

From the Editor

By Lyn Miller-Lachmann

This May 1, I embraced the role of proud mother as my youngest child, Madeleine, became a Bat Mitzvah. The ceremony, which took place two days after her thirteenth birthday, was the culmination of four years of Hebrew and Torah study. Maddy led the congregation in prayer, chanted from the Torah and Haftorah, and delivered a speech that interpreted the Torah passage in the context of her Jewish education and her life up to now.

As part of the service, various members of her family, including me, chanted the blessings before and after the Torah passages that she read. I still remember my struggle to learn Hebrew words that I did not understand and could barely pronounce. The first time I rehearsed, Maddy handed me the *siddur* (prayerbook) and asked me to read aloud the blessing before the Torah.

This one I had memorized, knowing I might be called one day to chant it. The process had taken me two years. Then she informed me that I had to know the blessing *after* the Torah as well.

"It's easy," she said. "It's just like the blessing before the Torah."

"It's not *just* like it. Aren't some of the words different?"

"Yes, but if you read the blessing before, you can read the one afterward."

I stared at the page, trying to find the blessing before the Torah.

"Don't you know what it looks like? You can read Hebrew, can't you?"

"No. Not really."

"Then let's go over it. I'll chant a couple of words, and you repeat after me."

Patiently (she will make a wonderful teacher someday!), she went through the prayer with me, but by the time we arrived at the fourth section, I'd forgotten the first. She ended up going to bed late so I could finish, and she woke up for school exhausted. And while she was in school, I tried to rehearse what she'd taught me and discovered I'd forgotten the entire thing!

Maddy is not unusually gifted with languages, and it took her four years of classes twice a week as well as intensive tutoring to get to this point. And were we to go to Israel, she couldn't carry on a conversation. But her pronunciation is good, and at 13 she is still young enough to be able to move to a non-English-speaking country and learn to communicate fluently without an accent. However, as my experience illustrates, my husband and I would have far more difficulty.

Several of the articles in this issue address the topic of language and culture. Children's relative facility in learning new languages became a principal rationale for the notorious Indian boarding schools designed to eradicate indigenous languages and cultures in the nineteenth and first half of the twentieth century. In their article "Linguistic Imperialism in the United States: The Historical Eradication of American Indian Languages and the English Only Movement," Margery Ridgeway and Cornel Pewewardy examine the ideological underpinnings of the English-only boarding schools, their impact on indigenous tribes and languages, and efforts to revive those languages today. Ridgeway and Pewewardy contrast the approach of the U.S. government toward indigenous populations with that of Spain and later Mexico in the Southwest and address its implications for the education of Spanish-speaking children today.

Ridgeway and Pewewardy's advocacy of bilingual education complements Toronto librarian Chrissy Mylopoulos's article on services to newcomer populations. Aware that the immigrant and refugee population includes many adults who encounter more difficulty learning languages (though they need to do so in order to fit into their new country economically and socially), she describes a model of school-library collaboration that takes advantage of children's adaptability and adults' motivation. Important to this collaboration are materials available in both the original language and English and staff with fluency in both languages.

Respect for another's language goes hand in hand with respect for his or her culture.

▼ continued on page 11

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▼ from the editor continued from page 4

This is the point Abenaki filmmaker Alanis Obomsawin makes in an interview that our Film/Video Subject Editor Christine McDonald conducted with her at last year's Sundance Film Festival. Obomsawin is the director of several documentaries that highlight conflicts between the Mohawk people of Quebec and the Canadian government, including *Kanehsatake* (which describes the standoff at Oka over the building of a golf course on tribal lands) and *Rocks at Whiskey Trench* (which depicts attacks by white Canadians on the Mohawk protestors). In her latest film, *Is the Crown at War with Us?*, she examines conflicts over the Mi'gmaq fishing rights, contrasting the efforts of Mi'gmaq elders to teach these skills to their children and grandchildren with the Canadian government's continued efforts to legislate away the unique cultural practices of First Nations peoples.

Place names have long been symbolic of the U.S. and Canadian governments' efforts to eradicate indigenous languages and cultures. In the past several decades, civil rights groups have tried to replace Indian mascots that caricature indigenous peoples. Our "Parting Words" column for this issue describes a parallel political effort to restore the indigenous name of the Rum River in Minnesota, which would replace a "punning translation" of the original Dakota Sioux name, Mdoteminiwakan. Minnesota human rights activist Thomas Dahlheimer discusses the reasons for the name change and the process of building political support to replace the pejorative translation of the Dakota word for "great spirit." His ongoing efforts deserve support and serve as a model for those wishing to initiate similar name changes elsewhere.

As always, the June issue features Isabel Schon's annual roundup of books in English about Latino children and their cultures. Designed to raise cross-cultural awareness

and appreciation on the part of non-Latinos and to foster self-awareness and pride among Latino youngsters, many of whom do not read or speak Spanish, this list features books about folklore; holidays and festivals; indigenous, Spanish, and Latin American history; and the arts. Also a regular feature of the June issue is the "Mixed Media" column, which reviews software, web sites, and microform products. Many of the products featured in this year's installment are resources in Spanish, other resources on Latino and Latin American cultures, and sources on immigration to the United States and Canada.

Although my Hebrew skills leave much to be desired, I have taught Sunday school (in English) at our Reform congregation for the past five years. Each year my seventh graders and I talk about the destruction of the Second Temple by the Romans more than 2,000 years ago, and how the Jews became a landless people until the establishment of the State of Israel in 1948. We have figured out that about 95 generations of Jews lived in exile in communities throughout the world, passing their language from generation to generation until Hebrew became Israel's official language. This year my eighth graders heard a presentation from an Israeli visiting teacher about Eliezer Ben Yehuda, the founder of modern Hebrew, and the challenges he faced updating a language that had changed little from Biblical times to describe, among other developments, the radio, the automobile, and the concept of gravity (and now the computer and the Internet). I explore with my students how easily languages are lost when a population loses its land, and the extraordinary efforts people make to keep their language alive, efforts each of my students makes when he studies for his Bar Mitzvah or she for her Bat Mitzvah. The articles in this issue underscore the importance of preserving our language, because language is a critical component of our culture and who we are. 📖