



# JDAIM Reads 2016: *The Mitten String*

## *The Mitten String*

By Jennifer Rosner, Illustrated by Kristina Swarner  
Published by Random House

**“You make our world a bit better with every stitch.”**

### Summary

Ruthie Tober and her family are traveling home from selling wool and knitted mittens at the market when they meet Bayla and her baby, Aaron. Ruthie’s family stops to help. Bayla is Deaf and has developed many ways to communicate with others. Inspired by how Bayla maintains a connection with Aaron, even when they’re sleeping, Ruthie sees past Bayla’s challenges to admire her ingenuity. Ruthie then knits a mother/baby mitten set for Bayla and Aaron, which demonstrates that Ruthie understands Bayla’s unique needs (*from PJGtS Parents Guide*).

### Why We Chose This Book



*The Mitten String* features strong female characters who each contribute a different skill or knowledge set. No one is portrayed as helpless or as a “victim.” The interactions are respectful, and Ruthie, though a child, is given honest and non-judgmental answers to her questions. Bayla, who is Deaf, has figured out how to communicate with those who are not. “Luckily, she reads and writes,” Ruthie’s mother explains. “It is very wise of her to carry a chalk and a slate.” When Ruthie sees that Bayla uses a string to connect her to her baby during the night—the baby tugs on the yarn to get his mother’s attention when she’s sleeping—she admires Bayla’s ability to solve a potential problem. She sees that baby Aaron woke up because his hands were cold, and she comes up with an ingenious solution, too: she knits

mittens for Bayla and for Aaron and connects one of each together so that both can have warm hands and a connection during the night. Bayla also has something to offer Ruthie: she teaches her the sign for “mittens” and how to find the plant that will dye the wool a bright blue.

It is our social responsibility to see a need and respond to it, just as Ruthie does for baby Aaron, by knitting him mittens for his cold hands and using that mitten to provide a connection and communication line to his mother while she’s sleeping.

### Connections with Jewish Disability Awareness and Inclusion Month

Jewish  
Disability  
Awareness &  
Inclusion  
Month



February 2016

In addition to the obvious (Bayla is Deaf and therefore has different abilities), this book offers the strong lesson that we are ALL better when we create an inclusive community and learn from everyone. The strings on the mittens—that connect parent to child and that later help each child keep track of their mittens (the way we should



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all “keep track” of each other so that no one is lost) also “ties” in to the symbolism of the JDAIM logo itself: a blue and gold intertwined ribbon that forms the Magen David and was designed to signify how inclusion is woven into every aspect of Jewish life and community.

With knitting, you are putting two things—loops of yarn—together. Each loop is needed, or there is a hole that could get bigger.

## Jewish Values

### Main Values:

- Learning from Everyone: לֹמֵד מִכָּל אָדָם – **Lo-med mi-kol a-dam** (appreciating the wisdom and knowledge of every person)
- “Who is wise? Someone who learns from everyone.” (Jewish sage Ben Zoma in *Pirkei Avot* (Ethics of our Fathers) 4:1)
- Inclusion: בְּיַחַד — **B’Ya-chad** (respecting and welcoming people with individual differences)

### Additional Values:

- Love Your Neighbor as Yourself: וְאָהַבְתָּ לְרֵעֶךָ כְּמוֹךָ — **V’ahavta l’ray-a-kha ka-mo-kha** (Leviticus 19:18)
- Don’t put a stumbling block before the blind: לִפְנֵי לֹא תִתֵּן מַכְשׁוֹל Lifnei l-**ver lo ti-tein** mich-shol (Leviticus 19:14) (Not Putting Obstacles in Others’ Paths)
- Each Person is Unique: כָּל אָדָם מְיֻחָד – **Kol A-dam me-yu-chad** (valuing individual differences and diversity)

