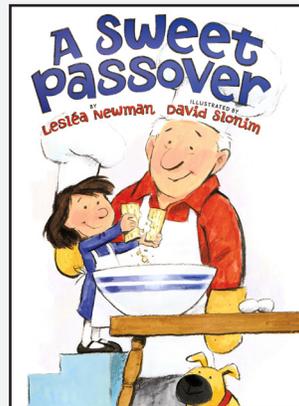


**First Opinion: More Than Matzah:
A Child's Eye View of the Observance of Passover**

Newman, Lesléa. *A Sweet Passover*. Illus. David Slonim. New York: Abrams, 2012.

Susan Britsch



A Sweet Passover is not just a sweet children's book. It moves the reader through the eight-day observance of Passover as experienced by Miriam, the child protagonist. This begins sweetly enough in Carlesque fashion: "On the first day of Passover, Miriam and Grandma ate matzah with butter. On the second day of Passover..." (unpaged). Small portraits pairing Miriam's face with that of each family member iterate the variations of matzah that carry them through the sixth day; on the seventh day Miriam devises her own sweet matzah treat. But then she reaches a real dilemma despite her love of the rituals and family activities of Passover: eating matzah does get old.

As Miriam experiences the first days of Passover, the images are large, presenting whole contexts on each page with minimal text. These express Miriam's joy—at her experience of observance? Then, suddenly we see another full-page image that conveys an emerging recognition: Miriam can no longer face any more matzah. In bed, the covers pulled up to her nose, she sees her blanket checker-boarded with unwanted, imaginary pieces of matzah. The author and illustrator also use print graphically here, the increasing point size a reflection of Miriam's growing distaste for matzah: "When she woke up on the last day of Passover, Miriam was sick, sick, sick of matzah" (unpaged).

The book proposes a resolution through the vehicle of another Passover tradition: matzah brei as prepared by Miriam's grandfather. The choice of this character as chef is not only

touching but also real, once again. Three generations of the family are visually and verbally included throughout the book's chronicle. Thus, Miriam is not alone, and observing Passover, while accomplished individually, is not a solitary pursuit.

An illustrated recipe for matzah brei is offered in narrative style as Grandpa prepares the dish. Here the text is accompanied by smaller, sequential images that detail the breaking of the matzah, the adding of the milk, and the cooking in butter. (A detailed, cookbook version is appended.) The image of Miriam's disgusted face appears on the next page. Confronted with a steaming plate of matzah brei, she's decided never to eat matzah again. Her refusal of the matzah brei prepared by her grandfather now recasts her eating of the Passover matzah as merely an activity, not really as observance.

Then a flashback occurs through a double-page image of the ancestors as slaves in Egypt, rushing to escape with no time to let the bread rise. A child leads the flight, a counterpart to Miriam with whom she can identify. This is immediately followed by another double-page set of portraits as each member of Miriam's family textually explains the role of matzah in the Passover observance. These two pages visually and verbally enact another central tenet of Judaism: individual interpretation and argumentation of text, in this case the Haggadah. This convinces Miriam, and now her face appears again, covered up to her nose as she peers tentatively across the dinner table. But instead of a bed covered with matzah, a single empty plate is all she sees. This visual repetition does much more to characterize the development of Miriam's understanding than the text does, and this is followed by yet another visual repetition. Now, instead of a visual list foregrounding the ingredients and cooking utensils for matzah brei, full-page images narrate the resolution Miriam herself has requested: the preparation of matzah brei with her grandfather. She understands the observance now as much more than the repetition of a single activity.

The images in the book thus do not simply chronicle the progression of Passover from the outside, as it were, but also from the inside. Miriam's point of view is visually expressed and the images effectively enhance the textual description and dialogue. The point of view of the book as Miriam's is further suggested by the media used for the images—in each, the charcoal strokes appear as black crayon outlines and the acrylic fill often has a crayoned or water colored texture. The stylization of the drawings, too, is childlike without being simplistic. The images carry the reader through *A Sweet Passover*. The visual motion of the book reflects the conceptual motion of Miriam's eight-day internal journey so effectively that they suggest an interactive four-dimensional context through which child readers can move back and forth across time—the flashback images appearing suddenly, the portraits of family members becoming visible one by one, almost as holograms speaking to Miriam and bringing new viewpoints to consciousness.

Several additions at the end of the book add further dimension and reach out to the reader's own experience of Passover. A nice inclusion is a short glossary that translates the

Yiddish vocabulary used throughout the text as essential to Passover: "Essen in gezunt: Eat in good health." One helpful and appropriate addition here would be the terms for all family members. Only *bubbeleh*, the diminutive for "grandmother," is shown. This is surprising considering the central role of the grandfather in the narrative. An author's note describes the exodus and explains the seder through expository text. *A Sweet Passover* thus takes readers through a multi-genre journey from the bitterness of Miriam's initial complaint to the sweetness of her realizations about Pesach. It is a journey that children and families can take alongside their own.

About the Author

Susan Britsch is a fine arts photographer. She is a professor of Curriculum and Instruction at Purdue University. Her background in linguistics, visual communication, photography, and early literacy development undergirds her teaching and research on visual literacy and multimodal discourse visualization.