

# Nurturing Diversity in Jewish Kidlit

BY PAMELA EHRENBURG

PROUD PJ LIBRARY AUTHOR AND PARENT

**WHEN MY DAUGHTER'S FIRST PJ LIBRARY BOOK** arrived in the mail in 2005, I was a nervous first-time mom on an extended maternity leave with a heavy focus on finishing my first novel during naptimes. If you had told me then that one day thousands of children would be reading a Jewish picture book about Indian food, and that I would be the author, I'm not sure I would have believed you.

In 2005 I was also busy re-engaging with my Jewish community, bringing my daughter to a dynamic Tot Shabbat service in the basement of our synagogue. As she, and then her brother, gradually outgrew racing in circles and grinding Cheerios into the floor, I was able to glance up now and then and manage conversations with other grown-ups. I came to appreciate how much the Jewish community had grown in the time I'd been less connected – and how Tot Shabbat was on the leading edge, welcoming all families and ensuring there was a place in Jewish life for all of us.

Meanwhile, as a reader, I saw PJ Library and others beginning to look at how Jewish kidlit could effectively represent all families in our community – though I also saw much room for progress. I was ready to write... and learn.

My book *Queen of the Hanukkah Dosas* began as a board book, a dosa recipe set to rhyme. PJ Library helped me nurture

a revision that combined the dosa making with another plot I'd originally imagined about making hamentaschen for Purim. Then, after the book found a publishing home, it was PJ Library that ensured the publisher identify an illustrator of Indian background. Of course, this pairing of a Jewish-but-not-Indian author with an Indian-but-not-Jewish illustrator is just one step along the continuum towards true multicultural representation: PJ Library is providing resources that speak to children today, but also preparing them for a time when they grow up to tell their own stories.

Without PJ Library's initial commitment, a book about Indian food on Hanukkah might have been a risky venture for a publisher – PJ Library made this risk feasible. And when the book began receiving wider attention, PJ Library's commitment helped to prove that books featuring diverse characters in general – and diverse Jewish books in particular – are not only essential for kids in our global community but are also part of a sound business plan. By mitigating risk for publishers, PJ Library enables diverse Jewish books to exist in the first place and to stand on their own legs.

This nurturing of diverse Jewish kidlit extends to middle-grade works through PJ Our Way. The manuscript I finished during my 2005 maternity leave turned into the 2007 novel *Ethan, Suspended*. Currently, PJ Our Way is helping to shape it into an updated manuscript that strengthens the novel's Jewish aspects and reflects lessons learned over the past decade about white authors portraying communities of color.

Of course, as my writing has grown, so have my children: It has now been more than a decade since I became a PJ Library parent. As my daughter prepares to become a *bat mitzvah*, I see how our community of those who create, nurture, and select books for young readers is entering a sort of adolescence as well. As Jewish kidlit grows up, we're increasingly aware of goals we haven't yet achieved, heights we haven't yet scaled – and where there's still room for growth.

I'm so honored that PJ Library has created space for me on this shared journey.

