

Celebrating Jewish Literature

A golem and a dybbuk

By Rabbi Rachel Esserman

The majority of fantasy novels I've read about golems, dybbuks and other supernatural characters have been serious works because the relationships between those creatures and the human ones tend to be fraught and unpleasant. However, that is not the only way to approach the subject: some authors use humor when portraying their supernatural characters. That's what made two novels—one about a golem and the other featuring a dybbuk—so interesting to read at the same time. The wonderful conclusion to the Golem and Jinni trilogy, "The Gate of Midnight" by Helene Wecker (Harper), is filled with drama, anguish and suspense while the delightful reprint of "The Dyke and the Dybbuk" by Ellen Galford (Sinister Wisdom) was not only funny, but offered a satire of the corporate world.

Those who enjoyed the previous Golem and Jinni novels will definitely want to read "The Gates of Midnight." For those who have forgotten what occurred in the first two books, Wecker offers a basic outline of previous events in the form of a diary written by Chana Levy, the golem. In the last book, Chana and Ahmed, the jinni, defeated the evil Yehudah Schaalman, the golem's creator, and trapped him in a flask that is buried under the sands of Syria. Chana now leads a peaceful life in a house hidden behind walls in Brooklyn, while Ahmad moved to Chicago to start a new life after pretending to have been killed in a fire. The two talk on the phone every day and, although they miss each other, have been unable to find a way to share their lives in the same city.

The two characters face great danger when Schaalman escapes from the desert after the flask that contains him is found and brought to the United States, where it ends up in the hands of a mob enforcer. Schaalman is looking to fully escape his prison and gain control of Chana again and enslave Ahmad. The problems Chana and Ahmad face are complicated by the 1929 stock market crash; the appearance of Thomas Beshara, who works to help build the Empire State Building, but whom readers learn has a

previous connection to Chana and Ahmad; and Kreindel Altschul, who once had her own golem protector and who dabbles in mystical secrets that Chana finds dangerous. The complex and exciting plot covers more than 450 pages, with the several plot lines coming together to create a suspenseful and satisfying ending.

What makes "The Gates of Midnight" such a success is that even the non-human characters feel real and convincing. Chana worries about losing control of her anger and hurting innocents. It's difficult for her to adjust to normal life, something that is not helped by the fact that she never ages and has to move before people realize there is something different and strange about her. Ahmed faces similar problems, in addition to his desire to use his skills to create something meaningful and awe-inspiring. However, his differences—his Middle Eastern looks and the distance he must keep from his coworkers—work against him. The humans in the book are also interesting, particularly Kreindel, who loves studying Torah and Kabbalah, but who has to hide her studies because, if revealed, she would lose her job as the head of an orphanage for Jewish girls. Although "The Gates of Midnight" could be read as a stand-alone novel, for a full understanding of the plot, readers would do well to read all three books.

While Wecker's novel is a serious work, "The Dyke and the Dybbuk" is laugh-out-loud funny. Galford strays from the traditional idea of a dybbuk: this is not a lost soul forced to remain on earth due to unfinished business. Instead, Kokos (the only one of the dybbuk's names that humans can pronounce) is part of an official business that employs various kinds of supernatural creatures (not all of which are Jewish). Unfortunately, Kokos was not successful in her last assignment: her possession of Gittel, a young woman in a village in Europe, ended when a rabbi imprisoned her in a tree for 200 years. When finally released, the dybbuk discovers just how much the world changed during that time: not only is the village and all its people

gone, her company has been bought out by another global enterprise and there are a ton of new rules and regulations she is supposed to follow.

However, Kokos wants to finish her original employment: she was hired to possess the women of this particular family for at least 30 generations. Unfortunately, continued possession looks to end with the current Gittel, Rainbow Rosenbloom, who is a lesbian and doesn't want to have children. The challenge interests Kokos: how can she create problems for a secular, totally Jewishly uninterested person whose sins would have made the original Gittel blush. Ah, there is one way to disturb Rainbow's life: Kokos makes her fall in love with an ultra-Orthodox woman and plots Rainbow's return to the ultra-Orthodox lifestyle. While the dybbuk enjoys the challenge, her corporate superiors keep trying to break the contract. Although, at first, Rainbow found the dybbuk intrusive and interfering, she begins to enjoy her company, even when Kokos makes her behave oddly. The plot follows their adventures to a fun and satisfying ending.

My favorite scenes in the book feature Rainbow's four aunts who love her, but criticize everything she says and does, from her name to her lifestyle and work life. Although the Passover seder is great, the section when Rainbow drives three of her aunts to visit the fourth was hysterical. Kokos' comments on the corporate world and societal changes are also really well done. There are touches of seriousness, as when Kokos compares the world's treatment of Jews and demons, noting that "one upon a time, the Christian world made no distinction between Jews and demons—knowing both had horns," that add depth to the novel.

What's amazing about "The Dyke and the Dybbuk" is how contemporary it feels. Although Galford originally published the novel in the 1990s, it's as relevant today as it was then. Kokos was enjoyable and fun company, although I'm not sure I would want to be possessed by her. I think she would make a really interesting friend, though. That's a high recommendation.

