

Review

From Invisible Diversity to Inclusive Representation: Culturally Sustaining Jewish Literacy in Children's and Young Adult Literature

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Abstract

Despite the rapid expansion of “diverse books” initiatives in children’s and young adult (YA) literature, Jewish identity remains inconsistently recognized within diversity frameworks in publishing, curriculum, and literacy education. This conceptual review examines how Jewish children’s and YA literature can serve as a resource through which young people interpret identity, confront erasure, and imagine more inclusive social worlds. Drawing on culturally relevant and culturally sustaining pedagogy, critical literacy, and critical youth studies, the article argues that Jewish narratives expand the interpretive possibilities of literacy education by foregrounding diasporic identity, antisemitism, and the internal diversity of Jewish communities. To operationalize this argument, the article proposes a culturally sustaining framework for K–12 literacy instruction organized across four strands: contemporary Jewish life, global Jewish identities, intersectional Jewish identities, and agency-centered narratives of antisemitism. The discussion illustrates how educators can use these texts to support youth agency, ethical inquiry, and critical media literacy, including in contexts shaped by curricular and political constraints. By repositioning Jewish children’s and YA literature as central to inclusive literacy, this article reframes representation as a question of interpretive possibility.

Keywords: Jewish children’s and young adult literature; diverse books; antisemitism education; culturally sustaining pedagogy; youth agency; critical literacy; Holocaust education; K–12 literacy; interpretive practices



Academic Editor: Pearl Subban

Received: 1 April 2026

Revised: 18 June 2026

Accepted: 19 June 2026

Published: 11 July 2026

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1. Introduction

The paradox of “diverse books” is that the category often erases Jewish identity even though it claims to expand representation in children’s and young adult (YA) literature. Although diverse books initiatives have reshaped publishing, curriculum design, and literacy scholarship over the past decade, Jewish identity is inconsistently acknowledged within diversity frameworks (Rabinowitz et al., 2021). This includes frameworks such as culturally responsive and sustaining pedagogy, critical literacy, HebCrit, critical youth studies, and children’s literature research, where Jewish identity is often subsumed under broader or racially bounded categories of diversity (Greenblatt & Koss, 2024).

This invisibility is reinforced by how diversity in children’s publishing is commonly tracked and reported. Major diversity statistics tend to categorize representation through

race/ethnicity, disability, gender, sexuality, and other identity markers, while Jewish identity, whether understood as religious, ethnic, or ethnoreligious, is not consistently counted as a category. As a result, Jewish representation is more difficult to identify within mainstream diverse books reporting (CCBC, 2023a), even as diverse books have become central to conversations about equity in literacy education. This pattern reflects a broader challenge for diversity frameworks. Because Jewish identity can be understood as religious, cultural, ethnic, or ethnoreligious, it does not fit neatly into categories organized primarily around race, religion, or ethnicity. As a result, Jewish representation may be present in individual texts but remain difficult to identify and sustain within broader diversity reporting. This is evident in how the Cooperative Children's Book Center (CCBC) categorizes Jewish representation under religious diversity. Their website states that "[f]or non-Christian religions, we consider both cultural and religious content (e.g., a book with either [original emphasis] a culturally or [original emphasis] religiously Jewish primary character would be counted as 'About' Jewish);" however, they do not do this for Christianity (CCBC, 2023b). This illustrates that while Jewish identity is acknowledged as both cultural and religious, it is still primarily categorized under "religious content and creators," reinforcing the tendency to treat Jewishness as a single-axis identity.

