

Jewish Children's Literature: Report From America*

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What a year 1990 was for Jewish content in children's books in America! Eric Kimmel's *Hershel and the Hanukkah Goblins*, a tale of things that go bump in the night, wonderfully illustrated by Trina Schart Hyman, was named a Caldecott Honor Book. And *Number the Stars*, by Lois Lowry, received the Newbery Award [as well as the AJL Sydney Taylor Award—see *Judaica Librarianship vol. 6, pp. 111–112—Ed.*]. Of course, there were those who complained that Hershel is not really a Jewish book because goblins and ghosties are not suitable Jewish themes. Tell that to I. B. Singer! And Lowry's book, an excellent work of great appeal, does return us to an earlier convention in children's books about the Holocaust, that of helpless Jews rescued by the courage of others. Still, what a year for Jewish content! Who could complain?

We can—and should—for there is still much to do. This report from the U.S. only skims the surface, pointing out progress, looking at some areas in need of improvement, and commenting on some discernible trends.

Responding to Demographics

The first trend reflects demographic realities. As the burgeoning birth rate brought a new emphasis on books for babies, forward-looking Kar-Ben Copies, Inc., led the way in providing a full line of board books designed to show concepts in a Jewish setting and to build Jewish vocabulary. As the baby boomlet ages, we can expect to see new Jewish books keep pace with it. Picture books are already in great demand. Production of young adult novels will probably decline for the next several years until the children catch up.

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Bible and Holiday Stories

During the past decade, a number of Bible stories, many of them wonderfully illustrated, have been published by trade houses. But why, oh why, must so many gifted artists begin and end with the Noah story? Surely a few could resist drawing all those animals and try on the rest of *Bereshit* (Genesis) or *Shemot* (Exodus) for size. Several Jewish publishers have mentioned to me their intent to develop brightly colored, simple-text storybooks on Biblical themes. Such books are already widespread and amazingly inexpensive in the Christian marketplace; a few of them, carefully chosen, may be adaptable to our needs in the interim.

Holiday books appear yearly but, as always, Hanukkah and Passover are favored topics, while the pickings on less widely known Jewish holidays remain slim. A series of small books by Jane Breskin Zalben, beginning with *Beni's First Chanukah* and featuring charmingly drawn small animals in the tradition of Peter Rabbit, was considered a breakthrough Jewish holiday item by a trade publisher (H. Holt, 1988). Overall, the trend is toward holiday books that tell stories, with information tucked in here and there; no didacticism welcome. Humor is used, but sometimes misused, especially in holiday books which misrepresent themselves, as with the derivative and silly *Bubbie and Zadie Come to My House*, in which cozy, Yiddish-style grandparent figures act out the Santa story. *The Chanukah Tree* (Holiday, 1988), another silly Hanukkah story, this one by Eric Kimmel, is compensated for by the same author's delightful *The Hanukkah Guest* (Holiday, 1990), in which Old Bear is treated to potato pancakes when he is mistaken for the rabbi by nearsighted Bubba Brayna.

We've seen some other good additions: Barbara Diamond Goldin's *Cakes and Miracles* (Viking, 1991) is a good Purim story that shows how useful and imaginative

young Hershel is, despite his blindness. Goldin's *The World's Birthday* (Harcourt, 1990) is a well-illustrated Rosh Hashanah story of great appeal. Miriam Chaikin [AJL Sydney Taylor Body-of-Work Award Winner—see *Judaica Librarianship vol. 2, pp. 28–30—Ed.*] has contributed many good books during the decade, most recently a simple book, *Hanukkah for Holiday House* (1990), and *Menorahs, Mezuzas and other Jewish Symbols* for Clarion (1990), which includes holiday symbols and rituals.

