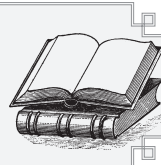


# Celebrating Jewish Literature



## A romance, a marriage saga and detective stories

By Rabbi Rachel Esserman

◆ “The Phoenix Bride”

An impossible romance between a Jew and a Christian in England in 1665: that’s one of the many interesting plot elements offered in the very moving “The Phoenix Bride” by Natasha Siegel (Dell). It’s only been 10 years since the once expelled Jewish population has been allowed to return to England and physician David Mendes is well aware his position is precarious. A Jewish doctor can easily be accused of murder if a non-Jewish patient dies. But that doesn’t stop him from attending to Cecilia Thorowgood, a young Christian widow suffering from a broken heart who is practically imprisoned in her sister’s townhouse in London. Their first meeting reminds them both of the wounds they bear: Cecilia mourns her husband who was lost to the plague, just as David misses a dear friend – a deeply loved friend – who was also lost to the same disease.

David’s employment was a last gasp measure since Cecilia’s sister and brother-in-law have no love for the Jews on their shore. But they do have plans for Cecilia’s future – ones she is not privy to at first – and need her well enough to fulfil them. David keeps a professional distance from his patient, but Cecilia soon discovers he is the only person she can confide in and with whom she feels comfortable. That leaves her wanting more. But David has his own sorrows to overcome: the realization that he couldn’t cure those he loved, something that makes him feel like a failure as a physician and which colors his personal life.

The course of their love is not smooth and the novel’s ending may not please some readers since there are no miraculous fairytale happily ever afters in “The Phoenix Bride,” just humans struggling to create meaningful lives in the midst of hardships. The novel offers many topics for discussion: the uncertainty the Jews of England felt about their place in British society, the lack of control women had over their lives during that time period and the way people were forced to conform to societal mores, even at the cost of their personal happiness. This excellent novel

will break and heal readers’ hearts.

◆ “Falling Through the Night”

Many novels focus on one of two time periods: the romance that occurs before someone marries or the problems a couple faces after they wed. “Falling Through the Night” by Gail Marlene Schwartz (Demeter Press) portrays the development of a relationship before and during marriage. However, neither period is easy for queer 30-something Audrey Meyerwitz, who longs for a partner and children. Unfortunately, she suffers from deep anxiety, panic attacks and insomnia. She’s also never completely come to terms with her family of origin: Audrey was adopted by a woman whom she considers her mother. However, her mother now focuses on her younger foster children – most of whom also have disabilities – and now has little energy for helping Audrey.

Fortunately, Audrey’s good friend Jessica helps her set up an account on a dating site where she meets Denise, a French Canadian. It doesn’t spoil the plot (since it’s revealed in the summary offered on the book jacket) to note that the two manage – with misgivings and problems – to marry and start a family. The book then explores the difficulties of married life – not only those of balancing a home life with friendships, but the complex decisions someone with mental health issues must make to protect herself. Some of the decisions made are heart-rending for Audrey and the reader. Audrey also learns that life is far messier than she expected, particularly when her fantasies of an ideal family must be given up in order to create a world in which she can successfully cope. She also learns that there is no guarantee for continued happiness: she must always be alert to the dangers that threaten her and her family.

Parts of “Falling Through the Night” felt more like vignettes, offering short scenes of different parts of Audrey’s life, than a complete novel, but, by its end, the scenes come together to show a fuller portrait. At times, readers may lose patience with Audrey, but that is one of the novel’s lessons: showing just how hard it is to live with the mental health issues Audrey faces every day.

◆ “The Cost of Living and Other Mysteries”

Frank Wolf is not your average private detective. Having lived through World War II in hiding with his wife and daughter, this former professor of philosophy moved to Brooklyn, taking whatever work he could find before hanging up his sign as a detective in the 1970s. In “The Cost of Living and Other Mysteries” by Saul Golubcow (Wildside Press), Wolf’s grandson, Joel Gordon, narrates three of Wolf’s cases. Gordon, both while in law school and then as a lawyer, serves as a legman for his grandfather by helping him gather information in order to solve and prevent murders.

The first two mysteries are relatively short: one concerns a kosher butcher who was murdered and the other an 8-year-old Chasidic child who disappeared on his way home from school. In the former, an insurance company asks Wolf to investigate since the deceased recently took out a very large insurance policy. It’s the detective’s knowledge of Jewish customs that reveals the true killer. Jewish knowledge also plays a role in the second case and offers insight into the close society of ultra-religious members of the Jewish community.

The third and longest story features a cold case: the police have been unable to discover who murdered a 16-year-old yeshiva student three years before. The student’s father is a client at the law firm where Gordon now works. He asks Wolf and Gordon to solve the case so he and his wife can finally find peace. I thought I knew not only who the murderer was, but his/her motive early in the story. I was completely wrong in both cases. The story’s ending was a bit convoluted, but ultimately convincing.

“The Cost of Living and Other Mysteries” reads half like the hard-boiled detective novels that Wolf loves and half like a Sherlock Holmes mystery where answers are pulled from thin air. Part of the fun is watching Gordon try to discern his grandfather’s thoughts and decisions. The work will appeal to mystery lovers looking for plots with Jewish content.

