

Sifriyat Pijama

HEBREW BOOKS COME TO LIFE IN ISRAEL



SIFRIYAT PIJAMA AND SIFRIYAT PIJAMA FOR LITTLE KIDS together reach 360,000 children in Israel. As the Israeli version of PJ Library, Sifriyat Pijama is adapted to suit Israeli society. It is a classroom-based program, operated by Keren Grinspoon Israel (Hebrew for Grinspoon Israel Foundation) in partnership with the Israeli Ministry of Education.

Like PJ Library, Sifriyat Pijama offers children and their families an opportunity to expand their home library and to create a tradition of

reading bedtime stories together and enjoying meaningful conversations on values and heritage. The program distributes high-quality literary books carefully chosen to invite discussion on values and Jewish/Israeli heritage in school and at home. Children are introduced to the books in class, and then they take them home to keep and enjoy.

We spoke with Galina Vromen, director of Sifriyat Pijama, to find out more about the program and how Sifriyat Pijama books come to life.

Unlike PJ Library, Sifriyat Pijama distributes books through schools. Why?

Israeli mailboxes are very small, and anything the size of a book has to be picked up at the post office – usually places where lines are long, particularly on Friday mornings, which is the only time most parents have time to do errands while children are still in school. I saw the classroom as a better venue for book distribution and soon discovered the tremendous value teachers would bring to the program. The teacher is the one who introduces the book to the classroom, usually reading the book in class 2-4 times, and often carries out book-related discussion or activities with the children. So by the time the book goes home, the child is really the family “expert” about the book – a very empowering experience for a small child.

What is the impact of the program on underserved populations?

A study by the Ministry of Education found that in 37% of the homes in the program, Sifriyat Pijama books were either the only or predominant children’s books in the home. That alone gives a sense of our impact. For immigrant children and their families, Sifriyat Pijama books are also an introduction to Israeli culture. It is a way for immigrant parents to be exposed to Israeli classical writers (such as Haim Bialik and Leah Goldberg) as well as contemporary writers such as David Grossman and Meir Shalev, who write for both kids and adults. I was very touched by a Russian mother who wrote to us to say that the first time she read to her child in Hebrew was from a Sifriyat Pijama book her daughter brought home, and by an

Ethiopian father who let us know that the suggestions in the back on book-related discussion ideas had led him to have conversations he had never thought to have with his daughter.

What does Sifriyat Pijama look for in books?

First of all, we are looking for good books with a strong plot, characters children enjoy, a good sense of humor, and great illustrations. We look for books which highlight common Jewish/Israeli heritage in a way that a wide swath of the population can relate to, whether they are religiously observant or not. So, we look for books that revolve around values such as visiting the sick and honoring parents, themes like the specialness of Shabbat, or historical events such as the first concert of the Israel Philharmonic Orchestra, but presented in a way that tells an engaging story and that is not didactic. It might be surprising to Americans, but we don't distribute a lot of books about Jewish holidays. There's a practical reason: We are a school-based program in Israel, and children are on vacation during major Jewish holidays. In addition, since Jewish holidays are national holidays, children are very much exposed to Jewish holidays, and we feel that it makes sense for Sifriyat Pijama to focus more on other aspects of Jewish culture/heritage.

How does Sifriyat Pijama source books to distribute?

We vary our books from year to year and don't repeat books more than once every five years, so the need for new books is always there. We regularly receive manuscripts and book proposals – I don't think there is a children's book author, illustrator, or publisher in Israel who does not know about the program. Some books are also sourced from the English PJ Library program. We also meet with children's book editors on an ongoing basis to brainstorm and discuss what they have in the pipeline and what we think is missing in our lineup. And we keep in touch with staff at Israel's leading art schools who know we are always on the lookout for talented illustrators.

How is Sifriyat Pijama funded?

The Israeli Ministry of Education is our biggest funding partner, providing 48% of funding for the cost of the books and their distribution in preschools and 66% of the funding for the books in first and second grades. The rest of the funding is provided by Keren Grinspoon Israel along with grants from a number of foundations, among them the Harry and Marian Farash Charitable Foundation and WIZO (Women's International Zionist Organization).

It seems as if Sifriyat Pijama has created more opportunities for the community, beyond the classroom and home.

Yes, it does this in several ways. First, Sifriyat Pijama has led to the creation of a cadre of books that underscore common Jewish heritage. Initially, we used mostly existing books, but increasingly we have worked with publishers to create new books or re-illustrate old books. We have sometimes given illustrators and writers their first break, and that's always a thrill. These books take on a life of their own because they continue to be sold by publishers commercially.

In addition, each year many children's theaters and storytellers develop performances based on books from our list and market them to schools, libraries, and community centers because they see it as an advantage – schools are interested in plays that are based on books the children know through our program, and young children like to see performances based on stories they already know. It's a win-win all around. Also, libraries sometimes organize exhibitions of what the preschools have done with the books, like art work and other book-related activities. As Sifriyat Pijama grows we strive to enhance efforts to supplement the program at the community level.



GALINA VROMEN has worked for the Harold Grinspoon Foundation (HGF) for the past 15 years, initially as director of special projects and Israel grants at the Foundation's head office in Massachusetts. She returned to her native Israel in 2008 and became the founding director of Sifriyat Pijama. Before joining HGF, she was an international journalist – in Mexico, France, the Netherlands, England, and Israel. She holds a BA in anthropology and mass media from Hampshire College and a master's in English literature from Bar-Ilan University.
