



PJ Library Turns 18

A reflection: Shaping the Jewish community we aspire to be.

**BY RABBI RICK JACOBS, PRESIDENT OF THE UNION FOR REFORM JUDAISM
GUEST CONTRIBUTOR**

Eighteen is a special number in Jewish tradition. It is the numerical value of the Hebrew word *chai*, meaning “life.” In Hebrew, each letter has a numerical equivalent. For example, the first letter of the Hebrew alphabet, *aleph*, is equal to one, the second letter, *bet*, has the value of two, and so on. The Hebrew word *chai* comprises the letter *chet*, which has a numerical value of eight, and the letter *yud*, which has a value of 10. This is why it is common for Jews to give gifts and donations in multiples of 18, and it is also why an 18th birthday is considered

PJ Library began with 200 children 18 years ago. Now books reach more than 650,000 children around the world.

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especially auspicious, representing life itself.

This year, PJ Library turns 18, and its 18th birthday means that this transformative program has ignited an entirely new generation through Jewish books. What an exciting milestone deserving of celebration and reflection! Many of the children who received their first Jewish books from PJ Library are now entering college, starting their first jobs, or exploring what it means to be an adult for the first time.

Today, as more Jews are unconnected to Jewish life than are connected, PJ Library has infused Jewish meaning into the lives of



our tradition as well as our longevity. The Union for Reform Judaism (URJ) has been intensely focused on connecting the not-yet-connected and those marginally connected to Judaism and the Jewish community. Likewise, over these past 18 years, PJ Library has sent more than 50 million books to so many in our community who might never have been connected to the Jewish community otherwise.

The 2020 Pew Research Center survey of Jewish Americans told us that at least a quarter of the youngest generation (ages 18–29) identify as people who are often on the margins of our Jewish communities, including those who are Black, indigenous, or people of color; LGBTQIA+; Sephardic or Mizrahi; interfaith; people who live with a disability; and more. The content of Jewish books increasingly reflects the growing diversity we see within the Jewish community today. PJ Library has operated with a broadly inclusive understanding of what contemporary families look like, which has helped create more Jewish communities where everyone belongs.

A milestone birthday like this is an invitation to reflect on the tremendous impact of PJ Library and, at the very same moment, join in imagining how this wildly successful experiment could help shape the Jewish community we aspire to be. The URJ and PJ Library are creating more pathways for those not yet connected to Jewish life to engage with the riches of Judaism. Those just beginning their Jewish journeys could be our next inspired scholars, leaders, and activists. PJ Library and the URJ are committed to growing our Jewish community and celebrating our vibrant diversity. That diversity not only makes us stronger, but it can also make us more creative and effective in shaping the world that God has called us to shape: a world of equity, compassion, wholeness, and peace. That's the bright future we are building, one book at a time, one soul at a time.

Happy birthday, PJ Library. We at the URJ offer our deepest appreciation to the remarkable Harold Grinspoon Foundation and all who make PJ Library possible. We love being your partners in shaping a more connected, inspired, and inclusive Jewish community. 📖

Rabbi Rick Jacobs is the president of the Union for Reform Judaism, which leads a large and diverse Jewish movement reaching 1.5 million people in North America.

so many families with young children. Too often, Jewish leaders expect that those who are not yet connected will come into our communities to experience what we think they should want. The brilliance of PJ Library is that it is focused on what we know Jewish families are truly seeking: to make reading time more meaningful by distilling thousands of years of Jewish wisdom for young readers. PJ Library books have captured the attention of children around the world as well as their parents and grandparents.

The *Vahavta* prayer says, “teach them [God’s commandments] diligently unto your children.” But in many families, parents or guardians aren’t sure what to teach or how to teach their children about being Jewish — until Jewish books arrive at their doorstep, providing an accessible on-ramp into Jewish life.

We’ve been called *am ha’sofer*, “the people of the book,” as Jewish learning has led to the perpetuation of the timeless values of

On average, more than 100 children across North America sign up every day to receive the gift of PJ Library for the first time.

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