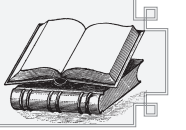


Celebrating Jewish Literature



What remains after grief

By Rabbi Rachel Esserman

Even though Steve Leder conducted more funerals than he could count in his 30 years in the rabbinate, it wasn't until he experienced personal loss – the death of his father – that he developed a new philosophy: one that says death offers people the opportunity to experience more meaning in their lives and to love more deeply. Leder, the senior rabbi of Wilshire Boulevard Temple in Los Angeles, has written two books to share this idea: “The Beauty of What Remains: How Our Greatest Fear Becomes Our Greatest Gift” and “For You When I Am Gone: Twelve Essential Questions to Tell a Life Story” (both published by Avery/Penguin Random House).

In “The Beauty of What Remains,” Leder focuses on what he believes is the typical reaction of those who are close to death: “Many people are ready for death the way we are ready to sleep after a long and exhausting day... We are not anxious about sleeping. We are not afraid of it. Disease, age, and life itself prepare us for death. There is a time for everything, and when it is our time to die, death is as natural a thing as life itself. Consider this very good news for those of us who fear dying. Dying people are not afraid of dying... Anxiety is for the living.” He notes that he is not talking about those who die young or who die suddenly in an accident. But he believes that people who are ill, especially those suffering from a long-term illness, are usually prepared for death. Whatever worries remain are not for themselves, but for their family.

Many of Leder's discussions focus on the best ways to tend to those who are dying. He advises visitors to ask questions about the good times they remember. That allows the dying to look back on their lives with joy. Led-

er does not see these visits as a good time to challenge relatives about painful moments or expect apologies for remembered hurts. According to Leder, while this might seem therapeutic for the living, it is painful to those who are dying. He suggests instead that visitors offer comfort, saying how good a parent/spouse/etc. they have been and because of that the visitor will be OK when they are gone.

People should also not expect final illnesses to change family dynamics. Leder writes, “Death does not change the essential nature of a person or a family, it just makes everything and everyone more so. Yes, there are rare exceptions, but generally speaking, families who are dysfunctional in life are dysfunctional in death. Loving, close families in life are loving, close families in death.” He uses his family, particularly his relationship with his father as an example, particularly the years his father lost to Alzheimer's, to model appropriate behavior. The author notes that his good and bad habits are a result of his reactions to his father's life and example. What he doesn't explore is how his deep grief might be partly due to the fact that, although he loved his father, his own life took a different direction than he might have wanted because of his father's influence.

One of the greatest challenges Leder faces as a rabbi is when he's asked to counsel people who are facing seemingly impossible decisions: “Most people coming to see me about a problem have no *good* options, only bad and worse. Sometimes it is bad to get divorced but worse to stay married. Sometimes it is bad to endure medical treatment but worse not to; other times the opposite is true.” On one occasion, he had to choose between what Judaism says should be done and the needs of the people who are

looking to him for support. He notes that in giving that advice, “I violated my faith and confirmed my humanity.”

“The Beauty of What Remains” also talks about creating a living will, a topic that is the focus of “For You When I Am Gone.” In the latter book, Leder asked a group of friends – of different ages and religions, with children or childless – to answer a series of questions about their lives. He uses those questions as his chapter titles and includes the answers he received, which could serve as the basis of an ethical will that allows parents to offer wisdom to the next generation. The author sees this as a way people can continue to speak to those they love after they are gone. It also offers a tangible document that can be referred to and read even years after a death. In addition to the friends who answered his questions, Leder includes writings from other sources that focus on important life issues and offer advice worth pondering.

The 12 questions include “When Was a Time You Led with Your Heart?”; “What Makes you Happy?”; “What Was Your Biggest Failure?”; “What Got you Through Your Greatest Challenge?”; “What is a Good Person?”; “What is Love?”; “Have You Ever Cut Someone Out of Your Life?”; “How Do You Want to Be Remembered?”; “What Is Good Advice?”; “What Will Your Epitaph Say?” and “What Will Your Final Blessing Be?” The answers included are interesting and offer excellent advice, even for those not interested in writing an ethical will.

Some of the most interesting sections are when Leder writes about his own life or offers wisdom he's learned through his rabbinate. One of my favorite examples can be found in the chapter about failure: “A lot of people think the See “Grief” on page 8

RECONSTRUCTING A LIFE

By Rabbi Rachel Esserman

How wonderful to read a memoir by someone who loves his mother. That love comes through clearly in Wayne Hoffman's “The End of Her: Racing Against Alzheimer's to Solve a Murder” (Heliotrope Books). Except for a short time when he was coming to terms with his sexuality (Hoffman is gay), he and his mother, Susan, had a wonderful relationship. That's why when Susan begins to suffer from dementia, he tries to solve a family murder in order to give them a common interest. The murder? His mother's grandmother, Sarah, had been shot and killed in Winnipeg, Canada, in 1913 and no one was ever arrested. But Hoffman's excellent work is more than a memoir and a murder mystery: it also offers insight into Canadian Jewish history.

Hoffman, who grew up in Maryland as the youngest of three siblings, claims to have been his mother's favorite, something his brother and sister do not dispute. His parents adjusted to his announcement of his sexuality fairly quickly and were completely accepting of his partner. As an adult, Hoffman spoke to his mother almost every morning, something that made her dementia even harder to accept. He was losing his daily confidant, the person with similar interests and with whom he could discuss his life.

It was after they learned of his mother's cognitive difficulties that Hoffman decided to research who had killed his mother's grandmother. He had heard the story of the murder often – his mother was such a great storyteller, no one minded her repeating a tale. In fact, Hoffman envied

her talent: “I inherited many things from my mother: her sweet tooth, a (probably not unrelated) lifelong struggle with my weight, the webbed toes that she'd gotten from her father. But most importantly, from a young age, I wanted to be a storyteller just like her. I loved the way she could hold people's interest, create memorable characters, and above all, make people laugh. My father called her ‘the funniest broad I ever met.’” But he realized the story she told made no sense and finally said so to his mother. According to family lore, his great-grandmother, Sarah, was breast feeding her latest baby on the porch outside her house in the winter and was killed by a drive-by shooter in broad daylight. When his mother asked Hoffman what he thinks happened if that story is not true, Hoffman realizes he never thought to explore what really occurred.

