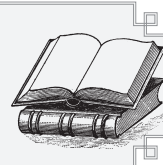




# Celebrating Jewish Literature



## *Jews and crime: fact and fiction*

By Rabbi Rachel Esserman

The connection between immigrants and crime has been a hot topic recently. However, it's not a new one: Jewish immigrant involvement in crime in the second half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century and the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> was one of the reasons U.S. immigration laws changed to limit immigration from particular European countries. Many Jews have long been fascinated by their forebears who were involved in these criminal activities. That interest can be seen in two recent works: the nonfiction "The Talented Mrs. Mandelbaum: The Rise and Fall of an American Organized Crime Boss" by Margalit Fox (Random House) looks at the career of a notorious fence (receiver of stolen goods), while the novel "The Whisper Sister" by Jennifer S. Brown (Lake Union Publishing) offers a fictional look at a young woman who runs a speakeasy during Prohibition.

"The Talented Mrs. Mandelbaum" is a light, breezy, popular history that portrays not only the life of Fredericka Mandelbaum, but the thieves, police and politicians who helped make her career possible. At first glance, Mandelbaum seems an unlikely master criminal: she was a wife, mother and well-liked neighbor who hosted dinners for high society. She was considered a philanthropist, donating money to her synagogue and providing for those less fortunate. When she arrived in the U.S. in 1850 at the age of 25, though, she had been just another impoverished immigrant. However, by the mid-1880s, it's estimated that she owned almost \$10 million worth of stolen goods. She was not a thief herself, but rather received those goods for resale.

Mandelbaum helped those who brought her stolen goods by providing them with legal counsel and protection. She was able to do so because of her connections to New York policemen (who were often on the take) and politicians (who also received kickbacks) The police and politicians were also pleased to be invited to fancy dinners at her

house that often included the upper crust of society. Those who bought the stolen goods from her at discounted prices were also happy because it allowed them access to goods they could not otherwise afford. Fox writes that it was at this "intersection of thrift, stuff, class and desire that Fredericka Mandelbaum found her calling. It would center on a singular kind of recycling: availing herself of choice items from one bourgeois home so that they might adorn another, or lifting bolts of silk from large textile concerns for sale to neighborhood tailors."

For a while, this proved a satisfactory relationship for almost all involved. However, life changed in the 1870s when attitudes changed toward the type of property crime that had brought Mandelbaum her wealth. The author notes these efforts focused on "property crime committed by people who weren't male, native born and of Anglo-Saxon Protestant stock," which made Mandelbaum a prime target. In addition, these reformers sought to also rid politics of members of the working class, particularly those who had recently immigrated to the U.S. According to Fox, "undergirding [the reformer's] efforts were the class bigotry and xenophobia that had increasing polarized New York." Efforts against Mandelbaum were successful, although she managed to avoid prison by escaping to Canada.

Although Fox does not try to explain why Mandelbaum turned to crime, she does offer suggestions about why she was so successful. The author notes that unlike other immigrant cultures that limited women to home and hearth, Jewish women were expected to work outside the home. This was common in the Old World, where women's occupations supported men's ability to study Torah. Also, Jewish women in the U.S. began to claim rights – secular and religious – that had not been available to them in Europe. While Fox does not explore Mandelbaum's relationship with her husband, readers can assume he made no objection

to her business practices.

What also helped make Mandelbaum's career possible is the timing of her arrival in the U.S., which was at the cusp of what Fox calls "the first Golden Age of American crime." Her enterprise began when amateurs were able to make an excellent living in criminal activities, as well as other professions from doctors to lawyers, who, at that time, could just hang out a shingle without having had any professional training. By the time Prohibition arrived, crime had become far more organized, so much so that someone like Mandelbaum would never have been able to obtain as much power as she did.

"The Talented Mrs. Mandelbaum" was fun and easy to read. Readers don't learn much about Mandelbaum's feelings, but that's not the intent of the work. The book is more focused on the organization she built and how it functioned within the political and social arena of New York City. While it doesn't exactly glamorize what occurred, it's difficult for readers not to root for this Jewish immigrant mother who managed to accomplish something amazing and unexpected.

While "The Talented Mrs. Mandelbaum" does not offer much discussion of Mandelbaum's feelings, readers learn a great deal about those of Minnie Soffer in "The Whisper Sister." The novel's prologue, which takes place in 1932, leaves readers with a question that will only be answered in the latter pages of the book. But first, it explores Minnie's life after she immigrated to New York City in 1920 with her mother and her brother, Max, to join a father she barely recognizes.

At first, Minnie doesn't realize the soda shop her father bought was just a cover for the speakeasy that sits on the other side of the building. Since Prohibition is the law of the land, her father must work with the gangsters who supply the alcohol. When difficulties arise, Minnie takes over the bar, becoming a whisper sister, as the women who ran these bars were called. She enjoys the life, working hard to make the bar more popular and prosperous, rather than the dingy, quiet place her father ran. She also enjoys her relationship with Duke, who works for Meyer Lansky (a real life gangster), and believes she has control over what happens at the bar. However, she is naive about both her relationship with Duke and those who supply her with the alcohol she needs.

Unlike "The Talented Mrs. Mandelbaum," "The Whisper Sister" is not light and breezy reading. Brown does an amazing job showing just how difficult immigrant life could be, especially when money was an issue. Minnie is forced to make heart-breaking decisions about how best to help members of her family when she is unable to care for them and support herself. Although the rabbi at the local synagogue offers help, there is only so much the community can do. Plus, Minnie underestimates the dangers of her life choices. The suspense in the latter part of the novel is nerve-wracking and absorbing – almost like a car accident from which you can't turn your eyes away.

Brown's novel offers the background that might explain why Mandelbaum acted as she did, although Mandelbaum was far more successful and seemed to have far less remorse about her actions. But this is what makes "The Whisper Sister" so successful and absorbing: it allows readers to understand and appreciate its characters and their decisions. The novel would be an excellent choice for book clubs because readers can debate the choices Minnie and the other characters make. The work is even more complex than suggested by this review and comes highly recommended.

