Newbery Honor–winning author Gail Carson Levine tells a moving and ambitious story about a young Jewish girl who must play her own role in her people's epic history—no matter the sacrifice.

When Loma's intimidating grandfather decides to bring her along on his travels across Spain, she experiences the perils and heartaches of a people whose very presence is less and less tolerated in the age of Queen Isabella and King Ferdinand.

At first, Loma relishes her adventures, but the older she gets, the more she longs for a family of her own—if her grandfather will ever allow her to leave his side.

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Ages 8–12
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A CEILING MADE OF EGGSHELLS

GAIL CARSON LEVINE

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Columbus sailed the ocean blue
in fourteen hundred and ninety two,
and in the self-same year, it's true,
Spain's king and queen expelled the Jews.

1483 CE, JEWISH YEAR 5243

My younger brother, two-year-old Haim, sat on the carpet, watching the kittens with me. I was in charge of him while Mamá, who had baby Soli with her, worked in the kitchen and bossed around our cook, Aljohar. I loved being Haim's little mamá, as my older sisters were my little mamás.

Abruptly, the biggest kitten, the one I had named Goliath, curled himself into a ball in the middle of play with the

others. I wasn't alarmed. Kittens often slept suddenly.

Haim reached his hand out to Goliath, but, fearing he'd be too rough, I guided the hand to my mouth and kissed his fingers. When I had my own babies someday, I would cover their hands with my kisses, too.

Haim said, as if it were two words, "Kit-tens!"

Mamá, with the baby on her hip, came to take him to bed. She was in one of her silent bad moods, not a yelling one—it was always one or the other. Haim jumped up and raised his hand for her to clasp. They left me.

I continued to watch the kittens as I had done by the hour since they were born. Now two of them were suckling, but three were curled up, sleeping, including Goliath. None had ever missed a meal before. It was another warning, though, at seven, I was too young to realize.

Soon, Mamá came for me, too. I followed her flickering oil lamp to the courtyard balcony, which led to all the upstairs rooms, including the bedroom I shared with my older sisters Vellida and Rica. Even Haim wouldn't get lost, because the balcony made a big square, and no matter which way you went, you'd always come back to where you started. In the dimness, I couldn't make out the tapestries on the walls or the floor tiles—412 green and 412 brown, which had taken me hours to count, because I kept having to start over. I loved to count.

At intervals, Mamá burst out, "No one listens!" and

"What I put up with!" and "Why!"

Mamá's *Why* was never really a question.

In my bedroom, she said the nightly prayers with me, clipping every word, reminding me of the *pop! pop!* when grease spills on a fire.

I climbed into bed, wondering if the Almighty minded her angry prayers. I didn't want Him to punish her. Since He knew everything, He should know she was angry at everyone, not just Him and me.

When Mamá left, she didn't snuff out the pole lamp, knowing others would come soon.

I prayed, as I did every night, for forgiveness for hating my brother Yuda. I hated him secretly, in my heart, and God utterly condemned heart-hatred. Yuda's hatred for me, which was on his tongue, was a lesser offense.

His tongue was bad enough. Rather than my name—Paloma, or my nickname, Loma—he called me Unblinking Lizard, based, he said, on my way of staring. In my mind, I called him Ugly Camel Head, because of his long eyelashes, full lips, smooth tan skin, and not much chin.

To distract myself from thoughts of him, I counted by sevens while I waited for my *abuela*, my grandmother, whom we called Bela. She was soft-footed, and I strained to hear her in the corridor.

The door creaked.

I had failed again. When I was younger, I thought

she could float in air, despite her plumpness. She was the shortest in our family, her head barely topping Belo's chin. Belo was what we called our grandfather, our *abuelo*. To sit on my bed, Bela had to rise on tiptoe.

I breathed ten times before she spoke. She always paused, seeming to know I liked a moment to get used to anyone's presence.

"Shall I tell you a story, little fritter?"

"Yes, please." I slid toward the middle of the bed to make room for her.

She heaved up her legs, wriggled to me, and lifted her arm to let me snuggle. "This story is—"

"—about a girl named Paloma who lived a long time ago in the kingdom of Naples." I inhaled Bela's cinnamon-and-rose perfume.

"How do you know?" she said with mock surprise.

I giggled. All her tales started the same way. Bela's sister lived in Naples, and every story took place there.

"Was she Jewish?" I said, though I knew.

"Of course she was. She—"

The door creaked again, and Belo filled the doorway—or seemed to fill it. He always appeared larger than he was.

Bela slipped off the bed, and they met halfway between the bed and the door.

