

Heidi Rabinowitz 0:12

[MUSIC, INTRO] This is The Book of Life, a show about Jewish kidlit, mostly. I'm Heidi Rabinowitz. It's January 2021, as I record, and I'm about to share with you some exciting news about Jewish books. But before I do, I want to place this moment in context. Just a few weeks ago, violent insurrectionists attempted a coup at the US Capitol and part of their motivation was to uphold white supremacy. Symbols of antisemitism were easily identifiable in this crowd, including the infamous t shirts reading "Camp Auschwitz" and "6 million wasn't enough." So in this moment, it is incredibly important that we make good use of books that help readers of all backgrounds understand Judaism rather than fear it.

On today's podcast, you will learn about [edited] 20 new award winning books that do just that. Please make it your mission to read these titles and to share them widely. From buying your own copies to posting on social media to requesting that your public library obtain these titles, there are many ways that you can help these important books reach more readers. That is an act of Tikkun Olam that we can all take part in.

Speaker 1 1:47

I also want to offer you one further resource to help you push back against antisemitism. My friend Susan Kusel, who you've heard many times on The Book of Life, was interviewed by my other friend Matthew Winner at the podcast Kidlit These Days. She offers some excellent guidance on teaching children about the Holocaust, a topic that is widely misunderstood, so please check it out at bookriot.com/listen/remembrance. I'll put a link in the show notes.

Speaker 1 2:21

Now, on to happier news. The Sydney Taylor Book Awards are presented to the best Jewish children's and teen books by the Association of Jewish Libraries each year. They're sponsored by Jo Taylor Marshall, daughter of the author Sydney Taylor, who created the beloved All-of-a-Kind Family series. The 2021 winners were announced at the American Library Association's Youth Media Awards event on January 25, 2021. Here is my exclusive interview with Rebecca Levitan, chair of the Sydney Taylor Book Award committee. Enjoy!

Heidi Rabinowitz 3:05

Rebecca Levitan, welcome back to The Book of Life.

Rebecca Levitan 3:09

Thank you!

Heidi Rabinowitz 3:10

I am so excited to have you here once again to reveal to us the winners of the 2021 Sidney Taylor Book Award!

Rebecca Levitan 3:20

Yay!

Heidi Rabinowitz 3:20

But first, please give us a little bit of background about the Sydney Taylor Book Award.

Rebecca Levitan 3:25

Sure, the Sydney Taylor Book Award is a literary award, given by the Association of Jewish Libraries. The name is in honor of the author of the All-of-a-Kind Family books, which most people recognize as the first and the best of Jewish kidlit that wasn't just about holidays or liturgy. It's awarded in three categories, picture book, middle grade, and young adult. And we have a winner honor and notable for each of those categories.

Heidi Rabinowitz 3:20

Okay, so we've got the three age categories. Let's talk about the gold medalists for each category, and then we'll move on to honors and notables. Tell us please... drumroll... What book was the winner in the picture books category?

Rebecca Levitan 3:57

So the winner in the picture book category is the book Welcoming Elijah by Leslea Newman and it's illustrated by Susan Gal. It's such a sweet book. It's this parallel between a little boy at a seder and this kitten outside, until the boy opens the door to welcome Elijah in and there's the kitten. Simple text. It's got diverse characters that are just really warmly illustrated. And it's just very sweet. And in all truthfulness, my four year old slept with this book in her bed for like six months of the past year. Like she loved it.

Heidi Rabinowitz 4:49

Wow, that's that's a testimonial right there. And that's wonderful because Leslea Newman was the Body of Work Award winner for the Sydney Taylor last year. So yes, she is not resting on her laurels.

Rebecca Levitan 5:02

No, she's not. And actually, this is her second gold Sydney Taylor book, the first being Ketzel the Cat Who Composed in 2016. And now this one, and she won a few honors and notables in the past as well. So yeah, she's not resting on her laurels.

Heidi Rabinowitz 5:18

Excellent. So let's move on. Tell us about the winner in the middle grade category.

