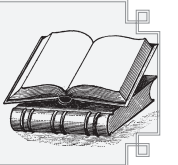




Celebrating Jewish Literature



Searching the past for answers

By Rabbi Rachel Esserman

Scholars and historians study documents and photographs, visit meaningful sites and interview people connected to the events. Family members search for answers to questions they were too young to have asked when their parents or grandparents were still alive. No matter how much research is done, it will never be possible to discover what happened to everyone caught in the whirlwind of the Holocaust. Memories fade, documents get lost or found, and knowledge disappears as survivors, perpetrators and bystanders age and die. That doesn't stop people from trying to understand what occurred as can be seen in two new books: "The Ravine: A Family, A Photograph, A Holocaust Massacre Revealed" by Wendy Lower (Houghton Mifflin Harcourt) and "Plunder: A Memoir of Family Property and Nazi Treasure" by Menachem Kaiser (Houghton Mifflin Harcourt).

Lower, the John K. Roth professor of history at Claremont McKenna College, takes a formal approach to her research. After she is shown a photograph taken during World War II that came to light after the collapse of the Soviet Union, Lower feels compelled to learn not only about the people pictured, but the open-air massacres that occurred in Ukraine during the war. The photo offers a rare action shot of the Holocaust, showing a woman falling into a ravine just after being shot and dragging down with her the child holding her hand. Behind her stand four men: two German commanders and two Ukrainian auxiliary members. One of the Ukrainian rifles is so close to the woman's head it's possible to see the halos of smoke from the gunshot. On the ground near the ravine is a pair of empty boots. Closer examination reveals another child, partly hidden by the woman's body.

Some information was relatively easy for Lower to uncover. For example, it didn't take her long to learn the name of the photographer. What surprised her was that he was not an official German one, but rather a Slovakian amateur named Lubomir Skrovina, who was later willing to testify about the massacre, even though that put his life at risk. Lower was also able to identify the men in the picture, although it took decades to convict these offenders of their crime. She gives the background of what was occurring behind the scenes, including others who were victimized – for example, civilians who were forced to dig mass graves for the Germans or be killed themselves. More difficult

was discovering the names of those who were murdered. Lower believes she may have discovered members of the family, but could not prove definitely whom the woman and children were. What was amazing is that Lower also learned of the one person who managed to escape death: Ludmilla Blekhman, who had lost consciousness during the massacre, but had not been shot. When she awoke, those who were dying helped push her from the pit after which she crawled through the woods until she found someone willing to help her.

While it seems incredible that Lower managed to gain as much information as she did since so much time had passed, that's not the only interesting thing about the book: the author also explores the Holocaust with a focus on the destruction of the Jewish family. Most studies feature information about individuals or speak about mass murder policies. Lower, however, sees the family unit as being important to the Nazis, noting that "Nazi policy was two-pronged: family welfare and family destruction." Family welfare focused on ethnic Germans of Aryan stock. Not only were they encouraged to reproduce, but the Nazis hoped to colonize the world with these ethnic Germans. Family destruction focused on anyone the Nazis deemed inferior, including Jews, Romas and Slavs, and anyone with mental or physical disabilities. This policy included restrictions on marriage, in addition to forced sterilizations and abortions. This was also one reason that whole families were moved to concentration camps at the same time. All members of the family unit were to be destroyed.

"The Ravine" is written in easy to read prose and the sheer range of topics was interesting and thought provoking. What Lower wants to do is give voice to all those whose voices were silenced, during *and* after the war. She also acknowledges the difficulties that can be caused by displaying photographs such as the one that started her on her search. For her, it is important *not* just to place them on display; she deems it essential to put them in context so that people understand what happened to the victims and why. Her book successfully accomplishes that.

While Lower's work is non-personal, Kaiser's focuses on his own family, at first on the grandfather who died before he was born. He notes feeling detached from him, even though he visits his grandfather's grave every year with his father and is named after him. Even the stories his father tells of his own father feel generic, as if they could

be about anyone. The family actually knew very little about his grandfather's life before he moved to Canada: He was the only member of his immediate family to survive, but his heirs know nothing of his life before or during the war, including what the author's great-grandfather did for a living or the name of the concentration camps to which family members were sent. Before his research, Kaiser didn't even know the names of his grandfather's siblings. As he notes, "We knew *they* had died, but we had no idea who *they* were."

It is only when Kaiser is in Poland for academic reasons that he begins to look into the family history. His father sends him documents showing that his grandfather had tried to reclaim family property in Krakow. Kaiser finds himself unexpectedly moved by them since this is the first time he's actually read anything his grandfather wrote. Although his grandfather's legal attempts were a failure, Kaiser decides to try again to reclaim the property – searching the records for ownership, hiring a lawyer, attending court proceedings needed to declare his grandfather's siblings deceased, etc. The process is frustrating and irritating, not just because of the restrictions the courts place on those trying to reclaim property, but the ethics of what should be done to the people who have been living in the property for decades.

This would have been a straight forward story about the difficulties of reclamation were it not for a strange fact that Kaiser uncovers: one of his grandfather's first cousins, Abraham, also managed to survive the war. But Abraham is not an ordinary survivor: he is a celebrity in Poland because he served as a Nazi slave laborer and wrote about his experiences building underground bunkers. It's not his survival that matters in Poland: instead, his words are mined by treasure hunters searching for Nazi gold and artifacts. To Kaiser's surprise, he is embraced by these people and not only interviews them, but visits some of the bunkers with them. Although he is irritated that they believe Abraham is his grandfather (and his attempts to correct that never work), he is also amazed at the number of people involved in treasure hunting and the joy they feel from their explorations, even when they are unsuccessful.

