



## LESLÉA NEWMAN: JEWISH STORIES IN CHILDREN'S BOOKS

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Joshua Holo: Welcome to the College Commons podcast and our acclaimed author series, brought to you by the Hebrew Union College-Jewish Institute of Religion, together with the Jewish Book Council. We'll meet authors recognized by the National Jewish Book Awards and discuss their celebrated books. My name is Joshua Holo, Dean of HUC's Skirball Campus in Los Angeles, and your host.

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JH: Welcome to this episode of the College Commons podcast, where I look forward to our conversation with Lesléa Newman. Lesléa Newman is the author of 75 books for readers of all ages. She has received many literary awards, including Creative Writing Fellowship from the National Endowment for the Arts, and the Massachusetts Artists Foundation. Miss Newman wrote, *Heather Has Two Mommies*, the first children's book to portray lesbian families in a positive way, and has followed up this pioneering work with several more children's books on lesbian and gay families. Among her Jewish-themed books for children is *Gittel's Journey: An Ellis Island Story*, which won the National Jewish Book Award in 2019, and *Welcoming Elijah*, the topic of our discussion today, which also won the National Jewish Book Award in 2020. Welcome, Lesléa Newman, to the College Commons podcast.

Lesléa Newman: Nice to be here.

JH: I wanted to ask you at the outset, what something that struck me, and it has to do with the relationship between the illustrations and the text. The book opens with a panorama of what could be either an American suburb, or a shtetl. And in so far as it's evocative of the shtetl, it sets a kind of chronological expectation of something vaguely in the 19th century, for example. And then when you go in to turn the page, and you begin to become a guest in the house, you see a population of people ready for the first night of Passover, the Seder. And the people are very diverse. There's a Black family, there's elderly people, there are young people, there's this whole diversity of people that feels very contemporary. The anachronism that the illustrations seem to set up in relation to the diversity, am I imagining that, or was that intentional?

LN: Well, as an author, I don't have a lot of say in the illustrations. That's really between the editor, the artist, and the art director. But I will say that diversity, and representation of diversity, is very, very important to me in my book. So I made that very clear to my editor. And if you look at the illustrations, you can't really tell who's with who, in terms of family dynamics. And I did that on purpose. On one of the opening pages, the text simply says, "Inside it was warm, outside it was windy." And you have a picture of a crowd of people approaching the boy's home, and the boy is standing in the doorway. Now originally, when I received the sketch for that painting, the boy was standing between a man and a woman, who the readers would of course assume that it was his parents. So I said to my editor, 'cause I didn't get to talk to the artist directly, why is the default that this is a boy with a mom and a dad? There's nothing in the text says that.

LN: And that immediately gives a message that this is the kind of family that this book is about. So I suggested that the boy be by himself opening the door for the guests, so that inside there could be one mom, two moms, a mom and a dad, two dads, a single dad, so that more families could see themselves in the story. So that's one example of how I try to be inclusive and how I can give feedback to my editor to pass on to the artist, which they listened to. And I was very grateful for that.

JH: It is a Passover story. It takes place on the first, or perhaps the second night, but certainly at a Seder. And the story effectively sets up a parallel experience between the cat, one of our protagonists, sort of one of the parallel tracks, and the boy inside with the family at Seder, on the other parallel track. The boy's story is filled with light and warmth, and sort of spilling out of the Seder. The cat's story, however, seems to be kind of lonely. Were you trying to evoke a sense of loneliness off from us on behalf of the cat, or is it just that a cat's life outside is different?

LN: Well, the book is really full of contrasts. The whole structure... The lines begin, inside this happens, outside that happens. So there's that contrast, is the contrast of light and dark, because it's night, and outside it's dark, and inside is light, which the illustrations show. And throughout the writing of the book, I kept thinking about the commandment to welcome the stranger, especially during the Seder. And so I wanted to show how the cat's life is changed when she becomes invited into the home.

JH: There's another theme, which is the tension that you build up in the text, in particular, where you want the parallel stories to intersect. And I'm thinking of the part where it says, "Still the boy waited and still the kitten waited." And clearly, you're building a tension there. So if we're allowed to give a spoiler, where they do meet, tell us the moment where they meet and what happens, and then I'll follow up with a question about it.

