Gavriel Savit 0:00
[COLD OPEN] I may be weird in that I kind of love cemeteries to begin with, I think they're so much fun to walk through: human beings, names, sculpture, you know, what's, what's not to love? I would say I'm a naturalized citizen of cemeteries.

Heidi Rabinowitz 0:20
[MUSIC, INTRO] This is The Book of Life, a show about Jewish kidlit, mostly. I'm Heidi Rabinowitz. The Way Back is a strange and wonderful, life affirming story about death, an adventure in which Bluma and Yehuda Leib, set out from the shtetl on a quest into the Far Country peopled by demons. It won the National Jewish Book Award in the young adult category, and was named a Sydney Taylor Notable. It's a crossover book that will appeal to adults as well as YA readers. Here's my interview with author Gavriel Savit. Enjoy!

Gavriel Savit, welcome to The Book of Life.

Gavriel Savit 1:13
Thank you.

Heidi Rabinowitz 1:14
Thank you for being here. Give us your elevator pitch, what is The Way Back about?

Gavriel Savit 1:21
The Way Back is the story of two young people from a little shtetl called Tupik in Eastern Europe in the 19th century. It follows them on parallel journeys into the Far Country, which is a land of demons and dead folks, as they traverse the ways there and back and come into conflict with the Angel of Death.

Heidi Rabinowitz 1:45
Can you explain the title, The Way Back. Why focus on the return journey?

Gavriel Savit 1:50
Yeah, I, I feel like I'm terrible at titles. It's so funny, you know, you spend so much time like polishing words and making sure language works well, and it always seems like the hardest little bit of text to pin down is what you're going to call the whole project. So I had a number of working titles on this project and none of which seemed to feel quite right and The Way Back was originally chapter title. I often find that the chapter titles come through in the end, and sort of usurp the crown, the the title, the whole thing. So The Way Back, I think, for me, it has a lot to do with my personal attachment to the story. It's not hard to find your way to death. What's hard is to come back afterwards. I certainly don't want to disparage anyone else's work, it's very important to explore grief, and the way that it challenges our individual experiences, but there are plenty of books like that. And I didn't want to write another book about how terrible it is to lose people. I wanted to write a book about what happens once that's occurred and how we make our way back ,sort of struggle our way through the loss and the grief and find others and fight the demons and, hopefully, at a certain point, make it all the way back.

Heidi Rabinowitz 3:12
All right, good. What was your inspiration for this story?

Gavriel Savit 3:18
That's a very good question to which I can only give a very long and rambling answer. I mean I think the truth is that inspiration for novels is always incredibly multifarious. We authors we get, we get good at giving a pat answer to like where did the idea come from? Well, the truth of the matter is mostly the idea started growing when I was born and then took long breaks for months and years, but sometimes little things would sneak into