What also makes this memoir different is that Kaiser lacks the spiritual connection that many looking into their family history feel. In fact, he refers to himself as cranky because of the legal process, the people he meets and the number of errors he discovers when trying to verify family stories that turn out to be myths. What is the most difficult thing for him to deal with, though, is the way the treasure hunters view World War II. They revise what happened, ignore the suffering of those oppressed by the Nazis and de-emphasize the Jews who were brutally and systematically murdered. He notes that "the moral narrative of the war is thus subverted, inverted, perverted. The Nazi misdeeds are minimized, whitewashed; they become the protagonists, even the heroes. The real bad guys are the forces pulling the strings, the conspirators, the ones hoodwinking the world... And where you have behind-the-scenes powers you have, inevitably, the Jews." That's something Kaiser finds extremely dangerous.

"Plunder" is an unusual memoir in that its explorations take two different directions that only rarely intersect. Readers looking for closure – for answers and final determinations – will find themselves disappointed in how, like real life, that rarely occurs. However, it's what makes the work intriguing, particularly the way it also offers food for thought about how differently people view the past.

DEFINING RELIGION

By Rabbi Rachel Esserman

Many Jewish professionals believe that contemporary American Jews are uninterested in Judaism, as seen by their lack of engagement with traditional American Jewish organizations such as the synagogue and Jewish Federations. Rachel B. Gross, on the other hand, thinks these professionals are using an incorrect measurement to evaluate Jewish engagement. Rather, Gross, assistant professor in Jewish studies at San Francisco State University, posits that Jewish engagement now takes a different form. In her "Beyond the Synagogue: Jewish Nostalgia as Religious Practice" (New York University Press), she expands the definition of Jewish practice to feature a wider range of activities, including those that she labels Jewish nostalgia.

Gross sees religion as "best understood as meaningful relationships and practices, narratives, and emotions that create and support these relationships." That means religion does not have to include specific beliefs about God or the practice of rituals. What others see as Jewish culture, Gross sees as religion. She notes that this more inclusive definition of Judaism is more traditional, that it is only in the modern era that Jews divided activities between those defined as secular and those labeled religious. That means that engaging in Jewish culture activities was once also considered engaging in Judaism as a religion.

"Beyond the Synagogue" looks at four specific activities that Gross believes should be considered Jewish religious practices – practices she calls nostalgic. She defines nostalgia "as a way of finding one's place in the world and of laying claim to the past. The institutions of American Jewish nostalgia encourage their patrons to claim ancestral heritages in ways that are meaningful beyond simplistic divisions among religion, spirituality, and culture." These activities are researching Jewish genealogy; visiting historic synagogue sites; using children's books and dolls as tools to teach about the Jewish past; and taking part in the Jewish culinary revival.

◆ Researching Jewish genealogy: Gross believes Jewish genealogy serves as a way for people to honor and remember their ancestors, something she sees as a very Jewish activity. The fact that many people join genealogy groups that support their members and increase connections between them also makes the practice a religious one. For Gross, the

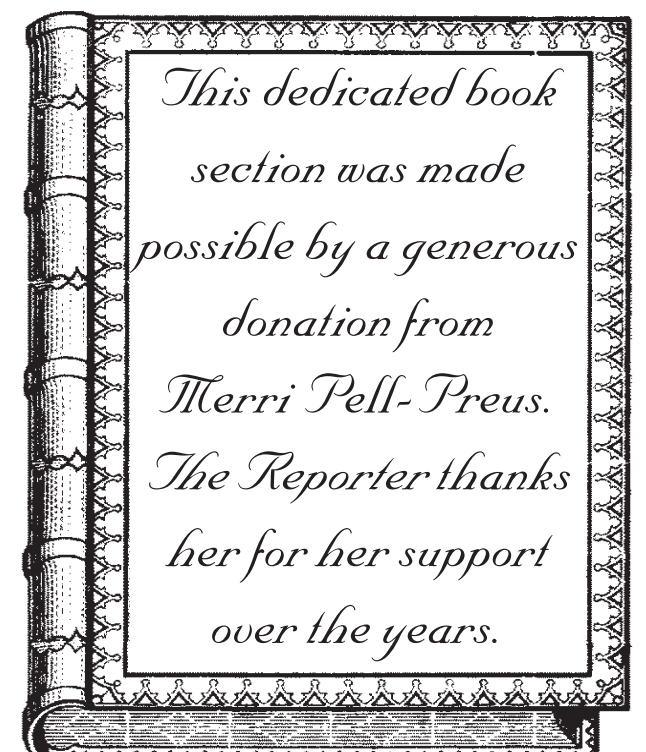
activity is "both broadly expansive and narrowly personal, as genealogists find their own ancestral legacies through which to lay claim to the past... The emotion connecting them to familial and communal histories is a means to claim ownership over the past and make it one's own."

◆ Visiting historic synagogue sites: Restoring old synagogues for use as heritage sites is another part of Gross' religion of nostalgia. She acknowledges there exists a conflict between a synagogue that is used as a museum and one used for ritual activities. The fact that many of these buildings are treated as symbolic religious artifacts – meaning they are restored with their ritual areas intact – creates a religious experience that allows visitors to imagine themselves standing in the footprints of their ancestors. Gross notes the buildings have that effect because "emotional engagement with the materials of nostalgia provides the basis for sacred relationships that cross spatial and temporal boundaries."

◆ Using children's books and dolls as teaching tools about the Jewish past: Parents help their children engage in nostalgia when they teach them about late 19th-early 20th century Jewish immigrants' lives. Gross writes about Jewish dolls that are part of the American Girl collection and the many children's books published about Jews living on the Lower East Side of New York. An increasing number of these are published in special editions by the PJ Library, which sends free books and music to Jewish children. These children, and their parents, are treating the elders in these books as if they were their grandparents, even though their experiences may have been several generations before their parents were born.

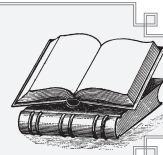
◆ Taking part in the Jewish culinary revival: Gross sees food as an example of shared religion, whether or not the food is kosher. She believes that "preparing and eating certain types of food places American Jews in a nostalgic network of sacred relationships with family members, friends, and coreligionists living and dead, historical and mythical." Her focus is on the revival of Ashkenazic food since other Jewish ethnic cuisines – Sephardic and Mizrahi – have not received the same treatment. It is the engagement with food and the Jewish past that makes this nostalgic in a religious manner.