I stood, too, to show respect—and, with my feet planted, I felt less afraid.

They were hugging! He had just returned from a trip somewhere. I knew only that he'd had an audience with the king and queen. He and Bela lived with us—or we lived with them, because he owned our house. He kissed the top of her head.

Then he loomed over me, his smile for Bela lingering.

No one in our family was tall, but he seemed to be and seemed heavyset though he was slender. The deception lay in his pulled-back shoulders and in the flow of his robe, which he let hang open, revealing his silk doublet and heavy gold chain necklace. His beard, which he kept combed and trimmed to two inches below his chin, was brown and gray. He was only fifty-one, though he seemed ancient. His wisdom was renowned. Even I knew he'd written two biblical commentaries and three books of philosophy.

"What did you learn today, Loma?"

I hadn't learned anything! "The kittens sleep a lot." But I'd known that since the day after they were born.

He frowned. "What else?"

My stomach knotted.

"Don't grill her, Joseph!"

They were arguing! I had created discord, which I hated.

But Belo's face relaxed. "I'll be in my study, Esther. Come soon." He patted my shoulder and left.

Esther was Bela's name, after the queen in the Bible.

She and I returned to our spots on the bed.

"He didn't mean to frighten you, fritter." She stroked my forehead. "Your abuelo is a great thinker who doesn't always think. He frightened your papá, too, when he was your age."

This astonished me.

She added, "He'll be nicer when he knows you better."

He'd known me my whole life!

"You're still a new arrival, and you're different every day. You're growing almost as fast as the kittens"—she tapped my scalp—"and you're changing in here." She returned to stroking. "Even I'm not sure who my fritter will be tomorrow."

I moved away from her hand and sat up. "Will Vellida's husband be nice?" My older sister was eleven. Soon Papá would find a husband for her. My oldest sister, Ledicia, who was eighteen, had been married for years and had two children: my niece, Beatriz, and my nephew, baby Todros.

"What does *nice* mean, fritter?"

Not like Yuda. "Kind."

"Kind, certainly. And *your* husband will be kind and gentle. God willing, I'll see to that."

I settled against her again. "Will we have a good life?"

"You'll have many happy, healthy children. Fritter, you'll be a mother beyond compare."

That's what I wanted most: to be a mother. Yes, beyond compare.

"I see that in you. You'll live in a house like this one, and when you're my age, you'll tell your own fritters stories every night."

"Will we be safe?"

"My sweet plum, Jews have lived in Spain for over a thousand years. We're in Spain, and Spain is in us. Sometimes the gentiles behave badly. We wait, and times get better." She chucked my chin affectionately. "Are you ready for the story?"

I said I was.

"King Solomon, who was visiting Naples, wanted to marry the beautiful Paloma, but she would consent only if he first made her a ceiling of eggshells . . ."

I laughed at the silliness, imagining egg white dripping on King Solomon. My eyes closed themselves. How many eggs would be needed to make a ceiling? I began counting and slipped into sleep.

But I woke briefly when Bela moved on the bed as she prepared to leave. "Did she get her ceiling, Bela? Was there a happy ending?"

"The eggshell ceiling was painted in many colors. It was as beautiful and surprising"—she shook her head, smiling—"and even as improbable as we Jews are in Spain.

The ceiling never fell down. After her troubles, that long-ago Paloma had such a good life—many healthy children, who were her reward for doing her best."

Satisfied, I slept. As usual, I neither heard nor felt Vellida and Rica slide in next to me.

The next morning, when I entered the dining room with my sisters, there were no kittens. The benches that had penned them in were stacked in the corner.

I arrived at the conclusion I wanted: The kittens had grown too big to be confined. They were now roaming free, hunting rats.

I went to the trestle table, on which rested barley bread and farmer cheese. When I'd put a big slice of bread and an even bigger chunk of cheese into a pewter bowl, I joined my brother Samuel, who sat on a bench. He moved to make room for me, although there already was room. Pleased, I smiled at him as I sat. He didn't smile back.

Yuda came in and did smile at me. My breath became shallow. A smile from him didn't bode well. After he cut his own bread and cheese, he ambled over.

"Lizard, I threw a *reale* on the kittens of blessed memory."

A reale was a silver coin, and "blessed memory" was what you said about the dead, but I didn't let the words sink in. "Why would you throw anything at them?

Did you hurt them?"

Samuel's hand found mine.

"They are past pain," Yuda said piously.

Meaning broke on me. A lump rose in my throat. I might have created discord then—even kicked him—but fear of him stopped me. My sin of heart-hatred grew.