## Ancient approaches to intersex individuals

By Rabbi Rachel Esserman

Close study of ancient texts – mishnaic, talmudic and midrashic – often shows that there was no one monolithic way of thinking about almost anything in rabbinic Judaism. That includes opinions on sexuality and gender, as shown in “And the Sages Did Not Know: Early Rabbinic Approaches to Intersex” by Sarra Lev (University of Pennsylvania Press). Lev, a professor of rabbinics at the Reconstructionist Rabbinical College, admits that her studies contained surprises since the text offered more options and greater flexibility than expected.

Lev’s work speaks to two audiences: those who are interested in rabbinic writings (whatever the topic) and those interested in works about identity politics. The two interests do not always overlap. What the author does note is that her work is “not a book *about* intersex people. This project does not seek to discern anything about intersex people living in the rabbinic period. It is, rather, a book about people *who talk about* intersex people.” However, she does not see the rabbinic discussions as purely theoretical. Although Lev does not focus on how these thoughts affected real-life people, she does believe that intersex people existed during rabbinic times, just as they do today.

Lev focuses on two types of intersex individuals: the androgynos and the tumtum. The ancient rabbis realized these individuals did not fit into traditional binary gender categories, the androgynos because their bodies contained features of both sexes and the tumtum because the person’s sexual features were hidden. The rabbis generally subscribed to a binary system – male and female categories – and were focused on what laws, responsibilities and behaviors were required by individuals in each category. Their main concern with intersex individuals seems to be how they fit into the legalistic, rabbinic system. Lev notes that “all the early rabbinic material that include references to an androgynos or a tumtum consider her/him a regular member of society. Rabbinic sources discuss issues such as an intersex person’s marriage, inheritance, and basic conduct... rabbinic texts do not assign individual androgynoi exclusively to the category of either male or female. Rather than consider each individual intersex person either male or female... the rabbis of Seder Androgynoso determine what *every* intersex person should do on a halakhah-by-halakhah basis.”

The author notes that the texts viewed do not offer only one approach to the subject. There are times when the text does not support a binary approach, as when Rabbi Yose sees the androgynos as being neither male or female, but in a category of their own. At other times, the binary is reinforced

as when the rabbis declare that in one specific instance, they should be treated as male, while in other cases, they should be treated as female. To make matters even more complex, there are times when the rabbis treated them as both men and women. Lev offers a chart comparing some of these approaches, which looks at the laws of impurity, inheritance, the consumption of sacrifices and more. The author also explores these in more detail in her writing, noting the difficulty of offering one specific approach.

Lev does not believe that the rabbis were trying to remove all doubt about the appropriate place of intersex individuals in rabbinic culture, writing that “the rabbis often lay down principles that enable us to live with cases of uncertainty, but only so far as those cases serve to reify the normative categories. The rabbis’ concern with the gray areas is neither eradication nor inclusion. It was a simultaneous foray into the margins and the affirmation of a center from which they can build a culture and into which they may take refuge.” That allows Lev leeway to explore the different ideas without having one mindset, something that fits into the rabbinical discussion as various rabbis offered differing opinions on not only what legal ruling connected to intersex individuals, but the nature of intersex beings.

The author discuss several different models as a way to understand rabbinic approaches, including:

◆ The uncertainty model: Since the rabbis were uncertain to which sex the individual belonged, these individuals were required to follow the prohibitions placed on both sexes. This severely limited their place in society and the actions they could perform in order to make certain they did not break any biblical or rabbinic laws.

◆ The “non”-model: This model places the androgynos and tumtum outside of the system, making them what Lev calls “essentially category-less.” They are neither male or female, and therefore are invisible in reality, even though they are written about in the text.

◆ The maleness model: These texts place the androgynos in the male binary category. Lev sees this approach as concealing physical and other differences. However, the author notes that the rabbis also saw the androgynos as a different variation of male, meaning their actions could still be problematic.

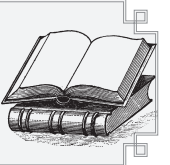
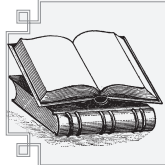
◆ Part /part model: This model sees the intersex person as part male and part female. This usually means that in some circumstances the intersex person is told to act as a male (following the laws for men), while at other times, their actions are based on the laws for women.

In her conclusion, the author notes how difficult it is to pinpoint rabbinic opinion. At times, the androgynos

and tumtum are lower on the rabbinic social ladder than women. But at other times, they are treated as men and have male privilege, which places them higher on the social ladder. There is, therefore, no one simple explanation of rabbinic thought on the topic and that may be the point. Lev writes, “Rather than aiming for resolution, the rabbis leave uncertainty in place. They do not mitigate it (as in the uncertainty model), ignore it (as in the maleness model), or contend with it (as in the part/part model). Rather, this text exposed uncertainty before us to wrestle with, in all its complexity.”

This review cannot do justice to the amount of material covered in “And the Sages Did Not Know” with its almost 260 pages of text. The writing is very scholarly and contains not only examples of quotes from, and discussions of, rabbinic sources, but a great deal of philosophical writing on the topic. This means that readers focused on one or the other will have to wade through a great deal of material that may not be of interest to them. Lev’s work, however, does offer challenging and intriguing thoughts that should open scholarly discussions. The range and depth of her book is impressive and is sure to be of interest to anyone in the field of intersex studies.





