



PJ Library and the 14th Street Y at the SUMMER IN THE SQUARE

BY RABBI SHIRA KOCH EPSTEIN AND BECKY SKOFF



WE NEVER THOUGHT we would find ourselves in a tent in Union Square, squawking like a chicken and yelling, “Gey Avek Du Fahrstunkeneh Katz!” More than 100 parents, nannies, and children sat in our tent in a New York City public thoroughfare, learning about a Jewish country chicken named Yetta, her new Spanish-speaking city-parrot friends, and how kindness can unite us all across cultures.

For the last two summers, the 14th Street Y, PJ Library, and the Union Square Partnership have joined forces to present Summer in the Square, weekly public programming grounded in Jewish values. Through interactive PJ Library readings and sing-a-longs, we brought the books to life in the middle of the hustle and bustle of downtown Manhattan. The events were free and open to anyone who walked into our tent.

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Summer in the Square offered us a way to reach unaffiliated, intermarried, and hard-to-reach families, including those that may feel intimidated walking into an unfamiliar space, with an opportunity to engage in a Jewish activity with no barrier to entry. We strove to communicate to those ambivalent about exclusively Jewish spaces that we want to speak to Jews and non-Jews alike.

Our team roved Union Square inviting people to non-religious Jewish story time for ALL children. Our storytellers were prepared to unpack each sensibility to offer meaningful content for all, with the potential for special richness for those who embrace Judaism. For Shabbat, we asked how people take breaks — and where and how their religion or culture helped enrich these breaks. Then we celebrated that Shabbat is a gift, allowing us a

break and inviting us to welcome our loved ones to celebrate with us with meaningful rituals and traditions.

We learned of our success as we talked to participants. A Catholic mother with a baby told us she had been searching for a way to bring her husband's Jewish faith into their household, but that she didn't know where to start. She had never heard of PJ Library and was ecstatic to hear there was a resource she could use at home. She told us this was the first Jewish program she had attended where she did not feel "stared at."

Our community catalyst, Laura Newmark, plays an integral role in continuing to cultivate and follow-up with these families, especially those unfamiliar with Jewish programming. One parent said to Laura, "What a treat to see so many children of all races and religions coming together

to enjoy stories and music based in Jewish values. The PJ Library books have such a magical way of bringing together Jewish values in a way that is so pertinent to everyone in today's society. Summer in the Square is such a wonderful experience as a whole, and story time with PJ Library is a great fit to round out the afternoon."

In *Beautiful Yetta*, the lost Yiddish chicken has a life changing adventure after happening upon an unexpected green parrot in the middle of the city — soon joining a community where she becomes a leader. Like that parrot, Summer in the Square engaged new families in fun, brought them together in conversation about Jewish sensibilities, and whetted their appetite for future involvement. We are grateful to PJ Library books, musicians, and ideas to help us to reach more of *aundzer tayere kinder* (our dear children).

About **14TH STREET Y**

The 14th Street Y is a cultural hub in downtown Manhattan, providing services for the entire community from health and fitness and personal training to camp and after school programs to arts and culture programming. No matter what your interests you have a place here and all members are invited to try out the many offerings, activities, and facilities.

About **DOWNTOWN JEWISH LIFE**

DJL is a collective, made up of 20 to 30 downtown New York Jewish organizations and individuals, that seeks to build a connected, culturally engaged community that is open and welcoming to all.

For more information, or to become a member, visit 14STREETY.ORG or call 646-395-4310.