

Thirteen-year-old Theo Kaplan loves soccer more than anything. So when his hero, Wes Mitchell, makes an antisemitic remark that goes viral, Theo's world turns upside down.

His teammates shrug it off as "no big deal," but anti-Jewish comments start spreading at school. Even worse, someone draws a swastika on Theo's locker—and the adults stay silent. Theo realizes: this is much bigger than soccer.

While his little sister, Annie, gets involved in unexpected ways, Theo wrestles with anger, confusion, and the urge to ignore it all. But when a new friend shows them that ignoring problems doesn't make them disappear, Theo and Annie face their toughest choice yet: stay quiet, or find the courage to speak up when it matters most.

"Don't Feed the Lion is a fierce and necessary reminder that silence is never the answer."

—Sacha Baron Cohen, actor

"This book shows how a single moment of hate can ripple—and how young people can choose to lead with strength and decency instead."

—Robert Kraft, Owner, New England Patriots and Revolution, and Founder of the Foundation to Combat Antisemitism ■

"This book doesn't just tell a compelling story—it gives kids the tools to recognize and stand up to hate."

—Jake Tapper, CNN Anchor and *New York Times* Best-Selling Author

"Don't Feed the Lion . . . is a story of grounded optimism, of the cyclical nature of history, and of proud resilience in the face of hatred, through family courage and personal agency."

—Isaac Herzog, 11th President of Israel



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PRAISE FOR **DON'T FEED THE LION**

“A brave and beautiful story that helps kids understand antisemitism—and stand up to it with strength, pride, and compassion. This book is so needed right now.”

—Gal Gadot, actress and advocate

“The NFL prides ourselves on integrity, courage and unity. *Don't Feed the Lion* brings those same values to the pages of a story every kid and parent should read.”

—Roger Goodell, NFL Commissioner

“When hatred is dressed up as opinion, we need stories that teach kids the difference. *Don't Feed the Lion* is a fierce and necessary reminder that silence is never the answer.”

—Sacha Baron Cohen, actor

“Don't Feed the Lion teaches children and teens to suppress the instinct for antisemitism even when they see it among their friends and mentors. When they recognize everyone has inherent worth independent of their background, children can be wiser than many adults.”

—Scott Galloway, Bestselling Author and Host
of the *Pivot* and *Prof G* podcasts

“As someone who's spent my life around athletes, I know how much their words matter. This book shows how a single moment of hate can ripple—and how young people can choose to lead with strength and decency instead.”

—Robert Kraft, Owner, New England Patriots and Revolution,
and Founder of the Foundation to Combat Antisemitism ■

“As a journalist and a father of teens, I've seen firsthand how antisemitism festers when ignored. This book doesn't just tell a compelling story—it gives kids the tools to recognize and stand up to hate.”

—Jake Tapper, CNN Anchor and
New York Times Best-Selling Author

“I see Bianna’s work every day as a world-class journalist trying to help audiences make sense of a scary world. I also know her as an outstanding mother. This book takes a surging and misunderstood epidemic—antisemitism—and helps explain and equip young readers to recognize it, confront it, and rise above it—with courage and compassion.”

—Dana Bash, CNN Anchor and Chief Political Correspondent

“Hate can’t be fought alone. This book shows young people—from every background—how to be allies, how to speak up, and how to build bridges instead of walls.”

—Van Jones, *New York Times* Best-Selling Author,
CNN Host, Founder of DreamMachine.org

“A story that manages to be both cautionary and charming, inspirational, generous and humane, scary and visceral but also heartwarming at the same time. It is essential reading for kids—and adults too—for our turbulent, scary, often malignant times when the open-heartedness, courage and clarity of a few can show the way to the many.”

—Simon Sebag Montefiore, Author of *Jerusalem: the Biography*

“This is an important and beautifully told story that captures the impact hatred has on individuals, families, and entire communities. At a time of growing antisemitism, it is critical that we teach our children to stand up for themselves and their heritage—and to come to the aid of friends in need. Bianna and Yonit have written a book that teaches a life lesson and is truly engaging.”

—Dr. Albert Bourla, Chairman and CEO of Pfizer

“A powerful, unsettling story about silence, identity, and courage in the digital age. Essential reading—not only for young people, but for anyone who believes freedom must be defended.”

—Mathias Döpfner, Chairman and CEO of Axel Springer SE

“*Don’t Feed the Lion* will resonate with young Jewish Americans and their parents, and will better equip them as they navigate their teens in a highly polarised social climate. It is a story of grounded optimism, of the cyclical nature of history, and of proud resilience in the face of hatred, through family courage and personal agency.”