my subconscious and so yeah, like, there are several particular points that I can point to that made me aware that the idea was growing, but I think any novel worth its salt is kind of working in the background for a long time. There were several particular ingredients though that I'm strongly aware of influencing the book. The first was that I grew up in a modern Orthodox community, and I read a lot of fantasy, and I was always very, very surprised that there weren't Jews in the fantasies. It seemed strange to me. There were Jews everywhere else. Why weren't there Jews in fantasy? And there was an essay that came out in 2010 entitled Why There Is No Jewish Narnia, that sort of tried to explain this by pointing to the notion that most fantasy is in some way an idealized Christian middle age experience, right? Middle age in the sense of the medieval period, not in the sense of like buying a nice car. And I'm not sure how much I buy that to begin with. I think if we look at some of the best fantasy out there, a lot of it is urban fantasy, which is kind of a weird term for fantasy that takes place in our contemporary world, a lot of it is set in the 19th century. I think one of the greatest pieces of fantasy full stop is Jonathan Strange and Mr Norrell. It's weird to me that there aren't Jews showing up and Jonathan Strange and Mr Norrell! So that was always something that sort of nagged at me like, how can it be that there's these two sort of separate portions of my identity that haven't met yet? So you know, I have long held an ambition to bring together my Judaism and my love of fantasy and this was sort of the time. There are another few pieces of inspiration that I can think of. One of them is a really tremendous musical that I used to be able to show my theater insiderdom by talking about how much I loved, but now is like very much mainstream. It won the Tony for Best Musical, in the year that it went to Broadway, it's called Hadestown; really fantastic musical, which is a sort of, I don't know, hobo jazz retelling of the Orpheus and Eurydice myth, another story of the challenges of going to Death's Door and coming back, and did a lot of thinking and listening to Hadestown throughout the development of the book. In fact, my first career was in musical theater. I actually had the opportunity to audition for Hadestown, not for the Broadway production, but for one other out of town productions in Edmonton, Canada, it was really great. I was able to sing the music with Anais Mitchell herself, and that was a great pleasure. Obviously I didn't get the role or else probably the book would have been significantly delayed, but the soul of Hadestown definitely I think, is deep in The Way Back. The final piece of inspiration, probably the most proximate piece of inspiration, was that at the very beginning of 2017 I met death for the first time. I lost my first child at the age of 28 weeks gestation, which is later than the things often happen. And at that age I suppose the, the body has to be born. So I had this very obviously difficult and strange experience with my wife of delivering the body of our first child and when I held her, I was surprised to find that she had my face. And that was a very deep and bizarre and interesting and unshakable experience and it sort of took me all the way to Death's Door and prompted me to try and find my own way back, and the writing of the book was a large part of that process for me. You know I'm lucky to be able to live my life as a full time artist and, you know, those sorts of experiences are gonna make their way into the work one way or the other, so I thought it was best to turn and face it and sort of embrace it and try and understand it through the work and with the work as much as possible. Obviously, that was an incredibly difficult experience in my life and nothing's ever going to change that, but I will say now that having incorporated it into my life with this book, it feels less like an interloper and more like a piece of the furniture, You know it's got, it's got its comfortable place in my life, and I think that's the most we can hope for in situations like that.

Heidi Rabinowitz 8:24
Wow, I'm so sorry about that. Thank you for sharing that. And it does seem like the book must have had a therapeutic effect because you do seem like at peace with it in a way that you wouldn't expect, hearing that news from you.

Gavriel Savit 8:38
It was several years ago now. I'm lucky to be the father of two beautiful, healthy daughters now, which obviously also helps. It's hard, right? Because therapeutic is probably the best word, but it also feels, I don't know, insufficient in some ways. One of the really fascinating things about having an experience like the one my family did is that in Jewish tradition, there are no mourning rituals for people who didn't live past 30 days,

so you can have a perfectly healthy child, if it dies on day 29 of its life you don't sit Shiva, you don't say Kaddish, none of it. On the one hand you know I actually found it useful, because I think it's really important to be able to make a distinction between what is a realized achieved human life and what is a potential human life. So in some ways I think having that distinction drawn by the tradition was really useful; in other ways it's kind of baffling. Jewish tradition is really good at mourning. Right? It's one of the best things we do, is, you know, shivah and shloshim and kaddish, like it's a very good system, and not to be able to do that, it sort of leaves you in the situation you're saying, Okay, well how do I, how do I, what do I? Right? And so part of the project, The Way Back for me was trying to open a Jewish space to look at and think about this particular loss and this kind of loss for me. Now I want to stress, because you know it is a book about death; I am probably the person in the universe, aside from arguably my wife, who could find this book, the most depressing, right, knowing what's underneath it, and I don't think it's a depressing book. Actually, it was important to me that it to be a book that engages with death through life, really through vibrancy and striving and activity, and not the wallowing in the grief because as I said, you know, there's, there's already plenty of that around. So for me it's a book about death, that should optimally be fun.

Heidi Rabinowitz 10:46
Yeah, I didn't find it depressing at all. I found it creepy in a good way, but not depressing and actually kind of life affirming. By the time it gets to the end of it.

Gavriel Savit 10:56
I'm glad to hear that. Yeah,

Heidi Rabinowitz 10:58
So I wanted to ask if you would be so kind as to sing a little bit of something from Hadestown because you must have a good voice if you auditioned.

