

PLANTING SEEDS OF OPPORTUNITY

By Amy Meltzer

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Nati Passow, director of the Jewish Farm School, plants and waters potatoes with young children and their families in the bimonthly Side Yard Seedlings program sponsored by PJ Library.

It's a hot Sunday morning, and families are streaming into a small urban garden in the heart of West Philadelphia, PA, warmly welcomed by the staff of the Jewish Farm School. After exploring seeds under magnifying lenses and digging through piles of dirt, children and their caregivers gather for a song and story about Na'amah, the seed-saving matriarch on the ark. Next, they bring this ancient *midrash* (an explanation or expansion of a Torah story) to life - creating sprout jars, making living seed necklaces, and planting carrot seeds in the garden. After a hearty snack of fresh vegetables and the blessing *borei pri ha-adamah* (creator of the fruit of the earth in Hebrew), everyone learns the Hebrew word for "seed" and then takes their seeds and sprouts home to nurture and to eat.

This is just one example of close to 100 unique programs funded by more than \$175,000 in PJ Library SPARK grants, made possible by the PJ Library Alliance, to engage families on five Jewish farms in the United States. Thanks to these grants, families raising young children have had a chance to connect to Jewish life while harvesting vegetables, planting flowers, grinding wheat, and feeding baby goats.

Why has the PJ Library Alliance invested \$175,000 in programs at Jewish farms?

Farms are the intersection of some of the most creative young professionals in the Jewish community and a comfortable place for families. Jewish farms boast a cadre of professionals who can deliver "quick and deep" Jewish content, one of PJ Library's Engagement Guiding Principles.

By offering meaningful and accessible Jewish content in a low-barrier and highly appealing setting, Jewish farm programs inspire parents to learn more about and connect further with Jewish life. The magic of Jewish Outdoor, Food, Farming & Environmental Education (JOFEE) programs is that they are both content-rich and highly accessible at the same time.

We know from Hazon's 2014 study, "Seeds of Opportunity," that JOFEE programs have provided a uniquely meaningful place for less-engaged Jewish adults to connect Jewishly. By investing in funding and training for Jewish farms, PJ Library SPARK grants have helped the JOFEE field extend its magic to families raising young children.

"The SPARK grant allowed us to jumpstart our Jewish family programming at Milk and Honey Farm," explains Becca Gan Levy, farm and sustainability director at the JCC in Boulder, CO. "I get giddy every Friday morning when I see so many families streaming in to celebrate Shabbat together. Our community loves it! I love it! To me, it's what Judaism should be: fully relevant, meaningful, and fun!"

Jewish farms have been highly effective at reaching less-engaged families with SPARK-funded Jewish programming. More than half of the participants surveyed last summer indicated that prior to attending these programs, their family had attended Jewish programs "never" or "a few times a year." Yet an overwhelming majority of participating parents indicated that the programs "sparked a Jewish moment" with their child and that they would "definitely recommend" the program to a friend. Abundance Farm, a food-justice farm and outdoor classroom located on the grounds of a Conservative synagogue and Jewish day school in Northampton, MA, reached more than 100 new families with young children in its first summer of farm-based Shabbat programming; most of these families had never attended a single program held within the walls of these institutions.

Engaging in Jewish programs on a farm can be the first step into a family's ongoing relationship with Jewish life. In each community with a SPARK grant, both the Jewish farm receiving the grant and the local PJ Library program professional are working to build relationships with new families, welcome them into the broader Jewish community, and invite them to participate in the range of opportunities for families with young children.



Support for programming on Jewish farms is just one of the many ways funding from the PJ Library Alliance has created new opportunities for families through PJ Library. Five years ago, we set our sights high with a bold vision for PJ Library. Our mission: build on a well-loved program to make it the predominant platform for reaching and engaging a new generation of Jewish families. An inaugural investment from the [William Davidson Foundation](#) inspired others. The Alliance is now a 19-member-strong collective of funders who together have pledged more than \$25 million to grow and deepen PJ Library's work. Alliance members pledge a minimum of \$1 million to support and shape PJ Library.

Over the next five years the PJ Library Alliance will further our ability to build on these achievements and broaden and extend the scope of PJ Library. Some of our goals:

CONTRIBUTE to the canon of great Jewish children's literature

SUPPORT thousands of parents hosting Jewish experiences in their own homes

MOTIVATE community partner organizations to grow PJ Library to reach more families

TEST engagement strategies through grant funding

PROVIDE professional development opportunities so that partners utilize the best and most up-to-date approaches to service their constituencies

The PJ Library Alliance welcomes new partners! If you are interested in learning more, please contact Will Schneider, will@hgf.org.