That put Hoffman, who has worked as a journalist, on the trail of the real story. It was not hard to find newspaper articles about the murder: the story was covered not only in the Jewish press, but the secular one. Hoffman was correct in believing that the events were different from the story his mother told. Sarah was shot while asleep in her bed with her youngest child lying beside her and her next oldest in a crib in the same room. However, the newspaper accounts were sometimes contradictory: many of the people that reporters and the police interviewed were Yiddish speakers whose English was not always accurate. Hoffman manages to learn a great deal before stopping his research when he is unable to pinpoint the murderer. However, he

makes another attempt years later and reveals the person he believes committed the crime. Unfortunately, it's too late to share his thoughts with this mother.

For those interested in Canadian Jewish history, Hoffman writes about the waves of Jewish immigrants who came to the country. He notes that, in the decades after the 1880s, “the Jewish population of Canada would climb from thirteen hundred to more than seventy-five thousand; the majority of those newcomers were from towns and cities in Russia – Marxist-leaning, Yiddish-speaking workers who fled growing anti-Semitic attacks following political unrest and the abortive revolution of 1905. Ten thousand of these Russian Jews would eventually settle in Manitoba, nearly all of them in Winnipeg. Newcomers initially lived in immigrant sheds, crowded wooden barracks housing hundreds of people along the Red River in the part of town known as ‘The Forts,’ or in shanties in ‘the flats’ nearby. Nearly all the Russian Jews eventually settled in Winnipeg's North End, giving it the nickname ‘New Jerusalem’ or, to those less fond of the newcomers, ‘Jew Town.’” He also writes of how his great-grandparents met and what happened to the family after his great-grandmother was murdered. One advantage of his research was connecting with family members with whom his family had long lost touch. Fortunately, he also includes numerous family trees that help make these connections clear.

“The End of Her” is one of those rare books where the different sections are not only equally interesting, but which come together as an extended portrait of a family. Its emphasis on the relationship between Hoffman and his mother shows how painful it was for him to watch her decline and how much he appreciated the woman she once was. Whether the author actually uncovered the true murderer will matter less to readers than that loving portrait.

Summer, marriage and melodrama

By Rabbi Rachel Esserman

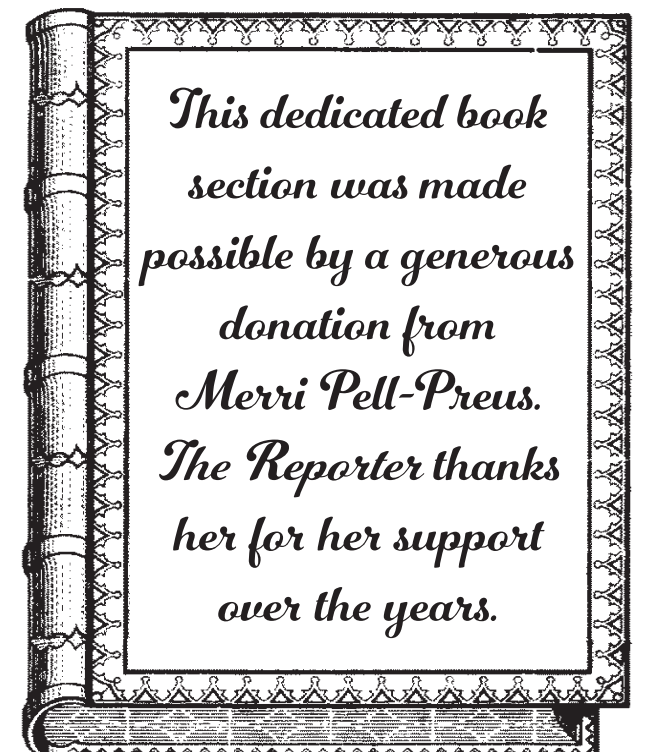
Google defines melodrama as “a sensational dramatic piece with exaggerated characters and exciting events intended to appeal to the emotions.” I consider melodrama to also include too many unbelievable coincidences and events. But that doesn't mean melodrama is a bad thing. For example, while I might have kept saying, “Oh, come on, really, yet another twist?” when reading Jennifer Weiner's novel “The Summer Place” (Atria Books), that doesn't mean I didn't keep eagerly turning its pages to discover what would happen. That makes it a great book for the beach or, in my case, a three-day weekend (although I did finish it in two days.) Yes, I know that Weiner does include some serious material: that was affective, but it was the convoluted plot elements that captured my attention.

It's hard to know where to begin since I don't want to ruin the surprises. What sets the plot in motion is 22-year-old Ruby Danhauser's announcement that she and her pandemic boyfriend, Gabe, are going to marry at her grandmother Ronnie's beach house on Cape Cod that summer. Her stepmother, Sarah, is upset because a) she feels Ruby is too young, b) has not known Gabe that long and c) she told Ronnie, who is Sarah's mother, about the wedding first. This is not Sarah's only worry: Eli, her husband and the father of her two sons, has been acting strangely since the pandemic started. Sarah feels shut out and alone. Readers learn why Eli feels this way: years ago... sorry, but I'm not going to reveal any of the surprises.

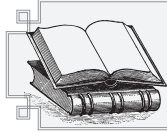
However, Eli is not the only one with a secret. Ronnie has something she needs to tell her children. A once successful novelist, she put her writing career aside for reasons that are part of yet another plot twist. Her son, Sam (and Sarah's twin) also has to make some difficult life decisions. He plans to reveal those when he comes east with his stepson for the wedding. Readers learn about Ruby's mother, who left Eli when she was a baby, and how Sarah and Eli came to marry. Ruby's interaction with her stepmother and her half-siblings also plays a role in the book. However, it is Ruby herself who sets the final over-the-top plot twists into action.

