



Finding Our Own **GENIUS** with Harold Grinspoon

IN 2018, HAROLD GRINSPOON, THE CREATOR OF PJ LIBRARY, WON THE SYDNEY TAYLOR BODY-OF-WORK AWARD — ONE OF THE MOST PRESTIGIOUS JEWISH LITERARY HONORS. But when Harold was growing up, none of his teachers ever said, “That kid is going to make his name in the book world.” As a child with undiagnosed dyslexia, Harold struggled with literacy as a student. “I never could spell, I couldn’t write well, and I couldn’t read well either,” he remembers. Teachers had limited understanding of learning differences in those days, so Harold was pretty much on his own. “There was never a conversation about dyslexia at school or at home.”

But there were many conversations about Harold’s emotional state. “I was a screwed-up kid,” he says. “My main feeling then was fury, to be really truthful.” The antisemitism in his neighborhood compounded his struggles. “As a Jew, I got beat up on the stairway of the school and was not invited into other children’s homes.” Harold had a lot to be furious about, and the fact that the adults in his life had little idea of how to help him only made it that much harder. “If you go to school and you’re different, that’s always a problem. Kids like to be the same,” he says. “I was uncoordinated, so I couldn’t play sports. The music teacher even told me not to sing because my voice was so bad! But I wanted to prove that I was not such a screwed-up kid. I decided I was going to make money.”

And that’s just what he did — really well, in fact. Some of the same qualities that made him feel out of step at school — his natural curiosity, coupled with a

(Above) Harold Grinspoon delivers PJ Library’s 3 millionth book in May 2012. In 2020, PJ Library surpassed 41 million Jewish children’s books shared around the world.

perpetual outsider’s perspective — allowed him to notice opportunities that others overlooked. With a keen, insightful eye, for several decades he acquired and sold real estate that other buyers ignored, proving to himself and to those around him that he was indeed not a “screwed-up kid.”

But his idea of what constituted success took a major turn when he received a cancer diagnosis. “Suddenly I didn’t want to just make money anymore. I knew I wanted to give it away Jewishly,” he recalls. “I had to change course.”

With the encouragement of Diane Troderman — Harold’s wife — and guidance from his close friend Rabbi Yitz Greenberg, Harold created the charitable foundation (the Harold Grinspoon Foundation) that carries his name.

But the concept of PJ Library, the flagship program of the Harold Grinspoon Foundation, was all his own. Once again, his natural curiosity and ability to think like an outsider helped him envision a program that would eventually foster Jewish connection in homes around the globe. That the program involved books — the very things that once contributed to Harold’s own sense of disconnection — is both ironic and poetic. But Harold points out that he always liked to read; he just did it slowly and needed to find books that spoke to him. He did it on his own terms — the way he does everything.

AN INTERNATIONAL HONOR:

US Library of Congress Honors Grinspoon Literacy Programs in Israel



In 2009, as PJ Library was first expanding across the United States and Canada, PJ Library's founder Harold Grinspoon launched a partnership with the Israeli Ministry of Education and other funders to bring books to children living in Israel. Today that partnership makes it possible for Grinspoon's Israel-based foundation — Keren Grinspoon Israel (KGI) — to distribute 3.5 million books annually to more than 500,000 Israeli children in preschool through second grade. The partnership supports two book programs: Sifriyat Pijama (Hebrew for "Pajama Library"), a program akin to PJ Library that distributes Jewish-themed stories in Hebrew, and Maktabat al-Fanoos (Arabic for "Lantern Library"), an Arabic early literacy program designed for Arab-Israeli children. In addition to Grinspoon and the Ministry, Price Philanthropies is a longtime generous supporter of Maktabat al-Fanoos.

In September 2020, KGI became the first organization in Israel to be selected as a Library of Congress Literacy Awards Program Best Practice Honoree. The Library of Congress recognizes 15 organizations around the world each year for their promotion of literacy.

KGI received the honor based on a recommendation from Professor David K. Dickinson, Ed.D., the Margaret Cowan Chair of Vanderbilt University's Department of Teaching and Learning. He noted that KGI's programs "provide exactly the type of supports known to nourish early development" through their high-quality books and associated activities.

As part of KGI's programs, once Israeli children are introduced to select books in school, they each receive a personal copy for their home library to enjoy with their family. Just like PJ Library, KGI's programs aim to strengthen children's language skills, values, and ethnic identity; create shared moments of parent-child reading; and stimulate and instill a love of reading.

We are grateful to the generous donors who have joined us and the Israeli Ministry of Education to support these Israel-based programs: the Abraham & Sonia Rochlin Foundation; the Azrieli Foundation; the Baron de Hirsch Fund; the Crown family; the Goldring Family Foundation; the Harry and Jeanette Weinberg Foundation, Inc.; the Jewish Federation of Broward County; the Jewish Federation of Greater Orlando; the Jewish Federation of Metropolitan Chicago; the Koppelman Family Foundation; the Max and Marian Farash Charitable Foundation; the Miriam Yellin-Steklis Memorial Legacy; the Mitzi and Warren Eisenberg Family Foundation; the Morris and Rosalind Goodman Family Foundation; the Naomi Ruth Fund; Price Philanthropies; Gerald Ronson and the Ronson family; the Salomon Family Foundation; Tmura — The Israel Public Venture Fund; and WIZO.

In early 2020, just before schools everywhere closed due to the pandemic, Harold spoke to a group of students at the Shefa School, a Jewish day school in Manhattan that serves students with language-based learning differences. He understood better than most what kind of struggles the students at Shefa face after having difficulty with reading as a child, and he didn't have the advantage of attending a program devoted to meeting his challenges. He has succeeded beyond most people's wildest imaginations — his own included.

"It was an incredible meeting," says Dana Raucher, a parent who attended that talk at Shefa. "Harold connected eye to eye with those kids. He spoke openly and honestly about growing up as a kid who's dyslexic and how that frustration can so easily turn to anger. You can't let that anger guide you." That is, after all, one of the secrets to Harold's successful life story: The best way to get around anger at what you *can't* do is to figure out what you *can* do. "I think the most significant thing is to understand the beauty and nature of what we can all do with our genius," Harold explains. ***"We all have genius in our lives. It's all about having the opportunity to express yourself in the way that's right for you, which I didn't have as a kid. But I have it now."***