A different look at Deuteronomy

By Rabbi Rachel Esserman

I would not refer to most Torah commentaries I've read as exciting and page-turning. This is especially true when the author and my theologies differ greatly. However, although Rabbi David Fohrman approaches the text from an Orthodox point of view, which includes accepting the biblical stories as historically accurate, I find his commentaries on the biblical text fascinating. This is partly because he offers a close reading of the text, looking to see what it actually says, rather than what other commentators have decided it means. Even when I don't agree with his thoughts, I enjoy reading them because I always learn something new. That's true of his latest work "Deuteronomy: A Parsha Companion" (Aleph Beta Press/Maggid). Once again, I found myself eagerly turning pages to learn the new and interesting ideas he offered about the text.*

Fohrman's work does not offer a verse-by-verse commentary, but rather discusses lessons readers can learn from each *parasha* or explains parts of the text he found puzzling. His specialty is showing the connections between different books of the Torah and how, when taken together, they can teach us something of greater importance than the individual verses can do on their own. For example, he discusses several laws found in Deuteronomy, and shows how they refer to previous stories and later biblical books. Readers probably won't be surprised that he ties the law of inheritance—the fact that the eldest son, even if born to a hated wife, must be given a double inheritance—to the story of Jacob, Leah and Rachel, although his discussion is cleverly done and offers insights into the character of Jacob's children. What was unexpected was showing how the law of captive women is reflected in the book of Esther. Even when he seems to be stretching his point, Fohrman's commentary on Esther's behavior was extremely interesting, particularly the reason he posits for Esther's refusal of the cosmetics and other beauty aids. Esther has been taken captive by the king—as have all the women he collected who will now be part of his harem forever—but, like the captive woman, she does not seek to beautify herself. In fact, a close reading of the text shows that what captured the king's heart was not her beauty, but her grace and kindness.

The author writes about the law of sanctuary cities as an example of how the Torah seeks to find a workable way to protect members of Israelite society. For example, Fohrman looks at both sides of the law, of how inadvertent killers are allowed to escape to a sanctuary city to prevent being killed, but also how a blood avenger is allowed to shed their blood if they don't do so. He notes how the inadvertent killer was most likely neglectful, but still doesn't deserve to be put to death. However, he also understands how a blood avenger will feel such pain and grief over the death of his loved one

that his desire to punish the killer makes sense. The larger point is that both these people are tied together by death, whether an inadvertently one or one as a form of justice. According to Fohrman, the Torah looks to teach that "the justice system, in the Torah's world, isn't merely a mechanism for making sure that everyone gets what's coming to them. It is a vehicle through which society teaches its highest values." He notes that the Torah seeks a "balanced path," writing that "the truest response to human failing is not to repeat it, but to demonstrate the better path that isn't taken. For it is only by doing so, by refusing to let apathy answer apathy or zealotness answer zealotness, that we can hope to build a society that navigates successfully between the shoals of those two deadly extremes."

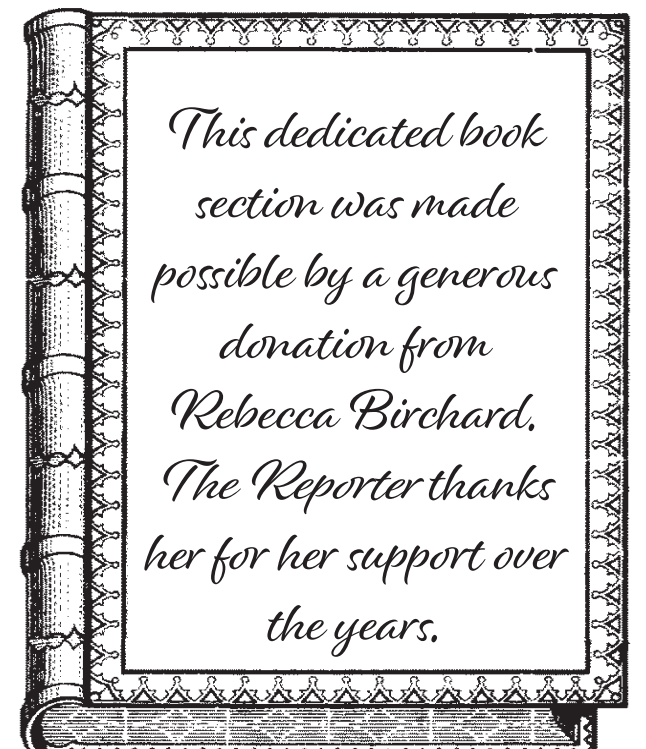
Many of the ideas Fohrman explores are too complex to explain in a short review because it's impossible to duplicate the author's careful step-by-step approach. However, his amazing interpretation of why Moses wasn't able to enter the Promised Land is worth trying to summarize. The traditional approach is that it was Moses' striking a rock, rather than speaking to it, so the Israelites will have water to drink that prevented him from being allowed to enter. Fohrman sees this as the concluding event in a series of events that are the real reason Moses is unable to fulfill his dream. The first event dates back to the Golden Calf, when God tells Moses that God will kill off the sinning Israelites and replace them with the descendants of Moses. Moses refuses to allow that to happen. Fohrman notes that there is something very important to note in what the Israelites actually say about the calf: they are less worried about being left alone in the desert than about losing Moses, whom they see as their only connection to God. The idea that Moses is their connection to God can also be found in what happens when the Israelites are attacked by the Amalekites. It's only when Moses' hands are held up by Aaron and Hur when Moses tires that the Israelites are able to defeat their attackers. What Fohrman makes clear is that the Israelites see Moses as the one who makes this possible. It is Moses, rather than God alone, who protects them.

Fohrman ties what occurs to Moses to the story of Jacob and Jacob's dream that takes place when he is fleeing his brother Esau. The promise God makes Jacob then is that God will bring him back safely to the land he is fleeing. The author doesn't believe that occurred when Jacob first returned to Canaan with wives and children, because his family soon moved to Egypt where his descendants became slaves. The fulfillment of God's promise to Jacob will take place now, when the Israelites cross the Jordan River. However, their belief that they need Moses to connect to God is wrong. That link must be broken. Fohrman believes that, in some way, the Israelites worship Moses, which is

why there can never be another prophet like him: all the people are able to connect to God, from the highest priest to the lowest in the land, including the water carrier. If this sounds a bit far-fetched, that's because it's a summary of more than 100 pages of close text study. However, even if readers don't agree with Fohrman's ideas, watching them develop is incredibly thought provoking and inspiring.