—Isaac Herzog, 11th President of Israel

DON'T FEED THE LION



BIANNA GOLODRYGA
YONIT LEVI



FOR:
JAKE, MAIA, LEILA, JOSH
YONATAN, ANI, ELEANOR
SONYA, ZEV, AND SAMSON

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*How could I know
That day long ago
Would break me and make me anew
One look in her eyes
Caught me by surprise
A heart so wild, so brave and so true
The tilt of your head
The sigh of the moon
As you turned to walk away . . .
I think I love you, Talia Kaplan
Oh please tell me why
I know I'm not wrong
'Cuz you gave me this song
So tell me that you love me too*

—“I Think I Love You, Talia Kaplan” by Ezra Elias, 1972



YOU KNOW THAT FEELING WHEN YOU'RE CHARGING DOWN the soccer pitch with the ball, and the opposing team swarms? But then, a pocket of space opens up—you have less than half a millisecond to take an outside the foot touch, move around the defenders, take your shot on goal—and you actually score?

“Nice job, Kaplan!”

Coach D never said that unless he meant it. I was flying. Sure, it was against a team that we'd beaten before, but whatever. I got this feeling that maybe, *just maybe*, I was legit. I mean, if nothing else, I'd just tied up the game. We were now officially at the top of the league table.

“That's what I'm talking about!” my best friend, Connor, cheered. He started doing a little victory dance for me that was somewhere between wiggling and a chicken laying eggs. I pushed him away because I didn't want to look full of myself but, honestly, it was a pretty awesome goal. Especially since I usually played defensive mid and Connor took shots on goal.

Connor and I had been tight since forever. Or I guess since the first day of Future Stars soccer clinic when we were four years old. All I remembered of that day was getting a bloody nose after a ball smacked me in the face. Connor said I was “super tough stuff” because I just smeared it on my sleeve and kept running. We hung out together every day after that, usually on a field or in his backyard. Then, as soon as I could put together all the letters, I wrote out SOCCER FOR LIFE with my big green crayon and drew a checkered blob under it that was supposed to be a soccer ball. I gave it to Connor on his fifth birthday and it was still hanging on his bedroom door to this day—almost eight years later.

Soccer really *was* our lives. Like, if we weren’t playing it, we were watching matches or looking up tutorials. We’d done tons of clinics, camps, and clubs together, playing pretty much neck and neck. We even did this weeklong intensive where we practiced eight hours a day and slept in fancy dorms. (Or, attempted to sleep—I was crazy homesick so Connor stayed up telling me stories about his dogs while we ate vending machine chips.) And now we were co-captains on the Oakdale Middle School team, which was pretty competitive, and definitely more of a time commitment.

But something had changed big time in just the past few weeks. I couldn’t figure out what exactly. I just knew that Connor had seriously leveled up his game. Or maybe I was dragging. Either way, he was starting regularly as right wing

and was sprinting all over, with pullbacks and tackles that made my head spin. Seriously, the dude was fire. I couldn’t be mad at him for it, either. He got out on the pitch literally every day, rain or shine or sleet or whatever you called this frigid gray mess from November to March in Chicago. No matter how much I practiced or joined in on his early morning drill sessions, I could not keep up. I felt like my legs were too long or my brain was too slow to link up and feed passes to him. Plus, Connor did one-on-ones with a private trainer and stayed late a lot to ask Coach D a question or drill down on some new move.

“Let’s get back to it. Focus on form. Readyssetgooooo!”

That was typical Coach D—not really waiting to see if we were ready or set; just wanting us to go. I liked Coach a lot, but there was no denying he was intense. Everything was urgent with him, like our soccer careers and maybe our whole lives depended on each move we made. I mean yes, we were top of the division—which was huge. Our team had never won the league before. But I was nervous enough without Coach stomping up and down the sidelines, screaming at us.

“What are you doing, boys?! Kaplan, the ball’s in play! Look alive!”

So much for feeling like I was legit. I was so distracted by Coach’s ranting that I missed an easy touch. Then I messed up a throw-in and almost got caught offside. I couldn’t wait for that sweaty ref to blow his whistle for half-time.

“S’all good,” Connor told me as we ran off to regroup and get water. “We still got another half. Get stuck in!”

I gave him a fist bump and repeated, “Get stuck in!”

This was how we used to sign off on our goofy soccer podcast we did in his basement. It wasn’t an actual podcast, but we pretended we were these sports announcers—T-Rex (me) and C-Dog (him)—and talked (into fake mics) about all the best pro players on the pitch. That’s how we’d started following Wes Mitchell, like five years before anyone else had even heard of him.