Taken together, these patterns point to a broader analytic problem. Many diversity frameworks depend on categories that appear stable, such as race, religion, ethnicity, gender, sexuality, or disability, but Jewish identity complicates that structure because it can be religious, cultural, ethnic, ancestral, diasporic, and racialized in different contexts. When Jewish books are counted primarily as religious diversity, the cultural and ethnic dimensions of Jewish identity may become less visible. At the same time, when diversity is organized primarily through racial categories, Jewish identity may be overlooked because it does not map consistently onto U.S. racial classifications. This helps explain why Jewish representation can be present in individual books or lists but still remain inconsistently recognized within broader diversity conversations. Jewish identities are frequently absent from many school-based diversity frameworks and reading initiatives (Association of Jewish Libraries [AJL], 2022; Greenblatt & Koss, 2024; Rabinowitz et al., 2021). This article argues that this absence is not simply a representational oversight but a limitation in the interpretive possibilities available within literacy education. When Jewish narratives remain invisible within diverse text frameworks, students lose opportunities to encounter Jewish identity as culturally complex, historically situated, and socially meaningful. This omission also constrains how young people understand difference, limiting their ability to examine how diasporic identity, religion, culture, race, and antisemitism intersect in historically contingent ways. In literacy classrooms, such absences do not merely reflect curricular gaps; they shape how students interpret identity, difference, and the social worlds they inhabit. This is not an argument for separating Jewish identity from other diversity work, but for recognizing how Jewish representation exposes the limits of frameworks that rely too heavily on fixed or single-axis identity categories.

This is especially troubling given the documented rise in antisemitism affecting K–12 schools. Recent reporting indicates increased incidents alongside limited educator preparation to address antisemitism or teach related content with confidence. National surveys document a significant rise in antisemitic incidents in K–12 schools, alongside widespread public support for improved education about antisemitism and the Holocaust (ADL, 2024, 2025). Anti-Defamation League reporting further indicates that many Jewish families perceive antisemitism as present in school settings, including in classroom materials and peer discourse (ADL, 2024). A RAND study similarly found that while most secondary English-language arts and social studies teachers address at least one topic related to Jewish life or history, instructional time remains limited

and teachers report needing additional support, particularly in the current climate (Shapiro et al., 2025). These findings underscore that Jewish inclusion is not only an issue of representation but also one of student safety, historical literacy, and ethical responsibility (Greenblatt & Koss, 2024). Together, these data suggest that curricular marginalization and educator under-preparation may compound students' vulnerability in moments of heightened public tension (ADL, 2024; American Jewish Committee [AJC], 2025; Shapiro et al., 2025).

Seen through the lens of literacy education, these conditions raise an important pedagogical question: what narrative resources help students interpret bias, understand identity complexity, and imagine more inclusive social relations? Addressing this question requires situating Jewish representation within broader theoretical conversations about diverse texts, culturally sustaining pedagogy, and youth agency.

2. Jewish Visibility and Humanization in Literacy

To address this gap, this section brings together conceptual perspectives that explain how literature functions as a site of humanization, interpretation, and youth agency within literacy education. Several complementary perspectives ground this review and together illuminate why Jewish children's and young adult literature must be included in discussions of diverse texts. Across these perspectives, a shared premise emerges: literature functions not simply as representation, but as a site through which young people interpret identity, encounter differences, and develop ethical understandings of themselves and others. Centering Jewish narratives within this work is therefore not only a matter of inclusion, but of humanization.

2.1. Humanization and Representation in Literature

The marginalization of Jewish representation conflicts with the long-standing argument that literature should serve as mirrors, windows, and sliding glass doors, enabling readers to see themselves, encounter others, and step into perspectives beyond their own (Bishop, 1990). When Jewish narratives are absent or narrowly framed, Jewish students are denied mirrors that affirm their lived experiences, while non-Jewish students lose meaningful opportunities to encounter Jewish life in its cultural, historical, and contemporary complexity. Such omissions do more than limit representation; they constrain the humanizing potential of literacy by positioning Jewish identity as peripheral, exceptional, or reducible to isolated moments of historical trauma.

