

openly acknowledges his or her place in the action. Marom's story strikes the reader as credible because he illustrates each concept and principle with a vignette that has the ring of truth to any adult who has spent time in a Jewish school.

In the concluding paragraphs of his essay, Fox reminds readers that "some of the most urgent problems require not immediate action but profound thought." *Visions of*

Jewish Education is an invitation to everyone concerned about Jewish education and its role in shaping the Jewish future to share in that profound thought. By joining the philosophical conversation, principals, teachers, policy makers, and other concerned Jews may find that their responses to urgent problems will be more visionary, more coherent, and more effective in touching the lives of Jewish learners of all ages.

Jewish Books for Jewish Kids

Heidi Estrin

AS A JUDAICA LIBRARIAN, I am often confronted with readers' preconceptions that a "Jewish book" means something akin to *Yonkele Makes Hamantaschen*. Jewish children's literature, though, is growing in both quantity and quality. Talented authors like Karen Hesse and Jerry Spinelli are contributing to the field, and Jewish books are winning the respected Caldecott Award.

We've come a long way, but have we come far enough? Dr. Wendy Mogul, author of *The Blessing of a Skinned Knee* and expert on Jewish childhood in modern America, says, "American Jewish children's identities are battered daily by the pervasiveness and glitter of Christianity and by the secular 'idol worship' of grades, status, and material goods. We need books that stand against those forces, engendering true pride in being Jewish and fostering excitement in the specialness of Judaism. In particular, we need books that get beyond Jewish customs to Jewish ideas. Take the concept of 'Chosen Peoplehood.' Children find this idea very provocative, especially when we teach them about it not as superiority but in terms of our special responsibility to change the world one person at a time."

Some of the most powerful Jewish books in recent years show how individuals make a difference. In the last year alone, *Tough Questions Jews Ask* for teens and the picture books *Bagels from Benny* and *When the Chickens Went On Strike* describe the rewards of taking responsible action. Recent winners of the Association of Jewish Libraries' Sydney Taylor Book Award feature characters who create positive change. In *Chicken Soup by Heart*, *Rivka's First Thanksgiving*, and *Gershon's Monster*, the main character takes small actions that make the world a better place.

"Some of my favorite Jewish children's books aren't overtly Jewish," says Mogul. "In *Outside Over There*, the reader just knows the characters are Jewish without any textual reference. We need to look for books that bridge the gap between 'subtly Jewish' books and heavy-handed Judaism in our more self-conscious literature. I see parents and teachers often choosing books showing a stricter level of observance than their own. Paradoxically, this can make children feel less pride by making them feel that they don't measure up to literary examples of Jewishness. I'd like to see more children's books in which liberal Judaism is taken seriously."

Such "incidental Jewishness" is a new and encouraging trend in children's literature. Perhaps due to multiculturalism, we now see Jewish characters whose Judaism is not the story's focus. The picture book *I Only Like What I Like* and the novel *Birdland* both realistically show Judaism as an important but not all-encompassing element of their protagonists' lives. Modern Jewish facts of life such as interracial adoption and interfaith marriage are acknowledged in books like *What I Like About Passover* and *Jalapeño Bagels*. Children from less traditional families can feel validated in their Jewish identity by seeing their lifestyles represented in such literature.

Are Jewish books serving the needs of today's children? Many are, but we must still be selective. Ask the librarian at your synagogue, JCC, or day school for recommendations, read reviews in the *Association of Jewish Libraries Newsletter* or *Jewish Book World*, sign up for the BabaBookz club (babaganewz.com), and seek out Sydney Taylor Book Award winning titles. "My library is my garden," said the poet Judah Ha-Levi, and Jewish children's literature is blooming.

Heidi Estrin, M.L.S., is Chair of the Sydney Taylor Book Award Committee for the Association of Jewish Libraries, and President of the Association's South Florida Chapter. She works as a children's librarian at Congregation B'nai Israel in Boca Raton. For more information about the Association of Jewish Libraries and its book awards, please visit www.jewishlibraries.org.

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