



**W**hy is Sifriyat Pijama, Israel's largest family Jewish education program, different from all other Jewish identity programs in Israel? Because it creates a continuous link between children, teachers and parents, using shared books to create a new common language about Jewish values.

Uniquely for a Jewish identity program, it focuses on the very young. At its core lies the Jewish concept of *girsā d'yankuta*, Aramaic for learning with one's mother's milk. It assumes that we develop a lifelong attachment to the stories, narratives, rituals and concepts in which we are immersed as children.

Sifriyat Pijama is the Israeli version of the PJ Library, created by the Harold Grinspoon Foundation. Like its North American counterpart, Sifriyat Pijama gifts high-quality children's books with Jewish content every month to youngsters and their families to enjoy in the privacy of their homes. Both programs are built on the premise that when parents and children snuggle together to read Jewish stories at bedtime, positive cultural identity begins to form on a profound emotional level.

Unlike in North America, the books in Israel are distributed through the state's preschool network. The teacher introduces the book of the month to the class and usually discusses concepts in the book or creates art projects or theater productions based on the month's story. Then, each child gets a copy to take home and keep. Parents tell us the children delight in bringing home a book in which they are already experts, able to "read" it to their parents or siblings because they already know it from class. The books include guides explaining the story's Jewish values and suggesting activities or discussion points to parents. The teachers also receive monthly e-newsletters that amplify the Jewish learning aspects of the books.

The program has benefited from operating within a Jewish state — and a highly centralized one at that. While the North American PJ Library program has been forced by the nature of the American Jewish community to grow community by community over seven years to reach an impressive 100,000 children in 175 communities, Sifriyat Pijama was able to leverage Israeli government resources to scale up quickly to a national level, making a major impact in a short time. Begun as a pilot in the 2009-10 school year with 3,500 children, Sifriyat Pijama has grown, through a partnership with the Israeli Ministry of Education, to reach 120,000 Israeli children and their families in just three years, with preference given to poorer communities. It plans to expand to about 190,000 children in the 2012-13 school year to include more affluent areas and reach about 70

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# SIFRIYAT PIJAMA: SNUGGLING UP WITH JEWISH IDENTITY

by GALINA VROMEN and  
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percent of Jewish communities in Israel. Ultimately, the goal is to reach 100 percent of children in government preschools.

We are often asked how we forged such a fruitful relationship with the Ministry of Education, which covers 48 percent of the cost of the books and their distribution (the remainder coming from philanthropy, with the Harold Grinspoon Foundation as the lead funder). The answer is that the program addressed two broad educational challenges: Israel's increasingly dismal scores on international academic achievement tests and the need to instill in the next generation a sense of common national identity and purpose. Sifriyat Pijama provided the answer to both challenges. First, exposure to books from a young age has been identified as a key to later academic success. Second, the Ministry embraced the idea that forging a common heritage means sending the same materials to secular and religious children.

Initially, the program was intended primarily for secular Jews. Our premise was that although secular Israeli Jews are familiar with Jewish holidays, they often know little else about Judaism and the richness of their Jewish heritage. At the same time, we decided to provide the same books and parental guides to both religious and secular schools — a unique approach in the national Israeli education system. We were warned by many experts that secular Israelis would resent the program, so we braced for a backlash that never came. It turns out that if you give parents wonderful books to read with their children, provide them with information on Jewish perspectives and encourage them to pass on their own beliefs and values, they're actually glad to learn about their Jewish heritage.

But that wasn't the only surprise. We learned that religious Jews often don't know much about their Jewish heritage either, and some know very little about general Israeli culture. Through survey and evaluation, we found that most teachers — whether traditional, religious or secular — were personally enhancing their Jew-

ish education from the material provided by the program.

Moreover, we realized that Sifriyat Pijama was introducing religious families to the wealth of wonderful secular Israeli books which many would never have otherwise introduced into their homes. Our lineup includes books such as *The Tractor in the Sandbox* by Meir Shalev and *Uri's Special Language* by David Grossman. Popular among secular Jews, these books are unfamiliar to many religious families. "I never buy secular books for my children. Where did you find this?" one mother in Rishon LeZion asked, referring to the Meir Shalev book. The story about an aging tractor and his aging driver stimulated a conversation — started at school and continued at home — about how to treat aging things and aging people. Sifriyat Pijama has helped create a common cultural ground between secular and religious families where it has been sorely lacking.

The key is good books. Our evaluations indicate that we have been getting it right: 90 percent of teachers and 95 percent of parents rated the books as excellent or good, with very little divergence between different populations.

To say we want books that will be embraced by both secular and religious families is one thing. To find such books on the Israeli market is quite another. Our book committee, comprising experts in Jewish education, child development and children's literature, looked high and low. Sifriyat Pijama soon found itself in the book creation business, working with publishers to bring out books they did not know the public wanted. This year saw the publication of *The Patience of Hillel* by Israel Prize-winning author Dvora Omer. Initially an un-illustrated story in an out-of-print anthology, the publisher agreed at our request to re-issue it as a stand-alone picture book. In addition to a customized edition for Sifriyat Pijama, the book was also published in a retail version. The publisher, Modan Publishing House, was shocked when the first printing of 2,000 copies sold out in two months, and it ordered a second printing. Modan is now considering a series of Jewish books. A similar fate awaited *One Little Chicken*, a rendition of a story about Rabbi Chanina Ben Dosa by American author Elka Weber, which has also pleasantly surprised its Israeli publisher. In total this year, Sifriyat Pijama has encouraged the creation or re-illustration/re-issue of five Jewish-content books and we intend to work with publishers on seven new books next year. Slowly, we are changing the Israeli book industry as publishers discover a popular need.

We hope Sifriyat Pijama will ultimately help create a generation that loves to read, has an awareness of Jewish perspectives on universal values and behaves like *menschen*. Ambitious, yes. Will we achieve that? We believe we are on the right path. Our teacher and parent evaluations show the books are stimulating vibrant discussions on Jewish values at home and at school. For now, *dayenu*. That is enough. ■