Fohrman is an excellent teacher: he talks directly to the reader and even notes when they may feel that his textual comparisons are less than convincing. For those who enjoy a close reading of the text, his discussion of how different sections of the Torah are related are well done, even if one doesn't agree with his interpretations. It's worth it, though, to follow his reasoning for the lesson he teaches. All five of his *parasha* companions belong on the shelves of anyone who enjoys learning about the twists and turns of Torah.

*To read The Reporter's reviews of Fohrman's commentaries on the previous books of the Bible, visit www.thereportergroup.org/features/off-the-shelf-biblical-commentary-by-rabbi-rachel-esserman-368553, www.thereportergroup.org/features/off-the-shelf-parasha-and-prophet-by-rabbi-rachel-esserman-377675, www.thereportergroup.org/features/cjl-exploring-leviticus-467131 and www.thereportergroup.org/book-reviews/cjl-exploring-the-biblical-book-of-numbers.



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Celebrating Jewish Literature

Biblical first families and God as a parent

By Rabbi Rachel Esserman

The publication of new biblical commentaries may seem without end, but those who love studying the stories found in the Torah text are often eager to discover new and different lenses with which to view them. Sometimes, the book was disappointing, merely rehashing what was said in prior publications. That is not true of the excellent and exciting “God and the First Families: Parenting, Trauma, and Healing in the Book of Genesis” by Stephen Spector (The Jewish Publication Society). Spector, a professor emeritus of English at Stony Brook University, not only reviews interpretations of other biblical scholars, but offers his own fascinating slant on the text.

In his introduction, Spector notes the underlying question he seeks to explore in his work: “Who is God?” This is not an existential question for him, but rather grounded in the idea that God seems to answer some prayers (for example, the author’s teenage prayer that his mother would survive cancer) and not others (for example, those who died in the Holocaust). He writes, “God answered my prayers and not theirs. Balancing these two realities has left me in an uncomfortable place spiritually: I am a skeptic who deeply believes in God.” He then reviews different American’s concepts of God and notes the ways God acts as a parent in the Bible, two things he finds complement each other. However, the author also notes the many traumas the biblical first families faced partly due to God’s parenting approaches, which changed over time. Spector also mentions how the patriarchs and matriarchs can serve as models of how *not* to parent.

Some of the parenting styles that the author believes God follows include the authoritarian (children are expected to obey without being given an explanation behind a parent’s decision or the reason for a punishment),

permissive (generally not giving children any directions and allowing them to act as they please), neglectful (ignoring children, even when they are harming themselves) and authoritative (children are expected to behave, but parents communicate the reasons behind decisions to help them with their personal and moral growth). These definitions are simplifications, but give a basis for Spector’s understanding of how God’s parenting styles that mirror those of humans.

In Genesis, the author sees God using several parenting styles. For example, it is an authoritarian God who tells Adam and Eve not to eat from the tree of good and evil because no explanation of the reason behind that decision is given. The same is true for the binding of Isaac: Abraham is told what to do without God explaining the reason behind the demand. Spector sees a change, though, when God begins to interact with Abraham’s descendants: “God in the later Genesis stories focuses less on obedience and submission and more on the moral and emotional development of Israel’s ancestors. An old Jewish saying holds that you know your suffering has been sent by God when it teaches you something. That’s what happens to Israel’s children as Genesis draws to a close.”

Many of the characters are traumatized by what occurs to them. That trauma was then passed down through the generations. The binding of Isaac is one example. Spector writes, “Although the Binding is a test of Abraham, it is Isaac who pays the greatest price and sustains the most injury. The emotional damage that the *Akedah* inflicts on him affects him deeply, and I propose that it infects his children and their children. Authoritarian parenting has silenced God’s favorite patriarch, Abraham, and injured Abraham’s son. Both have submitted to a higher authority, Abraham to God’s and Isaac to his father’s. The family has

proved worthy. But the price has been high, perhaps too high for mere mortals to endure without incurring injury. The experience exposes the fragility of the mortal players in the divine drama.”

In the later stories in Genesis, God does not directly explain what the characters need to learn, but instead teaches them lessons through the actions of others. For example, Jacob cheats his brother Esau out of his birthright and is then tricked by his father-in-law Laban to not only marry both his daughters, but work seven additional years to pay for marrying Rachel. Joseph’s brothers learn humility and are sorrowful for their actions against him, as shown by the way they seek to protect Benjamin when he is threatened in Egypt. They pass a test that allows Joseph to reveal his true identity. Joseph does not speak to God, but does note that he feels that it was God who brought him to Egypt, giving divine approval of his actions.

Spector does admit that one parental approach won’t work with every child in every situation. He sees a difference between to God’s interactions with individual members of a family – one where the authoritative approach works – and his approach to the Israelite people as a whole, where authoritarian methods work best. The author notes God’s return to the authoritarian approach during the Exodus from Egypt, when God governs by offering laws for all to follow, rather than dealing individually with each family.

This short review cannot do justice to “God and the First Families.” Anyone interested in analyzing biblical stories will want to read this book. It would also work for classes or study groups that can discuss in more detail the different possibilities Spector offers. Readers do not have to agree with all the author’s interpretations to find this a thought-provoking and rewarding work.