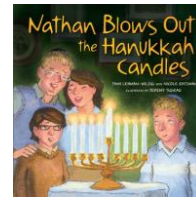
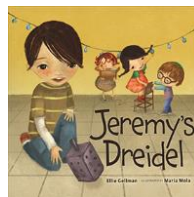
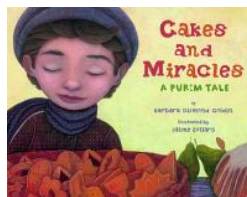
## Additional Jewish Connections

The Tobers are Jewish as are Bayla and her family. There are references to the Tobers’ village having a synagogue as well as Bayla’s family needing to get home before “the Sabbath.” There is a reference to a string from a child’s sickbed to the Holy Ark that carries the family’s prayers for her health. There is a Jewish relationship to strings. It is significant that the string that Bayla has on her wrist for nighttime is a beautiful shade of blue, one that Ruthie hasn’t seen before. On *Tzitzit* (the specially-knotted tassels attached to the *tallit* (prayer shawls), there is a *p’til techeilet*, a blue string from special marine dye. These fringes of the *tallit* remind us of our responsibilities.

In addition, some Jewish neighborhoods, especially Orthodox Jewish communities, construct an *eruv* (עירוב, "mixture") from string as a ritual enclosure that extends the line of what is considered “home” to allow residents or guests to carry certain objects outside their own homes on Shabbat. “The *eruv* allows these religious Jews to, among other things, carry house keys, tissues, medicines, or babies with them, and to use strollers and canes. The presence or absence of an *eruv* thus especially affects the lives of people with limited mobility and those responsible for taking care of babies and young children.” (emphasis added, [source: Wikipedia](#))

## More PJ Library Books about Appreciating Differences and Learning from Everyone

- *Across the Alley*
  - *Marven of the Great North Woods*
  - *Cakes and Miracles*
  - *Jeremy’s Dreidel*
  - *Nathan Blows Out the Chanukah Candles*
- The Mitten String*



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## Using This Book for a PJ Library Program

**Program Design:** Invite all PJ families with specific invites to children at local schools for the Deaf and other local affinity groups for families with Deaf or hard of hearing members. Offering a family program around the book, with an American Sign Language (ASL)-interpreted story time (provided in the PowerPoint to all PJ Professionals), with discussion and a craft project, learning some sign language, and helping the children communicate with each other—to build awareness, break down barriers and increase understanding of how each child can help others better navigate the world. Ground all of these in Jewish values.

### Sample Plan (adapt as needed for time/space/audience/etc)

1. Welcome/Check-In
2. Icebreakers
3. **Read the Book:** verbal and ASL
4. **Learn Together:** first-hand account by someone who is Deaf and/or their parent (simultaneously signed if needed) about being Deaf
  - Learning some ASL signs (also a handout)—from a student or native speaker?
    - Focus on words that enhance communication: hello, please, thank you, excuse me, yes, no, I'm sorry, play (do you want to play?)
5. **Questions:** Small group discussion while doing an activity about communicating (e.g. ASL, using the slates to write messages, charades-type game, etc)
6. **Craft or Activity:** project/take-home ideas (pick 1 or 2, max)
7. **Mitzvah Component:** everyone brings a pair of new gloves or mittens to donate to a homeless shelter (with sewing a length of yarn between the hands for any kids' gloves) as the "admission fee." Connect it the story and Bayla's baby, Aaron, being cold, and Ruthie wanting to help his cold hands while also respecting Bayla's system for seeing to her baby's needs in the nighttime.

### Tips for Success

- Read the book before planning so that you get a feel for the book and how you'd like to read it.
- Connect with your local Deaf community for planning and promoting your event.
  - Get started looking here: <http://wsjdeaf.org/resource/#DeafOrganizations> or <http://www.deafwebsites.com/resources/deaf-organizations.html>
- Location ideas:
  - A local craft store or yarn store (if the store's room is large enough—see below)—if you do an introduction to knitting at your event, they can offer a series of follow-up classes to continue the lessons.

