Building a Future for Jewish Writers

When mainstream literary spaces shut us out, Jewish authors are creating our own magazines, conferences, and platforms.

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Elissa Wald (left): “We need a strong, supportive community.” Erika Dreifus (right): “I ruled out the ‘do nothing’ option.”

Before October 7, 2023, Elissa Wald was perfectly happy in her career as a ghostwriter, using her skills behind the scenes to amplify the voices of other people. “But after the massacre and the world’s response to it,” Wald said, “I hit an emotional wall and felt I couldn’t go on with it. As much as I loved my projects, I felt it wasn’t the highest and best use of my voice at this time.”

What, then, would be a better use of her time? Well, she noticed the same thing that many of us experienced. Jews were being pushed out of literary spaces. Even those of us who never wrote about Israel were told that our voices did not count. That’s when she launched the Never Alone Substack newsletter and book club.

“I saw so many liberal Jews proclaim themselves politically homeless as the left devolved into full-throttle antisemitism. I thought, ‘I need to build a home for us.’”

The idea was for Jewish readers to “participate in organized campaigns where we would all buy the same book on the same day and send a Jewish author to the NYT bestseller list every month.”

But the project didn’t stop there. Wald quickly saw that supporting only a handful of writers each year was not enough. Jewish authors needed platforms where their voices could be heard. So, she launched *Judith.* The magazine now features essays from some of today’s leading Jewish writers—pieces that might not find a home elsewhere in the current climate. I’m the nonfiction editor for Judith.

She then created *Mazl: Magazine of the American Zionist Left*.
While *Judith* casts a wide net for Jewish arts and letters, *Mazl* gathers and amplifies left-leaning Zionist voices.

What Wald is doing by creating these Jewish-friendly publications and communities is an answer to an age-old question for Jews who are being marginalized from mainstream communities. Is it better to keep trying to engage with the existing literary community—a community that has made clear in many ways that Jewish voices are not wanted—or should we focus on forming our own organizations and events, as Jews did in many professions in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century? Organizations such as the Jewish Publication Society (founded 1888), YIVO (1925), The Workers Circle (1900), and the American Jewish Press Association (1944) emerged precisely in response to exclusion and antisemitism.

To Wald, the answer is clear.

“I think our ability to do our best work in the world is immeasurably strengthened by a stable, loving home life. Metaphorically, this translates to a

strong, supportive community where we take care of each other and support each other as we navigate the ever-narrowing bridge that is the diaspora."

Even Jewish literary advocate Erika Dreifus is coming around to this point of view. While Wald and I have been very loud, Dreifus has spent about a decade in quiet diplomacy to mainstream literary publications and communities.

I've known Dreifus for many years, and throughout that time I've watched her take on a role that few others were willing to assume: pushing back against antisemitism in the literary world, even when it meant risking her place within it. Her efforts began as early as 2006 and 2007, during the debates surrounding the Second Lebanon War and the publication of *The Israel Lobby* by John Mearsheimer and Stephen Walt, a book that argued US foreign policy was overly influenced by pro-Israel groups and was widely criticized for echoing antisemitic tropes. She was among the first to notice and challenge antisemitic undertones in literary spaces, including the National Book Critics Circle's blog.

Much of her work in those years involved writing private letters to editors, contacting colleagues directly, and even reaching out when prominent literary figures, such as Roxane Gay, made comments that troubled her. Dreifus has said she has never been one to let such moments pass without response.

As Erika explained, citing Rabbi Diana Fersko, "Traditionally, when faced by antisemitism, Jews have had three choices, and one is stay and fight, and the other is create something new, and the third is do nothing. And I kind of ruled out the 'do nothing' option."

That refusal to stay silent has defined her approach. "I like to say that the best thing my parents did for my writing ambitions and so-called career is having me born a Taurus, because I am kind of bullheaded on this stuff, and I don't give up easily, especially if people are ignoring me."