Novels about different countries and times

By Rabbi Rachel Esserman
Italy/U.S.

“How are these two characters related?” is a question that readers will ask when reading “Like Wafers in Honey” by Leah Eskin (Levine Querido). The novel is both a look at Italy under Mussolini during World War II and an exploration of life in the U.S. from 1950-2000. Each chapter is divided into three sections: in the first, 17-year-old Stella Fortuna and three of her siblings avoid transportation to a detention camp, hiding from fascist troops and those who would betray them. The second features recipes of Italian Jewish delicacies. The real life Edda Machlin serves as the main character in the third story – a woman who traveled to the U.S., married and tried to understand American culture, while offering friends and neighbors a taste of the dishes she knew growing up in Italy.

In other hands, this might have been an uneasy mix, but Eskin manages to turn these disparate sections into a charming narrative. Stella is poetic and imaginative, which makes her thoughts easy to read, even when she frequently has to move to escape being captured. However, her experiences teach her something important: that people are complicated – a mix of good and bad – something that makes her long “for her old sewing scissors, wish[ing] she could fashion a coat of many colors for each character in this story.” Edda, on the other hand, is down to earth and offended by what is called Italian food in America, something that leads her to write her own cookbook. She also must decide what to do with her memories of life in Italy during the war. One of her brothers notes, “Either you choose to forget, and live that slice of life that remains for us. Or you can choose to remember, and risk falling into the abyss. So, a compromise. To be able to survive and live a normal-looking life, I forget. But not within me. No, I remember.”

Unlike many Jewish World War II novels, “Like Wafers in Honey” does not focus on the Holocaust. Instead, it is a story of survival – survival when the world around you becomes one you no longer recognize, a world that once accepted you and now rejects your very existence. It also looks at how one survives and makes a new life when those years are over.

Guatemala/Berlin

Eduardo Halfon is noted for writing moody novels featuring a fictional version of himself as the main character. Many of his works are explorations of his family or his personal experiences, although he does claim they are not accurate views of his life. This is also true of his latest work “Tarantula” (Bellevue Literary Press), which looks at a traumatic experience that occurred at a Jewish survival training camp in 1984, while also discussing his relationship with his father and his meeting with a counselor from the camp in Berlin in contemporary times.

The traumatic camp experience opens the novel, but the narrative soon turns to why the author’s family moved to

the U.S. when he was around 10 years old. At 13, Halfon was sent to Guatemala to attend a Jewish survival training camp. The parents think this means learning how to live in the wilderness – camping in tents and learning how to navigate in a forest. Unfortunately, the counselors have something more sinister in mind. However, before readers learn exactly what happened at the camp, Halfon talks about his difficult relationship with not only his father, but Judaism. In fact, the two seem tied in his mind. The narrative moves in circles, with the author learning the reason behind the traumatic experience before readers learn about the specifics of his experience. Underlying the story are his thoughts about memory, not only the different ways people remember and disagree about events, but how these memories of childhood remain, underlying adult behavior even when people are unaware of them. However, as Halfon learns, they can rise at unexpected times and affect our actions.

“Tarantula” is not for those who prefer a straight narrative, but it does leave readers with a great deal to ponder and discuss, making this book a good choice for book clubs. Readers may debate whether some of what is revealed is true or invented, but that just makes the work even more intriguing to read.

Ancient Moav

There have been numerous debates about why so many adults readers now deliberately seek novels written for young adults. One simple reason is that many of these works feature moving stories about interesting characters whose dilemmas offer life lessons. That’s certainly true for Sharon Reiss Baker’s “Last Days in Moav” (Apples and Honey Press), which focuses on three siblings during the days before the Israelites crossed into the Promised Land after the Exodus from Egypt. The narrative generally rotates between three siblings. However, the eldest son, Netanel, offers a very different point of view than the other main characters, his twin siblings, 16-year-old Milcah and Gidon: Netanel died in a flood a few years back, but his soul remains attached to this world, making him a *rapha* (a ghost-like figure) that no one can see or hear. That means he watches his family, but is unable to communicate with them.

Milcah and Gidon are healers who not only use herbs, but are able to channel healing from God. This leaves them open to charges of witchcraft, which is punishable by death. Their family life is not easy: their father helps command the army, but is not a loving and caring figure. He ignores their younger brother, Avidan, and spends little time with their mother, who has sunken into a depression. However, he dotes on his new, pregnant wife. Milcah feels no one will ever want to marry her, but ponders other possibilities for her future when she meets someone new in the marketplace. Unfortunately, that future is threatened when she and Gidon are accused of deliberately killing a neighbor’s goats. The fine line they must follow to prove

their innocence will determine the course of their lives.

“Last Days in Moav” is filled with suspense and has an excellent plot. Its characters felt three-dimensional, developing and learning more about themselves and those around them. All of the characters except for Moses came from Baker’s imagination, allowing readers to view events from a very different point of view. Lovers of biblical-themed fiction will definitely want to add this work to their library.

Spiritual advice

By Rabbi Rachel Esserman

Life can be difficult and finding a way to deal with those difficulties is not always easy. Whether it’s a tragedy that breaks one’s heart or the accumulation of everyday cares and concerns that leaves one feeling overwhelmed, the days can seem a never-ending, gray, lifeless trudge. Two new works offer ways to help people through tragic times and/or find joy and meaning in life: Rabbi Amy Grossblatt Pessah discusses how she continues to find and create joy after the death of her 20-year-old son to brain cancer in “The Wholeness of a Broken Heart: Pathways to Resilience and Renewal” (Monkfish Book Publishing Company), while Debbie Plawner uses colors and symbols for readers to create a more spiritual life in “Illuminated Paths: 52 Ways to Access Your Inner Wisdom Through the Colors of Torah” (The Collective Book Studio).

