

**SYDNEY TAYLOR MANUSCRIPT AWARD
ACCEPTANCE SPEECH**

NECHAMA LISS-LEVINSON

Growing up, I wanted to work for the United Nations to make peace in the world. I later wanted to be a journalist or a muckraker, excited by the possibility of exposing injustice and influencing people through my writing. I ultimately became a psychologist, helping people to make peace with their families and within themselves, and influencing people to make changes in their lives.

But through the years, I remained a writer and a social activist at heart. I wrote personal articles on the developmental milestones of the Jewish family, as well as professional articles for the psychology journals. I reflected on my role in preparing my two daughters for their Bat Mitzvahs, wondering, “Whose Bat Mitzvah Was it Anyway?”, and explored what my older daughter would choose to do with her hyphenated last name, Liss-Levinson, when she married Jeffrey Sussman. After my parents died, I wrote a nonfiction book for children on dealing with death of a grandparent.

Meanwhile, I also marched and protested: against nuclear weapons, on behalf of Soviet Jews, for the starving children in Biafra, and most recently, for the people of Darfur. I met my soulmate, my husband, Billy, on a bus as a teenager, when we were both traveling from NY to Washington DC to attend a rally on behalf of Israel. I often use this story to encourage social activism when speaking to teenagers and young adults.

So it was no surprise that I jumped at the opportunity to accompany Rabbi Joel Soffin on a mission to help rebuild New Orleans in the December soon after Hurricane Katrina ravaged the gulf Coast. I was touched by the people we met there, both Jewish and non-Jewish, who were resolved to continue their lives in New Orleans, against enormous odds, as well as by the volunteers, who came with hearts overflowing with compassion. I was profoundly moved by a young Jewish family, whose home was destroyed by the floods. We spent a day in the moldy carcass of their house, extricating whatever valuables had been left up in their attic. We

brought down now useless pieces of their children's crib, broken dolls, moldy stuffed animals, and torn fragments from a Passover Haggadah. We laid it all out on the street, and ultimately left everything in a pile for the garbage workers to pick up, whenever that would happen.

Back in New York, I couldn't get this family, and the others I had met out of my mind. I organized a trip for members of my own synagogue to return to New Orleans, to bring down homemade Kosher food as part of the JCC's meals on wheels, to bring baby clothes, diapers and medical supplies to a grassroots shelter and clinic in the 9th ward, to play bingo with the elderly residents of the Jewish nursing home, and to bring Matzah covers to families facing their first Passover after the hurricane.

After returning from this second trip, I knew I had to write about what I had experienced. I wanted the story to be for kids in the upper grades of elementary school. I wanted them to be able to understand what it means to lose everything, to be taken from one's own home, to be unsure of the future, and yet to be resilient and to survive. I hoped I could fashion a story which would help children to grasp the concepts of loss and grief, but to also learn that even amidst tremendous loss, one can have the capacity to do Tikkun Olam, to help to make the world a better place. It was a contemporary American Jewish story of exile and redemption.

The heroine of my story, Gertie, is a nine year old Jewish girl, who must flee New Orleans with her family on the day Katrina arrives. Gertie's name, which most of you recognize as the name of the Sydney Taylor's central character in *All of a Kind Family*, was actually chosen in memory of my mother, Gertrude, who, along with my father, instilled a great love of reading in my soul. My children remember their grandparents' bedroom as a room with a bed, covered and surrounded by enormous piles of books. This book is a tribute to their lives and the lessons they taught me.

Now, in Gertie's own words:

Sometimes family traditions can be a pain in the neck. For Thanksgiving, before we actually get to eat the dessert, which include pumpkin pie, chocolate fudge pecan pie, and apple cranberry pie, everyone has to say what they're thankful for.

Personally, if I was one of the adults, I would have not done this tradition for this year. I didn't think it was a good idea to have to say what you were thankful for when so much was destroyed, disappeared, upside down and gone. But my parents and grandparents apparently did not agree. No not at all.

My dad gave a whole little speech about how this year we had to be especially thankful and grateful for all we had. He then told again his story of what happened with the hurricane. This time, I didn't want to hear it again, so I just got up and pretended I had to go to the bathroom. That is a polite way to show that you are not interested in what an adult is saying.

But even when I got back from the bathroom, we still were not finished with the whole going around thing, because my mom was first and she was going on and on. She was thankful that dad was OK and that he was able to help so many people. She was thankful that her sister was able to take her and all of us in.

Well, then, my mom and Aunt Charlene got up and were hugging and laughing and then crying too. It seemed to me we might never get dessert. I wanted a piece of chocolate pecan pie and a piece of pumpkin pie too. The apple cranberry could be for someone else.

Aunt Charlene was grateful that baby Sam was growing and doing all of his milestones, like saying "dada" and crawling around. I personally didn't think

that his crawling around was something I was thankful for. The more he crawled around, the more he reminded me of Jonah, getting into my stuff and didn't seem as cute as when he just lay there and said "goo." Aunt Charlene was also thankful that we were there because it gave her and Uncle Mike a chance to know me and Jonah better. Well, that was something I could finally agree with.

Now it was Jonah's turn. What would he say? I couldn't be sure he even knew what we were doing, but of course, he had to get a turn anyway.

"I'm thankful," he said and then he stopped and looked around at everyone.

"Aha," I thought. "I'm right. He doesn't even know what this is about. Let's skip his turn," I was saying this just in my brain, not to anyone else. I didn't say it out loud, because my parents would disapprove and strongly disagree and say Jonah deserves a turn like everyone else, but this seemed like a waste of time to my mind.

So then, Jonah looks around the table again, and then he says, "I'm happy that we didn't get a puppy last year for my birthday, even though I really wanted one, because now it would be drowned in the hurricane and dead."

Well, I can tell you, no one expected that from Jonah.

Every one of the adults just kept looking from one to the other.

So I spoke up. "Jonah," I said, "you have rescued this Thanksgiving from just a lot of mumbo jumbo. You acted even older than five years old. You are right about the dog. Now let's everyone eat dessert."

And so we did.

I sent the manuscript in for the Sydney Taylor Award after hearing Aileen Grossberg speak about it last November at the Jewish Book Council's Conference for Jewish Children's Book Authors. After hearing Aileen, I felt that my manuscript had all the elements suitable for the competition, except that it just wasn't long enough.

I returned home to talk over this dilemma with my husband. With his usual good humor, he agreed to a "Writing ONLY" weekend, in which we did nothing but write (he was working on his own project) from the time Shabbat was over till work started on Monday morning, and during that time, I was able to expand and finish my manuscript, "When the Hurricane Came to New Orleans". Thank- you Billy, for being a constant source of encouragement and support in my life.

I also want to thank you Aileen, and the members of your committee for your hard work and devotion to this task. I feel extremely grateful for the honor that you have bestowed upon me.

And so, tonight, my hopes remain very similar to the hopes and dreams I had as a young girl. If and when this manuscript is published, I hope that it will help children to understand their own sorrows, and to be empathic to other children who are facing difficulties. On a more global level, perhaps they will begin to understand the daily tribulations faced by children in the world at large. I also hope that this book will inspire the children who read it to become social activists in their own lives, to understand that within each of them rests the divine spark, with which they can ignite a world of change.

Thank you for this honor.

NLL 7.08.09