Over time, Dreifus grew frustrated with the limits of quiet diplomacy. Too often her private letters went unanswered, or responses from editors were evasive and dismissive. More recently, she has begun to publish these letters herself,

including an Open Letter to the Editor of the New York Times Book Review, which appeared in Judith Magazine. The letter challenged the paper's coverage of Palestinian poets and represented a shift toward more public advocacy. Her tone remained measured and well-documented, but the act of publishing the correspondence itself was more assertive than her earlier, private approach.

Still, Dreifus acknowledges that she is weary. "I'm getting really tired and giving up on some of the 'stay and fight,' even though I'm very tenacious," she said. She no longer writes to *Poets & Writers* because, as she put it, "that is not worth my time any longer." She is reserving judgment on AWP, noting that once the Jewish Book Council became involved there were improvements, but she has also seen troubling signs.

I saw this myself at AWP in Los Angeles early this year. Compared with previous years, the climate felt less threatening. I did not fear for my safety, and security was visibly tighter. Still, our panel was interrupted by a protester who scattered stickers across the table and shouted about "genocide" before being escorted out.

At this stage in her life, Dreifus said, she prefers to focus on deepening her own Jewish knowledge rather than expending energy on editors who are not listening. She wants to read more, listen to podcasts, and attend events that introduce her to aspects of Jewish heritage she did not grow up with. As she put it, "I want to keep learning about my own Jewish heritage, which encompasses things beyond my own experience … learning about things that I didn't know so much about before."

That desire to spend her time in Jewish spaces also explains Dreifus's commitment to new initiatives. She is on the board of Artists Against Antisemitism, which is hosting its first major writers' gathering, or *mifgash*, in September.

The group itself came together quickly in the months after October 7 as Jewish artists looked for ways to respond to the surge of antisemitism in their fields. What began as a grassroots network soon established itself as a nonprofit, with a

board and regular volunteers. Its first major effort was an auction that raised money for antisemitism education by offering books, services, and artwork. Support has grown since then, including a grant from UJA-Federation of New York to help build community among Jewish writers.

The upcoming *mifgash* is the clearest expression yet of that mission. Dreifus describes it as "a celebration of Jewish creativity, identity and storytelling," while acknowledging that the challenges facing Jewish writers will also be part of the discussion. The event is in-person only, with applications from writers in New York City, Long Island, and Westchester receiving preference.

Dreifus will also be a speaker at another initiative aimed at strengthening Jewish literary voices, the Jewish Authors' Summit organized by 70 Faces Media. I am serving as a behind-the-scenes adviser on the event, which is scheduled for October.

Jennifer Rubin, senior producer of digital events at 70 Faces Media, explained the purpose.

"As the largest Jewish media company in North America, 70 Faces Media has spent nearly four years training Jewish professionals and volunteers in the concrete digital skills they need to effectively reach and engage our communities online," Rubin said. "Since October 7th it has become increasingly clear that Jewish authors and storytellers, whether they write Jewishly or not, are in need of similar training to promote their work and reach broader audiences. Our Jewish Authors' Summit: How to Reach New Readers Now, a free online event to be held on October 23rd, will do just that."

Another speaker at the 70 Faces Media summit will be Jonathan Rosen, host of The Jewish Lens podcast, who has been outspoken about the failures of the children's publishing industry in particular. "Before October 7th, it was always, 'We want to be inclusive of everyone, just not you,'" Rosen said. "After October 7th, it's grown ugly and vile with daily purity tests. Denounce your kind or be pariahs and face excommunication."

Rosen said he has seen this exclusion firsthand, both as an author and as a former literary agent. He recalled rejections that revealed an informal quota system for Jewish stories. “I actually got the rejection that stated, ‘We already got a Jewish story this month.’ So, that means there was a quota. Not for the amount of holiday books. But for Jewish stories in general.” In his view, this shows editors are either fearful of being seen acquiring Jewish material, openly discriminatory, or simply ignorant.

His conclusion is that Jewish writers should stop asking for inclusion and instead build their own institutions. “When someone constantly tells you that you’re not welcome, don’t beg them. Do your own thing and make it better.”

Another new initiative is OfTheBook Press, founded by Susan Gordon in 2024 as a direct response to the exclusion of Jewish voices in mainstream publishing. Gordon said she had already seen the trend developing before the boycott lists began circulating. Since launching the press and its accompanying journal, she has received a steady stream of submissions from talented Jewish authors who report being shut out of other publications.