## *Success, assimilation and tradition*

By Rabbi Rachel Esserman

Although Al Jolson was once one of America's popular performers, his star has diminished. That's partly due to the fact that he frequently performed in blackface (using burned cork or makeup to color his skin) – something frowned upon in contemporary times – and the fact that his appeal was best appreciated live where his overly dramatic gestures could reach the last row of the theater. Richard Bernstein's biography of Jolson – "Only in America: Al Jolson and 'The Jazz Singer'" (Alfred A. Knopf) – offers not only information about Jolson's life, but about the times that created him. It also focuses on the history of his most successful film, "The Jazz Singer," which in some ways mirrored Jolson's life. What really interests Bernstein, though, is his belief that Jolson's success could only have happened in the United States.

The author sees Jolson's life as an example of "the American immigration story at its best, the escape from a place where a rise to fame and fortune like his would have been impossible to a place where such a rise defined what the country considered special about itself." Jolson was born Asa Yoelson in Lithuania, a country not friendly to its Jews. He came to the United States at age 9 and quickly adapted to American culture. This was in spite of his father, who was a rabbi and disliked his son's choice of career. Jolson began singing in the streets with his brother when they were young, yet somehow became one of the most popular and highly paid performers in the country. His personal life suffered: he was married four times to non-Jewish women. Bernstein notes how Jolson would pursue these women, but then lose interest after the marriage. According to the author, Jolson seemed the happiest in the company of men.

Bernstein places Jolson in context by writing about the Jews who ruled Broadway and created Hollywood. He notes that "Broadway was a place of American possibility. It was untrammled, unregulated, absent of WASP aristocrats, where what counted was talent, ambition, and grit, not pedigree or family advantage. It was also a place where Jews gained power, and while Jews competed against other Jews and even sometimes stabbed them in the back, they didn't discriminate against them." Audiences – Jewish and non-Jewish – seemed to love comedy skits that showed Jews and Blacks in a less than progressive light. White and Black actors performed in blackface and gave the audience what it wanted in order to survive. Bernstein feels that Jolson portrayed his Black characters as more intelligent than did other comedians, but the basic format was impossible to escape.

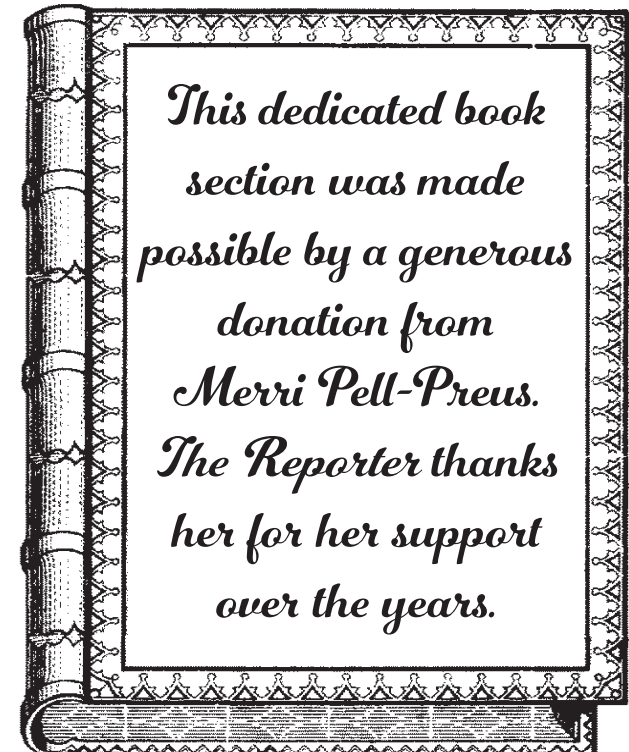
The author also discusses the history of "The Jazz Singer," noting it was first a short story and then a play. Its plots portrays the struggle between a singer who looks for success on the secular stage, and his cantor father who wants him to have a career as a religious singer. The melo-

dramatic climax of the play features a difficult decision: when his father becomes dangerously ill on Yom Kippur, the singer is asked to take his place and sing *Kol Nidre*. Unfortunately, it also happens to be the night of the singer's Broadway debut. The son decides to fulfil his father's wish and spends the night singing at the synagogue. However, fortunately for him, this does not derail his career.

Bernstein notes that "The Jazz Singer" was the first serious film Hollywood made about Jews and Judaism. Up until that time, the Jews who owned the studios were not interested in portraying Jewish life, unless the film was a comedy and the religious aspects were not taken seriously. The author writes how "The Jazz Singer" offered a very different portrayal of Jewish life "with its scenes of caftan-clad rabbis and cantors, and real Torah scrolls and praying in Hebrew, and its emotional climax, the chanting of Kol Nidre in an actual Orthodox synagogue,.... going much deeper into Jewish religious life and observance than any other of the Jewish-themed movies that preceded it, and that Jewish life could be shown realistically." The film's success with Jewish and non-Jewish audiences proved that it was possible to produce a film with Jewish content that would make money for the studios. In fact, for the film to succeed, it needed to reach non-Jewish moviegoers. That success was helped by the fact that it was one of the first films to include sound: moviegoers were able to hear Jolson sing, something that would not have been possible years before.

The irony is that Jolson – a secular Jewish performer who did not observe Judaism in his private life – performed in a film that focused on the importance of religious connection. Bernstein notes that assimilation into American culture was not only allowed, but encouraged; that was how these immigrants became American. This allows the author to offer what he sees as "the great paradox of Jewish history," which is that "the place Jews emigrated from, the Russian Pale of Settlement, with its ghettos, discrimination, blood libels, and pogroms, unwittingly preserved Jewish identity, which itself was a kind of fruit of stubbornness, while the dazzling freedom of America, where there was antisemitism but fewer barriers to success, threatened it with extinction." For Jolson, being an American mattered as shown by his travels to entertain American troops during World War II and the Korean War, continuing his performances even after he became ill. If the U.S. would not pay for his visits to the troops, he used his own funds.

Bernstein does an excellent job using Jolson and "The Jazz Singer" to explain Jewish American life. Sometimes the author pushes his points a bit far, making readers wonder about the extreme importance he gives to the singer and film, but that does fit with the grandiose way that Jolson felt about his life and career. "Only in America" is easy to read and offers a great deal of interest even to those unfamiliar with Jolson and his work.