Gavriel Savit 11:08
Oh man, you know, one of the things in my college training that was drummed into us is to avoid singing unaccompanied if you can because it always sounds a little more raggedy. I'll tell you what, next time we're in the same place, Heidi, I'll be more than happy to sing for you.

Heidi Rabinowitz 11:23
OK, because I am a musical theater fan so I'm just very intrigued.

Gavriel Savit 11:28
Oh, you can find lots of terrible bootlegs of me on YouTube and whatnot, if you're if you're, if you're truly motivated. I have a BFA in Musical Theater from University of Michigan that was my sort of first career. It's a really interesting trajectory to have come from performance into writing. They're very very different and very similar in some surprising ways. The number one thing I miss about performance is the sort of communal creativity, which is not so much available when your job is to sit in the proverbial garret typing away at all hours of the night, but the upside is, I got really tired, in my theatrical career, of waiting for permission to do creative work. It's the worst thing about theatrical life is that you want to be working, all artists want to be working, but without a group, you know, even if you're doing a solo performance need someone to light the thing, you need someone to sit out front and tell you when you're messing up. There's no theater alone. Whereas, I can easily make up my little stories and send them out into the ether, all by my lonesome, which is a saving grace,

Heidi Rabinowitz 12:34
Right. So we talked about how Jewish fantasy is rare. Do you have any theories as to why Jewish fantasy is so rare?

Gavriel Savit 12:44
I have a lot of theories about the inherent Jewishness of fantasy fiction. I think Western conceptions of magic are in large part inspired by the presence of a sort of quiet, quote unquote semi secretive Jewish presence in a lot of European society. I mean if you look at the emergence of the sort of the main body of modern Western occultism much of it is derived from Christian Kabbalah, which is, of course, taken from the reading that a lot of Christian mystics did have Jewish sources. Obviously, there are other pieces as well, there's a lot of hermeticism which is sort of Egyptian inspired Greek pseudoscience, but really, after the Renaissance and onward I think a lot of it has its roots in Jewish tradition. I mean I think we can point to the fact that much of the sort of fantastical canon, so to speak, is Anglo. The UK obviously has a much smaller Jewish representation than the US does and there are some more significantly, troubling traditions of antisemitism in the UK than there are in the US, and, in so far as much of the first few waves of contemporary fantasy were sort of nationalistic -- I mean you look at Tolkien, you look at even CS Lewis, who's peddling a very particular kind of English Christian-ness -- I think those visions of kind of cultural purity don't necessarily have a whole lot of space for primarily Jewish positions. Though, of course, Tolkien does have Jews, I mean it's very clear that his dwarves are modeled on the Jews. In fact he directly confirms this in his letters, and anyone with enough Hebrew to shake a stick at knows that Gimli's battle cry at the Battle of the Hornburg, "Baruk Khazâd! Khazâd ai-mênu!" sounds pretty Hebrew. But yeah I mean I think it's been a long time coming to sort of turn towards Jewish fantasy. I think we often lose sight of the relative newness of Jews in American letters. I mean, Philip Roth wasn't that long ago and he was transgressive in a lot of ways but his Jewishness was part of his transgressiveness. I think in the middle of the 20th century it's still kind of a transgressive thing to write in an openly Jewish perspective, but certainly before his generation, most of the writers of directly Jewish literature were not writing in English, they were writing in Yiddish. There's quite a lot of fantasy in Yiddish literature. There's not a lot of fantasy that is unapologetically popular fantastical fiction for a wide audience, and also unapologetically Jewish, and I'm here to gladly push that agenda.

Are there any read-alikes for your book or just any other Jewish fantasy that you have enjoyed that you can recommend to us?

I don't know that I can offer read-alikes I can certainly say Adam Gidwitz's wonderful. The Inquisitor's Tale is a lot of fun on that front. Naomi Novick's Spinning Silver is sort of similarly fully fantastical, fully Jewish. This is the gauntlet, I'm throwing it down, I want to see as much Jewish fantasy as we can find. Cover the world and readalikes I'll be very excited about it.

Heidi Rabinowitz 16:08
Okay, great. This story is very densely populated with demons and supernatural creatures, and some of them I'd heard of and some of them I had not. So I was wondering if you could give us any helpful background either about individual demons or in general about the Jewish view of magic and and some background on that.