Pessah notes in her introduction that life is difficult and of the need to move through the grieving process, using faith to find the beauty that remains in the world. The author reminds readers that, while we cannot choose what happens to us, we can choose how we respond. However, she is clear that people need to cultivate faith now, before facing the illness or death of a loved one. It is through processing the brokenness that Pessah found ways to craft wholeness. She accomplished that by connecting to community, family, friends and nature.

Readers should note that Pessah has a kind of faith that others may not share: she believes that her late son sends her signs, everything from practical jokes he would have played to events that remind her of him. While that idea may not resonate with everyone (it didn’t with this reader), she still offers a great deal of excellent advice, particularly how not to be permanently swallowed by sorrow. Yes, there are days when she feels overwhelmed by the death of her son, but she still looks to find joy somewhere that day. The author correctly notes that life is bittersweet and offers practical suggestions for when one feels overwhelmed. These include allowing oneself to deeply feel those emotions; focusing on the moment; making sure to breathe in the joy and breathe out the sorrow; spending time in nature; and being kind and compassionate to oneself, which includes realizing that some days are going to be more difficult than

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Celebrating Jewish Literature

Legend, real person or a bit of both

By Rabbi Rachel Esserman

Some books are difficult to review because they aren’t what you expect. That was the case with “I, Wandering Jew: A Five-Century History of Our Modern Condition” by Yair Mintzker (Princeton University Press). Mintzker’s book is a well written, in-depth work about the legend of the Wandering Jew. My problem? I thought there was going to be more Jewish content. There were also some sections that left me puzzled, which says less about the work than my sense that the author and I were focusing on different parts of the legend.

In his introduction, Mintzker discusses the origin of the Wandering Jew legend. The story seems to have first appeared in a pamphlet published in Germany in 1602. It tells of a German student who met a man called Ahasverus, who claimed to have been alive when Jesus was crucified. When Jesus tried to rest against the wall of Ahasverus’ shop while carrying the cross, Ahasverus cursed him. Jesus is then said to have answered, “I will stand here and rest, but you must go!” According to the pamphlet, Ahasverus was then forced to wander the world until the Second Coming. The author also notes that this legend was accepted as fact by the Nazis and was yet another reason they condemned the Jewish population of the world.

Readers might expect Mintzker to discuss the origin of the pamphlet first and then show how the idea of the Wandering Jew was later adopted by the Jewish community. Instead, he writes about this in reverse order, something that was a problem for me. His first chapter, which takes place in 1952, deals with a so-called Wandering Jew, who traveled from Europe to Israel and then to South

America. The man turns out to have been a real person and there is even a record of his death. Yet, Mintzker sees the Wandering Jew as part reality and part myth, noting that how people think about the idea matters as much as the legend. I didn’t find this particularly convincing, at least in this chapter.

His chapter on “The Nag,” written by Yiddish author Shalom Jacob Abramovitsh under the name Mendeley Mocher Sforim (which translates into Mendeley the Book Seller), does show how the legend became part of the Jewish psyche. The main character of the novel tried to assimilate into Russian culture, only to find that the books he reads for his schooling drive him mad. The work compares the Jewish people to an overworked wreck of a horse (the nag), which comes to symbolize the Wandering Jew. The author notes that “over the nineteenth and early twentieth century, the stereotypical Ahasverus was cast as a sympathetic Jew, before becoming part of a concrete embodied reality. Some Jews could now identify deeply with, and live vicariously through, a version of the Wandering Jew.”

The next two chapters focus a great deal on the origin of the original pamphlet and Protestant theology. Mintzker tells of those who, in 1711, proved that the legend was not based on a real event or person, although some still felt there was a general truth to the idea of Jews being cursed. The discussions of various versions of Protestant theology were beyond my general knowledge. (I confess to knowing about Luther and Calvin, but I never studied Protestant divisions of the time in any detail.) Mintzker notes the way these theologians disparaged each other (with the name calling reminiscent of today’s social media).

It is in the second chapter that the author does his big reveal: Mintzker believes that the original story actually had nothing to do with Jews. He not only notes the theologians being made fun of, but the one who inspired the Wandering Jew legend. That not only made the theologian seem like a buffoon, but compared him to those who don’t believe in or understand Christianity. Most casual readers will not recognize the names of these people: they are not major figures for those who know little about the origins of the different forms of German Protestantism.

The last chapter, which returns to the present day, offers a third-person look at Mintzker’s life. He sees himself as a Wandering Jew, first living in Israel and then traveling to different parts of the world. For him, the Wandering Jew serves as a literary symbol and a fact of life. He asks the question: “At its core, Ahasverus’s legend depicts Jews as eternal strangers no matter who they are or what they do. But in light of postcolonial discourse, one has to wonder: if Jews aren’t indigenous to what they call the Land of Israel, where exactly *are* they indigenous? In America? Poland? Scandinavia? Jews, according to postcolonialism’s binary ideology, are always and everywhere alien; their fate is to remain wandering Jews.”

It was the story of the author’s life found in that chapter of “I, Wandering Jew” that made me glad I persevered and finished the book. The work concludes with a translation of the original story of the Wandering Jew found in the 1602 pamphlet. What will remain with readers is the thought that a work of fiction can take on its own life and affect generations who believe its truth. That is a lesson worth contemplating.