*This dedicated book section was made possible by a generous donation from Merri Pell-Preus. The Reporter thanks her for her support over the years.*



# Celebrating Jewish Literature



## Exploring biblical laws for contemporary meaning

By Rabbi Rachel Esserman

Western society's legal system has been influenced by biblical law, even when lawmakers don't specifically reference the Bible in their thinking. Instead, these laws serve as the underpinning of the system, something that is often taken for granted. Daphne Barak-Erez explores the connections and disconnections between biblical laws and contemporary dilemmas in "Biblical Judgments: New Legal Readings in the Hebrew Bible" (University of Michigan Press). Barak-Erez, a justice of the Supreme Court of Israel and a former dean and professor at Tel Aviv University, does not offer a historical study of the development of biblical laws, but, rather, focuses on the way these laws can shed light on potential solutions for contemporary problems.

Barak-Erez presents more than 120 short essays—usually only three to four pages each—that discuss a wide variety of topics. Her work is divided into six parts, including sections on "Law and Government," "Judging and Judges," "Human Rights and Social Justice," "Criminal Law," "Private Law" and "Family and Inheritance Law." The author notes that she does not offer traditional rabbinic interpretations of biblical laws for three reasons: 1) those interpretations usually feature predetermined choices while she prefers readers to be open to a variety of possibilities; 2) she believes that every reader of the Bible should be able to see the work from their own particular perspective and 3) her focus is on legal and jurisprudential parts of the law in which traditional commentators were generally not interested.

While the essays are easy to read, they do assume some familiarity with the biblical text. However, Barak-Erez provides footnotes on each page that tell where in the Bible the relevant information can be found. It would be difficult, although not impossible, to use the book for Torah study since the work does not follow the order of the laws as offered in the biblical text. Readers can access that information, though, through the index.

Sometimes the same story is used to illustrate more than one topic. For example, the tale of Joseph and Potiphar's wife is discussed in the "Judges and Judging" and the "Human Rights and Social Justice" sections. The former case focuses on the "he said, she said" principle with Joseph and Potiphar's wife offering different testimony about what happened. It also looks at the physical evidence available and how it could be interpreted. In addition, the author writes of other methods that have been used to decide guilt and innocence in the past, for example, the use of casting lots (based on the belief that God would make the guilty party known). However, Barak-Erez notes that, in the regular course of events, most legal decisions have been based on physical evidence and witness testimony.

In the social justice section, the author looks at the sexual harassment aspects of the case, since a person in a position of power (Potiphar's wife) was demanding sexual contact from someone in a lesser position of power (Joseph). Barak-Erez also discusses Queen Vashti from the Book of Esther to show the possibility of retaliation that can occur when someone refuses a superior's advances.

Each essay held something of interest, but some stood out for this reader:

◆ "Caleb hushed the people"—The Importance of Minority Opinions" focuses on the story of the 12 spies in the book of Exodus, when 10 of the spies sent to Canaan declare that it would be impossible for the Israelites to conquer the land. Although this was the majority opinion, two spies—Caleb and Joshua—felt differently. At first, their opinions weren't solicited, that is, until Caleb told the people to be quiet and listen to him. Although, ultimately, he failed to convince the Israelites, Barak-Erez sees the principle of including minority opinions as extremely important. She notes that this doesn't mean that the minority opinion will win, just that it needs to be heard. The author also mentions that in the Anglo-American courts, minority opinions are released along with those of the majority so people can learn what every justice thought.

◆ "The Judgment of Solomon—What Is a Just Trial" offers a fascinating look at what should serve as the more important aspect of a trial: a fair process or a just outcome. The case under discussion requires Solomon to decide which of two women claiming to be a baby's mother is the true parent. Without DNA evidence, Solomon picks who he thinks will be the best parent, which does not actually mean that is the birth parent. Barak-Erez also discusses a modern play, "The Caucasian Chalk Circle," that focuses on a similar dilemma. She notes that "in reality, we do not typically know what is the 'right' outcome. Therefore, when striving toward a resolution, our standard of choice is procedural justice. Fair procedure does not guarantee a desirable outcome, but it nonetheless increases the chance of its attainment."

◆ "Vengeance—Vigilantism and Lynching" features an unexpected comparison between vigilantly justice and social media. The biblical case under discussion is from the book of Numbers when Pinchas stabs and kills an Israelite man and the Midianite woman with whom he is having sex. Pinchas and his descendants are rewarded and most commentators offer positive interpretations of his action. Barak-Erez notes, though, how this type of justice as worked against Jews over the centuries, including the lynching of Leo Frank in the American South. She also writes how accusations on social media treat people as guilty without

giving them an opportunity to defend themselves and often have great negative effect on their lives. The author sees two sides of the issue: 1) these anonymous sources offer no way for the accused to defend themselves, making them metaphorically the equivalent of a lynching or 2) the posts serve as "the last resort of disempowered individuals who are unable to directly contend with a well-heeled or prominent perpetrator with great resources." She also notes that "sometimes, they are [both] at the same time."

◆ "Gleanings, Forgotten Produce, and the Edges of the Field—From Social Duties to Social Rights" explores the biblical commandment to leave the corners of fields from which the poor can gather food by focusing on the story of Ruth and Naomi from the book of Ruth. Barak-Erez looks at the development of welfare laws in modern times, which help provide for the poor. She notes the differences between Ruth and Naomi in their ability to gather from the field: while Ruth is young and strong enough to do so, Naomi is too old to do the same. The author discusses the difference between assistance to the poor as a form of religious charity and compares it to legal systems that provide for the poor through governmental actions. She sees these governmental actions as a way of acting according to biblical laws, although now in a form that suits a non-agricultural society.

◆ "Dinah, the Levite's Concubine, Tamar, and the Revolt of Absalom—Rape and Sexual Abuse" discusses several different rapes that occur in the Bible and the characters' reactions to them. Particularly interesting was the story of Absalom's sleeping with his father's concubines, which Barak-Erez sees as a rape that is often not discussed by commentators. She notes the reactions to Dinah's rape, with Jacob ignoring what occurred, while Simeon and Levi overreacted by killing others in addition to the rapist. (The author discusses this in more detail in other essays in her book.) Perhaps the most horrific case is the rape of the Levite's concubine in the book of Judges, which ends in the concubine's death, as she was sacrificed (without her consent) in place of the Levite who made no attempt to save her. In all of these cases, Barak-Erez notes that the woman's point of view is often ignored. None of these women were consulted about the actions the men took to avenge them. The author's focus, therefore, is on getting the law to take note of and listen to women's voices.