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Celebrating Jewish Literature



The war and its reverberations

By Rabbi Rachel Esserman

The never-ending number of novels about World War II and/or the Holocaust amazes me. It's so easy to get behind because numerous new ones are published each month. In fact, I decided not to ask for review copies of six recent works because I already had five novels for this review. While those books might have been wonderful, unless I want to review a World War II/Holocaust-themed novel every week, I have to make tough decisions about which books to ask for. That doesn't mean I won't be reviewing more novels on this topic. In fact, I already have another book with a similar theme on my pile, and am looking forward to other works that are scheduled to be published this year. However, as much as I hate to admit it, there are limits to the number of books even I can read and review.

"The Most Precious of Cargoes"

Sometimes the simplest narratives are the most powerful. That's certainly true of "The Most Precious of Cargoes: A Tale" by Jean-Claude Grumberg (HarperVia). In fewer than 120 pages, Grumberg captures an incredibly wide range of emotions.

The story reads like the fable: the illiterate, barren wife of a very poor woodcutter tries to survive an unnamed war, even as she longs for a child of her own. While searching the woods for what meager food she can find, the high point of her day is watching for the train that passes daily. Sometimes those on the train throw her notes she saves, but cannot read. One day, the train contains a Jewish father whose newborn twins are starving because his wife is no longer able to produce milk. Making a heartrending decision, he tosses one twin from the train in the hopes that at least that one might survive. That infant is found by the woodcutter's wife. The emotions that child creates in the lives of the woodcutter's family lead to a simple and heartbreakingly beautiful tale.

At the end of the novel, Frank Wayne, the book's translator, notes his fear that his English version would not be able to reproduce the poetry of the original French. While I have not read the French version, the American edition of "The Most Precious of Cargoes" promises to become a classic.

"Our Darkest Night"

"Our Darkest Night" by Jennifer Robson (William Morrow) focuses on a lesser known part of the Holocaust: what happened to the Jews in Italy. Although Venice has been affected by fascist anti-Jewish rules, Antonia Mazin doesn't feel that her life is in any real danger. However, that changes in 1942 when the German presence becomes

more prominent. In an attempt to save his daughter, Antonia's father asks for help from a former patient, a priest who lives in a small village in the countryside. Although she doesn't want to leave her parents, Antonia bends to her father's wishes – traveling with Nico Gerardi, a stranger recommended by the priest, to his family farm. However, in order to keep her safe, Nico says she must not only pretend to be Catholic, but his wife.

Life on the farm is not easy for Antonia, who was studying with her father to become a doctor. But Nico's family is warm and loving – except for one sister who takes an immediate dislike to her. But even the village is not safe from the Nazis, especially one who takes an active interest in Nico's life. The interaction between the two, and the fact that Nico is helping others escape the Nazis, places not only Antonia, but his whole family in danger.

"Our Darkest Night" is absorbing and the pages turned quickly. The last 100 pages were filled with such suspense it was impossible to put the book down. The characters were interesting, as was the development of the relationships between them. The ending felt wonderful, although it may strike readers as unrealistic. However, other parts of the work are based on events that occurred in a real town in Italy: The priest and parishioners of Mezzo Ciel have been honored by Yad Vashem as Righteous Gentiles for their actions during the war.

"This Magnificent Dappled Sea"

Actions that manage to remain hidden for decades can suddenly come to light in unexpected ways. That's the idea behind "This Magnificent Dappled Sea" by David Biro (Lake Union Publishing). At first, the novel's two plots seem to have nothing in common: in 1990s Italy, 9-year-old Catholic Luca Taviano is unable to shake a cold. Unfortunately, that simple illness is not the real problem: he has leukemia. A bone marrow match is difficult to find: his father, who was adopted by the grandparents with whom he lives, died in a car accident. His late mother's family, who want nothing to do with him, are also not matches.

The second story, which takes place in Brooklyn, tells of Joseph Neiman, a pulpit rabbi who is suffering a crisis of faith. He finds himself falling into a dark hole of depression, not helped by the fact he seems to be unable to help his teenage son, who has been accused of theft. When a congregant's daughter is diagnosed with leukemia, Neiman arranges for a bone marrow fair to take place. Imagine the surprise on both sides of the Atlantic when a Jewish match appears for a Catholic Italian child. What it means is that secrets from World War II may have to be revealed

in order to save Luca's life.

"This Magnificent Dappled Sea" is less a World War II story than one showing how the results of a simple action can reverberate for decades. The novel's many characters are well drawn, particularly Luca's grandfather and his self-punishing way of dealing with secrets. The ending is satisfying in that it feels realistic, especially when showing how Luca manages to forge a compromise between his conflicting heritages.

"The Plum Trees"

Some novels try to accomplish too many things. That's true for "The Plum Trees" by Victoria Shorr (W. W. Norton and Company). The contemporary story – that of Consie who learns that her Great-Uncle Hermann may have survived the Holocaust – gets lost and as a result its conclusion feels unsatisfactory. Where the novel does succeed is in its portrayal of Magda, Hermann's daughter, and her description of life before and during World War II, including her time in a concentration camp and a death march at the end of the war.

The novel also succeeds in showing why Hermann's family delayed leaving their home. Life changed slowly enough to make them believe they would be fine – until it was too late. Hermann's struggle to understand what the Nazis really felt about Jews – which serves as a betrayal of his humanist beliefs in the goodness of mankind – is particularly effective, as are Consie's later struggles to understand what occurred in Europe. She reads about the nature of evil and ponders what philosophers and political scientists, including Hannah Arendt, thought and wrote about that time.

Unfortunately, while all this is makes for interesting reading, the book doesn't work as a novel. The original impetus for the story – whether or not Hermann survives the war – gets lost in the many other layers of the story. However, if readers are looking for insight into how a Jewish family felt about their lives in Europe before the war – the love of their home, the land they lived on and the culture to which they were so attached – "The Plum Trees" does a wonderful job portraying that, along with a graphic portrait of the horror of the Holocaust.