Rebecca Levitan 5:24

So the winner in the middle grade category is from debut author M. Evan Wolkenstein. And it's Turtle Boy, a really great story about a kid who's trying to find his Bar Mitzvah project, and gets roped into visiting a terminally ill teenager in the hospital. And he's kind of a jerk to the guy, you know, he's not really up for this, but they become friends. And Will starts to complete the boy's bucket list before the end. And it gives him a lot of confidence, and perspective. It's a serious book. It's a fun book. We all love the rabbi in it. He was a bit of a compulsive eater with bad news, which I think a lot of us can identify with. We thought this was a really wonderful book and hope a lot of kids pick it up.

Heidi Rabinowitz 6:17

Well, I'm really excited to hear that because when Evan was on The Book of Life, he was just so much fun to talk to. He and Joanne Levy, who wrote Fish Out of Water, they really bonded over some of the similarities in their books. So yeah.

Rebecca Levitan 6:33

I really enjoyed Fish Out of Water also. I'm glad that they got to talk.

Heidi Rabinowitz 6:36

Yeah. Okay, well, that's wonderful. So tell us about the winner in the young adults category.

Rebecca Levitan 6:43

So the winner in the young adult category, and I'm actually really excited about this, is a graphic novel by Tyler Feder. She did the illustrations and the writing. It's called Dancing at the Pity Party. And it's a memoir about her mother's battle with cancer and ultimately succumbing to it. It's a lot about family. It's a lot about the shiva, and so the Jewish mourning practices. She really was close with her mother, and so it's really beautiful to see, we

don't always see that in YA books. It's got a lot of Jewish themes of honoring your parents and visiting the sick. It's also a good guideline for people who maybe haven't had that experience, but if you come across someone who does, what you should or shouldn't say to them, in order to be sensitive to their experience.

Heidi Rabinowitz 7:32

Okay, so these are the three gold medalists, and I want to talk about the other books that have been recognized in a moment. But first, I wanted to just think about whether there's anything that ties these three winners together. Are there any commonalities that you see?

Rebecca Levitan 7:49

Some of the commonalities I see is that they're all contemporary. Refreshingly, this is the first year in many, many years, that we haven't had a Holocaust book win.

Heidi Rabinowitz 8:00

So frequently, there is a Holocaust book at the top level, I'd like to ask you to dispel the myth that Holocaust books are the favorite type of literature of the Sydney Taylor Book Award committee.

Rebecca Levitan 8:15

Yeah, I will say that is not the case. It's hard. It's hard to keep reading book after book after book about the atrocities and the hiding in the running. But it's sort of a self-perpetuating cycle where the publishers put in an effort, they're usually very well done. So they win. And so then the publishers see, oh, these books win, and they're being bought. And so then we'll put more money behind those. And I don't think all of the publishers see that other publishers are doing them as well. So it ends up that we just have this glut of Holocaust books. And when that's the large majority of the books that the committee is looking at, you know, those tend to rise to the top, even if we're not fully enjoying the topic matter.

Heidi Rabinowitz 9:10

I believe you've told me before that up to 50, or even 60% of the books that the committee receives can be Holocaust books in any given year.

Rebecca Levitan 9:19

Yeah, I often find myself, when I'm reading the books, I have to alternate between a non-Holocaust book and Holocaust book in order to just kind of break it up a little. There are such important stories to be told, but boy, do we read a lot of them.

Heidi Rabinowitz 9:33

So statistically, it's not surprising that Holocaust books frequently end up winning.

Rebecca Levitan 9:38

Exactly, yeah.

Heidi Rabinowitz 9:40

Let's talk about the honor books.

Rebecca Levitan 9:43

Okay, so the winners for the silver for picture books, the first one is *I Am the Tree of Life: My Jewish Yoga Book*, by Mychal Copeland and illustrated by Andre Ceolin. It has a yoga pose and a small Bible story on every page. Ah, really beautifully illustrated, and it very thoughtfully acknowledges that yoga is not originally a Jewish practice and where it comes from, but it can be incorporated in Judaism. My kids did all the poses multiple

times, they really enjoyed this one. And it's one that we feel like a lot of classrooms could use, a lot of librarians could use. And all the stories in it are done really well.

