

Couples who Collaborate

Chana and Larry Stiefel

MARY-KATE SABLESKI



Chana and Larry Stiefel are new to publishing as a couple but bring with them a wealth of diverse experiences. Chana has written and published more than thirty books for children. She writes both fiction and nonfiction, ranging in topics from avocados to zombies. Recently, *Let Liberty Rise* (2021) was named a Bank Street Best Book for Children (ages 5–9) and received a starred review in *School Library Journal*. Her forthcoming book, *The Tower of Life: How Yaffa Eliach Rebuilt her Town in Stories and Photographs* (2022) is a Junior Library Guild Gold Standard Selection, and received a starred review from *School Library Journal*.

Larry is a pediatrician; the new book *Mendel's Hanukkah Mess Up* (2022) is his first book for children and first collaboration with his wife. In the story, Mendel is always messing up. So, no one is more surprised than he, when the rabbi asks him to drive the Mitzvah Mobile through the streets of New York and invite everyone to the Hanukkah Bash. What if he messes up again? But as Mendel begins to spread the joy of the holiday, he learns that mistakes can happen and sometimes the results can be miraculous. This engaging couple live, and laugh (a lot), near New York City.

Q: How did you two meet?

Chana: On a blind date. Larry was a resident in pediatrics, and I was working as an editor for Scholastic. I was writing for children, and he was taking care of children. Now we have four children and we're publishing our first children's book together! We've been married for twenty-nine years.

Q: Where did you get the idea for *Mendel's Hanukkah Mess Up*?

Larry: I used to write a blog of funny Jewish stories called *The Maggid of Bergenfield* (a “maggid” is a storyteller from the old country in Europe, and Bergenfield is the New Jersey town where Larry grew up), and the stories were about the Bible and Jewish holidays. I would write one each week for many years. They were geared towards older kids and adults.

Chana: Then our local Jewish newspaper printed them in a weekly column.

Larry: One time when Chana was away for Hanukkah, I decided to write a different story for each of the eight nights. *Mendel's Hanukkah Mess Up* came from one of those stories.

We always said we would try to make into a children's book. One time, we went on a long walk, and we composed the arc of the story while we walked.

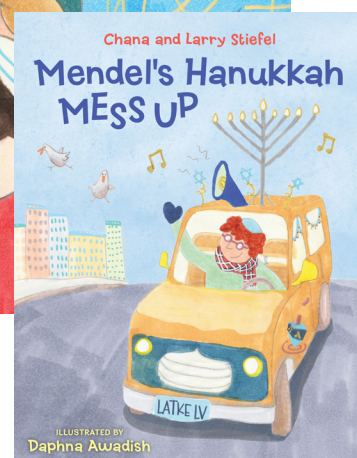
Chana: Something about this story just said to me, this could be a book. Not every short story can play out that way, but I really liked the characters and the storyline.



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Mendel's Hanukkah Mess Up by Chana and Larry Stiefel; illustration by Daphna Awadish, used with courtesy of Kalaniot Books.



Q: As a doctor, Larry, did you ever think you would also be a published children's author?

Larry: Well, I was an English literature major in college. I've written two unpublished novels which are currently holding a door open in our house.

Chana: It's amazing to me that he was able to write a short story every week and publish those in a newspaper while working as a pediatrician. And . . . he's really funny. During quarantine, he started a Facebook group called Larry Stiefel's Coronavirus Quarantine Joke of the Day. People would look forward to seeing the new joke he posted each day for 150 days. We play off each other's humor when we write, and we are a little critical of each other's writing, sometimes, but I think it benefits our work.

Everything I write, I share with Larry, and it goes both ways. He has a very good critical eye and is so supportive. You need a good support group to do this work, and when you have a spouse or a partner who's so supportive it just makes the process so much better. Larry also puts my books in every examining room; he sells more books than any publicist.

Q: Can you talk about your process as a couple?

Larry: I tend to come up with a lot of crazy ideas, and Chana very calmly reels me in.

She sees the potential in what's out there to know what would work and what wouldn't.

Q: How did you work through the editing process for this book?

Chana: We really go back and forth in a very fluid way as we work. We have a lot of fun with the process. I shared the story with my writer's critique groups and got some feedback to share with Larry.

Larry: The original wording of the story was very different by the time we submitted the book. I'm just so pleased that the story is going to come to light. We talked it out together, so when I saw it on paper, I felt it was our baby, not just hers or mine. Even in the illustrations, Chana had a much better eye than I did for noticing details that were important. I usually came to realize she was right.

Chana: Did you hear that? He said I was right!

Q: How have your children reacted to your writing?

Chana: I have four copies of every one of my books for my kids to hopefully take with them someday when they have their own families. To me, that's what it's about. I want to share my books with the world, of course, but it's also very personal for me. And our kids are so supportive. They come to all of my book events and cheer me on.

Larry: One of Chana's first books was *Daddy Depot* (2017), which is based on the fact that our daughter Maya was very frustrated with me, and she and Chana made up a story where they return me to the Daddy store.

Chana: The idea for *Daddy Depot* sent me on the path of writing fiction. It took eight years from idea to publication.

Q: What is it like to share your work with children, other than your own?

Larry: It is so much fun to walk into the examining room at work and see kids reading the book.

We are hoping that we can have a reading at my practice in the waiting room where we can gather kids who have known me for many years to come and hear the book. It's very exciting for me, and it just naturally flows into what I do for a living anyway.

Chana: We love interacting with kids. Larry comes to all my readings, so it will be fun to have him at the front of the room with me for this book. I just have so many memories of my mom reading my favorite picture book, *Blueberries for Sal* by Robert McCloskey to me over and over again, and the impact it had on me, so much so that I wanted to become a writer. I like to share that with kids through my books.

Q: How do you see your book contributing to increased diversity in children's publishing?

Chana: Jewish books aren't necessarily thought of when you think of diverse books, but they should be. Jews are a minority in this country—we're less than 2% of the population in America.

Other Selected Books by Chana Stiefel

Stiefel, Chana. *The Tower of Life: How Yaffah Eliach Rebuilt her Town in Stories and Photographs*. Illus. by Susan Gal. Scholastic, 2022. 40p.

Stiefel, Chana. *Let Liberty Rise*. Illus. by Chuck Groenink. Scholastic, 2021. 40p.

Stiefel, Chana. *Daddy Depot*. Illus. by Andy Snair. Feiwel and Friends, 2017. 40p.

It would be great to see Jewish books on diverse lists, to be more inclusive of Jewish characters. There was a great discussion I saw on a group recently that emphasized having casual Jewish references or illustrations, to include a child with a kippah on his head or a girl wearing a Jewish star, or if there's a street scene, include a Kosher bakery, or a synagogue, or other ways of including Jewish culture. It builds empathy and understanding. Children will see that we're more alike than different, and we have a lot of things in common. Also, Jewish authors are increasingly representing the diversity within Jewish culture in books, that we are not all of Eastern European descent. Jewish people can be of all backgrounds and orientations.

Q: What advice do you have for other couples who might be interested in collaborating?

Larry: To make the project work, feature the parts that each of you are good at, play to your strengths, and have fun doing it. This never would have worked if we didn't have fun doing this. We enjoyed working together and used that to our advantage.

Chana: It was definitely a joyful process. Write from your heart. &