

*From The (NY) Jewish Week (2/18/08)*

## People of the Children's Book

**The PJ Library, a national program now in Manhattan, gives kids free Jewish tunes and tomes.**



*PJ Library participating families receive a new book or CD very month, allowing the entire family to explore Judaism at once. Photos courtesy of PJ Library*

by Randi Sherman  
Staff Writer

More than a dozen children sat around the tables in the Society for the Advancement of Judaism's social hall, braiding rainbow-tinted pipe cleaners into childproof havdalah candles and creating their own besamim, or spice bags, with choices of cloves, lavender and cinnamon. They came together on a Saturday night, Feb. 2, on the Upper West Side for SAJ's first Havdalah Pajama party, an extension of their PJ Library chapter.

The PJ Library piloted in December 2005 in Western Massachusetts where the Harold Grinspoon Foundation is located, and the program went nationwide in October 2006. After hearing on National Public Radio about Dolly Parton's Imagination Library, which promotes literacy for all families, and after seeing firsthand how reading a story can calm a crying child on an airplane, Grinspoon decided to create The PJ Library to promote Jewish identity and engagement, according to Marcie Greenfield Simons, director of The PJ Library.

Children ages 6 months to 7 years receive a monthly mailing of an age-appropriate book or music CD to enhance their Jewish lives at home. With more than 55 PJ Library communities currently running in the United States and between 12 to 15 communities in the process of launching, the Harold Grinspoon Foundation is launching a new \$3 million challenge grant, with applications available online Feb. 15, to create additional communities. The new communities will receive a two-to-one matching grant, so for every two children the community signs up, the Grinspoon Foundation provides funding for a third.

The books are chosen by experts from various fields, including Jewish children's librarians, Jewish early childhood educators, parents of age-eligible children, children's book editors and more. This committee comes together once a year and is left in seclusion with hundreds of book and music options. "What they look for are beautiful books with lovely illustrations that will engage both children and parents and instill the joy of Judaism," said Greenfield Simons. "We want them to pull these books off the shelves and go back to them again and again."

The books teach about holidays, Bible stories, different types of Jewish families and Jewish values. The purpose is to create Jewishly-engaged families, but not denominationally specific. In order to gain funding from the Grinspoon Foundation, the community must promise to sign up all interested families, including ones that are unaffiliated and interfaith.

"We understand that every family, every individual engages in Judaism in a way that is meaningful to him or her," Greenfield Simons said. "It's not a goal to have every family light Shabbat candles or travel to Israel. We want them to connect with the magic and power of Judaism through The PJ Library ... to have them want to connect with other Jewish families, whether it be enrolling in a Jewish preschool or attending a Jewish concert."

After participants in SAJ's Pajama Havdalah made their candles and spice bags, the 15 children and their parents sat around a multicolored carpet and listened to the synagogue's rabbi, Michael Strassfeld, read "Castle on Hester Street," a PJ Library-chosen book by Linda Heller, in which a grandfather tells his granddaughter the story of how he and his wife came to America. Some children sat quietly fixated on Rabbi Strassfeld and the book, eagerly responding to the rabbi's questions. Younger children, unsurprisingly, could only sit still for so long before making a mad dash across the room or out into the hallway.

Some of these children receive their monthly package from the PJ Library. Sam and Lynn Cohen, who were unable to attend the event, signed up both their children when SAJ started its chapter last fall, which now includes 54 kids from 34 families. So far they've been very pleased with the results. "[The PJ Library] is such a wonderful resource for parents trying to raise Jewish kids," said Cohen, an actor. "There are so many demands on a parent to provide for their children, choosing schools and taking care of their health. The cultural needs tend to slip through the cracks." The books the Cohen family received for their daughter Rose, age 4, and their 1-year-old son Wolf make "use of the precious bedtime story ritual, making it time to enrich their lives religiously and culturally," Cohen said. Books such as "The Keeping Quilt" by Patricia Polacco helped the family to teach Rose about "abstract religious concepts like death and funerals, angels and souls," in a way Cohen wouldn't have thought of, while others spark interesting and fun conversations. While Rose's little brother Wolf likes to hear the stories that arrive for his sister, he receives his own books and "Oy Baby" CDs. "While we did have Jewish books, our collection didn't include much Jewish music," Cohen said. "A couple of [Rose's] favorite songs are off those CDs, and in Hebrew. To hear her running around singing songs in Hebrew is very heartwarming." Living in Hell's Kitchen, the Cohens don't encounter much Jewish culture in their own neighborhood and would recommend the library for any family not living in a particularly Jewish community. "We're touched and very grateful," he said.

Another PJ Library recipient is Julia Kurtzberg, the 20-month-old daughter of Holly Kurtzberg, a physical therapist from the Upper East Side who recently joined SAJ. Kurtzberg thought the program would be a great way to begin introducing her daughter to Judaism. "We thought it would be great to get books and music to expose Julia to Jewish life, culture and holidays," she said. "She's only 20 months old, so it's not like she's going to sit through a service or go to Hebrew school." Julia, who is "very verbal and loves to dance and sing," often requests her "Oy Baby" CD, specifically the song "Zum Gali Gali." The music has taught her to say Shabbat Shalom. Julia has asked again and again for the Chanukah book the family received in December, from which she learned to identify dreidels and the menorah. Kurtzberg has already referred friends to the program. "Other than what we do in our home, [Julia] doesn't get a lot of exposure to Jewish stuff," Kurtzberg said. "It's nice that she can understand this through books the way she does Sesame Street." N

To sign up for the SAJ chapter of the PJ Library, contact [saj@verizon.net](mailto:saj@verizon.net) or call 212-724-7000. Space is limited. Institutions interested in starting a PJ Library can obtain challenge grant applications at [www.pjlibrary.org/challengegrant.php](http://www.pjlibrary.org/challengegrant.php). The deadline to apply for grants is April 30. For more information, see their Web site, or call (413) 734-0292.