

THE HOPE OF ISRAEL

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May 2021 was a terrible time in Israel.

But on May 24, days after a tentative ceasefire took hold, a group of Jewish and Arab Israelis gathered at Beit Ha'Gefen, the Arab-Jewish Culture Center in Haifa, Israel. They were there to celebrate the dedication of the Galina Vromen Reading Corner. The space is a fitting tribute to our dear friend and colleague Galina Vromen and her work to advance Israeli society through children's books.

Galina joined the Harold Grinspoon Foundation back in 2002 on a lark. She was a journalist with a love of travel and an interest in languages and cultures, but after meeting with my father-in-law, she decided to give philanthropy a try. Harold had formed the Foundation with a mission to support the Jewish community and the State of Israel. Galina was the perfect person to develop the Israel grants strategy; not only did she speak Hebrew, but she also had the smarts and the tenacity to drive projects forward.

As PJ Library was gaining popularity here in the United States and Canada, we began to ask ourselves whether a similar program would be a good fit in Israel. Galina was challenged with the task of figuring out how to create such a program, and shortly thereafter, Sifriyat Pijama, the PJ Library book program in Hebrew, launched. Not long after the institution of Sifriyat Pijama, its sister program for Arab-speaking Israeli kids, Maktabat al-Fanoos, followed. Both programs are made possible thanks to the close partnership Galina created with the Israeli Ministry of Education and with other generous funders who, like us, want to support Israel's work to advance literacy and culture. As of today, these award-winning programs have delivered over 30 million free books to children across Israel.

When Galina announced her plans for retirement after 18 years with the Foundation, we wanted to honor her outsized contributions in an enduring way. We were fortunate to find Beit Ha'Gefen. The mission of the



Galina Vromen with current and former colleagues at the dedication ceremony of the Galina Vromen Reading Corner at Beit Ha'Gefen

organization is to recognize and honor the different cultural, ethnic, and religious identities within Israel and create space for dealing with their complexity. It is a mission that resonates deeply within us. This multicultural center was the perfect place to honor Galina, with a brightly lit space designed for kids and children's books in both Hebrew and Arabic.

At a beautiful ceremony before Jewish, Muslim, and Christian friends and colleagues, Galina shared remarks that acknowledged the complex and very real and painful divisions among Israelis but also the many shared values that filled the room. She expressed her thanks to the many people who make these book programs possible and shared a moving story attributed to Yoel Peretz, a storyteller from Haifa, that inspired thoughts of a better future. As she concluded her speech, Galina expressed her own abiding wish: "I hope the Galina Vromen Reading Corner will further the vision of the Foundation and of Beit Ha'Gefen, that it will become a space for children and parents to enjoy, to grow, and just to be. In peace." It is a hope we share for the kids of Haifa and for all of Israel.