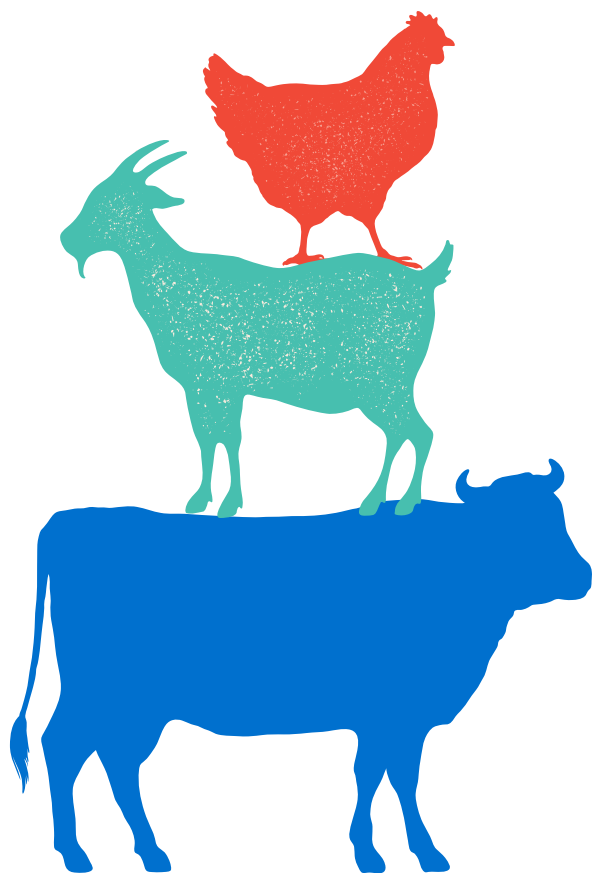


# GETTING INTO OUR STORIES

PJ LIBRARY IS TELLING JEWISH TALES IN MORE AND MORE WAYS, BUT THERE'S ONE COMMON THREAD



**By Jason Allen**

SENIOR CREATIVE WRITER, PJ LIBRARY

**A JEWISH FOLKTALE FROM EASTERN EUROPE** tells of a family struggling with an intolerably crowded home. In crisis, they seek out their rabbi's wisdom. The rabbi advises them to bring their noisy chickens to live inside. When that doesn't work, they're told to also bring in their mischievous goats and then finally their giant cow. When the family tells the rabbi that none of this has helped, that in fact things have become intolerably intolerable, the rabbi says they should now send all the animals back outside. Ahhh ... Suddenly the family feels they're living in peace. It seems the rabbi has fixed everything.

When I was asked to write a modern adaptation of this story for PJ Library's podcast *Have I Got a Story for You!*, to be honest, I wondered why. PJ Library's book offerings include several adaptations of the folktale, and the moral (or at least what I thought was the moral) never really resonated with me.

These stories are described as demonstrating the Jewish value of *sameach b'chelko*, being content with one's lot in life. I struggled with this as a theme because I took it to mean either that we shouldn't

hope to improve things or that simply because worse things exist, we should stop *kvetching* (which means complaining in Yiddish, but you can *kvetch* in any language). As a parent, I aspired to give my own kids a more optimistic and empowering message.

I adapted the traditional folktale's goats and chickens into bossy robots and bags of moon sand. That was some good nerdy fun, but my understanding of the moral still hadn't clicked into place. Only when I put myself into the mind of the main character did it finally dawn on me how wrong I'd been about this story. The moral isn't to shut our mouths and tolerate awful conditions; instead, if we want to improve our outward circumstances, the first step must be to end our inner war with them. And sometimes that requires obeying a moon-bot or filling your house with goats.

Instead of forcing myself to write about a character who learns to tolerate his lousy lot in life, I could now wholeheartedly write about someone whose situation improves once he stops seeing the world as his enemy. And once I heard the brilliant performance of the cast and efforts of the production team in the podcast episode, titled "Moon Station One," I was glad I had given up the war with my initial qualms and had finally found my own connection to the story.

I work alongside some fantastic storytellers at PJ Library who are bringing more and more Jewish stories off the bookshelf and into new places, like podcasts, videos, read-alouds, special mailings, social media posts, and beyond. We may all have different styles and methods, but I'm sure of one thing we have in common: the crucial step of finding our connection to the story. I'm equally certain it was the same for the storytellers whose time-honored works we adapt.

Maybe something in a classic Jewish story strikes an obvious and deeply personal chord in us. Or maybe something in the original doesn't sit right with us and we have to wrestle with our own worldview to understand the story before we can present it to others, as happened with me. Or maybe we have to poke and prod until something jumps out and excites us, provokes us, and pulls us in. But if we're going to ask your family, in more ways than ever before, to connect with our stories, we absolutely have to do it ourselves.

*No goats, chickens, or cows were forced to move in with me during the writing of this article.*