Her decision to create OfTheBook was also shaped by personal experience. A decade earlier, Gordon co-founded a literary journal but was later forced out by her colleagues because of her strong ties to Israel. More recently, she said she has faced doxxing and threats tied to her forthcoming debut novel, including messages sent directly to her publisher urging them not to release her work.

Gordon said her main motivation now is to provide a home for Jewish writers who are finding doors closed elsewhere. OfTheBook, she said, is not simply a reaction against exclusion but also a platform to highlight the depth and range of Jewish creativity.

Another effort to support Jewish authors is coming from Yehudit Singer Freud, whose company, Singer Publicity, has long specialized in books related to Jewish life and Israel. She is preparing to launch TheBookShuk.com, a digital platform designed to showcase Jewish authors and connect them with respectful reviewers and a broad media network.

“The goal is to streamline the review process, give authors exposure to media that respects them and help them spread their message to an enthusiastic, like-minded audience,” Singer Freud said. The site, now in its final stages of development, will offer a space where Jewish writers can count on fair coverage and visibility in a marketplace that has grown increasingly hostile.

At this year’s AWP conference, I also joined the Jewish Writers Caucus, created specifically to address the alienation Jewish authors have felt in the wider literary community. The caucus was co-organized by the Jewish Book Council and Yetzirah, and Jessica Jacobs, founder of Yetzirah, opened with a reminder that “this is a lonely, isolated time, a time of grief and anxiety” and that the caucus was meant to be “a way to be together in community.”

In my subgroup on publishing, Miri Pomerantz Dauber of the Jewish Book Council described the challenge of measuring the scope of the problem. Anecdotal evidence of discrimination is overwhelming, but the council’s data show that Jewish books continue to be released at a steady pace. The contradiction is striking: Jewish authors report being excluded, dropped, or told “not now,” yet the numbers suggest the flow of Jewish titles has not diminished. I asked whether the wrong criteria were being used—whether counting “Jewish books” as a broad category obscures the fact that books about Israel, or those with unapologetically Zionist voices, may be the ones quietly rejected.

Dauber emphasized that the JBC is not trying to fight antisemitism in publishing directly, but to work around it by demonstrating that Jewish books can be a sound business decision. If an event is canceled, they help the author find another venue. They highlight the market share Jewish titles do have. Dauber said the most important response we can offer is to show that Jews continue to write books—and, just as critically, that Jews continue to buy them.

Beyond these new initiatives, there is also a growing network of Jewish-friendly conferences and resources that continue to support writers. The Jewish Book Council hosts its annual conference each November, and Yetzirah holds a summer gathering for poets. The Association of Jewish Libraries welcomes

writers and allies at its June conference, while Jewish Joy Con each March and PJ Library's Picture Book Summer Camp in August provide opportunities for emerging and established authors alike.

The uncertainty surrounding the Giller Prize in Canada illustrates the risks of treating Jewish voices as disposable. After boycotts and protests targeted its corporate sponsors for ties to Israel, the country's most prestigious literary award cut loose longtime backers but has so far failed to secure stable replacements. Without new funding, the prize that once showcased the best of Canadian writing may not survive. For generations, Jewish writers have been central to the vibrancy of Canadian and international literature. To imagine a literary world that excludes them—or reduces them to a handful of approved anti-Zionist voices who represent only a fraction of Jewish opinion—is to imagine a field diminished in honesty, complexity, and depth.

That dilemma—whether to stay and fight for space in mainstream forums or to build our own—has run through every conversation in the Jewish literary community since October 7. What gives me optimism, for the first time in almost two years, is seeing how many writers are choosing the second path: bypassing the gatekeepers and launching new publications, conferences, and platforms that affirm Jewish identity rather than erase it. The sheer depth of creativity and commitment on display suggests that, even if we are excluded elsewhere, we are more than capable of building something lasting on our own.

Dreifus said one of her colleagues put it best when she said, "They'll miss us when we're gone."