# Celebrating Jewish Literature

## Living with, and talking about, the dead

By Rabbi Rachel Esserman

A funeral is one of the most difficult tasks a rabbi performs. It can also be one of the most meaningful, whether from learning unexpected details of a person's life or bringing comfort to their loved ones. Note, not closure, but comfort, because there is no closure. In fact, learning how to live with loss and death can greatly enrich a life as Delphine Horvilleur, a Liberal French rabbi, shows in her beautiful and moving work, "Living with Our Dead: On Loss and Consolation" (Europa Editors).

Horvilleur, who studied to be a physician before becoming a rabbi, notes that the ill and dying are often hidden in contemporary times. That makes it more difficult for people to accept death when it comes because we often hope for medical miracles. Even Horvilleur tried to keep death from her home by never returning directly there after a funeral. That changed with the pandemic, which she notes brought death directly to her door.

When pondering the many different roles a rabbi plays, Horvilleur discovered an unexpected one: storyteller. The ability to tell a story plays an extremely important role during funerals: "Knowing how to narrate what has been said a thousand times before, while giving the person who hears the story for the first time unique keys with which to unlock the meaning for themselves – that is my function. I stand by the side of women and men who, at turning points in their lives, need stories. These ancestral stories are not only Jewish, but I speak them in the language of this tradition. They create bridges between eras and generations, between those who were and those who will be. These sacred stories open a path between the living and the dead. The role of a storyteller is to stand by the gate to ensure that it stays open." These stories breach the wall between life and death, helping mourners to carry their loved one

with them, even as the years pass.

In the different chapters of "Living with Our Dead," Horvilleur offers stories about funerals she's performed, showing how each are the same, yet different, due to the uniqueness of the individuals who have passed away. She notes that doing a eulogy can be difficult because she is often just repeating what the mourners have told her. Understanding that her role is to transform their words, she writes that what she is doing is "accompany[ing] the grieving, not to teach them something they don't yet know but to translate what they have told me so that they in turn can actually hear it. In that way, the narrative that left their lips returns to their ears by the intermediary of a voice that isn't theirs, or at least not altogether theirs. It's a voice that creates a dialogue between their words and an ancestral tradition, transmitted from generation to generation, to both 'good' and 'bad' Jews, and especially to those who are doing their best."

Horvilleur notes the importance of saying the *Shema* when someone is dying. She sees that declaration as a way of proclaiming that no matter what divides us, there is always a chance of unity – that a part of those who have passed away remains alive with their loved ones. She writes this in context of one of the most difficult funerals a rabbi can do: that of a beloved friend. By being both a friend and rabbi, Horvilleur sought to offer her friend what was needed, although, in the end, she, too, mourned a painful loss.

Horvilleur shows one woman's ability to live with death when she writes about Miriam, whom she met when she was an apprentice rabbi in New York City. The author was surprised when this vibrant older woman told her that she was once so depressed, she spent all her time and energy planning her own funeral. The event that changed her

life occurred after Miriam's daughter told her they were going shopping. However, rather than being taken to a store, Miriam's driver dropped her off at the Riverside Memorial Chapel. There they held her funeral: family, friends, neighbors and storekeepers she knew all gathered to discuss her life. The gathering was not morbid; rather, the people told stories about their connections to Miriam and laughed, enjoying the chance to celebrate her. It gave them the opportunity to show their love, something that changed Miriam's life. No longer did she plan her funeral; instead, she now tried to live her life to the fullest.

Horvilleur also writes of her time in Israel more 25 years ago – listening to Yitzhak Rabin speak hours before his death – and how that experience ties to her ideas of Zionism. She uses biblical stories to inform her visit to a relative's grave in the French countryside, walking through a cemetery she had never expected to visit. In each case, her understanding of the Bible and Jewish tradition underlies her writing. For example, when discussing the story of Cain and Abel, and King Solomon's "Ecclesiastes," she writes that, "Everything that we build solidly ends up wearing out, disappearing, while that which is fragile, ephemeral, fallible, paradoxically leaves indelible traces in the world. The mists of past lives don't evaporate: they permeate us and lead us where we never thought we would go."

"Living with Our Dead" is only 151 pages, but that number belies its wisdom and depth. Horvilleur's work speaks to everyone, not just rabbis. Her writing is clear and, although her point of view is that of a rabbi, she also fulfills her aim as a storyteller, offering her readers a new way to view the world of death and dying. "Living with Our Dead" comes highly recommended for those who have mourned and those fortunate enough to not yet be touched by death.

## A FEMINIST CLASSIC REPUBLISHED

By Rabbi Rachel Esserman

During the past few decades, scholars and feminists has been recovering work written by Jewish women during the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. The majority of these books are from the Ashkenazic world, which makes the new edition of the novel "Mazaltob" by Blanche Bendahan, translated and edited by Yael Azagury and Frances Malino (Brandeis University Press), even more welcome since it offers a view of Sephardic culture. Also included in the book are essays by Azagury and Malino giving background about Bendahan's life and the culture in which the novel

takes place. The work, which was originally published in 1930, was Bendahan's first novel. Although the author lived most of her life in France, her story takes place in Tetouan, Morocco.

