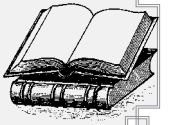


Celebrating Jewish Literature



Converts, returnees and the Inquisition

By Rabbi Rachel Esserman

When most people think of the Inquisition, they think of the Spanish Inquisition, which was established by King Ferdinand II of Aragon and Queen Isabella I of Castile in 1478. However, the Inquisition began more than 200 years before and understanding its development is important to understanding Jewish history of that time period. That's one of the reasons behind Paola Tartakoff's "Between Christian and Jew: Conversion and Inquisition in the Crown of Aragon, 1250-1391" (University of Pennsylvania Press). Tartakoff – a professor of history and Jewish studies at Rutgers, the State University of New Jersey – picked 1391 as her end date because the lives of the Jewish population changed greatly that year: the Massacre of 1391, one of the worst antisemitic attacks to take place during the Middle Ages, occurred then. It's estimated that 100,000 of Jews were murdered and another 100,000 forced to convert. Framed by a case of a convert who sought to return to Judaism in 1341, her work focuses on Jewish apostates, the attempts to re-Judaize them and how they were treated by both Christians and Jews.

The Inquisition was originally set up in 1231 to fight against Christian heretics. During that time period, the Jews of Aragon were considered the king's personal property – "his treasure" – and could be punished by no one else. However, that protection changed when a Jew converted to Christianity. Conversions were considered a prize by the Church, which saw converts as the proof its religion had supplanted Juda-

ism. It was, therefore, considered worse for a former Jew to return to Judaism than for a "cradle" Christian to convert.

However, conversion did not mean automatic acceptance by the convert's Christian neighbors. First, many were suspicious of the person's motivation. Tartakoff shows how many Jews left the Jewish community because they were in *herem* (banned from the community) or sought to escape other punishments. She writes, "The realities of Jewish conversions fell short of Christian ideals. Many Jews who sought baptism were marginalized individuals who hoped, first and foremost, to extricate themselves from personal difficulties. They were baptized in haste and possessed only superficial knowledge of Christianity." These converts often kept in touch with their families and did business with other Jews, which made Christians suspicious as to whether they were still following Jewish customs and performing Jewish rituals.

An additional problem was that many Christians saw Judaism as more than a religion. They believed Jews were a people, meaning that their Jewishness was part of their essential nature and could be passed to the next generation. The author notes, "Christians [who believed this] must have wondered whether conversion could truly trump ethnicity and whether Jewishness could really be left behind." This often meant that these converts were not welcomed by Christians and even the second generation of those who had converted were sometimes looked at with suspicion. Not being accepted by Christian communities

may have left converts wondering if they should return to Judaism. However, the Jewish community was also not fond of these converts. They didn't trust them and often made their lives difficult.

Tartakoff notes this left several options for converts moving forward with their lives. Some became wandering beggars; their poverty was considered proof that they had given up Judaism, because they no longer owned any worldly goods. Others became preachers and tried to convince other Jews that they, too, should convert. Some sought ways to harm the Jewish community. One final option was returning to Judaism, although that put them in danger with the Inquisition because they would now be considered heretics for leaving the Christian faith.

The author notes similarities between the rituals used to convert someone to Christianity or to return them to Judaism. Both include washing or immersing in water. (For Christians, it was baptism. For Jews, it was use of the *mikvah*, the ritual bath.) Jewish names were changed to Christian ones and changed back if someone returned to Judaism. New Christians were given new clothes as part of their conversion. Re-Judaizing meant returning to clothing worn by members of the Jewish community.

"Between Christian and Jew" offers a fascinating look at the borderline between Judaism and Christianity at the time. Tartakoff suggests that there is more work to be done, but her book is an excellent beginning. Anyone interested in Jewish history will find it well worth reading.

Novels about the war and its aftermath

By Rabbi Rachel Esserman

I've written before about the times I've thrown up my hands and said, "That's it! No more books about World War II, the Holocaust or their aftermath." At one point, I even crossed off two of the books featured in this review from my "to ask for" list. Yet, when I hear good things about a book, it becomes difficult not to ask for a review copy, if only to see if it offers something new or interesting. Sometimes, that doesn't happen and it feels as if I've wasted precious reading time on mediocre works. Fortunately, that did not happen with the novels in this review. All offer something to challenge or move their readers.

◆ "The Enemy Beside Me"

Sometimes the Holocaust can feel like a family business, one passed on through the generations. That's true for Milia Gottstein, whose grandfather and father ran the Survivor Campaign, an organization that seeks to bring Nazi war criminals to justice. Milia certainly had not planned on running the organization after her father's death. However, she changed her mind when she learned what happened to her grandfather's family in Lithuania during the war. In Naomi Ragen's "The Enemy Beside Me" (St. Martin's Griffin), Milia is given an amazing opportunity. Although she's been declared a Public Enemy of Lithuania, a country that continues to deny its responsibility for the many Jewish deaths within its borders, she's asked to speak at a Holocaust conference in that country by Dr. Darius Valus.

Darius has an ulterior motive for asking Milia to take part in the conference. He's in the midst of researching a family story passed down to him from his grandmother: according to family lore, his grandfather rescued a Jewish family and received a beautiful necklace in gratitude for his help. Darius wants people to know about his relative's heroism. However, not everyone is happy that he invited Milia; they're afraid she will use this opportunity to condemn their country. Darius' career is on the line, but he is confident that they will be successful in not only speaking to students across the country, but at the concluding symposium.