LN: Well, I love when the stories are running on a parallel track, and then they merge. And where they merge is when the boy opens the door for Elijah, which is his favorite part of the Seder, which was my favorite part of the Seder when I was growing up. And then we have the lines, "Inside, the boy looked outside. Outside, the kitten looked inside." So that is when they meet.

JH: And then the boy opens the door and what does he say?

LN: He says, "Elijah?" And the kitten says, "Meow!" And that's how Elijah found a home, is how the book ends.

JH: You've taken the idea of opening the door for Elijah, this part of the Seder are known to almost anyone who's ever attended one, and a kind of climactic moment, which in the traditional course, you open it and Elijah is either invisible or depending on how you believe about Elijah not there, there's a lot of ways to understand it, and now it's a kitten who comes in and becomes integrated into the family. And this might be too far off, I don't know, but I run a Rabbinical Seminary, so I tend to go in this direction, the prophet Elijah is associated in Jewish tradition with the heralding of the messianic age, and in that regard, there's a messianic component to the ritual of opening the door for Elijah. I found it deeply compelling and maybe reading forward too much into the story that if you merge those two things, the messianic idea of Elijah with the book Welcoming Elijah, you get a sense of the Messiah with a messianic age being lonely and outcast and wanting to come and wanting to join us and yearning for us as much as we yearn for a messianic age when the lion will lie down with the land and what have you. Is that taking this too far, or is there something in that in your thinking?

LN: Well, I'd love to say that I did that on purpose, and I should say that, but I didn't, but now that you bring that up, I just love how you read that into the story, and it makes total sense because the kitten is yearning to come in just as much as the boy, when he sees Elijah is yearning to bring Elijah into the fold. So I would say absolutely, and my mother wouldn't instruct me to say, "Oh yes, I did that on purpose," so...

[laughter]

JH: Yeah. Take credit for it.

LN: Right. [chuckle]

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JH: Before we return to the podcast, we wanna let you know about digital learning on the College Commons platform. Beyond this podcast, which is available to the public at large, check out the online courses at [collegecommons.huc.edu](http://collegecommons.huc.edu), for in-depth learning, digital syllabi, assignments, inspiration for teaching, and one of our most influential courses called Making Prayer Real. Subscribe with your synagogue for all this and more. Just click, sign up at [collegecommons.huc.edu](http://collegecommons.huc.edu). Oh, and one more thing, help us up and rate us on iTunes, but whatever you do, do not give us five stars unless we deserve it. Now, back to our podcast.

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JH: With respect to the diversity of the people shown in the story and the fact that you don't really know the relationships that anybody could be, anybody's uncle, brother, sister, wife, husband, whatever, the quality of that mixing evokes another quality in my mind about Passover, which is that Passover is one of the holidays that Jewish families most commonly and widely invite their non-Jewish friends and family too, and it's a holiday that lends itself to that in my experience. Is that part of your experience just as a person who celebrates Passover, and if so, what do you think it is about Passover that lends itself to that capacity to be broad-minded and open-armed and welcoming?

LN: Well, it's one of the few holidays that we celebrate at home instead of going to shul, and there's a big meal, which is always exciting and interesting and fun for people, and it's the holiday about storytelling and who doesn't love to hear a story, and we tell the story year after year, and every time a new person is at the Seder, we're reminded that not everybody knows the story, and it's important to tell the story, and the new guest brings their own questions and adds to the discussion. So, it's a very heimish time and it's a time where everybody gets to participate, and I think that's another reason because it's not that you just sit back and listen, people take turns reading from the Haggadah, people ask questions that in my case, people bring food, so they're not simply served, but it's a participatory meal. So there are just so many opportunities for everyone to share in the ritual, and I think that's why it's so inviting for people to come to one's home and be part of it all.

JH: I wanna ask you about your commitment, your authorial commitment to diversity in general, not just in the Jewish context. Why is the diversity question so important to you as it evidently is, and perhaps more importantly, what's the unique power of children's books in presenting stories of diversity?

