

## Seven Questions with Blima Marcus



*This issue's Seven Questions with ... features Blima Marcus, oncology nurse practitioner and Assistant Adjunct Professor at Hunter College. Marcus has garnered national attention for her efforts as a vaccine educator in ultra-Orthodox communities. Her scholarly publications include, most recently, A Nursing Approach to the Largest Measles Outbreak in Recent U.S. History: Lessons Learned Battling Homegrown Vaccine Hesitancy (Online Journal of Issues in Nursing, 2020). Marcus also serves on the editorial review board at Online Journal of Issues in Nursing and is a reviewer at Bellevue Literary Review: A Journal of Humanity and Human Experience.*

### 1. Thank you for taking the time to speak with AJL News and Reviews! Can you tell us about your work as a vaccine educator?

I am an oncology nurse first and foremost. I rarely encounter children, and my work never crosses with primary care, which is where vaccines are discussed and administered. However, in my work in oncology I constantly care for an immunocompromised population. And this became important for me in 2018 when New York became the epicenter of a measles outbreak.

I began receiving questions from friends and acquaintances who had questions on vaccine safety and didn't have anyone else to turn to with the time and ability to delve into the science and address their concerns. Many nurses and several physicians joined me in this, and we formed a non-profit health outreach and education organization, called the E.M.E.S. Initiative, where EMES stands for Engaging in Medical Education with Sensitivity, and in Hebrew, emes means truth and honesty.

At our core we use both empathy and science when we speak to anxious parents. We meet parents where they are at, literally and figuratively. Before COVID-19 happened, we met with parents in homes, in school classrooms, and by phone, email, and text. We created content tailored to their concerns. Most importantly, we taught them how to critically evaluate information they come upon — how do you know if information is accurate? In an era of so much misinformation, who do you trust? We give parents these tools so they can feel empowered and learn to discern science vs false information.

### 2. As you may know, libraries and librarians play an important role in educating the public about reliable resources for information, including health information. We call this part of librarianship "information literacy." What role, if any, can public librarians and school librarians play in helping Orthodox communities learn about information literacy?

A significant part of our work with the E.M.E.S. Initiative is empowering parents to learn how to learn, and that's where information literacy is so important.

Libraries can host "information seminars" to help community members learn how to become fluent in critiquing sources of information. Learning how to look up information,

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how to discern accurate from inaccurate information — these are skills!

I also think it would be great to host learning events with health-care experts on topics relevant to the community the library serves. One of the biggest issues I've noted in ultra-Orthodox communities is a lack of focus on preventative health measures. There are hundreds of organizations dedicated to helping the ill, either with medical referrals, health insurance payments, car rides to hospitals, meals, help with childcare, travel, etc. But there is very little attention paid to health promotion.

We need better access to information on mammography, genetic screening, cancer screenings, vaccinations, mental health screenings and more. This community rises to the occasion very well when someone faces a medical crisis, but I would love to see us prevent these crises more.

**3. Do you ever use books, such as children's books, for example, either to communicate with children about vaccines, or to give to parents to facilitate a conversation with their children? If not, would you want to encourage writers to explore this topic in Jewish children's literature?**

Ann Kofsky, author of a children's book on vaccination, sent me a copy of her book, *Judah Maccabee Goes to the Doctor* [Apple & Honey Press, 2017], and I was pleasantly surprised by how perfectly it addressed the topic of childhood vaccination. I had initially expected a simplistic, "Berenstain Bear" kind of storybook.

It was nothing I had anticipated. It was wise, creative, empathic. Instead of simply focusing on the importance of vaccines in preventing illness, it points to the important but often-forgotten point in protecting OTHERS who cannot get their immunizations. Judah is afraid of a shot but when his dad points out that his baby sister Hannah is too young for her vaccines and needs Judah to be immunized to prevent passing on diseases to her, Judah agrees. And he cries, but briefly. Tying in this sweet children's story to the Chanukah story where Judah is proud to learn that his namesake, Judah Maccabee, was also a brave and strong warrior on behalf of his family and other Jews, is just another layer to this fabulous children's book.