"Biblical Judgments" offers thought-provoking discussions about the biblical legal system and our contemporary one. With its more than 120 essays, it's impossible to do justice to its depth. One does not need to be a lawyer or biblical scholar to find much of interest in its pages. General readers should also enjoy this stimulating work.

## JEWES AND PIGS OVER THE AGES

By Rabbi Rachel Esserman

Regular readers of this column might be puzzled: Didn't she already review a book about the history of Jews and pigs? Those asking this question would be remembering my 2021 review of the excellent "Evolution of a Taboo: Pigs and People in the Ancient Near East" by Max D. Price ([www.thereporter.org/book-reviews/off-the-shelf-a-taboo-like-no-other-by-rabbi-rachel-esserman](http://www.thereporter.org/book-reviews/off-the-shelf-a-taboo-like-no-other-by-rabbi-rachel-esserman)). However, as a person interested in anthropology and sociology, I am endlessly fascinated by food customs. That's true of food customs across the world, but, as a rabbi, the study of the history of *kashrut* (Jewish food customs and laws) holds a special interest. I was thrilled, therefore, when I learned that one of my favorite Jewish food historians, Jordan D. Rosenblum, had written a new book. I'd been impatiently awaiting the publication of his "Forbidden: A 3,000-Year History of Jews and Pigs" (New York University Press) and the wait was worth it. Rosenblum's book not only shows why the pig stands out as the symbol for foods Jews will not eat (or, sometimes, deliberately eat), but also offers interesting tidbits about the history of that development. For puns lovers, the work features some real groaners, proving the author also has a sense of humor.

Rosenblum is interested in how the pig became what he calls "a litmus test for Jewish/non-Jewish identity and practice." He notes that he "refer[s] to the animal in question as 'the pig,' rarely referring to it as 'pork' or 'bacon' or 'ham.' In doing so, I want to remind us that the pig is so much more than just food. It is also both an embodied and metaphorical nonhuman animal, which is

being used to stake various claims about the identities of human animals." At one point in history, the pig became "The Pig," an entity that also referred to ancient Rome, the civilization that conquered Jerusalem and destroyed the Second Temple. It was at that time that, according to Rosenblum, "biblical Israel moves from Judean tribe to Jewish religion." Following the dietary rules then became a major symbol of Jewish identity.

This plays out in the martyrdom narratives Rosenblum relates from the Greco-Roman period. People allowed themselves to be killed, rather than eat pig. That is what makes the pig stand out as a symbol of something more than food, as the author cleverly notes in the title of his chapter about contemporary America, "No Jew Ever Died Refusing to Eat Shrimp." Rosenblum writes, "While biblical texts treat the pigs as just one of a several categorically nonkosher animals, now it was singled out and endowed with greater significance. With the development of the Second Temple Period of pig as a litmus test for Jewish identity and practice... From this era on, to eat the hare, the rock badger, or the camel simply does not carry the same transgressive weight as does eating the pig." That's because, from that time onward, not eating pig meat could be dangerous, particularly for those Jews living in Europe.

Eating or not eating pigs came to define not only Judaism, but Christianity, particularly during the Medieval Period. Jewish identity was tied to pigs in unusual ways. For example, Christianity came to identify physical Jews with physical pigs. It was thought that the reason Jews didn't eat pigs was because pigs and Jews were biologically related. Pigs also became a symbol of vice and therefore a symbol of Judaism, which is strange considering the Jewish aversion to pigs. Drawings and sculptures showed Jews drinking pig's milk directly from the sow's teats. In Spain, Conversos, Jews who converted to Christianity, were referred to Marranos (pigs), which was a derogatory term, and their diets carefully watched to see whether they ate pig's meat or kept any part of the Jewish dietary laws. If they were accused of avoiding pig, they risked being

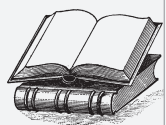
tortured and/or killed by the Inquisition. There were so-called humorous songs or stories that told of Jews being outwitted and forced to eat pig. Actually consuming pig was considered so important a religious marker that it was said that the Jew who ate pig converted to Christianity by that action.

Rosenblum's discussion of the contemporary period shows that the complex relationship between Jews and pig continues. His discussion of Israel notes that, while parts of the population would prefer if everyone kept the laws of *kashrut*, some Israelis show their rejection of Judaism by eating pig. He notes that "while for religious Jewish Israelis, to ban the pig is a symbolic victory against religious oppression by non-Jews, now for secular Israelis, to permit the pig is a symbolic victory against religious oppression by religious Jews... secular Israelis use pig to intentionally transgress Jewish law and, in doing so, to establish a new—and highly contested—Jewish identity." The pig as a symbol is also used in Israeli culture for something that is disapproved of, for example, those who compare women carrying Torahs at the Western Wall to pigs carrying Torahs.

The chapter focusing on contemporary America offers a variety of interesting tidbits. Rosenblum notes that, in memoirs written by formerly Orthodox and Chasidic Jews, eating pig is considered particularly transgressive. That first taste of pig seems to be a major step in their journey to secular living. The author notes instances in film and television where the non-eating of pig is used to symbolize that someone might be Jewish. In addition, he writes of the wonderful children's book "Baxter, the Pig Who Wanted to Be Kosher," noting the book would not be as funny if Baxter were a camel or other animal forbidden by the Bible.

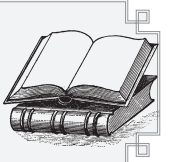
One need not be a scholar to read "Forbidden." Rosenblum has written a popular history that's perfect for those with no previous experience in its subject matter. The work allows readers to ponder the ways Jewish and non-Jewish identity can be expressed through food. Fans of Rosenblum will now be impatiently waiting for his next book.