The summer house itself is a minor character in the book and its thoughts open the different sections of the novel. She (as the house is called) worries about what will happen to the family if Ronnie sells her, especially because she can't speak to them, but only watch their actions: “The house never gave up. She kept working at it, trying to find ways to let her people know she heard them, that she saw them, that she wanted to help. They might take her for granted; they might leave her empty all through the winter, letting mice chew through her insulation to make nests inside her walls, but she cared for them, and always would.”

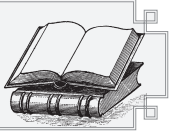
Whether readers like “The Summer Place” will depend on their tolerance for plot twists and almost unbelievable coincidences. While not normally the type of book I enjoy, reading it was a great way to forget my own problems. I also couldn't wait to talk about the plot and share the melodramatic action.



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Celebrating Jewish Literature



A rom-com about romance...

By Rabbi Rachel Esserman
After being dumped

It's bad enough that Lauren Leo is 41 and the last of her friends to marry. Well, to almost marry because in the opening chapter of Marilyn Simon Rothstein's "Crazy to Leave You" (Lake Union Publishing) Lauren is dumped by her fiancé minutes before she is supposed to walk down the aisle. Some readers will think she dodged a bullet after learning how he did that and his not-exactly healthy relationship with his mother. But Lauren's family is no picnic, either: her mother constantly harps (and harps and harps and harps....) at her about her weight and criticizes almost her every move. Lauren envies her younger sister, Stephanie, who is definitely their mother's favorite child. Stephanie has the perfect job, a perfect husband and perfect children.

Lauren's life is made more complicated when her older sister, Margo, shows up at her door and camps out in her apartment. Not only had Margo refused to come to Lauren's wedding, she's had no contact with their parents for ages. Although she claims to be there to support Lauren, Margo's real purpose is to resurrect her acting career: the fact that she gained a great deal of weight damaged her chances for employment in California. Lauren throws herself into job at a public relations firm as an antidote to heartache and hopes her efforts will result by being made partner. An additional complication occurs when she's injured in a car accident and needs a driver, Ruby Cohen, who at first annoys her with his attempts at conversation. However, she does grow fonder of him overtime, although the nature of their relationship remains unclear to her. Then revelations from several of her friends make her doubt whether any romance can last a lifetime.

"Crazy to Leave You" includes several subplots that make it more complex reading than many rom-coms. They add depth to a work that features a fairly realistic look at the world, while also offering a fun romance. Parts of the plot offer topics for discussion at book clubs, including women's body images and the glass ceiling that still exists in many workplaces.

That is just like a TV movie (maybe)

There is a cable TV channel that warps women's views of romance and the world. At least one could make that case after reading "As Seen on TV" by Meredith Schorr (Forever/Hachette Book Group). Adina Gellar is enamored with the channel's movies that show a big city woman who goes to a small town to help prevent it from being exploited by a big city builder. Not only does the heroine come to love the town, but she finds true romance with a

small-town hero. Unfortunately for Adina, life is far more complex than a made-for-TV movie would suggest.

Adina is a freelance journalist who is hoping for her big break: a permanent job at an online magazine. The publisher loves her new idea, showing how a real estate magnate is ruining the small town of Pleasant Hollow. If her article is good enough, she'll have that job. Unfortunately, Adina has to use to her own money for expenses; even though her mother helps, finances are tight. Even worse, Pleasant Hollow is far from the charming towns featured on that cable channel. Most people seem happy with the construction that's happening, at least those who are even willing to talk to her, rather than finding her questions intrusive and annoying. Adina does meet an interesting man, only it turns out he's working for her supposed villain, the real estate magnet. Is Adina wrong? Maybe small towns aren't as wonderful as she believes, and maybe romance and happiness are different from what those TV movies have led her to expect.

"As Seen on TV" features some realistic subplots, which add more depth to the novel. Money troubles and a portrayal of a woman who is clear about her desires (career and sexual) create additional interest. But there is still plenty of fun and humor in this anti-TV-romance-movie work.

That was destined to happen

Ever want to shake some sense into a novel's main character? That occurred when reading "Meant to be Mine" by Hannah Orenstein (Atria Paperback). I wanted to grab Edie Meyer and say, "You dumped a wonderful man who loved you, who understood you and whom you loved because your grandmother Gloria told you that you would meet the love of your life on a particular date and that date will happen in a few months. I don't care how many times she's been right about the date that someone in your family has meet their true love: why turn away someone wonderful for an uncertain future?"

But maybe her grandmother is right: on the date predicted, Edie travels to Maine to watch her sister's boyfriend propose to her. Edie also meets the gorgeous Theo on the plane and, with a few clever twists, they end up dating. Theo seems to be everything that Edie is looking for, but sometimes things seem off. Not that Theo isn't a great person, but they don't always fit or seem to want the same things. Is it possible that her destined match is the wrong one?

What's not a problem is Edie's relationship with her grandmother. Gloria is a great character and it was wonderful to see Edie attend a regular mah-jongg date with Gloria, her mother and her sister. The scenes when these

relatives interact are among the best sections of "Meant to be Mine." Plus, the initial premise – learning the date that one will meet the love of one's life – was clever. An additional pleasure was my correctly guessing the ending.

THE COST OF WAR

By Rabbi Rachel Esserman
The Spanish Civil War

Spain has a mixed Jewish history. Tales of tolerance and understanding while the country was under Muslim rule clash with the forced conversions and expulsions of the Jewish population during the reign of Christian monarchs Ferdinand II of Aragon and Queen Isabella I. Yet, during the Spanish Civil War, Jews from other parts of Europe and the U.S. traveled to Spain to fight against Franco and fascism. "Home So Far Away" by Judith Berlowitz (She Writes Press) tells how that fight affected the life of one Jewish woman.

