

Prayers for Healing Cross Cultural Lines

By BARBARA DELATINER
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SANDS POINT— OVER a career that has spanned three decades and produced about 50 volumes, the writer and illustrator Jane Breskin Zalben has become best known for her children's books about Jewish holidays, as celebrated by Beni the Bear and Pearl the Lamb.

So when she decided to compile a book exploring how different cultures deal with stress and threats, she faced a challenge. "Let There Be Light: Poems and Prayers for Repairing the World" (Dutton), published this month, is a journey outside her usual territory.

In the past, even when the work she wrote and illustrated was not overtly Jewish, her young-adult novels, chapter books and picture books had a Jewish sensibility.

"My characters just happen to be Jewish because I write about families and about friendships and the feelings and emotions that exist within them, affect them," she said. "Since I'm a Jewish person living within a large world, when I tell a story -- and that's my primary goal -- I'm dealing with my feelings and experiences."

Often these are memories from when she was a small child. "You know, the smell of crisp apples at Sukkot," she said, "the latkes that sink in your stomach like bowling balls, the cousins racing around the house, distracting the adults."

Profoundly affected by the terror attacks of Sept. 11, 2001, though she did not lose a relative or close friend, Ms. Zalben was reminded of a cornerstone of Judaism: tikkun olam, the Hebrew phrase that means repairing the world.

It seemed to Ms. Zalben that the concept of healing the world was a common thread through many religions.

The idea of looking beyond Judaism was one that she had explored in books about a lamb named Pearl, she said during an interview in the home she shares with her husband, Steven Zalben, an architect.

When she wrote about Pearl's reaction to the death of her grandfather, for example, Ms. Zalben researched and wrote about how other cultures observed mourning.

For her latest book, as she sifted through the Koran, the Torah and other religious works, as well as ethnic poetry and folk tales, she found hundreds of examples of the concept of repairing the world. "But I deliberately chose material that connected family, love and hope," she said.

Last fall, Ms. Zalben set about illustrating the passages, a process that ordinarily comes easily to her. But rather than employ her usual technique of producing very detailed drawings on parchment, Ms. Zalbin created a series of five-color collages fashioned from painting, photography, computer imaging, cut paper and fabric. Japanese rice paper is

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worked into an illustration for a quote from Buddha; tree bark she brought back from Africa appears on the African pages; a leaf from her backyard accompanies a Native American prayer.

But does all this add up to a children's book? Ms. Zalben, who said that the days of "Beni the Bear" and "Pearl the Lamb" were over, paused. "It's supposed to be for 'over 5,' " she said. "But I guess it's for all ages. But mostly it's a book I did for myself."

Ms. Zalben will discuss "Let There Be Light" at 5 p.m. today at the Port Jewish Center, Port Washington. Information: (516) 944-7202.

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