

Spotlight on... Eleanor Ehrenkranz Scholar of Jewish literature publishes new poetry anthology

By Cindy Mindell

Dr. Eleanor Ehrenkranz is a professor at Pace University, where she teaches "Critical Reading and Writing about Film." A former New York University professor, she spent 25 years teaching English in secondary schools. A reviewer for *Jewish Book World*, Ehrenkranz has lectured on Jewish literature at synagogues and JCCs throughout New York, Greenwich and Stamford.

It was while preparing a few years ago for one such lecture on Jewish poetry at UJA



Greenwich, where her daughter Pam Ehrenkranz serves as executive director, that Ehrenkranz was inspired to edit a new volume highlighting Israeli and American Jewish poets. The result is *Explaining Life: The Wisdom of Modern Jewish Poetry, 1960-2010* (AuthorHouse, 2012),

a compilation of more than 100 poems categorized in several sections: love, loss, family relationships, death, alienation, war, and renewal. Ehrenkranz chose English translations not only for their linguistic accuracy, but also for their content and rhythm. Some of the poems are accompanied by responses by Jewish celebrities and scholars including Sen. Joe Lieberman, novelist Dara Horn, and humorist Judith Viorst.

Ehrenkranz says that she selected contemporary poets whose works are 50 years old at the most, rather than psalmists and ancient poets because she was targeting a young readership. "The psalmists and old poets write a more stilted, biblical Hebrew and would not appeal to that audience," she says. "And the new poets reflect today's society as well as universal concepts."

Similarly, she chose not to publish the original Hebrew and Yiddish versions alongside their translations. "The people who are interested in reading this poetry would not be conversant in these languages and would not pay attention," she says. "They would be reading the poetry for its emotional appeal."

There were several poems that the editor had to exclude. One poet, Natan Zach, refused to allow Ehrenkranz to include his work. The publishers of other poems, written 50 years ago, were impossible to track down and so could not grant reprint permission.

The project took longer than expected, three

years just to get the go-ahead from publishers and enough responses from commentators. "But finding the poems was delightful and I don't really know how long it took, because I was reading and enjoying," Ehrenkranz says.

The title, *Explaining Life*, points to the ability of poetry to accompany us during significant experiences, or point out the extraordinary in the mundane. "First, poets are the guardians of memory. They recapture moments from our past that have gone by quickly in a blur of time. And when they isolate those moments, we relive them and remember who we were and how we got to be who we are now. In a sense, poetry reintroduces ourselves to ourselves," she says.

The title, *Explaining Life*, specifically, "adds the depth of biblical allusion, which underscores the timeless concepts poets are communicating," she says. In one poem, for example, Yehudah Amichai describes Hagar, who has been banished to the desert by Abraham and Sarah with her infant son Ishmael and no provisions. Hagar places Ishmael far away from her so that she does not have to witness his death, "an action many mothers would understand," Ehrenkranz says.

In another poem, the young poet Yehoshua November relates the connection between God and man in a simple depiction of a man praying.

"The effects of living in a war zone in present-day Israel, or having suffered loss in the Holocaust, or the depiction of family relationships all reflect the basic foundation of what it means to be a Jew today," Ehrenkranz says. "So the title has a two-pronged meaning: it explains life in terms of universal truths and refers to historic events which have shaped Jewish lives and continue to affect them."

Among Ehrenkranz's favorite selections is "I Am Soaked through by You" by Yiddish poet Rachel Korn, an "emotionally naked" poem that was unusual for a woman writing in the mid-twentieth century. The editor also found former Senator Joe Lieberman's response to Robert Pinsky's "The Night Game" thoughtful and in-depth. "It's a thrilling poem about baseball, a sport that Jews didn't play, so kids growing up never thought they'd see a Jewish player," Ehrenkranz says. "Until Sandy Koufax and all of a sudden, there was hope." That poem is reprinted here, together with Lieberman's comments.

Ehrenkranz says that she would have liked to include additional works by Yehudah Amichai, Judy Kronenfeld, and Yehoshuah November, among others, and may consider putting out a second edition that also features more responses from celebrities and scholars. "I had to stop at some point," she says. "An artist never feels that he's finished with a painting; you have to rip it out of his hands."