Klara first experienced Spain in 1925 while visiting her uncle, who hid his Jewish heritage from his children and neighbors. However, even though asked to not to mention she was Jewish, Klara felt more at home in Spain than she did in her native Germany and, after five years, found a position teaching at a Madrid medical school. There she tries to help the female students who are treated as second class citizens. She also works to further the communist cause, believing it is the only way to form a just society, and participates in marches and other actions close to her heart.

Klara is a pacifist, but her stance wavers once the Spanish Civil War begins. Although, at first, she only expects to help nurse the wounded, she soon finds herself willing to put her life on the line. But not everyone agrees on politics or for what they should be fighting. What is more important: winning the war or furthering the socialist/communist cause?

"Home So Far Away" is written as a diary, meaning that, unlike readers, Klara has no idea that she's fighting for a lost cause. Her entries focus more on politics than on her personal life since politics and justice are her passion. The novel ends abruptly, which may leave readers partly unsatisfied and wondering what happens to Klara after its final entry.

Warsaw, Israel, Spain and France

A panoramic novel whose main character travels from Warsaw to France, then to Israel and Spain, before returning to France: that summarizes the travels Rivka Berg makes in the years before, during and after World War II in "The Corset Maker" by Annette Libeskind Berkovits (Amsterdam Publishers). Rivka is independent minded: she starts a business with her best friend Bronka in Warsaw, even though few women ran their own stores during the late 1920s. Rivka then decides to travel to Palestine to find her sister, Golda, whom the family has not heard from in years.

An underground group helps her leave Poland, although she plans to return after learning what happened to Golda. Since Palestine is still under British control, Rivka has to travel under an assumed name, Raquela, first to France, and then be smuggled into Palestine. Things go awry during her time in Palestine and she has no desire to remain the country and become a pioneer. Since she has no money to return to Warsaw, she finds herself traveling to Spain with someone looking to fight in the Spanish Civil War against the fascists. There Rivka/Raquela makes a life for herself, until the war ends and it becomes dangerous for anyone Jewish to remain in Spain. She returns to France; however, life there is also not easy once the Nazis conquer the country.

"The Corset Maker" offers readers romance, adventure and excitement: Rivka has relationships with several men, which allows her to discover that love can appear in different forms. There are also many coincidences, as characters return to her life or meet people she knows, something that could have been unconvincing, but which isn't because it adds to the drama. That's because the plot and characters are well done, making the novel interesting and absorbing reading.

Finding refuge in Stockholm

When is a spy novel not exactly a spy novel? When, as with "Dr. B." by Daniel Birnbaum (Harper), it tries to do something far more complex. "Dr. B.," which is based on true events, opens with its title character, German-Jewish journalist Immanuel Birnbaum (also known as Dr. B), imprisoned in Stockholm for spying for Nazi Germany, something that makes little sense since he fled from Warsaw to escape the Nazis' invasion of Poland.

Landing in Stockholm, Immanuel writes for a Swiss newspaper under the name Dr. B. and finds work with the German publisher S. Fisher Verlag, whose business has also moved to Stockholm. Immanuel meets many different people while working, including a potential English spy and saboteur, and a Russian woman who has great influence at the Soviet embassy. However, what concerns him and other refugees is whether the country's financial connections to Germany will determine their treatment. Many of the refugees are hoping to leave the country, to move to England, Shanghai or the U.S. The city also See "War" on page 8

Gender and the Talmud

By Rabbi Rachel Esserman

Nonbinary gendered individuals found in the Talmud: Max. K. Strassfeld (who uses the pronouns they/their) was fascinated by the discussions they discovered about them in the rabbinic text. Strassfeld wanted to know more, to not just understand what the rabbis thought, but how that knowledge could contribute to contemporary understanding of trans and intersex (someone with mixed male and female biological traits) individuals. In "Trans Talmud: Androgynes and Eunuchs in Rabbinic Literature" (University of California Press), the author notes that their interest is not the same as the rabbis; in fact, they deliberately use a "bad/trans" (their words) reading of the text that may influence contemporary readers' ideas about gender.

While the Talmud uses several terms to denote eight different terms to describe gender, Strassfeld subsumes several of them into two main types: androgynes and eunuchs. In the book's glossary, eunuchs are defined as "one understood to be male who lacks testicles, a penis, or both, whether congenitally or due to removal." Androgynes are called "a person whose body includes both genitalia traditionally regarded as female and genitalia traditionally regarded as male." The rabbis' interest in these different genders was often connected to an individual's legal responsibilities. For example, are these individuals like females, meaning they are only responsible to for the *mitzvot* women must perform? If not and they are considered male, then they must perform all the *mitzvot* for which men are responsible. Strassfeld is particularly interested in the times when the rabbis consider these individuals as neither male nor female, but rather a third gender.

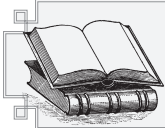
While it's difficult to find a central thesis to discuss, the individual sections of "Trans Talmud" offer interesting and intriguing ideas, usually by taking something that was of minor interest to the rabbis and making it the focus for rethinking the meaning of gender. For example, Strassfeld notes the rabbinic idea of deciding a person's status by whether they are fertile (in this case as to whether they can father children, but also for women) and asks readers to think about what that means for those too young or too old to be fertile. How do you define someone who has not yet gone through puberty who may or not may fit these categories, particularly when they may already have physical signs to show they belong to one of the nonbinary gender categories?

Another interesting idea is the comparison of Jewish and Christian ideas about eunuchs. For example, while rabbinic Judaism considered only two categories of eunuchs (born eunuchs and those who become eunuchs after birth), the New Testament considered another type; "those who become eunuchs for the sake of heaven." This difference may be because the rabbis could not contemplate the idea that men would deliberately choose to become eunuchs since marriage and procreation play such a large role in Judaism. In addition, it's considered a *mitzvah* for men to be fertile and multiply. Rabbinic texts even debate the number of children necessary to fulfil this requirement with the standard answer being a minimum of two children (although whether that is two male children, or one male and one female is debated).

