

## New anthology reveals wisdom of modern Jewish poetry

By ILENE NECHAMKIN

A while back, Eleanor Ehrenkrantz, a Pace University professor of English, was invited to give a lecture about modern Jewish poetry for the UJA Federation in Greenwich. "So I went to the Scarsdale Library, and loaded up with about 12 poetry books," she said in a recent interview at the Inquirer offices. She leafed through the books, culling the poems that she'd speak about from the various collections and anthologies of American and international poems she'd checked out.

"Then I realized there was a need for another book, another collection of American, Yiddish and Israeli poems," she said. Ehrenkrantz then began systematically reading the works of Jewish poets, many for the first time, creating her own collection, to be eventually (and quite recently) published as "Explaining Life: The Wisdom of Modern Jewish Poetry 1960 to 2010."

The slim volume unites, under one cover, poets as diverse as Bob Dylan and Yehuda Amichai, Lea Goldberg and Louise Gluck, Allen Ginsberg and Marge Piercy. The poetry references the Hebrew Bible, describes Jewish holidays, the immigrant experience and religious encounters, but also address the concerns of all poetry, explaining and quantifying the human condition. It's intended for the general reader who likes poetry, of course, but also as a resource for high school teachers and college professors, she said.

Ehrenkrantz, who taught English for 35 years at Rye Neck and Thomas Jefferson high schools in Westchester while working on a Ph.D. at New York University, likes to compare her experience to



ALISON WACHSTEIN PHOTO

**Eleanor Ehrenkrantz**

a short story by W. Somerset Maugham called "The Verger."

A verger, she explained, is a layman who helps out, like a sexton, at an Anglican church. In Maugham's story, when a new vicar at a particular church discovers that the longtime verger is illiterate, he fires him.

On his way home, the former verger craves a cigarette, and realizes that there isn't a tobacco shop on the street. Soon he finds a vacant store, and, reasoning that he can't be the only man to walk the street in need of a cigarette, he opens a tobacco shop on the spot. Over the next 10 years, he opens more shops, always on streets that don't have tobacco shops, and soon becomes a millionaire. One day his bank manager finds out the verger turned

entrepreneur is illiterate. "Imagine what you could have accomplished, what you could have become if you could read," the bank manager said.

The man replies that he would have been a verger.

The verger had his tobacco shop. Ehrenkrantz created a poetry collection.

Most of the poets are new to Ehrenkrantz, who can identify good poetry on the first reading. "I had a teacher who said that the first line of a good poem must be conversational and draw the reader in," she said. The teacher was M.L. Rosenthal, the prominent critic and essayist at New York University.

She said she "spent four or five years trying to get permission" from the original publishers to include their poems in her collection, a "surprising" amount of time.

Miriam Arond, an editor at Good Housekeeping magazine and a fellow congregant at Young Israel of Scarsdale, suggested Ehrenkrantz ask celebrities and scholars to write their personal responses to a particular work, for inclusion in the book to spark interest. Ehrenkrantz sent out the letters — and waited, never ex-

### Readers' responses

To the poetry:

*"I loved reading Robert Pinsky's poem 'The Night Game.' It is wonderfully wise and evocative, characteristically American and Jewish. I see, in Pinsky's works, the limitless opportunities of America through the lens of baseball."*

— Sen. Joseph Lieberman

To the collection:

*"Eleanor Ehrenkrantz's Jewish poetry anthology encapsulates the agony of the Middle East in distilled images that pierce the heart."*

— Tovah Feldshuh

pecting anything much.

One day the actor, folksinger and musician Theodore Bikel called to find out which poem she wanted him to write about; she had given him a choice of three.

Bikel responded to Amichai's "For My Mother":

"This is an extraordinary poem with language in English that makes Amichai breathe to a different rhythm, no less authentic than his own," Bikel said.

As it happened, biblical scholar Avivah Zornberg responded to the same poem at length, which, she said, "addresses the enigma of an absent presence."

Ehrenkrantz said the critic and essayist Joseph Epstein initially complained that the poetry she sent him wasn't "Jewish." In the book he responds to another Amichai work, "The Real Hero," which posits that the "real hero" of the story of the sacrifice of Isaac is the ram "[w]ho didn't know about the collusion between the others." Epstein said the poem, in parts, is a reminder that unacknowledged victims are figures of interest. Curiously, biblical scholar Rabbi David Silber wrote that Amichai missed the point, that "the

idea of the sacrifice, is that the sacrifice is the person."

The poems are arranged by subject — love, loss, family relationships, death, alienation, war and renewal — and the book includes brief biographical information about the poets. Ehrenkrantz did not analyze or parse the works — though she does respond briefly to a poem by Edward Hirsch — hoping instead that the readers "would come fresh and untouched" to the poetry, and open to its power.

"Poetry allows you to take a long look at your experiences, and highlights them and explains why it's worth living," she said. Her own poem "Aftermath" is included in the collection, a description of widowhood and the accompanying crushing, unfathomable grief. There's also a poem by her son David, "Time Lines," about the generational cycle.

And Rabbi Jonathan Morgenstern of Young Israel of Scarsdale contributed a response to "And My Brother is Silent," by Amir Gilboa, which is part of the synagogue's observance of Israel Memorial Day.

Ehrenkrantz said she didn't know she loved poetry until a high school teacher exposed her to its power. "I took to poetry very naturally, like breathing," she said. The teacher, she said, would simply read a poem aloud at the beginning of a class, and not talk about it. "I began to look forward to the recitation," she recalled. "Afterwards, I realized that he molded me. I began to thirst for poetry."

*Eleanor Ehrenkrantz's "Explaining Life: The Wisdom of Modern Jewish Poetry 1960 to 2010" is available for purchase, in paper or as an eBook, at Amazon.com.*