



“Books are sometimes windows, offering views of worlds that may be real or imagined, familiar or strange. These windows are also sliding glass doors, and readers have only to walk through in imagination to become part of whatever world has been created or re-created by the author. When lighting conditions are just right, however, a window can also be a mirror. Literature transforms human experience and reflects it back to us, and in that reflection, we can see our own lives and experiences as part of the larger human experience. Reading, then, becomes a means of self-affirmation, and readers often seek their mirrors in books.”

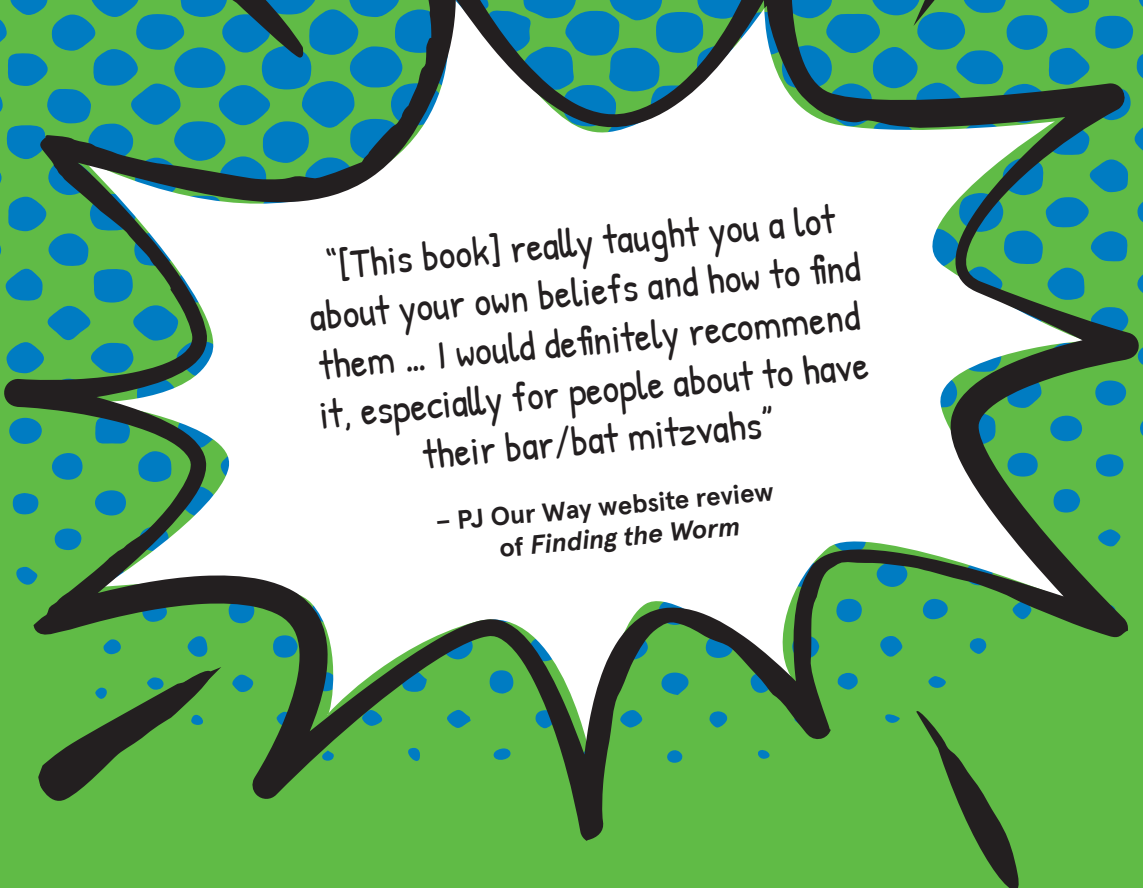
—RUDINE SIMS BISHOP, Ph.D.

Content Framework

PURPOSE

This framework presents the core themes essential to PJ Our Way books, serving as a guide for the PJ Our Way Book Selection Committee and other content creators. PJ Our Way books, which aim to offer readers both mirrors and windows into Jewish life, should fall into at least one of the Content Framework’s three main categories.

The framework should also act as a springboard for authors, editors, and community partners to brainstorm and innovate around the core themes and values that PJ Our Way endeavors to convey.



"[This book] really taught you a lot about your own beliefs and how to find them ... I would definitely recommend it, especially for people about to have their bar/bat mitzvahs"

- PJ Our Way website review
of *Finding the Worm*

INTRODUCTION

PJ Our Way is designed to support kids ages 9 through 12 with books that address the issues and ideas most important to them. The program creates a path of learning and inspiration that, for many, leads up to the Jewish lifecycle event of *b'nai mitzvah*, becoming a Jewish adult at age 12 or 13.