To complicate matters, Milia's personal life is falling apart: her surgeon husband has left her for another woman. She knows he's resented the effort she's put into her work. Her efforts to bring Nazis to justice speaks to her on many levels – in part because she was named for an aunt who perished during the war. As for her trip to Lithuania, Milia distrusts Darius because she's not exactly sure what he's trying to accomplish. But as the two set out on their tour, they start to bond, especially when Darius begins to understand the true story of what occurred during the war. But speaking the truth in Lithuania is not easy and there may be a large price to pay.

"The Enemy Beside Me" works well on many levels. Ragen has created interesting, believable characters whom readers will come to care about. Yet, what really kept the pages turning is the novel's compelling plot. I kept reading – finding it difficult to put the book down – because I wanted to know what would happen in both main characters' personal and professional lives. The novel also explores varying ways of understanding history, including offering testimony about how poorly the Lithuanians were treated by the Soviet Union. However, it's the testimony about the Jews of Lithuania during World War II, which is based

on true incidents, that is truly heartrending. Those words can be difficult to read, but, as the characters in the book note, the only way to create a better future is to have a clear understanding of the past.

◆ "The Little Liar"

At the conclusion of his new novel "A Little Liar" (Harper), Mitch Albom notes that he wanted to write a work about the Holocaust for years, but waited to find a story he felt was new and different. The result was worth the wait: his novel is a wonderful, moving work, not only because Albom wrote about what happened to the Jews of Salonika, Greece, but because his story feels fresh and original.

The reason for this difference is partially due to Albom's unusual narrator: the Angel of Truth who, in rabbinic tales, told God not to create humans because they would fill the world with lies. As punishment, the Angel of Truth is thrown from heaven to earth – forced to roam the world with those whose lies Truth can clearly see. However, Truth learns that there are the rare humans who never lie, even when they know they will be punished for telling the truth. That's true of 11-year-old Nico Krispis, who is tricked by Udo Graf, a Nazi officer, into telling the Jews of his city that it's safe to get on the train taking them to a concentration camp. When Nico learns of the lie, he vows never to speak the truth again. He is also determined to follow that train and free his family from the camp.

The narrator doesn't just tell the story of Nico, though. What makes the novel work is the way readers learn about the lives of three other characters, in addition to Nico: Udo (Albom does an excellent job showing how Udo justifies his service to the Nazis); Sebastian, Nico's brother who has sworn to punish his brother for that one lie; and Fannie, a Jewish girl loved by both brothers. Readers learn of Sebastian's time in the concentration camp, Fannie's life in hiding and what happens to the four characters after the war. The dramatic conclusion of the novel was simply amazing, even though I'd partially guessed what was going to happen. My reaction after finishing was to write a single word in my notes: "Wow!"

"The Little Liar" was one of the books I'd crossed off my books-to-ask-for list. I am so glad I changed my mind. The pages of the novel simply flew by. The Jewish parables Truth periodically offers feature interesting commentary on the action that enhance what is already an amazing work.

◆ "We Must Not Think of Ourselves"

Lauren Grodstein's "We Must Not Think of Ourselves" (Algonquin Books of Chapel Hill) was another book I'd originally crossed off my list, filing it under "even I can't read everything." However, after seeing a lot of good press – and noting that it was a Read with Jenna pick – I decided to ask for a copy and I'm glad I did. Grodstein's novel offers an unusual view of life in the Warsaw Ghetto during the 1940s that was different from other books I've read about that time period.

Adam Paskow, who narrates the novel, is not a religious Jew. In fact, he and Anna, his late non-Jewish wife, practiced no religion. Even as the Nazis narrowed his world, Adam spent a great deal of time thinking about his relationship with Anna and the fact that they were never able to have children. That doesn't change when he is forced to move into the ghetto. His life there expands when he is asked

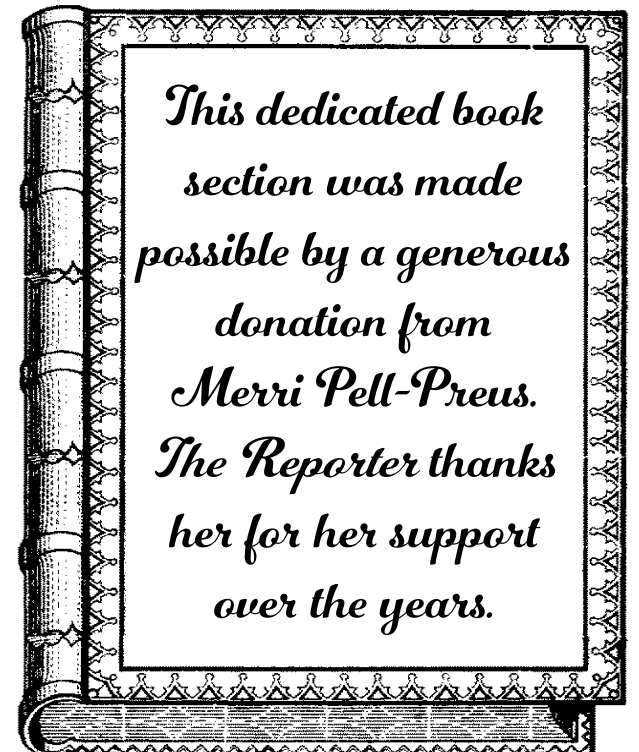
to be part of the Oneg Shabbat project: its members are asked to interview their friends and neighbors about their life before the war. The reason? The group is documenting the Jewish world that is currently disappearing. Adam interviews not only his flatmates, but the students to whom he teaches English in an unused basement in the ghetto. These interviews are interspersed with Adam's narration of his daily life – a life that doesn't feel quite real to him.

