

Translating Texts to Children

*A Review-Essay of the Books of Sandy Eisenberg Sasso
(all published by Jewish Lights Publishing)*

God's Paintbrush (1992)

In God's Name (1994)

But God Remembered (1995)

A Prayer for the Earth (1996)

God In Between (1998)

For Heaven's Sake (1999)

God Said Amen (2000)

Cain and Abel: Finding the Fruits of Peace (2001)

BY BRUCE BLACK

Call her God-crazy. Sandy Sasso is intoxicated with God. She's drunk on the divine, struck with the same God-fervor as Jewish mystics and poets of ages past.

Sasso, a rabbi in Indianapolis, has written eight picture books since her first was published in 1992. She speaks about God as naturally as if God were napping in the next room or waiting for a game of hide-and-seek to begin, and she shows readers that seeking God is an essential part of what it means to be human. That she has chosen to explore the nature of God within the context of picture books is a sign of her deep faith in children to grapple with a complex, difficult subject.

Searching for God

In her first book, *God's Paintbrush*, Sasso links a loosely structured series of scenes through the sensitive observations of a first-person narrator who serves as witness to God's presence in the world. The book begins with the image of God painting the world with a sunbeam and ends with the narrator understanding that God's colors are in her, that she can paint with God's paintbrush, too. It's a powerful metaphor, implying that children, not just adults, can shape the world into something good and beautiful.

Questions such as "What does God's touch feel like to you?" and "How can you help God touch the world?" are included as part of the text.

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These questions don't simply reinforce the underlying assumption of the text — that we are linked to God through our relationship to the world, each other and ourselves — but encourage children to begin searching for God beyond the pages of this book.

Each of Sasso's books explores different variations of this search for God. While her first book shows children how they might sense God's presence, her second, *In God's Name*, is designed to help young readers discover God's true name. In the same style that served her well in *God's Paintbrush*, Sasso again creates a safe journey for children by using a list to serve as the book's loose structure.

Voices Together

In this instance, the narrator's search for God's true name leads her to ask a host of different people — a farmer, a young girl, a shepherd, a soldier, an artist, a nurse, a slave, grandparents and others — what they call God. She learns that everyone calls God by different names. Each believes his or her name for God is best (echoing a competitive children's game that most young readers will easily recognize). The farmer calls God the source of life, while the girl calls God the creator of light and the soldier calls God a maker of peace.

It isn't until these people come together by a lake and call out their names for God at the same time that they understand that all names for God are good. God can contain many attributes. No name is better than any other. In

keeping with Jewish tradition, the voices come together and call God one.

In searching for God's "true" name, Sasso helps young readers understand the need for tolerance and pluralism if the world is to become a place where all can live together in peace.

Redeeming Memory

If Sasso's first two books are explorations of how children might relate to a personal God, her third book, *But God Remembered*, probes the nature of God's involvement in history. Each of the women in this book (Lilith, Serakh, Bityah and the daughters of Zelophehad — Nahlah, Noa, Hogleh, Milcah and Tirzah) and their heroic deeds have often been forgotten by history. But Sasso shows children that although people may forget deeds performed long ago, nothing is forgotten in God's memory.

This is the kind of book that instills hope in the hearts of children — especially Jewish girls. Not only does Sasso retell Jewish history from women's perspective, she shows how no woman is ever invisible in the eyes of God. Indeed, meritorious deeds are rewarded, even when the deeds themselves, and the names of the women who perform them, are left unrecorded in human history.

A New Perspective

In most children's stories about the Flood, the focus is on Noah and the animals. But in *A Prayer for the Earth*, Sasso takes a different approach, bor-

rowing a “seed” from *Bereshit Rab-bah*, and blending her love of *midrash* with her ongoing search for God’s presence in the world.

Sasso tells the story of Noah’s wife, Naamah, who, like her husband, is a rescuer. Naamah does not rescue animals, however, but the seeds, flowers, trees, vegetables and fruits of the earth. She brings these seeds aboard the ark, plants a garden and posts a sign near it reading: “Not For Eating.”

During the storm that follows, her garden offers Noah and Naamah a respite from the turmoil aboard the crowded ark. Thanks to Naamah’s care in gathering seeds from all over the earth, the world today is filled with the pleasing scents and colors of many plants. Each time we plant seeds in the ground, Sasso suggests, we’re reminded of Naamah’s love of the earth and are able to enjoy the “fruit” of her labor.