Jews Around The World

Ten years ago, books about Jews in other places were few and dealt mostly with Israel, European immigration to America, or the lives of those touched or destroyed by the Holocaust. Now, in an ever-shrinking world, we need more books to point out the unique qualities of all places and cultures where Jews can be found, as well as the fact that we are One People. In a work like Sonia Levitin's *The Return* (Fawcett, 1988, paperback), we are given a strong sense of Ethiopian-born Desta as one of us, but with a sharp, clear portrayal of her culture, its beauties and horrors, and its impact on her life as a woman and a Jew [another AJL Award Winner—see *Judaica Librarianship vol. 4, pp. 171–173—Ed.*]

Recent works from Australia and South Africa include one by Allen Collins, husband of AJL's "woman in Melbourne," Ros Collins. *Jacob's Ladder* (Lodestar, 1989) is based on brothers in a Jewish home for children during the '40s. In it, Collins shows Jewish life in Australia at many levels, street and institutional, as well as the use of Australia as a haven for refugee children. South Africa sent us *Home Grounds*, by Lynn Freed (Summit Books, 1986), a drama of a young girl in a theatrical family shaped and corrupted by the racial problems of their country. Such books, already in English, do not pose the problems connected with getting a good translation. Still, surely there are many

more good children's books out there waiting to be discovered and shared with American readers. I call on all of those here today to help make American publishers aware of works with Judaic themes in other languages, for possible translation.

American and Israeli Themes

Even on the home front we need diversity. Not enough stories are set in the American South, in small towns, in the Bible Belt, in atypical families found everywhere throughout America present and past. One picture book that fills this need is *Berchick, My Mother's Horse*, by Esther S. Blanc (Volcano, 1989), a warm story of an observant Jewish pioneer family and their relationship with each other and their faith [Sydney Taylor Picture Book Award Winner—see *Judaica Librarianship vol. 6, pp. 109–110.—Ed.*]. For preteen and teen readers, Lois Ruby's short-story collection, *Two Truths in My Pocket* (Viking Press, 1982) was one of the first and remains one of the best attempts to deal with new issues, including interdating by black and white Jews and the racial/religious tensions involved, a traditional father's response to a son who doesn't want to become a rabbi while a daughter does, or the spiritual hunger of a learning-disabled child.

Considering our interest and our need, Israel is surprisingly underrepresented on our shelves. *Becoming Gershona* by Nava Semel, translated by Seymour Simckes (Viking, 1990), which describes young Gershona's experiences with her family, other children, and a mysterious new boy in Tel Aviv during the late 1950s, succeeds in giving young readers a strong sense of unique place plus universal feelings. But such books are just a beginning. We also need *introductory* works with big pictures, straightforward text. David Adler's *A Picture Book of Israel* (Holiday House, 1984) was a misnomer, its good text marred by small, unappealing black-and-white pictures. We should have book equivalents of the *Rehov Sumsum* videos, lively and engrossing, for younger children. While *On Eagles' Wings and Other Things*, by Connie Colker Steiner (Jewish Publication Society, 1987), was a step in the right direction, since it gave young children a sense of *aliyah* and Israeli diversity, there's more to be written for five-to-nine year-olds and even younger children.

For older readers, where are:

—Stories telling more about the difficulties of life in Israel and their impact on American *olim*, as well as *sabras*?

—School stories about Lag B'Omer picnics with guards riding shotgun on buses?

—Images of the "minor" festivals as celebrated in Eretz Yisrael?

—More on the impact of immigration from Russia and Ethiopia?

We can only hope that these vital topics will be represented in juvenile Judaica soon.

Sephardic Jewry

In connection with the 500th anniversary of the Spanish expulsion, works on Sephardim range from nonfiction books on the first Jews of New Amsterdam through collections of Sephardic folk tales, biographies, and exciting historical novels. Jacqueline Dembar Greene wrote *Butchers and Bakers, Rabbis and Kings* (Kar-Ben, 1984) about the Jewish community in 12th-century Tudela. The same author's *Out of Many Waters* (Walker, 1988) is the story of two Jewish sisters kidnapped during the Portuguese Inquisition and sent as slaves to Brazil. Their adventures, as they escape to New Amsterdam, are exciting and appealing. Other books of this era are Pamela Melnikoff's *Plots and Players* (Bedrick/Blackie, 1988), set in Elizabethan England, and Henye Meyer's *The Exiles of Crocodile Island* (Mesorah, 1984), about 2,000 Jewish boys and girls expelled in 1493 and sent to an equatorial island off the coast of Africa.

