

A Compendium of Jewish Culture

An Interview with Jane Breskin Zalben

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You're an icon in the children's literature world, having written more than fifty books. Why does your latest title, *Beni's Tiny Tales: Around the Year in Jewish Holidays*, feel different from your others? Do you feel closer to it?

I need to answer this in a circuitous way because life often takes indirect paths. I have done many kinds of books and have illustrated and written most of them, but sometimes, I have illustrated other authors, and other times, other artists have illustrated my text.

My first Beni book was *Beni's First Chanukah* about bears and squirrels celebrating and sharing their holiday traditions as we did with our children and friends. It was my ode to all the Christmas trees I never had. All the red-and-green sugar-dusted cookies, wreaths, and pine roping my family would never do. I desperately wanted to spray-paint reindeers on my bedroom window prancing in fake snow and prayed for Santa to arrive, bringing me a Patty Playpal doll. A Jewish child growing up in a non-Jewish world.

Fast forward to my older son asking when he was little as we drove through Main Street of our town lit with glittering bells and candy canes, "Why are there no Chanukah decorations?" And years later, my younger son at five declared, "If I can't have a tree, then I'm going to marry a girl who isn't Jewish so I can have one."

Around that time, the early 1980s, one of my best friends, head of our local library children's room, suggested I write a Chanukah book. She eventually went to be on a Caldecott committee, and observed, "We have nothing really good we can read to young children for a Chanukah story hour." With resistance, and after



Photo courtesy of Julie Gribble, KidLit TV

much urging, I wrote my first religious picture book, starring a bear named Beni.

To cut to the chase, Talmudic discussions went on for six months in the publishing house—how would Jewish people take to anthropomorphic animals? They wanted me to illustrate it with humans. Channeling Beatrix Potter, I said, "Have someone else do it." Everyone responded with a definitive, "No!"

The manuscript was sent to a rabbi, who brought it to the head of a Jewish book club, who asked around. They said, "Make sure it's clear that the different religions have different animals. Separation, even in the animal kingdom? When I was at my drafting table, my son leaned over. "How come the squirrels aren't wearing yarmulkes like Beni?"

"They celebrate Christmas," I answered. "See their tree in the forest."

And he said very seriously, "I didn't know that squirrels aren't Jewish, and bears are. Cute animals are now abundant in Jewish picture books. I've been told, over and over, Beni was the first in mainstream literature.



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SHAVUOT

*"He gave us this land, a land of milk and honey.
Where I now bring the first fruits of the soil."*

Deuteronomy 26:9-10



Shavuot is a wheat harvest, called the "Feast of Weeks" or the "Festival of First Fruits," occurring in June. It celebrates the section in the Ten Commandments (a part of the Torah—the first five books of the Bible) where the Torah is given to the people of Israel on Mount Sinai after their freedom from slavery in Egypt. The festival lasts two days. On the second day, the Book of Ruth, one of the five biblical scrolls, is read. Ruth, a convert to Judaism, is welcomed when she returns to the Land of Israel with her mother-in-law, Naomi, after they become widows and lose their wealth. It is a story of love and acceptance, setting a path for her future descendant, King David.

Shavuot is one of the three major pilgrimage festivals, with the other two being Passover and Sukkot. Dairy food is eaten to symbolize how the Torah feeds the mind and milk nourishes the body. Synagogues and homes are decorated with flowers, greens, and fruits.

This holiday is very child-friendly: As the Torah and Ten Commandments show how to live an honorable life, children can learn how to share and act with empathy and kindness.



Art from the story, "Late Night at the Cousins Comedy Club" (Featuring the Playroom Players) from *Beni's Tiny Tales: Around the Year in Jewish Holidays* by Jane Breskin Zalben (Christy Ottaviano Books / Little Brown, 2023)

Why is this book different from all my other books? Because it is a one-of-a-kind treasury that grew from a few tales to ten picture books bound into one thick volume of 144 pages with about one hundred pieces of art and a silk ribbon marker; this compendium has origin history with the meaning of each holiday, new stories, fusion recipes, craft activities, songs with lyrics and music, prayers, a glossary of Yiddish and Hebrew words with pronunciations and definitions, an index.

It has condensed thirty-five hundred approximate years from slavery to freedom to the present day—a "go to" for everything Jewish where everyone can learn about customs in one place—a reference, but fun. A cultural glimpse offering various traditions, including those in other parts of the world. My editor, Christy Ottaviano, said, "Make the stories contemporary, reflecting the times we are living in now." Many things are said on the family tree, and within the stories themselves, without being said.

This Beni book is heartfelt. It goes to the core of who I am.

You mention you worked on this during the pandemic; how did that influence your approach?

The book's concept began at the beginning of the pandemic. My husband turned to me one night at dinner and asked, "What ever happened to Beni's family? What became of all the bears in the series?"

Beni was far from my mind. Time passed with other book projects. For years, I also had been doing large mixed media paintings and showing in galleries and libraries. I stopped doing art for books,

and just painted huge modern art canvases, after my mother, a school librarian, died.

