

Linda Elovitz Marshall 0:00

[COLD OPEN] I'm thrilled to be here on The Book of Life podcast, and especially thrilled to talk about my book The Polio Pioneer: Dr. Jonas Salk and the Polio Vaccine. When I began writing it, I had no idea how timely it would be. With that in mind, I would like to give special thanks to all of the scientists who've been working on the vaccine, thank you so much. To the doctors, to the nurses, to every single health care worker, to drivers, to everybody who has helped, everyone who has gotten groceries for somebody who couldn't go to the store, for everyone who has pitched in, in one way or another to help us through this: thank you all so much. And if I didn't mention you, I mean you, whatever you did, you did something that you knew in your heart was right, and you're continuing to do that, and together we'll get through this; together we'll be strong, and thank you, I really mean it.

Heidi Rabinowitz 1:06

[MUSIC, INTRO] This is The Book of Life, a show about Jewish kidlit, mostly. I'm Heidi Rabinowitz. Today I'm talking with Linda Elovitz Marshall about her picture book biography The Polio Pioneer: Dr. Jonas Salk and the Polio Vaccine. This timely book gives me life in an almost literal sense, by making it easy to understand the hows and whys of life-saving vaccines. It's March 2021 right now, and the American Rescue Plan is getting shots into arms across the nation. I'm grateful that that includes my own arm. I hope this episode will inspire anyone who's hesitating to go ahead and get a COVID vaccine. I'd love it if you'd share this episode widely to help me with that mission.

Linda Elovitz Marshall, I'm sure Book of Life listeners have heard of polio, but can you refresh our memories, and tell us what exactly is polio?

Linda Elovitz Marshall 2:16

I'm going to tell you what I remember of polio, from being a child, because I can't describe it neurologically, I can't describe it any way other than to say that it is a virus that cripples, makes people sick, and then, even if they've recovered, often returns in later life. I have to tell you that I was a child when polio came into my life. I was four or five years old, living in Boston. My parents were originally from Hartford, and the polio epidemic in Boston was terrible. My mother whisked me and my brother from our home in Boston to where her parents lived in Hartford, because she was so worried that we would catch polio. Did I know what it was? No, but I did know that kids were getting sick. I knew I couldn't go swimming. I knew I couldn't go to the movies. I couldn't play with my friends. There were all sorts of things I couldn't do because I might wind up in a iron lung. I might wind up walking on crutches like the posters of kids I saw from the March of Dimes. Something terrible might happen, and my mother was scared. She was really, really scared. So we left. Fortunately we never got polio. That's one of those things that, you know, for me as a child, made such a difference because my whole life changed, and it made a powerful impression on me. And when the polio vaccine became a thing, suddenly my life opened up. That's what polio meant to me and that's why I wrote this book.

Heidi Rabinowitz 4:00

And what is a polio pioneer?

Linda Elovitz Marshall 4:03

The "polio pioneer" phrase is used in two different ways. We used it as the title for the book because Jonas Salk was groundbreaking in discovering the vaccine. The phrase polio pioneer also applied to the 2 million children who lined up and got their shots, and every child who got a shot, got a little button that he or she could wear, and it said, I'm a polio pioneer. So, kids were very proud to be participating in the study, and to be vaccinated, much the way we are now. What a great thing it is these days to be vaccinated!

Heidi Rabinowitz 4:49

Can you remember getting your polio shot?

Linda Elovitz Marshall 4:52

So, I'm somebody who's traumatized by shots, just the idea of it, I feel my hands getting sweaty already just talking about, Do I remember my polio shot? I think I have repressed it. I do remember years later there was a different vaccine called the Sabin vaccine. The Sabin vaccine used a live virus and it was taken in a sugar cube. I do remember lining up in school and getting that sugar cube with that dot of vaccine on it, but I don't remember the shot. I can't remember any shot that I ever got. No, I don't remember that my polio shot, sorry.

Heidi Rabinowitz 5:33

Okay. Was there anything interesting that you discovered during your research that you just couldn't fit into the book?

Linda Elovitz Marshall 5:42

Dr Salk, before he decided he wanted to become a doctor, wanted to be a rabbi. I thought that was cool. I mean he wanted to make changes in the world. He thought about being rabbi He thought about going into politics, maybe he would be governor, senator. And then when he was in college, he discovered chemistry, and that changed his life. But I couldn't put all of the things he wanted to be in the book, nor could I put in that in an early part of his young life, he lived in a, what sounded to me like a little cabin in the woods and he'd chop wood and, you know, had a wood burning stove, I mean, this stuff is really cool, but I didn't fit that in.

Heidi Rabinowitz 6:27

Alright, that is cool. Why did you feel it was important to emphasize Dr. Jonas Salk's Jewish identity in your book?

