

Sydney Taylor Manuscript Award Acceptance Speech

By: Yael Mermelstein

Picture my life for a moment if you will, back when I started writing my manuscript. I am an ultra orthodox housewife with five children ages 8 and under, living in a quaint settlement in Israel plunked in the middle of the Judean desert. Between my job, my kids, my cooking, and my laundry, I should have been running around my kitchen in a kerchief and a housecoat, watching the shepherds herding their sheep on the tan mountainous monotony outside my window, adding a few new varicose veins for a little excitement. But as far as I can see, I've landed myself somewhere else right now.

Our sages tell us "Ein davar haomed bifnai haratzon". Nothing stands in the way of our will. I have always willed to be a writer . On my second date with my husband, I told him- "Yehuda- you know I'm a writer" and he said "That's nice." I think I even brought along some samples of my work. We got married and as our beautiful family started to take shape- very quickly, writing fell off of the radar.

Three years ago, my husband turned to me and said

"What happened to my wife the writer."

I said "What do you mean? I am a writer."

"No," he replied. "You haven't written a thing since our wedding." "

"I'm busy," I replied. "I'll get around to it later."

But he wasn't satisfied with that. One Saturday night, he took out the phone book and started flipping through it.

"I'm looking for Sarah Shapiro's phone number," he told me.

Sarah Shapiro, my husband knew, is my favorite orthodox writer, the daughter of writer Norman Cousins. My husband put the phone to my ear.

“It’s ringing,” he said. “Tell her that you want to be a writer.” I had no choice. When she picked up the phone I was like -

“ Hi! I want to be a writer, can you help me!” And she was so gracious.

That week I started writing again, and within a few months I was publishing articles regularly.

But I wanted to write a book. When I heard about the Sydney Taylor Manuscript Award, I knew that this was something I had to try. But being as I was busy with children from 7 in the morning until 9 at night, and then I had to meet all of regular deadlines and tend to my newborn baby, I knew that I had to do something drastic to get there. I printed out a calendar, penciling in a word count that had to be met every day over the course of many months. I left myself a couple of months at the end for revisions, each day detailing exactly how many pages needed revision. Then I rigidly enslaved myself to that calendar. Through all of the ups and downs of running a large household, and all of the varied medical and emotional issues of my brood, I stuck to that schedule like an old wad of gum on the bottom of a school desk.

When my manuscript was at 35,000 words, I went to a local Israeli SCBWI event, led by the wonderful Anna Levine, author of *Running on Eggs* and *Jodie’s First Dig*. I asked Anna if she would mind looking over a couple of chapters for me, and she graciously accepted. She called me a few days later, and the gist of the conversation went something like this:

“Bbjjjjjj lot of talent, bjjjjjjgreat voice, characters, dialogue, wonderful bjjjjjjj but what does your character want bjjj” between all of the static I think I finally realized that Anna was telling me “Yael, your story has no plot.”

So I sat on that for a day, and then two days, watching my neatly penciled calendar disintegrate, along with my dream of finishing my plotless novel. There were less than three months left until the contest, and I had basically been advised to dump the whole thing and start again.

My parents were visiting at the time, and with their encouragement, I started thinking. What did my character want? And then I had it. My protagonist, Randi, grappled with the spiritual and emotional challenges of having a handicapped brother. But it hit me like a nutcracker that what my main character really wanted was to get rid of her brother, institutionalize him, and have a normal family. And all of a sudden, my book was called “Getting Rid of Jeremy,” and everything fell into place.

In getting rid of Jeremy, Randi, an unaffiliated Jew, meets up with Shifra, an ultra orthodox Jew. It seems that their only commonality is that they both have disabled siblings. Together, they learn to respect each others similarities and differences, and as Randi begins to understand that her brother’s seemingly imperfect body houses a beautiful and perfect soul, she comes to terms with his shortcomings, as well as her own.

As someone who volunteered with disabled children for many years, I came to this understanding myself, and wanted very much to give this over in my novel. One summer I played mommy to a group of little boys with Down’s Syndrome in sleepaway camp, and Jeremy is essentially a composite of a few of those children. I also wanted a book that would give others a taste of the beauty of the Jewish religion, fostered by my

own great love of Judaism. Thank G-d, I managed to finish the book in the final stretch, and then I had to wait.

All contestants were supposed to be notified by April 15. I remember walking down the street with a friend to get my mail, as the mail in Beitar comes to a central location, not to my home. My friend knew that I was anxious about the contest, but as it was April 15, I figured it was all over. I remember saying to her- “You know, It’s April 15.” And she lovingly put her arm on mine and said “Don’t worry Yael- you don’t make enough money to pay taxes.”

The next morning I woke up to Aileen Grossberg’s e-mail. My heart was drumming so hard- I called up my husband at work and said “I won!” he said “No!” I said “Yes!” he said “No!” I said “Yes!” and he said “No!” until he finally realized I was telling the truth, went out and bought me a pizza and came home to celebrate.

This award has already changed my life. I have gained confidence in my writing abilities that only this type of recognition can accomplish. I have a picture book that has been accepted by Hachai publications with the working title “The Car With a Smile” and a few other picture books and a middle grade novel that have garnered interest as well. I have received requests for the winning manuscript as well, but for the time being I would like to revise and polish the manuscript and then send it out further. I need to make another calendar!

Thank you so much to Aileen Grossberg and the Sydney Taylor Manuscript committee for selecting my manuscript, and to the family of my absolutely favorite childhood author, Sydney Taylor, who bestowed this honor in her memory.

Thank you to my warm, loving, and always supportive family. To Yehuda, Mommy and Daddy, and Danielle and Josh- thank you for coming all this way. A special appreciation goes to my grandparents, Safta and Zeidy. Having these two people here tonight, both survivors of the bleakness of Auschwitz, highlights even further the nature of this accomplishment. Our family survived by the skin of its teeth, and look where we are now due to your tenacious grip on survival.

I left four of my kids back in Israel and I overheard them telling all of their friends, “My mother is going to America so that she can collect a thousand dollars.” Well, I know they can’t understand what this award really means, but I know that I have received so much more than that and I thank you all for this honor.

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