

## AJL Sydney Taylor Manuscript Award Competition\*

*Introduction by  
Lillian Schwartz*

*The Sydney Taylor Manuscript Competition was conceived six years ago by Ralph Taylor as an avenue for unpublished authors to promote fine literature for all children aged 8 to 12, as exemplified in the "All-of-a-Kind Family" stories written by his late wife, Sydney Taylor.*

*The winners were chosen by our reviewers for their fulfillment of each dimension in our guidelines: literary ability, universal appeal, deepening understanding of Judaism for all children, and revealing positive aspects of Jewish life.*

*The five AJL reviewers were confronted with a dilemma this year that was diametrically opposite the dilemma faced last year. The fifth annual competition resulted in no prize; this year we joyfully announce three winners!*

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*\*Remarks at the Banquet of the Association of Jewish Libraries' 26th Annual Convention, Miami Beach, FL, June 25, 1991.*

### **Hanna Bandes**

*Hanna Bandes has been writing nonfiction, as she says, "for most of my life." She has had a diverse professional career which has included teaching, social work, technical writing, and a retail mail-order business. She currently resides in Boston, where she has been involved in storytelling in various forms. She organized the Jewish Storytelling Coalition there in 1989, was editor and publisher of Neshama, a quarterly for Jewish women, and will be storyteller-in-residence in Fairbanks, Alaska, this summer. In the Fall she will be giving a course in Jewish stories and storytelling at Hebrew College.*

*A natural progression from this background has been the creation of stories to tell. Her first prize-winning manuscript is Rabbi Aaron's Treasure, a gentle retelling of a Talmudic tale.*

*Hanna Bandes: It is my pleasure to present to you the Association of Jewish Libraries Sydney Taylor Manuscript Award for your manuscript, Rabbi Aaron's Treasure.*

### **Remarks by Hanna Bandes**

I want to thank you for this award. Sydney Taylor's wonderful "All-of-a-Kind Family" books were very important in the development of my cultural awareness, so it is a tremendous honor to receive an award in her name. I'm very pleased to be able to be here tonight to receive it.

Lillian Schwartz said she thought you'd be interested in knowing how my story, *Rabbi Aaron's Treasure*, came to be written. There's a rabbi in Boston who has a weekly television show, 11:30 to midnight on Sunday nights on Channel 38. About three years ago he asked me to be on the show. He told me I should tell examples of all the major types of Jewish stories—Biblical, Talmudic, Midrashic, folk, fairy, Hasidic, historical, and personal—plus give a little explanation of each type. Leaving about ten minutes for him to interview me out of a total program length of 28 minutes, that worked out to a little over two minutes per story-and-explanation.

I started looking frantically for very short stories. In *The Ma'aseh Book*, a very old collection of Jewish tales, I found the story "How Rabbi Gamda Became Rich," which comes from the Talmud, [Tractate] Nedarim 50b. The story says that Rabbi Gamda, a saintly and holy man, gave sailors four coins and asked them to bring him something from far away. They brought him a monkey. The monkey escaped, and they found it in a hole. In the hole there was a treasure. This story became one of the tidbits I used on the television show.

Later I turned the TV presentation into a longer workshop for parents and teachers. One day someone asked me what happened to the monkey. I didn't know. The Talmud didn't say. So I thought about it, and why Rabbi Gamda wanted to become rich, and wrote it up as a picture book.

In preparation, I read several books about monkeys and spoke to the primate specialist at Boston's Metro Park Zoos, Dr. Deborah Schildkraut. She was very helpful. I sent her an early version of the manuscript to review. We set up a phone appointment and she went over the manuscript line by line, explaining where I inaccurately portrayed the monkey. She believes that monkeys make terrible pets and belong in the wild, and suggested that I send the monkey back to Africa. This was one of her valuable ideas which I incorporated into the book.

I started sending the manuscript to publishers. I got a slew of rejection letters, one of which had a personal note saying that the manuscript was either too short or too long.

What did the editor *mean*? My manuscript was *perfect*. Every word was a finely polished gem! So I put it aside for a while. Sometime later I sent it to the Jewish Publication Society and got back a lovely, two-page rejection letter. Alice Belgray, the editor, gave me very specific suggestions, and when I reread my manuscript in the light of her letter, I could see that some of my jewels were only paste.

I sat down and rewrote the manuscript using those suggestions, developing it into a 40-page manuscript for 7-to-10-year-olds.

