



# Celebrating 77 Years Of Service To The Visually Impaired

## JBI International

When JBI was established in a small Bronx apartment in 1931 (as The Jewish Braille Institute), no one then could have imagined that JBI would grow to become the world's largest library of Jewish interest for the blind and visually impaired. Today it serves 35,000 individuals in over thirty countries and in eight languages—English, Russian, Yiddish, Hebrew, Romanian, Hungarian, Polish and, most recently, Spanish. All of its services are free of charge. While JBI's programs have grown dramatically, its mission remains the same—to enable blind, visually impaired, reading disabled and physically handicapped individuals of all ages and backgrounds to participate fully in all aspects of Jewish educational, cultural, and communal life.

The cornerstone of the organization's work is The JBI Library, the *only* comprehensive collection of Jewish interest books (very broadly defined) in the world for those who cannot read standard print. The JBI Library's vast and growing collection includes more than 13,000 Talking Books and thousands of Braille titles and Large Print publications. Its Barbara and Stephen Friedman Talking Books Library contains fiction, history, biographies, short stories, humor, psychology and self-help, Jewish studies, liturgical materials, memoirs, cookbooks, mysteries and more. JBI's Audio periodicals include *The Jerusalem Report*, *Moment*, *Commentary*, *Hadassah Magazine*, *Jewish Quarterly* and *Tikkun*, as well as its own audio magazine, *The JBI Voice*. JBI also produces a Russian-language version of *The JBI Voice* and will soon be offering *La Voz de JBI* Spanish quarterly. One of the most popular offerings, *The JBI Monthly Cultural Series*, brings high quality drama, music and lectures to subscribers, many of whom are homebound. JBI helps visually impaired Jews worldwide celebrate holidays with Large Print, Braille and Audio liturgical materials. For Passover, it offers 17 versions of the Haggadah in Hebrew with English, Russian, Spanish and French translations. Again, all of these Haggadot—in Large Print, Braille and Audio—are free of charge.

In recognition of the breadth and significance of its collection, JBI has been designated one of only two Affiliated Libraries of the United States Library of Congress, although this designation brings JBI no federal funds.

JBI always responds to special individual requests. For blind, visually impaired and reading disabled children, JBI's materials are essential to supporting their educational mainstreaming among their peers. Because JBI is the *only* library that offers "reading" material of Jewish interest for the blind and severely visually impaired, these students truly have nowhere else to turn. JBI is determined never to turn away any blind or visually impaired student in need.

Each year, JBI "converts" printed textbooks, other educational ma-

terials, Torah and Haftorah portions for Bar/Bat Mitzvah celebrations and much more into Braille, Audio or Large Print format on a customized basis. These texts are invaluable to those receiving them. The mother of one of JBI's young users wrote, "Madeline would just be sitting there passively if she didn't have JBI's materials to put her on an even playing field with the other kids. Now, she's able to keep up. Really, there is no other place that does what JBI does." Tyler, who is now 15 years old and lives in Kansas, has been a user of JBI services for nearly a decade. Each year, JBI provides him with his Hebrew school textbooks, as well as leisure reading materials. One summer, when he was going to overnight camp for the first time, he requested the camp's songbook in advance. JBI then translated the entire book into Braille so that Tyler could sing along with the other children. After he celebrated his Bar Mitzvah in Israel, his mother wrote to JBI, "Although Tyler received many gifts on that day, it was your generosity that provided the Hebrew Braille that allowed him to recite so movingly, and to learn Hebrew at all. Tyler will never be blind to the beauty of his heritage, in large part thanks to JBI."

Since approximately 20 percent of the population over the age of 65 experiences severe age-related vision loss—often as a result of cataracts, glaucoma, diabetic retinopathy, or macular degeneration—JBI feels it must be properly equipped to meet the educational, literary and cultural demands of this large and well educated generation. JBI Library's Audio and Large Print publications enable them to stay better informed, more intellectually stimulated and more socially engaged, allowing them to feel less isolated and less prone to depression. JBI's books, magazines and cultural programs keep lonely minds engaged and offer adults a way to participate in continuing education and communal activities despite visual impairment or a physical disability that may prevent them from holding a book.

JBI Talking Book Clubs is now engaging more than 600 seniors in South Florida and on Long Island, providing a much needed social component to their lives. Anita, a visually impaired senior citizen, recently enrolled in a course in Jewish Ethics at the Siegal College of Judaic Studies to further her education. Completion of the course required study of several densely written texts including Aristotle's *Nicomachean Ethics* and Walter Wurzburger's *Foundations on Covenantal Ethics*. Given Anita's limited vision, it was nearly impossible for her to keep up with the class reading schedule. That is where JBI's ability to respond to individual requests came into play. Through the use of its new state of the art digital recording studios and its volunteer corps, JBI was able to record in a timely fashion all of the required course texts for Anita's use. The files were compiled onto one easy-to-use MP3CD, and the material was sent to her for delivery on the day classes began.



*Dr. Chaim Stolovic examining a patient at the JBI Low Vision Children's Clinic in Tel Aviv*

*JBI's newly renovated Manhattan headquarters, almost complete*

Since 1967, JBI's facilities have been located in a wholly owned seven story, turn of the century double brownstone on East 30<sup>th</sup> Street in Manhattan, which was last renovated in the 1960s. At this site, all of JBI's Audio, Braille and Large Print materials are produced and then circulated to subscribers throughout the United States and in over thirty countries. As a result of its outreach efforts, an unprecedented number of individuals are now calling upon JBI's resources. Since 2000, the Talking Book circulation in the U.S. alone has increased 265 percent!

As the demand for JBI library services continued to grow, its need for modernized and more efficient space became more urgent. Library production, circulation, duplication, shipping and storage were inefficiently spread over four non-contiguous floors with only one elevator available to move all of the heavy and bulky library materials. The facility had reached a critical stage and was in need of a great deal of structural repair. So this year, JBI embarked on a major redesign and reconfiguration of its building. The renovation has created a climate controlled archive for the storage of JBI's irreplaceable library collection, made the building more accessible to blind/disabled staff members and volunteers, improved energy efficiency, rectified structural problems, facilitated new wiring and cabling infrastructure, and created space for

the introduction of in-house cultural programming for the blind and visually impaired, such as Talking Book Clubs. Reconfiguring the recording complex has enabled JBI to add two additional booths (bringing the total to six) to help keep up with the demand for more recorded materials in eight languages.

According to Judy Tenney, chairman of JBI, "We have never been busier or more vibrant. The 'new' JBI that is emerging from a year-long renovation and reorganization of its headquarters is streamlined, efficient, technologically current and ready to meet the educational, literary and cultural demands of the large and growing population of visually impaired members of the community. But, as always, it remains dedicated to the personal and individual needs of each and every client.

"As we like to say, our work at JBI is 'costly but priceless'—costly to produce but priceless to those who benefit from our services." **M**

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