Honey on the Page
A Treasury of Yiddish Children’s Literature
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Book Club Discussion Questions

An unprecedented treasury of Yiddish children’s stories and poems enhanced with original illustrations

While there has been a recent boom in Jewish literacy and learning within the US, few resources exist to enable American Jews to experience the rich primary sources of Yiddish culture. Stepping into this void, Miriam Udel has crafted an exquisite collection: Honey on the Page offers a feast of beguiling original translations of stories and poems for children.

Arranged thematically—from school days to the holidays—the book takes readers from Jewish holidays and history to folktales and fables, from stories of humanistic ethics to multi-generational family sagas. Featuring many works that are appearing in English for the first time, and written by both prominent and lesser-known authors, this anthology spans the Yiddish-speaking globe—drawing from materials published in Eastern Europe, New York, and Latin America from the 1910s, during the interwar period, and up through the 1970s. With its vast scope, Honey on the Page offers a cornucopia of delights to families, individuals and educators seeking literature that speaks to Jewish children about their religious, cultural, and ethical heritage.

**Honey on the Page Book Club Questions**

Thank you for considering *Honey on the Page* as a choice for your book club. These questions are intended to facilitate a discussion for adults, although they are certainly adaptable to teenage audiences as well. Please feel welcome to contact the editor and translator for materials more suited to younger or intergenerational audiences.

1. What’s the first Jewish story you remember hearing or reading? How important were stories that you read or heard in childhood in shaping your own Jewish identity? What role did storytelling play in your Jewish education? Was there any honey, literal or metaphorical, at your first encounter with Jewish texts?

2. What are your immediate associations when you think of “Yiddish children’s literature?” Did you have access to *Yiddish* children’s stories while growing up or raising your own children?

3. *Honey on the Page* begins with a group of holiday stories, and these in turn begin with Shabbat. These stories are written by secularists, yet they feature several aspects of traditional Shabbos observance. What kind of Shabbos experience were these authors highlighting and why? What was most important to them about the holy day? How might a weekly cessation from labor have synchronized with a progressive worldview?

4. The Jewish children’s holiday book market is dominated by books about Hanukkah, which is especially understandable since the Festival of Lights falls close to Christmas. *Honey on the Page* emphasizes several other holidays, often restoring perspectives that have fallen out of fashion. Lag Ba’Omer was a kind of informal children’s day, while Purim (which is now observed as a costume-intensive kidapalooza) was an opportunity for children to learn about charitable giving. Did any of the holiday tales in *Honey* subtly shift your understanding of how a given Jewish holiday might be observed or which themes might be placed at the center?

5. In its second section, the anthology presents both fictional and non-fictional approaches to writing about Jewish history—with all of its dignity, triumph, violence, sorrow and resilience. Which did you find most valuable or memorable? At what ages would you feel comfortable sharing these stories with children you know?
6. Veteran teacher and educational theorist Emily Style has observed that children need “windows and mirrors” in their reading and curricula: books that will afford them vantage points onto the experience of diverse Others and books that will reflect their own experience back to them. Most of the stories in Part III, “Folktales, Fairy Tales, Wonder Tales” and Part IV, “Wise Fools,” could be transposed to other cultural milieux, yet they are all marked by Jewish trappings. How deeply Jewish do you think these tales are? Do they fulfill the function of mirrors for Jewish children and windows for those curious about Ashkenazi Jewish culture?

7. Across cultures, a great deal of writing for children involves animals—either as the protagonists of allegories and fables or as being in relationship with human children. Why are animals and children such an enduring combination? Why do fable traditions across the globe enlist animals in teaching ethical lessons?

8. For at least the past century in the United States, there have been distinct markets for school textbooks and other works for children. That was not the case in Yiddish: many of the stories in Honey on the Page were published for use in the Yiddish school systems that flourished in Eastern Europe and throughout the Americas. It makes sense, then, that so many stories are set in schoolrooms, whether the traditional boys’ cheder or the more modern, coeducational Yiddish shule. How do the school stories portray the experience of going to school? Is there anything surprising or notable in these portrayals? What seems universal and even current?

9. Part VII of the anthology focuses on scenes of informal learning outside of the classroom environment. What roles do parents play (or not play) in these children’s independent learning experiences?

10. The anthology’s final section focuses on Jewish families in both urban and rural settings, mostly in the US. How do we see girls’ roles expanding in some of these stories? What kinds of values are these families trying to transmit to their children? What kind of a Jewish future do these stories seem to anticipate?