

Jewish Federations and PJ Library



By Jerry Silverman

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PJ LIBRARY CAME AT AN IMPORTANT TIME FOR JEWISH FEDERATIONS – after a recession and as the world was changing, when federations needed to reconsider what it meant to reach out to community. Relational strategies were in the zeitgeist. Many organizations were experimenting with getting inside of participants’ lives rather than demanding they show up in formal spaces. Curious leaders of Jewish federations were asking, “How do we make connections between our historic and sacred network of organizations and people’s living rooms?”

Amcha, the people, were increasingly staying where they were (we thought), but our institutions still provided opportunities for fulfillment, joy, and Jewish exploration. Some agencies were offering opportunities for Jewish federations to invest in their relational experiments, but these were only early investments, too distant to be influential on federations’ strategies. In a relational environment, how could Jewish federation leaders change how they think about Jewish education, including program methodologies, funding, and metrics? PJ Library offered a response to all of this.

More than 90% of Jewish federations fund PJ Library. In most communities, federations also play a role in operating the program. Many accompany the books with strategies meant to engage more families deeper in Jewish life. Through relational connectors, PJ Library subscribers form playgroups, participate in tzedakah projects, and come together en masse to celebrate holidays with crafts, stories, and ritual. They sing the Havdalah blessings over ice cream in town squares and crowd into bookstore corners for storytime.

As they developed these initiatives, Jewish federations needed to adapt and consider the implications of a program like PJ Library for their work. Many of these considerations may seem old hat now, but ten years ago we had only instincts (not proof texts) for all of this. Being in ice cream shops and bookstores, working with people who aren’t members, creating a program outside of agency walls – all of that needed to be figured out, learned, and practiced.

Some of our best creativity has emerged in thinking through how we introduce PJ Library subscribers to camp, preschool, and day school. We’ve figured out part of the answer, that introductions come in slow tastes of these programs (an afternoon, a day, a Shabbat), and federations will continue to build wider and longer pipelines.

Ten years ago, PJ Library gave federations a laboratory in which to study all of these principles, enabling federations to successfully do this kind of engagement work with families with young children and then apply the same principles to teens, 20-somethings, families with school-age children, and empty nesters.

For Jewish federations, PJ Library has brought to life what Jewish engagement and community can look like today: diverse, accessible, life-based, relational, and rooted in doing. It has become the centerpiece of a robust Jewish engagement agenda.

It is not surprising to me that PJ Library was the brainchild of Harold Grinspoon, a breakthrough thinker and one of the *g’dolim* (Hebrew for greatest) of our time. The Harold Grinspoon Foundation has been an invaluable leader. The product is fresh and continually interesting. It is supportive of implementing professionals, shown by the annual PJ Library International Conference, the many in-person and web-based learning opportunities, and the online resource center offering how-tos, downloads, and guidelines.

I am deeply grateful for this precious gift to the Jewish community. I know it will continue to impact countless lives for many years to come.