Mazeltob is both the title of the book and the name of its main character. The name derives from the phrase *mazel tov*, meaning good luck. (It is not uncommon in the Sephardi and Mizrahi world to substitute a "b" sound for the "v.") However, readers will discover that Mazeltob does not have much good luck. Although she's attended school and is well educated in French, she has no control

over the course of her life since marriages are arranged by parents and all women are expected to marry. The man who seeks her hand is Jose, who returned from Brazil to Morocco to find a Jewish wife as custom demands. However, he is used to living as he pleases, which means drinking and carousing with friends.

It doesn't take Jose long to realize that he's made a mistake, leaving him looking for an excuse to return to Brazil without Mazeltob. Her return to her parents' house makes her an object of pity as the years pass without her husband sending for her. Making matters worse, her childhood friend Jean, who is half Jewish, realizes he has always been in love with her. Mazeltob feels the same, but has no way to free herself from her marriage since no one knows how to contact Jose. This forces the two lovers to make difficult decisions about their future.

Of great interest were the Moroccan Jewish customs that may be unfamiliar to Ashkenazic Jews. For example, although Mazeltob moves into the same house as her husband after her marriage, she is not allowed to leave her bed for the first seven days, nor is he allowed to spend time alone with her. The community also pities those who die in the early days of the week: they believe the souls of the dead can only ascend to heaven on Fridays. Those who die before that are doomed to wander the earth for several days.

A woman's place in this society is greatly circumscribed. Mazeltob's face was not only covered with a veil when she married, but she lowered her eyes because she considered herself unworthy of looking at the rabbi doing the ceremony. When someone dies, women can attend the candle flame lit after the death, but their prayers are considered worthless. Any woman who is divorced or widowed stands no chance of marrying again: they are only allowed one man in their lives. The reason men do not want to marry these women is because tradition says any children born to them will resemble the woman's first husband, rather than her current one. It should be noted that although Bendahan writes what her characters believe, her novel seems a protest against the role of women.

The question when an older work is republished is whether it stands on its own or serves mostly to satisfy reader's curiosity about the past. My feelings about "Mazaltob" were mixed. I felt distanced from the characters and didn't get emotionally involved in Mazaltob's story until its end. However, I did have a strong reaction to the treatment of women in the society in which she lived. Of greater interest to me was learning about the many different customs that were practiced. Others may find the plot and emotion of this doomed love story more emotionally involving. Book clubs may also find those customs and the decisions Mazaltob makes worthy of discussion.

\*A thank you to Bryan Kirschen, chairman of the Department of Romance Languages and Literatures, and an associate professor of Spanish and linguistics at Binghamton University, for his help in clarifying that not only is the "b" substituted in place of a "v" in writing, but in pronunciation.

## Love, sex and war

By Rabbi Rachel Esserman

◆ "We Are Only Ghosts"

Some people know how to be invisible. It's a trait 42-year-old Charles Ward has perfected as a waiter at Café Marie in New York City in 1968. Almost no one – whether at work or in his very private life – knows anything about his past or how he came to the United States. That changes one day when someone he knew in Europe enters the café. In "We Are Only Ghosts" by Jeffrey L. Richards (John Scognamiglio Books/Kensington Books), readers learn the tragic story of Charles' life and his attempt to finally understand the true meaning of what happened to him.

That recognition begins the sad and brutal tale of Charles' relationship to Berthold Werden. Before World War II, Charles was Karel Benakov, a Jewish teenager living with his parents in Czechoslovakia. At the age of 17, Karel, his parents and his sister were sent to the Auschwitz Concentration Camp. There, Obersturmführer Werden took an interest in Karel, rescuing him and allowing him to live in the basement of his home, which was a short distance from the camp. Life there was not easy because Berthold's wife and son hated Karel and treated him poorly. However, Karel was grateful for the relative safety he found there. But Berthold wanted something else from Karel, something Karel was willing to give in order to remain alive. However, other feelings grew during their time together: a sense of gratitude for being allowed to live and finally escape Europe for the United States.

Those mixed feelings remain in 1968 when Charles makes himself known to Berthold, who first moved to Brazil after the war before coming to live in New York. Using an assumed name, Berthold runs a jewelry store and lives a quiet life. The two begin an uneasy relationship, one that leaves Charles wondering if he will remain a ghost for the rest of his life, unable to tell people who he really is. Then something happens that forces Charles to face his past and make important decisions about his future.

"We Are Only Ghosts" is a powerful, moving and disturbing novel. It contains graphic sexual content and violent episodes that may shock some readers. These are not gratuitous: they explain the characters' psyche and reactions to events. The work will leave readers debating

the nature of love and connection, in addition to pondering just how fine is the line between love and hate.

◆ "Bonfire Night"

Before Britain declared war on Germany in 1939, British Jews could have been excused for wondering if their homeland would side with Germany. The British Union of Fascists was reported to have between 40-50,000 members at one time. If it ruled England, no Jew would have been safe from persecution. "Bonfire Night" by Anna Bliss (John Scognamiglio Books/Kensington Books) opens with a scene based on the real life Fascist-sponsored march that took place in the East End, a Jewish section of London, in 1936. It's there the two main characters meet. Kate Grifferty is a photographer snapping pictures she hopes will appear in one of London's newspapers. David Rabatkin, a Jewish medical student, is hoping to keep his brother, Simon, from getting into trouble. The two are drawn to each other, even though they both know their families would not approve of their relationship.

