

# Reviews of Titles for Adults

EDITED BY MERRILY F. HART AND DANIEL SCHEIDE

## FICTION & POETRY

**Azriel, Yakov.** *Beads for the Messiah's Bride: Poems on Leviticus.* St. Louis, MO: Time Being Books, 2009. 118 p. \$15.95 (ISBN 978-156809-128-0).

Yakov Azriel has written a book of poems on what might seem like an unlikely subject, the book of Torah that is mainly laws of priestly conduct and, in particular, the laws of sacrifice. The poem entitled "Beads," from which the book's title is derived, is a personal meditation on the process of repentance on Yom Kippur. Other poems are midrashic in nature, such as the one entitled "Night in the Sukkah of Joseph and his Brothers." Some poems are more effective than others but on the whole, this is a well-crafted poetry collection that readers will want to return to again and again. It is recommended for high school and synagogue collections.

*Marion M. Stein, NY*

**Del Bourgo, David.** *Prague Spring.* Charleston, SC: Mystere Press, 2009. 276 p. \$14.95 (ISBN 978-1-44211-987-1).

Inspector Simon Wolfe of the San Francisco Police Department pursues the killer of a United States congressman's son. The inspector's past as a Holocaust survivor and Nazi hunter intrudes in the process of tracking down the killer and solving the murder. The fast-moving story, involving drugs and prostitution, takes place in the late sixties in the Bay Area. This is the author's first published novel. He is a poet and painter who lives in the Los Angeles area. The book is an appropriate addition to fiction collections in Jewish community center and public libraries.

*Susan Freiband, Arlington, VA*

**Leegant, Joan.** *Wherever You Go.* New York: Norton, 2010. 253 p. \$23.95. (ISBN-978-0-39305-476-7).

Joan Leegant's award-winning first book was the story collection *An Hour in Paradise* (2003). It has taken Leegant seven years to give us her first novel, and it was worth the wait. *Wherever You Go*, set primarily in Israel, is a luminous journey through the lives of three young Jews struggling with issues of territory and home. Yona Stern travels from New York to Israel to make amends with her estranged sister, who lives in a West Bank settlement. Aaron Blinder, a year-abroad dropout searching for fulfillment, thinks he has found meaning in life by associating with a violent fringe of Israeli society. Mark Greenglass, a New-York-born Jerusalem Talmud scholar who has lost his religious passion, finds himself unexpectedly caught in the drama.

The novel is a small masterpiece, small only in that Leegant needs few pages to say a lot. Her book is eloquent, timely, and thought provoking—sure to be a hit with book clubs. In tackling Israel's complex political and social situation, Leegant, who teaches at Bar Ilan University and lives in Boston and Israel, doesn't give all the answers, but she certainly asks all the right questions. Seven years ago, Leegant was selected for the Barnes & Noble Discover Great New Writers program. If you didn't

discover her then, be sure to do so now. Her new book is highly recommended for all libraries that collect fiction.

*Elizabeth Edelgass, Jewish Community Library of Greater New Haven, Woodbridge, CT*

**Miller, Lily Poritz.** *In a Pale Blue Light: A Novel.* Toronto: Sumach Press, 2009. 256 p. \$24.95 (ISBN 978-1-89454-983-7).

Set in Cape Town in the years before and during the Second World War, the story is narrated through the eyes of Libka, the twelve-year-old daughter of Eastern European immigrants, at a vulnerable moment in her life, when she must help her mother and her younger siblings cope with the sudden death of their father. Possibly a result of the author's long absence from South Africa, the novel has an almost dream-like haunting quality. The story takes place away from the popular Jewish ghetto in Maynard Stree. The author brings alive a lesser-known neighborhood that has today been converted into an up-market boutique area known as the Cape Quarter. With a lyrical sensitivity Miller captures the ambiance of the Cape's diverse population groups. Her protagonist, Libka, displays a political maturity beyond her years, and her defiance results in her expulsion from her school and ostracism from her peers. Her insights and reactions to difficult circumstances shed light on South Africa's racially divided society and on its Jewish community. Many autobiographical memoirs have been written since the dawn of democracy in South Africa in 1994. This fictionalized memoir has an added freshness and originality, and is highly recommended for synagogue and research libraries.

*Veronica Belling, University of Cape Town, SA*

**Shrayer, Maxim D.** *Yom Kippur in Amsterdam: Stories.* Syracuse: Syracuse University Press (The Library of Modern Jewish Literature), 2009. \$24.95 (ISBN 978-0-81560-918-6).

In this debut collection of short stories, Maxim Shrayer investigates shades of Russian-Jewish identity and experience in America. His felicitous prose focuses on the lives of Russian immigrants who have made a life here, not the trials and tribulations of those just arrived. Mark Kagan, a graduate student at Yale in love with gentile Sarah, casually takes up Hebrew studies with a yeshiva student, Zalman, as he agonizes over the issues of marrying a non-Jew in "The Disappearance of Zalman." Zalman's studious impassioned Hasidism affects the assimilated Kagan deeply but does not appear to bring him closer to Judaism. However, the story's final paragraphs, as in several other stories, deliver a surprise.

Maxim Shrayer joins a list of Russian-born authors enriching American Jewish fiction with stories and novels, but he is also a noted scholar, professor of Russian, English and Jewish studies at Boston College, author of several nonfiction titles, and editor of the two-volume award winning *Anthology of Jewish-Russian Literature*. The settings of his stories are often universities and the experiences are universal. Recommended for all fiction collections.

*Merrily F. Hart, Ann Arbor, MI*