War and survival

By Rabbi Rachel Esserman

Someday I am going to get a t-shirt printed with the phrase, “Even I can’t read everything (but not for lack of trying).” That was one of the reasons I didn’t originally ask for a review copy of Yishay Ishi Ron’s “Dog” (Soncata Press), which later went on to win two national Jewish Book Award: the Miller Family Book Club Awards and the Jane Weitzman Award for Hebrew Fiction in Translation. The other was that I knew the subject matter made for difficult reading. However, I was debating buying a copy when I saw that Ron had another book coming out: “The Girl Who Rode the White Elephant” (Soncata Press). When I asked for a review copy of that work, the publisher sent me that book and “Dog.” What is clear from reading both is that Ron writes powerful and moving fiction.

Both works are partly based on real life. “Dog” tells of an Israeli soldier who is so traumatized by what occurred during his time in Gaza that the only way he can forget those events is to medicate himself with heroin. He sleeps in an abandoned building in Tel Aviv and spends his days begging for money so he can buy more drugs. The unnamed soldier now goes by the name Geller, based on the fact that he believes that someday he’ll be able to bend a spoon with his mind like the famous illusionist Uri Geller. Although his family cares about him, Geller can’t bear to spend time with them because he feels like a complete disappointment. The only family member he visits is his father, whose stroke has left him unconscious and who is being kept alive by machines.

Geller’s life changes when a stray dog enters his life. The dog is injured and Geller wants to help him, even though he is unable to help himself. When Geller collapses on his way to taking Dog (as he is now called) to a vet, Geller is taken to the hospital and the dog is almost abandoned. Fortunately, Doris was walking by at the time and, even though she doesn’t want a pet, decides to take care of Dog. Curious about Geller, she and Dog seek him out at the abandoned building after he is quickly released from the hospital. Doris is the only who seems to accept Geller as a human being even with his drug habit. It’s not that she doesn’t want him to get clean, but she is still willing to befriend him even if he continues to take heroin. In fact, parts of the plot hinge on the fact that Doris looks for Geller even in places he believes are too dangerous for her to enter.

The author uses different points of view to help readers better understand his characters: Geller speaks in the first person, while the third person is used to present Dog and Doris’ thoughts. The sections featuring Dog are convincingly canine: it’s clear that Dog is an animal, not a human in disguise. My only complaint is that the novel seems to end, rather than conclude, leaving readers to ponder or debate what happens after the last page.

“Dog” is painful and disturbing to read, which is the point. Geller suffers from post-traumatic distress, but, after having been a member of an elite Israel Defense Force unit, it’s hard for him to admit that he can’t cope with his memories. Using heroin not only numbs him, but makes him forget the past. At least, that’s true until his

body once again demands a hit. Ron dedicates his book “to the combatants whose eyes have seen things that their minds refuse to forget.” What Geller and those combatants experienced was heartbreaking. My final reaction was to think that rather than thanking soldiers for their service, we should apologize to them for all they suffered.

It’s clear that “Dog” is based on Ron’s personal experiences, something he notes in his biography. That made me wonder if he could write about events he has not personally experienced. I’m glad to say the answer to the question is yes. “The Girl Who Rode the White Lion” is not only powerful and moving, but extremely suspenseful. It focuses on two time periods: Nazi Germany before and during the beginning of World War II, and several countries in the late 1950s.

The section about the Frank family takes place during the earlier period: Sarah’s father has been sent to a concentration camp by a former friend of the family who is now a member of the SS. Hubert Zimmer has always been envious of his friend’s success and partly in love with his wife, Ruth. Although relationships are forbidden between Germans and Jews, Zimmer tries to rape her. Ruth manages to escape with her daughter, although no one will help her for fear they will also be arrested. Seeking shelter at a circus, Ruth orders Sarah to hide. What happens then is something readers will have to discover for themselves, but Ron definitely captures the magic Sarah feels at the circus, particularly the wonder she experiences seeing the elephants and lions perform.

The 1950s section begins in New York City with the death of a white lion who lives at the Central Park Zoo. While doing an autopsy on the lion, Dr. Mark Spencer discovers a ring with the SS insignia on it. Unable to control his curiosity, Mark travels to France and then Israel to learn why and how the lion came to swallow the ring. His search not only uncovers secrets, but changes his life as he learns more about what happened to the Jewish community of Europe during the war.

Ron does a superb job allowing readers to see into the minds of his characters. Particularly of interest are the chapters featuring Zimmer’s thoughts. Readers come to understand his psyche while still being able to disdain and condemn his actions and thoughts. The members of the circus where Sarah hides are also shown as complete characters with conflicting emotions and desires. That includes the problem faced by one character: is it permissible to save someone you love if you have to sacrifice someone else to do so?

While readers may correctly guess how the white lion swallowed the ring, that does not negate the suspense since there is far more to the tale than one might at first suspect. The novel’s ending proved surprising, heartrending and satisfying. “The Girl Who Rode on the White Elephant” is based on a real story, but the author successfully fleshes out the details of his characters, good and bad, in an amazing way. Ron is definitely a writer to watch. I look forward to more of his works.

Advice.....Continued from page 8

others. That advice can speak to anyone facing great life problems: even in the midst of the worst days of their lives, they can look to find joy in the world, just as Pessah does.

“The Wholeness of a Broken Heart” offers a great deal of wisdom, even for those who disagree with Pessah’s theology, because the practical applications of her ideas can still be helpful. Her work is rooted in Jewish concepts, from the importance of Shabbat to the value of community, and is filled with stories about those who have found joy after suffering sorrow.

