Two great books for giving

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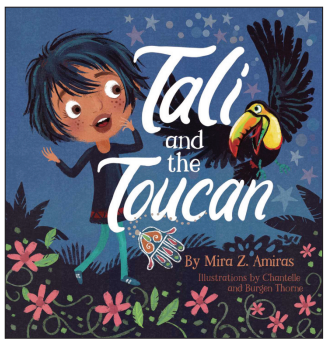
Honestly, I think adults would benefit from reading children's books, even if they don't have kids. Generally, the books impart good messages, like how to overcome challenges or be proud of who you are, and their illustrations are works of art. The two I reviewed for this issue of the *Jewish Independent* are prime examples.

Tali and the Toucan by writer Mira Z. Amiras and illustrators Chantelle and Burgen Thorne (Collective Book Studio) is set in San Francisco. The young protagonist, Tali, longs to tumble, swing and cartwheel like other kids, and she would love to take martial arts. But she is debilitated by fear – that the world will shatter, that she will break into a million pieces, that she will get hurt. Then, one night, she has a dream. At first, it's kind of a scary dream, with a storm raging, chickens flapping about. One chicken makes it to the roof, pecks a hole in the window glass, and transforms into a toucan. The colourful-beaked bird teaches Tali how to tumble and soar in the sky. She awakes with new spirit and courage, no longer feeling like a chicken but like a toucan, ready to fly – and fall – with the other kids.



While not spelled out in the story, at the end of the book, there's a note that explains that Tali's fear of the world shattering "is taken from Jewish teachings that the world is indeed broken and that our job, called in Hebrew *tikkun olam*, is to put it back together again – starting with ourselves." In addition to the "hamsa she wears – an amulet common to peoples of the Middle East worn to protect children – her dreams lead her to conquer her fears, begin her tikkun and follow the path of Aikido, the Japanese martial art of nonviolence that teaches harmony, mutual assistance and peaceful resolutions to conflict."

Other than the fact that Tali wants to do martial arts, the text of *Tali and the Toucan* doesn't touch upon ideas like multiculturalism, cooperation or what a well-functioning society looks like, but rather expresses these concepts through the artwork. There's a lot to look at in the illustrations and they beautifully capture Tali's emotional journey.

Oy, Santa!, or There's a Latke to Learn about Hanukkah by writer Joyce Schriebman and illustrator Gil von Meissner (Intergalactic Afikoman) also expresses so much with its artwork. Whereas Tali's hamsa makes an appearance on almost every page of her book, different kinds of light run through *Oy, Santa!* – white swirls full of stars, hanukkiyot with candles lit, strings of Christmas lights and exploding fireworks. While *Tali and the Toucan* only hints at multiculturalism and doesn't explicitly talk about Judaism, *Oy, Santa!* puts both topics front and centre.

On Christmas Eve, young Oliver Overstreet writes an email to Santa: "I know you're busy making toys, so I won't write much. But I'm Jewish. And that means you don't have to come down my chimney on Christmas Eve. I just wanna make sure you know."

And so begins a delightful – and educational – email exchange between Oliver and Santa, who assures Oliver that he knows that both Oliver, and Oliver's friend Ibrahim, do not celebrate Christmas. Oliver rails at Santa's signoff, wishing Oliver a "Happy Chrismukkah!"

"Dear Santa," he writes. "I know you're still very busy. But please don't write Chrismukkah. That's not my holiday. I celebrate HANUKKAH. And Hanukkah and Christmas are different…." Oliver goes on to explain the story of Hanukkah and some of the fun ways the holiday is celebrated.

Santa and Oliver talk about many things in subsequent emails, from elves getting time off to celebrate whatever holidays are in their culture, to miracles and how reindeers fly, to whether it's acceptable to put ketchup on latkes, and more. The conversation even gets a little heated, but – spoiler alert – Oliver and Santa work things out.

Oy, Santa! is a wonderful read, with lots of humour, fun illustrations, and great takeaways about identity, diversity, culture, civil discourse and friendship.