While PJ Library's focus on young children is necessarily parent-driven, PJ Our Way shifts its attention to the kids themselves. The program enables tweens to embark upon their personal Jewish journeys at a stage when they are becoming more independent in other parts of their lives as well. We accomplish this by emphasizing three main elements:

1. Choice: This is the guiding principle of PJ Our Way and the center point of the program: Every month, subscribers can choose one of four different free books.

2. Engagement: As a kid-driven program, PJ Our Way gives subscribers the opportunity to engage on several levels. They can rate and review books on our website; join the Kids Advisory Committee, which reviews manuscripts under consideration; and apply to be a part of the Design Team, which creates videos and blog posts for pjourway.org.

3. Conversations: Important conversations often take place overtly within a given book as characters engage with Jewish subjects or values. Those discussions frequently continue off the page as readers consider each story within the context of their own lives and talk about it with friends and peers. To keep parents engaged with what their kids are reading and to encourage these conversations, we offer Parent Guides that provide ideas for discussion questions and summarize a book's Jewish values, positive role models, and themes.

With these three ideas in mind, the PJ Our Way team knows that books also need to align with typical tween preferences. Many middle-grade readers gravitate towards books that include humor, strong visual elements, time-travel, magical animals, or contemporary stories about kids to whom they can relate, as well as books by authors they recognize. In short, a PJ Our Way selection needs to be fresh, engaging, and well-written, with strong kid appeal. Many of these stories provide the content and context that give our readers the space to wrestle with age-appropriate issues from a Jewish perspective. Accordingly, PJ Our Way offers books in which protagonists have Jewish experiences involving questioning and doubting, discovery, and growth – experiences that our readers are going through simultaneously.

FRAMEWORK

חנך לנער על פי דרכו

Chanoch lana'ar al pi darko

Educate the child according to their way – PROVERBS 22:6

This content framework is divided into three main sections: Jewish Representation, Jewish Narratives, and Jewish Values and Life Cycle, with key topic areas under each section. As the quoted biblical verse affirms, each child will have a different approach to their Jewish identity; thus, the framework aims to capture a variety of perspectives. Because Jewish lives and experiences are holistic, most of these concepts refer to and rely on one another. Authors and creators may choose to focus on a single content idea or to include several themes. The most successful books integrate Jewish ideas and perspectives into a story that broadens and deepens a child's world view and Jewish identity.



"I felt represented in the book because Ted is both Asian and Jewish — and so am I! Click Here to Start is exciting to read and I highly recommend it."

– PJ Our Way website review

1. Jewish Representation

שבעים פנים לתורה
Shiv'im panim laTorah

There are seventy faces to the Torah

– BAMIDBAR RABBAH 13:16

As the quoted verse from this midrash suggests, there are many ways to approach and understand Judaism; those multiple interpretations and customs are what make Jewish life so vibrant. PJ Our Way books and the characters within them should capture this vibrancy by reflecting the diverse nature of our subscribers, their communities and families, and the variety of ways in which one can approach Judaism. This is especially important as tweens begin to establish their unique identities. We seek stories that reflect these varied paths so readers can both find ones that best represent them and learn about those that are less familiar.

- **Families like mine and others:** Reflecting the wide range of family life within the Jewish world, encompassing both what readers recognize from their own lives and that which is new to them.
- **Amplifying stories:** A focus on less-commonly told stories about a variety of traditions, levels of religious observance, communities, diverse family structures, interfaith families, and racial and ethnic diversity.
- **Languages and heritage:** Sephardi, Mizrahi, Ethiopian, and Ashkenazi communities and customs, as well as the variety of Jewish ethnicities, cultures, and languages (Hebrew, Yiddish, Ladino, and the range of languages spoken by Jews around the world).
- **People and places:** Positive Jewish role models from yesterday and today, from all professions and countries, famous and less well-known; people who inspire kids to think outside the box, be creative, help others, fight injustice, and change the world for the better.



2. Jewish Narratives

וְשִׁנַּנְתָּם לְבִנְיָד וְדַבַּרְתָּ בָּם

Veshinantam levanecha vedibarta bam

And you should teach it to your children and talk of them – DEUTERONOMY 6:7

Storytelling has always been a cornerstone of Jewish life; some of the earliest Torah directives regarding childrearing emphasize the importance of handing down narratives to the next generation. In this verse, the Torah underscores what we know to be true about books: Stories inspire conversations. We look for books that portray Jewish narratives in a way that will spark curiosity, interest, and desire for further discussion. Additionally, it is important to recognize that kids today are creating their own life stories within a world where hate and antisemitism continue to spread. Faced with this challenge, tweens realize that while hate exists, there is a crucial role for them to play in actively stanching its spread. When readers see what has come before them, historically and ideologically, they are able to visualize the role they can play in changing the future.

