

# TELLING STORIES IN THE FIRST-PERSON PLURAL

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When my son was about 3 years old, we visited my great aunt. She was 102 at the time, the oldest person my son had ever met. He sat quietly at my side for a while, watching her cautiously from across the room, and then, with more than a trace of wonder in his voice, he whispered in my ear, “Was she actually in *Mitzrayim*?”

Mitzrayim – the ancient land of Egypt where our ancestors were slaves to Pharaoh. Where, as we recite at the Passover seder each year, we were slaves to Pharaoh: *avadim hayinu*. And the Holy One brought us out from there with a strong hand and an outstretched arm.

**This, in some way, is our story of stories. We tell it in the first-person plural so that we and our children learn to take it personally. At the seder, we don't just tell the story; we eat it, quite literally internalizing it to make it our own.** By the age of 3, our son had already tasted enough matzah and dipped enough parsley in saltwater tears to have metabolized the story of our people's Exodus from Egypt not as a distant legend but as intimate family lore. Here he was, meeting our oldest living relative. Maybe she actually remembered what it was like to be a slave, to face the forbidding Reed Sea (also known as the Red Sea), and to experience freedom for the first time.

As his mother, I, too, had been hearing the story of our Exodus from Egypt for as long as I could remember. It was a story that had long since left the page and entered my life in important and sometimes unexpected ways. I remember as a teenager going to my mother, upset about a situation that felt desperate to me at the time. “Imagine,” she said, “just think how the Israelites must have felt standing at the Reed Sea with the Egyptian army closing in behind them. If they had hope, so can you!”

I don't remember if, as a distraught teenager, I fully appreciated this perspective at the time – I doubt it! But it was a gift my mother gave me many times over – the ability to hold this and other stories close. To know that I was not alone. The stories we tell again and again become part of us, and we, in turn, become part of them. They accompany us, anchor us, comfort, cajole, and even command us: “You shall not oppress the stranger for you were strangers in the land of Egypt. You know the heart of the stranger.”



Years later, when my son was a teenager and battling a serious illness, the story of the Exodus was with me again, this time not so much as prose but as prayer. Adrift in the fear of that uncertain time, the only prayer I could muster was my older brother's meditation on our daily liturgical recitation from the Song at the Sea: “The God of Exodus throws open the door of the Reed Sea for every human being trapped in desperate straits. The secret which we conceal from each other but which this prayer seeks to expose is that each one of us at times finds ourselves standing trapped at the sea with the pounding of horse hooves behind us ... How the opening occurs is not explained. Sometimes it does not even look like an opening. We bring it about through our own efforts, but it comes upon us by surprise and beyond our control.”

I don't remember how I responded when my son asked me whether his great-great-aunt had actually been in Mitzrayim. But I hope I whispered back, “Yes, she was. We were all there. And we all went forth together. We are all going forth together still.”

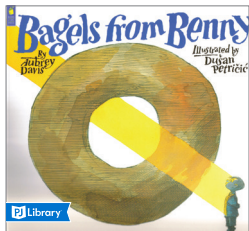
# A COMMUNITY OF COMMUNITIES IN PJ LIBRARY BOOKS

**The best stories — the ones that resonate deeply with the human experience — are timeless and cross-cultural.** Certain folktales pop up in various forms around the globe because they speak to truths that people know in their bones, no matter who they are or where they're from. No one understands this better than the Jewish people. We Jews are often described as "the people of the Book"; at the heart of it all, we are a community woven together by stories.

In fact, the Jewish people contain multiple communities: Orthodox, Reform, Conservative; Ashkenazi, Sephardi, Mizrahi; American, Israeli ... you name it. And yet many of us, from the most engaged to the least, know the story of our Exodus from Egypt. It is, as Rabbi Anisfeld says, our story of stories. But it is hardly the only one.

PJ Library is building on the foundation that already supports the Jewish people and has for millennia. Just as we are a community of communities, our titles are varied and cross-cultural, but the through line is the same. With each book we send, we open the world of Jewish stories to families and invite them to strengthen their place in the larger Jewish story.

**Want examples? We've got hundreds of them. Here are just a few:**



## Bagels from Benny

**Written by** Aubrey Davis  
**Illustrated by** Dusan Petric

Benny loves helping his grandpa bake bagels, and customers love those bagels! When

Grandpa tells Benny that God is responsible for those bagels, Benny understands him literally — and tries to thank God by placing some bagels in the Torah ark in the synagogue before Shabbat each week. The bagels keep disappearing, so Benny assumes God is enjoying them. When he finds out who has really been eating those bagels, his understanding of God broadens — and so does ours. This beautiful story, based on an old tale about the 16th-century Hasidic sage Rabbi Yitzhak Luria, is every bit as relevant today as when it was first told.

**Ages:**  
5 to 6  
years

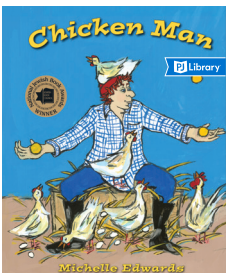


## When Jessie Came Across the Sea

**Written by** Amy Hest  
**Illustrated by** P.J. Lynch

Though the Exodus from Egypt is significant for all Jews, American Jews have also been shaped by an exodus of a different kind: the massive wave of immigration from Eastern Europe to North America at the turn of the 20th century. In this story, Jessie is chosen by her rabbi to make the arduous journey across the Atlantic — alone! Once on the Lower East Side of Manhattan, she learns a trade, goes to school, and even falls in love. Her bravery, resilience, and growth inspire readers no matter which country their families came from or what their immigration stories look like.

**Ages:**  
6 to 8  
years



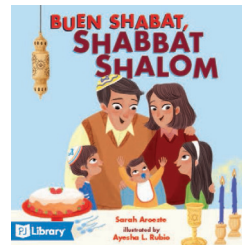
## Chicken Man

**Written and illustrated by** Michelle Edwards

This sweet snapshot of early kibbutz living has an important message tucked in. Rody, aka Chicken Man, loves working in the chicken coop on

his kibbutz in Israel's Jezreel Valley. In fact, he takes so much joy in his tasks that others on the kibbutz start to feel jealous and ask if they can have that job! Rody is moved from the chicken coop to the laundry room, and then to the orchard, and then to the *gan* (children's house). But somehow, no matter which job he's given, he manages to make it seem fun. Could it be that it's less about the jobs and more about his attitude? Spoiler alert: Rody is eventually transferred back to the chicken coop, and no one is happier about that than Rody — except maybe the chickens!

**Ages:**  
4 to 5  
years



## Buen Shabat, Shabbat Shalom

**Written by** Sarah Aroeste  
**Illustrated by** Ayesha L. Rubio

In the words of the Israeli writer and thinker Ahad Ha'am, "More than the Jews have kept Shabbat, Shabbat has kept the Jews." That's why every Friday evening around the globe, Jews everywhere gather together to sing, pray, eat, and, of course, rest. This simple story depicts a Shabbat scene in a South American setting, and each page includes a word in Ladino, the language once spoken by Sephardic Jews. While some of the words may be new to many families, the rituals will be comfortingly familiar, underscoring that no matter our various backgrounds, we Jews are members of the same tribe.

**Ages:**  
6 mo. to  
2 years