Linda Elovitz Marshall 6:37

Because I was proud. I felt proud that somebody with the same background that I have made such a major contribution to all of our health and to my life. It spoke to me. It spoke to me. Everybody I write about has to speak to me in some way. Otherwise, I don't want to spend that much time writing about them if they're not in my heart.

Heidi Rabinowitz 7:04

There's a long history of medical racism in our country and I guess around the world, which ranges from unconscious biases of doctors to intentional harm to communities of color, like in the Tuskegee experiment. And I want to acknowledge that reality. However on the cover of your book, and throughout the illustrations, we see white children, black children, and brown children being immunized against polio together. In the early 20th century treatment for polio was segregated and unfairly distributed, and in fact I'll link to an interesting article about this history at Bookoflifepodcast.com. But black children took part in the clinical trials for the Salk vaccine, and it seems that this was a step away from that racist history.

Linda Elovitz Marshall 7:56

That brings us to Salk himself. Salk had certainly known discrimination, He'd known antisemitism. He went to City College because that was one of the few places that would accept him. He understood what it was to be discriminated against and didn't want that to happen to anybody else. He wanted to make the world a better place. From the very beginning he sees soldiers returning from World War One. And while the crowds are jubilant, they're thrilled the war is over, the war is over, but not Jonas Salk, who was four years old at the time. Instead, he is seeing people who are maimed and wounded and feeling very sorry and sad for them. So, he's a very sensitive person who is aware of the differences and how hard people have to work. It's just part of who he was.

Heidi Rabinowitz 9:06

If you visit the website of the Salk Institute at salk.edu, the tagline says, "Where cures begin: we explore the very foundations of life, for the benefit of all." That is pretty lofty, Tell us about the Salk Institute, and your visit there.

Linda Elovitz Marshall 9:26

So, I was so lucky to go, I cannot believe it. What happened was, I was invited to read one of my books that's actually PJ Library book at a Jewish Community Center in La Jolla, California, and realizing that I was going to La Jolla, I was wondering what else I might be able to do there. I would extend the trip a little longer, on my own dime of course,. Then I found out that that's where the Salk Institute was, and I could, maybe, maybe, maybe go and visit. So I contacted a scientist who I knew who had just left the Salk Institute for something in New York and he arranged for me to get a visit. The woman who led me around her name is Care Dipping, and she was absolutely wonderful and Dr Peter Salk, Dr. Jonas Salk's son, made sure that I got the best treatment, ever. And at that point, my idea was just a tiny tiny seed, And they showed me around, they brought me to the library, I got to look through windows at, you know, scientists, wearing white coats, and it was, like, so cool. The Salk Institute is an architectural beauty, it sits on a bluff overlooking the Pacific Ocean. And it's like, you can feel the ideas waft in and out, you can feel creativity there. It just was so exciting, and I was so glad to be there, and I just soaked in everything I could. That's what it was like. Did it start the book? Maybe. Maybe. I know I owe them an awful lot, they were just absolutely gracious.

Heidi Rabinowitz 11:12

You named your son after Jonas Salk, is that right?

Linda Elovitz Marshall 11:15

That's correct.

Heidi Rabinowitz 11:16

Yeah, talk about that and why that name is so very meaningful for you.

Linda Elovitz Marshall 11:22

So it's, it's really funny that my husband and I never discussed that that's why we chose that name. Our son was named after my husband's grandfather whose name was Yehezkel. His English name was Oscar and Oscar just did not seem like a good name at the time, because, you know, I mean, Oscar the Grouch was like, vivid a memory. So, so we didn't want to go there, so we took the yud from Yehezkel and tried to figure out, well, what would we use. And when we came to Jonah, we both lit up. Was it going to be Jonah, or Jonas? And we decided that Jonah, we liked it more. Let me just brag a little bit. I have to brag about all four kids, they're all absolutely wonderful. But this is the one who seemed to have the aptitude for taking things apart and putting them together. I thought of him as my little scientist and he would take the pins out of hinges on doors, and the smaller doors, when I opened them they'd fall off. He wanted to see how things were put together. So I would tuck him into bed at night and say I bet you're going to be a doctor someday, you're going to be a doctor, and guess what that one became a doctor. They've all done wonderful things. Right.

Heidi Rabinowitz 12:54

Vu den? That's great. You wrote an essay for Lilit Magazine about musar and vaccines. Explain what musar is and its relationship for you to the COVID vaccine.