- **Bible:** Contemporary, historical, unique, and overall engaging perspectives on core Jewish stories.
- **The Divine:** Tweens struggle with the notion of God and God's role in the universe. They are eager to know how Judaism views the Divine and spirituality and what role the notion of God has played in Jewish history. Most importantly, they are curious about how characters like them relate to these ideas.
- **History:** Stories from key moments in Jewish history, fictionalized or nonfiction, from around the world.
- **Antisemitism:** Now more than ever, books can help our readers understand how Jews who came before them confronted and combatted antisemitism and were able to overcome persecution.
- **Israel:** History of ancient Israel, the founding of the State of Israel, early Zionism, the kibbutz movement. The people and places of today's Israel especially as it has turned into a hub of Jewish culture, traditions, and creativity. Israeli holidays and traditions, with an emphasis on contemporary connections to Israel, including children living in Israel.

"This book was great!! I learned lots of good musical Leonard Bernstein history. It even has sheet music so I could even play it on the piano. TOTALLY recommend this."

– PJ Our Way website review of *Music Was It!*

3. Jewish Values and Life Cycle

לְמַדוּ הַיָּטִב דְּרִשׁוּ מִשְׁפָּט אֲשֶׁרוֹ חָמוּץ

Limdu heitev. Dirshu mishpat. Ashru chamotz.

Learn to do good. Devote yourselves to justice.

Aid the wronged. – ISAIAH 1:17

As our readers approach the age of b'nai mitzvah, whether or not they choose to celebrate it formally, they will become adults in the eyes of the Jewish community at large. While they are still too young to drive, vote, or go to college, Jewish tradition will see them as equal participants in rituals and customs, both personal and communal. Furthermore, today's tweens see themselves as change agents, actively involved in pursuing what's right through volunteer opportunities and taking active and vocal roles in their communities. As our readers approach this major turning point, PJ Our Way looks for books that highlight Jewish values and lifecycle events to support our readers on this journey.

- While universal values and Jewish values are similar, we look for stories that highlight the particular Jewish perspective of these values. For example:
 - *Gemilut chasadim*, loving-kindness, involves taking actions that lead to treating others with kindness.
 - *Gevurah*, courage, entails heroism, going above and beyond what is expected.
 - *Tikkun olam*, repairing the world, refers to partnering with God to take care of the planet and fix a broken world.
 - *Tzedek* and *tzedakah*, justice and charity, share the Hebrew root word for justice. Giving charity is doing what's right and just.
 - *Elu v'elu divrei Elohim haim*, this and this are both the words of the living God, refers to the need for tolerance and the ability to hear and grapple with different opinions.
- **Family milestones with a Jewish twist:** Birth of a sibling, marriage and divorce of family members, illness, death.
- **Personal milestones:** Going to Hebrew school, starting middle school, first time at summer camp, b'nai mitzvah preparation and celebration.
- **Holidays and cultural touchstones:** Traditions, rituals, observances, music, and food from diverse Jewish communities, families, and cultures

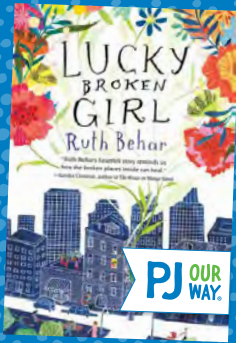
"Pink Slippers, Bat Mitzvah Blues was incredibly special to me because I also missed dance classes that all my friends did for Hebrew school. But this book showed me it's worth it and it made me feel so much happier and proud to be Jewish and be happy to go to Hebrew school."

– PJ Our Way website review

WHAT ABOUT THE HOLOCAUST?

It's hard to talk about Jewish books, and Jewish middle-grade books in particular, without addressing Holocaust content, especially since this is the age when this subject is taught. As a result, there is a growing and robust market for Holocaust books. We choose stories that address this tragic part of Jewish history without overwhelming our readers. While there are best practices for teaching about the Holocaust, there are relatively few guidelines for how to evaluate individual books, partially because it is not possible to predict what familial and educational experiences will shape a reader's understanding of the Holocaust. Moreover, we are cognizant of the fact that, by the time our readers become leaders in the Jewish community, there will no longer be Holocaust survivors among us. Thus, it is imperative that we bring tweens into this conversation now. In accordance with our mission and framework, any potential PJ Our Way books with Holocaust content should include narratives about Jewish representation, Jewish narratives, and/or Jewish Values and Lifecycle that are:

- Age and developmentally appropriate
- Accurate and authentic
- Focused on survival and hope without explicit content (e.g., graphic violence, scenes in ghettos or concentration camps) unless necessary to the story
- Representative of individual, familial, and communal growth, healing, and resilience



"I felt like Ruthie was my friend ... There were so many good messages, but the best one was how to forgive people."

PJ Our Way website review of *Lucky Broken Girl*



"I actually found out that some of my family might have left Spain at the time this book takes place! The whole time I was reading this book I felt like I was really there."

PJ Our Way website review of *Secrets in the House of Delgado*

PJ OUR WAY®



ABOUT PJ OUR WAY

PJ Our Way sends free Jewish middle-grade books to children ages 9-12. Our goal is to spark and strengthen their Jewish identities through age-appropriate stories that explore Jewish culture, history, practices, and values.

pjourway.org