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





# Celebrating Jewish Literature



## Jewish fantasy: dybbuks and mirror realms

By Rabbi Rachel Esserman

If you have ever adored a novel, you sometimes approach the author's next work with trepidation. After all, is it possible for them to succeed in enchanting you a second time? That was particularly true in the case of Sacha Lamb, whose first book "When the Angels Left the Old Country" was a Stonewall Book Award winner, a Sydney Taylor Award winner, a Michael L. Printz Honor Book and a National Jewish Book Award finalist. It was also listed as a best of the year by NPR, the New York Public Library and Kirkus. (To read *The Reporter's* review of the work, visit [www.thereportergroup.org/book-reviews/off-the-shelf-sorrows-and-joys-in-old-and-new-countries?entry=431350](http://www.thereportergroup.org/book-reviews/off-the-shelf-sorrows-and-joys-in-old-and-new-countries?entry=431350).) While Ariel Kaplan's first book in The Mirror Realm Cycle, "The Pomegranate Gate," didn't win any awards, readers of that exciting work have been impatiently waiting for the second in the series. (To read *The Reporter's* review, visit [www.thereportergroup.org/book-reviews/off-the-shelf-angels-alternative-worlds-and-jewish-themes?entry=459425](http://www.thereportergroup.org/book-reviews/off-the-shelf-angels-alternative-worlds-and-jewish-themes?entry=459425).) Those who loved both those books as much as I did will be happy (thrilled, jumping for joy?) to learn that their second works are also a delight.

The opening of Lamb's second novel, "The Forbidden Book" (Levine Querido), left me a bit confused as first because its plot requires readers to puzzle exactly what has happened to its main characters. For example, why did 17-year-old Sorel Kalmans leap from her window to escape an arranged marriage? It's clear that the marriage was not a love match, but rather a political arrangement between her rich father, a leader of the Jewish community, and the local Chasidic rabbi, who controls the more religious members of their town. Sorel's groom-to-be, the rabbi's son, could barely look her in the face when they met. But running away seems an unusual response in a novel that takes place during a time when women had few rights.

At first, her escape seems a success. Sorel disguises

herself as a young man and takes the name of Isaac Jacobs. It soon becomes clear, though, that was a mistake because there is another Isaac Jacobs living in their town and a great many people seem to want him dead. Although Sorel originally planned to leave the area, she finds herself enmeshed with learning why people want Isaac dead. With the help of Sam, a peddler who seems to be following her everywhere, and Adela, a friend of the original Isaac, Sorel not only wants to find Isaac, but discover what his disappearance means to the larger Jewish community.

In the beginning, it wasn't clear why "The Forbidden Book" was labeled a fantasy, readers soon learn it includes several mystical elements, including a dybbuk, angels, a mysterious dog and a book humans and otherworldly creatures want for different reasons. While to say more would spoil the plot, the story quickly became absorbing and includes some surprising revelations. The ending was wonderful, with the author successfully tying together all the different aspects of the plot.

Although "The Forbidden Book" is a standalone novel, the same is not true for Kaplan's "The Republic of Salt" (Erewhon Books): while readers can puzzle out parts of the plot without having read the first book in the series, it would be difficult. (If you are a big fan of fantasy with Jewish content, feel free to put this review down and order the first book in the series before continuing.) The story takes place during the Spanish Inquisition and, in the first novel, the Jewish characters were traveling from Spain to new, hopefully more hospitable homes. However, a few of them, including Toba and Naftaly, stumble into another a mirror realm of the human world where magic is real. Toba and Naftaly discover they are part human/part Mazik, which means they can perform magic due to their Mazik blood. What they also learn is that a full-blooded Mazik is looking to take over not only the mirror realm, but the human world, something that would spell disaster for both worlds.

The end of the first book left human and Mazik characters traveling toward the human and Mazik versions of the city of Zayit, where they hope to prevent its takeover in both worlds. However, unexpected problems arise, including demons and other mythical creatures who might be able to save or destroy each world. This is, of course, an oversimplification shown by the fact the novel opens with a five-page listing of the characters found in both worlds, and four pages explaining the different geographical locations featured. While no plot summary of the first novel is offered, these pages help readers reorient themselves.

The most important thing about "The Republic of Salt" is how quickly its 500-plus pages flew by and how absorbing it was. The characters – from both worlds – come to feel like friends and it's crushing when something bad happens to them. This is only the second book in the series and even though it leaves many questions unanswered, my final question was a simple one: when will book three be published?

## Jew, not a Jew

By Rabbi Rachel Esserman

"Goyhood, *he thought* – the state of rebounding from one travesty to the next." – Mayer Belkin in "Goyhood"

What happens when you discover everything you thought about your life was based on a lie? At age 12, twins Marty and David Belkin learn from Ida Mae, their mother, that they are Jewish – that not only was their father Jewish, but their mother's mother was also Jewish. The impetus behind this revelation is the Chabad rabbi who had just moved into their small town in Georgia. Rabbi Kugel takes both boys under his wing, but only Marty, now known as Mayer, becomes observant. In fact, as readers learn in "Goyhood" by Reuven Fenton (Central Avenue), he not only leaves the South to learn in a yeshiva in New York City, he agrees to spend his life within the confines of his small, Orthodox community. He is aided in this by the head of the yeshiva who arranged for him to marry his daughter, Sarah, and promises to support him as long as he continues to study and never leave the yeshiva, something to which Mayer agrees.

However, Mayer's life is turned upside down when a phone call informs him that his mother has died. He returns to Georgia to be with his brother – who, after years of flitting from one unsuccessful deal to another, is finally rich – and bury his mother. But he is surprised to learn that Rabbi Kugel wants to see him and David before the funeral, which should have been taking place that day. Kugel shows them a letter he received from their mother, sent just before her death, in which she reveals a secret: she is not Jewish. That means, according to the Orthodox Jewish law that Mayer accepts, that neither he nor David are Jewish. That also means his marriage to Sarah is invalid and all his years of study are meaningless because he believes that it is forbidden for non-Jews to study Talmud.

