



# SPEAKING “Jewish” AS A SECOND LANGUAGE

*By Carla Naumburg, PhD*

CLINICAL SOCIAL WORKER & AUTHOR  
PROUD PJ OUR WAY PARENT

**WHEN MY OLDER DAUGHTER** was a toddler, she thought Tu B’Shevat (the new year of the trees, similar to Arbor Day) was the most important Jewish holiday. It was certainly her favorite, but not because her father and I hosted a Tu B’Shevat seder or took her out to hug the large oak at the local park. Truth be told, I didn’t even know what Tu B’Shevat was before the board book *It’s Tu B’Shevat* arrived in the mail from PJ Library.

My little girl really loved that book. For months, she toddled around the house, baby doll in one hand, her beloved PJ Library book in the other. As we read it over and over again, the story of Tu B’Shevat became a part of her internal world, and mine too.

It wasn’t just Tu B’Shevat, of course. Once my second daughter came along, the three of us learned about the symbols of the new year as we followed Engineer Ari on his Rosh Hashanah train ride from Jaffa to Jerusalem. I remembered my grandfather’s giant cans of gefilte fish as we read *Five Little Gefiltes*, and I got a few ideas for Sukkot — another holiday I didn’t grow up with — from *A Watermelon in the Sukkah*. (For the record, we did not hang a watermelon in our sukkah.)

Although I grew up in a culturally Jewish family (hence the giant cans of gefilte fish), I wasn’t raised with any sort of Jewish education or observance. My husband has a strong Jewish education and background, and, as an adult, I spent years attending services, taking classes, and reading every book I could get my hands on. I thought I knew enough.

But then I became a mother — a Jewish mother, no less — and somehow all of the learning I had done wasn’t enough. Perhaps it was the sleep deprivation, but I struggled to remember the names of holidays, the melodies for the blessings, and even the basic Hebrew words I had learned.

I knew I wanted something different for my daughters, but I wasn’t sure how to give it to them. And then PJ Library books started arriving in our mailbox every month, and I learned so much more than the Hebrew word for the helper candle in the menorah or what it might feel like to be a young girl traveling to Israel for the first time.

I learned that children’s books aren’t just useful for teaching my daughters; they’re a powerful way for adults to reclaim the stories we may have forgotten, or never learned in the first place. If you want to learn something new — whether it’s how to cook *matzah brei* or why your great-grandmother kept a live fish in her bathtub every spring — head over to the kids’ section (or sign up for PJ Library!).

The reality is that I will always speak “Jewish” as a second language. But thanks to the help of PJ Library, PJ Our Way, and the other Jewish communities in our lives, I’m not only becoming fluent, but I’m also raising two native speakers who are growing up knowing exactly what Tu B’Shevat is and why we celebrate it.



*Carla Naumburg, PhD, is a clinical social worker and author of three parenting books, including the forthcoming How to Stop Losing Your Sh\*t with Your Kids (Workman, 2019). She lives outside of Boston with her husband and two daughters.*