Linda Elovitz Marshall 13:11

Thank you, Heidi. I've just begun to study musar. The study of that is one of the many gifts that I've gotten from staying home during this period. As I wrote in the essay, I attended a class with my second or third grade granddaughter, and they talked about how to behave and how to think about other people's perspectives. That's part of the whole idea called middot. I'm still a little unclear of how it all fits together but I knew there was something in there that spoke to me and something in there... When I got my vaccine, and I wanted to shout to the world, but I thought, I can't do that because there's so many people who are also wanting to get their vaccines and it's such, such trauma. I mean I tried and tried and tried to get an appointment, I was in tears. I couldn't figure out how to make the system work, I couldn't figure it out. And then when I finally did get an appointment, I wanted to shout about it, I wanted a ritual, a mikvah, but I didn't want to hurt other people's feelings. And then I thought back to the musar study that I've been doing, to what had happened in my granddaughter's class and how I'd learned about not bursting somebody else's bubble. What had been happening on that day was, a little girl was presenting another little girl with a present. And she was so excited about giving this other child the present, she whispered to another girl who was standing by, guess what, I'm giving her watercolors! And that other little girl said, she already has them, and they're not that much fun. And I thought, Oh, this is not good, this, this is, I'm glad they're teaching about bursting bubbles. And it's something that I do sometimes because I get excited and exuberant and I forget. Well, this isn't about bursting bubbles. This is about not wanting to share my exuberance or joy, in a way that might make other people feel bad. And I did not want to do that. And so I remembered to pull back and be quiet about it and try to be introspective and that I wanted some sort of rituals, something, something quiet. And what I did, because I'm a writer, is I wrote. It helped me. I've since learned from a friend of mine who's a rabbi, Rabbi Cheryl Weiner, who's in Florida, and she and I have known each other since our days of Hebrew school, we were both eight years old when we first met, we wound up going to the same college together, and we're now planning our Barnard College 50th reunion. So Cheryl said that there is a website called Ritualwell.org, and that I could find rituals in there. So thank you again for asking that.

Heidi Rabinowitz 16:23

Sure. And in fact, after reading your article I thought, hmm, I wonder what rituals do exist, and I was looking at Ritualwell, and I also came across the Central Reform Congregation in St. Louis, Missouri, and they had created this compilation, a PDF full of different blessings and reflections. So I actually had one that I wanted to share, called A Reflection for Receiving the Coronavirus Vaccine. And this is by Rabbi Rebecca Kaml, who if Google has steered me right is a chaplain at the University of Illinois Hospital. And so this is how it goes. As we move from darkness to light, may we take this vaccine as a sign of what is to come. A world reopened and renewed, embracing family and friends, gathering together in joy. May we also be mindful of what has been, the lives lost, the sorrow felt, and may the past and present intertwine, giving us hope for the future.

Linda Elovitz Marshall 17:28

That's so beautiful Heidi, so very beautiful. In our emails back and forth prior to this, you'd mentioned if there was some sort of tikkun olam are teaching that I might want to share...

Heidi Rabinowitz 17:45

Yes, that was actually my very next question for you, so please do share with us what action would you like to invite listeners to take to help heal the world.

Linda Elovitz Marshall 17:56

So, in the musar study group that I'm in, we are reading the book Every Day Holy Day by Alan Morinis. They're very very short segments. I wanted to share one because it spoke to me. With Passover and Easter coming on, we talk about this season of rebirth, even here in the Northeast it's amazing what happens, every year at Passover time, little chives are popping up in my lawn. And you know, instead of thinking them as weeds, they are signs of spring, they're the bitter herbs coming up right in my lawn, it just gives me great joy to see them.

And this week we're talking about joy, and I'd like to read it a section. It's week three, day four. One day people noticed Rabbi Nosson Zvi Finkel, who lived from 1849 to 1927, who was called the Alter of Slabodka, enjoying a private banquet. What was the occasion? He had been told that a man in a far off land, who he did not know, had won a great prize. So the Alter was full of joy for him. And so he made himself a party. The beauty of being joyful for someone else is so special. I mean when we can celebrate the goodness that happens to somebody else, then that's one of the ways we're absolutely our best selves. We can really kvell for someone else. Right now, there are things to be joyful about as we look forward. It's funny I, my grandchildren were here last week for Shabbat dinner. I was joyful, because I've been vaccinated and I could hold and cuddle them, and I've been making the rounds, seeing my grandchildren, and holding them, and I have to tell you these hugs are the most joyful, ever. Absolutely delicious. Real, real IRL, in real life, hugs. Talk about joy!

Heidi Rabinowitz 20:16

As we record, it's nearly Passover. Tell us about your earlier picture book The Passover Lamb.