Heidi Rabinowitz 10:28

And Another notable thing about that particular book is that there's a Jewish child of color right there on the cover.

Rebecca Levitan 10:34

A little boy doing his tree pose, and he's super adorable. It's got the children doing poses on each page on one side, and it tells you exactly how to do each pose. And then on the other side is the corresponding Bible story. So like the story of Rebecca at the well, it has you doing the camel pose because she also watered the camels.

Heidi Rabinowitz 10:57

Adorable.

Rebecca Levitan 10:57

The other silver is Miriam at the River by Jane Yolen and illustrated by Khoa Le, so beautifully illustrated. It's really, really striking. And it's got beautiful poetry from Jane Yolen. It's the tale of Miriam putting baby Moses into the river, from her perspective, just really beautiful.

Heidi Rabinowitz 11:21

Tell us about silver medals in the middle grade category.

Rebecca Levitan 11:25

Okay, so I have to say, for all the middle grade, these were so closely scored, that the discussion was pretty intense. They're all such good books. So the first one is No Vacancy by Tziporah Cohen, about a family that moves to a motel in upstate New York to sort of revamp it. And she meets this friend Kate, and they decide to concoct a "miracle" to try and encourage tourists to come to the town and bring in some more revenue. A great story about community and interfaith understanding. And one of my most favorite things about this book was Miriam's uncle is Orthodox. And she says, we're all Jewish, but we all observe in different ways, or something to that effect. And I was just so taken by that. And I think more kids need to see that. It's a great book.

Heidi Rabinowitz 12:24

It is, I agree. I interviewed Tziporah on The Book of Life. That was another wonderful interview. I was very excited about that book. Yeah. Great.

Rebecca Levitan 12:33

So the second silver medalist is Anya and the Nightingale by Sofiya Pasternack, and her Anya and the Dragon got the silver medal last year. It's a follow up to the first book, though, we had several committee members who read it as a standalone. It's an exciting fantasy that involves mythical creatures and Judaism. She's a strong character, and it's just a fun, fun read.

Heidi Rabinowitz 13:03

Excellent and another past Book of Life guest. Terrific!

you

Rebecca Levitan 13:07
You get all the good ones!

Heidi Rabinowitz 13:08
I do! Alright, keep going.

Rebecca Levitan 13:10
And so the third silver medalist is *The Blackbird Girls* by Anne Blankman. It's about two girls who flee the Chernobyl nuclear meltdown in 1986. It's juxtaposed with the story of a woman escaping the Nazis in 1941. It sort of merges these two timelines. And turns out the woman who escaped in 1941 was the girl's grandmother, and how they all sort of come to support each other. And it's a really interesting look into the Soviet Union in the 80s. And, you know, it had me looking up how long daylight is in Russia, you know, in the summer, and the Grand Choral Synagogue, and a lot of beautiful elements of friendship and caring for someone else, even if maybe you don't always agree with them. So that takes us to our young adult honor. We only had one for young adults, but it was *They Went Left* by Monica Hesse. It's a historical mystery with an unreliable narrator. It's actually sent into DP camp right after the Holocaust. It's the story of Zofia who is desperately searching for her little brother Abek. And what happens in her time in the DP camp is really, really well written. And if you are one of those people who loves an unreliable narrator story, it's definitely definitely one to pick up.

Heidi Rabinowitz 14:31
Tell us how many notables we ended up with and give us an overview of them. You can give us the rundown of titles there, if any remarks that you want to make about them, do a few shout outs, feel free to do that, too.

