



Beyond the Books

PJ Library events build connections and community, supporting families on their Jewish journeys.

BY NAAMA KRAUZ, ENGAGEMENT ASSOCIATE

When Aliza Plotkin and her family moved from Houston, Texas, to West Bloomfield, Michigan, in 2022, they left behind a wealth of relationships in the Houston Jewish community. Aliza had signed her son, Isaac, up for PJ Library as a baby, and the family had made lasting local connections through PJ Library community events. Would they find a similar sense of belonging in their new hometown?

Shortly after moving, Aliza learned about a PJ Library meet-and-greet for families new to the Detroit area, hosted in partnership with JFamily Detroit. At that event, she discovered and joined a brand-new family Shabbat program. All at once, she felt the doors of the Detroit Jewish community open.

“By showing up at that one program, we were able to immediately step into this new

Families gather for events in the greater Washington, D.C. area and in New Haven, Connecticut.

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ARYEH SCHWARTZ
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community,” Aliza says. “PJ Library helped facilitate a beautiful transition for my family. To be able to move from Houston to Detroit and seamlessly fall into similar programs and events and comfort — it really helped us acclimate to our new area. I felt less alone.”

Access to a warm, vibrant Jewish community can make all the difference for Jewish families. That’s why, when it comes to PJ Library, the delivery of free monthly Jewish-themed books is just the beginning. Across the US and around the globe, PJ Library connects families for community events and programs designed to build meaningful relationships to Jewish life and to each other.

These encounters fill a widespread need: Three-quarters of PJ Library parents say they want to become more connected to their local Jewish community, and over 60% say they are more likely to attend a family event if it is endorsed by PJ Library. In 2022 alone, more

than 3,000 PJ Library events welcomed over 100,000 families across the US and Canada.

“The goal of PJ Library events is to intentionally bring families together in person to meet others and feel more connected to their local Jewish community,” says Tracy Newman, PJ Library’s director of community engagement. “Jewish connections help us feel part of something bigger, especially when we celebrate with peers in similar life stages.”

Adds PJ Library community manager Saskia Swenson Moss, “Going beyond the books transforms an individual connection to Jewish life into a collective one.”

PJ LIBRARY WAS ALWAYS MEANT to be more than books. As more and more families signed up, the PJ Library team recognized an opportunity to connect new parents to one another and to their local communities. To do this, PJ Library provided grant funding to encourage local partner organizations (such as Jewish federations and JCCs) to hire family-engagement professionals to run programs and events. These professionals develop creative and meaningful ways for families to bond and celebrate their shared Jewish connection – in parks, synagogues, camps, bookstores, and other venues – so families with diverse interests and needs can find a comfortable entry point to Jewish communal life.

The effects are profound. At JCC Greater Boston, PJ Library manager and family connector Alyssa Kaitz raves about the Afikomen Squad – a group of families who hit it off at a Welcome Baby stroller walk and continue to get together for PJ Library programs, playdates, and Jewish holidays. One of the mothers, Shoshana E., says, “I’m so excited to watch our babies grow up together and go to their bar and bat mitzvahs 10-plus years from now.”

In North Carolina’s Durham-Chapel Hill community, early childhood family ambassador Elisabeth Gerson helps connect PJ Library families through themed playgroups including “Multiracial Toddlers,” “2ish, 3ish, Jewish,” and “Not My First Rodeo” (for families with multiple children). Families have told Gerson that before these PJ Library playgroups came along, they weren’t sure where they fit into the Jewish community. “We feel supported and like we can do this,” Gerson recalls a parent sharing. “If families came away from this



Friendship grew between members of the Afikomen Squad, a group of families who continue to celebrate Jewish holidays together.

PHOTO COURTESY OF JCC GREATER BOSTON

“If families came away from this experience feeling like they were part of a bigger community, what more could we have asked for?”

ELISABETH GERSON

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After moving to Durham, the PJ Library playgroups offered Stephanie Hawkins the Jewish connection she craved. “It’s so nice getting to know other Jewish families with young kids, recognizing faces when you go to temple, and feeling like your kids are going to grow up in the same type of warm, close-knit Jewish community you did,” she says.

In Winnipeg, Canada, PJ Library events have become a bridge to families’ Jewish journeys, welcoming them when a new baby is born and guiding them through Jewish experiences that promote belonging and connection. PJ Library professional Florencia Katz and her team connect members of the local Jewish community through curated WhatsApp groups, baby-shower events, and a community challah train.

“Each time we meet a friend who is not familiar with the program, we always share our amazing experience and suggest signing up,” says Winnipeg parent Anna Shapiro. “It’s a great way to meet other Jewish families.”

FOR ALIZA PLOTKIN, the Sharing Shabbat program she signed up for over a year ago blossomed into a source of friendship and enriched her family’s Jewish experience in their new neighborhood.

“The impact PJ Library has had on my family is in helping us figure out our place in Jewish life and the values we wanted to bring forward in raising our son,” she shares. “It’s helped us find community, and that community has then helped us instill those values in our family’s life. And that has been incredibly special.”

Interested in finding PJ Library programs and events near you? Visit pjlibrary.org/pj-near-you.