

Tent: *Children's Literature 2017*

BY JOSH LAMBERT
ACADEMIC DIRECTOR,
YIDDISH BOOK CENTER

ALMOST FORTY YEARS AGO the Yiddish Book Center was founded because a group of young readers couldn't get their hands on the Jewish books they needed — in that case, Yiddish novels assigned in graduate school classes. So while the Center is now probably best known for rescuing and digitizing more than a million Yiddish books, it makes perfect sense that the organization serves as the host of a new retreat that's all about making sure young readers have all the Jewish books that they need — this time, by supporting authors of children's literature.

This new program, Tent: Children's Literature, brought 20 authors of picture books, early chapter books, and middle grade fiction together in Amherst, MA for a week of writing workshops and exploration of the history of Jewish children's literature. More than 120 authors applied for the opportunity, and the selected participants came to Amherst from as far afield as Switzerland, Spain, and Israel (and as near as Boston). The group met with top editors, practitioners, and critics in the field of children's literature; saw priceless original illustrations by masters like William Steig and Uri Shulevitz at the



Eric Carle Museum of Picture Book Art; and discovered little-known works written for children in Yiddish.

Those works exist because long before the founding of PJ Library, major Jewish writers already understood the single importance of children's literature. In the decades following the *haskole*, or Jewish Enlightenment, and throughout the 20th century, almost every major author of Hebrew and Yiddish literature wrote at least a few works for children. Miriam Udel, a professor at Emory University in Atlanta, is creating the first anthology of Yiddish children's literature in English translation — a project that has been supported by the Yiddish Book Center's Translation Fellowship. She visited Tent: Children's Literature to share some of the treasures she has found and will soon make available in English for the first time.

Other sessions focused on pressing questions for children's authors today: What are the challenges of representing Jewish children, without relying on cliché and stereotypes? How can the field of

Jewish children's literature learn from the recent #WeNeedDiverseBooks campaign? What crucial Jewish stories remain untold?

This program, which was made possible by the support of the Harold Grinspoon Foundation, helped the writers to understand the content needs and priorities of PJ Library, and gave them space and time to refine their works-in-progress and generate new ideas for book projects. Most importantly, it offered them a chance to form a community of like-minded but diverse authors who can encourage one another in the creative process and inspire one another to do their best work.

Our hope is that the writers will stay in touch and collaborate on innovative projects. One of them, Betsy Rosenthal, wrote a note to the group when she arrived back home: *"For me the week was magical and I want to thank all of you for your part in making it so. I came home charged up ... and ready to work on some new ideas and improve my manuscript. And, I feel as if I've found my people."*

FOR MORE about Tent: Children's Literature visit YIDDISHBOOKCENTER.ORG/KIDLIT