"Send for Me"

There are writers who demand a great deal from their readers. Take, for example, "Send for Me" by Lauren Fox (Alfred A. Knopf). Her novel feels disjointed, slipping back and forth between characters and different time periods without labels to orient readers. That makes it far too easy to confuse the characters of four generations of women whose interactions are both demanding and loving.

Parts of the novel take place in Germany: Klara and her daughter, Annelise, clash over everyday chores and choices. Their relationship becomes less fraught when Annelise marries and has a daughter of her own. However, life in Germany has become dangerous and the families look to move to the United States. Unfortunately, only Annelise, her husband and daughter, Ruth, can get visas. With promises to find a way to bring her parents to the United States, Annelise and her family emigrate. Interspersed with this story is that of Clare, Ruth's daughter, who seems unable to settle into adult life. When she falls in love with someone British, Ruth worries how that will affect her relationship to her mother.

Readers are left to decide why Ruth and Clare react as they do, particularly in relationship to their mothers. Fox notes that her novel is based on family letters. While the plot and characters are fictional, excerpts from the letters – which are quoted between chapters – are affecting as they portray the feeling of a woman who longs to see her daughter. While "Send for Me" may not be a complete success as a novel, it does capture the essence of love and loss, in addition to showing how those emotions can influence several generations of a family.

Religion, money and hate

By Rabbi Rachel Esserman

Are houses of worship built to celebrate the glory of God or the glory of humans? That question would not have been asked of synagogues in medieval Europe because of the many restrictions limiting the size and height of those buildings. Other laws restricted where Jews could live and which occupations they could hold. It might therefore seem strange to read a review of a novel called "Cathedral" (Europa Editions) in a Jewish newspaper, but Ben Hopkins' brilliant and panoramic look at 12th-13th century Hagenburg (in an area of the Rhineland that was part of the Holy Roman Empire) not only speaks to Christian readers, but to Jewish ones.

The 600-page novel contains a wide cast of characters and their lives overlap in unexpected ways. Always in the background is the cathedral that is being built – one so awe-inspiring that it will rival the glory of those being constructed in Paris. Reaction to the building varies: it brings tears to the eyes of shepherd Rettich Schaffer because, even though only partially finished, it is the most beautiful thing he has ever seen. Eugenius von Zabern, a priest who is also the bishop's treasurer, has no doubt the building will be impressive if ever completed, but mostly thinks about the expense since he is in charge of raising funds to continue its construction. Yudel Ben Yitzhak Rosheimer, the nephew of the city's best known Jewish moneylender, sees the cathedral as an abomination, a monstrosity that is like a "demon squatting on the idolatrous earth." These are only a few of the 15 characters who live in the shadow of the cathedral.

A great deal of the plot centers on the competition between the merchant class and the church as to who will control the city's resources. The artisans and merchants gather into guilds to consolidate their power – although Jewish artisans were not allowed to join and were then no longer able to ply their trades. The church does not want to cede to any power to what it sees as an upstart class, even when its power is threatened by the demands of the city's increasingly larger population, as those from the countryside flock to the city for work. Both clergy and merchants try to tie the aristocracy to their cause. That landed class looks to its own desires, sometimes siding with the clergy and other times with the guilds. The changing fortunes of

each side shows the move from clerical power to secular power – a struggle for not only the money, but the souls and beliefs of all who live in the city.

Of interest to Jewish readers will be the ways the Jewish population of the city survives in this hostile atmosphere. At best, the Jews were tolerated within the city's border. Judaism was seen as a lesser religion, as shown by the statues that will decorate the cathedral. The statue portraying Judaism shows a dejected woman: "Her eyes are blindfolded, her mouth is drawn down in sadness. Her right hand carries a broken spear, from her left hand, a stone tablet is falling. She is the Old Covenant, she is the Synagogue. Blinded, broken, in darkness, unaccepting of the Truth and the Light." The statue symbolizing Christianity, on the other hand, shows a woman whose "eyes are open, her richly curled hair carries a Crown. Her seeing eyes stare into a bright future."

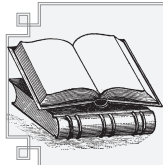
Jewish and Christian lives did overlap, especially when a Christian was low on funds. Since there are no banks and Christians were forbidden by the church to lend money with interest, many Jews served as moneylenders. That was one of the few occupations open to them, especially after the formation of the guilds, which made it impossible for Jewish artisans to sell to anyone other than fellow Jews. Yet, dealings with the Church often went through middlemen, Christians working for Jews who pretended to handle the transactions so they would be sanctioned by the Church. This time period was also the beginning of Christian attacks against the Talmud, which led to its burning in some areas of Europe, along with the additional persecution of the Jewish community.

Although "Cathedral" contains a large number of characters and a variety of interweaving plots, it was surprisingly easy to read. All of the characters are complex and fascinating people whose interactions will intrigue readers. What was surprising is how readers will come to care about them, even those they disliked at first. Other characters, who at first seemed pure of heart, will disappoint as they become corrupted by power and money. The ending ties the different strands of the novel together in a satisfying and meaningful way, showing the power of simple faith, no matter in which religious tradition it is celebrated.

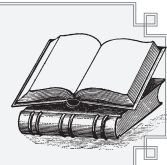
DEFINING Continued from page 5

According to Gross, the activities create greater connections as those who research Jewish genealogy visit historic synagogues and buy Jewish books to read to their children and grandchildren. Many of them may also visit a Jewish restaurant – not a kosher one, but one that claims to serve Jewish food reminiscent of what their ancestors ate.

"Beyond the Synagogue" expands the definition of religion to include a variety of activities. Based on her definition, the activities Gross describes can be considered religious practice. However, even if they accept her definition, scholars and readers will debate whether these activities are truly Jewish. Another question to consider is whether the children of those who practice nostalgic Judaism will continue to identify as Jewish. But those who support Gross' theory might suggest that each generation discovers or creates its own Jewish practices. The debate is an interesting one and anyone who thinks seriously about contemporary Judaism may want to read "Beyond the Synagogue."