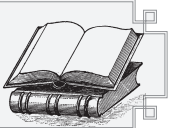
Strassfeld also looks at contemporary U.S. laws and how they can be understood as transphobic. For example, they discuss "bathroom laws," laws that forbid transgendered individuals from using the bathroom that is not that of their birth sex. They also quote from a Mississippi marriage law that says marriage can only be the union of one man and one woman, which not only forbids intersex and trans marriages, but gay and lesbian ones. The law also declares that a person's sex is the one determined at their birth. However, Strassfeld notes the law ignores those born with mixed sexual characteristics, something the ancient rabbis did acknowledge.

Strassfeld's book contains information that could be of interest to two separate audiences, although what they hope to gain from it may not overlap. For example, those interested in rabbinic literature may be looking for the legal ramifications of the rabbinic discussions. For those working in gender studies, it will be the aspects of trans and intersex history that stand out. Strassfeld does recognize each audience is familiar with different terminology and tries to note the terms with which they may not familiar.

"Trans Talmud" offers as many questions as it answers, but that seems to be the point of the work: it forces readers to explore how we understand gender. What would be of interest is a discussion between the work's two potential audiences so they can learn from each other. Until that happens, Strassfeld's book will be of most interest to those seeking to challenge their ideas about the meaning of rabbinic literature and how it can be used to inform contemporary times.



Celebrating Jewish Literature



Nonfiction, Fiction and Fantasy for tweens (and adults)

By Rabbi Rachel Esserman

I don't know if it's because there were so few books for Jewish tweens published when I was young, but I love reading books for this age group. Not only are numerous books being published, but the works are really impressive in depth and breadth. Since I've enjoyed them so much, I think other adults might feel the same. Maybe parents or grandparents and tweens can form their own book clubs and discuss these works and others. What if synagogues offered book clubs for tweens? With the right leader, they might be a huge success.

"Alias Anna"

Once in a while it's to my advantage not to have paid close attention to the PR about a book. Otherwise, I might not have read the wonderful "Alias Anna: A True Story of Outwitting the Nazis" by Susan Hood with Greg Dawson (Harper). First, I didn't realize it was nonfiction. (I thought it was a novel based on a true story.) Second, I was unaware it was written in poetry, something that might have led me to pass on asking for a review copy. But I'm glad I did because "Alias Anna" is not only beautifully written, but it also packs a powerful punch.

In easy-to-read prose poetry, this biography tells the moving story of Zhanna Arshanskaya, a young and brilliant musician, who lived in Ukraine with her parents and her equally talented sister, Frina. The poetry is written in the third person, but the authors also include short comments on events using Zhanna's own words. This commentary adds even more depth to the story. The authors use a variety of styles, with my favorite chapter being the poem "What Goes Around Comes Around." Once read in the traditional way (top to bottom), the reader is encouraged to read the poem the opposite way, beginning at the bottom. It's brilliantly done and offers insight into Stalin's life.

Life is not perfect for Zhanna's family in a Ukraine governed by the U.S.S.R., but things quickly take a turn for the worse when the Nazis conquer the country. Her family and the other Jews in their town are gathered and taken on what is clearly a death march. Zhanna's father bribes a guard to allow her to escape, telling his daughter the most important thing is to survive. She does so by changing her name and hiding in plain sight, playing music for the Nazi oppressors who have no idea she is Jewish.

Even knowing from the beginning that Zhanna lived through the war didn't lessen the suspense, which kept me quickly turning pages. What's fascinating is that Zhanna never elaborated on what occurred until her granddaughter sent her a letter (which is featured in the prologue) asking about her story for a school project. Readers will be grateful she did.

"A Visit to Moscow"

Does the graphic novel "A Visit to Moscow" (West Margin Press) portray a true story? The writing credits say it is an adaptation by Anna Olswanger from a story told by Rabbi Rafael Grossman (West Margin Press). In an afterward by Grossman's son, he notes that this is a story his father told when he spoke about his visit to the Soviet Union in 1965. The purpose for the trip was to learn whether reports that the Jewish community was being persecuted were true.

Grossman travels as part of a group of rabbis. Their itinerary is severely restricted and they are told not to leave the hotel without their tour guide. However, Grossman pretends to have a headache and skips one of the tours. Instead, he heads to an address given to him by a Russian woman living the U.S. who is worried about her brother. The man who opens the door is very suspicious because he had no way of knowing if Grossman is a rabbi or a member of the KGB seeking to trap him. When he is finally let into the apartment, Grossman discovers a secret, one that makes a lasting impression on him.

To tell more of the story would spoil the surprise, but it is extremely well done. The excellent illustrations by Yevgenia Nayberg use color to create a mood that informs the story, generating far greater emotion than one might expect from the sparse number of details included. The book ends with factual information about the plight of Soviet Jews that helps place the story into perspective. Since Grossman has passed away, Olswanger is unsure how much of the tale is fact and how much is fiction. However, she hopes to eventually find the Soviet family featured and learn the truth. That story would also be a fascinating one to read.

"Wayward Creatures"

Two very different families are featured in "Wayward Creatures" by Dayna Lorentz (Clarion Books). That is not an unusual sentence for me to write in a review, but in this case the difference is greater than normal: the families featured are from two different species – coyote and human. Each chapter features a first-person narrator – either Rill, a young coyote, or the half-Jewish 12-year-old Gabe – both of whom are having a difficult time. In Rill's case, it's because her parents expect her to watch over her younger siblings, even though they are refusing to learn to hunt and expect Rill to feed them. Gabe's problems began when his



A scene from "A Visit to Moscow" (used with permission of the publisher)

father lost his job and are compounded by the fact his two closest friends have been ignoring him now that they are in junior high. His parents and sister don't seem to notice he has any problems, probably because no one is paying much attention to him. When Gabe sets off some fireworks to impress his former friends, he starts a forest fire, one that injures Riff and leaves her helpless.

The chapters alternate between Riff and Gabe, and both are extremely well done. The sections where Gabe discovers the damage he's done and how to control his temper felt convincing. The sections about restorative justice – a program in which Gabe is enrolled so he won't go to jail – were interesting and thought provoking. (The author offers more information about the program at the end of the book.) Riff's narrative is fun because she is such an appealing character, something I would never have said about a coyote before reading this novel.

