



The
emerging
story

JEWISH Life

Escape the hype of the seasonal gift-giving push, and this Hanukkah, offer your kids something nice and low-tech — like books. Jewish books, in particular.

Notwithstanding Amazon's new Kindle device, designed to be a 21st Century technological concept of a book, holding an actual book and reading to your young child, or seeing an older one curl up and become absorbed in the pages of a good story, remains one of life's parental pleasures.

Here is a small selection, for different ages, of newly published books suitable for Hanukkah gift-giving. Even if you don't like to link the holiday with gifts, there's always room for a book or two.

Perfect for children ages 6-10 is the story told and illustrated in **Hanukkah Moon** by Deborah da Costa, illustrated by Gosia Mosz (2007, Kar-Ben, \$7.95 pb).

Just when you think you know Hanukkah and its customs, here is one celebrated by Latin-American Jews — a celebration of the new moon that appears during Hanukkah week.

Young Isobel visits her Aunt Luisa, who has just moved to America from Mexico, to join her in celebrating the "Hanukkah moon".

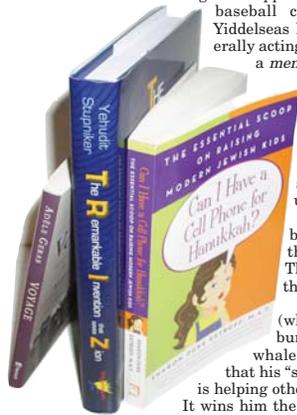
"Feliz Januca", a banner over her aunt's fireplace reads. Happy Hanukkah.

Finally, it is Rosh Hodesh, and time for Aunt Luisa's Hanukkah Moon party, which includes breaking the dreidel piñata, much to Isobel's delight.

This is a charming story, and a lovely way to introduce youngsters to the fact that while Jews from other parts of the world may have different customs, all are celebrating the same holiday.

It's not exactly "Finding Nemo", but this tale of a little fish who wins a Hanukkah contest is a sweet story.

Mr. Mentch by The Mamas, illustrated by Iosi Salem (2007, Pitspopy Press, \$9.95 pb) is a vibrant little yellow fish who wears green flippers and a red and white baseball cap, as he swims the Yiddelseas helping others, and generally acting like — you guessed it — a *mentsch*.



The unusually spelled Mr. Mentch helps Mr. Shlemiel, who falls and is caught on his ladder, Mrs. Yenta who is chased by a hungry lobster and he even cleans up Dr. Shmootz.

But Mr. Mentch is sad, because he has no part in the Hanukkah show. There is nothing special that he does.

Thanks to Mrs. Klutz (whom he helped when she bumped into Hershey the whale), Mr. Mentch realizes that his "special gift from Hashem" is helping others.

It wins him the Maccabee trophy, and it will help you convey to a young child the importance of acting like a *mentsch*.

The Holocaust is not a subject one would consider introducing to a child for Hanukkah. But **Eli Remembers** by Ruth Vander Zee and Marian Sneider, illustrated by Bill Farnsworth (2007, Eerdman's, \$16) could be bought now and saved for a later time.

Appropriate for ages 8 to 12, this is a family story, with soft and evocative illustrations. It is based on actual events.

Eli recalls how, as a young boy, every Rosh Hashanah, first his great-grandmother and then his grandmother would light seven candles. He knew this always made his grandparents sad, but he didn't understand why. Eli's mom would only tell him that "some things are too difficult to talk about."

Then one year, after his great-grandparents had died, Eli and his family travelled to Lithuania, where his great-grandmother had come from.

There, they went to the Ponar Forest, where 80,000 Jews had been murdered, including members of his own family.

Eli now understands the reason for seven candles. "I felt as gray as the sky," he says when he learns of the massacre. And he promises his grandfather, "I'll always remember."

An excellent book for children ages 12 and up, first published in 1983 and now reprinted as a small inexpensive paperback, is a story of immigration to America in the early 1900s.

When **Voyage** by Adele Geras

(2007, Harcourt, 145 pp., \$6.95 pb) opens, it is November, 1904. Fourteen-year-old Mina, her mother and little brother are boarding a ship that will carry them from Europe to America, where they will join their father.

Mina is excited: "In America, no one with hate us, or kill us, or set our houses on fire.... I will ride in streetcars and look at tall buildings, wide streets, and shops full of everything."

But first the voyage — two weeks in steerage, crowded together, with no privacy, where "Smells of bread and herring and tobacco smoke and damp clothes and garlic and unwashed bodies hung like clouds in the room."

But people adjust, somehow bear it and even begin to form relationships with each other, some of which will last into the New World.

Geras tells the stories of a number of passengers making the voyage. Whatever the differences in their lives, all share the same dream — the opportunity for a new and better life in America.

Adolescent and teen readers will relate to the characters and their stories, which can serve as a lead-in for discussion of issues such as immigration, and what this country has meant to so many generations.

Voyage is highly recommended — for a gift, a school reading assignment or a parent-child book club.

Young teens interested in science and technology, wrapped up in adventure and mystery, have a satisfying new book to delve into. Set in Israel, with characters that are religiously observant, it is especially appropriate for readers who are also religious.

The Remarkable Invention That Saves Zion: A Tale of TRIZ by Yehudit Stupniker (2007, Pitspopy Press, 292 pp., \$18.95) turns on four university students and the visiting American cousin of one of them, their professor, his new invention and an anti-Semitic spy who has infiltrated the country.

What's at stake is nothing less than the Jewish claim to the land. The students are all new practitioners of a method of problem-solving called TRIZ, a method the author wishes to promote.

Eager to see their professor's invention before he unveils it, they sneak into his lab, and find that he has built a kind of time-travel, historical machine.

It's amazing and thrilling — until it's stolen, right before the professor is to present his remarkable invention.

Their attempts to find it, and discover just who stole it and why, take them on an adventure that requires their skills and clear thinking.

The writing is awkward in places, can be overly didactic and is less polished than that of more experienced writers.

That being said, this is a story steeped in Jewish life, in Judaism and in Israel, and there aren't many books for teens that can claim that distinction.

Once you've selected books for the kids, you may want to choose something for yourself. On second thought, maybe that should be before you buy something for your kids.

To help you hone your Jewish parenting skills, pick up a copy of **Can I Have a Cell Phone for Hanukkah? The Essential Scoop on Raising Modern Jewish Kids** by Sharon Duke Estroff (2007, Broadway Books, 304 pp., \$12.95 pb).

In Chapter 11 ("Here Comes Santa Claus") Estroff, a Jewish educator syndicated columnist and mother of four, offers her advice and suggestions on the December dilemma.

It's pretty basic: strengthen ours instead of worrying so much about the influence of theirs. The stronger your children's Jewish identity is, the better equipped they are to cope with the surrounding culture.

It's not a new message, but it remains on-target and timely. From playdates, homework and extracurricular activities, to bar/bat mitzvah, *tzedakah* and Jewish holidays, with humor and insight Estroff offers suggestions for coping with the day-to-day challenges of Jewish parenting.

Her style is breezy and chatty, a bit too cutesy at times, but an easy read packed with a lot of good, practical advice. ☑

— GILA WERTHEIMER
ASSOCIATE EDITOR

