

The Artscroll Holiday Series (1990–1992)

Rosh Hashana, with Bina and Benny and Chaggai the Holiday Dove.

Chanuka, with Bina and Benny and Chaggai the Holiday Dove.

Yom Kippur, with Bina and Benny and Chaggai the Holiday Dove.

Sukkos, with Bina and Benny and Chaggai the Holiday Dove.

Purim, with Bina and Benny and Chaggai the Holiday Dove.

Pesach, with Bina and Benny and Chaggai the Holiday Dove.

Shavuot, with Bina and Benny and Chaggai the Holiday Dove.

The Four Fasts, with Bina and Benny and Chaggai the Holiday Dove.

Behrman House (New York)

Our Jerusalem: A pictorial curriculum for kindergarten and first grade. Prepared in cooperation with the Municipality of Jerusalem, 1978.

Feldheim Publishers (Jerusalem/New York)

Fiction

Savta Simcha and the Incredible Shabbos Bag, 1980.

Yedidya and the Esrog Tree, 1980.

The Riddle-Rhyme Book, 1981.

The Adventures of Jeremy Levi, 1981.

Savta Simcha and the Cinnamon Tree, 1983.

The Story of Mimmy and Simmy, 1985.

Shuki's Upside-Down Dream, 1985.

The Terrible Wonderful Day, 1986.

The Gift that Grew, 1986.

Savta Simcha and the Seven Splendid Gifts, 1987.

Hello Heddy Levi!, 1989.

Sharing a Sunshine Umbrella, 1989. (A Mimmy & Simmy Story.)

The Biggest-Littlest Birthday Cake, 1992. (A Mimmy & Simmy Story.)

Savta Simcha, Uncle Nechemya, and the Very Strange Stone in the Garden, 1992.

Nonfiction

Who Knows One: A Book of Jewish Numbers, 1981.

Follow the Moon: A Journey Through the Jewish Year, 1984.

From Head to Toe: A Book About You, 1988.

The Jewish Factfinder:

A Bookful of Important Torah Facts & Handy Jewish Information, 1988.

Teasers, Twisters, Stumpers:

A Bookful of Tricky Torah-Riddles, 1989.

Shvut Ami Publications (Jerusalem)

Yana and Marina Come Home, 1993.

(A trilingual publication: in English, Russian, and Hebrew.)

II. Translations

French

De la Tete au Pied. Editions Feldheim, 1988.

Savta Simcha et son Incroyable Sac de Chabbath. Geneve: Editions MJR, 1990.

German

Savta Simcha und die wunderbare Schabbos-Tasche. Zurich: Morascha, 1989.

Savta Simcha und der Zimtbaum. Zurich: Morascha, 1991.

Savta Simcha und die sieben wundervollen Geschenke. Zurich: Morascha, 1992.

Hebrew

1. *Be-ikvot ha-yareah*. Feldheim Publications, 1986.

2. *Mimi ve-Simi*. Feldheim Publications, 1988.

3. *Halomo ha-muzar shel Shuki*. Feldheim Publications, 1988.

FIRST INTERNATIONAL SYMPOSIUM ON JEWISH CHILDREN'S LITERATURE

4. *Yom 'alitz yom margiz*. Feldheim Publications, 1988.
5. *Mi-Kaf regel 'ad rosh*. Feldheim Publications, 1990.
6. *Hanukah 'im Binah ve-Beni ve-Hagai ha-Yonah*. Artscroll-Mesorah, 1990.

1. בעקבות הירח, 1986.
2. מימי וסימי, 1988.
3. חלומי המזרח של שוקי, 1988.
4. יום עלינו יום מרגיז, 1988.
5. מכף רגל עד ראש, 1990.
6. חנוכה עם בינה ובני וחגי היונה, 1990.

Spanish & Russian

The Jewish Factfinder scheduled to appear in both languages in 1993.

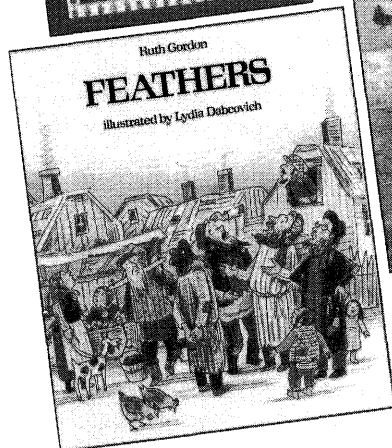
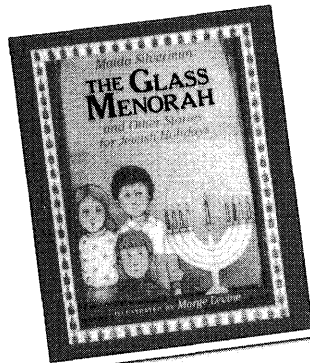
Yaffa Ganz holds a Bachelor of Arts degree in History from the University of Chicago. She served as the founding editor of the Young Readers Division for Feldheim Publishers (Jerusalem/New York) for ten years, and is the author of more than 200 published articles and stories in the Anglo-Jewish press. Thirty-five of her juvenile books have been published, and several have been translated into Hebrew, Russian, French, and German. She was the recipient of AJL's Sydney Taylor Body of Work Award in 1990, and is currently teaching a course in creative writing at Michlala—Jerusalem College for Women. The Ganzes live in Jerusalem.

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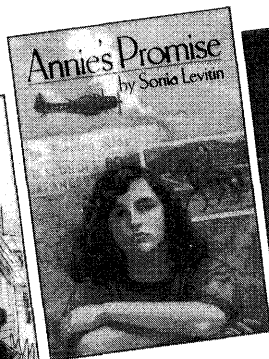
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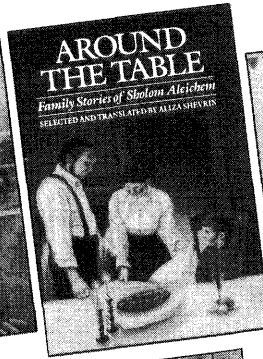


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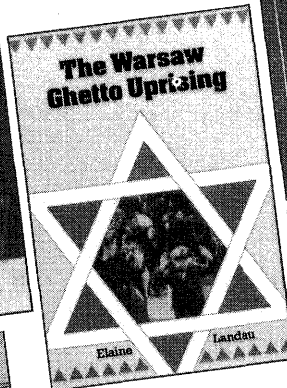
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—*School Library Journal*
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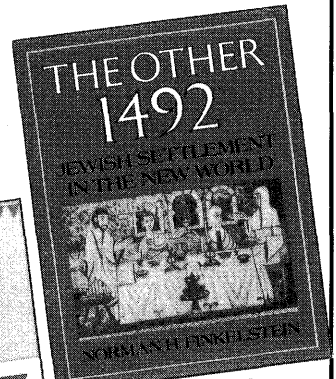
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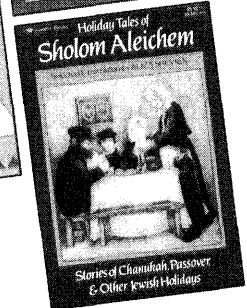
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