This is an excellent work for tweens from troubled families to help them better understand their emotions. The book is not preachy; the author makes Gabe and Riff's learning feel real and natural. As an adult, I found the book delightful and enjoyed spending time with both characters, although there was something special in getting to know the sweet and charming Riff.

"The Button Box"

What's the best way to learn about history? Time travel, of course! That's what happens to Jewish Ava and her Muslim cousin Nadeem in "The Button Box" by Bridget Hodder and Fawzia Gilani-Williams (Kar-Ben). The two cousins, who spend afternoons with their Granny Buena, have had a bad day: a bully has mistreated them because of their religions. To take their mind off what happened, Granny tells them a story of one of their ancestors, Ester ibn Evram, who lived in Sabtah, Morocco. She also shows them a button from her fancy button box – a button that once belonged to Prince Abdur Rahman the first, a Muslim leader who, with the Jews in his community, made Spain the center of arts and science in the eighth century.

But before finishing her story, Granny feels the need for a nap, leaving the button box with the cousins. When they decide to sew Rahman's button onto Ava's sweatshirt, something very strange happens: darkness descends and they suddenly find themselves in Sabtah. The two quickly become involved with an intrigue that could either save Ester and the prince, or change the course of history.

"The Button Box" blends adventure and history, and is perfect for young readers who enjoy novels with time travel. Ava and Nadeem are appealing characters, and the fact that neither is perfect adds to their charm. The book concludes with an author's note about Sephardic Jews, Muslims and which characters are based on fact and which are fictional.

"The Lost Ryu"

How could I resist a book that features a Yiddish speaking dragon? Even though Cheshire, as the dragon is called, doesn't play a major role in Emi Watanabe Cohen's "The Lost Ryu" (Levine Querido), I love the fact that each character has their own small dragon (called ryu) who talks to them. The main character, 10-year-old Kohei Fujiwara, has never seen the big dragons that existed during World War II, which ended 20 years before the novel begins. Kohei's family life is not easy: he and his mother live with his grandfather, a cranky old man who drinks and throws things.

Kohei's mother expects him to befriend their new neighbor, Isolde, a half-Jewish and half-Japanese girl his age who has just moved to Japan from the United States with her parents. Kohei has no desire to be her friend. Instead, he's concerned about his grandfather: Kohei blames his grandfather's behavior on the fact he no longer has his own dragon. Kohei then decides to travel to where new dragons are hatched so he can bring his grandfather one, even though it is a long trip and his mother would forbid him from doing so if she knew. Although Kohei hasn't wanted to be friends with Isolde, she has befriended him



Two pages from "A Visit to Moscow" (Used with permission of the publisher)

and decided he will not travel alone. The adventures they have and the truth he discovers about his late father during the trip changes his life.

Although Kohei is a complex and interesting character, Jewish readers will be interested in Isolde's background. Her Jewish father was sent to America by his family in order to escape the Nazis. Her Japanese mother's parents had been placed in a detention camp in the U.S. She wonders if she belongs anywhere: in the U.S., she's considered Japanese; in Japan, she is considered American. When Kohei makes fun of Cheshire for speaking Yiddish, a language he believes no one speaks, she quickly notes that a language dies only when the people who spoke it die, referencing the Holocaust without actually saying the word.

But "The Lost Ryu" ultimately belongs to Kohei, who learns a difficult truth about war and human nature. However, any lesson taught by dragons will appeal to readers who wish that dragons were real. They may also envy Kohei and Isolde for having a dragon of their own.

Apps and games

By Rabbi Rachel Esserman

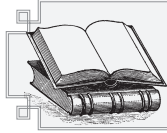
Is it possible to create an app that will help you find happiness? Can playing online games provide an escape from life's difficulties and griefs? How much of our personalities and actions are based on our physicality, and how much on our intellect alone? Two recent novels explore the intersection between online life and off-line reality: "Happy for You" by Claire Stanford (Viking) and "Tomorrow, and Tomorrow, and Tomorrow" by Gabrielle Zevin (Alfred A. Knopf). While what I've written might make the two works sound intellectual and cold, it is the very human feelings they elicit that make them so intriguing and ultimately moving.

Evelyn Kominsky Kumamoto, the narrator of "Happy for You," is at a crossroads. After four years of working on her philosophy dissertation, she's unsure whether she wants to continue. Her research is on the mind-body problem, but new technology – for example, social media, virtual reality and artificial intelligence – has complicated the issue. She believes our bodies are not very important, noting that her "dissertation argued that our online selves were an extension of our consciousness, that they were so deeply enmeshed with our cognitive processes, that they had become part of our minds." However, Evelyn is not sure she believes her own theory, one of the reasons she finds herself applying for a job at "the third-most popular internet company."

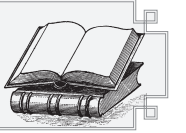
The third-most popular internet company (which is never named) hires her to research the components of happiness so the company can develop an app that will be used to make people happier. Evelyn is unsure that's possible because emotions are complex. For example, she notes that "studies had shown that a group of people would say that they were all experiencing the same emotion – anger, for example – but MRIs of their brains would show entirely different regions lighting up." Plus, Evelyn wonders if everyone defines happiness the same way. Would a text asking how you are feeling at any given moment and then making suggestions for what to do next really make a difference in your life, or might you just think you were happier because an app told you you were according to its algorithm?

These are some of the same questions Evelyn is asking in her own life. As one of the few mixed-race people – in her case, half-Asian, half-Jewish – in many situations, including her new job, she doesn't know if she thinks about happiness the same way other Americans do. Her Jewish mother died not long after her bat mitzvah, so her connection to Judaism has lessened as she's grown older. She worries about marrying her long-term boyfriend, Jamie, not because of anything he's done, but rather because she questions what she wants out of life. Her equilibrium is further upset when she realizes her

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Celebrating Jewish Literature



Translated from the Yiddish and Hebrew

By Rabbi Rachel Esserman

Stories from 1930s' (pre-World War II) Europe and 21st century Israel: what do they have in common? Human nature, of course: the search for love and meaning, and the struggle against the sorrows of daily life. In their wonderful tales, Chana Blankshteyn's "Fear and Other Stories" (Wayne State University Press) and "Café Shira" by David Ehrlich (Syracuse University Press) show how humanity's basic needs have not changed over the past century.

