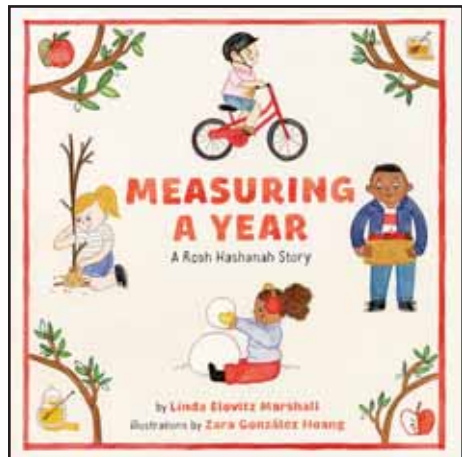


A Kitten, a Goblin and a New Year: A Conversation Among Three Jewish Picture Book Authors

By Jacqueline Jules, Ann Koffsky and Linda Elovitz Marshall

What do a kitten, a goblin and a new year have in common? Give up? Here's the answer: All three are the subjects of fall 2022 picture books by Jacqueline Jules, Ann Koffsky and Linda Elovitz Marshall, all members of the same writing group. They meet on Zoom twice a month.

Admirers of each other's work, they interviewed each other about their upcoming books. In this conversation, they discuss helping others, observing sacred time and reflection as integral to Jewish life.



In sweet, sparse, rhyming text, "Measuring a Year: A Rosh Hashanah Story" asks a very interesting question: How do you measure what happens during the year? By trips, by events, by interactions with others? By how much you've grown? Or what you learned?

Linda Elovitz Marshall Discusses 'Measuring a Year'

Jacqueline Jules: How did you decide what measurements to suggest in your picture book?

Linda Elovitz Marshall: For this book about the passage of time, I chose elements that made good pictures, focusing on elements that made my heart sing (or cry).

Jacqueline Jules: What criteria do you use for evaluating the past year at the High Holidays? Do they correspond with what you list in this book?

Linda Elovitz Marshall: I don't really have a checklist, although perhaps I should. Perhaps I should put "make a check-list" on my to-do list. Every year, though, I try to assemble a family photo album, showing the good things that my family has experienced over the year. As far as times that aren't so good, well, those are harder to depict as well as to discuss.

This past year, we moved. We also welcomed a new baby into the family, had graduations, celebrations, a bat mitzvah, all sorts of life events. Putting it all together in a family album helps a lot.

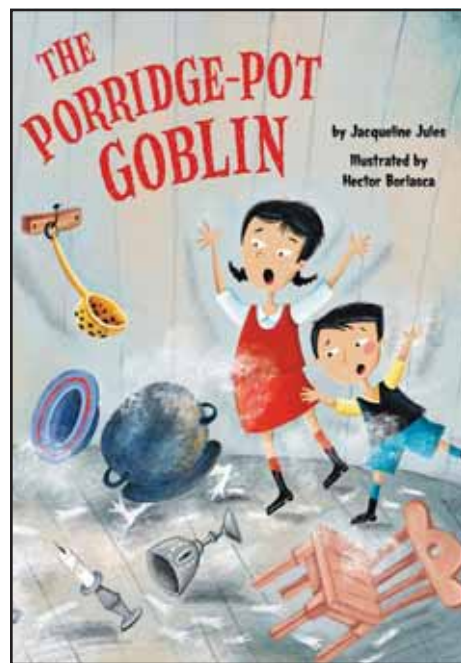
Ann Koffsky: I love the way the illustrations in "Measuring a Year" convey the words and go beyond. For example, the spread that reads, "Times you were strong? And super brave?" shows two images: one of

a boy helping a friend climb up a wall, and a second image of a young girl bravely getting a shot. How much were these visuals things you had in your own head vs. images that the illustrator came up with? How close was your collaboration with her?

Linda Elovitz Marshall: As always, I left lots of room for the illustrator and art director. I'd definitely envisioned being "very strong" as helping someone. In the final art, I made sure it was a GIRL helping a boy, rather than the other way around. As for "super brave," I'd envisioned the character doing something dramatic, e.g., fighting lions or leaping over huge streams. Getting a shot was not on my radar, maybe because I'm a big chicken when it comes to getting shots. I get them, of course, but I try to make sure I get a lollipop afterwards, too.

Ann Koffsky: OK, I'm a Broadway geek and as soon as I saw the first page of your book, the song "Seasons of Love" from "Rent" started playing in my head. Did that song inspire you to write "Measuring a Year: A Rosh Hashanah Story"?

Linda Elovitz Marshall: Yes, absolutely! The book was inspired by a Yom Kippur sermon given by the late Cantor Jodi Schectman at Congregation Beth Emeth in Albany, New York. Cantor Schectman talked about life changes: sending their youngest child to college, moving from New Jersey, taking a new job ... and it all got me thinking: How do you measure a year? And how could I, through words and images, talk about measuring a year in a way that speaks to children? "Measuring a Year: A Rosh Hashanah Story" is dedicated, in part, to the memory of the much-beloved Cantor Schectman.



In "The Porridge Pot Goblin," siblings Rose and Benny take over Shabbat preparations as they let their tired mother get some rest. Meanwhile, an invisible goblin tries to stir up a fuss. Rose and Benny outsmart the goblin with a porridge pot as a makeshift Havahart humane trap.

