



**President
Reuven Rivlin**

People of the book: The next generation

Two months ago, we gathered here at the President's Residence in Jerusalem to mark 50 years since Shmuel Yosef Agnon, the renowned writer, became the first Israeli to win a Nobel Prize. During the event, I was reminded of a typical Agnon quote, which, in my opinion, corresponded perfectly with the PJ Library program, a Jewish, non-profit organization that provides free Jewish content books to families with children across the world.

In Agnon's classic, "A Simple Story," Haim Nacht tells his daughter: "I know I do not bequeath you with wealth and assets; however, I am teaching you how to read, as when one's world is darkened, a new one will appear by the mere reading of a book."

Hebrew has been the language of the Jewish soul and creativity for more than 3,000 years. The book and the narrative have been marching together throughout our history.

The term "People of the Book," which refers to followers of monotheistic Abrahamic religions, was coined by the Muslims in the Quran and has stuck with us ever since. Throughout the ages, the term, which has almost become synonymous with the Jewish people, reminds us that the power of Israel lies not in the sword, but in our spirit and creativity, as evident in the sheer scope of Hebrew literature, ancient and modern alike, with numerous books being published every month.

As in every field, the big question is how to instill the art of reading and the passion for books in the next generation. A mutual effort by Sifriyat Pijama (the Hebrew language version of PJ Library) and Maktabat al-Fanoos (an Arabic-language book program) constitutes one of the largest enterprises in the world, relative to the size of the population, in providing children with books and encouraging reading at a young age.

All across the country, from Herzliya to Majdal Shams, almost every household in Israel with a kindergarten-aged child, including my own grandchildren, has received free books through this initiative. To date, some 10 million books have been distributed.

Recently, my wife Nechama visited a kindergarten in Jerusalem and read one of the Sifriyat Pijama books to the kids. She saw firsthand the joy in the children's eyes and the teacher's wonderful work in regard to the book. I heard her recount the stories told by parents about the magical shared moments with quality books.

Equally unique is the Maktabat al-Fanoos(Lantern Library) program, which empowers and enhances the use of Arabic among Arab children across Israel. The program enriches children's vocabulary and strengthens their affinity to their linguistic heritage and culture.

For me, as the son of a professor who also translated the Quran and “Tales of the Arabian Nights” into Hebrew, this is a truly unique breakthrough.

The children of today are the future of this country. In order to cultivate a tolerant, empathetic society, we must generate a common cultural ground, teaching them good reading habits and, most importantly, good conversational skills -- to promote wide, deep and respectful dialogue among children and between children and adults.

This op-ed is part of an address by the president of Israel in recognition of the distribution of the 10th million book of these two programs, which reach 90% of children in Israel public preschools. Sifriyat Pijama is operated in partnership between The Harold Grinspoon Foundation and the Israeli Ministry of Education. Maktabat al-Fanoos is operated by the same two partners, in conjunction also with Price Philanthropies.