



Jewish Connection in Turkey

A new PJ Library launch provides learning, fun, and fortitude for Turkey's Jewish community.

BY RYAN TOROK

Across North America last September, 7-year-olds received the book *The Mysterious Guests: A Sukkot Story*. In a third-grade classroom in Istanbul, some 20 students read the same story in class that same month (and crafted colorful *sukkah* decorations) before taking their own copies home.

Jewish-studies classes at Turkey's Ulus Jewish Schools, a 110-year-old Jewish day school, now feature a new addition: PJ Library books.

PJ Library launched in Turkey in September, distributing books to children at two locations: Ulus Jewish Schools in Istanbul and the Jewish community center in the coastal city of Izmir. Already PJ Library is reaching 230 Turkish Jewish children ages 4-8 with storybooks and a sense of shared connection to the Jewish people.

To start PJ Library in a new country takes months of planning and preparation. No one

Members of PJ Library's Turkey and UK teams met in London last fall.

PHOTO COURTESY OF LAUREN HAMBURGER

could have anticipated just how relevant PJ Library's launch would be for Turkey's Jewish community, a thriving Jewish bastion in a Muslim-majority country.

"It's very timely that we launched in Turkey last fall and started helping to reinforce a sense of community and global connection through the program," says Rachel Kozupsky, PJ Library's director of international programs. "Joyful Jewish experiences are so important nowadays."

Jewish people have lived in Turkey since antiquity. Many also migrated from the Iberian Peninsula during the Spanish Inquisition, bringing Sephardic culture and the Ladino language with them. Today, Turkey has a Jewish population of about 16,000, most of whom are Sephardic and live in Istanbul, the country's largest city. Istanbul is home to 19 synagogues along with kosher butcher shops, Jewish businesses and social services, a museum celebrating the rituals and customs of Turkish Jews, and even a Jewish newspaper. Izmir, Turkey's third-largest city, was once

a flourishing home for Sephardic Jewry; its Jewish population is now about 1,200.

How does PJ Library work in Turkey? Unlike in North America, where books arrive in the mail, books in Turkey are sent directly to the Jewish school and the Jewish community center. Teachers in both locations plan lessons and lead classroom activities based on the books — which are in English — and afterward, children take copies home to enjoy with their families.

“We integrate the PJ Library books into the curriculum and use the books in our lessons to bring the Jewish content to a higher level,” says Sami Levi, Jewish studies coordinator at Ulus Jewish Schools. “The students learn more about Jewish values, traditions, and culture.”

Alongside books based on Sukkot, Hanukkah, and Passover, teachers have led students in classroom discussions, art projects, and creative-writing exercises.

“Our teaching partners in Turkey have been very thoughtful with how they incorporate PJ Library resources,” says Lauren Hamburger, regional director of PJ Library in the UK and Europe. “In the Istanbul and Izmir communities, there’s a high degree of Jewish cultural affiliation. The goal is to bring familiarity with Jewish content to a higher level.”

So far, the approach is working. “The impact of these books is noticeable in our classes. Kids quote characters and events from the books, which helps them practice English and adds to their learning experience,” says Selena Benaved, who oversees PJ Library distribution at the Izmir Jewish community center’s Sunday school. “Kids are excited to get new books each month. Parents mention that their kids love reading the books and even read them to younger siblings before bed.”

“The books are beneficial and fun. My son enjoys them and even taught our family about challah from one of the books,” one mother shares. “We love reading PJ Library books together. The illustrations are fantastic, and they have helped Rami learn about Jewish holidays in a fun way,” says another.

This Jewish education has benefits across generations. “Ultimately, we want our books to reach not just children but the parents,” Hamburger adds.

Thanks to support from the Harold Grinspoon Foundation and generous private donors, PJ Library in Turkey provides a unique point of connection for this historic Jewish community.

“We love reading PJ Library books together.”

A MOTHER IN IZMIR

“It can feel isolating to be Jewish in these times,” Kozupsky says. “Knowing our children are part of such a meaningful shared Jewish experience, within their local community and globally, is comforting. Watching events unfold around the world has been difficult, but I have tremendous hope knowing that families all over are raising their children with the same Jewish stories, values, and connection — a foundation that will help children stand up as proud Jews as they grow.”

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GLOBAL JEWISH COMMUNITY

Sarah Hurwit’s in-laws are from Izmir, Turkey. As a means of reconnecting with her husband’s parents’ native city, the Atlanta, Georgia-based PJ Library parent and donor helped lead efforts to bring PJ Library to Turkey. “We’ve been getting PJ Library books for a long time,” Hurwit says of her two children, ages 6 and 8. “There was an opportunity to connect with a community we love, and we wanted to get involved and help.”

For Hurwit, playing a role in PJ Library’s expansion to Turkey has been rewarding beyond expectation.

“It’s been a wonderful experience,” she says, “and it’s deepened my commitment to PJ Library, seeing a glimpse into how thoughtful and intentional they are when doing their partnership building.”

For children around the world, PJ Library is a regular, reliable source of Jewish learning and connection. Because of generous donors like Hurwit, PJ Library can help children everywhere feel a sense of belonging to a wider world united by tradition.

PJ Library gifts books to children in 40-plus countries, on six continents, in seven languages. (Want to know what it’s like launching PJ Library in South America’s largest Jewish community? Look for more in our next issue!) But there is much more work to do. That’s why PJ Library created the International Fund — to bring Jewish stories, values, and joy to even more children.

Make a gift to the PJ Library International Fund and join a community of funding partners ensuring Jewish children across the globe grow up proud to be Jewish. Visit pjlibrary.org/proofgift.