



# Jewish Joy for the Very Young

Israeli author and illustrator Varda Livney delivers humor — and comfort — via the inviting cast of characters she creates for PJ Library’s youngest readers.

BY NAOMI SHULMAN, MANAGING EDITOR OF PJ PUBLISHING

Only about 1% of the manuscripts PJ Library receives from authors are selected to become PJ Library books, so having one of your books chosen is a big achievement. Having five of your books chosen? That’s an enormous accomplishment, and Israeli author-illustrator Varda Livney is one of few authors who has done it. If you’ve had a baby or toddler enrolled in PJ Library in the past few years, chances are you’ll recognize Livney’s cozy, funny bunnies (and other characters). Her latest book, *Jewish Cats All Year Round* (PJ Publishing, 2024), will be sent to families of infants in August. *PROOF* chatted with Livney about her inspiration for creating these books and how writing and illustrating has kept her going through especially challenging times.

**Naomi Shulman:** You didn’t start out as a children’s book author. How did you end up doing what you do now?



**Author Varda Livney imbues her books with whimsical warmth.**  
PHOTO COURTESY OF VARDA LIVNEY

**Varda Livney:** I started out in advertising, but then I began creating greeting cards. Writing greeting cards is kind of like writing really short books, which is perfect when you’ve got little kids and a short attention span! Around that same time, I got my foot in the door at Simon & Schuster, illustrating children’s books — and then I wrote and illustrated one of my own: *What I Like About Passover* (Little Simon, 2002). Then my kids grew up and didn’t need as much care, so I

decided to try my hand at books again.

**NS:** You create board books geared toward the very youngest audience: babies and toddlers. What inspires you to make your books? Do you have children in your life who you have in mind as you create?

**VL:** I had a very warm and fuzzy Jewish upbringing. I want to help share that with

other people, and it starts from babyhood. When you're little, you're a sponge. Things are familiar to you growing up, and you might not even remember later why you know it. My kids were very inspiring, but they're grown, and they don't do the same funny little toddler things. But now I have a great-niece and a great-nephew, and they're just as funny. I like humorous books, and I want my books to be fun for parents to read too. When I'm working on my projects, I'm amusing myself and hoping they'll also entertain other people.

**NS:** You're originally from the US, but now you live in Israel. I imagine this year has been hard; how are you in this moment?

**VL:** I'm lucky — my immediate family is safe. The first week [after the October 7 attack], everyone was in shock and horror. Then people went into Jewish-mama mode, making meals, and collecting and sending items. Everyone came together. The younger generation, they're so amazing. There have been a lot of people helping each other and showing up for each other. I'm never going to be the head of a peace movement, but what can I do? I hope to help bring about world peace through drawing bunnies. Art is absolutely an outlet for me.

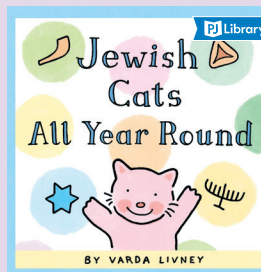
**NS:** We're excited to send out your latest PJ Publishing book, *Jewish Cats All Year Round*, which shows cats (and mice) celebrating Jewish holidays. What inspired this one?

**VL:** A few months ago, we had some cousins from Texas visit, and the kids kept count of how many cats they had seen running around Israel. I don't think cats are inherently funny — but a cat making *sukkah* decorations? Now that cracks me up. I hope babies and families will find it funny imagining their cats or dogs or parakeets making *sukkah* decorations or blowing a shofar.

**NS:** PJ Library has sent out a lot of your books, some of which have been published by PJ Publishing (our in-house imprint) and brought to market with the support of committed funding partners. How has your relationship with PJ Library encouraged you?

**VL:** I am a total PJ Library fangirl. Besides putting books in kids' hands, Harold Grinspoon and the crew have helped make it possible for writers and illustrators to spend more time doing what they love and believe in and less time waitressing! 📖

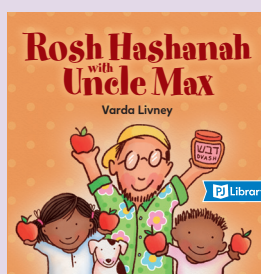
## FAVORITE BOOKS BY VARDALIVNEY



### *Jewish Cats All Year Round*

► Age 0  
PJ Publishing

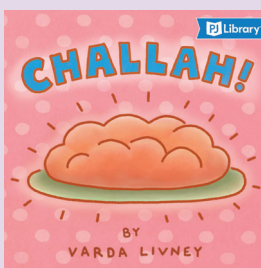
Jewish cats (and their mouse friends) celebrate Jewish holidays all year long ... and so can Jewish babies!



### *Rosh Hashanah with Uncle Max*

► Age 1  
Kar-Ben Publishing

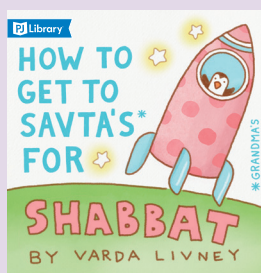
Today is Rosh Hashanah, the Jewish New Year, and the whole family is coming together to celebrate.



### *Challah!*

► Age 3  
PJ Publishing

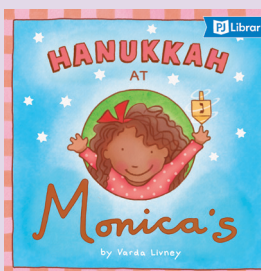
Louis is a Shabbat-loving baby bunny whose first — and only — word is “challah!” Will his parents ever get him to say anything else?



### *How to Get to Savta's for Shabbat*

► Age 3  
PJ Publishing

Through the jungle, down the slide, up to the moon, and onto a cloud ... this journey to Shabbat dinner is full of adventure!



### *Hanukkah at Monica's*

► Age 3  
PJ Publishing

Monica's house is the place to be for a candle-lighting, dreidel-spinning, latke-frying good time. Octopuses, jellyfish, and robots all agree!