“You sure you can’t come over and watch the press conference tonight?” Connor asked just before the second half started. “I think the whole team is gonna make it. Maybe after dinner or something?”

I shook my head, too bummed to go over it again. Wes Mitchell—the GOAT when it came to professional soccer—had been negotiating probably the biggest deal in soccer history so he could re-sign with Mersey Athletic Club in England. There were rumors about some press conference happening tonight, and I really wanted to go to Connor’s, especially since everybody else would be there. But it was my little sister’s birthday. “And y’know, Fridays . . .” I mumbled.

Fridays were like a holiday in my family. Every week, we did Shabbat at my grandparents’ apartment and made this big meal. When I was little, it was a lot of fun. Connor had even come to a bunch of Shabbat dinners, which was a blast.

(Except for the time he sort of choked on a chicken bone and my sister started crying.)

But more and more, it seemed like everybody in my grade was getting together on Friday nights without me, and I felt like a loser saying I couldn’t go. I had to leave practice by five on the dot so I could walk with my little sister over to Grandma and Grandpa’s. Which was ridiculous. As of today, Annie was eleven years old. She could walk there on her own—she’d said so herself! I couldn’t decide if my parents were making me walk with her because that’s how we’d always done it or because they were trying to ruin my social life completely.

Meanwhile, Connor could do whatever he wanted. His family lived in one of those big old houses by the lake with lots of high ceilings and fancy chandeliers. They had two sheepdogs named Crispy and Bacon, a couple of gerbils, a trampoline in their backyard, and usually a foreign exchange student or cousin sleeping in the den. Connor’s parents were chill and loved having a mess of kids around. Which was fine. I wasn’t necessarily jealous. Or maybe I was. Connor seemed to be nailing it in general. And I was . . . getting yelled at again.

“Second half. Listen up!” Coach barked. “We’re mixing it up a little. In front I want Connor, Nico, and Kaplan. Push hard. *Talk to each other!*” He looked at me and bugged out his eyes while he said that.

Wait, what?

Ever since Coach D came on at the beginning of eighth

grade, I'd been begging him to try me as a forward instead of midfield. And now, in the last half of a tied game—when I had to leave at *five o'clock on the dot*—he was giving me a chance?

“Yesssss!” Connor said.

“Kaplan?” Coach asked.

“On it, Coach.”

I tried to jog into position all nonchalant, but I felt like my legs were wobbling and my breath was so loud. What if I messed up? What if I wasn't aggressive enough? Plus, I could feel Evan Pratt's eyes on me. This was usually his position. I had no idea why Coach had given it to me this time. But I couldn't think about that now. I needed to just toughen up and focus on the play.

The whistle blew. We went out strong. Connor made some really sweet passes and Nico got a great chip that went just a little too high. I was trying to get a touch, trying to be useful.

“Get in there!” Coach kept shouting. “This is it!”

Get stuck in! I kept chanting under my breath. *C'mon, Kaplan. That means you.*

The clock was ticking. I got the ball a couple of times, but no one was letting me through. Their defense was tough. At some point, the stadium lights went on, and I knew it had to be close to five, which meant that Annie would be waiting for me. I tried not to look over at the bleachers, but there she was,

waving at me and pointing to her watch. What did she want me to do, stop in the middle of a game?

“Theo! We have to go!” Annie yelled.

I couldn't with her. This was my one chance.

“I'm open! I'm open!” Nico yelled in my ear as he bolted by, practically knocking me over.

“T-Rex! Over here!” shouted Connor. It took me way too long to realize that the ball was already in my possession. In fact, by the time I looked down and went for a pass, someone on the other team swiped it away and tore down at our goal. With a quick cross to his teammate just outside the box and a curling shot into the top right corner, they had the goal.

“Now THAT'S what I'm talking about!” their attacking mid screamed. He bowed toward the bleachers and smirked at me.

“What was that?” Coach screeched, grabbing his hair in frustration.

I didn't blame him. It was beyond embarrassing. I had no idea how I'd let it slip out from under me. Everybody on our team was quiet now. The air felt so cold and dark. Coach had us switch up plays a few times with a couple more attacking patterns—going wide and then pushing up with a double pass. But nothing stuck. The clock was running down:

5:13, 5:14, 5:19.

And then . . . it was over. Oakdale Middle was no longer top of the league.

We shook hands and mumbled, “Good game.” It *had* been a good game—until I got in there.

“Let’s circle up!” Coach called. I ran over to the sidelines, trying to ignore the fact that Annie was flapping her arms over her head like a giant bat.