Gavriel Savit 16:30
For sure. So, the first thing I'll say is that demons and magic are very deeply rooted in traditional Jewish sources, you really don't have to go very far at all, you go right into the Gemara. In the first tractate Berakhot, there's a source that directly says there are 11,000 Demons for each human being on the face of the planet. There's specific spells articulated about how to see the demons and witness after effects, so they're very very clearly part of Jewish tradition. I do think it's important to say that Jewish demons are significantly different certainly than Christian demons. I'll go further, even quite different from sort of popular imaginations of demons, which I think tend to be based on Christian perspectives. The demons in Judaism are still subservient to God, as everything is in our theology, there's one big guy upstairs and everyone is subject to his influence. So it's not a sort of situation where a demon is trying to overthrow God, that's not really inherent in Jewish tradition. I

think, in fact, though the word shedim in Hebrew is popularly translated as demons, I often think that they're significantly more similar to fairies and the folklore of the British Isles and they are to Christian demons. They're not unholy, they're sort of mischievous and out for their own particular ends. Once I started thinking of them in terms of the fey, they became a lot more legible to me, because you know the word demon conjures up like the big red dude with the horns and the fire and that's so not what's going on in any of the traditional sources, the sort of mischievous perspective is one that I find much more engaging.

Heidi Rabinowitz 18:05
So, can we talk a little bit about Lilith? Because there have been such widely varying interpretations of whether she's a villain, or a tragic heroine, or or who she is, can you talk about the background on Lilith and your interpretation?

Gavriel Savit 18:33
Absolutely. So Lilith. I knew pretty early on that she was going to be one of the demons that I brought into my book. She probably is derived from an ancient Near Eastern Screech Owl goddess, the word, lilit appears a few times in Tanakh and is often translated as owl or screech owl. Round about a document called The Alphabet of Ben-Sirach, she shows up in what is a deeply misogynistic portrayal. And that's the origin of the sort of Lilith that most people know. That's the story of her being Adam's first wife, who essentially is displaced because she refuses to be sexually subservient to Adam. And that is a sort of iconic picture of Lilith, that is carried through a lot of sources, up until this day. I thought that that was probably a pretty simplistic view of what was probably a pretty dynamic and interesting perspective to take on Jewish life. I mean there's no question that traditional Jewish life is heavily gendered and has strongly segregated gender roles and if you're going to write in that sort of traditional space in the 19th century, that's an element of Jewish life that you have to encounter. So, I thought it would be really interesting to bring in a portrayal of Lilith, that is not apologetic and also is not simplistic, right, a demon who can really speak to and maybe for, even, some anxieties and troubles and struggles that are true and real in heavily gendered societies, because you know, if we're playing in a world in which demons are real, the demons are going to take the handholds where they are, right?And we know from contemporary sources that a lot of Jewish women in traditional life felt stymied by the kinds of gender segregation and misogyny inherent in a lot of that society, and so it seemed to me that if there's an inherently feminine demon, who's coming through in this culture, she's going to have some real ammo to play with, and she ought to be allowed to play with it. There is, I think, a strong urge to make female and feminine characters into sort of super heroines without struggle or without challenge, without blemish. And while I understand the importance of representing women and feminine people in a positive light, as has not been traditionally done nearly enough, I also think that take kind of diminishes the dynamic, complicated, personal experience of so many women and feminine people like, you know, perfect people are boring. You know, struggles are interesting, that's why we're all here. And so it's really something that I thought a lot about and wanted to be very careful about. I didn't want anyone to be able to hold up my Lilith and say, you see, women are bad and wrong, because that's certainly not how I feel and hopefully we can see in The Way Back a Lilith, who is preying on certain anxieties that are imposed on women and feminine people in ways that feel resonant and real.

Great, and I want to also just acknowledge what a feminist book this is, that none of the female characters are boring, or one sided or subservient, they're all very fully realized. They are their own people.

I'm glad to hear that.

Heidi Rabinowitz 22:11
And it's just really interesting to find that in an old fashioned feeling story set in the past.