- See if there is a local farm where families could see a sheep shearing or see wool being processed. (This would be done in late spring, not in February as the sheep need their wool for the cold months!)
- Partnering congregation or JCC
- Pick one or two options from the list of **Program Crafts and Activities**: see two sections, below.
- PJ Library, The Jewish Federation of Greater Washington and JDAIM are making a **PowerPoint presentation that uses the books and videos of each page being ASL-interpreted**. This is available to anyone who wants to offer this program in conjunction with their local PJ Professional. (Find your local professional on their map page: [pjlibrary.org/communities.aspx](http://pjlibrary.org/communities.aspx).) You will need a computer, projector and screen in your program space in order to offer this ASL-interpreted story-time. (You can also ask/hire a local ASL interpreter if you would rather have a live person instead of a video.) A separate version, with just the videos (no book images), is also available upon request.

### Tips to avoid some potential pitfalls:

- When picking a space, keep in mind the following: ASL speakers need sight-lines to see everyone who is signing. Often, ASL speakers will sign “in the round,” in a large circle so that everyone can see everyone. So you can’t do a program like this in a small, crowded room, for example. Everyone needs room to move.
- Printed signage should be clear—don’t rely on everything being verbal. Have clear signs that point out the registration table, where the bathrooms are, where the program will be, the schedule for the event, etc.
- Use nametags.
- Any social action or mitzvah project shouldn’t be to “benefit” the Deaf community—instead, you can bring the Deaf and hearing community together to work on a mutually beneficial project (like collecting mittens for the homeless and then sewing a long piece of string to them to keep them together, or creating a piece of artwork, like a mural, together).
- As the book notes, “users of sign language actually prefer gloves to mittens, as they employ their fingers to spell words and to sign.”

## Using This Book in a Classroom

- Read the book before planning so that you get a feel for the book and how you’d like to read it. If it’s a PJ Library version, there are notes on the French flaps (on the inside covers) that give some additional background.
- Use the **conversation starters** to get ideas flowing. As Ruthie’s mother did, answer any questions truthfully and matter-of-factly.
- There is value in having something tactile for kids to hold during class, especially during times (such as circle) when they need to sit still. Having a [finger-knitting](#) option or “fidget” or something to hold can often help children concentrate. And having something tactile makes it a memory. There is a rabbinical student with autism who points out that the times in shul when she puts her *tallit* (prayer shawl) over her head helps her focus and concentrate as it blocks out peripheral distractions.

- You could discuss the “language of color” with different strings—especially if you are making friendship bracelets. In the Middle East, blue is the color of *mazal* (luck). In Europe, a red string is worn as a type of talisman to ward off the “evil eye.” ([There is also a Kabbalistic connection for this.](#))
- Pair students up and have them come up with something they can either teach each other or teach the class.
- Pick one or two options from the list of **Program Crafts and Activities**: see two sections, below.
- Play “What Can You Learn?” Similar to charades, ask your students to write different types of people or animals, such as mom, doctor, ant or elephant, on slips of paper (or prepare these ahead of time). Put all the papers into a hat or jar. Each child chooses a paper and says what they can learn from that person or animal. Add the unexpected, such as liar or thief—what can children learn from misbehaviors? \*

## Using This Book at Home

- Read the book before reading it to your children so that you get a feel for the book and how you’d like to read it. If it’s a PJ Library version, there are notes on the French flaps (on the inside covers) that give some additional background.
- Use the **conversation starters** to get ideas flowing. As Ruthie’s mother did, answer any questions truthfully and matter-of-factly.
- Invite a friend over and do one or two of the **Program Crafts and Activities** ideas. Or [contact your local PJ Library Professional](#) and offer to help them run a program!

## Crafts for a Program, Classroom or at Home



- **Making friendship bracelets:** these could be braided, knitted, beaded or knotted. The key with friendship bracelets is that you can’t tie it on by yourself (though some kids will try!)—you have to tie it on someone else. Encourage participants to make a friendship bracelet for someone else, preferably someone they’ve just met. An additional connection is that, like the braided Havdalah candle, we are stronger when we are together.
- **Teaching to knit or crochet:** you could have a starter class on knitting or crocheting—they could start with a scarf (and the cost of knitting needles and yarn could be included in the cost of the program or ask a local store for a donation or discount).