Ida Mae has also demanded to be cremated and have her ashes spread somewhere meaningful. Mayer is less concerned about spreading her ashes than with quickly arranging for an official Orthodox conversion and finding a way to explain to Sarah that they need to remarry since their first marriage is Jewishly invalid. But his relationship with Sarah is not the usual one of man and wife: they have been unable to have children and she has walled off a part of herself from him. Since the brothers, not being Jewish, are not required to sit *shiva*, David asks Mayer to join him on a short road trip. Mayer is horrified by David's behavior during their travels, particularly when David invites a woman he sort of knows to join them in New Orleans.

The trip does give the brothers an opportunity to better know each other, but also shows the many ways they differ. David is impulsive and fun seeking. Mayer can be extremely self-righteous and has a low opinion of anyone who isn't Jewish, which is funny considering that he now doesn't consider himself a Jew. (He adamantly refuses to accept patrilineal descent.) However, he also shows an amazing ability to talk to people, as shown in the wild and funny section when the brothers and their new friend visit a fireworks store. Because Mayer has lived such an isolated existence, readers will soon guess the underlying problem with his and Sarah's relationship, which shows just how clueless he is.

The novel's ending is also wild, although when thinking back, it doesn't feel completely believable. However, that won't bother most readers because it was so satisfying. In fact, the plot contains numerous semi-believable coincidences, but those just add to the fun. What does work is watching Mayer struggle after learning the truth about his life and trying to find a way to live in his new reality. Grappling with his ideas about God, Mayer must also decide if God really only cares about Jews, a puzzle whose answer may change the direction of his life.

## Work, family and romance

By Rabbi Rachel Esserman

Romantic comedies: that is the longer term for what are frequently referred to as rom-coms. The shorter term suggests these novels are light and fluffy with no real substance. However, the best of these works offer a wider view of women's lives. For example, two new rom-coms – "Til There Was You" by Lindsey Hameroff (St. Martin's Griffin) and "Behind Every Good Man" by Sara Goodman Confino (Lake Union Publishing) – focus on their main characters' desire to find meaningful work, in addition to portraying their connections/disconnections to their parents.

"Til There Was You" is the more traditional rom-com. Lexi Berman is in culinary school when the novel opens. Although she loves cooking, she finds her classes difficult and unsatisfying because she is unable to concentrate on her favorite part of cooking: creating new and exciting recipes. However, she plans to persevere, if only to make her late mother proud. Cooking for her mom when she was dying of cancer was Lexi's way of showing love. Her desire to succeed is fueled by her wish to prove that her mother's belief in her was not unfounded. She is also determined to prove her worth to her father, who quickly remarried and moved to Florida after her mother's death, leaving Lexi alone in the family's apartment in Manhattan, which no longer feels like home.

Lexi does know the one thing she doesn't have time for is romance. However, when she meets Jake Taylor, a musician performing at a dive bar, they spend a wonderful weekend together. He appreciates the blueberry pancakes and other food she cooks for him. Although he is heading to Los Angeles to cut a record that next week, she can't help but wonder if they will stay in touch. He seems to want to, that is, until he suddenly begins ghosting her. Lexi tries to forget him and concentrate on her classes, but then, suddenly, not only does Jake become an overnight success whose music she can't avoid, his first hit song is about her pancakes. Even Lexi's friends are drooling over him, although they don't connect the new superstar to the Jake who once spent a weekend with Lexi.

Then Jake unexpectedly shows up at Lexi's door saying that he misses her and needs a friend. Lexi is willing to help him as a friend, but wants to guard her heart. That, of course, turns out to be easier said than done. Plus, the pressure of his celebrity greatly affects her life, including the work that she is now doing at a restaurant. Lexi is not sure exactly what she wants out of life since working at the restaurant isn't making her happy. She also has yet to deal with her feelings about her father, who wants to stay in touch, but to whom she can barely speak. These additional complications may destroy any possibility of a relationship with Jake.

"Til There Was You" was funny at times – with parts

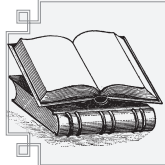
making me laugh out loud – and moving at others. Some readers may not be happy that Jake is not Jewish, but that doesn't seem to bother Lexi. The novel contains a great amount of hot sex. Its ending was fun, crazy and exciting. The author does a good job tying together all the different parts of the plot and answering questions readers might have had about Lexi's behavior.

Unlike Lexi, who is single, Beverly Diamond, the main character in "Behind Every Good Man," is married with two young children and lives in a DC suburb. Her husband, Larry, runs a senatorial campaign for an incumbent. While she does have issues with her mother, Beverly adores her father, a retired congressman and former speaker of the House, whose contacts helped Larry. In fact, her life seems just about perfect, until her world comes crashing down: Beverly learns Larry is having an affair with his secretary. Although encouraged to forgive him and move on, she can't shake his betrayal and orders him from their home.

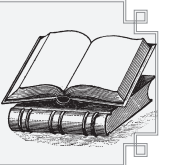
Unfortunately, a woman's economic position in 1962, when the novel takes place, is precarious. When Larry threatens to take away the house, Beverly decides she needs to find work. But she left college before graduating to marry Larry and has no business skills. However, after years of living with her father and Larry, she does have political savvy and chutzpah. She marches into the office of Michael Landau, an underdog running against the senator for whom Larry works. Although his current campaign manager is less than thrilled to have her in the office, Beverly soon proves her worth, especially after showing the men the way to succeed is by attracting women voters.

An additional complication is finding someone to watch her children while she's working. However, unexpectedly, her mother moves into her house to help her. That seems great, except for the fact her mother wants everything done her way. Beverly does appreciate the help, though, until she realizes that her mother has left her father and the move into her home is permanent. She can't stand the idea that her parents' marriage is a failure and adds reuniting them to her agenda.

"Behind Every Good Man" is light and breezy reading. The writing features dialogue and short descriptions, which makes the pages turn quickly. The best parts of the novel are watching Beverly clash with Michael's campaign manager and successfully manipulate him. Although her desire to work began partly as revenge, it turns out that Beverly is a natural. It also helps that Michael is a far better candidate than the one for whom Larry works. The romance in this rom-com is less important than the political campaign and that's fine because the political campaign was such fun to read about. In other hands, the novel could have been a depressing melodrama about a wronged woman. Instead, it was a great deal of fun about a woman who knows her worth.