2.2. Critical and Culturally Sustaining Literacy Frameworks

Humanizing representation is further supported by critical literacy traditions that position reading as both interpretive and political work. Freire's (1985) conception of literacy as reading the word and the world emphasizes that learners engage texts in relation to their lived realities, using them to name, question, and reimagine social conditions. Similarly, critical literacy scholarship highlights how readers analyze power, representation, and ideology through engagement with texts (Lewison et al., 2002; Luke, 2012; Vasquez, 2014). Hebrew Critical Theory (HebCrit), an emerging framework, extends this critical literacy orientation by examining how Jewish identity and antisemitism are positioned within systems of power, including Christian normativity, racialization, and assumptions about Jewish whiteness (Rubin, 2013, 2017, 2019, 2020). For this article, HebCrit is useful not as a replacement for culturally sustaining pedagogy or critical literacy, but as an additional lens for understanding why Jewish identity is often misrecognized, flattened, or omitted within diversity frameworks. Including Jewish narratives within this work expands the

scope of critical inquiry by making visible forms of identity, history, and marginalization that are often overlooked within dominant diversity frameworks.

Following Sciurba's (2022) guiding question, "How do texts help [children] (re)imagine their own lives?", this article examines how Jewish children's and young adult literature functions as a set of interpretive resources through which both Jewish and non-Jewish youth understand identity, challenge erasure, and imagine more inclusive social worlds. Representation in this context is not merely symbolic. The texts available to students shape the interpretive frameworks they use to make sense of identity, difference, and injustice. When Jewish experiences remain invisible or simplified, opportunities for ethical reasoning and sociopolitical analysis are correspondingly limited.

Culturally relevant and culturally sustaining pedagogies further underscore the importance of centering Jewish narratives within literacy education. Ladson-Billings (1995) identifies academic success, cultural competence, and critical consciousness as interconnected aims, while Paris and Alim (2017) extend this work by arguing that schools should actively sustain the cultural and communal practices of minoritized groups. Applying these frameworks to Jewish representation challenges the tendency to treat Jewish identity as outside or secondary to diversity initiatives. Because Judaism functions as an ethnoreligion, Jewish identity may operate simultaneously as religious, cultural, ethnic, and diasporic identity, and in some contexts as a racialized identity (Gitelman, 2009; Gonzalez-Lesser, 2020). Recognizing this complexity strengthens multicultural frameworks by demonstrating that identity categories are historically contingent, internally diverse, and intersectional (Botelho & Rudman, 2009). This includes attention not only to cultural practices but also to the linguistic traditions through which Jewish identity is expressed across diasporic contexts.

The complexity of Jewish identity is particularly important in U.S. educational contexts, where Jewish identity is often misrecognized or flattened. Jewish religious diversity results in a wide spectrum of how customs are observed or interpreted. In the United States, three major denominations, Orthodox, Conservative, and Reform, are often used to describe this diversity, though they do not encompass the full range of Jewish religious expression (Gustavus Adolphus College Library, 2025; My Jewish Learning, n.d.). Additionally, many Jews in the United States do not identify as religious and instead understand their Jewishness as cultural, ethnic, or ancestral, or some combination of these, complicating assumptions that Jewish identity can be understood solely through religion (Pew Research Center, 2021).

Demographic research underscores the diversity of Jewish communities, including variation in race, ethnicity, language, and cultural background (Pew Research Center, 2021). Jewish communities are diasporic, with histories shaped by migration, displacement, and adaptation across global contexts (Levine, 2004). In the United States, Jewish populations reflect this diversity, including Ashkenazi, Sephardic, Mizrahi, and other smaller cultural groups such as Beta Israel (Ethiopia), Bene Israel (India), Igbo Jews (Nigeria), and Kaifeng (China), alongside multiracial Jewish identities. This diversity is often obscured in dominant narratives that center Ashkenazi experience and contribute to assumptions of Jewishness as monolithic or synonymous with Whiteness (Schraub, 2022). While Ashkenazi Jews have been historically dominant in U.S. narratives of Jewish identity, Jewish communities also include a wide range of cultural, racial, and ethnic identities. Schraub (2022) further argues that when Jewishness is treated as monolithic or suggestive of Whiteness, these differences are obscured, and many students experience curricular invisibility. From a literacy perspective, this means that "including Jewish books" cannot function as a single-category solution; culturally sustaining design requires attention to both the diversity of Jewish life and the varied ways antisemitism operates across contexts.