Then, late in December, I heard about your competition. Lillian was out of town and I finally reached her around January 2. The deadline was January 15, and the rules were that the manuscript had to be at least 64 pages long, written for 8-to-12-year-olds. Lillian was kind enough to give me a two-week extension, and I went to work. During the next three weeks I literally did nothing but work, eat, sleep and write—and research daily life in Palestine during the third century. The librarians at Boston's Hebrew College and Brandeis University's Goldfarb Library gave me invaluable assistance in this task.

I developed the characters, added additional characters and some subplots, all of which greatly strengthened the book. But I don't know where the ideas for the expansion came from. Mr. Carmi spoke of his imaginary friend who drew the pictures for Mr. Kimmel's book [see preceding article, "AJL's Sydney Taylor Awards for Children's Literature"]. It's like that—the ideas came from outside me and I just put them down.

It's an incredible experience, one for which I am profoundly grateful.

I mailed the manuscript on January 20, one week after the deadline and one week before Lillian's extension expired.

The intense work I did on the manuscript in those last three weeks somehow cracked a dam in my imagination, and I began to get a slow stream of new story leads, which I began writing down. When Lillian called and told me that I'd tied for first place, I couldn't believe it at first. When her words finally sank in, that crack in my imagination broke completely, and I was flooded with ideas. I remember when I lived in Idaho and a dam there broke, completely inundating the town of Rexburg and flooding the whole Snake River Plane. The ideas started coming like that, washing many things in my life away and changing the face of everything else. One of the speakers tonight said, "We all need to work 9-to-5 jobs." I'm very lucky—I was laid off in March, so I have lots of time to write. It's wonderful!

But writing, as you've heard from the other speakers, is a funny business. You write, then send the manuscript off, and months later you get a rejection note, so you send it off again. There's an incredibly long time between writing and getting any kind of feedback from the pros—and when you hear, it's usually negative. It isn't easy to keep up the enthusiasm in the face of all of that.

This is where this prize of yours is so important. It says, "You're not crazy to think you can write. Other people think you can, too—people whose business is books." It's tremendously encouraging.

And it opens doors. Suddenly an agent is interested in seeing my work, and a publisher is looking at the manuscript itself. I hope I sell *Rabbi Aaron's Treasure* and that it's just the start of a long, successful writing career. If it works out that way, it will be in no small measure due to the encouragement and support that this award has given me. For that, I cannot thank you enough.

*(Continued on next page)*



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## Aviva Cantor

*The award of first place is shared by Aviva Cantor for her manuscript, Tamar's Cat: A Story of the Exodus. This recognition is an answer to a long-awaited dream. The story was written in 1979, growing out of Ms. Cantor's research and writing on animals in Jewish law, lore, and literature. This material was published in the Third Jewish Catalog, and in a 10-lesson unit for Jewish and Israeli schools on the treatment of animals.*

*Aviva Cantor is a journalist, having worked for the London Jewish Chronicle and the Jewish Telegraphic Agency. At present, she resides in New York. If her name is familiar to you, it may be because Aviva Cantor was a cofounder of Lilith, the feminist quarterly. She is a lecturer and author of the Egalitarian Hagada, the Bibliography on the Jewish Woman, and a forthcoming book analyzing Jewish life from a feminist point of view.*

*Tamar's Cat brings life to characters out of the magnificent epic that is the Exodus. A young person of today can still identify with a 10-year-old girl who yearns for a pet, forbidden in her world of slavery. The sensitive character development was noted by the reviewers as they praised this finely crafted story.*

*Aviva Cantor: I am delighted to present to you a first-place award for your story in the Association of Jewish Libraries Sydney Taylor Manuscript Competition.*

## Remarks by Aviva Cantor

Lillian Schwartz, fellow prize-winners, noted guests and officers of the Association, *haverot ve-haverim* [friends].

I am delighted and honored and very moved to accept this award for my children's book, "Tamar's Cat," a story of the Exodus from Egypt as experienced by a 10-year-old Jewish girl. Tamar, like her parents, is a slave to the Pharaoh in Egypt, and her mother, Shifra, the chief midwife of her tribe, is involved in organizing all the details of the Jews' departure. Tamar's main concern is how to get her cat, Shunra—who once belonged to a cruel overseer and escaped from him—out of Egypt. [Shunra is the Aramaic word for cat; the word is found in the song Had Gadya in the Passover Haggadah.—Ed.]