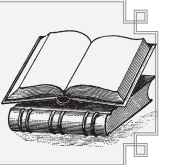
Irish Catholic Kate lives with a father who blames her for the death of her mother in childbirth and is only willing to let her live with him if she pays her own way. David is a member of a close-knit Jewish family to whom it is very important he marry someone Jewish and continue their traditions. To make matters more difficult, David wants a conventional relationship, while Kate has no desire to marry.

Their stories continue during the war years when German planes bomb England during what is known as the Blitz. Kate and David each try to find their own way, but are unable to forget the other. However, a secret Kate keeps may change the course of both their lives. Their ability to make decisions is complicated by the sheer necessity of surviving and the worry about whether Britain can win the war.

"Bonfire Night" is not a conventional love story, so some readers may be dissatisfied with its ending. However, it does ring true to the needs of both main characters. While Kate and David feel three-dimensional, some of the minor characters come across as stereotypes, particularly the members of David's family. Jewish readers unfamiliar with British antisemitism of the time will be particularly interested in the opening section of the novel.



# Celebrating Jewish Literature



## Exploring Leviticus

By Rabbi Rachel Esserman

Commentaries on the Bible are rarely page turners. Even the most interesting are more likely to make people nod their head in agreement than encourage them to eagerly continue reading. This is especially true for works on the biblical book of Leviticus, which, with its listing of sacrifices, is of little interest to some contemporary readers. An exception to this is Rabbi David Fohrman's "Leviticus: A Parsha Companion" (AlephBeta Press/Meggid). A few chapters were so interesting that I couldn't stop reading until I finished them. Even those chapters whose arguments were less convincing are still worthy of study for the brilliant ways that Fohrman ties his ideas together. Readers do not have to agree with his thoughts to enjoy his work.

Fohrman notes that many readers have difficulty understanding why Leviticus is part of the Bible because it is so different from the first two biblical books. He writes, "Let's face it: Genesis and Exodus had a really good story going: God develops a relationship with a family of humans, but they eventually become enslaved in Egypt, until the Lord frees them from bondage with signs and wonders. Hollywood has made quite a bundle out of telling the story from *The Ten Commandments* to *The Prince of Egypt*. But then along comes Leviticus, and rudely interrupts the narrative flow of the Torah." The question Fohrman explores is whether Leviticus can be best understood by noting its relationship to the stories found in Genesis and Exodus. He sees the repetition of words and phrases in the three books as connecting them in order to create what he calls "a rich tapestry of meaning."

An example of this can be found in the chapter "Vayikra 1: A Peek into the World of Offerings." Fohrman believes that each sacrifice listed relates to sacrifices offered by characters in Genesis and Exodus. It's impossible to completely explain the connections in detail in this short review, but the author sees the *chatat* (sin) offering as connected to the first time humans sin, when Adam and Eve disobeyed God and ate from the Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil. The *shelamim* (peace) offering is similar to the covenant offering made between Jacob and his father-in-law Laban. The author discusses how Noah and Abraham made the *olah* (burnt) offering. Noah's occurred after his exit from the ark, while Abraham's was done as part of the *Akedah*, the binding of Isaac. Fohrman sees these offerings as representing three different aspects of our relationship to God: the *chatat* represents respect, the *shelamim* sharing and the *olah* awe. He believes that, while we no longer make animal sacrifices to God, they still offer ways to understand our connection to God.

## Dark and funny Jewish humor

By Rabbi Rachel Esserman

Confession: I'd never heard of actor/comedian Brett Gelman before learning about his book "The Terrifying Realm of the Possible: Nearly True Stories" (Dey Street Books). I also didn't remember seeing its title on any list of upcoming books with Jewish themes. Even when I received an e-mail about it, I wasn't sure I could review it for the paper. Although the characters seemed to have Jewish names, it wasn't clear the stories contained Jewish content. Fortunately, I answered the publicity person's e-mail and asked that question because not only are its characters Jewish, but Gelman's very dark and strange work offers the most jaundiced and jaded look at Judaism and God since Shalom Auslander's "Beware of God." His characters, though, reminded me of early Woody Allen films, the ones filled with nebbishes and their overbearing families.

Gelman's stories feature characters from a wide range of life stages. Abraham Amsterdam (the child) either has severe mental health issues or is actually being tormented by demons. Mendel Freudenberger (the teenager) wants so desperately to be popular that he can't tell when other teens are making fun of him. Formerly popular comedian and actor Jackie Cohen (the adult) watches his career disappear after writing, directing and acting in one of the most politically incorrect films ever produced. Iris Below (the senior) drives her son to distraction in one of the funniest sections of the book. Although the last section features Z (the dead), God's appearance is the story's highlight and will either delight or offend readers. That section also ties together other sections of the book.