But Sasso’s story isn’t simply about how humans need to care for the earth. By creating an active, passionate woman as a co-partner with her husband, she redefines a woman’s role in Jewish history. Naamah is a rescuer with a good heart and an intimate relationship with God through prayer and deeds. *A Prayer for the Earth* is as much a story about a relationship between humans as it is about how sustaining our fragile ecological system can bring pleasure to humans and God.

Looking Past What We Can See

In her fifth book, *God In Between*,

Sasso weaves a fable of a nameless town with no roads, where the houses lack windows. Tired of going nowhere, the people of the town send two people in search of God to help them solve their problems.

Once again, Sasso takes a very sophisticated question (“Where do you look for God when you need God?”) and shapes it into a story that will help children understand the question on their own emotional and intellectual levels. By framing the question as a puzzle, Sasso encourages children to seek out their own answers, to solve the puzzle of God — even to question the very existence of God — themselves.

Most children, like the characters in the book, know that God can’t be “seen.” But thanks to the fictional journey Sasso has shaped, readers may be able to form a new idea in their minds so that they, too, can see “God is in the between . . . between us.” In Sasso’s universe, God is in the space between people who help each other find a way to solve each other’s problems.

Sasso encourages children to probe beyond what is visible, to look beneath the surface in order to feel and hear God’s touch and voice. In helping children learn to see in this way, Sasso offers them the gift of understanding that you don’t always need to go far from home to find God. God can be wherever you are.

In Search of Heaven

For Heaven’s Sake, Sasso’s sixth

book, poses a variation of the same passionate search for God pursued in her previous books. But this search is prompted by a different question: "Where is heaven?"

Isaiah searches for heaven in the only way that he knows, by asking everyone if they can tell him where heaven is. Each person suggests another way to understand heaven. For his father, heaven is the taste of fudge brownies. For his uncle, heaven is somewhere above the clouds. For the mail woman, heaven is where you don't have to work. And for his sister, looking for heaven is a waste of time because she isn't sure there is one.

With the help of his grandmother, though, Isaiah finds heaven — the place where God lives — in his heart, and in all the places and people that Isaiah has visited on his journey: "Isaiah: 'Heaven's in you.' Grandma: 'Heaven's in you, too.'" Sasso suggests that heaven is in all of us when we treat each other with kindness and respect, and that we can get close to God by getting closer to other people and by letting other people get closer to us.

God is seen differently in *For Heaven's Sake* than in Sasso's other books. And if Sasso can envision God differently in each of her books, children may feel free to rethink their own ever-changing ideas about God, too — yet another important lesson Sasso teaches young readers. Our ideas about God need not to be fixed forever. Ideas, like people, can change.

In *God Said Amen*, Sasso holds up a mirror to human foibles and shows

how people must look from God's perspective when we are unable to see the answers to our own prayers. Human stubbornness and self-centeredness, Sasso suggests in this retelling of a Hasidic parable, cut people off from one another and, as a result, cut us off from God. Children learn how to see answers to prayers by looking beyond stubbornness and self-centered pride.

The Problem of Evil

Sasso's most recent book, *Cain and Abel*, is a darker book than her earlier efforts. For the first time, Sasso addresses the difficult question of evil in the world despite God's presence. Using an ancient midrash to explore human emotions and motivations, Sasso introduces children to the story of Cain and Abel in a non-threatening way, and shows how misery and violence grow out of anger and how such unbridled anger can ultimately destroy God's world.

Even if the question of evil in the world is unanswerable, it's one that Jews — and humanity — have struggled with for centuries (and grapple with today in the face of terrorism). Sasso does not simply show the dark side of what happens when people fail to listen for God's voice or search for God's presence. She encourages readers to think about and discuss ways to regain the lost fruit of Paradise and bring peace to the world.

In all of her work, Sasso's mission is nothing short of teaching children how to recognize God in the world

and talk about God in their lives. Whether Sasso weaves new stories around the same God-themes, or bases her stories on ancient tales, she strives to make the ultimate human questions about God's existence accessible to children. Not only does she introduce children to God-language, she makes it abundantly clear that to be a Jew — indeed, to be human — is to engage in this search for God, even though God's presence may appear hidden in the world.

In each of her books, Sasso suggests that it is this search — and what we discover along the way — that shapes us and our world. Only when readers begin this search, Sasso suggests, can they find God and begin to build a world of peace and harmony. To Sasso's credit, she does not ask simple questions or provide easy answers for young readers. Rather, she strives to spark a conversation between children and adults that will help shape a better world for us all.