Jacqueline Jules Discusses 'The Porridge Pot Goblin'

Linda Elovitz Marshall: What are the goblins in your life? How do you trap them? And do you let them go—à la Havahart or porridge pot traps? If so, where?

Jacqueline Jules: Anxiety is the goblin in my life. And it is invisible like the goblin teasing Benny and Rose in "The Porridge Pot Goblin." To restore peace to their home, Benny and Rose have to realize that the goblin is as big as a porridge pot, but not bigger. When I assess my fears, I generally realize that they are not as large as they seem. So like my young protagonists, I decide I can manage much better than I originally thought.

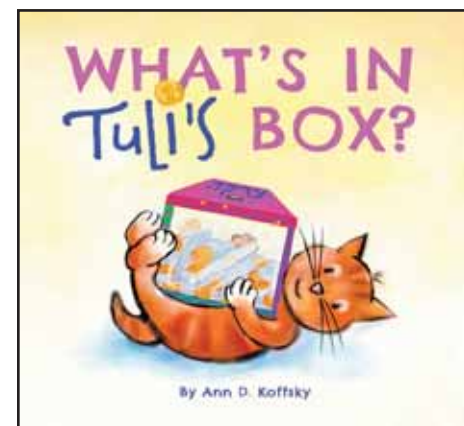
Ann Koffsky: I really enjoyed how your goblin disrupts the shalom bayit, the "peace in the home" of this family, and how you surfaced the value of shalom bayit in this indirect, whimsical way. Why was it important for you to talk about that value? What does shalom bayit mean to you?

Jacqueline Jules: Shalom bayit is what I feel when I sit down to Shabbat dinner on Friday nights. I love having a quiet meal with my husband at the end of the week. After candle lighting, we sing "Shalom Aleichem" and recite the blessings. During dinner, at a table set with our good dishes, we talk without the distraction of phones or television. Shabbat evening is sacred space carved out of busy lives. In "The Porridge Pot Goblin," Benny and Rose don't let a mischievous goblin disrupt their peaceful Shabbat. And I do my best not to let anything or anyone disturb my Friday nights, either.

Ann Koffsky: What disruptions do you think can threaten shalom bayit for kids today? In other words: What are the goblins in kids' minds today? How do you think parents can use "The Porridge Pot Goblin" as a tool to talk about that with their kids?

Jacqueline Jules: Sadly, I think children have many reasons to be anxious in our society. Children are well aware of school shootings and extreme weather events. And certainly, the COVID-19 pandemic disrupted school life and activities. Many kids witnessed their parents wiping down groceries, quarantining mail and using copious amounts of hand sanitizer. They must have felt the presence of invisible dangers. I think parents can use "The Porridge Pot Goblin" to talk about being afraid of something they cannot see but they know exists. The two children in "The Porridge Pot Goblin" work together to manage their fears. This could lead to a discussion of how family members and others can support each other emotionally.

In "What's in Tuli's Box?" an inquisitive kitten named Tuli discovers an empty box and promptly steps inside. Mother Cat explains that the box is not a toy, it is a tzedakah box, used to collect coins which will be shared with others.



Ann Koffsky Discusses 'What's in Tuli's Box?'

Jacqueline Jules: Why did you choose cat characters for this book?

Ann Koffsky: One of the ways I approach writing stories for really young kids is through animals. It's a trope, it's a cliché, but it is both of those things because it works. Kids—and grown-ups—connect with them. So since kittens are just so adorable, I decided I wanted to work with them. And then I thought: What is the personality of kittens? And the answer was—curious. OK, if kittens are curious, what Jewish object can this kitten be curious about? And of course, the internet is full of adorable kittens playing with boxes ... which lead to tzedakah boxes. That's how my brain works. Tzedakah is one of those beautiful mitzvot that is both universal and uniquely Jewish. It's about generosity and sharing.

Linda Elovitz Marshall: In "What's in Tuli's Box?" Mother Cat tells Tuli that the box contains coins. But thinking deeply about it ... what are coins? What are coins good for? How do we—or kids—come to understand that money/coins—although maybe they can't buy love—can buy warmth and security and other good things (even chocolate)? What would you do with a full tzedakah box?

Ann Koffsky: I'd empty it, send the value to my favorite charity, and begin filling it again. Immediately. Just like when we complete reading the Torah on Simchat Torah, we right away start from the beginning again, because there is no end to learning. And there is no end to tzedakah and generosity.

Jacqueline Jules is the author of 50 books for young readers. She is also a poet. Her work has appeared in over 100 publications. She lives on Long Island and enjoys taking long walks along the water. Visit her online www.jacquelinejules.com

Ann D. Koffsky is the author and illustrator of more than 40 books. Ann's work has been featured in The Washington Post, The Philadelphia Inquirer, Jewish Action magazine, Mishpacha magazine and Hadasah magazine. Ann lives in West Hempstead, New York with her family.

Linda Elovitz Marshall is the award-winning author of almost two dozen fiction and nonfiction picture books. Linda and her husband now live in the Adirondack Mountains and New York City, where Linda enjoys swimming, hiking, and watching clouds. Visit her online at www.lindamarshall.com