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seems to teem with spies for both England and Germany, countries that believe Stockholm will play a vital role in the war they believe is coming.

If the plot lines sound confusing, that's because they are at first, both for the characters and the reader. In addition to the main character, there are many secondary characters whose main purpose seems to be talking about subjects (politics, Jewish music, conversion to Christianity and women's issues) that serve mostly to irritate the other characters. Readers unfamiliar with what took place in Stockholm before World War II will find the author's "Afterward" interesting in that it resolves some of the confusion, but not all. "Dr. B." works best for readers who enjoy puzzles; for this reader, the book was more interesting in retrospect than on first reading.

World War II in Italy

The only novel in this review to feature a non-Jewish main character is Anita Sabriel's "A Girl During the War" (Atria Paperback). Why review it? Because it contains Righteous Gentiles, including Marina Tozzi's father, who is murdered by the Nazis for hiding a Jewish artist. Marina only escaped death because she was food shopping when the soldiers arrived at their home. But Rome is no longer safe for her and the only person she thinks can help is her father's American friend Bernard Berenson, who lives in a villa near Florence, with his partner, Belle de Costa Greene. All three are art lovers – Marina's father owned an art gallery – and she is recruited to help Bernard catalogue his art books.

But it's impossible to escape the war even in Florence. Not only do the Nazi soldiers control the area, but the Italian resistance is active. Marina is recruited by Carlos, a young, handsome neighbor, to evaluate art pieces being sold to fund the resistance. She also befriends another neighbor, Desi, who is in despair because she is pregnant by a German soldier and is unsure of what her mother's reaction to the news will be. In addition, Marina is puzzled by some of Bernard and Belle's actions. Why are jewelry and art objects disappearing from the villa? Are her hosts more involved in the war than she knows? Her questions only increase when the war comes to a close and she has to acknowledge that her judgment of friends and neighbors may not have always been accurate.

"A Girl During the War" was absorbing and interesting reading. I looked up some details to learn if they were accurate, but was unable to verify all the facts. That didn't prevent me from enjoying the work, including its realistic ending, which also managed to be very satisfying.

Memories and shadows after the war

For many people, the war didn't end when the fighting stopped, even for those who were never in concentration camps. That's true for Raska Morgenstein, now known as Rachel Pearlman, in David R. Gillham's "Shadows of Berlin" (Sourcebooks Landmark). During the war, Rachel and her artist mother spent years as U-Boats, Jews who lived in Berlin during the war, hiding from the Nazis and moving from place to place with no regular access to food, employment or housing. Her mother did not survive and Rachel moved to the U.S. with her Uncle Fritz, her only living relative. Now, in 1955, Rachel lives in Brooklyn with Aaron, her American-born husband, who doesn't understand how what happened during the war still affects the way she feels about their life.

However, what happened in the war is not forgotten as shown by an incident that landed her in Bellevue's psychiatric ward. Once home from her short stay there, she visits a psychiatrist to whom she refuses to reveal the true reason for her pain. He encourages her to start painting again, but Rachel is afraid of what she'll reveal on the canvas. Her delicate balance is again upset when Uncle Fritz tells her he discovered one of her mother's paintings in a pawn shop. Rachel tries to buy the painting, but doesn't have the funds with her. When she returns a second time, the painting has disappeared. But just seeing that portrait of the woman Rachel calls the "Red Angel" brings forth memories, ones that may destroy her life.

"Shadows of Berlin" is moving, heartbreaking and surprising. Rachel is a wonderful, complex character whose plight made me care about her deeply. The author also does an excellent job in portraying Aaron, a man who loves Rachel, but who lacks the insight and experience to help her. Even readers who think they might be tired of books about World War II may find themselves intrigued by this impressive novel.

Blankshteyn's book originally appeared in Yiddish two weeks before the author's death in 1939. Few copies of the original exist, so Anita Norich has performed a real service in translating these stories for publication. My favorites are the love stories: they feel real, showing how life can be a series of compromises, yet still bring joy. For example, in "The Decree," Shtoltzman is a determined communist who has passed a decree that religious marriages are no longer legal. Leah, the woman he loves, is the granddaughter of a rabbi and refuses to be wed unless it's under a *chuppah*. The resolution of their dilemma is delightful.

"The First Hand" shows love developing over time as its characters struggle to make a living. Andrée, who never knew her father, is left an orphan after her mother dies. Her only living relative, an aunt, can't care for her since she needs to work in order to survive. Andrée is taken to an orphanage, and, once she turns 15, is sent to work at a clothing business. She slowly improves her lot by hard work and determination. True love is not easy to find, though, and it's a pleasure to watch it develop and grow, despite the obstacles placed in its way. However, in the story "The Incident," love is thwarted when politics turn deadly, but that isn't the ending: life continues in ways that can still bring comfort and, sometimes, joy.

Blankshteyn also writes about the difficulties the Jewish

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hardest thing to say is "I'm sorry," but I think that it is even harder to say, "I was wrong." It's hard to say those words to others and often even harder to ourselves." He believes this is because people are punished for making mistakes so we try to pretend we have not done anything wrong, rather than facing what truly occurred and dealing with it honestly.

Leder also explains that the question of whether someone is a good person is far more complex than most people think. For example, he notes, "The complicated truth is that the question of good and evil is not about our essence but our essence at any given moment. Ask anyone fighting to stay sober one day, one hour, one minute at a time. Any anyone in a committed relationship with a wandering eye deciding whether or not to remain his or her best and truest self... When it comes to good and evil, we are each at the center of a battle that sometimes rages and sometimes smolders within us until we die."

