



## MY JEWISH JOURNEY, ONE STEP AT A TIME

**By Yoko Cisinski**

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**If you had told me 10 years ago that I would be sharing Jewish storybooks with families in Tokyo, I don't think I would have believed you.** And yet, now I run the PJ Library program in Japan, fostering community around Jewish storybooks that impact more than 40 children and their families with the hope of bringing PJ Library to even more families in the future.

I was born and raised in the countryside of northern Japan. As a child, I went to a Christian kindergarten (though my family is not Christian, it was the closest public kindergarten from our home) where I was exposed to old stories from the Bible, learning prayers and even going to Sunday school. Looking back, I think it played a role in forming my spirituality and the idea that there is something bigger than humanity. If I hadn't had those experiences as a child, I may not have even thought about becoming Jewish.

I started learning about Judaism after I got engaged to my now husband, a French expatriate who was working in Japan, and I officially converted just before our wedding so that we could have a Jewish ceremony. Upon my conversion, I didn't have a clear view of what Jewish family life would look like. All I knew was that my Jewish journey had started and that I wanted to continue studying with our children once they were born. Raising our children Jewish was important to both of us, and I wanted to ensure I could bring Jewish life into our home in a meaningful way, especially since I was new to Judaism and we weren't surrounded by a large

Jewish community. I took it one step at a time. One day, I baked challah for Shabbat just to try, and then over time it became a routine that now includes the prayers and family Shabbat dinner with our kids.

When our first daughter was 10 months old, we moved to Singapore and found a small-yet-thriving Jewish community. A little over a year later, our lives changed when PJ Library came to Singapore. Unlike in the US, the books didn't arrive in our mailboxes; a wonderful mother-son duo organized the PJ Library program as part of the boy's bar mitzvah project, and each month they would deliver the books to the local Hebrew school where we would pick them up.

Though PJ Library was always an important part of our family, it made the biggest impact in our home when my daughter started reading on her own at 5 years old. She would read to her 2-year-old sister and began asking questions about Jewish values and traditions. The books were so helpful for starting conversations and even supported my own Jewish education; I didn't have any Jewish childhood experiences of my own to draw from, so the books helped fill in the gaps. I was learning along with my daughters!

When we returned to Tokyo a couple of years ago, I was disappointed to find out that there wasn't funding for a PJ Library program at the time. My daughters relied on their PJ Library books for comfort and consistency since their environment had changed so much from what they knew in Singapore, but I was thankful for the PJ Library books we already had at home. Fortunately, a few months later, the Jewish community center received funding for a PJ Library program to support families in Tokyo, thanks to the **Inspiration Fund**, an Ohio-based foundation. ....

Before books could arrive, they needed a coordinator to manage logistics and bring the community together. I was so excited about the program that I said I would help, thinking I'd just be delivering books throughout the communities. Little did I realize that I'd actually be running it!

I'm so proud of the PJ Library program that we've created in Tokyo, and I'm excited to watch it grow. My family still benefits from PJ Library, and the books have helped my daughters develop their cultural identities as they grow up. PJ Library is a great program not just for kids, but parents too since we read together. My daughters beg their father to read *Adam's Animals* to them every night, which has created a special Jewish moment for our family. I've learned a lot sharing Judaism and PJ Library books with my family and other families in my community, and I'm still learning.

# From Toledo to Tokyo



## SUPPORTING PJ LIBRARY GLOBALLY

When traveling abroad, we always explore the Jewish community in the country we are visiting. We find it so interesting to observe Jewish traditions in different parts of the world and always feel an immediate connection with the Jewish individuals we meet. It is merely physical distance that separates us. We want Jewish children in different parts of the world to experience the same wonderful benefits that PJ Library has provided to the children in our local community.

We are excited to be able to play a role in helping to provide PJ Library to Jewish children in cities around the world, such as in Tokyo, Japan.

Our goal is to give children the opportunity to participate in PJ Library, a program that will enhance their lives and instill important values they will carry with them through adulthood. It's about giving children the tools to become the best that they can be.

We are proud to be part of this worthwhile and exciting program that is dedicated to the youngest members and future of the world's Jewish community.

### ► **By the Inspiration Fund**

We originally became aware of PJ Library by reading about it in the *Toledo Jewish News*, the monthly publication from the Jewish Federation of Greater Toledo, and talking to family and friends whose children and grandchildren thoroughly enjoyed it.

PJ Library has always been very successful in the Toledo, Ohio, metropolitan area. The director of programming who coordinates and executes the many events and activities in the area does an excellent job and makes every effort to grow PJ Library in the community. The original Toledo funders of PJ Library had great foresight; they jumped on the PJ Library bandwagon early and tirelessly worked to make it a phenomenal success in our area. When the opportunity presented itself, we were thrilled to get involved with the local funding of PJ Library. Because we have seen firsthand how PJ Library greatly enhances young Jewish lives, we decided to extend our reach beyond the US.

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*If you are interested in supporting global PJ Library programs and giving to the PJ Library International Fund, contact Will Schneider, director of fundraising and community advancement for PJ Library, at [will@hgf.org](mailto:will@hgf.org) or 413-276-0716.*