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**CONTACT: Miri Pomerantz Dauber
natanbookaward@jewishbooks.org**

Natan Announces 2018 Natan Book Award Winner and 3 Finalists

New York, November 13, 2017- The Natan Fund today announced the winner of the 2018 Natan Book Award at Jewish Book Council: Matti Friedman's *Spies of No Country*, which will be published by Algonquin Books in Fall 2018.

The Natan Book Award, run in partnership with the Jewish Book Council (JBC), is a unique pre-publication prize of \$25,000 intended to support books that can catalyze important conversations about Jewish life. By focusing on books that have not yet been published, Natan and the JBC help the author to complete his or her work while developing a customized plan to distribute and promote the winning book, particularly in Jewish communities around the world.

In *Spies of No Country*, Friedman - the award-winning author of *The Aleppo Codex* and *Pumpkinflowers* - tells the story of four Jewish men who emigrated from Arab countries to pre-state Israel and were soon recruited into the embryonic Jewish intelligence forces. In addition to revealing a gripping and heretofore untold true-life espionage story, *Spies of No Country* also offers unique insight into complex issues of Jewish and Israeli identity that are only now beginning to be explored in Israel and in global Jewish communities.

The spies called *mistaarvim* – literally, “Ones Who Become Like Arabs” – were drawn from an early wave of Mizrahi Jews (Jews from Muslim countries) who came to Israel to escape lives of poverty, powerlessness and persecution. They traversed the boundaries between Jews and Arabs, blending - often imperfectly - into both worlds. By focusing on these Mizrahi Jews, *Spies of No Country* returns to the moment of Israel’s birth and tells a radically different story about what the country is and how it was created. Israel always saw itself as belonging to the story of Europe, and many of its enemies have chosen to see it that way, too – as a foreign implant. But Israel’s population has always been Middle Eastern as well as European, and the country is becoming increasingly Middle Eastern over time, from religion to culture to politics. Understanding the country now means moving away from stories about Europe and instead placing the Middle East in the center.

“With narrative grace and terrific reporting, *Spies of No Country* carries us to important themes about the Jewish past and present,” said Book Award committee co-chair Franklin Foer. “This is a fresh, exhilarating history of Mizrahi Jews in Israel. It is an important portrait of the diversity of the Jewish people—and, therefore, couldn’t be more urgent for our own contemporary understanding of the Middle East.”

Natan Book Award Finalists

For the first time, Natan also announced three 2018 Natan Book Award Finalists, awarding each \$2,500 toward marketing or distribution of their books:

- Jeremy Dauber’s *Jewish Comedy: A Serious History* (W.W. Norton, Fall 2017), which explores the millennia-old history of Jewish comedy as a unique window into understanding Jewish identity from the Bible to the present day;
- Ilana Kurshan’s *If All the Seas Were Ink* (St. Martin’s Press, Fall 2017), an accessible and personal guided tour of the Talmud that offers new insights into its arguments through the lens of a deeply personal memoir of love and loss;
- James Loeffler’s *Rooted Cosmopolitans: Human Rights and Jewish Politics in the Twentieth Century* (Yale University Press, Spring 2018), which uncovers the forgotten story of inextricable links between the creation of the international human rights movement, Zionism and the struggle for equal rights for European Jewry in the early 20th century.

Tali Rosenblatt-Cohen, co-chair of the Natan Book Award committee, notes that by awarding support to Finalists, Natan is able to shine a spotlight on a variety of Jewish themes and issues. “Those of us on the committee were eager to delve into the many ideas and questions raised by these books, and we think they deserve to be shared widely. Kurshan’s intimate, personal relationship with the Talmud will bring Jewish text alive for readers of all backgrounds; Loeffler’s history upends the contemporary demonization of Zionism as antithetical to human rights; and Dauber brings the long view to understanding Jewish humor and its critical role in shaping Jews’ understanding of themselves and other communities’ understanding of Jews.”

The submission period for the 2019 Natan Book Award will open on December 11, 2017.

2018 Natan Book Award Committee

Daniel Bonner

Tali Rosenblatt Cohen, co-chair

Franklin Foer, co-chair

Matthew Hiltzik

Jodi Kantor

Rebecca Lieberman
Judith Shulevitz
Tali Farhadian Weinstein
Michael Wigotsky

The Natan Fund is a giving circle based in New York. Natan has allocated over \$12.5 million to over 240 innovative Jewish and Israeli startup and post-startup nonprofits, social businesses and social entrepreneurs around the world.

Natan is also a thought leader in the Jewish philanthropic world, serving as an authority on issues such as the need to fund Jewish innovation and social entrepreneurs, the Jewish nonprofit “innovation ecosystem,” and the necessity of creating new philanthropic vehicles that can reach and engage potential Jewish philanthropists.

Jewish Book Council is a not-for-profit dedicated to promoting Jewish interest literature and connecting the Jewish community to books that will inspire, engage, educate, and entertain. With over 280 touring authors each year, over 1,000 book clubs, over 1,100 events, its newest annual print publication, Paper Brigade, the National Jewish Book Awards and the Sami Rohr Prize for Jewish Literature, and a vibrant digital presence, JBC ensures that Jewish interest authors have a platform, that readers are able to find books on topics across Jewish life that may interest them, and ultimately have the tools to discuss those works with their community.