Rebecca Levitan 14:43
Okay. So our notables for picture books, we had *The Eight Knights of Hanukkah* by Leslie Kimmelman, *The Polio Pioneer: Dr. Jonas Salk and the Polio Vaccine* by Linda Elovitz Marshall, and *The Ninth Night of Hanukkah* by Eric Perl. *The Polio Pioneer* is particularly timely; definitely opened up some conversations with my kids about vaccines and research which was really interesting. For middle grade our notable books were *Beni's War* by Tammar Stein. We have to be brave escaping the Nazis on Kindertransport by Deborah Hopkinson, *A Place at the Table* by Saadia Faruqi and Laura Shovan, and *Letters from Cuba* by Ruth Behar. *A Place at the Table* I think left us all very hungry. It's a lot of food related talk in the book. But we really enjoyed the friendship between the Pakistani Muslim girl Sara, and this British Jewish girl Elizabeth, standing up for each other, and cooking all the while; it was, it's a really great story. And then our notables for young adult were *Today Tonight Tomorrow* by Rachel Lynn Solomon, *The New Queer Conscience* by Adam Eli, *The Way Back* by Gavriel Savit, and *The Assignment* by Liza Wiemer. These are all really great books for all sorts of different reasons. If you are a rom com fan *Today Tonight Tomorrow* is your thing. *The New Queer Conscience* we felt was a really important story of advocacy. He takes this idea of *Kol yisrael arevim ze lazeh*, all of Israel looks out for each other, and suggest that the queer community does the same. And as someone not part of the queer community, it gave me a lot of things to think about on how to be a better ally. If you are into Gothic fantasy, *The Way Back* is your thing, and *The Assignment* by Liza Wiemer is just a great story about standing up for what you know is right.

Heidi Rabinowitz 16:40
I have to say, now that I've heard this entire list I am really excited because everything from the gold to the notables is all just top quality. I can imagine even the ones that are at the notable level, you know, just depending on the mix of who's in the conversation and what other books it's up against, any of those could even have been gold. Yeah, because they're all really excellent books. That's wonderful.

Rebecca Levitan 17:03

Mm hmm.

Heidi Rabinowitz 17:04

So we're looking at more humor with *The Eight Knights*, which I want to point out is K N I G H T. The eight "kuh-nig-its" of Hanukkah, so you know, we've got strong entries in the humor category. We've got romcoms with *Today Tonight Tomorrow*, we've got fantasy, with *Anya and the Nightingale*, which we always are talking about how we wish there was more Jewish fantasy and sci fi.

Rebecca Levitan 17:28

And *The Way Back*. We've got LGBTQ.

Heidi Rabinowitz 17:31

We've got graphic memoir with *Dancing at the Pity Party*. We have unusual settings where you wouldn't necessarily think of setting Jewish stories: Cuba, Chernobyl. We have interfaith friendship, Muslim/Jewish friendship. And we have diversity. Many of these books include diverse characters, *Eight Knights of Hanukkah*, I know has quite a diverse cast. *The Tree of Life* yoga story, as we talked about.

Rebecca Levitan 17:57

The Ninth Night of Hanukkah also has the family asking for help from the entire building. And it includes a black family and an Indian family and everybody working together. So it's really nice to see that.

Heidi Rabinowitz 18:09

Right, a diverse community, even though it's a sort of a traditionally white, presumably Ashkenazi family that centers in that story, the community that they're building in their new home, with their new neighbors is very diverse. Oh, and in talking about interfaith friendship, not only that we have *A Place at the Table* with the Muslim/Jewish friendship, we also have *No Vacancy*, right, with the Christian/Jewish friendship, that is also very strong and another story of community between Jewish and non-Jewish neighbors who all come together to support each other. So a beautiful selection.

Rebecca Levitan 18:42

Yeah, we're so pleased with this.

Heidi Rabinowitz 18:45

Me too. So in the past several years, the winning authors and illustrators have been part of a Sydney Taylor Book Award Blog Tour, which is like a bookstore, except they appear on blogs instead of live in bookstores, which of course, this year is especially appropriate because they can't go to bookstores anyway. Are we doing the blog tour again this year?

Rebecca Levitan 19:04

The intention is we're doing a blog tour, check out Jewishlibraries.org. That's the AJL website to find out all about where the stops are. And it's happening February 8th through the 12th.

