

## Jewish Books in Review

is a service of the JWB Jewish Book Council,  
15 East 26th St., New York, N.Y. 10010



**Rabbis and Wives.** By Chaim Grade. Translated from the Yiddish by Harold Rabinowitz and Inna Hecker Grade. Alfred A. Knopf, 201 E. 50th Street, New York, NY 10022. 1982. 307 pages. \$15.95.

Reviewed by Jacob Kabakoff

The late Chaim Grade was a distinguished Yiddish poet, but he also received acclaim as a superb novelist and short story writer. A survivor of the Young Vilna group of writers, he was the author of several volumes of poetry in which he immortalized the life and tradition of European Jewry.

The three novellas included in Grade's newest volume represent his fifth prose work in English translation. When asked in an interview why he had turned to the writing of fiction, Grade replied that his was a two-fold purpose. First, he felt an historical obligation to describe the human tragedy (and comedy) of European Jewish life before it was systematically uprooted. And he wanted to show, through the medium of art, that the problems and struggles of the Jews of yesteryear were relevant to our own times because these problems and struggles never really change.

What Shmuel Yosef Agnon, the Nobel Prize laureate, succeeded in doing for Galician Jewry, Grade accomplished for the rich world of Lithuanian Jewry. He has peopled his novellas not only with rabbinic figures, with ascetic recluses and with contentious Mizrahi and Agudah supporters, but also with a host of strong women, with shopkeepers, and other mundane types. He depicts the rhythm of their daily lives without nostalgic embellishment and dwells on the shadows as well as the lights

of their existence.

Because of his absorbing psychological treatment of his characters, Grade makes their concerns and conflicts real and meaningful for us. In the novella "The Rebbetzin" we follow the machinations of a scheming woman who is motivated by disappointment and envy. The second novella, "Laybe-Layzar's Courtyard," which is set in Vilna, is filled with closely packed action, including a dramatic clash between an inflexible, fanatic father and a gentle reclusive rabbi who cannot escape involvement in community affairs. The last novella, "The Oath," relates how, by a clever turn of events, a dying Vilna wheat merchant is able to provide for his wife's marital future but is unsuccessful in keeping worldliness from engulfing the lives of his son and daughter.

Grade's novellas, like his previous large-scale novel "The Yeshiva," are anchored in reality and chronicle day-by-day happenings, but at the same time they touch on transcendent universal issues which speak to the mind and the heart.

Dr. Jacob Kabakoff is Professor of Hebrew Literature at the City University of New York and editor of the Jewish Book Annual.



## Your Jewish Lexicon Adult Jewish Studies — Union of American Hebrew Congregations

### Fathers And Mothers

The foundations of the Jewish family are the *av*, "father," and the *em*, "mother." More intimately, within the family, they are the *abba*, "Dad," and *imah*, "Mama." The fathers of the Jewish people, the three Patriarchs — Abraham, Isaac and Jacob — are the *avot*; and the four Matriarchs — Sarah, Rebekah, Rachel and Leah — are the *imot*, the "mothers." Abraham's Hebrew name, of course, is *Av-raham*, "father of a multitude of nations." (See *Genesis 17:4-5*.)

Eve, or *Chavah* in Hebrew, was the *em kol chai*, the "mother of all living." The prophetess Deborah was called *em b'yisrael*, "a mother in Israel." We hear more Hebrew expressions using *av* than *em*, a fact that has distressed Jewish feminists. For instance, our ancestors conceived of God as the great *av*, Father. A deeply moving prayer recited during the High Holy Days is the supplication, *Avinu Malkenu*, "our

Father, our King." Another prayer of supplication is addressed to *Avha-Rachamim*, "Father of Mercy" or "Merciful God." The small tractate of the Talmud known as *Pirke Avot*, "Chapters of the Fathers," a collection of ethical sayings and teachings, is one of the most popular and beloved of all Jewish books.

Despite the emphasis on *av* in Jewish tradition, a number of passages in Scriptures place *av* and *em* on an equal level regarding their relationships with their offspring. The Fifth Commandment, for example, enjoins us to "honor your father (*avicha*) and your mother (*imecha*)" equally. In the same vein, the Book of Proverbs contains similar references to fathers and mothers. Look up *Proverbs 1:8*, as one instance, and see if you can discover the Hebrew words for "your father" and "your mother." The advice to children there is still valid.



Pictured is JCC board member Lynne Sheffer who is working with new areas of adult programming for the Clai group and people 50 and over. The committee will begin working in March.

## 2nd Annual PASSOVER FAMILY AFIKOMEN HUNT Is Coming Sunday, April 3

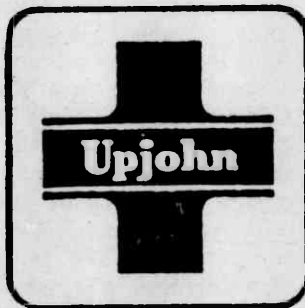
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