



When the first PJ Library books made their way into homes throughout western Massachusetts, no one knew just how far PJ Library books would travel. Now, more than 15 years later, kids in the Amazon – the place, not the store! – are growing up with the same books as children from San Francisco to Siberia.

Meet Anne Benchimol, vice president of the Amazon’s Jewish Committee for the Beit Yaacov Rebi Meyr Synagogue and PJ Library ambassador in Manaus, Brazil, where the days are warm and humid and the Jewish community is tiny with a big history. “We may live far away from the rest of the tribe,” Benchimol says, “but our community is 200 years old.”

So how did Jews end up in the Amazon?

When rubber was king in Brazil in the 1800s, many Jews from Morocco – including Benchimol’s ancestors – immigrated to take part in the burgeoning industry. In 1824, not long after Brazil became an independent nation, the new Brazilian constitution guaranteed freedom of religion for all citizens. With economic prosperity and the opportunity to practice their faith freely, Brazil seemed like the perfect place for Jews to settle with their families.

Unfortunately, that prosperity didn’t last for long. After the rubber industry crashed in 1929, many in the Amazonian Jewish community left to search for new opportunities elsewhere, but those who remained held fast to their traditions and customs. “Jews in the Amazon and Manaus really wanted to preserve their culture,” Benchimol explains, “because when you leave your place of origin, you want to keep your center, your essence.” And their traditions are still being passed down today. “The way we pray is almost the exact same way of praying as our great-great-great-grandparents when they arrived in Brazil,” she points out. “The same music, the same intonation, the same everything. We keep our traditions – and we are very proud of them, by the way – because that’s what we can offer to our kids.”

But it's not all the community has to offer their children. Thanks to Benchimol, they now offer high-quality Portuguese Jewish books too. Benchimol first heard about PJ Library through her daughter Rebecca, who married an American. "[Rebecca's] mother-in-law had signed up one of her American grandchildren for PJ Library, so when he was finished with the books, they'd send them on to Rebecca's son Benjamin," she explains.

Then a friend told Benchimol about the PJ Library program in Brazil, so she contacted the director of PJ Library in Brazil, Karin Zingerevitz. In just six short months, just about every Jewish child in Manaus started receiving PJ Library books. "Manaus is like a case study – every eligible child is signed up," says Zingerevitz. She ascribes the rapid growth to the incredibly close-knit nature of the Jewish network.

With an organization that promotes acceptance and inclusion of all Jewish traditions and cultures and universal Jewish values, PJ Library is a perfect fit for the Manaus Jewish community. Even though the Jewish community in the Amazon has customs that may not be familiar to other Jewish groups, families can easily connect to PJ Library because the books and resources are all-inclusive without focusing on any one culture or practice of Judaism. Benchimol agrees: "It fits us because it's fit to be everywhere."

Though the Jewish community in the Amazon is understandably protective of its particular traditions, it embraces PJ Library's focus on the diversity of Jewish practice and universal values and is searching to expand its connection with the rest of the Jewish world. "You give an opportunity to our kids to be connected all over the world. If I want to pass something on to my kids, the thing I want to pass is good values. And that's what I find inside these books," Benchimol explains. "They do not judge if readers are converts or very religious or Ashkenazi or Sephardic or Moroccan – they want to teach Jewish values to kids. That's what motivates us. And it gives the children a book in their hands!"



Anne Benchimol with her grandchildren

Zingerevitz echoes this last point. "Before PJ Library came to Brazil, we had maybe five Jewish books in Portuguese for kids. I know the titles because I bought them," she says, laughing. "Having PJ Library in Brazil will change the future of the Jewish community here." With more access to Jewish children's books, kids in the Amazon can feel more connected to the larger Jewish community through PJ Library while also sharing the experience with other Jewish children in their region. And with so many of the eligible children in the Jewish Amazonian community already signed up for PJ Library, it's clearly a hit with adults and kids alike.

For Benchimol, it's personal; her own grandkids are now PJ Library subscribers too. "PJ Library is very new here, but we are in love."