In both works, Leder offers his own living will – written for his two children – as an example. Although the author mentions Jewish customs, this is not a work for those seeking information about how to hold a Jewish funeral or the Jewish laws of mourning. It's aimed at a general audience, one looking for psychological and practical advice on how to deal with the messy emotions of grief and use them to appreciate the beauty life offers.

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Japanese father – whom as far as she knows has not dated since her mother's death – now has a serious girlfriend: he has not only changed how he lives, but is attending church with his Japanese girlfriend.

Then something changes and "Happy for You" takes a more serious tone. The surprise makes sense in the context and forces Evelyn to think more clearly about what's truly important in life. However, this seriousness is still leavened by Evelyn's deadpan humor; although she may not actually consider herself funny, readers will. The only puzzling part of the novel was its ending: a specific event occurs that's not part of the general narrative, but which felt like it symbolized an important lesson. Unfortunately, it's meaning was not completely clear. However, that is a small flaw in a well-done work.

While "Happy for You" features one main character and takes place over a short period of time, "Tomorrow, and Tomorrow, and Tomorrow" offers two – the half-Korean and half-Jewish Sam Masur and Jewish Sadie Green – and present events that occur over several decades. The two former friends/enemies (flashbacks explain their relationship) knew each other in California when they were younger and reconnect when they are attending different colleges in Boston. Sam sees Sadie on a subway platform and calls out to her. She almost doesn't answer, but, after talking to him, hands him a copy of a video game she's made for a class. Sam, who is majoring in mathematics, but isn't interested in the subject, decides that the two of them should work together to create a video game. Their work is the beginning of a legendary collaboration. With Sam's roommate Marx, who handles the business aspect of their work, they become a gamer phenomenon.

Fortunately, readers don't have to like video games to be entranced by this novel because it is the human relationships, particularly the intriguing friendship that develops between Sadie and Sam, that is the most important part of the work. Watching how their relationship changes from when they were in their early teens to contemporary times serves as a wonderful character study. This works because they are

population faced in the period before World War II. "Director Vulman" is a terrific story about how Jews were often chosen as scapegoats when the government was looking for someone to blame. What's ironic is that the Jews in this case feel more German than Jewish. The title character wonders, "What connection did they all have to Jews, to those very different Jews there on the other side of the border. He felt like a German, loved Germany with all his soul, was proud of the country he thought as his, the land of high culture and infinite possibilities." Unfortunately, not everyone felt the same way.

All nine stories in "Fear and Other Stories" were well done and featured interesting plots and characters. My hope is that Blankshteyn's work will now reach a wider audience.

"Café Shira" by David Ehrlich (Syracuse University Press) calls itself a novel, but feels like a connected collection of short stories. That's not a complaint: the café is the scene for much of the action, which focuses on those who visit or work there. Although Avigdor owns the café, he spends as little time there as possible. When the café first opened, he had grand plans for it; now he just wants to be left alone. The café is mostly run by Rutha, a waitress who recently moved to Jerusalem and is exploring what it means to be an adult.

The café is frequented by regulars who get upset if anyone else sits at their table. There is Ruhama Shittin, who writes poetry, but doesn't make a living from it; Kuti, who prefers to sit outside, even when it's cold and complains about the prices, even though he has no financial worries; Raymond, who can become violent when disturbed; and Noar Sela, who is in love with Rutha and writes stories that imagine them as a couple. The cast of characters is far wider than this since it includes people who only periodically stop by the café. Readers not only hear selections of their conversations, but learn what they are thinking. Adding to the mix is Christian Joubaux, a tourist from France who is studying for the priesthood. He hopes to have a religious experience, but undergoes a different type of conversion.

Ehrlich captures what the café means to the people who frequent it: Rutha thinks that "it's amazing what a coffeehouse can be for so many people, what a crossroad, what a meeting place for worlds and ideas. And despite her ability to read people and sometimes even their thoughts, there are more stories and plots to Café Shira than she can handle." The tales show how the café means much more to people than a place to buy and drink a cup of coffee; it is in some way their home away from home.

"Café Shira" was published in English after Ehrlich's death. (The introduction notes that he died during the pandemic, but not of COVID. He refused to seek treatment for a heart attack due to his fear of being infected with COVID at the hospital.) This excellent work makes me wish he were alive to write more great books; I can only hope that his other works will also be translated into English.

both interesting in their own right, particularly Sam whose life has been filled with challenges and physical pain. How do they differ? One example is shown when Zevin writes, "It is worth noting that greatness for Sam and Sadie mean different things. To oversimplify: For Sam, greatness means *popular*. For Sadie, *art*." For two people working on the same video game, that means trouble.

The novel also explores the attraction of video games, which allows both characters to escape real life. In Sam's case, "Sam did not believe his body could feel anything but pain, and so he did not desire pleasure the same way that other people seemed to. Sam was happiest when he felt nothing. He was happiest when his body was feeling nothing. He was happiest when he did not have to think about his body – when he could forget that he had a body at all." This happens when he plays video games. Sadie, on the other hand, enjoys more of life: "She liked playing games, seeing a foreign movie, a good meal. She liked going to bed early and waking up early. She liked working. She liked that she was good at her work, and she felt proud of the fact that she was well paid for it. She felt pleasure in orderly things – a perfectly efficient section of code, a closet where every item was in its place." This type of life suits her because it means she could be uncompromising in her creations, making games that appealed to her and a few others, rather than the masses.

However, when a change in one of the video worlds they created has real world repercussions, it radically alters both of their lives. That's when "Tomorrow, and Tomorrow, and Tomorrow" becomes an incredibly moving, fascinating and great work of literature, making it rank with the best novels of the year.

"Happy for You" and "Tomorrow, and Tomorrow, and Tomorrow" portray young people who have yet to learn that it's impossible to control all life's twists and turns – that the real world can make apps, games and the internet seem irrelevant. That isn't to dismiss those things: the characters never do. However, they do learn to differentiate between the two. They also discover the importance of human connections and the way they create true meaning in life.