While Pessah’s work offers a traditional approach to spirituality in that it features written text, Plawner presents an intriguing way for readers to explore a different path to spirituality. Her work comes with a short booklet, an oracolor wheel and a set of 52 cards. The author bases her work on the Zohar, a Jewish mystical text, that says that a soul journeys through four levels of light, light that the author sees as interacting with color. Three realms – mind, body and heart – are connected to various color pathways. Each color offers English and Hebrew concepts to explore. For example, under the term mind, readers can concentrate on gratitude/*bracha*, intention/*kavanah*, attitude/*tzedakah* or attention/*hineni*. Each individual color is used as an

avenue to understanding four levels of meaning: *pshat* (surface level understanding), *remez* (using the Hebrew word to explore additional meaning), *drash* (practical suggestions to use this idea) and *sod* (a spiritual meaning that suggests ways for readers to reflect on what they’ve learned). Each page ends with a blessing for readers related to the theme of the card.

Plawner relates several different ways to use the cards. Readers can search the deck to find a color that appeals to them and then ponder the Jewish concept offered. The author also suggests different types of readings that can be done through layouts that may remind readers of tarot cards. These step-by-step suggestions will help those with no experience in using color and illustrations to explore spiritual ideas.

What does stand out is how beautiful the cards are. Although sometimes the subtle shades of colors can make them difficult to read, they are a pleasure to look at and explore. Even those who might scoff at using cards to explore spirituality may enjoy sifting through and setting out their favorite cards. Plawner’s work offers an intriguing and very different approach to exploring Jewish concepts and ways to incorporate them into readers’ lives.



Celebrating Jewish Literature



Romance, social media and sex

By Rabbi Rachel Esserman

One reason people enjoy romantic comedies is because their endings are predictable: a true rom-com guarantees its main characters a happily ever after. Even if they face serious problems – physical or psychological – readers know that everything will work out in the end. In a world where that often doesn’t happen, these books not only offer comfort, but the thrill of an exciting romance readers may never themselves experience. That’s certainly true of two recent rom-coms, “Soon By You” by Dahlia Adler (St. Martin’s Griffin) and “Extracurricular” by Rachel Lynn Solomon (Berkley Romance). Although the characters belong to two different worlds, the novels have several things in common: both feature characters who are afraid they will never experience a satisfying relationship and who find their world impacted by social media. Both works also offer a great deal of explicit sex, something readers who prefer more chaste works should note.

“Soon By You” takes place in New York City’s tight-knit Modern Orthodox community. Twenty-nine-year-old Arielle (Ari) Becker fits the category of always-a-bridesmaid-never-a-bride, although she’s not sure she ever wants to get married. A free spirit who has a not-so-great reputation in her community, she has hooked up with (but never had actual intercourse with) several men, none of whom look at her as a serious marital prospect. What does bother her, though, is that most of her married friends no longer want to maintain their friendship, greatly reducing her social life. She worries this may happen with her current roommates: one is getting married and the other is in a serious relationship. Ari also knows she can’t afford their apartment by herself, which would mean looking for new roommates. Matters are not helped by the fact that Ari hates change, but can do little to stop it.

The romantic element of the story begins during a wedding and, of course, it’s dislike on both sides at first sight. When Ari tries to balance on her high heels during a wedding ceremony, she loses her balance and steps on Judah Klein’s foot. Judah is the strictly Orthodox singer everyone wants at their weddings, bar/bat mitzvahs and other happy occasion. He is 33 years old and unmarried, something unusual in his community. However, even though he has gone on numerous dates, he’s never been attracted to any of the women. Plus,

he has a far more strict Orthodox practice than Ari, including being *shomer negiah*, meaning that he won’t touch a woman who is not his wife. Unfortunately for him, Judah can’t seem to avoid Ari and finds that, for the first time in his life, he actually feels desire for someone. The novel answers the question of whether two people with such different approaches to life can form a mutually satisfying relationship.

“Soon By You” is laugh out loud funny. (My favorite line in the book is when Judah, who doesn’t yet know Ari’s name, refers to her mentally as “Stompy McGlaremaid” for the if-looks-could-kill glares she gave him when they were waiting for the bride and groom to walk up the aisle.) Watching Judah come to terms with his feelings for Ari was a pleasure. Seeing Ari learn someone could care enough to risk his reputation for her – many of their interactions in public appeared on social media – was heart-warming. There is more sex content than one might expect from a book focusing on the Orthodox community, but it works since it portrays the way Judah comes to terms with his sexual feelings and what he wants from life.

While “Soon By You” was funnier than “Extracurricular,” Solomon’s novel does not lack in its own delights, particularly in how it made one of its main characters, Ramona Wilder, feel so believable. Ramona is a singer/actor with a very successful career who decides to retire when she is 26. Her mother had pushed her into show business at a young age and Ramona feels that everything she’s done – from the almost starvation diet to the men she dated – were part of her career path, not her life. Now she wants to find out who she really is and do something she never had the chance to do: attend college.

However, things are different than Ramona expected when she attends her first class, an introduction to psychology taught by the 36-year-old, recently divorced Nick Navarro. Nick has just moved into a guesthouse owned by his sister. Although he loves her and adores his niece, he feels like a failure because of his divorce. How could he not notice that his ex-wife was so unhappy that she found a more satisfying relationship with one of her coworkers? Although he enjoys his research, Nick deeply loves teaching and is looking forward to this semester as a break from feeling sorry for himself (although he does try to limit those feelings to only 10 minutes a day). He is also up for tenure this year, but his

career has been so successful, he’s not actively worried about that occurring.

