

How partnership creates opportunity for Russian-speaking Jews

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AS A CHILD, MY FAVORITE BOOKS included such titles as *Kolobok* and *Dr. Aybolit* and the poems of Agniya Barto. If these don't ring a bell, it's probably because you did not grow up in the Soviet Union in the 1980s. Likewise, in the 1990s, after my family moved to the United States, I was at an utter loss when American friends or TV shows referred to Dr. Seuss, *The Giving Tree*, Amelia Bedelia, or other beloved mainstays of children's literature. This lack of a shared canon always underscored my sense of being an immigrant. I love the stories of my childhood, but I also missed being in on the joke or knowing the reference.

Today my 5-year-old daughter can spot the big white envelope, with a blue logo and her name on it, from across the room. She does not know it yet, but it is this envelope that, month by month, is giving her a shared canon of literature with Jewish children around the world. It's not hard to imagine her sitting in a dorm room years from now and laughing at a punch line involving Sammy Spider with her roommates from any one of the 17 countries where PJ Library is reaching families today.

I am lucky to not only be a PJ Library mom but to also have had a hand in helping PJ Library grow in scope and scale through a partnership between the Harold Grinspoon Foundation and Genesis Philanthropy Group (GPG). PJ Library is uniquely broad in its appeal and extremely versatile, giving it tremendous potential to further GPG's mission of strengthening the Jewish identity of the Russian-speaking Jews (RSJ) around the world. The openness and dedication of the PJ Library team has made

possible an engagement strategy based on both the best practices of the program and the specific needs of the Russian-speaking community. By leveraging local Russian-speaking Jewish professionals, who became critical advocates of the program to the RSJ population, today PJ Library books reach thousands of Russian-speaking Jewish families across North America. Many of these families also participate in specially designed "beyond the books" engagement opportunities to further their connection to their community and each other.

Neither the Harold Grinspoon Foundation, nor we at GPG, were willing to stop with North America. We collaborated on a PJ Library pilot program in Moscow in the Russian language that launched in December 2015. Today, 7,000 children and their families in communities across Russia are also a part of the PJ Library experience.

I believe PJ Library to be a unique project, which has shown the continued relevancy of books in the information age. In the wild and endless sea of digital distractions, it has created an anchor of quality, a dedicated stream of reliable content that, like a compass, helps to guide the next generation to the vision of a common Jewish identity based on shared Jewish stories and ideas.

The universality of the medium of the printed word proves itself again and again to be a great common denominator. Each PJ Library book is a building block for the future of Jewish peoplehood, answering the needs of parents seeking cultural enrichment, an introduction or a resource on the Jewish calendar, or simply, a bedtime story to share. Thus, "Jewish reading" becomes a pastime to enjoy, not a chore to be endured.

Beyond those considerations, however, there is also a tremendous effect on a child's sense of self, since PJ Library books are in many cases the first-ever pieces of correspondence children receive in their own name. This show of respect is much more than just a gesture. It is a recognition of the child as a growing individual and a demonstration of faith in his or her intellectual capabilities. PJ Library doesn't just educate and entertain – it empowers.

Now, as we begin a new chapter of cooperation between PJ Library and GPG in the United Kingdom, where we go beyond Russian speakers to focus wider on underserved Jewish families around the country, regardless of where they were born, I am certain that PJ Library's unique mission and our partnership are vital for ensuring our common Jewish future – one book at a time, one child at a time, and one family at a time, mine included.

Visit gpg.org for more information about Genesis Philanthropy Group.



RUSSIAN-SPEAKING JEWS

During the 70 years of Soviet rule, Russian-speaking Jews in the Soviet Union were denied basic freedoms and opportunities for self-fulfillment. Their passports listed most of them as Jewish, providing ample opportunities for anti-Semitism and limiting their abilities to enter some universities, get jobs, and advance in their personal or professional lives. At the same time, there was almost no opportunity to engage Jewishly in society or at home. When the gates of the Soviet empire first cracked, and then fell, many Soviet Jews came to America in search of better lives for themselves and their children. Decades of grassroots advocacy in America also played a crucial role in the emigration of Soviet Jews.

An American success story today, Jews from the former Soviet Union have been able to establish themselves as an integral part of Jewish communities across North America. And now, the children of those immigrants are becoming parents themselves. These new parents grew up as Americans. They went to American schools and colleges, they watched *90210* and *Saved by the Bell*, and they listened to New Kids on the Block and Madonna. But they also grew up in homes where everyone spoke Russian. They spent their summers with grandma learning physics and chess, not in a Jewish camp. They celebrated Jewish holidays with Soviet-Jewish family dishes. For the most part, they didn't have a friend or a relative who would suggest Hillel or a gap year in Israel. In short, while being thoroughly Americanized in many ways, in terms of their Jewish identification and associations, they look a lot more like their parents than their American contemporaries.

Now, when Russian-speaking Jews of this generation are taking their place in Jewish communities – as participants, contributors, and volunteers – they also seek to give their children the high-quality Jewish cultural content that they themselves missed. Here, their needs and the mission of PJ Library meet in perfect union and create a tremendous opportunity, which the Harold Grinspoon Foundation and Genesis Philanthropy Group are working to harness.