- **Decorating chalkboards:** there are a lot of trendy small chalkboards out there—they could be decorated and used with chalk (or chalk markers, though you need water to change the message) for children to communicate during the program or beyond.

- **Mitzvah Project:** have all participants bring a pair of new gloves or mittens to donate to the homeless in your community. If they're kid sizes, have participants attach them with a length of string and a yarn needle. (You could pre-cut strings or have the kids work in teams to figure out how long it would need to be (a child's wingspan, plus a little extra for slack and tying a knot) to get them working together.)



- **A Shared Project:** something that groups of two or three children can complete together, regardless of ability. This could be a different type of mitzvah project than above (especially if you live in an area where it's not too cold even in winter!). Some examples: braiding/beading/knotting/knitting [eyeglass chains](#) (a string with loops attached to help someone not lose their glasses), decorating reusable water bottles to donate to the homeless, etc.

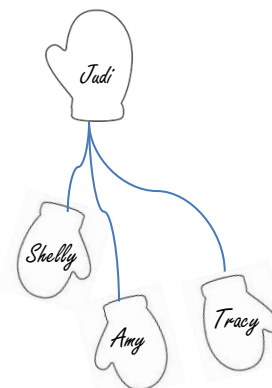
- **Create a “chai five” by creating a hamsa:** A mitten is like a *hamsa* in that both show an open hand. The word *hamesh* or *hamsa* means five in Hebrew or Arabic. There are five digits on a *hamsa* hand, a universal symbol of peace (open hand=no weapon!). Also called The Hand of Fatima or The Hand of Miriam, the *hamsa* design has been used as a good luck design on walls and on jewelry. The number five can be significant for Jews, referring to the *Humash*, the five Books of Moses, or the fifth letter of the Hebrew alphabet, *hey*, short for God's name. It can be significant to Muslims, referring to the five pillars of Islam for Sunnis and the Five People of the Cloak for Shiites. In many folk traditions, it was thought to ward off the “*ayin hara*,” or “evil eye.” In the home, the *Birkat Habayit* blessing is traditionally hung on the wall next to the front door or next to a window. It is meant to drive any evil spirits out of the house and protect the occupants within.
- **Making [bookmarks with tassels](#):** to give to someone else (at the event) or in a donated book (you could do a book collection at or before the event). You could also do a string bookmark that has beads at the bottom or top (with enough plain string in the middle to fit inside a book).
- **Invite a local artists or craftsperson to teach:** work together to create a class work of art. \*
- **Note:** [finger-knitting](#) in a mixed group of ASL speakers and non-ASL speakers, while it is easy to teach and doesn't require knitting needles, effectively silences the ASL speakers as they can't use their hands to communicate if their hands are tied up with strings.



### Activities for a Program, Classroom or at Home

- **Making Connections (part I):** get a ball of yarn and have everyone stand in a circle—preferably next to someone new. The first person takes the yarn and decides who in the group they've learned something from and tosses it to them while holding the end of the string. Example: Elana says, “Lisa, I've learned how to jump rope from you” and tosses it to Lisa. Lisa then attaches part of the string to herself (in her hands, to a belt loop, around a wrist, under her foot), maintaining a connection with the first child. Lisa says, “Henry, I learned how to say hello in four languages from you” and tosses it to Henry. In this way, everyone can continue to connect to someone else, holding on to a piece of the yarn along the way. You could also start with each child just stating their name and something they are good at (particularly if it's a program where participants don't know each other...yet!).
  - You could also extend this by having people still hold their string but try to move—together.
  - At the end, you could also cut up the string that was used for the exercise and use that for the bracelet or bookmark activities listed above.