Celebrating Jewish Literature



Graphic works for all ages

By Rabbi Rachel Esserman

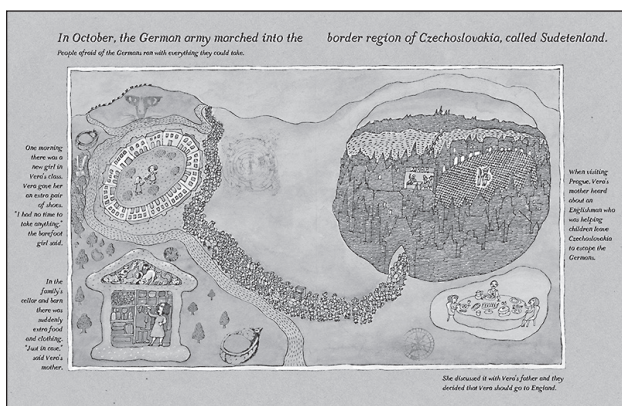
When a writer offers long descriptions of people and places, my mind rarely forms a visual image from the text. Instead those words create an emotional mood – one that may not be completely faithful to the author’s intent. That’s one reason I enjoy books with drawings or photographs: the pictures offer me a different way to understand the story, letting me experience how the author/artist visualizes the characters and situations. This review features works for all ages that combine text and images to enhance the readers’ enjoyment.

For readers grades one-four

A simple combination of words and pictures can create a very moving experience. That will be true for adults who read “Nicky and Vera: A Quiet Hero of the Holocaust and the Children He Rescued” by Peter Sis (Norton Young Readers). The reason? Adults know what happened to most of the children whom Nicholas Winton was unable to save. This picture book tells the story of Winton, who seems an unlikely savior: a young man interested in fencing and skiing. The only reason he traveled to Prague in 1938 was because a friend suggested that destination in place of the planned skiing vacation. Winton realized how dangerous the Nazis were and arranged for 699 children under the age of 17 to travel to safety in England before World War II began.

Vera Gissling’s story is intertwined with Winton’s. In 1938, the 10-year-old Vera was living with her family in a small town near Prague. When the German army marched into their country, Vera’s mother managed to find a spot for her daughter on one of the trains to England. When Vera returned after the war, none of her family remained and she moved permanently to England. Years passed and Winton’s wife discovered the secret of what he had accomplished, something he never mentioned. The end result is that Winton is honored by those who survived due to his efforts. Sis quotes Winton as saying, “I was not a hero... I did not face danger, as real heroes do. I only saw what needed to be done.”

“Nicky and Vera” is an excellent way to introduce children to World War II and the people who quietly tried to help. Parents would do well, though, to discuss the material with their children since those unfamiliar with the war may have many questions. Adults will appreciate the author’s notes offered at the end of the book, which give more details about Winton. The drawings create the appropriate mood and readers will find themselves pondering the additional layers of meaning they bring to the tale.



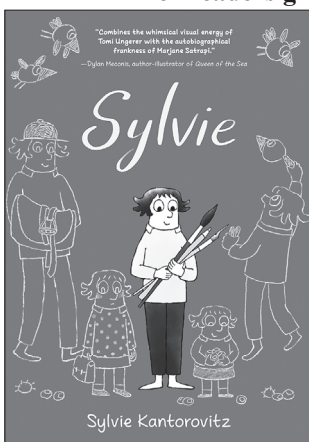
A page from “Nicky and Vera” by Peter Sis

By Rabbi Rachel Esserman

Warning: If you prefer to view Israel through rose-colored glasses, then you should skip this review of Rebecca Sacks’ novel “City of a Thousand Gates” (Harper). If you’re hoping that the Israeli-Palestinian conflict can be easily resolved, you should think twice before opening its pages since it will leave you in despair. The events that occur just before the novel opens are horrific: the brutal stabbing of a 14-year-old Israeli girl by a Palestinian and the retaliation beating by a group of Israeli teenagers that leaves a 14-year-old Palestinian boy in a coma. The reactions to these events – the very different reactions – ripple through the characters’ lives. What is unusual, though, is how a book focusing on the political reality of the situation is also so intensely personal – offering intimate details about the characters’ mundane day-to-day lives.

“City of a Thousand Gates” follows numerous characters whose lives are impacted by the murder and the beating. For example, Hamid enters Israel illegally so he can earn money for college. The Israeli who hires him to install air conditioners is less concerned with politics than cheap labor. Hamid earns far more than he could working in the territories, but also faces danger whether he’s sneaking

For readers grades four-seven



The cover of *Sylvie* Kantorovitz’s graphic memoir

principal. Sylvie was born in Morocco and is Jewish. The questions she gets asked (did they kill Christ, do they eat Christian babies) would sound ridiculous if her fellow students weren’t serious about their accusations. However, most of the memoir focuses on Sylvie’s daily life: the problems between her mother and brother, Alibert; the addition of two younger siblings whom Sylvie helps take care of; the fights between her parents; and the increasing difficulty of schoolwork as Sylvie must decide on her course of study. Her real love is drawing, which unfortunately must take second place to schoolwork and chores.

Kantorovitz’s drawings of Sylvie and her surroundings are delightful. Sylvie’s personality shines through the deceptively simple figures. While the memoir is aimed at young readers, older ones will also enjoy spending time with this sweet, wonderful young woman.

For readers grades seven-nine

Not everyone who lived in Germany during the 1930s and ‘40s supported the Nazi cause. Some risked their lives to protest Hitler and his cronies. That was true of the university students who formed the White Rose, which published and distributed leaflets against Hitler’s policies. Their story is told as a graphic novel in Andrea Grosso Ciponte’s “Freiheit! The White Rose Graphic Novel” (Plough Publishing Company).