However, readers are less likely to become invested in the characters' lives than in Gilman's humorous descriptions of their thoughts and actions. For example, Abraham has just learned that Christians hate Jews, although he doesn't

In "Emor: A Solar System in Time," Fohrman explores the idea of Shabbat. He opens with a fascinating idea focusing on the first mention of Shabbat in Genesis: the "first of all Sabbaths was God's very own. Notice that this celebration of the Sabbath by God didn't involve any humans, nor do humans, at the time, even know about it. We, the readers of the text, many years after Creation, know about it. But at the time, God didn't command Adam and Eve to observe the Sabbath or even tell them that He was resting. For all we know, Adam and Eve were completely unaware of the Sabbath's existence. That first Sabbath was God's, and God's alone. He was the Being to rest on it." Fohrman sees this Sabbath as a prototype to the Sabbaths that humans will later celebrate. He explores how the Sabbath is not just for humans, but for all living things, animals and plants. A break from creating is needed because all creation includes some form of destruction: for example, he notes how making bread includes the killing of plants/seeds. For Fohrman, this act of destruction and creation means "every time we make a loaf of bread, it is like we are playing God. We foster life and then snuff it out, wielding the mysterious forces of life and death as tools to serve our creation needs." Just as God took a break from performing these acts, so, too, do we need to do the same.

In the interesting, but not completely convincing, chapter on *parashat* Behar, Fohrman talks about "The Yovel and Children of Cain." He notes yet another way the laws in Leviticus are related to specific stories found in the books of Genesis and Exodus: "A law may come to rectify a

historical wrong. Or, on the other side of the ledger, a law may seek to reenact a high point in our history, ensuring that its legacy continues to influence the life of a nation even after the passage of centuries. Sometimes, it may be a little of both. A law may pick up on a hopeful potentiality in a story that was, tragically, never actualized." In this case, the Sabbatical year is tied to the story of Cain, the son of Adam and Eve, who murdered his brother, Abel. Since the chapter is 40 pages long, it's difficult to summarize the discussion, but it focuses on how the descendants of Cain are connected to what is not done during the Sabbatical year and how this ties to the lesson that we are all our brothers' keepers. Even readers who are not convinced will be intrigued by the discussion.

Other chapters offer excellent looks on their particular *parashot*, including the one on Kedoshim, which offers 30 pages of discussion on one verse, "Love your neighbor as yourself." (19:18) Fohrman writes easy-to-read prose and offers explanations that novice readers of the Bible should be able to understand. Those who have more background will find even more to appreciate. Readers will find themselves looking forward to his commentaries on "Numbers" and "Deuteronomy."

Reviews of Fohrman's earlier *parashot* companions can be found at <https://www.thereporter.org/features/off-the-shelf-biblical-commentary-by-rabbi-rachel-esserman-368553> and <https://www.thereporter.org/book-reviews/off-the-shelf-parasha-and-prophet-by-rabbi-rachel-esserman?entry=377675>.

## Disconnections

By Rabbi Rachel Esserman

Some experiences can permanently affect people's lives. That often causes a disconnection with their family and friends who are unable to understand how they have changed. Leela Corman explores this idea in her graphic novel "Victory Parade" (Schocken Books). The novel mostly takes place in Brooklyn in 1943, but the effect of having lived during World War II underscores the action.

Rose Arensberg, who works as a welder in the Brooklyn Navy Yard, connects the different characters. Rose lives with her daughter, Eleanor, and Ruth, a German-Jewish refugee. Although married to Sam, who is serving in the U.S. Army, Rose is in the midst of an affair with a disabled former veteran. Her marriage was the result of an unexpected pregnancy and she worries about what life will be like when her husband returns. Ruth, who suffers nightmares from what happened to her in Germany, takes no nonsense from male customers, something that causes her to be fired from several jobs. She finds fitting employment as a professional woman wrestler, although her anger remains a problem. At the end of the novel, Sam returns to his family, but is haunted by what he saw in the concentration camps of Europe. Unfortunately, none of these characters are willing or able to talk about their experiences.

The graphic format of "Victory Parade" leaves readers having to fill in some of the blanks behind the meaning of the actions and words of the characters. However, that seems to be the point: as in real life, we often have to guess what lies behind the behavior of those we know. The drawings are stark and blunt; this is not a prettified version of the world, but rather a rough and raw one. The work features examples of nudity in a sexual context and includes scenes

from a concentration camp. While definitely not a book for children, it serves as an intriguing and disturbing vision of life during World War II.



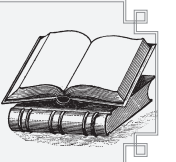
A page from Leela Corman's "Victory Parade" (Graphic credit to Leela Corman/Reprinted with the permission of Schocken Books)



Above, left and right: Pages from Leela Corman's "Victory Parade" (Graphic credit to Leela Corman/Reprinted with the permission of Schocken Books)



# Celebrating Jewish Literature



## Jewish mystic or psychological breakdown

By Rabbi Rachel Esserman

The essence of some novels is open to debate. Even when readers learn about the character from several viewpoints, there are questions that may never be fully answered. To be fair, some readers of Toby Lloyd's "Fervor" (Avid Reader Press) will feel confident that they know exactly what happened to Elsie Rosenthal, while others will still be puzzled at the novel's end. What is clear is that something happened to Elsie after her grandfather, Yosef, a Holocaust survivor, died.

Hannah and Eric Rosenthal are observant Jews who live in North London with his father, Yosef, and their three children, Gideon, Elsie and Tovyah. As Yosef approaches the end of his life, Hannah interviews him about his experiences in the Holocaust, something that greatly affects her children. To make matters worse, once he dies, Hannah publishes a book about their conversations, which reveals a secret Yosef would have preferred to take to his grave. But the family's splintering really begins when Elsie disappears for several days. It doesn't spoil the plot to reveal that she is found, but the Elsie who returns is noticeably different in behavior and actions.

