

A Minyan to die for

LOIS GOLDRICH

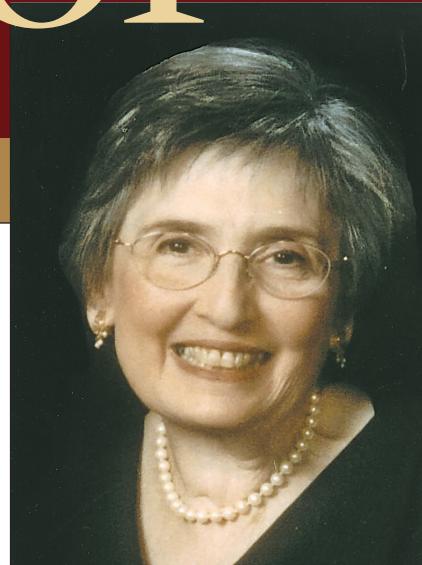
Chances are, if you need to recite Kaddish but your synagogue constantly lacks a minyan, you won't go out and kill someone

to ensure that, next time, there will be a greater crowd at the service.

"That's almost like a bad joke," said Shulamit E. Kustanowitz, acknowledging the absurdity of the situation but admitting that the idea has intrigued her for years. Exploring the implications of this scenario, the author of "Murder at the Minyan" uses the premise to create a story touching on many of the societal and cultural challenges facing Jews today.

Kustanowitz told The Jewish Standard that she had two major reasons for writing the book, published in August by Infinity Press. First, having grown up as the daughter of a Conservative rabbi, she wanted to explore what life was like in a home like the one she remembered. "Some characters made me think of my parents and of people we knew," she said. "I felt like I was spending time with them again."

Second, she said, she is tired of seeing inaccurate portrayals of religious customs in the media. For example, she noted, "You see on television that it's bad luck to see a bride before the wedding. This is completely contrary to Jewish tradition, where the groom raises the bride's veil before the ceremony. And when you see prayer, it's with clasped hands and people talking to God. In Judaism, most prayer is communal and recited in the plural. Jewish rituals are different," she said, "and I wanted to show that."



The author, who said the book provides what she believes to be "an accurate representation of a slice of Jewish life," pointed out that "Kaddish is one of the most widely observed and best-known Jewish rituals." Even if people choose not to observe the ritual requirement, "they still know about it," she said.

Kustanowitz, who lives in Fair Lawn and is a former managing editor of this newspaper, said that while she had previously written only nonfiction — she is the author of "A First Haggadah" (1979) and "Henrietta Szold, Israel's Helping Hand" (1990) — she thoroughly enjoyed creating this fictional account. The author of nonfiction articles for The New York Times, The Record, and the Jerusalem Post, she wrote about Israel for many years for Travel Weekly and the travel industry.

"Fiction is easier," she joked. "If you don't like something, you just delete it." She said, more seriously, that sometimes fiction provides a more effective vehicle to tell one's story. "I wanted to tell my children about my life as the child of a rabbi," she said. "I thought they would listen better if it was done as fiction."

Pointing out that congregations "expect perfection from their rabbis," Kustanowitz said shul members "want their rabbis to be totally devoted to them, have all the answers, and never make a mistake." Because of her own experience, however, she is able to "see rabbis as people." Rabbi Avi London, the main character in "Mur-

MURDER AT THE MINYAN

A Novel



Shulamit E. Kustanowitz

Shulamit Kustanowitz says her book could be called "a novel about mitzvot."

der," is sympathetically portrayed as a husband, father, and religious leader. According to Kustanowitz, the book might well be called "a novel about mitzvot." Throughout, London helps members of his Conservative congregation face life-cycle crises, "looking to the Torah for insights and focusing on traditional Jewish values."

Kustanowitz said that while she wrote "Murder at the Minyan" for adults, it is also appropriate for teenagers, since it has "no sex or profanity and very little violence." She has already been asked by local synagogues to lead discussions of the book — which tackles issues such as Shabbat observance, kashrut, Jewish education, conversion, visiting the sick, and burying the dead — and has received requests from sisterhood gift shops as far away as Denver. The book includes a glossary of Jewish terms to make it more accessible to those with a limited Jewish education.

"The difference between this and other books with a Jewish theme," said Kustanowitz, "is that I actually like Jews." Many books, even by Jewish authors, appear to "look down" upon Jews and Jewish life, she said. "Jewish books are stacked next to books on the occult and Jewish history is called 'legends.'"

"Murder at the Minyan," for sale at Judaica House in Teaneck and online from BuyBooksOnTheWeb.com, can be ordered direct from the publisher or from bookstores. For more information about the book and its availability, visit www.MurderAtTheMinyan.com, which features a downloadable book discussion guide.