The graphic novel feels cinematic in the way it moves between scenes, highlighting what both the White Rose was doing and the actions of Nazi leaders. These sections – many of which also juxtapose the philosophical ideas of the members of the White Rose and the propaganda espoused by the Nazis – create a mood that feels appropriate to the action. That’s also true of the dark, almost deary drawings that portray a story without a happy ending.

“Freiheit!” (which means liberty or political freedom) highlights the actions of a group that should be better known. The work concludes with an English translation of the leaflets the members of the White Rose distributed for those who better want to understand their philosophy. Parts of “Freiheit!” can be disturbing so parents may want to also read Ciponte’s work in order to discuss it with their teenagers.

For those interested in the biblical text

Dikla Laor’s beautiful photographs will be the first thing to catch readers’ eyes after they open “Women in the Bible in the Golan Heights.” The vivid and colorful photos have a painting-like feel and offer visual interpretations of a biblical text. Also included are several verses about

Sylvie Kantorovitz’s “Sylvie” (Waker Books) is a charming, clever graphic memoir about a young girl looking to find her place in the world. The author manages to capture the way Sylvie comes to understand her own needs, while also realizing the ways her parents – particularly her mother – are trying to mold and influence her.

Sylvie doesn’t feel completely comfortable with her French classmates. It’s not just that they live at the school where her father is a



A page from Andrea Grosso Ciponte’s “Freiheit!”

the women featured and short rabbinic commentary to highlight an aspect of the women’s stories. But it is the photos themselves that will speak to readers.

For example, the longing on Lot’s wife’s face is palpable as she glances back for one last look at the daughters she’s left behind in Sodom. The aged Sarah radiates great contentment when sitting in a field where a young Isaac is playing. The photo of Leah and Rachel asks readers to ponder which woman is the beloved one, while noting how their hands reach for each other, even as they cannot look each other in the eye. The mixed feelings Rahab experiences when her city is about to be conquered by Joshua are apparent in the way she holds herself. The moving portrayal of Jephthah’s daughter shows the many emotions she must have experienced while waiting to be sacrificed.

What makes the photos so impressive is not just the models, but the way the women are framed; they show just how beautiful are the hills and valleys of the Golan Heights. **See “Graphic” on page 8**



“Jochebed” from “Women in the Bible in the Golan Heights” by Dikla Laor

Daily life and political despair

across the border or entering through Israeli checkpoints. Ori, a 19-year-old who lives in a settlement, guards one of those checkpoints. His settlement was the home of the murdered girl, and his mother, Miriam, fears for his safety and worries that he has abandoned their Orthodox faith.

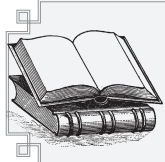
The Israeli Ido and his American-born wife Emily focus on their newborn baby and their careers, while trying to ignore their very different feelings about the Israeli army and the settlements. Samar Farha, one of Hamid’s professors, know that while academic circles respect her because of her Ph.D., some members of her family treat her as inferior because she’s unmarried and has no children. Vera, a German freelance journalist hoping to make a name for herself, sympathizes with the Palestinian cause, while longing for Amir, a professional Israeli soccer player who rarely acknowledges her text messages. This leaves her torn between her professional desires and her almost overwhelming sexual feelings. And these are only a few of the more than 25 people listed in the opening cast of characters.

The despair and fear felt by each side is palpable. Miriam wonders about the purpose behind the settlement where she lives if Ori no longer practices his faith: “What is the point of all the locked doors and the locked windows, the walls

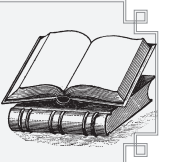
and the barbed wire, the grief, the rocks, the knives, and all the ways there are to die in these territories? These are the sacrifices, this is the labor – it is the work of a whole life to keep the commandments, to love and tend this land, the only inheritance that matters.” The Palestinians see Israelis settling in land that does not belong to them – filling swimming pools with clean water, while Palestinian homes are lucky to have running water. The callous treatment they receive at checkpoints and the ability of the Israeli army to enter their villages and search their homes makes most of them hate those who enforce these rules. Underlying this is fear they will be erased from the land their ancestors cultivated, that the Israelis won’t stop until they disappear.

“City of a Thousand Gates” is not a pleasant book to read. The explicit sexual scenes jarred until it became clear that the author was showing how fear and pain can live side-by-side with routine activities and everyday desires. The feelings of hate and destruction on both sides may leave readers squirming in their seats. Even relatively simple things – like the Arabic curse words used by Israeli soldiers whose translation turned out to be pornographic – were usually far more complex than one might imagine. “City of a Thousand Gates” is an impressive, if unlikeable, work.

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Celebrating Jewish Literature



A synagogue and a frozen yogurt shop

By Rabbi Rachel Esserman

What possible connections could there be between a synagogue and a frozen yogurt shop? They both serve as buildings that offer meaningful lessons, or at least they do in two recent novels: “The Rabbi Who Prayed with Fire: A Rabbi Vivian Mystery” by Rachel Sharona Lewis (Ladiesladies Press) and “Milk Fed” by Melissa Broder (Scribner). I’m not certain how the two main characters of these works would interact: Rabbi Vivian might be less than impressed with Broder’s heroine Rachel’s obsession with calories, while Rachel might scoff at Vivian’s social organizing. Fortunately for readers, we can enjoy both heroines without worrying whether they would clash.

Rabbi Vivian is a wonderful character: she’s a young, new rabbi who wants her congregation to join interfaith efforts and make their city a better place. It’s the perfect time for politics: a special mayoral election is taking place shortly and affordable housing is one of the main issues. The extra land the synagogue owns would be perfect for that type of housing, although not all members of the congregation agree. Joseph Glass, the senior rabbi, wants to do the right thing, but after years of being battered by so many different opinions, it’s difficult for him to decide

the best way to use the land. Good intentions then go awry and Vivian finds herself at odds with a woman to whom she is attracted. Will politics ruin not only her professional life, but her social one?