The members of the Oneg Shabbat project meet periodically and their leader shares news from the outside world. However, the news is rarely good: their dream that the United States will join the war effort and defeat the Germans begins to seem unrealistic. While Adam appreciates the project, he comes to a different understanding – that the real hope for their community is not to record the past, but to stay alive. He wonders if they have already condemned themselves, believing that no one will remain with whom they can share their stories.

While at first, Adam seems almost dispassionate – as if he's unable to realize what is happening around him – the reality of the situation becomes real to him in the last 100 pages of the book. The novel then went in a different direction than I expected, one that offered a moral dilemma that will break readers' hearts and made this a moving, wonderful work. As with "The Little Liar," I was grateful that I changed my mind and asked for a review copy.

◆ "The Boy with the Star Tattoo"

A common plot device in novels about World War II is to offer plot lines that take place in more than one time period. In that way, the author is able to show not only what happened during or just after the war, but how what occurred reverberated throughout the decades. The device can be very effective, as shown in Talia Carner's new **See War" on page 7**



Celebrating Jewish Literature



THE FRUIT OF THE TREE OF KNOWLEDGE

By Rabbi Rachel Esserman

The Hebrew word used in the Bible for the fruit of the Tree of Knowledge, which was found in the Garden of Eden, is *peri*, a generic word meaning any kind of fruit. Yet, when most people think of the story, they visualize that fruit as an apple. As Azzan Yadin-Israel notes in “Temptation Transformed: The Story of How the Forbidden Fruit Became an Apple” (The University of Chicago Press), that was a relatively new development since there was little to no mention of the apple in this context before the 12th century. In his short work, Yadin-Israel, a professor of Jewish studies and classics at Rutgers University, uses written texts and visual imagery to determine when and why that change occurred.

Ancient written commentaries do not agree on any specific type of fruit: among those suggested are grapes, figs, pomegranates, wheat shafts and dates. Although a few texts mention apples, these were very limited. There were also commentaries that suggested the fruit was an unknown type only found in the Garden of Eden. As for pictorial images from that time period, the fruits that usually appeared were figs, pomegranates or grapes. Other images just show an unidentifiable fruit that doesn’t have the characteristic of any specific plant.

Yadin-Israel believes the apple tradition began in 12th century France and then moved to other areas, including Germany, England and Northern Italy. He suggests the shift occurred for linguistic reasons. His discussion is based on the fact that the original Latin word to describe the forbidden fruit was *pom* (singular) or *pomum* (plural). To oversimplify his very detailed explanation, when biblical works appeared in Old French, the meaning of the Latin word *pom* was narrowed to mean not all fruits, but only apple. Yadin-Israel writes, “What is clear is that once ‘apple’ became the dominant sense of *pom*, the various Old French accounts of the Fall of Man communicated a clear and simple lesson: Adam and Eve were tempted by an apple.”

It was during this time that paintings of the Garden of Eden began to more consistently use the apple to represent the forbidden fruit. As Yadin-Israel notes, “[Artists] knew Scripture from vernacular sources: sermons, plans, and for the literate, vernacular Bible translations and adaptations. Consequently, Old French-speaking artists adopted the apple while contemporary Latin commentators did not.” For those who read and understood Latin, there was another word – *malum* – that meant apple, while *pom* remained a generic word for fruit in general.

Yadin-Israel notes that French painting and culture

greatly influenced the change in English and German references to the forbidden fruit, although this did not take place overnight. Spanish commentators and painters did not make the same change because vernacular translations of the biblical text were discouraged. That meant that Spanish commentaries were written in Latin and used the word *pom* as referring to fruits in general. There were similar linguistic reasons for why Northern Italy adopted the apple as the forbidden fruit, while Southern Italy did not, often portraying the forbidden fruit as a fig. Later, illustrated books pictured the forbidden fruit as an apple, which helped the idea become more firmly established in people’s minds.

“Temptation Transformed” is a beautifully designed work: it offers black-and-white photos and color plates to show the different images of the forbidden fruit that have appeared over the centuries. Yadin-Israel does an excellent job analyzing the different texts he discusses. While his subject matter may seem to have a narrow focus, his sources are not: he offers an interdisciplinary and wide-eyed view of the topic – using Jewish and Christian written and visual sources. Anyone interested in how cultural and linguistic changes can influence our interpretations of the biblical text will find “Temptation Transformed” to be of great interest.

Essays about the disappearing Yiddish culture

By Rabbi Rachel Esserman

Isaac Bashevis Singer wrote so many essays for the *Forward* newspaper that many were published under pseudonyms. David Stromberg, who translated and edited “Isaac Bashevis Singer Writings on Yiddish and Yiddishkayt: The War Years, 1939-1945” (White Goat Press)*, writes that Singer was not known in the U.S. as a novelist/short story writer during this period. His writing focused on Yiddishkayt, including many musings on European Jewish/Yiddish customs and communities. Stromberg notes that Singer was trying to accomplish a massive task: “He wanted to get it all on record – not only the customs but also the immediacy of the loss that he realized was taking place at that very moment... [the knowledge of what was happening] was crushing for Singer. It also drove him to put pen to paper and write.”

Stromberg introduces each of the 25 essays with a short note placing it in context. Older readers might find them difficult to read due to the very small size of the print, but they are worth the effort. One thing that stood out was that Singer offers no ethical commentary when talking about Jewish religious customs. For example, when writing about the *agunah* (a wife whose husband has either decided not to give her a divorce or who has disappeared), he notes the problem – especially in Europe where the marriage

age could be very young – but accepts the rulings, rather than asking for a change in the way marriage/divorce was accomplished. Singer sees the problem as a fact of life. His purpose is instead to teach his readers about the world in which he grew up: he wants to remember what that world was like, warts and all.