Of course, fireworks start when Ramona turns up in his class. Their introduction does not go well: he walks in to find her yelling at one of the other students, who had been making disparaging remarks about her, remarks he didn’t hear. He’s not sure she’s actually there to learn or if this is a stunt to help her career. Ramona reacts badly to his comments and, at first, has difficulty adjusting to being in school. She is also dealing with mixed feelings about her relationship with her mother and, when one of her former co-stars is accused of sexual assault, mentally revisits what occurred during their time together. Plus, all her relationships with men have been transactional: they thought she could help their career and didn’t care about her feelings so she is definitely not looking to hook up with anyone.

This wouldn’t be a rom-com if Ramona and Nick didn’t start a relationship. However, he is her professor, making the relationship a forbidden one, at least until the semester is over. Plus, the 10-year age difference makes him uncomfortable, as does having to hide from the public eye. Is it possible for them to overcome their differences and for Ramona to find meaning in life beyond her former career? In addition to discussing these issues, “Extracurricular” also looks at the meaning of stardom and the positive effects that performers can have on the lives of those who adore them.

While I enjoyed both books (the pages of each flew by), I wondered after I finished them if the romances were realistic. It’s clear that that is not one of the requirements for rom-coms and I appreciated the endings of both works. I did ponder, though, whether part of that enjoyment came from the fact that in each work, the men seemed unable to control their desires. I’m not talking about sexual assault: they both respected and cared for these women. However, Judah is willing to risk his career by being involved with someone members of the community think is beneath him, and Nick is willing to risk his tenure and all he’s worked for by being with Ramona. That kind of devotion seems more like wish-fulfillment than reality. Wish-fulfillment, though, is one of the reasons readers love this genre and what makes it so popular: as messy as these romances can get, readers know there will be a warm, happy, satisfying ending.

Lost sacred works

main focus was on the actual writings themselves, for example, legal contracts and marriage documents, etc., found in the geniza. This came to mind when reading “Hidden Scrolls, Buried Bibles: How We Discover the Sacred Past” by Eva Mroczek (Yale University Press). I had hoped to learn about the contents of the scrolls themselves. Instead, Mroczek’s focus is on her subtitle: the myths told about lost scrolls, and the stereotypes and prejudices offered in the stories of their recovery. The lessons she teaches offer a new way to view these documents and the tales of how they were discovered.

Mroczek initially looks at the structure of the biblical text, noting that the Bible we have was not inevitable since that text was affected/formed by a variety of factors. She writes, “A scribe would have encountered a variant oral version of a patriarchal legend; a redactor could have decided to combine sources differently, choosing one version of a story rather than intertwining two, texts now lost could have been preserved by accident or design, while some of the books we now have could have perished in flames.” In fact, there are currently at least three different versions of the biblical text: the Jewish Bible, the Catholic Bible and the Protestant one, which differ on the number of books they contain and the order in which they occur. While the author does not specifically write of talmudic discussions about the inclusion of such selections as the Song of Songs, she does note how in Kings 2 the priest Hilkiah discovered a scroll, a document that is accepted as law, even though its commandments may not have been previously practiced. (Some scholars believe this was the book of Deuteronomy, but it is never specifically labeled as such.)

The author also talks about what may be missing from the biblical texts currently available. For example, the book of Proverbs is said to contain only a small number of those written by Solomon. Hippolytus, an ancient historian, believed that Solomon actually wrote 3,000 proverbs and 5,000 songs. According to Hippolytus, King Hezekiah’s officials were the ones who chose which works would become part of the biblical canon. Mroczek also writes of the discovery of scrolls that offer alternative versions of the biblical text, although

it is exceedingly rare for the accepted version of the text to be changed to feature any of these variations. She notes that the scrolls were copies made by different religious sects, which, either by accident or deliberate intent, changed the text.

According to Mroczek, finding a perfect text is impossible: “A stable unchanging text is only an abstract ideal.” This is partly due to the fact that these texts are vulnerable to time, nature and human actions. That is why so few hidden texts appear whole; insects, weather, fire, etc., can easily ruin a scroll, leaving scholars trying to piece together the original, a difficult – if not impossible – task. However, there are Jewish legends that suggest extra copies of the Torah were made so it would never be lost. This tradition notes that Moses made 13 copies of the Torah: one for each tribe and a 13th to be placed in the Ark of the Covenant. Later legends suggest that this 13th scroll is now safely kept in heaven.

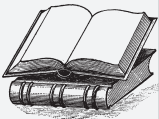
Mroczek is particularly interested in the myths that surround the discovery of these hidden texts. She notes that almost all contain the same elements: an ignorant person chasing an animal or seeing an animal enter a cave/hole that contains scrolls. These people – usually natives of the area – are said to have no idea what the texts are worth, sometimes using them to start fires or wrap objects. Other tales note that, while they may be ignorant of their value as sacred items, they know the scroll can be sold for a profit. These stories have become a genre of their own with the author noting that, even when they are clearly not true, people prefer them to learning what actually occurred. She sees these stories as racist since they treat the Arabs who found these scrolls as ignorant and crude – viewed as if their culture has not developed since biblical times.

“Hidden Scrolls, Buried Bibles” seemed less a cohesive work than a review of disparate subjects. However, it also contains a great deal of interesting material, particularly its discussion of a variety of Jewish and Christian traditions concerning these texts. Where it succeeds best, though, is in its analysis of the myths of the discovery of these works: readers will find themselves viewing these stories very differently.

By Rabbi Rachel Esserman

Years ago, I reviewed two books about the Cairo geniza. I had a clear preference for one of the books, but two friends who also read both preferred the other. When thinking about our difference of opinion, I realized that they were interested in the discovery of the documents and the work the scientists did to make them legible. The reason I preferred the other book was because its

Rabbi Rachel Esserman’s previous book reviews can be found on The Reporter’s website under “Features” at www.thereporter.org/book-reviews.





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