As we know from Herodotus, taking a cat out of Egypt was punishable by death. Shifra, of course, has given Tamar strict instructions against taking the cat. The story follows the narrative of the plagues—including that of frogs, when Shunra chases the little amphibians—up to the point where the Jews are at the shores of the Red Sea. What happens next, I won't disclose. I'm hoping that you will read the story yourself when the book is between hard covers and you have it in your hands—and in your libraries.

In writing this story, I drew on several things: Scripture, of course, and the *midrashim* about the midwives who saved children from Pharaoh's genocide; the *midrash* about Nahshon, the first Jew who walked into the waters of the Red Sea and thus became the first *free* Jew; and my love of cats and of all animals. And above all: my love of books and of libraries. My first public act, I think, was joining the New York Public Library's Tiffany Street branch in The Bronx at the age of four.

How did I come to write this book? I'd been doing research for several years in two specific areas: the position of women in Jewish life, and the treatment of animals according to Jewish tradition. I began to research what we can call "The Animal Question" after I returned from Israel, where I saw that our beautiful tradition of concern for preventing *tsa'ar ba'ale hayim*, the pain and sorrow of living creatures, was being ignored, especially in the education of the children. I subsequently became active in CHAI, Concern for Helping Animals in Israel, and education is a large part of our work.

So, as you can see, the book goes back several years, and I must tell you now that I wrote the first draft in 1979—that's 12 years ago. I thought it was a rousing tale for the 8-to-10-year-old age group, that it conveyed Jewish values and traditions through telling a good story, with characters children can identify with. I thought it wouldn't be that hard to find a publisher—after all, everybody told me there's a market for children's books. So I sent out my manuscript in 1980 like Noah sent out the dove from the Ark—or more accurately in this context of a story about the Exodus—like Yoheved put Moses in the basket on the River Nile. I sent it to dozens of publishers, Jewish and general, and it always came back in fat envelopes; those are the kind with rejection slips. (Authors hope for

those thin envelopes with letters that state, "We are happy to accept your book for publication.") The rejection letters, when there were any (mostly you get boilerplate rejection slips) said the story was "too Jewish," "not universal enough." So I put it in my file drawer until this year, when I reworked it for your Sydney Taylor Manuscript Competition.

I'm telling you about this experience—which is not uncommon to writers—for a very specific reason and it is this: in the eleven years since I first submitted the manuscript of "Tamar's Cat" to publishers, there has been a 180-degree change in attitude in the U.S. about Jewish cultural endeavors. We can see it in the revival of klezmer music to the point of klezmania, in the Jewish arts and crafts movement, in the expansion of courses on Jewish subjects in universities and of Jewish scholarship, and in the burgeoning publication of Jewish books. There is, in short, the beginning of a Jewish cultural renaissance in America. Despite all the gloom-and-doom statistics about the decrease-by-attrition in Jewish numbers in the U.S., there's an *increase* on the part of those Jews who choose to be Jewishly-identified in seeking ways of exploring and expressing their Jewishness and in conveying it to their children.

We are seeing a flowering of Jewish children's publishing. Publishers are now seeking Jewish children's books. And the writing and publishing of books for Jewish children and young adults is practically virgin territory, which awaits cultivation. I'd love to see biographies for children and teenagers of some of the greatest heroes of the Jewish people—ghetto fighters, rescuers, chalutzim, poets. I'd like to see children's and teenagers' novels set in periods of Jewish history such as the Golden Age in Spain, Renaissance Italy, turn-of-the-century Vienna; stories about rabbis of the Talmudic era, about Rashi and his daughters, about Jews during the Crusades, about Jews who organized unions and revolutionary movements in Russia, and later in the U.S. I'd like to see books about contemporary Jewish life in Argentina, in France, in North Africa, in the Soviet Union, and in Israel and North America. I'm talking both of fiction and of nonfiction. The Midrash and the Agadah are just beginning to be mined for ideas for books such as the one written by Hanna Bandes [see above]. And there are also hundreds

of stories that have never been translated from Hebrew, from Yiddish, and from Ladino, and reworked for American Jewish children. So this is a very exciting time to be involved with Jewish children's literature.

As Jewish librarians, you are in a key position to encourage the publication of Jewish books for children—and for adults, as well. To paraphrase a TV commercial, When you talk, publishers listen. And so do parents and educators, because you know what the kids like to read.

