

# What was your favorite book as a child?



Eric A. Kimmel, the most prolific PJ Library author, signed Meredith's copy of the book to both her and her two children during this past year's Author Israel Adventure.

By Meredith Lewis

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**WHAT WAS YOUR FAVORITE BOOK AS A CHILD?** For me, this question is like asking me who my favorite child is, given that I work closely with dozens of our authors and oversee the selection of more than 136 PJ Library titles each year.

But my answer is always the same, without any hesitation:

When I was about 8 years old, I received my first and only copy of Eric A. Kimmel's *Hershel and the Hanukkah Goblins*. The story tells the tale of Hershel of Ostropol, a young man on a mission to banish ghoulish goblins who are haunting a local synagogue and preventing everyone from celebrating Hanukkah. Using his astute guile, Hershel outwits seven goblins only to then encounter the king of all the goblins.

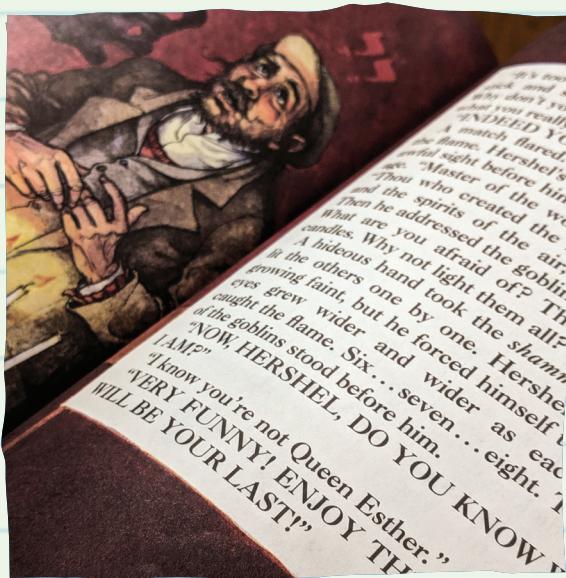
The king is so frighteningly illustrated that I remember not being able to fully look at the page when he asks Hershel, in a booming voice, "Do you know who I am?" But then, Hershel, with the perfect mix of bravery and nervousness, replies, "I know you aren't Queen Esther."

The joke is, of course, that Queen Esther is from the story of Purim, not Hanukkah. She was known for her beauty, quite the opposite of the horrific-looking goblin. But the first time (and every time) I read this book, I smiled and immediately felt safe. I had not only the Jewish knowledge to understand what the author was doing, but felt in that moment that I belonged to something bigger than just this narrative.

Now that's not to say that other readers less connected to the Jewish experience can't appreciate the gripping plot, the Caldecott-winning illustrations, or the timeless quality of this story. But because of the traditions and culture that my parents and my teachers had instilled in me, I felt I had some kind of magical key that opened up a deeper meaning in this story.

This experience, so special and fulfilling, guides my vision for PJ Library and the books we choose. I carry it with me through every selection, asking myself, "Will this book be someone else's *Hershel*?" Thirty years from now, will a new parent watch their child tear open a PJ Library envelope and find their own favorite (Jewish!) book from childhood? One so ingrained in their memory they can still recall their favorite moments and illustrations?

Just a few years ago, I pulled down my copy of *Hershel* from my bookshelf. It is in surprisingly good shape, given the years of use and hundreds of reads. The inside cover has the initials of my maiden name, written in my mother's handwriting. Together,



I read this book with my two children. During one of these reads when my older son, Ari, was about 7 years old, he stopped me on the page where the king of all the goblins appears. Ari looked at me and said, "Mom, that's funny. Because, you know, Queen Esther is from the Purim story."