All the essays offer something of interest, but the following stood out:

◆ Singer addressed the question of “What Is a Dybbuk?” while suggesting that, rather than being inhabited by a dybbuk, most sufferers were not possessed by a malicious spirit, but simply experiencing a type of hysteria. Unfortunately, he also sees the sufferers as acting out a part, even if they don’t realize they are doing so. The idea of a real mental illness as we know it today didn’t seem to occur to him.

◆ In “The Yiddish That We Spoke in the Old Country Is Being Forgotten,” Singer mourns the loss of true Yiddish. He sees Jewish immigrants to the U.S. losing the ability to speak a true Yiddish: that would mean creating new words and formulating new ideas through the use of that language. He also mourns the loss of many Yiddish books in Europe and wishes the collections of books had been better protected.

◆ A wonderful celebration of the city of Warsaw is offered in the essay “Each Jewish Street in Warsaw Was Like a

Town of Its Own.” Although Singer struggles with the destruction that was occurring, his tribute to the city offers an insiders’ view of a soon-to-be-lost world.

◆ In “Why Movies Aren’t Made about Jewish Life,” Singer complains that films of almost every time period and ethnicity appeared on American movie screens, but none were made about Jews and Jewish history. He also suggests that “there is no medium more suitable for the job [of fighting antisemitism] than a good Jewish film. It certainly won’t be made in Hollywood.” Films made decades later would prove him wrong.

Other essays speak to Jewish identity and the difficulties of being Jewish in the United States. He also writes about Jewish history and concepts in order to educate his audience. The essays are consistently interesting and offer readers not only a look into Singer’s ideas, but the time period about which he is writing. Study groups looking to understand Jewish life in early 1940s should find much to discuss about each essay – whether they agree or disagree with Singer’s ideas.

*This is not the first book of Singer’s essays Stromberg has edited, but that work – “Old Truths and New Clichés” – contains essays written in the 1960s-70s. *The Reporter’s* review can be found at www.thereporter.org/book-reviews/off-the-shelf-oz-and-singer-discuss-writing-and-life?entry=415690.

Yearning for real connections

By Rabbi Rachel Esserman

Americans are facing an epidemic of loneliness, at least according to newspaper articles. These reports note that people feel they have few friends and even fewer people they can count on in times of need. Rabbi Sharon Brous recognizes this desire for connections – to have people stand by you when you need strength and who allow you to lend them your strength when they are in need. Finding ways to accomplish this is the impetus behind her book “The Amen Effect: Ancient Wisdom to Mend Our Broken Hearts and World” (Avery). Brous offers stories portraying what she calls sacred companionship and shows how people can become a part of those communities. Underlying this effort is “the power of saying ‘Amen’ to one another’s grief and joy, sorrow and celebration with our very presence. Of bearing witness to profound suffering and protesting injustice with our very presence. Of comforting and consoling, surviving and thriving with our very presence.”

Brous calls this desire for connection the Amen Effect, much as how saying amen after a prayer means the person agrees with the essence of those words. To show how this works in practice, she offers wisdom from Jewish stories, although readers should note that her book does not feature in-depth study of these texts. The periodic stories/examples from Jewish writings are used as a segue into the stories of real-life people from her religious community – she is the spiritual leader of IKAR in Los Angeles – and others whom she has met in the course of her rabbinate.

The story that sets the tone for her work is from the Mishnah and discusses what occurred when pilgrims heading to the Temple in Jerusalem entered the Temple courtyard. The majority of the pilgrims would turn to the right and make a counterclockwise circuit around the area.

However, anyone who was suffering, those whom the author calls “the grieving, the lonely, the sick – *someone to whom something awful had happened*,” would turn to the left and make a clockwise circuit. Those moving in the counterclockwise direction were to stop and ask what had happened, and offer comfort. Brous notes that, at some point in our lives, almost everyone would need to walk clockwise. The story also makes clear that the community – those who were not directly dealing with sorrow – were required to lessen their suffering.

The problem is many people are at loss as to how to put this idea into action. A major component of Brous’ book is the specific examples she offers on how to accomplish this. They are all based on a very simple idea: showing up for joyous occasions and for sad ones. It means sitting with someone even if you don’t know the right words to say. It means offering to others the same aid you’ve received during times of sorrow. It means acknowledging someone’s suffering, even if you don’t understand what they are going through. Brous notes that the greatest words of comfort are simply, “I see you... You are not alone.”

Being a member of a religious community is also something she sees as important. Brous writes, “We now know that walking together, singing together, seeing and being seen by each other – all these things enhance our emotional health and deepen our sense of connectedness. They alter the physical and psychological landscape of a group and the people in it.” This is the impetus behind IKAR and something she believes should be the driving force of every synagogue community.

Brous illustrates the importance of comfort by offering a story from her own life. After receiving news of a family death when she was alone at a retreat center, she experienced physical pain, pain so bad that she

wondered if she had damaged a nerve. But a healer, who was also at the center, noticed her pain and asked Brous if someone she knew had died. The healer also suggested that Brous was carrying years of pain and grief in her muscles. Even those who normally are the strong ones – the ones people lean on – need to recognize when they need help. They need to admit to themselves that someday they “will walk in the direction of the bereaved and broken-hearted. And to trust that when we do, there will be someone to hold us, to tenderly release the grief frozen in our bodies, to bring us raspberries and weep with us, too.” She notes that this ability to let others offer help will lead us to “be[ing] revitalized not only with greater humility, but with deeper compassion – for ourselves and with those we love.”