“It’s freezing!” she shouted. “And it’s my birthday!”

Everybody on the pitch turned to look.

“Um, what’s going on, Kaplan?” asked Coach.

“Sorry. I just . . . it’s my sister’s birthday, and we have this thing . . .”

I hated that I had to do this in front of everybody. I hated that Connor leaned into the coach and said something I couldn’t hear. I hated it most of all when Coach nodded and announced, “Riiiiight. I forgot it’s Friday. Well, then . . . you do what you need to do. Good effort today.”

At that point, I felt the opposite of good. I just wanted to evaporate. I sprinted over to get my stuff and motioned for Annie to follow me out of the stadium.

“You saw me waiting, right?” she asked, galloping to keep up. Now that I’d stopped sweating and running, it was crazy cold, but I threw my jacket over my shoulder because nobody in my grade wore jackets to or from practice. That was like wearing a huge sign that said *DECIDEDLY NOT COOL*. “Hello?” Annie persisted. “Are you not gonna talk to me? Or even ask how my birthday’s been so far?”

I shot her a look that hopefully translated to, *Please keep your voice down until we get out of here so the whole team stops staring at me*. Then, once we’d moved past the bleachers and the equipment sheds, she said, “Since you didn’t ask, it was really fun. Sophie gave me this humongous thing of jelly beans that I left in my locker and Meryl gave me the most softest socks ever.”

“*Softest*,” I told her. “Not most softest.”

“Well, excuse me,” Annie said. “Stressed much?”

All I could do was grunt. Didn’t she realize that I’d just blown my chance at ever playing up front again? (Answer: no.) Or that my soccer career was basically hanging by a thread and my co-captainship was in jeopardy? (No.) Or that everything in eighth grade—including walking with my little sister in public—was beyond stressful? (Again, nope.)

Annie had just started middle school a few months ago and was still excited about switching classes and trying things like climate club and chorus. She had no idea that in a few short years, she would have three times as much homework and all these teachers quizzing her about plans for the future and her “untapped potential.” My math class this year was impossible. I had a chemistry quiz every week, reading responses due practically each day, and somehow I was supposed to explain the Spanish-American War—in Spanish! And not that I was comparing, but it seemed like all the guys

in my grade had either a girlfriend or the start of a moustache except for me. There was no way to fix that. Life was just complicated. Especially on Fridays.

Luckily, Annie was too busy to notice that I was basically dying next to her. While I kept replaying my bungled pass and Coach's look of defeat, Annie spent our entire eight-block walk yammering about all the people who either did or didn't recognize that it was her birthday. (Apparently, her Science teacher had let her drop pennies out of the window to prove that gravity never got old. A bunch of girls who were usually mean were less mean. Honestly, I couldn't keep track of a lot of Annie's stories.)

"Anyway. Definitely ready for some carrot cake and presents," she said as we rounded the corner of my grandparents' street. "I'm starving." She rubbed her mittened hands together and ran the last few yards.

"Hello, hello! If it's not my favorite granddaughter or the winning lottery ticket, I'm not interested!" Grandpa Ezra's voice came out in a gravelly singsong through the intercom.

"It's me! It's me!" Annie sang back. Then the door shook and buzzed, and she leaned in with her whole body so the catch would release. (My grandparents' apartment building was about as old as the pyramids, but they swore they didn't want or need anything else.)

"Ah ha! It's the birthday girl and her trusty sidekick!" Grandpa opened his arms wide at the top of the stairs, and

Annie charged up so she could dive right into them. Then he looked me up and down and added, "Oy. No hat? No coat? You're making my bones rattle. Come in!"

"Mmmm! Is that a carrot cake I smell?" Annie said, beelining for the kitchen. Even though I wanted to be chowing down on pizza and watching TV at Connor's, I had to admit it smelled good in here.

"Eh, eh, eh!" Grandpa grabbed Annie's elbow and swung her back toward the living room. "No peeking or the boss will fire me."

The boss, of course, was Grandma Talia. Grandma was about five foot one and completely in charge. Of everything. Even though she probably wasn't due home from work for another half hour, I knew she'd written down a detailed list of everything Grandpa had to get done before we came over. It was kind of crazy how scared Grandpa was of her.

"C'mon," he said, as if reading my mind. "I need your help tidying up before she gets home. And you probably want to change, yes?" He sniffed a little in my direction, letting me know I stank like sweat.

"Sure. Thanks."

No matter how much we "tidied up," this apartment was always an epic mess. As in, I bet my grandparents would totally win on one of those reality shows about hoarders. Just on my walk down the hall to the bathroom, I passed three piles of