# Celebrating Jewish Literature



## Family, career and more

By Rabbi Rachel Esserman  
"Songs for the Brokenhearted"

Israel from a Yemenite Jewish point of view: that describes Ayelet Tsabari's short stories and memoir. While those works were excellent, they may leave readers unprepared for her moving and powerful first novel, "Songs for the Broken-Hearted" (Random House). The work, which takes place in the years 1950 and 1995, offers a fascinating look at Israeli life during those difficult and pivotal time periods.

The 1950s were not an easy time for Jews who immigrated to Israel from Arab countries. Although many wanted to come to the Promised Land, life seems far from promising at first: they were forced to live in camps with their only shelter tents that offered little to no privacy. Food was sparse and tasteless. Even worse, the Israelis from Ashkenazic backgrounds treated them as primitive and ignorant. However, some remember those years fondly: at least, Yacob does, as he remembers hearing a woman singing by the river. For him, it was love at first sight. Unfortunately, even when his affection is returned, a life together is impossible. Saida already has a husband and child: there is no way she can leave her family and even innocent meetings are dangerous.

The majority of the novel, though, takes place in 1995, when Saida's daughter, Zohara, returns to Israel after her mother's death. Although the two were not close, Zohara now feels lost. Her aimlessness is partly caused by the fact that she and her American husband recently divorced. She's also lost interest in obtaining the Ph.D. toward which she has been working. Zohara and her older sister, Lizza, have grown even further apart over the years, with Zohara

knowing almost nothing about her teenage nephew, Yoni. She does note the growing division in Israel over the Oslo Accords. Yoni, who is distraught over losing his grandmother, becomes part of a group that opposes the accords. Readers with a knowledge of Israeli history will foresee just how dangerous Yoni's growing attraction to that group might be.

Tsabari brings the two parts of her plot together with great skill, but the work also offers an intriguing and extremely well-done look at Israeli society. There are discussion of the Ashkenazic-centric attitude in Israel, which greatly affected Zohara when she was sent away to boarding school after her father's death. The novel also mentions the disappearance of Yemenite babies from the immigrant camps: whether these children died as some claimed or were given to Ashkenazic parents is a question that still remains unanswered. What really stood out, though, is the discussion of the songs the Yemenite women sang that allowed them to express their feelings in a societally acceptable way. In fact, Zohara only begins to truly understand her mother when she learns about the music that these women have passed orally from generation to generation.

The depth of plot and character found in "Songs for the Broken-Hearted" marks this book as a major work of literature. It not only shows another side of Israel – including the casual racism against those whose families emigrated from Arab countries – but portrays how even those who are discriminated against can still deeply love the land that is their home. Book clubs interested in serious literature will definitely want to read and discuss "Songs for the Broken-Hearted."

"The Love Elixir of Augusta Stern"

Some writers start out strong and quickly run out of ideas. That is *not* true of Lynda Cohen Loigman, whose

works have offered a wide variety of plots and characters. Her latest, "The Love Elixir of Augusta Stern" (St. Martin's Press), is a delight: alternatively funny and moving. Its main characters, Augusta Stern and Irving Rivkin, are wonderful and engaging, both in the sections of the novel that take place in 1923 and those that show life in 1987.

Augusta is finally retiring from her job as a pharmacist at age 70 – well, really 80 – although she is only doing so to prevent discovery of how she changed the dates on documents showing her age. She's spent her life in New York City, but her niece Jackie has arranged for her to retire to a lovely senior retirement community in Florida. Augusta is not thrilled with the idea, but, at least, there is a pool she can use to continue the exercise – swimming – that keeps her in shape. Unfortunately, her first day at the pool, she hears a voice she never expected – or wanted – to hear again: Irving greets her and acts as if they can be friends. But the two have a history from her teenage years in Brooklyn, where they met at the pharmacy owned by her father.

Augusta's life radically changed after her mother died in 1920. Her father, sister Bess and Augusta seem lost without her. The worst part for Augusta is that her mother died from diabetes not long before insulin – which could have saved her life – became available. This fuels Augusta's desire to become a pharmacist, which few considered an appropriate career for a woman. That desire becomes more complex when Aunt Esther arrives. Esther is a wonderful cook and makes their apartment once again feel like a home. She is also an apothecary, although not a formally trained one. Her herbal remedies help people when doctors and drugs fail them. Augusta's father is not pleased that Esther is dispensing her remedies, but as long as she keeps them out of the store, he is willing to let her continue.

When Irving comes to work for the pharmacy as a delivery boy in 1923, he and August become friends. She begins to fall for him and believes that he feels the same. When she uses a love elixir on him – against Esther's teachings – things don't go the way she planned. In fact, Irving breaks her heart and she's determined that won't happen again in 1987. As much as he tries to befriend her, Augusta rebuffs him. That makes her a wonderful character: tough, cranky and crotchety. Irving is also interesting because readers soon realize there is more to his story than Augusta knows. The novel weaves the two time lines to show not only what happened in the past, but how life can offer new opportunities no matter your age.

"The Love Elixir of Augusta Stern" celebrates women who were willing to fulfil their dreams, even at the risk of heartache. The novel also shows how it may never be too late to find love, if only one is open and willing to risk being hurt. Book clubs who have discussed Loigman's previous works will definitely want to add this one to their list. Readers who are unfamiliar with the author may find themselves looking up her earlier works to enjoy once they finish this one.

"The Singer Sisters"

Mothers and daughters taking different life paths: those differences form the undercurrent of Sarah Seltzer's "The Singer Sisters" (Flatiron Books). At first, it seems that what divides Emma and her mother, Judie, is the choice between a music career or a more conventional life. This simplifies the dilemma since Judie once had an extremely successful music career, performing with her sister and writing songs for her successful musician husband. Emma, who is just starting out in her career, longs for the kind of success her mother had: people still love Judie's music even though she has long disappeared from the public eye to raise her three children. However, as Emma and readers discover, there is far more to Judie's story. The novel moves back and forth in time as mother and daughter each must decide what they want from life.