Brous concludes her book with a section called “Practices” that offers practical suggestions on how readers can incorporate the Amen Effect into their lives. They include simple things like “Go to the Funeral” and “Meet Your Neighbors.” Others may be more difficult to implement – for example, “Honor the Divine Image” and “Take a Joy-Break.” However, the author believes following these practices will bring people together and create space for the joys and sorrows that will inevitably come to every life.

Brous writes well, which, on the one hand, makes the “The Amen Effect” easy to read. However, it contains many tales of grief and sorrow that might trigger emotional responses in those who have suffered similar experiences. But that is the point of her work: teaching us how to reach out to those in grief to help them and us heal. Brous sees these meetings as sacred encounters, leading all involved to a deeper understanding and recognition of each other’s humanity.

Celebrating Jewish Literature



Adjusting to different worlds

By Rabbi Rachel Esserman

Jewish history is filled with fascinating tales. Sometimes, though, it takes fiction to make these stories come alive: a novel can fill in thoughts and emotions to which historians rarely have access. That's shown in two recent novels; "Our Little Histories" by Janice Weizman (The Toby Press) offers both a personal and public view of more than a century of Jewish history, while "Ravage and Son" by Jerome Charyn (Bellevue Literary Press) focuses on the emotions and actions of those living in New York City at the turn of the 20th century.

"Our Little Histories" tells its story in reverse chronological order. Beginning in Chicago in 2015 and ending in 1850s Propoisk, Belarus, it portrays the different directions that Jewish lives have taken through the story of three brothers who were separated early in life. The reason for that separation is not revealed until the final section of the novel. The previous chapters move backward in time, telling the stories of different branches of the family: one group in the United States, a second in Israel and the third that remained in Europe and did not survive World War II. Each section focuses on a different character and forces readers to piece together the family connections. (An extended family tree proved very helpful in this.)

In the opening section, Jennifer creates Living Installations for museums: for a short period of time, real people live in recreations from the past and are watched by an ever changing audience. She's already created Greek, Roman, Inca and Native American installations. Now she's offered the chance to create one showing what Jewish life in Belarus was like in the 19th century. Jennifer is intrigued with the prospect because her ancestors originally came from that area and she's never visited. To create the installation, she reconnects with distant Israeli cousins who are now religious and willing to live as their ancestors did – at least, while the public is watching. Watching the installation in Belarus has an unexpected effect on Jennifer and her teenage daughter.

Readers learn of the Israeli branch of the family when Jennifer's mother visits them during the 1960s. The first member of the family to immigrate to Palestine tells of living on a *kibbutz* in 1946, noting how many people don't feel at home in the land because they've come from different countries. The upcoming storm – World War II and the Holocaust – is noted in a section where some people still

War.Continued from page 5
novel "The Boy with the Star Tattoo" (William Morrow). The story focuses on three characters: Claudette Pelletier (in the early 1940s), Uzi Yarden (in 1946) and Sharon Bloomenthal (in 1968).

Claudette, a French seamstress, believes she will never find love due to a physical disability that makes it difficult for her to walk. She's grateful to the duchess who has given her a safe haven and protects her from the Germans who've taken over France. The chateau where they live also offers protection to those seeking shelter from the Nazis. That includes a Jewish man with whom Claudette falls in love. When her lover must flee in order to avoid capture by the Nazis, he promises to come for her after the war. The result of their affair, though, is that Claudette is pregnant. When the duchess is forced to flee France, Claudette decides to travel with her, but that means leaving her child behind.

Uzi, an Israeli, travels to Europe in order to search for hidden Jewish children so he can bring them to Palestine as part of the real-life Youth Aliyah. His mission is to find older children who will be smuggled into the country since the British have forbidden Jewish immigration. However, one younger child captures his heart and he finds it difficult to abandon him.

Several decades later, Sharon travels to France as part of a secret Israeli naval operation. She is mourning the loss of her fiancé who died in a downed submarine, a sub which has not yet been recovered. However, she is intrigued when approached by Daniel Yarden, who believes she has the skills he needs for the naval operation. An orphan whose parents died when she was a young baby, Sharon wonders if perhaps she can learn more about her mother, who came from France as part of the Youth Aliyah. When she learns that Danny came to Israel the same way, although he was much younger than her mother, she agrees to join the mission so she can find out more about both of them.

The three sections of "The Boy with the Star Tattoo" come together at its conclusion, which contains a great many unbelievable coincidences. However, readers won't complain because that made the ending extremely satisfying. Carner's book has generated some controversy on social media due to its very positive portrait of Israel. As a first-generation Israeli, Carner notes that she is proud of her country. Those who read her work will understand and appreciate her feelings.

believe that Hitler is an aberration and life will soon return to normal. It also shows how difficult it is for those with money to understand the despair poverty brings. The desire of second generation American immigrants to assimilate is made clear in a story that takes place in Chicago in 1938. A meeting of three cousins in 1896 Belarus clearly shows the different directions the family will take as they question whether they should remain in Europe, emigrate to Palestine or move to the United States.

It is, however, the final story, which takes place in Belarus in 1850, that will tug on readers' heartstrings as they learn the reason why the three brothers – triplets – were separated. The heartrending choice their mother makes will make readers re-evaluate the other sections of the work, particularly the first section, since it reveals what is missing from Jennifer's installation: the fear always present in Jewish lives. "Our Little Histories" gains in power since the sum of its small histories are greater than the individuals parts.

While "Our Little Histories" looks at life on three different continents, "Ravage and Son" has a much narrower focus: the Lower East Side of New York City. Although its prologue takes place in 1882, the majority of the work occurs in the 1920s. The novel deals with the messy, complex world of slum landlords, the Yiddish theater, gangsters who preyed on ignorant immigrants and wealthy uptown Jews who were embarrassed by their poorer brethren. It contains a wide variety of characters – some real and some fictional – to create a panorama of the times.