Storytelling and Biographies

A resurgence of storytelling as an art has been accompanied by a tremendous increase of retellings and collections in both secular and Judaica publishing. Jason Aronson has published heavily in this area. While folklorists like Howard Schwartz, storytellers like Peninnah Schram, and children's authors like Adèle Geras have put together outstanding collections for reading and telling, other anthologies come from traditional *midrashic* sources or are translated from works published outside the U.S.

Biographies are always in short supply. In 1982, on a panel sponsored by the Jewish Book Council in New York, I said we needed bios for *young* readers. We still do.

Though David Adler was listening and gave us *Our Golda* (Viking, 1984) for eight-to-eleven year-olds, other authors and publishers aimed too high, producing bios for age 12 and up. For these older readers, two books on Levi Strauss (whose name we wear), books on Jewish women such as Israeli heroine Sarah Aronsohn and U.S. astronaut Judith Resnick (who died in the Challenger explosion), and a sprinkling of others have been published in recent years. But for the younger ones, we still need works on musicians, writers, humanists, scholars, and statesmen written on the level of Adler's new secular series on Washington, Lincoln, Jackie Robinson, and others.

To summarize, the picture in children's book publishing in the U.S. is a confusing one. Buyouts and consolidations in the trade filled the 1980s; we don't know which imprint belongs to whom half the time. Prices are high, while library and school budgets are low. But we have cause for optimism. Yaffa Ganz is bringing Jewish concepts into books on zoology and math; publishers like UAHC [Union of American Hebrew Congregations], Feldheim, and the Jewish Publication Society are striving mightily to produce children's books that hold their own against the trade; and children's books are still big business in the U.S. As participants in the First International Symposium on Jewish Children's Literature looking back at the Jewish children's books of our youth, we realize that we have indeed come a long, long way, despite the distance left to go.

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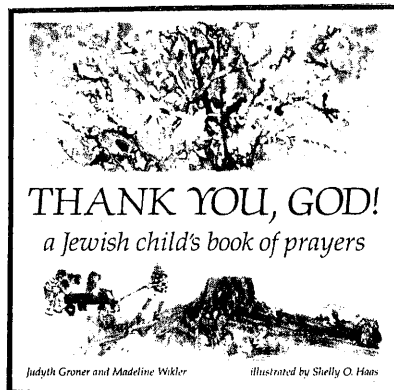
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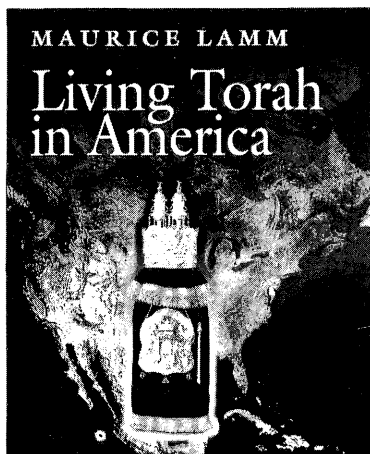
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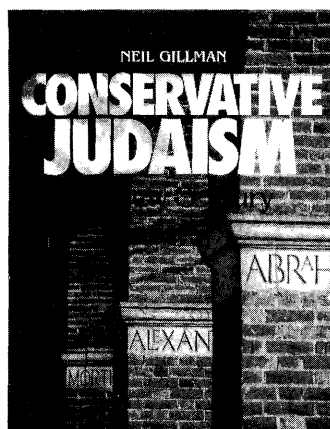
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