Missing family and friends, I went into my studio each morning and created Beni's current family with backstories. It was comforting to disappear into this fictional family, especially when I couldn't see my own. Away from the horrible news we all were experiencing every day. So, I have to admit, it was easier. What a gift to spend each day this way. There were no distractions. Except for a deer appearing in my woods with a baby fawn. Or weird gold mushrooms. Or wondering if I could get toilet paper and yeast. No airplanes. No cars. No commitments to anyone. Now I was in a vacuum.

I like people. Some, I love. But I *love* being alone in a room with words or art. Toward the end of the book, while drawing, I discovered podcasts. So, I wasn't entirely alone. Although the book was a vast undertaking, it gave me purpose. The work is who I am. It makes me feel whole. Complete. I don't like living without it. Period. So definitely, easier. For my personality. Perfect.

With all the discussion in libraries about inclusion and diversity, why is this new book especially important to the canon of Jewish literature?

Through my research, I discovered that Jewish people make up about 0.2% of the population globally, and around 1.7% in the US.¹ But Jewish books are rarely embraced by lists of diversity. Only fairly recently were the Sydney Taylor awards included with the Youth Media Awards announcements. I have quietly won four silver Taylor medals in the past. A Koret Foundation award. Honoree

for the William Allen White Award. I am glad the Association of Jewish Libraries is now part of the American Library Association [award announcements] and can partake, along with others, on such an anticipated day each year.

Now more than ever with the extreme rise of anti-Semitism, maybe we need to rethink, what exactly is diversity? Should Jewish literature be included on those lists? Jewish people are a minute portion of the population, yet often loom large, discriminated against throughout history worldwide.

I am first generation. If my mother hadn't migrated with her parents on a boat to America from religious persecution in Poland, me, my children, and their children would not exist. I broke down crying when I was invited to speak to a school in Warsaw in 2003 to students whose grandparents had been Jewish, died in the Holocaust, or were hidden, but they and their parents were no longer of Judaic faith.

My protagonists are Jewish because that is where I am coming from. I've written a bar mitzvah comedy novel with Korean friends in it and their customs, a Black teacher in a predominantly white suburban school, but it is only most recently when I did two picture books on Muslim/Jewish relationships that they were included on lists of diverse books. I always write about all kinds of people. I live in a big world. We all do.

I appreciate the grand reference to "a canon of literature," but I like to think, librarians can, and often expose communities to "the other." There are many "others." Maybe, Beni can be shared to show beliefs and ideas to a population that doesn't have a lot of Jewish people as well, and that individual or class or library hour might see who we are by seeing the love within this one extended family. Which brings us full circle. The more people exposed to Judaism through my children's books, the more we become understood. Familiar. Just as people. Or sometimes, even, as sweet little bears.

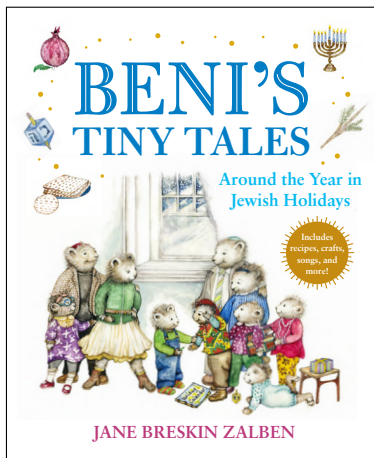
It might make a drip in any ocean, but when we are living in a time, again, with hate and censorship, it is only a step away and

Families are families. They eat together and connect through that very act. Young and old and in-between, share and joke, plant and cook, build and grow, argue and hug, experiencing the challenges and joys that life offers. Families are diverse—emotionally, psychologically, and otherwise.

reminiscent of 1933 in Nazi Germany, the beginning of an impossible time for Jewish people, and then the world at large. When Elie Wiesel won the Nobel Peace Prize, he said, and it has been used over and over in terms of book banning, "We must take sides. Neutrality helps the oppressor, never the victim. Silence encourages the tormentor, never the tormented."²

What's next for you as an author/artist?

I have several manuscripts I am working on. Different types of books. A mystery middle-grade novel. Nothing like Beni. Some in the drawer. Many of them are good. Solid. It's harder to sell a book now because books have fads, even though children don't as readers. There is one I am passionate about—combining the art of my large paintings and my illustrative style. It would be a passion project. I am fascinated by other worlds. Stars. Light. Dreams. We'll see . . .



My new picture book is *Gingerbread Dreidels*, illustrated by Thai Phuong (Charlesbridge/Penguin Random, Fall 2024) about two families of different faiths coming together to celebrate Christmas and Chanukah. Both these holidays will take place on the exact same day in 2024! From day one, I suggested that one of the grandmothers in the book be of a diverse background, an Ethiopian Jew.

References

1. "Jewish Population by Country," Wikipedia, July 11, 2023, https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Jewish_population_by_country.
2. "Elie Wiesel Acceptance Speech," The Nobel Prize, December 10, 1986, <https://www.nobelprize.org/prizes/peace/1986/wiesel/acceptance-speech/>.