What plot there is centers on Ben Ravage, an unacknowledged illegitimate son of one of the Lower East

Side's slum lords, Lionel Ravage. After being rescued as a young boy by Abraham Cahan, the real-life editor of the *Jewish Daily Forward*, Ben attends Harvard Law School, but doesn't practice because his heart belongs to the streets in which he grew up. He takes a job as a detective for the Jewish Kehilla, which helps police the Lower East Side. However, when Ben tries to protect the innocent from the corrupt New York City police force and court system, he makes some serious and powerful enemies who threaten his life. That doesn't stop him: although Ben knows he can't change the world, he seeks to help as many individual souls as possible.

But Ben is not the only character featured. Readers learn about the Lower East Side through the eyes of several others. For example, Cahan tries to use the *Forward* to help the citizens of the Lower East Side. Although he wishes he could rid the area of corruption, he often finds himself focusing on the smaller troubles of its citizens, helping them adjust to America or offering advice for their personal problems. There's a Yiddish actress who finds fame and is desired by rich and powerful men, but longs for one poor suitor only. The lesbian daughter of one of the rich Jewish financiers causes problems for her family when she prefers slumming and drugs to her father's social world. All these characters and more have serious flaws, as does the system in which they live. "Ravage and Son" does not offer a pleasant, rosy-eyed view of immigrant life, but it does make readers feel the despair its characters do. In the end, the novel shows people fighting a battle they ultimately can't win, even as they continue to try to save their world and those living within it.

Finding your life path

By Rabbi Rachel Esserman

Some novels are difficult to define because they combine elements of several genres. For example, "A Shot in the Dark" by Victoria Lee (Dell) and "The Breakaway" by Jennifer Weiner (Atria Books) are definitely not rom-coms, although their plots contain a heavy dose of romance. The main characters in each are at a crossroad that forces them to make serious choices that will affect the course of their personal and professional lives. This is more than finding a partner: rather, they are looking to build meaningful lives, even if by doing so they remain single.

The two characters in "A Shot in the Dark" – Elisheva Cohen and Wyatt Cole – are both wounded and trying to rebuild their lives. Ely, who grew up as a Chasidic Jew in Brooklyn, returns to New York City from California with a scholarship for an arts program that she sees as the next step for her mixed-media artistic career. Her life has not been easy: thrown out by her family as a teenager, she's struggled with drug and alcohol addiction. But she found a path to recovery through her art and is looking forward to classes with Wyatt, a noted and reclusive artist. Her first night in New York with her new roommates ends with her going home with a very hot stranger – a trans male – for the best sex in her life.

Unfortunately, when she attends class the next day, it turns out that her hot date is none other than Wyatt, who says that not only can't they continue their relationship, but she can't take his class for ethical reasons. While, at first, this sounds like the perfect set-up for a rom-com, the novel takes a more serious note since Ely is not the only one trying to overcome her addictions. Wyatt, too, used drugs and alcohol to blunt the pain of being disowned by his father once he wanted to transition from female to male. Wyatt has slowly built his now-successful career, but has also avoided the limelight to protect himself.

In addition its other pleasures, "A Shot in the Dark" offers some fascinating thoughts about the process of making art. Wyatt sees art as "a form of telepathy, really. You have an idea, or a feeling, and you try to get someone else – someone totally different from you, with different wants and fears and interests – to share you emotions, even if just for a moment. It doesn't always work. But when it does, it's the best experience in the entire world." He also tells Ely, who is afraid of critical judgment, that "all the best art is like bleeding in front of strangers. It's terrifying. 'Vulnerable' is a good word for it. Someone could slip in when you're raw and aching and twist a knife right where it hurts the most."

"A Shot in the Dark" does a wonderful job creating characters who feel real and vulnerable. Readers should note that there are explicit descriptions of sex and the author offers the trigger warning that "this book contains vivid scenes of substance abuse." But readers will also come away caring deeply for Ely and Wyatt, and rooting for them to find their artistic and personal paths.

While "A Shot in the Dark" deals with drug and alcohol addiction, "The Breakaway" focuses on health and body

image. Although readers hear the voices of several characters, 33-year-old Abby Stern is the novel's main focus. Unlike her successful siblings, Abby has not yet found her life path. She has jobs, rather than a career. She's almost made her peace with her plus-size body, although her mother frequently encourages her to lose weight, even though Abby is healthy. Her real love is bicycling, so much so that she agrees to lead a 12-day cycling trip when its leader drops out. What prompted her decision is her relationship with her boyfriend, Mark Medoff. The two met at a weight loss camp as teenagers and then lost touch. When Abby and Mark met again, he was no longer overweight: in fact, he now eats very little and runs for miles every day to keep his weight down. However, he doesn't cycle and has no interest in learning.

Mark is ready for them to take the next step, but Abby finds herself resisting leaving her apartment and moving in with him. She knows he loves her, but she's a bit uncomfortable with his attitude about food, including whether he would feel comfortable with her keeping treats like ice cream in their shared housing. While she loves Mark, she also can't help remember a night of passion that occurred just after they met and before they were seriously dating. That night in New York City remains vivid in her mind.

The opening day of the bike ride reads like a rom-com since Sebastian, her one-night stand, is one of the participants. Although the novel explores their feelings, that's not the main focus of the trip. Sebastian, whose life has been a series of one-night stands, finds himself a social media sensation, but not in a good way. After a group of women post that all but one of them had slept with Sebastian, the post gains momentum as other women who slept with him chime in. That leaves Sebastian wondering about the course his life has taken, including how his parents' troubling relationship might have affected him.