Heidi Rabinowitz 19:15

February 8 through 12, 2021. Tune in. And if listeners want to find out more about the Sydney Taylor Book Award, or get a list of winners that they can easily print out, I know that they can find that at, as you said at Jewishlibraries.org or if you put in [SydneyTaylorBookAwards](http://SydneyTaylorBookAwards.org) (with an s) dot org, that'll take you straight to the Sydney Taylor section of AJL's website.

Rebecca Levitan 19:38

Yes, it will and it will give you all the information on this year's winners, past winners, and if you want to buy the shiny seals for your copies of these winning and honor and notable books, you can do that.

Heidi Rabinowitz 19:51

Excellent. Now the Sydney Taylor Book Award is one of AJL's Awards, but there is also a Sydney Taylor Manuscript Award. I believe Aileen Grossberg, the chair of the Sydney Taylor Manuscript Award committee shared the winner for 2021 with you, will you tell us about that?

Rebecca Levitan 20:10

Yes, the Manuscript Award is for an unpublished middle grade manuscript and a lot of manuscript winners end up going on to being published and hopefully further recognized. So the 2021 Manuscript winner is *Cats and Honey Cake* by Sonja Spear, a humorous work of realistic fiction. It's about Abby Zipperstein's mother started up a cat rescue service in the family's living room, Abby's family has to deal with the cats and challenges of growing up in this offbeat family.

Heidi Rabinowitz 20:42

Right, and some mouthwatering descriptions of the baking of honey cake,

Rebecca Levitan 20:47

I hope it ends up published with a recipe.

Heidi Rabinowitz 20:50

I'm sure it will. So along with the Sydney Taylor Book Award, there is another form of recognition that the Association of Jewish Libraries is now offering. This is brand new, and it's not a book award, it's a recommended reading list. Now, this is very different, because instead of books that were published in the past year, this is books that are about to be published, that are being published right now in the spring of 2021. And they're being recognized as Holiday Highlights. This means that these are Jewish children's books about Jewish holidays, and they are the best of the best within that category. So the AJL Holiday Highlights books for spring 2021 are *The Passover Guest* by our own Susan Kusel, who definitely earned this through terrific writing and the illustrations of Sean Rubin, not through her friendship with us because, you know, we love her, but we were not going easy on her. This is a top quality book.

Rebecca Levitan 21:50

And she earned three stars so far...

Heidi Rabinowitz 21:52

She's gotten three starred reviews from people who aren't friends with her! Yeah, the next one is *Soosie, the Horse that Saved Shabbat* by Tammy Lehman-Wilzig, illustrated by Menachem Halberstadt and that's by a new small Jewish press Kalaniot. So that's exciting. *The Four Questions* by Lynn Sharon Schwartz, illustrated by Ori Sherman, this is actually a reprint, Levine Querido brought it back into print. And what's interesting is that this is very different than what happens with the Sydney Taylor Book Award where reprints are eligible only if they are significantly different, like if they have a whole new set of illustrations or the text has been strongly revised. In this case, the book's not that different. It's just on the market again. And for Holiday Highlights, that's what counts is that we want to promote the holiday books that are currently being sold. And it's okay if it's the same as before. If it's great, that's what counts. And then the last one is *Meet the Matzah*, written and illustrated by Alan Silberberg, which is a very humorous story, where matzah and bread and other baked goods are personified and telling the story of Passover. So three Passover books and one Shabbat book, were the top holiday books that this committee found, and I just want to call out, this committee is top quality as well, because these are people who have vast experience on all sorts of children's literature award committees.

We've got Robbin Friedman, Amy Lilien-Harper, and Sylvie Shaffer, who all did a terrific and extremely thoughtful job of choosing these top winners, and they are now about to start looking at books for the fall 2021 Holiday Highlights. So I just wanted to mention that even though it's not about Sydney Taylor, I think, if you're interested in Sydney Taylor, you would be interested in this as well.