The most interesting section of the novel deals with Judie's younger life, particularly what occurs after she ran away from home as a teenager. The events that took place formed her worldview and character. To say more would spoil the plot, but most readers will be able to fill in the blanks before the characters in future generation understand what occurred. What Emma does not realize at first is how these events changed her mother's priorities. When she does discover why her mother acted as she did, she still has difficulty coming to terms with her mother's choices because what they desire is so different. An additional problem arises when Emma performs songs her mother wrote and never wanted to be performed publicly. That threatens to permanently rupture their relationship.

To this reader, Emma came across as a bit spoiled, partly because she so favors her father, a problematic choice due to his behavior over the years. She is also unable to appreciate her mother's desire to focus on her family rather than her career. Although I didn't feel particularly engaged with the characters during most of the novel, its ending proved to be extremely moving, partly because it explores the feelings that music creates in its listeners – how it can make them feel as if the writer was speaking directly to them.

## Dystopias focus on Israel and anomalies

By Rabbi Rachel Esserman

The Oxford Dictionary defines the term dystopia as "an imagined state or society in which there is great suffering or injustice, typically one that is totalitarian or post-apocalyptic." That term describes two recent novels – "The Third Temple" by Yishai Sarid (Restless Books) and "Next Stop" by Benjamin Resnick (Avid Reader Press) – that offer very different versions of the future. Sarid's book features a post-democratic kingdom of Israel, while in Resnick's a black hole suddenly swallows the state of Israel. Both works explore how these events affect Israel and the Jewish community.

"The Third Temple" opens with a statement by a Scientific Council noting that the following document was written by Prince Jonathan, who was third in line for the throne of the Kingdom of Judah. At first, readers might assume that the novel pretends to be a newly found book of the Bible. However, it soon becomes clear that this is a vision of the future. Jonathan is writing his words while sitting in a jail cell after the kingdom was conquered. Over the course of the novel, readers piece together exactly how the kingdom formed and why it failed.

The impetus for the change from a democracy to a kingship was a nuclear attack that destroyed Tel Aviv, Haifa and other progressive cities. Jonathan's father, Jehoaz, had a vision that told him to return to the true version Israel: a third Kingdom of Judah based purely on biblical law. Declaring himself both king and high priest, Jehoaz expelled all the Amalekites (which is how Jonathan refers to Arabs) from the state. Most importantly, he rebuilt the Temple, reestablished the priesthood and reinstated animal sacrifices. Since Jehoaz believes that the destroyed cities had gone against God's will, he encouraged the Judeans to live in strict accordance to biblical law and return to farming. This has not prevented food shortages and other financial difficulties, since the rest of the world has boycotted Israel, allowing for no food or other goods to be exported to the country.

Jonathan's focus, though, is on the Temple. Although he was physically injured and, therefore, according to biblical law, should not have been able to serve as a priest, his father allows him to help his older brother Joel, who handles the financial aspects of the Temple. Jonathan focuses on the daily sacrifices, which are described in great detail, from the slicing of the animal's throat to the collection of the blood and the burning of sections of the carcass. Although Jonathan feels God's presence in the Temple and carefully follows the laws, unlike the other priests, he can no longer bring himself to eat meat.

After Jehoaz declares war against the surrounding Amalekite nations, Jonathan receives a mysterious visitor. Claiming to be an angel bringing the word of God, the visitor tells him that he must demand that his father relinquish his kingship. If not, God will destroy the country. This revelation causes Jonathan to ponder the meaning of his connection to God and to wonder why God needs animal sacrifices, especially when people are starving. Jonathan also begins to wonder if God actually cares about the Jews since the visitor also recounts all the evils that have happened to the Jewish people over the generations.

"The Third Temple" is an unusual novel in that it is im-

pressive and unlikable at the same time. But that's its power: it makes readers face what might happen if Israel was no longer a democracy, but rather a kingdom based on biblical laws enforced by one man. In an author's note written in 2024, Sarid notes that, when the novel was published in 2015, people in Israel saw it as science fiction, but today its treatment of extremism is seen as contemporary and relevant. Book clubs that focus on difficult, serious fiction should find much to discuss.

While "The Third Temple" take place in Israel, "Next Stop" begins in an unnamed metropolis that clearly feels like New York City. When Israel disappears in a black hole type anomaly and other, smaller anomalies appear across the world, the world has a typical reaction: the Jews are to blame. That blame is caused by fear: no one knows what caused the anomalies and no one knows when the next one will appear. Plus, if someone Jewish approaches an anomaly, they feel pulled to enter it, even against their better judgement. However, no one knows what is on the other side since no one who entered an anomaly has ever returned. As fears grow, Jews are fired from their jobs and forced to live in specific areas. Even children aren't safe: they are soon enrolled in Jews-only schools.

In the midst of this turmoil, Ethan Block meets Ellen Halperin during the time when Jews could still obtain regular employment. He is drawn to her, but she, at first, resists their mutual attraction. This is partly because she has a son, Michael who is 6 when they meet. Michael's father was a non-Jew who deserted her and Michael, and this makes her wary. Their relationship develops with the secular Ethan meeting her family, who are more observant, although not Orthodox. Even as they try to develop a life together, strange and unexplained events affect their decisions, from a so-called messiah who causes people to float above the ground to a mysterious jar of pickled tomatoes that never empties no matter how many tomatoes are taken from it.

Another difficulty is that Ethan and Ellen approach their situation from different points of view. Should they take part in a growing Jewish resistance movement? Or should they wait for the world to return to normal and restore Jewish rights? Looming behind these choices are the anomalies. Some non-Jews want to force the remaining Jewish population to enter them. Some Jews feel that all Jews should emigrate through them, although, in both cases, one question remains: what is on the other side? An additional question that the novel never truly addresses is exactly what caused the anomalies in the first place and what – if any – is their connection to the Jewish people.

"Next Stop" is a puzzling work because so many of its questions remain unanswered, even after its conclusion. What does succeed is the author's portrayal of the developing relationship between Ethan, Ellen and Michael. Readers will begin to care about them, even when the parts of the plot focusing on the anomalies don't make sense. For this reader, the ending of the novel felt incomplete: while interesting, I felt like I was missing something essential. Was there a deeper meaning or did the author just want to leave readers with unanswered questions? This intriguing work may have greater appeal to readers who enjoy debating unanswered questions.