The aftereffects of her disappearance continue almost a decade later. Due to her uncontrollable and dangerous behavior, Elsie has been in and out of mental health institutions. Gideon moved to Israel to remove himself from the family sphere. Tovyah attends Oxford University where, because of his serious and pedantic nature, he is disliked by almost everyone. The one exception is his next door neighbor, Kate, who finds his behavior and ideas intriguing. While Hannah's first book and controversial support of Israel has made her an unpopular figure on the Oxford campus, it is her latest work that has pushed Tovyah even further from his family: she writes that Elsie's issues are being caused by her involvement with Jewish mysticism, which has left her either possessed by a spirit or lost in a different spiritual sphere. However, Tovyah, who has dis-

avowed religion, believes his sister's problems are caused by their dysfunctional family.

Kate's own relationship to Judaism is interesting, partly because she had no idea she was Jewish when a child. In fact, her father only learned that his mother was Jewish after she died. It was also then that he discovered the man whom he thought was his father was, in fact, his mother's second husband. As to whether any of his mother's extended family still existed, that remained a mystery. Since both her parents were not religious, Kate had little experience with Judaism beyond her brother's Jurassic Park-themed bar mitzvah, one her brother decided he wanted on his own. Tovyah notes that, according to the laws his family follows, she would not be considered Jewish, although Kate does feel a connection to Judaism.

Although a majority of the novel follows Kate and Tovyah at Oxford, Elsie's behavior underlies the interactions that occur. Readers will debate whether Elsie really has had mystical experiences (one section featuring Kate will make that seem a possibility), if she does suffer from mental illness (other sections lend credence to that possibility) or if she is deliberately self-destructive (a thought offered in still others). This may leave readers feeling unsatisfied if they wish to have one idea completely confirmed. Even reading Elsie's thoughts in one section did not completely solve the mystery.

The most interesting parts of the work, though, focus on different family members' feelings about Judaism. Tovyah challenges his family's Orthodox practices and opinions. For example, he ponders "the problem of God. God, who is everywhere, all places at all times, and yet also was nowhere ever. The constant intrusion of nothingness. Tovyah had to thank him for every scrap of food that passed his lips but couldn't even say his name... This was the twenty-first century, wasn't it, they lived in liberal, democratic, modern Great Britain. In affluent North London! The indignities of feudalism, of expulsion, of

shtetl life, of the Pale of the Settlement, were centuries behind them (centuries!) And here they were, behaving like the lowliest, mud-licking serfs, thanking the invisible Lord for the food they ate."

What Tovyah does not realize is how important being religious is to his mother, who came from a secular Jewish background before becoming Orthodox. Her parents were "affluent, liberal, and fully assimilated" and felt "no need of old-world hocus pocus." It was a personal revelation that brought her to Judaism: "As she closed her eyes she was aware of a crowding presence, infinitely perceptive; a judgement more intelligent, more penetrating than her own; an eye without dimensions; an ecstatic vision, searing hot. The dizzying realization that she and everything was turning. Forever.... Every act of cruelty or kindness is both known and recorded, everything thing we've ever done weighted in the balance. And we are never, any of us, isolated. Think these thoughts, take them seriously, and you must change your life." That was when Hannah felt the need to find a synagogue and become part of the traditional Jewish world.

Between their different feelings about Judaism and about how best to help Elsie, Tovyah and Hannah are unable to come to terms because they inhabit extremes, each refusing to acknowledge the feelings and thoughts of the other. That includes the disturbing event at the end of the novel, one which Kate also experiences and which changes the direction of her life.

Readers may have mixed feeling about "Fervor." The novel is well written, but the different narrative threads – some told in first person and some in third person – didn't always hold together. As mentioned before, there seems to be no one clear understanding of Elsie's experience, something that may appeal to some readers, but which others will find off-putting. Lloyd is definitely a writer to watch, though; it will be interesting to see his approach to Judaism and family life in his future works.

## Israelis in the U.S. and Israel

By Rabbi Rachel Esserman

There's been a backlash against Israeli authors recently, everything from leaving negative reviews on websites because the authors are considered Zionists to the cancellation of readings and book signings. Refusing to read these authors, though, would mean missing two excellent and interesting works: Maya Arad's "The Hebrew Teacher: Three Novellas" (New Vessel Press) and "On Her Own" by Lihi Lapid (HarperVia). The stories in the former take place in the United States, while the latter offers a view of Israeli culture.

Arad's author biography notes that she is the author of 11 books, but this is the first of her fiction to published in the U.S. When reading the title story, I looked at the publication date of the original Hebrew work (it was 2018), because its message is so timely, she could have written it yesterday. The story focuses on Ilana, a Hebrew instructor at a college in the Midwest, who's faced with a disturbing new Hebrew literature professor at the university: Yoad

Bergman-Harari. To Ilana's surprise, Yoad dislikes reading literature and is only interested in the philosophical and sociological implications of the writing. He also refuses to participate in local Israeli community events and is very left-wing in his politics. The two clash because Ilana, whose life revolves around her teaching of Hebrew and her connections to the community, cannot understand his attitude. Arad does a wonderful job showing how the personal is indeed political and the shifts in academia's thoughts about Israel.

