

ARTICLES

Staging Your Zoom Background to Sell More Books! – by Ellen Scolnic and Joyce Eisenberg

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We're the authors of three books – and we have been presenting our popular book talk to audiences for almost 20 years. But, when COVID put an end to in-person group meetings, we realized we would have to transition our “Shmoozing With the Word Mavens” program to Zoom. We had our work cut out for us! We bought microphones so people could hear us better, adjusted the lighting in our offices so it didn't highlight our wrinkles, and elevated our computers to minimize our double chins.

We didn't think about our backgrounds until Ina Garten, celeb chef and cookbook author, shared a photo of her loaded dishwasher on Instagram – with knives in it! Her followers were aghast. Didn't she know that good knives should always be hand-washed? The famous cook didn't realize that her innocent post would really stir the pot.

If people were so quick to criticize the Barefoot Contessa on the contents of her dishwasher, what would our audiences think of what we put on our shelves and walls?

Some people can get away with a messy background. Jamie Apody, a sports reporter for Philly's Action News, Zooms from her basement studio, previously known as her family den. There's a large TV on one wall; she routinely flips the camera to show her boys wrestling, and a huge messy pile of toys. She has a good excuse: three sons – ages 3, 6, and 8. We have no excuse. Neither kids nor pets roam through our homes.



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At first, we tried to disguise our clutter with one of Zoom's virtual backgrounds. But those are not foolproof! If you wear a striped shirt, you can disappear. The screen is distorted and wavy. Our arms are jiggly enough; we don't need them to wave anymore! And, a fake background can be confusing to Zoom newbies. When we used an image from a safari trip as our background, an audience member wondered why we were traveling now, and warned us to be careful.

It was time to “curate” our backgrounds.

We've learned a few lessons from Instagram, the ground zero of fake. Not everything is as it seems. Did you see that size 2 Instagram influencer in her kitchen – with a mandoline slicer, lemon zester, and egg separator at the ready? Do you think she actually *made* those fancy iced cupcakes topped with chocolate curls, artfully arranged on a lace doily? Think again...

When Ellen posted an Instagram photo of the Jewish apple cake she had baked, the kitchen looked pristine. She knew enough to push the dirty dishes to the side, hide the burnt pot holder, and just focus on the cake.

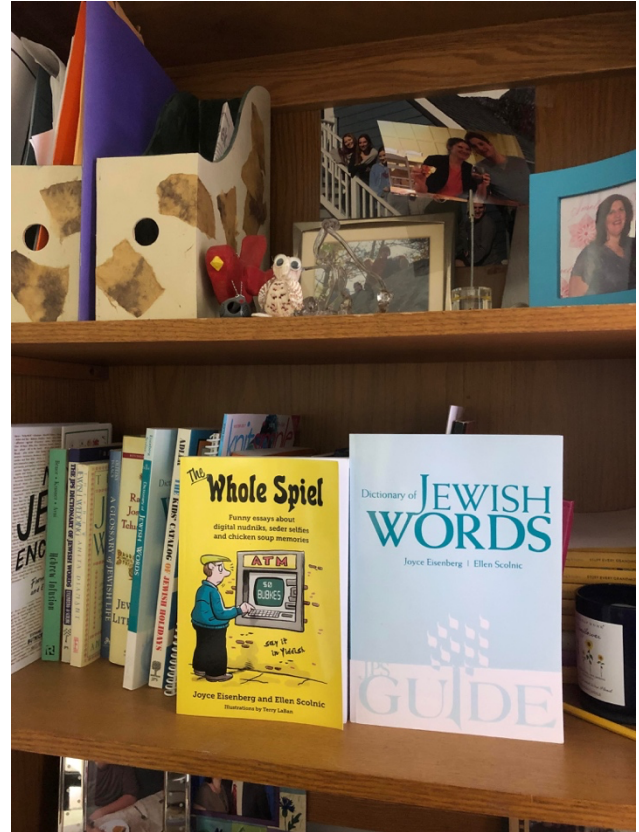
That picture of Joyce hard at work on the computer? It's a tight, carefully cropped shot. You can't see her computer screen so you don't know that she's on Amazon, adding an air fryer to her shopping cart and not deleting a dangling participle from a potential bestseller.

A year ago, when Ellen put her suburban house on the market, she learned some additional lessons about "content curation." Her realtor recommended that she stage the house to get it sold. An efficient staging lady swooped in and swept out family photos and piles of papers. The bird trivet, the clay wall hanging her son made in second grade, and the blue glass hamsa from Istanbul were all too personal to keep on display.

The stager replaced them with plastic plants, small horse statues, and generic "antique" globes. It's tough to argue that the world isn't round (although some apparently will!) so décor like a globe is perfect.

When pundits and late-night comedians broadcast from homes, their bookshelves are showing. They seem to have put a lot of thought into what we see. Experts are busy offering up advice in articles such as "Great Libraries for Your Zoom Background" and "10 Books That Should Be There and 10 That Shouldn't." According to the latter guide, our copies of *The Complete Idiot's Guide to Learning Yiddish* and *How to Edit Like a Pro* would have to go.

When Joyce Zooms, her husband's bookcase is visible behind her head. At their first practice session, Ellen noticed an 8x10 picture of Ted holding two axes (throwing them at targets is his hobby!). But, would people know he wasn't an axe murderer? These distractions had to be relocated. So did the dry cleaning on the closet door, the clay tchotchkes the kids sculpted in Pre-K, and the plastic bucket of quarters.



Ellen decluttered the family photos on her bookshelf and strategically lined up copies of our books – facing outward – so everyone could (hopefully) read the titles. She also took down a papier-mâché sculpture of a sun, lovingly made by one of her kids in grade school because when it hangs on the wall just above where her head appears on Zoom, the sun's rays create the unfortunate illusion that she has a unicorn horn.

When it's time for a gig, we have to remember to make ourselves presentable, too. Although we still wear yoga pants, we put on a nice top and a pair of earrings. Before we sign on to Zoom, we take the advice of screen legend Elizabeth Taylor, who wisely said, "Pour yourself a drink, put on some lipstick, and pull yourself together."

We pull ourselves together, and put on a little lipstick...but we save the wine for afterwards.