LN: A children's book has the power to change a child's life. And so when I was growing up, I never saw a Jewish family in a children's book ever. And as a child, I didn't have the words to express how alienating and isolating that made me feel. I just knew that I was different, that my family was different, I would ask my parents things like, "Why can't we have a Christmas tree? Why can't I hunt for Easter eggs?" They were very adamant that those were not our family traditions, and those were not things that I would be participating in, so I just would get mad because I blamed them. And I remember when I saw my first Jewish children's book, I was in my late 20s, and I was in a store in Northampton, Massachusetts, where I lived, and the book was Mrs. Moskowitz and the Sabbath Candlesticks, and tears just ran down my face.

LN: I finally, at that age, saw a book that represented my family, and so I know from my own direct experience, even though I grew up in Brighton Beach, a very Jewish neighborhood, all the families around me looked like my family, basically. But that direct experience was not as powerful as the messages I received from never seeing a family like mine in a book or on TV or in a movie, and so it really became my mission as a children's book writer to provide children with the opportunity to see themselves in books. And that started when a woman who was a lesbian mom with a very young child stopped me on the street and asked me to write a book about a family like theirs, and so I immediately could feel her desire to create that experience for

her child, and I took that very seriously, and that's how Heather Has Two Mommies came into being, so ever since then, I've just carried on that mission.

JH: I'd like to ask you about Gittel's Journey for a couple of reasons. First of all, I think most Jewish families are interested in their family stories and they're arrival to the United States, but also because my daughter's name is Gitte. Gittel is the diminutive of Gitte, and so the name is in our family as well, and I wanted to ask you if, as the name intimate it might be the case, is this also a personal story for you?

LN: My Children's book, Gittel's Journey: An Ellis Island Story is based on my own family history, and it really... All I knew about it was an anecdote, which was that Gittel whose real name was Sadie, came over in the early 1900s by herself as a child, and all she had was a piece of paper with the name and address of a relative scrolled on it, and she had held that piece of paper so tightly throughout the whole journey that when she showed it to an immigration officer, all the ink had worn off on her hand and it was illegible, and so her picture was put in the Jewish newspaper and miraculously her relative found her and came to Ellis Island to get her. And this story was just lodged in my bones, and then when all the immigration issues came to the forefront in our country in the last couple of years, that story just traveled to the forefront of my brain and I decided to write about it, and I got to interview my 93-year-old aunt who is the daughter of the real Gittel, she didn't really remember anything else, so I had to do a lot of research to bring that anecdote alive in a children's book.

JH: Tell us about what you're working on now, I know that your oeuvre goes far beyond children's books.

LN: Well, the book that I'm most excited about, which actually I'm not actually working on because it was just published... Just just published. So I'm working on publicizing it, is called I Wish My Father, and it's a memoir in verse, so it's a book-length collection of poetry that explores my experience taking care of my dad during the last five years of his life, and it's a companion to a previously published book called, I Carry My Mother, which was about my shepherding my mom through the last years of her life, so my parents have become a boxed set, which I think would amuse them, and those books are very near and dear to my heart, obviously, 'cause they're very personal.

JH: And writing in verses, is it the first time you've ever written something in verse?

LN: No, actually, poetry is my first love, so I began my literary life as a poet. I started writing poems when I was eight years old, and we moved from Brighton Beach to Long Island, which is a very different culture and neighborhood, and I was very bereft. I did not like it, I really missed Brooklyn. So I've been writing poetry for a really long time, my first publications were poems published in 17 magazines when I was a teenager, and then I studied with Allen Ginsberg at Naropa Institute. He was my mentor for many years. And then I studied with Grace Paley at the Cummington Center for the Arts. So I've been a... Poetry has been the start through thread of my life, and as you can see, Welcoming Elijah, though it's not written in rhymed verse, if you type that text out, which I did for 25 drafts, it is a poem, and many of my children's books are written there as rhymed or un-rhymed verse.

JH: Well, Lesléa Newman, I wanna thank you for the pleasure of your company in conversation and sharing your work with us, and I want to remind our audience that Welcoming Elijah, the children's picture book is available everywhere, it's a beautiful and elegant read, and I hope everyone enjoys it. Not only for Passover, but certainly for the Passover season when it comes around, and until then, I look forward to talking to you again about your future publications. Lesléa, thank you so much.

LN: Thank you.

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JH: We hope you've enjoyed this episode of The College Commons podcast. Available wherever you listen to your podcasts or at the College Commons website, [collegetcommons.huc.edu](http://collegetcommons.huc.edu), where you can also stay tuned for future episodes.

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