

*This is the fifth of a six-part series of essays written on behalf of the Montclair Public Library Foundation. Read previous essays in the Chapter Series link at <http://montclairplf.org/>.*

### **A safe place... in literal and figurative ways**

Meny Shemtov (as told to Alexis Romay)

“Love Your Library” series

When I was approached to write about the importance of libraries for this essay series, at first I didn't know what to say. Don't get me wrong: I use the library, like anyone else; but I just don't necessarily *think* about it.

However, once I had a pen in hand and the library in my mind, it was as if a dam had opened, and memories started pouring. Suddenly, I had a very clear image from my childhood: I could see the ramp that went to the second floor of the public library in my hometown of Yerucham, Israel. I could *smell* a distinctive, hard-to-replicate scent of books, new and old. I could *hear* the sound of hushed conversations.

In Israel, every public building is required to have a shelter; the shelter in our library was located on the first floor. Kids used to spend their time downstairs, while the adults would be on the higher level, engaging, we assumed, in intellectually higher work. To us, children, the adults and their books looked important, studying silently, preoccupied with matters of the real world, while we found solace and entertainment in (young adult) literature. So, when I say that the library was a safe space in which I could read and write, I mean it in more than one way.

The library was also an airport: it offered this perpetual sensation that you were there and you were nowhere. Even within the library, already a universe in itself, there were micro-universes: if the threshold at the entrance divided the ordinary world from the special world, the proverbial ramp that led to the second floor established a distinction between the world of children and the world of grownups.

We had no cell phones; we played trivia and cards, and had no distractions from the content within the bound covers of the chosen book. For my generation, it was the library, martial arts or playing soccer on the streets.

Another image that evokes the library of yore brings me my grandpa, Marcel, who used to make book covers for older books in the public library. He was a painter, who'd also make the frames for his own paintings. He was a role model, my role model.

The library was, of course, the place where I fell in love with reading; it was where I discovered Yehuda Amichai's *Love Poems* —a poetry collection that has followed me everywhere: during my three years in the military, and then from country to country, from city to city, from job to job —a talisman of sorts.

Adding another dimension to being a haven, libraries have always felt like a reminder that I am and want to be part of something bigger. Aside from books, periodicals and DVDs, and all the resources they may offer, libraries are ultimately about community, and about accessibility.

That sense of creating community is what brought me to the food industry. A restaurant is not just about putting food on people's plates, any more than a library is about putting a book on your hands. So, next time you are at the library, and grab a book: may you find peace and joy. Bon appetit!

*Meny Shemtov is the owner and executive chef of Mishmish Cafe. He recently opened Marcel Bakery & Kitchen in Upper Montclair, where he keeps a copy of Amichai's Love Poems. He lives in Montclair with his wife and two children.*

*Tax-deductible donations to the Montclair Public Library Foundation's annual fund drive, now underway, may be made at <http://montclairplf.org/> or by mail to 50 South Fullerton Avenue, Montclair, NJ, 07042.*