- **Making Connections (part 2):** Give each child four cutouts of a mitten shape, three with one hole punched and one with three holes punched in it, plus three pieces of yarn (6-12" long). They should write their name on the one with three holes (and they could decorate it if you wanted to add more time to the activity); this is the "Name Mitten" referred to below. The others are the "Friend Mittens." The idea is that they have to create a connection to someone new to them at the program over something they have in common—then create a literal connection by tying their Name Mitten to one of the Friend Mittens and writing the other child's name on the Friend Mitten. (The second child would do this in reverse—so that their Name Mitten gets attached to a Friend Mitten with the first child's name.) Depending on parental involvement or the children's ages, they could write what the connection is that "ties" them together (e.g. "we both like pizza" or "we are both afraid of snakes"). Then they should continue with two other kids.



- **Making Connections (part 3):** using the same idea as "part 2," each child could create connections, but the mittens are put on a wall and connected in that way in a more permanent display (better for a classroom or for a non-public-space program where you can keep the mittens on the wall for a little while).
- **Teaching some American Sign Language (ASL):** teach the sign for mitten and the signs for two or three other words that are listed in the Sign Language Glossary at the end of the book. Check out this video to learn one way to sign mitten: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=jkrIMNIGLUQ>. Ask children to sign their new words every time they hear these words in the story. \* If you have an ASL interpreter or someone who knows ASL in attendance, ask them in advance to do the teaching.
- **Ideas for Nonverbal Icebreakers:** putting the [ZOOM! book](#) back in order; creating a "secret handshake" with a partner; draw something that represents your favorite activity/memory or your personality—for people to guess; written "Telephone" game (give each person a piece of paper and have them write a sentence or phrase at the bottom of it then pass it on to the next person. That person draws a visual depiction of the phrase then folds the paper to hide the words and passes their picture to the next person. That person then interprets the picture by writing a caption, folding the paper over the picture before passing it on. When you get to the top of the page, ending on a phrase, share them aloud (with an interpreter as needed)! (insert more ideas here)
- **Play Cat's Cradle:** This game is about give-and-take between two people. Don't allow talking! (If you have a mixed group of hearing and Deaf participants, playing cat's cradle effectively silences the Deaf participants, so disallowing talking will even the "playing field.")



## Conversation Starters

Depending on the ages, how much time you have and the familiarity of the people within the group, use some of these to get conversations going as a group or in smaller groups:

- How do you communicate that you're happy? Sad? Lonely? What body language does someone show when they are feeling a strong emotion?
- Did your parents use Baby Signs with you before you were able to speak? If so, what were some of the words you used?

- How do you communicate—without words—that you want to say hello or tell someone they did a great job?
- American Sign Language—and its counterparts for other languages and cultures—is just an advanced way of communicating for those who cannot hear.
- What have you learned from someone else? What have you taught someone else?
- What did Ruthie and Bayla learn from each other? \*
- Tell us about something new that you recently learned. Describe some of the steps that went into learning your new skill. \*
- What is something that you could teach to a friend? \*
- What are Ruthie's and Bayla's unique qualities and challenges? What are your unique qualities and challenges? \*
- Bayla cannot hear. How would your life be different if you were unable to hear? \*
- What are examples of how Bayla uses her unique skills to care for Aaron? \*
- What do Deaf parents do nowadays to know if their child needs them at night?
- What do Deaf children use for an alarm clock?
- What can you do alone? What can you do better when someone helps you?
  - Inclusion is not about benefitting the “other” (those who are different from you)—it makes each of **us** stronger.
- Ruthie has a lot of questions about what life is like for Bayla. What questions do you have for someone who is Deaf?
  - *Note:* we realize this last question is a BIG topic. The thought process is to have the members of the group who are Deaf share what day-to-day life is like and for the members of the group who are not Deaf to think about how they could make it easier (e.g. clear, written signage or knowing a little ASL or knowing that they could use pen and paper to communicate or... (kids come up with great stuff).

Contact: Sarah Rabin Spira, PJ Library in Greater Washington, [sarah.rabinspira@shalomdc.org](mailto:sarah.rabinspira@shalomdc.org), 301-230-7243

Sources:

\* PJGtS Complementary School Resource Guide (Lisa Litman) (pieces marked with an asterisk (\*) were taken from the PJGtS guides).

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