Linda Elovitz Marshall 20:23

So I'm sitting right now in my old farmhouse in Selkirk, New York. We've lived here for 40 some odd years. So I am now in the spot where The Passover Lamb took place. And so much of The Passover Lamb is based on a true story. We had sheep. And just before the seder, one of our sheep, named in the book Snowball but her real name was Elizabeth, gave birth, and Elizabeth had twins (in the book, they're triplets). And she did not take care of one of them. And it was a problem because we were getting ready to leave to go to my aunt and uncle's house in Massachusetts, about two and a half hours away, and we had to leave. But Elizabeth was not taking care of that baby lamb. So we fed it with a bottle, and tried to figure out what do we do, what do we do? Ultimately we figured out the solution. We put a diaper on that lamb, we brought that baby lamb with us to the seder. We named him Moses. That's why the child in the book, the little girl, I gave her the name of Miriam, the brother is named Aaron, and Moses the baby lamb, that Passover Lamb grew up healthy and really big, so big he would like butt us, I mean it was, it was time for him to go. So eventually we found another home for Moses the Passover lamb, where they loved him very very much.

Heidi Rabinowitz 21:56

You are a prolific author and I'll link to your website at Bookoflifepodcast.com so people can see all your books. What are you working on next?

Linda Elovitz Marshall 22:07

I have several books forthcoming. My husband's name is Bob Marshall. As it happens, there was another Bob Marshall also Jewish, who founded The Wilderness Society. I really wanted to tell his story. It's going to be published by the South Dakota Historical Society because of the Bob Marshall Wilderness that's out there. So that's something that's in the works. And then there are tons of things that... I mean I've got a sheet of paper that lists, probably four or five different projects that I'm supposed to be working on today. Who knows what will get done? But another thing that I have been grateful for during the pandemic is that my circle of writer friends has grown exponentially. I mean especially, you know here, you and I, Heidi, we're talking, and I'm in that wonderful Jewish Kidlit Mavens group which I love, I mean it's so much as opened up. And I feel like even by being shut in, my world has expanded. I've had the time to look around and be interested in things I never thought I would be interested in before. Being a writer for kids, I've tried to share, share these things.

Heidi Rabinowitz 23:30

Is there anything else you'd like to talk about that I haven't thought to ask you?

Linda Elovitz Marshall 23:34

I gave a copy of the book to the pharmacist who gave me the shot.

Heidi Rabinowitz 23:40

Oh, that's nice!

Linda Elovitz Marshall 23:42

I also gave a copy, two copies, one to Bill Clinton, and one to Chelsea, because you know Chelsea also writes kids books.

Heidi Rabinowitz 23:51

How did that come about?

Linda Elovitz Marshall 23:53

So I was in Chappaqua with my daughter. Bill Clinton lives in Chappaqua. And we went into Scattered Books, which is a little bookstore, and there were too many people in there and I was worried and I hadn't yet been vaccinated so I ran outside. And my daughter came running after me and she said, Mom, you got to meet somebody, you got to meet somebody. And so she dragged me inside; well at the same time he was coming out because I think there were too many people there for him too. And so she introduced me, and she said Give him one of your books. Well I didn't happen to have one. So I got his information, and I sent two books to the bookstore and they held my books for him. He went into the bookstore, and he picked them up, and I got a letter from Hillary, thanking me for the books.

Heidi Rabinowitz 24:44

That's so cool!

Linda Elovitz Marshall 24:45

Yeah, I I've been trying to get the Gates Foundation, because they've done so much work on polio, to know about the book, I haven't been able to figure out in in yet, so...

Heidi Rabinowitz 24:57

Okay, so if any listener know somebody at the Gates Foundation, please get in touch.

Linda Elovitz Marshall 25:02

Right.

Heidi Rabinowitz 25:03

All right, that's awesome. Linda Elovitz Marshall, thank you so much for speaking with me today.

Linda Elovitz Marshall 25:09

Heidi. This has been so wonderful. Thank you so much for inviting me to The Book of Life podcast. Hopefully my Jonas Salk book is helping kids and their families to understand the importance of vaccines, and to understand a little bit more about how viruses work. So, thank you so much. I'm very grateful.

Ambika Sambasivan 25:33

[MUSIC, TEASER] Hi I'm Ambika Sambasivan, I'm the publisher and cofounder at Yali Books.

Maxine Rose Schur 25:40

Hi, I'm Maxine Rose Schur. I'm the author of the advanced picture book Brave with Beauty.

Ambika Sambasivan 25:46

We'll be joining you soon on The Book of Life podcast.

Maxine Rose Schur 25:50

I would like to dedicate this podcast to all the travelers in the world. Somerset Maugham once said that the good traveler has the gift of surprise. So I would like to dedicate this episode to all travelers who travel to learn, to wonder, and to be surprised.

Heidi Rabinowitz 26:17

[MUSIC, OUTRO] Don't be a stranger. Say hi to Heidi at 561-206-2473, or bookoflifepodcast@gmail.com.

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