

The Bible rewritten – for children

There are several things that distinguish Pitspopany Press's *Jewish Children's Bible* from other Jewish children's Bibles, says Pitspopany Press general manager Ya'acov Peterseil.

First, there is the fact that they have used the Hebrew text instead of the English King James Bible as the basis for their five-book version – the first of which came out in September.

In addition, they have included a section of midrashim at the back of the book, so that parents and children can discuss the meaning of the stories in more depth. And lastly, they have included stories which most children's Bibles – both Jewish and Christian – tend to ignore, such as the story of Hagar.

"Most of the other Jewish children's Bibles on the market have one major problem: They don't deal with all the stories, and they are not age-appropriate. Very few children's Bibles deal with the story of Hagar and she is a very important character," said Peterseil, sitting in his downtown Jerusalem office from where he directs the operation of Pitspopany Press, an English-language publishing house which sells Jewish children's books, mainly in the US. "They also don't deal with the battle of Shechem and Simeon and Levi. We have to deal with this story, but very carefully so as not to scare the children."

Without delving into the rape of Dinah by the son of King Hamor of Shechem, the Children's Bible author – well-known children's writer Sheryl Prenzlau – tells how the son, Prince Shechem, captures Jacob's daughter Dinah and wants to marry her, but Jacob doesn't want to allow it. The book explains that after convinc-

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ing the men of Shechem the only way they will be able to marry their women is by being circumcised, Simeon and Levi go into the city to rescue their sister and kill all the male residents.

When there was a question about a fact, or logic, in certain stories, Prenzlau used the commentary by Rashii to keep the stories consistent with Jewish tradition, said Peterseil.

Still, Peterseil admits, they could not include every Bible story in their version either, but he is confident they have covered most of the stories which children in their target audience of six- to nine-year-olds can understand, and also which can be properly illustrated.

The illustrations were so important to them that they used three illustrators: Zely Smekhov, Daniel Goldberg, and Lena Guberman – all of whom, like Prenzlau, live here. The illustrations finally used in the book were first approved by a test audience of children – including Peterseil's own, as well as those of Pitspopany's production manager Chaim Mazo.

In the introduction to their Genesis, they explain how they consciously decided to portray all the Bible characters in vivid color, because trying to hide the faces of the characters would have been "too contrived." For example, they said, it would have been impossible to show the meeting of Jacob with his son Joseph after many decades of separation without showing the emotion on their faces. Yet all the illustrations maintain an integrity to the religious appearance of the characters, noted Peterseil. All men wear head coverings, and

all the women are dressed modestly.

For some people who grew up seeing pictures of a young Isaac about to be sacrificed, the illustration in this children's Bible may appear a bit strange. The illustration shows a grown man following Abraham as he takes his son up to an altar. But this is a truer depiction of the event, said Peterseil – according to the Bible, Isaac was actually 37 years old when God told Abraham to sacrifice him.

"The problem is that people start reading the King James version and other non-Jewish versions and those ideas seep into the Jewish world," he said.

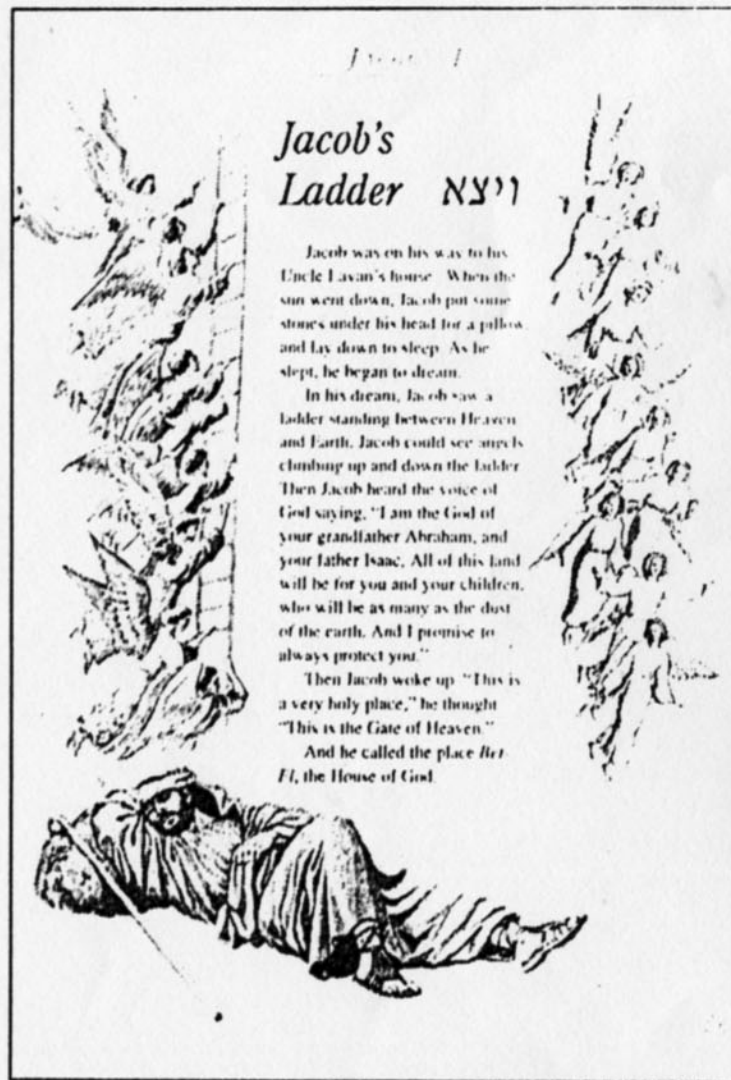
Another example is the story of Jacob's ladder. In most illustrations the angels climb up and down on the same ladder. But in this version, they were careful to be faithful to the actual text which describes how the angels climbed down one ladder and up the other, said Peterseil.

"This series is based on the philosophy that a children's book should be usable for everybody from Reform and Conservative, to Orthodox Jews. Everybody should be able to get what they want from the Bible," said Peterseil. "We are trying not to be didactic but we are also trying to be as true to the textual writing as possible."

For example, he said, any reference to God in this children's Bible is non-gender specific. God is simply referred to as "God."

"It may seem like a small thing, but most Reform or Conservative Jews would not accept a book that has a male figure of God," said Peterseil. "It's a matter of being sensitized to their needs."

Trying to market English-language Jewish children's books to



A page from Pitspopany Press's *Jewish Children's Bible*.

the US from Israel is not always an easy endeavor, but Peterseil credits Pitspopany's success to the fact that it launches books in series. Another recent group title they launched is the *10 Best*, which now includes *10 Best Jewish Children's Stories* and *10 Traditional Jewish Children's Stories*. Another book in the

series based on 10 Hasidic stories is due out soon.

Peterseil expects the other four books of the *Jewish Children's Bible* to be on the market by March 1998. Though 95 percent of their business is done in the US, Pitspopany Press books are also marketed in Israel through Sefer ve-Sefel in Jerusalem.