Rebecca Levitan 23:41

Definitely,

Heidi Rabinowitz 23:42

It's tikkun olam time; this is your chance to do a little bit of activism, by calling upon listeners to take any large or small action or or ponder some thought you'd like to invite them to consider. So what would you like to share with us?

Rebecca Levitan 23:58

Having read so many Holocaust related books in the past couple of years, you can really see some parallels of that time period and what's happening in the world. And I would like to charge everyone to pick up some of those books and read them. But be... to not let that happen again, and to stand up and to speak out. Whether that means donating somewhere that's going to help these causes or calling your Congress people. But we can't let this happen again. We can't stand by idly, and it's important that we say so.

Heidi Rabinowitz 24:40

Very good. Thank you for that. Is there anything else that you would like to talk about that I haven't thought to ask you?

Rebecca Levitan 24:47

So I want to thank the Sydney Taylor committee. I know this was particularly difficult year, but I want to thank outgoing members Marjorie Ingall and Rena Citron, current members of Aviva Rosenberg, Judy Ehrenstein, Toby Harris, and Martha Simpson. Everybody has been really, really wonderful. And I really appreciate all their hard work. I also want to thank all the contacts at the publishers, who I know we're also dealing with a difficult year, and who all were super gracious about making sure that the committee got all the books that they needed and were very kind about it. Because I think for all the horribleness that 2020 brought out, I think it also brought out a lot of good and people were very supportive of each other. And so I want to acknowledge everyone who helped out. I especially want to thank before I forget, Susan Kusel, past chair, and I would say my mentor, she helped guide me the past couple years. I know she's super glad to not have to be involved anymore. And she earned it. And I want to thank her for that.

Heidi Rabinowitz 26:01

Great. So speaking of Susan Kusel, the other night, Susan and you and I were leading a discussion for the Association of Jewish Libraries, one of AJL's virtual events called AJL Presents, part of the series of events that AJL does that is open to the general public. And we spoke about the Sydney Taylor Book Award, and also about the mock Sydney Taylor Book Award that's new this year. And the video for that will be up soon. So I invite people to check that out if you would like to get all the nitty gritty details.

Rebecca Levitan 26:35

There was a good discussion. And if you are interested in the mock award blog, you should definitely check it out, maybe even review for it. I'm excited to be able to tune into it now that I'm done scoring.

Heidi Rabinowitz 26:49

Right. Right, because the only people in the world who aren't allowed to vote for the mock awards are the people serving on the real Sydney Taylor Book Award committee. So now you won't be one of them anymore, and you'll be able to vote for the mock awards. All right, terrific. Well, Rebecca Levitan, thank you so much for speaking with me.

Rebecca Levitan 27:08

Thank you for having me, Heidi, it is always so much fun.

Aviva Brown 27:11

[MUSIC, TEASER] This is Aviva Brown, author of Ezra's Big Shabbat Question, and I will be joining you soon on The Book of Life podcast. And I'd like to dedicate my episode to all the other late bloomers who didn't figure out what they wanted to be when they grew up until they were already really grown up.

Heidi Rabinowitz 27:38

[MUSIC, OUTRO] Don't be a stranger. Say hi to Heidi at 561-206-2473 or BookofLifepodcast@gmail.com. Check out our Book of Life podcast Facebook page, or our Facebook discussion group Jewish Kidlit Mavens. We are occasionally on Twitter too at [BookofLifePod](https://twitter.com/BookofLifePod). Want to read the books featured on the show? Buy them through [Bookshop.org /shop/bookoflife](https://www.bookshop.org/shop/bookoflife) to support the podcast and independent bookstores at the same time. You can also help us out by becoming a monthly supporter through Patreon, or making a one time donation to our home library, the Feldman Children's Library at Congregation B'nai Israel of Boca Raton, Florida. You'll find links for all of that and more at [BookofLifepodcast.com](https://www.BookofLifepodcast.com). Our background music is provided by the Freilachmakers Klezmer String Band. Thanks for listening and happy reading.

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