2.3. *HebCrit: A Dimension of Critical Race Theory Examining Jewish Identity*

Hebrew Critical Theory (HebCrit) builds on the foundations of critical race theory to examine antisemitism, Jewish identity, and positionality (Rubin, 2013, 2017, 2019, 2020). This includes analyzing Christian privilege, understanding Judaism as a religion that is one aspect of Jews as a people (a component of Judaism as an ethnoreligion), “model minority” or “invisible minority” thinking, and Jews as being overgeneralized and identified as white. HebCrit connects tenets of critical race theory, such as discrimination in society being normal and unrecognized, the relationship between people and whiteness, the social construction of race, and the importance of storytelling to learn about a people from their own experiences (Rubin, 2013, 2017, 2019, 2020). This article examines how children’s literature can illuminate key aspects of HebCrit, for example, how Christian privilege can be illuminated through stories like *Don’t Feed the Lion* (Golodryga & Levi, 2025) in which the character has to navigate celebrating Shabbat while being a member of the school’s soccer team, which has practices and games during the weekly holiday. As demonstrated throughout the article, including tables with specific books, aspects of HebCrit have been incorporated in the “Four Strands of Diverse Jewish Texts” outlined below.

2.4. *Youth Agency and Interpretive Communities*

A critical youth studies perspective further emphasizes that young people are not passive recipients of these representations but active interpreters who use texts to make sense of their social worlds (Quijada Cerecer et al., 2013). Research on youth reading cultures demonstrates that adolescents build interpretive communities around texts across classroom and digital contexts, including participatory spaces such as BookTok (Boyd, 2014; Jenkins & Ito, 2015; Martens et al., 2022). Within these spaces, young people circulate texts, assign value to narratives, and shape collective interpretations of meaning and relevance. For Jewish youth in particular, such interpretive communities can provide opportunities to encounter representations that affirm, complicate, or challenge dominant narratives, especially in a literary landscape where Jewish identity is often marginalized or narrowly framed.

Across these perspectives, a consistent insight emerges: young people engage in consequential interpretive work with texts. They do not simply receive stories, but use them to negotiate identity, belonging, and ethics in relation to their lived experiences. Research on youth civic imagination and literary engagement demonstrates that narratives support young people in constructing understandings of identity, social relationships, and possible futures (García et al., 2015; Jenkins & Ito, 2015; Santa María et al., 2022; Storm, 2025). For Jewish youth, these processes unfold within conditions of partial visibility, where representation may be absent, limited, or shaped by dominant narratives. At the same time, non-Jewish students engage Jewish narratives as windows into communities they may otherwise encounter through stereotypes or incomplete curricular representations. In these interpretive encounters, literature becomes a space where students reconsider not only individual stories but also the broader assumptions that shape how identities are understood.

This interpretive work becomes clearer when we consider what classroom discussion around these texts might look like in practice. For example, a teacher might use *The Do More Club* (Kramaroff, 2023) to support students in moving from identifying antisemitism as a harmful act to considering what response and repair can look like in a school community. After reading about Josh’s decision to create a club grounded in tikkun olam, students could discuss questions such as: What choices were available to Josh? What made action difficult? What kinds of support did he need from peers and adults? What would an upstander response look like in our own school context? Such a discussion would not ask students

simply to admire Josh's actions, but to analyze the conditions that make agency possible, including language for naming harm, relationships that support action, and opportunities to participate in repair. In this sense, youth agency becomes visible as interpretive and ethical work: students use the text to understand antisemitism, evaluate possible responses, and imagine how communities might act differently. This example also clarifies how the framework functions instructionally, supporting students in moving from interpretation to ethical reasoning and action.

Taken together, these perspectives establish that the inclusion of Jewish children's and young adult literature is not only a matter of representation, but of expanding the interpretive and ethical possibilities available to young readers. However, inclusion alone is insufficient. What matters is the range and type of Jewish narratives made available to students and how those narratives function within classroom contexts. To address this, the following section introduces a framework of four strands of diverse Jewish texts that together reflect the complexity, heterogeneity, and lived realities of Jewish life. Jewish representation therefore operates not only as a case of inclusion, but as a critical lens for examining how texts shape what students are able to see, question, and imagine about identity and belonging.