Gavriel Savit 22:17
Isn't that one of the most amazing things, right? Like one of the huge sort of stymieing challenges of traditional patriarchy is that you can see that the women and the women's perspectives are there in so many of these stories and they're either pointedly omitted or glossed over or co-opted in ways that make them uninteresting. I think there's so much to be looked at and explored and gloried in, in these traditional ways of life that just hasn't been brought to the fore. I'm very glad and excited that you thought so.

Heidi Rabinowitz 22:55
So, in an interview in The Nerd Daily, you described a scene in The Way Back as a kind of Quidditch World Cup for demonkind, and I'm also a big Harry Potter fan so I really enjoyed that metaphor. Could you unpack that a little bit?

Gavriel Savit 23:11
It was an aesthetic feeling as much as anything. That scene in question is a gathering in the Zubinsk cemetery before the wedding of the granddaughter of the Rebbe of Zubinsk. I have a very strong memory of encountering the Quidditch World Cup for the first time. I was 11 years old when the first Harry Potter book came out, I grew up with Harry Potter my whole life, and so those books are like deep baked into my psyche, and so that sort of aesthetic feeling of the sort of roiling magical energy held back just behind the gates felt to me really appealing, and what would be likely to happen in a situation like the one in which these demons find themselves. Yeah, I was really excited by the opportunity to try and create something that felt similar to the Quidditch World Cup sequence.

Heidi Rabinowitz 24:02
So I was just thinking about the spoon, the sharp spoon. That is an important tool of the personified Death. And that's not something I had ever heard of before, so I was wondering what elements are just your interpretation of some existing tradition and what you introduced?

Gavriel Savit 24:22
I will proudly say that I'm not a scholar, I'm an artist. So I'm gonna pick up what's interesting and subvert it and co-opt it and make it serve my ends. There's a lot in the book that's very much research based as a whole. I would say that the book is a decent reflection of traditional folkways, though there are a lot of specifics and details that I either invented or interpolated. There is not a tradition about a sharp edged spoon. There's a moment in the book that references a true folk practice of pouring out all of the water in a house where someone has died in the morning, and the sort of folk tradition for the practic is that the Angel of Death may have washed his knife in the water, and so we wouldn't want to drink that water. One of the sort of central aspects of my vision of the Angel of Death is that they appear to whomever they're meeting in a familiar, almost sort of reflective guise so when the Rebbe of Zubinsk meets the Angel of Death, he looks like a rabbit to him. When someone's old Bubbe meets the Angel of Death, she looks like an old woman. And so, when Bluma encounters the instrument of the Angel of Death, which might traditionally be understood as a knife or a dagger, the Angel of Death is in the guise of an old woman. And it felt to me, sort of pleasing to play with utensils in that way if the Angel of Death's faces shifting here if their gender is shifting here. Then, how might their paraphernalia shift to to match that appearance.

Heidi Rabinowitz 26:11
That's awesome. I love that.

Gavriel Savit 26:13
Interestingly, we talked about Lilith, one of the other major demons in the book is Mammon, who is not originally a Jewish demon. Obviously the Hebrew is mammon which is sort of like lucre like you know filthy

gelt. And it's interesting, Milton was the first to turn Mammon into a demon, almost certainly derived from a line in the Christian Testament where Jesus says, You can't serve God and mammon at the same time. Now in Hebrew he's basically saying you can't be godly and a capitalist at the same time, his words, not mine. But, yeah, Milton personified Mammon and made Mammon into a demon and I thought that that was a fascinating dynamic. An externally born demon of money and wealth that haunts the Jews and is somehow tied by name to the Jews, I thought that was a very engaging thing to bring in. So there's a lot of little stuff that I kind of picked up around the margins and knitted in, but on the whole I would say it was important to me that anyone with a strong Jewish background or Jewish education could pick up the book and read it and feel that it was familiar and an accurate representation of the sort of picture that we all have in our souls of what was on the other side of the ocean.

Heidi Rabinowitz 27:34
I felt like there was a sort of a Neil Gaiman vibe to this book.