“The Rabbi Who Prayed with Fire” made for quick and easy reading. I guessed “whodunnit” and why, but that didn’t spoil the fun. In fact, I was pleased that I spotted the clues as early as I did. Anyone who has been on a synagogue board will note how Lewis captures the give and take of those meetings, which can seem long and tedious. Young rabbis will appreciate the problems Vivian faces while trying to balance her personal and professional lives. My favorite lines in the book were Vivian’s thoughts about going to a dance club after she was ordained: she visualizes “three bearded old men staring her down with disdainful eyes... It was soon after her ordination that the panel of rabbis first appeared to her in her favorite dance spot in Brooklyn, sitting on bar stools, drinking wine from the kiddish cups and shaking their heads in disapproval.” That is a wonderful image. Fellow readers will join me in hoping this is the first in a series.

While Vivian feels like a far more mature character than Rachel, the heroine of “Milk Fed,” it’s unlikely she

knows the exact number of calories she consumes in a given day. That’s the central fact of Rachel’s life, though. Rachel’s days revolve around food, although her focus is on limiting what she eats. A chubby child, her mother continually tried to control everything and anything that went into her mouth. Rachel calls her mother “the high priestess of food, the religion of our household: *abstain, abstain, abstain.*” Rachel felt the most Jewish as a child when she visited her grandparents, who, she says, were “deeply obsessed with Jewish food,” noting they “would drive me to New York and take me on a tour of all the old culinary haunts of our tribe.” Now that Rachel is slim and living in Los Angeles, she counts calories, is rigid about what and when she eats and tucks nicotine gum into jaw 24 hours a day to help limit her appetite.

Rachel does allow herself to indulge in a small amount of frozen yogurt each day. She has trained the counter person to stop the flow of yogurt when it reaches the lip of the cup. But one day, when Rachel walks into the shop, she finds a different person behind the counter: the Orthodox Miriam. Miriam seems the opposite of Rachel: fat, religious and embracing of food and the joy of family. When Miriam fills her cup to overflowing, Rachel has difficulty getting rid of the excess yogurt. When Miriam gives her a yogurt with all the toppings she normally refuses, Rachel is smitten not only with the food, but with Miriam. The descriptions of food that follow are the most erotic I’ve ever read and the descriptions of what Rachel wants to do with Miriam aren’t far behind. But there’s a problem. Miriam invites Rachel to celebrate Shabbat at her parents’ home, where Miriam lives, and the family embraces Rachel. Yet, if the two women start an affair, will Miriam’s family, to whom Miriam is greatly attached, ever accept it?

While this description might make “Milk Fed” sound very serious, Broder leavens the drama with a great deal of humor. Although in different hands Rachel might have come across as unlikeable, she’s not: readers will sympathize with her and the problems she faces.

Being a Jewish teenager

By Rabbi Rachel Esserman

For some teenagers, being Jewish plays a major role in their lives. For others, it’s a minor part of their identity, at least until they come face-to-face with antisemitism. Seeing their lives reflected in the novels they read, however, is something both they and their parents can appreciate.

“The Violin Players”

I wish I could say that the reprint of “The Violin Players” by Eileen Bluestone Sherman (The Jewish Publication Society) was out of date, but unfortunately its message is as relevant today as when the novel was first published in the 1990s. It may seem strange to read about a teenager who is not glued to her cell phone, but that’s true of Melissa Jensen who moves from New York City to the Midwest when her father accepts a position at a college there. She could have stayed with her grandparents, but this secular Jew did not want to bend to the rules of their Orthodox practice.

Although Melissa expects to hate her new school, she finds herself befriended by the cool kids and discovers that the school orchestra is far more professional than she expect-

ed. Even better, she has a chance for the lead in the school play. She also finds herself attracted to Daniel Goodman, another violinist in the orchestra who is an extraordinary musician. Life seems perfect until antisemitism raises its ugly head. No one suspects that Melissa is Jewish so, when a bigoted, popular classmate makes ugly comments about Jews, no one is willing to tell him to stop – including Melissa. When things start to escalate and Daniel’s best friend is targeted, Melissa must decide whether to embrace her heritage and risk censure, or fight prejudice.

“The Violin Players” is well done and Melissa is an engaging character. The novel contains enough suspense for the pages to turn quickly. Although it teaches a lesson, it’s never preachy and Melissa’s discoveries feel natural and real. The novel will generate discussion in a classroom setting or in a teen book club. It can also be used as a starting point for parents to talk with their teenagers about contemporary antisemitism.

“It’s My Party and I Don’t Want to Go”

Unlike Melissa, Ellie Katz, the narrator of “It’s My Party and I Don’t Want to Go” (Scholastic Press) loves being Jewish. It’s speaking or standing before large groups of people that scares her. After she has a panic attack during her older sister’s bat mitzvah party, Ellie decides she can’t have the same type of event. However, when the time comes to plan her own bat mitzvah, Ellie doesn’t want to disappoint her parents who are planning a big party. She decides the only way she can prevent the large ceremony and party from happening is sabotage. With the aid of her only friend, Zoe, she makes plans to derail the event that include e-mail hacking, food fights and strange requests to the DJ. However, Ellie discovers that each action has unintended results and those results include hurting the people she loves the best.

“It’s My Party and I Don’t Want to Go” is laugh out loud funny at times and Ellie is a delightful character. The issue of panic attacks is taken seriously over the course of the book, which also makes some good points about the natural self-absorption of teenagers. While it might sound strange, the obituaries Ellie mentally writes for herself when facing her fears are the best parts of the novel. This excellent work can help teens who have performance fears or are very shy: it never talks down to them or pretends their feelings aren’t real.

“The Castle School (for Troubled Girls)”

Being Jewish only plays a minor role in Alyssa Sheinmel’s “The Castle School (for Troubled Girls)” (Sourcebooks). It’s the forbidden tattoo Moira Dreyfuss gets that’s the final straw for the parents of this troubled teen. Combined with her skipping school and sneaking out of the house at night, Moira’s parents decide she should attend a special school, one that can help her come to terms with the death of her best, and only, friend Nathan. Moira feels she’s being punished by being sent away, something she believes she deserves, but for reasons her parents don’t suspect.