The two other novellas focus on family relationships. In "A Visit (Scenes)," Miriam travels to the U.S. to visit her son, Yoram, and his family because they have not visited Israel in years. She longs to get to know her grandson and spend time as a family. Unfortunately, Yoram, who works in Silicon Valley, is rarely home and her daughter-in-law, Maya, can barely stand to be in the same room as her. Even worse, they didn't prepare her grandson, Yonaton, for her visit so he treats her as a scary stranger, that is, when he

even gets to spend time with her. That's because he spends long hours at a daycare center so Maya can work on her Ph.D. The story has greater depth than this summary suggests, though, because Arad not only offers Miriam's viewpoint, but those of Yoram and Maya. Those sections show the barely visible cracks in their marriage they are trying to hide from Miriam and themselves.

"Make New Friends" portrays problems that can occur when a mother invests too much interest in her daughter's social life. Efrat, who lives in California with her family, worries that her middle-school-aged daughter, Libby, does not have enough friends. Oh, there seem to be girls who are willing to talk to her when they see Libby in a store, but those same school friends never invite her to any gatherings. Efrat crosses a line when she begins to follow those girls on social media, something that has implications to her relationship with her daughter. The story is clever in that Arad slowly reveals as much about Efrat as she does about the relationship of the preteens.

"The Hebrew Teacher" is so good, it made me wonder why more of Arad's work has not been published in English. I hope this book is just the first of many.

While all of Arad's stories take place in the United States, Lapid's novel offers an interesting view of the underside in Israel. It opens with a disturbing look at Nina, a teenager who ran away from home with Shmueli, an older married man and petty criminal. After Shmueli becomes abusive and Nina witnesses a crime, she runs away from him. Looking for a safe haven, she finds herself hiding in a stairway of an apartment building in Tel Aviv with no idea what to do next. Her problem is partly solved when Carmela, one of the building's residents, finds her and thinks Nina is her granddaughter. It quickly becomes clear that Carmela suffers from dementia. Lapid's descriptions of Carmela's wavering between knowing what is happening around her and the fog that comes over her feels convincing and is extremely moving.

Nina pretends to be Carmela's granddaughter and begins to care for her, both practically (for example, cleaning her apartment) and emotionally. However, Nina, also worries about her mother, Irina, a Russian immigrant, who is desperate to learn if her daughter is OK. Irina had warned Nina not to leave with Shmueli and now regrets the fight they had that night. But Shmueli is looking for Nina and visits Irina, frightening her and leaving her worried about what will happen if Shmueli finds her daughter.

Lapid also offers the thoughts of several other characters, which makes the novel feel episodic at times, but does produce a more complete portrait of life in Israel. The work comes together in the end with a satisfying and moving conclusion. It also offers readers a chance to ponder the meaning of family and what constitutes a home, which makes it an excellent work for book clubs.

## Humor. . . . . Continued from page 7

really understand exactly what happened between the Jews, Jesus and the ancient Romans to cause that hatred. He does know one very important thing, something that will influence the course of his life: People don't hate Jews if they're funny. "If a Jew is funny, people forget they're a Jew and they could be loved. If a Jew is funny, he or she would become famous. He or she could become quite popular. 'Cause that's what fame is. Popularity. Popularity on a grand scale. And that's the second thing Abraham wanted the most. To be popular."

The plot of Jackie's film will make readers either gasp with horror or laugh. Even though everyone else who worked on the film wants to forget its existence or claims to have PTSD from the filming, Jackie defends his work. The film, called "Auschwitz Antebellum," was supposed to be "a magical realist romantic comedy about a Jewish prisoner in a Nazi concentration camp and an enslaved Black woman on a plantation in the antebellum South magically switching places, then, after switching places, learning the similarities of their two situations, then after learning their similarities magically finding themselves together, first in the concentration camp, and then the plantation." The two then fall in love, marry and form a successful jazz record

label. It won't be a surprise to learn that Jackie was never able to get a film financed after this one was shelved without being shown in theaters.

Z feels fortunate to have a private meeting with God after arriving in heaven. Well, at least, Z does at first. But there is a problem; it turns out that, although God claims to hate insecure people, God is the most deeply insecure creature Z has ever met. Z is then faced with a dilemma: be truthful in his conversation with God and possibly get expelled from heaven or lie. The decision is not made any easier by the fact that God's temper gets triggered when God is asked a question. At one point, God explains a need for validation from humans, saying, "I have a universe to run. A pretty great universe at that, right? Sure, it's not perfect. What is? But it's a universe, and I should get some credit for that. Now I know what you are going to say. If I am so secure, why do I need the validation, right?... I just deserve it. There, I said it. I deserve the credit and, sue me, I want to be acknowledged for that. That's my right, right? At least I can ask for that? After all I've done, right? I mean, I invented sex, for crying out loud. That's pretty cool. Right?" Things only go downhill after that, which means Z soon gets to experience the joys of hell.

While I had a wonderful time reading "The Terrifying Realm of the Possible," the stories didn't make a lasting impression. It's the humorous sections I remembered, especially the most outlandish ones, rather than the characters and their actions. The book is obviously not for everyone: it aims to challenge and offend, all the while offering a very Jewish view of the world.

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