The group of riders begins to bond, but then a problem arises: the teenage girl on the ride has a secret, one she wants to keep from her mother who has accompanied her. Can she find someone to aid her and keep her secret? This mother/daughter dynamic is echoed in another part of the plot since Abby's mother showed up for the trip without any notice, claiming she wants to spend time with her daughter.

While the ending of "The Breakaway" might seem a bit too good to be true, the author does an excellent job portraying the different emotions her characters feel and their struggles to find their way in the world. There is a wonderful description of what it means to truly love someone: Sebastian notes that "she would have his heart in her hands, every day. He would give her the power to wound him, to hurt him, to make him not want to live. To leach all the color from the world; to steal all the savor from food; to turn minutes into hours and hours into days and the rest of his life into a painfully slow slog to its inevitable end." Although that may sound a bit excessive, in the context of the novel, it works and is just one example of how the author makes readers care about her characters and root for their happiness.

Celebrating Jewish Literature



A mystery, a rom-com and a generational saga

By Rabbi Rachel Esserman

◆ A mystery

There's nothing like a good murder to bring three generations together. OK, not everyone would agree with that statement. In fact, in "Mother-Daughter Murder Night" by Nina Simon (William Morrow), Beth wishes her mother, Lena, would concentrate on her recovery from cancer and let the police solve the murder of Ricardo Cruz, a naturalist with ties to a local land trust, whose body was found in the salt march near their home. But Lena refuses to back down. The high-powered real estate agent is not only bored not working: she hates living in the country with her daughter, rather than in exciting Los Angeles. She also worries the police think that Jack, her granddaughter and Beth's daughter, may be responsible for the death.

Disagreements between Lena and Beth are not new: there were years the two didn't speak and their peace is an uneasy one. Beth resents how Lena subtly – and not so subtly – criticizes her life. That includes everything from the purchase of household items Beth does not want to suggestions on whom Beth should date. Jack is often caught between the two, but she loves helping her grandmother research why the murder might have occurred. But tracking a murderer can be dangerous, even if you're not weak from chemo and have no appetite. That doesn't stop Lena, who fearlessly marches into danger.

Simon has written an excellent murder mystery with enough red herrings that readers may not guess "whodunit" until the end of the novel. However, it is the relationships between the three women that makes "Mother-Daughter Murder Night" more than your average murder mystery. Readers will alternately delight in Lena and be horrified when she acts like an obnoxious witch. It's fun to see Beth maintain her independence in light of her mother's heavy-handedness and her attempts to be less critical of her own daughter. The intergenerational disagreements make this a great novel for book clubs, although some discussions might get heated if two generations of the same family attend.

◆ A rom-com

There are several clichéd ways for folks to meet in rom-coms. That doesn't mean that writers shouldn't use these clichés. In fact, it's great fun to read a book where the two people destined to fall in love hate each other at first sight. That's because readers get to sit back and enjoy watching the two duke it out before they fall madly in love.

It's also what made "Keep This Off the Record" by Arden Joy (Rising Action) such a delight to read. Well, that and one of the best casts of secondary characters found in any rom-com.

Abigail (Abby) Mayer and Freya Jonsson hated each other at first sight in high school. During a reunion held 10 years later, it didn't take five minutes in proximity to each other for tempers to flare. Unfortunately for the two of them, their closest friends – Naomi, whom Abby has known since high school, and Will, Freya's producer and friend – fall in love. Since Abby and Naomi were part of a close-knit group, it's inevitable that Abby and Freya will cross paths. Although they both wish the best for their friends, they can't stop insulting each other: all it takes is the sight of the other to bring back memories from high school. To add to the complications, the Jewish Abby is gay and a therapist, while the non-Jewish Freya keeps almost everyone at arm's length to protect her career as newscaster. Of course, readers know that even though the two have little in common, sparks are going to fly at some point.

The cast of secondary characters adds to the pleasure. There's Naomi, who neglects to tell Will she's been married before because she wanted to start anew (even though her ex-husband is a stalker who refuses to admit their relationship is over). Abby's younger sister, Becca, seems to love her husband, although she can't stop cheating on him with almost every man she meets. When he learns she hasn't been faithful, she tries some very unusual ways to save her marriage. However, the ultimate fun character is Riley: Riley, who uses the pronoun they, seems to dance through life, offering comic relief and delightful commentary on the action. They are filled with joy and a love of craziness that may make readers wish they had their own Riley for a friend.

The pages of "Keep This Off the Record" turned quickly and kept me interested from the first word to the last. The PR material offered an e-mail address for the novel's film and TV rights: some smart producer should snap them up right now. It would be awesome to see Abby and Freya spar out on the big or small screen.

◆ A multi-generational saga

Four generations of a Sephardic Jewish family: that's the premise behind Ruth Behar's "Across So Many Seas" (Nancy Paulson Books). Although it's aimed at younger readers, anyone who enjoys generational sagas will appreciate the novel. Behar looks at the life of a 12-year-old

girl in 1492 Spain, in 1923 Turkey, in 1961 Cuba and in 2003 Miami. The impetus for the plot in the first three sections are political upheavals that change the lives of the countries' citizens.

Most older readers will recognize the year 1492 as the year that the Jews of Spain were offered two options: convert or leave the country. Those remaining who did not convert would be put to death. Benvenida's family delayed abandoning their home until almost the last minute. Although her aunts try to convince her father to convert like they have done, he refuses and says he will not abandon his God and his faith. Benvenida chronicles the difficulty of leaving the place where their family has lived for generations, the problems they face during their journey on land and the terrors of traveling by ship for the first time in their lives. Although the family departs the ship to stay with family in Naples, it's clear they will soon be leaving for a safer land, that of Turkey.