My children love how the sibling relationship is depicted. They delight when Hannah tips the tower Judah built for her. They love the honesty where Judah is scared of the doctor, and how he does cry briefly after his shot. I love the sibling portrayal as well, and I love the emphasis on vaccination to protect those vulnerable around us. The easy explanation goes a long way in explaining immunology.

I think there is a need for public health books for children AND for adults! COVID-19 showed us how fragile we are and how our behaviors affect others. Many people confuse medicine and public health — and there are very few similarities. Medicine and medical decisions are personal, but public health is... public. I've heard people say they'll think about whether the COVID vaccine is right for them. But it is not about them, actually — it's necessary

for the public. And this concept seems new to many people. I think it would be great if this concept could be addressed in a children's book, which will likely also be educational for the parents.

**4. You have studied at length in higher education. Can you tell us about your experiences doing research in libraries for your nursing studies? Were librarians available to support you?**

I've only had excellent experiences with librarians. My longest stretch in one college was at the Hunter-Bellevue School of Nursing where I received my doctorate. I developed relationships with the librarians there because I spent 5 years in that institution and completed my doctorate capstone. I remember one librarian being unable to help me, but he referred me to a colleague at a completely different institution and medical center. I emailed her and about a week later I received a response. She profusely apologized for the "delay" in her response, explained that she was caring for a very ill person and couldn't email me back immediately — and then she sent me a dozen articles on the topic I needed. Librarians are so devoted.

The first semester of my DNP program at Hunter was in September of 2012, and I spent that entire semester having classes in the actual Hunter College library on 68th street and Lexington Avenue! Hurricane Sandy ruined portions of the Health Sciences Campus near the FDR Parkway on the East River, and we had to be relocated — and somehow the only space for our classes was in a section of the library on their main campus on the Upper East Side. We sat amidst aisles of books in chairs, and it was amazing. Libraries and hospitals are the two places in which I feel most comfortable.

**5. As an oncology nurse, do you have access to hospital libraries and librarians? Medical librarians are specially trained to support medical professionals in their research, teaching, and clinical practice, and perhaps they have been able to support your work.**

When I worked in academic institutions, I did have hospital libraries available to me and I often used them! Using the electronic databases have been the best method for me to access relevant clinical information, but I loved that there was a physical space with access to physical and electronic literature on any topic — with librarians to help. Between my university and my medical institution, I was flush with resources. This proved very helpful as my E.M.E.S. team and I created content on vaccine information, because we sourced nearly every single sentence with references.

**6. What do you want secular librarians to know about the Orthodox community as library patrons? How can we be most welcoming in all library spaces?**

It depends on the Orthodox community, because they are not monolithic. In the ultra-Orthodox spaces, what would make participants feel comfortable would likely be gender-segregated forums or events. Having sections with culturally appropriate books would also be welcoming to Haredi families. Kosher

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cookbooks, Jewish children's books, books in Yiddish or Hebrew would be ideal. Ultra-Orthodox men often do not participate in sports or other "extracurricular" activities, and they often turn to politics for stimulating reads, so political biographies or autobiographies may be popular.

### 7. We always ask, because we love books, what do you like to read for fun? Any favorite authors?

I don't stop reading. I live with my husband and two children in a 2-bedroom apartment in Brooklyn without a lot of space, but I do have a narrow closet with shelves where I store both books and shoes (I also love shoes). As I buy more of one, I need to get rid of the other, and the books always win, so my shoe collection has dwindled.

Before I went to nursing school one of my undergrad degrees was in history, and I focused on Civil War America. That led me to spend the next decade reading up on the American slave experience and how we haven't really reconciled our past, which has led to an incomplete Civil Rights era. We have so much left to do in the fight for racial justice. Some of the books which really left me affected include *Negroland* by Margo Jefferson, *Go Set a Watchman* by Harper Lee, *Black Like Me* by Howard Griffin, *Homegoing* by Yaa Gyasi, and *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* by Harriet Ann Jacobs.