3. Culturally Sustaining Jewish Literacy: Four Strands of Diverse Jewish Texts

Building on the conceptual framework outlined above, this article proposes a culturally sustaining approach to Jewish representation in K–12 literacy instruction organized around four strands: contemporary Jewish life, global Jewish identities, intersectional identities, and agency-centered narratives of antisemitism. Together, these strands provide a structure for designing text sets that reflect the complexity, diversity, and lived realities of Jewish experience while supporting students' interpretive, ethical, and critical engagement.

A culturally sustaining approach to Jewish literature requires more than the inclusion of isolated texts. It requires educators to distribute Jewish narratives across the curriculum and throughout the academic year that reflect Jewish life across time, geography, language, and identity, ensuring that Jewish identity is encountered as dynamic, contemporary, and internally diverse rather than confined to historical units, holidays, or singular themes. At the level of text selection, the guiding principle is not only whether Jewish characters appear, but whether the available literature represents Jewish life as multifaceted, culturally situated, and connected to broader social contexts.

The inclusion of Jewish literature should include texts across four strands: first, contemporary Jewish life across denominations and cultural backgrounds to foreground everyday experience and joy; second, global and racially diverse Jewish identities to decenter Ashkenazi normativity and broaden students' understanding of the Jewish diaspora; third, intersectional Jewish identities that reflect the complexity of young people's lived experiences; and, fourth, narratives of antisemitism that center personhood, moral agency, and the roles of bystanders and upstanders. Taken together, these strands create narrative conditions in which students encounter Jewish life as multifaceted and historically situated rather than as a single symbolic category. These strands are intended to support text selection and inquiry rather than to function as fixed or exhaustive categories. In practice, many texts work across strands, reflecting the complexity and fluidity of Jewish identity and experience. They also respond to concerns raised by HebCrit by making room for Jewish identity as cultural, religious, ethnic, diasporic, and sometimes racialized, rather than treating Jewishness as a single or easily classified identity category. Used in relation to one another, the strands support text sets that invite comparison, pattern recognition, and critical inquiry.

Text selection should be guided by clear evaluation criteria that emphasize breadth beyond holidays, avoidance of stereotypes, reducing antisemitism to the Holocaust, and intra-Jewish diversity (Association of Jewish Libraries [AJL], 2022; Nicosia & Martin-Kerr, 2025). Curated university library guides can also support educators in identifying developmentally appropriate titles and verifying thematic alignment with instructional goals (University of Illinois Urbana-Champaign Library, 2023). To operationalize this framework, educators must move from abstract commitments to intentional text selection across grade bands. Rather than functioning as standalone “diverse books,” these texts are most powerful when used in relation to one another within text sets that invite comparison, pattern recognition, and critical inquiry. Across strands, the goal is not only representation, but the cultivation of interpretive practices through which students come to understand identity as multifaceted, historically situated, and socially constructed.

3.1. Contemporary Jewish Life

This first strand centers everyday Jewish life, practice, and community across denominations and cultural contexts. These strands foreground joy, routine, and relationality, positioning Jewish identity as lived rather than exceptionalized or trauma-based. This is particularly important given the tendency for Jewish representation in school curricula to be confined to Holocaust study or holiday-based instruction. In elementary classrooms, picture books such as *Challah Day!* (Offsay, 2023) and *A Hat for Mrs. Goldman: A Story About Knitting and Love* (Edwards, 2016) situate Jewish practice within the rhythms of family, generosity, and community care. In *Challah Day!*, a weekly ritual is highlighted as an ordinary, joyful practice. The book’s title refers to the celebration of Shabbat, a practice common across Jewish cultures. Although challah is specific to Ashkenazi Jews, Sephardic and Mizrahi Jews have their own distinct traditional loaves, which are cut, shared, and eaten to signify the beginning of the Sabbath. In *A Hat for Mrs. Goldman*, young Sophie sees her elderly friend knitting hats for people in the community, and she helps by making the pom poms since she struggles with knitting. But Sophie wants to do something special for Mrs. Goldman, and so she struggles to knit her a hat, ultimately loved for its imperfections. Mrs. Goldman’s Jewish identity is portrayed by her use of Yiddish words, an explanation of the Jewish value of doing a mitzvah—a good deed. Both texts focus on kindness, generosity, and community, and support comprehension by situating cultural practices within familiar relational contexts that are accessible and relational, rather than explanatory or didactic. They also expand students’ understanding of belonging, and of humanizing Jewish people, by showing how identity is enacted through everyday actions.