Reina is thrilled to be celebrating after the Turkish War of Independence in 1923. What she mistakenly believes is that change will also offer more freedom to young women. One wrong decision leads to her father disowning her and sending her with a relative to Cuba, where an arranged marriage awaits her. It is in Cuba in 1961 that Reina's daughter, Alegra, hopes to serve the Castro Revolution. Alegra chooses to work as a brigadista, someone who travels to the Cuban countryside to teach those who have never had a chance to attend school to learn to read. However, life works out differently than she planned.

In Miami in 2003, Alegra's daughter, Paloma, ponders the stories she's learned of her family's history. Are they Spanish because they consider themselves Sephardic, even though they have not lived in Spain for centuries? Since Turkish Jewish customs have also been passed down through the generations, are they really Turkish? How much have the years in Cuba affected her heritage since, while her mother is a Sephardic Jew, her father is African-Cuban? Paloma is hoping that an upcoming trip to Spain with her parents and her grandmother Reina will answer some of these questions.

"Across So Many Seas" would be perfect for book clubs containing teens and adults. Parents will want to read it with their children, focusing on how choices parents make can affect their children in unexpected ways. Adult book groups that enjoy reading multi-generational sagas will also find much to discuss.

Jewish food from across the world

By Rabbi Rachel Esserman

Confession: I frequently anthropomorphize objects from stuffed animals to mechanical devices. Yes, I can assign almost any inanimate object a personality. However, I normally don't do that with the food I eat – that is, unless the food is offered in a book format. This is a long way of saying I loved the delightful drawings in the children's board book "P is for Pastrami: The ABCs of Jewish Food" by Alan Silberberg (Viking), which offered humanized versions of different Jewish cuisines. Even better, it features some Jewish delicacies with which I was not familiar. That means that parents reading this work to their children might just learn something, too.

Much of the food will be familiar to most readers. Even though the letter P is used for pastrami, Silberberg still managed to include one of my favorite foods: the letter D "is for DILL pickle," which the Dill Pickle himself notes is "Delicious." A CHALLAH (for the letter C) wearing a kippah wishes readers a "Shabbat shalom," while a LATKE offers a "CHHAPPY CHHANUKAH" with the drawing of the letter L also serving as a menorah. A Kosher Hot Dog (for the letter K), which looks a bit like a superhero, notes it's "ALL BEEF! ALL THE TIME."

There are several Israeli foods featured: the picture of "F is for FALAFEL" features three cute, smiling falafel balls. The eggs in SHAKSHUKA (for the letter S) shout out the name of the dish. A T-shaped grinder turns sesame seeds into TAHINI for the letter T. Some foods are referred to by a name I've never heard before: "Y is for YAPRAH," with the two yaprah shown noting they are also known as grape leaves. Did you know a QUAJADO (for the letter Q) is a

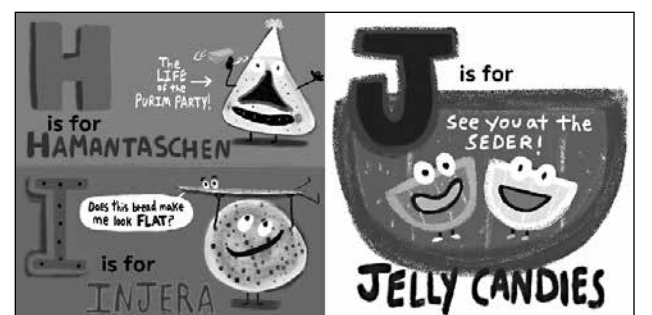
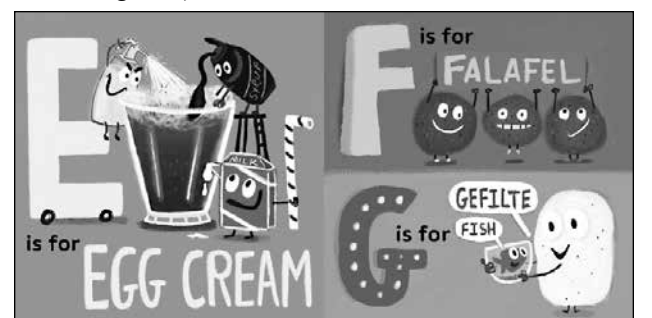
type of frittata made from eggs, cheese and vegetables? Well, I didn't until I looked up this Jewish dish that is said to have been prepared in Spain before the Spanish Inquisition. (I found that information online when I looked up the origin of the dish.) The word ZHUG (for the letter Z) sounded familiar, but I wouldn't have been able to define it as Yemeni hot sauce without the smiling, dancing bowl filled with zhug letting me know.

Although I wouldn't mind writing about every letter of the alphabet offered since every drawing is adorable, I think you get the idea. Know anyone with a young child? This would make a great gift for them. If the parents are foodies, then they'll love it, too. Actually, if you are

looking for a fun book for a foodie friend, this would be a perfectly silly gift for them, too. Yes, I know they don't need to learn the alphabet, but the pictures are such fun, they bear repeat viewing, something that parents ("read me that again!") know all about.



Above, below and at right: Pages from "P is for Pastrami: The ABCs of Jewish Food" by Alan Silberberg. (Photos used with the permission of Penguin/Random House)



Rabbi Rachel Esserman's previous book reviews can be found on *The Reporter's* website under "Features" at: www.thereporter-group.org/book-reviews.