Moira takes an instant dislike to the school and the creepy Dr. Prince who runs it. She believes something sinister is happening behind the scenes, but also finds herself bonding with her fellow students, many of whom she’s surprised to learn want to be there. Although Moira is the novel’s narrator, each student has her own chapter, which describes what brought them to the school – something that adds depth to the narrative.

The plot’s twists and turns are entertaining and surprising – for both Moira and the reader. The novel is also extremely moving: I found myself crying on and off during the last 100 pages, a sure sign that Moira and her friends felt real and alive.

Book talks

◆ The Center for Jewish History will offer the virtual program “Bugsy Siegel: The Dark Side of the American Dream,” featuring author Michael Shnayerson, on Monday, April 26, at 4 pm. For more information or to register, visit <https://programs.cjh.org/event/bugsy-siegel-2021-04-26>.

◆ Jewish Women’s Archive will hold April Quarantine(ish) Book Talks on Thursdays: April 15, Jessica Cohen, translator of “And the Bride Closed the Door,” on the art and politics of literary translation; April 22, event in honor of National Poetry Month, with poets Joy Ladin, Shara McCallum and Lesléa Newman; and April 29, Brandy Colbert, author of “Little & Lion,” on a Black Jewish teen’s exploration of identity. All sessions will be held at 8 pm. To sign up for the series, visit <https://lp.constantcontactpages.com/su/8uG8YGs/QBC>.

◆ Centro Primo Levi New York will hold the virtual talk “Surviving the Ghetto” on Monday, April 19, at 11:30 am. Serena Di Nepi will discuss her book “Surviving the Ghetto,” which traces the history of the birth of the ghetto in 16th-century Rome. For more information or to register, visit https://zoom.us/webinar/register/WN_TTtOSR-bT46dVc--t4gQ2w.

◆ The Jewish Week will hold the virtual talk “The Light of Days: The Untold Story of Women Resistance Fighters in Hitler’s Ghettos” on Tuesday, April 20, at 1 pm. Judy Batalion will speak about her book “The Light of Days” about a cadre of Jewish women in Poland who helped transform the Jewish youth groups into resistance cells to fight the Nazis. For more information or to register, visit <https://jewishweek.timesofisrael.com/event/the-light-of-days-the-untold-story-of-women-resistance-fighters-in-hitlers-ghettos/>.

◆ My Jewish Learning has started the Great Jewish Book Club, which will feature Jewish novels from the past century. The first meeting will be held on Tuesday, April 13, at noon. The book for April will be “Bread Givers” by Anzia Yezierska, which explores the pushcart and tenements of the 1920s Lower East Side through the eyes of a young Jewish-American immigrant. For more information or to register, visit www.myjewishlearning.com/the-hub/explore-100-years-of-great-jewish-literature-with-my-jewish-learning/.

◆ The Skirball Culture Center will hold an evening with biographer Blake Bailey where he will talk about his newest work, “Philip Roth: The Biography.” The event will talk place on Tuesday, April 13, at 8 pm. For more information or to register, visit www.skirball.org/programs/words-and-ideas/blake-bailey-conversation-peter-sagal.

Graphic Continued from page 7

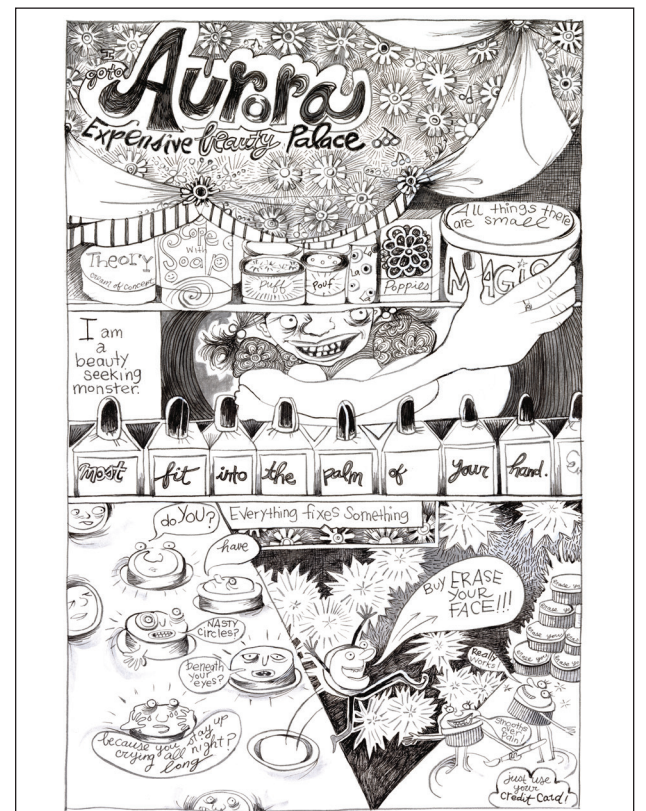
The 44 photos offer a different way to view and interpret the biblical text, and make clear the photographer’s love of the disputed area in which she lives.

For mature readers

Some memoirs are told in a straight forward, linear form. Others, like Shira Spector’s “Red Rock Baby Candy” (Fantagraphics), are a psychedelic journey into the author/artist’s psyche. The non-linear story jumps around in time and place, yet still manages to portray Spector’s feelings about her life, the death of her father and her attempts to become pregnant.

No two pages in this work feel alike: some tell a traditional story with easy to read dialogue and commentary. On others, the drawings and text circle each other – asking the reader to search for the written word. The memoir also contains very explicit sexual content that might make some readers uncomfortable. However, Spector is to be applauded for how bravely and openly she discusses her hopes and fears.

“Red Rock Baby Candy” is not for everyone because Spector demands attention and the willingness to search for the meaning of her drawings. This graphic roller coaster ride will, however, reward those readers with its emphatic embrace of life.



A page from “Red Rock Baby Candy” by Shira Spector