



South Africa's First PJ Library Graduates

The first cohort of kids to enroll in PJ Library in South Africa recently celebrated their graduation. Their proud parents look back, and ahead.

BY JOSHUA SEVITZ

Leora Hessen has watched her daughter, Eden, gain much more than a library of Jewish-themed books from PJ Library over the years. The stories helped teach her independence, empathy, and the power of learning, to name a few.

“Receiving these books helped ignite a passion for reading in my child by exposing her to captivating stories,” Leora says. “The books have helped Eden explore different worlds, cultures, and perspectives, sparking her curiosity and imagination.”

Last November, Leora watched as Eden, age 8, joined her fellow second-grade classmates for a special graduation ceremony at their Jewish

In Jewish day schools across South Africa, second-graders held PJ Library graduation ceremonies.

PHOTO COURTESY OF UNITED HERZLIA SCHOOLS, CAPE TOWN, SOUTH AFRICA

day school. One by one, educators presented the kids with certificates. The children then sent letters of thanks to PJ Library in a bright red mailbox as they bid farewell to the program they had grown to love over the past five years.

Eden and her classmates were among some 1,200 Jewish children across South Africa who celebrated a unique milestone: They became the first cohort of kids in the country to graduate from PJ Library. Established in 2017 thanks to the generosity of the Gore family in memory of Daniella Moffson (see the sidebar for more), PJ Library in South Africa has become a beloved fixture in Jewish schools that parents of graduates say they will miss.

Across North America, PJ Library books arrive in the mail, but around the world, books are sometimes distributed in classrooms or at pickup locations. In South Africa, PJ Library serves about 2,200 children in 23 Jewish day schools, in partnership with King David Schools in Johannesburg and United Herzlia Schools in Cape Town.

Kids receive books in class once a month for eight months each school year, from age 3 to age 8. Preschool children wear their pajamas to school every month on book distribution day. “The younger children know that when they wear pj’s to school, they will be gifted a new book,” explains Andi Hendler, PJ Library’s Cape Town coordinator. “It’s a very exciting day!”

Teachers read books aloud in class and lead engaging activities for children tied to each story’s theme. After reading *What’s the Buzz? Honey for a Sweet New Year*, children got to meet a professional beekeeper. Kids baked cheesecake (while wearing their PJ Library aprons!) when they read *Cheesecake for Shavuot*. And students wrote get-well cards for young patients at a local children’s hospital after reading *Bear Feels Sick*. After each classroom activity, children take their books home to read with their families.

“As a school-based program, our teachers use PJ Library books to broaden Jewish values in the classroom and engage parents in the partnership between school and home,” Hendler says. “The most significant feedback we receive from parents and grandparents is their gratitude for supporting a love of reading and Jewish values in their homes. This demonstrates the value of PJ Library in building connections and promoting Jewish identity within the community.”


For Joanne Goldstein, whose son, Maxx, 9, is one of the graduates, PJ Library offered a chance for her family to learn together. “PJ Library puts the responsibility and the joy of Jewish teaching into the hands of parents — however much or little we may feel we know. The books give us the tools and the confidence to be our children’s teachers,” Joanne shares. “PJ Library really expanded our son’s Jewish literacy and knowledge — and did the same for whoever was lucky enough to read the books with him. He loved the feeling that he, the child, was teaching us, the parents, too.”

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ANDI HENDLER

Adds Leora: “These stories have enabled [Eden] to comprehend the essence of being Jewish and how to embody the qualities of a mensch.”

As Eden and Maxx graduate (with dozens of PJ Library books in their personal bookcases!), their mothers say they hope to continue what the program helped inspire: a family tradition of reading, discovery, and joy.

“PJ Library makes it so easy to connect with both the child and the beautiful values of our faith,” says Joanne. “Without it, we as parents just need to work that little bit harder to bring such moments into our busy daily lives with our kids. PJ Library was a wonderful jump start; it’s up to us to keep that engine running.” 

Joshua Sevitz is head of Jewish life and education at King David Schools and the director of PJ Library in South Africa.

WITH THANKS

PJ Library in South Africa is made possible by the Gore family, whose generous support honors their niece of blessed memory, Daniella Moffson.

Daniella grew up in New York City, attending Jewish day school and Jewish summer camp, while maintaining strong ties with her family in South Africa. Deeply moved by Jewish values, she spent a gap year studying in Israel, where she volunteered with Magen David Adom and at a foster home for disadvantaged youth. She returned to study premed at Barnard College.

On January 13, 2016, Daniella was tragically killed in a bus accident in Honduras. After a week of volunteering with the Columbia University chapter of Global Brigades, the bus in which Daniella was traveling crashed on its way to the airport. She died as she lived — giving to others.

Daniella’s family helped establish PJ Library in South Africa as part of their commitment to carrying on her legacy. According to Daniella’s aunt Lauren, the program epitomizes what Daniella cared about most: giving to others, promoting Jewish values, honoring tradition and history, and being welcoming to all.