You have played a key role in the present flourishing of Jewish publishing and of the Jewish cultural renaissance. And I wish and hope that you will go *me-hayil le-hayil*, from strength to strength, in this and in all your endeavors on behalf of the Jewish people, its cultural heritage, and its younger generations.

Thank you for honoring me with this Award.

### **Kirby Rogers**

*This year, for the first time, the Manuscript Committee has awarded a second-place prize. Dr. Kirby Rogers' story, Operation Dewey, is a fast-moving adventure tale that will surely capture the imaginations of all the young people who read it. The exciting story of two boys who become involved with the capture of a Nazi spy during World War II sounds like a natural. In the skillful hands of Kirby Rogers, it is.*

*Kirby Rogers holds degrees in voice and in church music, as well as a Ph.D. in Music Education. He is currently a fifth-grade teacher in Edgewater, Florida. Some of his scholarly works have been published in the Index Series of the Music Library Association, Interdisciplina, and the Journal of Research in Music Education. I am delighted to welcome his lovely wife, Evelyn, who joins him here tonight.*

*It is my pleasure to present the Association of Jewish Libraries Sydney Taylor Manuscript Award for second place to Dr. Kirby Rogers for his story, Operation Dewey.*

*Lillian Schwartz has been Librarian at Temple Emanu-El in Providence, Rhode Island, since 1974. She has been Coordinator of AJL's Manuscript Competition since its inception.*

### **Remarks by Kirby Rogers**

When I started up here to the speakers' stand, I said to my wife, "I think I'll leave out about half of what I was going to say, because it is so late."

Somebody at the next table heard what I said and exclaimed, "I told you prayers are answered!"

And I stopped a rabbi out in the lobby this afternoon, explained that I was supposed to make a short speech at the dinner tonight, and asked if there was a verse of Scripture that might fit the occasion.

He said, "Certainly, if you don't mind taking a verse out of context. Quote a part of one of King David's prayers: 'Remember how short my time is.'"

Not too many years ago, when I was singing solos a lot and conducting choral groups, I never got nervous—that is, not until I had to say something. Let me tell you, in case you're wondering, I'm nervous.

Once there was a young Episcopal priest who had just completed four years of college and three years at the seminary, and he was sent to the big cathedral in the big city to continue his training under the watchful eye of one of the veteran rectors of the church. When the Sunday came for him to preach his first sermon in front of the large congregation, he was scared.

He said to the older minister, "I don't know what to do—I'm *so nervous!*"

It just happened that they were in the senior minister's office, so he reached in the bottom drawer of his desk, and said, "Sometimes if things aren't just right, I take a little nip from my friend Jack Daniels."

And he set the bottle and a glass on the desk.

We aren't sure how many reassuring nips the young minister had, but when he stepped into the pulpit he wasn't one bit nervous.

After the service, when he and the older minister were putting away their clerical gowns, the young preacher asked how the sermon was.

The older priest said, "Well, son, that was as fine a sermon about David and Goliath as I've ever heard; but you must remember that David *slew* Goliath—he didn't beat the hell out of him!"

My efforts to write a formal speech for this event have not been successful, because a formal address does not lend itself to my central purpose tonight.

My sole purpose for addressing you tonight is to say "thank you" to many people [who have had an influence on my work] over a period of many years. I must say thank you—

- Not just to the distinguished reviewers who read my story and awarded it a prize;

- But to these same individuals for giving some of their valuable time to provide some incisive, valid, and thought-provoking criticism about the story;

- And to Lillian Schwartz for her courtesies and encouragement.

- But my thanks go back much further than the present, to the families in which I grew up, for creating a setting of cultural harmony where a friendship such as that of my best friend and me—one Jewish and one not—could flourish.

- And I must say thank you to a Jewish groceryman who paid me to stack cans on the shelves—when he really didn't need me—as long as I promised not to spend the money until I went to college.

- And to three different Jewish businessmen who gave me part-time and summer jobs while I was in college—they really didn't need me.

- And to others to whom my family and I will always be indebted for their assistance and encouragement in business matters; for their willingness to share their religious knowledge, their culture, and their infectious faith (for Jewish faith is a faith of action); and for the soul-wrenching experiences they shared reluctantly—telling of personal tragedy and horror in the European hell of the 1940s. Those common tears of love which we all shed as one have transcended national and cultural boundaries.

And so, again, all I can say to each of you is, "Thank you." My prayer, my goals, and my faith are in tune with your message for the world.