Another favorite category over the last decade for me have been books set during the World War II and Holocaust era. As a child and teen I read many, many Holocaust memoirs and that left me

never wanting to read about those experiences again.

But then I dived into the other experiences of the war — the heroes who rescued and hid Jews, the Nazis who did not follow orders, the experiences of Germans who were uncomfortable with the regime. Some great options include *Ordinary Men* by Christopher R. Browning, *The Hiding Place* by Corrie ten Boom, *The Search for Major Plagge* by Michael Goode, and *The Zookeeper's Wife* by Diane Ackerman.

For fiction, I absolutely love Sherlock Holmes and Agatha Christie, and I own both collections. I've never fallen for modern mystery. My other love is for Herman Wouk, and I've enjoyed many of Ken Follett's books as well for good historical fiction.

Finally my top books include *The Scarlet Pimpernel* by Emmuska Orczy, *A Little Life* by Hanya Yanagihara, *Bel Canto* by Ann Patchett, *Death Be Not Proud* by John Gunther, *The Elegance of the Hedgehog* by Muriel Barbery, *The Casual Vacancy* by J.K. Rowling, *A Gentleman in Moscow* by Amos Towles, *The Guernsey Literary and Potato Peel Pie Society* by Mary Ann Shaffer, and *The Count of Monte Cristo* by Alexandre Dumas has been a favorite since I was very young.

As an oncology nurse practitioner who does a lot of palliative and end of life care, the books that have helped me most are *The End of Your Life Book Club* by Will Schwalbe, *Man's Search for Meaning* by Viktor Frankl, *Gift From the Sea* by Anne Morrow Lindbergh (which should be mandatory reading for every woman), *This is My God by Herman Wouk*, and *The Most Good You Can Do* by Peter Singer.

## Digital Exhibition: Romaniote Memories, a Jewish Journey from Ioannina, Greece to Manhattan

Vincent Giordano was a photographer and filmmaker dedicated to finding and recording the unique, collective memories of families and communities. From 1999 until his untimely death in 2010, he documented the places, people and events of New York's Romaniote Jewish Community, centered at Kehila Kedosha Janina on Broome Street in Manhattan, and their city of origin, Ioannina, Greece. Giordano intended to make a full length documentary on the subject titled *Before the Flame Goes Out*; sadly, he passed away before his project was complete.

In 2019 Hilda Giordano donated the archive of Vincent's work to Queens College, where it is a major part of the Hellenic American Project and is preserved as part of the Benjamin S. Rosenthal Library's Special Collections and Archives. Due to COVID-19 restrictions, the physical collection has not yet been processed. Fortunately, we were able to use a selection of scans of Giordano's prints and negatives to create a new online exhibition Romaniote Memories, a Jewish Journey from Ioannina, Greece to Manhattan: Photographs by Vincent Giordano. Many of these



Courtyard and Pergola of Ioannina Synagogue

Photo credit: Vincent Giordano, Queens College Special Collections and Archives

images have never been presented in public before.

The Hellenic American Project seeks to expand Greek American Studies, which has traditionally focused on the immigration of Greek Orthodox peoples to the U.S., to include communities such as the Romaniote Jews, whose history and culture are not widely known or understood. As exhibition curator Dr. Samuel Gruber says, "The largely unknown Romaniote Jews are a living link with

ancient Judaism of the Hellenistic period, which formed the matrix out of which Christianity was born and developed and from which came great rabbis and scholars who influenced Jewish life, including R. Tobias ben Eliezer, R. Moses Kapsali and Shemarya Ikriti." Romaniotes have their own language - a dialect of Greek that combines words and phrases from Hebrew and Turkish - which is only spoken by the older generation. Tragically, in Ioannina, of the 1,960 Jews deported to Auschwitz by the Germans during World War II, only 110 survived.