Gavriel Savit 27:38
Oh absolutely, yeah Neil Gaiman is one of my rabbis. I would say I remember reading through the Sandman series when I was, gosh, in middle school, in high school I sort of frantically took them out of the Ann Arbor Public Library volume by volume, and they really just enchanted me and blew my proto-storytellers brain open in terms of scope and scale and what we can lay claim to as magic, and what we ought to lay claim to as magic and sort of deep aesthetics of what it means to be a sort of magical storyteller, so definitely there's a lot of Gaiman in my inkwell I would say.

Heidi Rabinowitz 28:19
Excellent. Are there any other influences, or your rabbis, who you would want to acknowledge?

Gavriel Savit 28:25
Oh man, so many. Tolkien is a big one. I mentioned Harry Potter before. Susanna Clarke who, by the way just came out with a phenomenal new book, Piranesi, that everyone should read if they're interested in fantasies, wonderful. Yeah, I'm I'm a magpie, you know if it hits me at the right time, I'm gonna squirrel it away. I always really enjoy writing acknowledgments, you know, Jewish tradition has a strong ethic of citing one sources. I think it's in Pirke Avos but I'm not sure, it's definitely in Talmud somewhere, the notion that who ever cites their sources is basically saving the world, so it always feels good to me to get to the end of a project and be able to say these are the sort of aesthetic colors that are chasing themselves around my brain while I'm doing this. I also came from musical theater, before I was a musical theater performer, I was a musician I played the violin starting at age three. So music is a very, very deep part of my process. The first thing I do when I start working on a new project is to go to Spotify and start a playlist that accompanies me all throughout the process, and I actually have my working playlists for all of my projects available on my website, Gavrielsavit.com. You can go and you can listen. It's a really interesting practice for me, right, because it's sort of Pavlovian and slips me into the atmosphere of the project. I circle back to one of these playlists years and years later and it'll automatically just throw me into the aesthetic world of the project. I could go on and on about all the different influences and contributories to the work, sometimes feels like there's nothing original in at all. It's just a giant collage, But you know what, we'll keep my imposter syndrome for my therapist.

Heidi Rabinowitz 30:05
When you dedicated this episode in the teaser, you dedicated it to the denizens of...

Gavriel Savit 30:13
...the Fairview Cemetery in Ann Arbor, Michigan, yeah.

Heidi Rabinowitz 30:16
Yeah, tell us about who you were thinking of, specifically.

Gavriel Savit 30:19
My wife and I moved back to Ann Arbor where we both grew up after our stillbirth, and we lived in this little apartment building, right near the shores of the Huron River. This tiny little cemetery, which is one of the oldest in the city, is right there next to the parking lot and I used to walk my dog in there all the time. When you're writing a book about death, about passing through cemeteries to the Far Country, having the company and support of a cemetery's worth of the departed to visit with every day as you work through the ideas is invaluable. And I may be weird in that I kind of love cemeteries to begin with, I think they're so much fun to walk through: human beings, names, sculpture, you know what's, what's not to love? So yeah, there are several cemeteries that played a very important role in this book: Fairview Cemetery in Ann Arbor is maybe primary amongst them, where I thought of most of the things, but much of the book was written in New Haven, Connecticut. Now the Grove Street Cemetery, there is a phenomenal cemetery, I think it's the oldest non like house of worship affiliated cemetery in the country. It's really amazing. And then also, even if you haven't been to Prague, you may have seen pictures of the old Prague cemetery, because it is a staggering Jewish cemetery, it's very small relative to the number of people who are buried there and so the gray stones all stick out like sort of jagged teeth. It's very very atmospheric and I was privileged to visit it, not long before the stillbirth, so that also sort of wormed its way into my brain. So yeah no I'm, I would say I'm a naturalized citizen of cemeteries.

Heidi Rabinowitz 32:18
That's great. So, this book the way back, is a Sydney Taylor Notable Book and also the National Jewish Book Award winner for the young adult category. Mazel tov, by the way!

Gavriel Savit 32:31
Thank you very much. Thank you,

Heidi Rabinowitz 32:32
And your previous book, Anna and the Swallow Man, was the winner of the Sydney Taylor Book Award.

Gavriel Savit 32:38
It also won the Goldberg prize for debut fiction for the National Jewish Book Awards.

