

**TWO AUTHORS, ONE VISION:  
Fact and Fiction in Children's Books  
Norman H. Finkelstein**

**Norman H. Finkelstein**, the author of thirteen non-fiction books for young readers, is the recipient of two National Jewish Book Awards and the Golden Kite Honor Book Award for Non-Fiction. *The Other 1492* was a Booklist "Editor's Choice" title and an American Booksellers Association "Pick of the Lists." It was a "Notable Children's Trade Book in the Field of Social Studies: and one of the Association of Jewish Libraries' "Jewish Children's Books Too Good to Miss."

At about the same time that *The Other 1492* was published, I became aware of a work of fiction that dealt with the same basic topic, *Out of Many Waters* by Jacqueline Dembar Greene. I rushed to obtain a copy, anxious to see how the

author treated the arrival of the first Jewish settlers to North America. I breathed a sigh of relief when I discovered that Jackie Greene and I agreed on the history. Each of us, though, had used a different genre to get our points across to our readers. Since then, we've appeared together in our by now standard "dog and pony" show to tell students, teachers and librarians that the journey to New Amsterdam can be factually and successfully depicted in several ways.

Sadly, not everyone is familiar with the roles American Jews have played in the history of our country. They read of Roger Williams and William Penn but not of Asser Levy. They learn of Paul Revere and Thomas Jefferson but not of Haym Salomon. They hear of Susan B. Anthony but not of Henrietta Szold and Ernestine Rose. In an age of multicultural sensitivity, it almost seems as if Jews are too often written out of American history. For most people, young and old, Jewish and non-Jewish, American Jewish history begins with the arrival of Yiddish speaking masses from Eastern Europe at the end of the nineteenth century. Having just celebrated the 350<sup>th</sup> anniversary of Jewish settlement in America, we need to constantly remind ourselves not only that we've been here so long, but how, indeed, we got here in the first place.

Times certainly have changed over the past 350 years. Jews have gone from being insecure immigrants to full participants in every aspect of American public and social life. Since 1654 we've reshaped our culture and religion to fit a democratic America. In the process, we have influenced American society in many ways. It's the message of inclusion and pride begun by those first settlers that I try to convey in all my Jewish-themed writing.

The idea for *The Other 1492* came to me just as the country was preparing to celebrate the 500<sup>th</sup> anniversary of Christopher Columbus bumping into America. For me, as for many Jews, 1492 had yet another connotation – the Expulsion of Jews from Spain, an event that directly led to the first Jewish settlement in our country. I also wanted readers to understand that Jews have been involved in the building of America from the very beginning. In *The Other 1492* I trace the arrival of the first Jewish settlers in New Amsterdam in 1654 and highlight their struggle for equal rights. Even before sitting down to write, I tried to imagine the typical questions a twelve-year old would have. Here are a few that came to mind.

### **Where did they come from?**

The fact that the first Jewish settlers came from Brazil confounds many of my readers. My challenge is to make them understand the connections in history; how Jews arrived and lived in Spain; how they there created their own unique culture; why they were expelled in 1492 and how some of their descendents eventually ended up in South America.

“The Golden Age of the Jews in Spain was an unprecedented time. While it was not perfect-and indeed had its own periods of discrimination, expulsion, and forced conversion – this five-hundred-year period allowed Jews to become active participants in the country’s political, social, and business life. At the same time, their own own religious culture and learning were enriched by the cosmopolitan society surrounding them. Whether under Arab or Christian rule, life for Spanish Jews was considerably better than that experienced by other European Jews. All This was now to change for the worse.”<sup>1</sup>

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“Even as Christian life renewed itself, [as the Reconquest began in the eleventh century]... wild and false rumors about Jews and their religion spread throughout the countryside.”<sup>2</sup> Many Jews, scared for their lives, converted to Christianity, at least outwardly. It was the suspicion about these New Christian’s sincerity that led to the establishment of the Inquisition. In 1492, Ferdinand and Isabella ordered the remaining unconverted Jews. It was that group of loyal Jews who were expelled in 1492.

### **Why did they leave the palm trees, sultry breezes and bikinis of Copacabana?**

I wanted my readers to understand what happened in 1654. Why were the Jews forced to leave Brazil? Where did they go? How did that little group of 23 end up in New Amsterdam rather than Amsterdam, their probable original destination.

“Columbus’s great discovery opened the way to further exploration...Jews and Marranos found their way across the Atlantic to establish new homes [far from the Inquisition]. Many settled in Portuguese run areas of Brazil where they thrived economically. When the Dutch captured territory there, particularly Recife, an active and proud Jewish community began to emerge. In 1654, the Portuguese returned. Once out of the closed, it is difficult to get back in. The Jews quickly left.

### **Who was Asser Levy and why is he so important?**

I gave special attention in my book to Asser Levy, the first authentic Jewish-American hero. He gets little notice in history book accounts of colonial America yet he “did more than gain equal rights for himself and the small group of Jewish refugees. As an outsider in a small settlement he risked social and economic isolation by his outspoken demands for equality. He set the scene for an America where, years later, determined individuals could fight for rights and freedom for all citizens.”

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“On November 5, 1655, [Asser] Levy presented a petition [to Governor Peter Stuyvesant] that he and Jacob Barsimson be allowed to stand guard duty like other citizens of New Amsterdam or be excused from paying the unfair tax... The response closed with a pointed message that basically told the two men that if they didn’t like living there, they were free to leave. Shortly thereafter Levy began standing guard as a member of the militia alongside the other men of New Amsterdam.”<sup>3</sup>

When people ask me what I do, I answer, “I fill holes.” It’s those holes in young people’s understanding of Jewish history that I try to fill. *The Other 1492* is also about connections and asks readers to imagine what the Jewish world would be like today had only one of the following *ifs* happened:

If Spain had not expelled the Jews.

If religious bigotry had not forced the conversion of Jews.

If the Portuguese had not claimed Brazil

If the Dutch had not welcomed the Jews to Recife.

If the Portuguese had not reconquered Brazil.

If the twenty-three Jews had given in to Governor Stuyvesant’s bigotry and left New Amsterdam.<sup>4</sup>

1654 was an eventful year for American Jewry. Later Jewish immigrants to America were no less thankful to Columbus than the original twenty-three refugees from Recife. The title of a popular Yiddish song sums up the gratitude felt by generations of American Jews: *Leben Zoll Columbus!* – Long Live Columbus!

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<sup>1</sup> Norman H. Finkelstein. *The Other 1492: Jewish Settlement in the New World* (New York: Scribners, 1989), 19.

<sup>2</sup> Finkelstein. 41-42.

<sup>3</sup> Finkelstein. 78.

<sup>4</sup> Finkelstein. 92.