Heidi Rabinowitz 32:42
Excellent. So, other than both being written by you, do you feel like these two books have any particular relationship?

Gavriel Savit 32:50
Man, that's a really great question. I mean, the fundamental interaction is my weird pseudo magical aesthetic sensibility. I suppose, Anna and the Swallow Man is at its core a book about uncertainty, which for me was a very exciting prospect and deeply under explored facet of human existence that is like very basic to life, and there's something obviously 180 degrees opposed about writing about death, which is perhaps the most certain thing there is. I think they might complement one another pretty well, they both look at these big questions from the perspective of young people, which is probably the best perspective, generally speaking. I try and keep my perspective as immature as possible. They're both about finding the magic, where it is. I definitely think they would recognize one another at the family reunion.

It's Tikkun Olam Time. What action would you like to call listeners to take to help heal the world?

I thought a lot about this and I want to thank you for the opportunity to talk about this, because it's a great idea. Obviously, the world is in kind of rough shape right now on a number of fronts, and I'm happy to say that there are a lot of people who are calling for material support for all sorts of worthy causes. I know that from my own perspective, I have limited material support to offer to all of the worthy causes. So I thought it might be worthwhile to try and think of something that might repair the world from a more internal perspective. This is what I was thinking about. Unexpected kindness is, I think maybe the most important thing any of us can receive and we all receive it all the time, and I think we're often grateful for it in the moment and we often forget about it very quickly. So, for my call to Tikkun Olam, I would like to invite people to take somewhere between two and five minutes at some point today, and sit in quiet and try and think of someone who was kind to you, in a time in place when it wasn't necessary. And to sit with the gratitude and to think about that other person and to imagine where they are and to try and send some kindness their way psychically as much as possible, because yes, absolutely we are in a place where we need to support each other with material means. But I also think we're really in a place where we need to reach out to one another, and be interconnected, and not individual as much as as humanly possible. And I think it will do you good to take some time to meditate on your gratitude for other people. For some people that will definitely feel like it does good to send gratitude out through the ether, I don't know if that has any objective reality, I think it's definitely a worthwhile gesture to undertake once in a while anyway. So, even if it feels hokey, I invite you to do it, I think you'll feel better.

Heidi Rabinowitz 36:21
Great, thank you. I like that. It's a creative answer. Is there anything else you want to talk about that I haven't thought to ask you?

Gavriel Savit 36:29
You're very fun to talk to so we can just sit and talk about lots of different things.

Heidi Rabinowitz 36:34
Thank you. I'm enjoying this too!

Gavriel Savit 36:35
Oh, and I will say this: look, I write fiction, so this is gonna sound self serving, but I have to say that nothing has felt more useful to me during this absurd period of upheaval than reading fiction. I, for much of my adult life have not read that much fiction because I'm reading for research and because I'm busy with other stuff. And when we landed in this global nightmare that we're in, it was one of the first things that I went back to and it's so useful because it changes the pace of your thinking, right, and particularly now when all of us are like doom-scrolling all the time, slowing down and matching the pace of someone else's thought and traveling out of your body to another place and time and circumstance is the most regenerative thing. So, you know, you don't need to buy my book, you don't need to buy any books, go to a library but, do yourself a favor, read some fiction.

Heidi Rabinowitz 37:35
All right, that is advice I definitely agree with. Gavriel Savit, thank you so much for speaking with me.

Gavriel Savit 37:42
Oh, it was my pleasure. Thank you so much, Heidi, this was wonderful.

Heidi Rabinowitz 37:44
A lot of fun!

E. Lockhart 37:46
[MUSIC, TEASER] Hi, this is E. Lockhart. I'll be joining you soon on The Book of Life podcast to talk about my new book, Whistle, A New Gotham Hero, and I'd like to dedicate my appearance on the podcast to the writer Fran Lebowitz with thanks for the laughs.

Heidi Rabinowitz 38:13
[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 @bookoflifepod. Want to read books featured on the show? Buy them through 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 by 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 to all of that and more at BookofLifepodcast.com. Our background music is provided by the Freilachmakers Klezmer String Band. Thanks for listening, and happy reading!

Transcribed by https://otter.ai