In middle grade classrooms, contemporary narratives extend this work by engaging more explicitly with questions of identity, belonging, and intra-community diversity. Texts such as *The Dubious Pranks of Shaindy Goodman* (Lowe, 2024) and *Absolutely, Positively Natty* (Greenwald, 2023) depict Jewish characters navigating school, family, religion, and peer relationships in ways that normalize variation within Jewish communities. *The Dubious Pranks of Shaindy Goodman* normalizes Orthodox Jewish school life, disrupting monolithic representations and inviting students to consider variation within religious communities. In *Absolutely, Positively Natty*, Natty copes with her mom’s absence and a new middle school by embracing relentless optimism and starting a pep squad to hold herself, her dad, and her community together. Judaism appears quietly and naturally through family dynamics, values of perseverance and care for others, and everyday cultural touchstones, presenting Jewish identity as an integrated, contemporary lived experience rather than the center of the conflict. Together, these texts support students’ interpretive work by positioning Jewish identity as lived, negotiated, and embedded within broader social contexts.

In secondary classrooms, contemporary young adult texts extend this strand by engaging more explicitly with identity, family, and cultural continuity. *Summer Nights and Meteorites* (Reynolds, 2024) centers on the Barbanel family, a Sephardic Jewish family whose experiences expand dominant Ashkenazi-centered narratives of Jewish life in the United States. Jewish identity is portrayed through family relationships, cultural references, and everyday experiences rather than as the central conflict. This representation invites students to consider variation within Jewish communities while reinforcing Jewish identity as lived, contemporary, and embedded within broader social contexts.

Across grade levels, this strand supports culturally sustaining pedagogy by presenting Jewish life as dynamic, contemporary, and internally diverse. Rather than positioning Jewish identity as historical or symbolic, these texts create conditions in which students encounter Jewishness as part of the ongoing fabric of social life.

3.2. Global Jewish Identities

The second strand expands representation beyond Ashkenazi-centered narratives by foregrounding the geographic, cultural, and linguistic diversity of Jewish communities. These texts challenge monolithic representations and help students understand Jewish identity as diasporic, historically mobile, and shaped by migration, language, and place. This strand is especially important in disrupting curricular assumptions that position Jewishness as culturally uniform or synonymous with a single racial or ethnic identity. It also speaks directly to HebCrit's concern with how Jewish identity is often overgeneralized or folded into assumptions about whiteness, since global Jewish texts make visible Jewish communities whose histories, languages, and racialized experiences complicate that frame.

In elementary contexts, picture books such as *The Very Best Sukkah: A Story from Uganda* (Nambi, 2022) and *Tía Fortuna's New Home: A Jewish Cuban Journey* (Behar, 2022) introduce students to Abayudaya (the Jewish community in Uganda, called the People of Judah) and Sephardic Jewish experiences, embedding cultural practices and diverse heritages within family stories. In *The Very Best Sukkah*, Shoshi and her brothers strive to build the best sukkah, a temporary hut-like structure built during the Jewish holiday of Sukkot, in their village's annual contest. It highlights ways similar cultural practices are celebrated in communities around the world. In *Tía Fortuna's New Home*, Estrella's Tía has to move from her longtime home Seaway in Miami to a senior living community. Estrella is saddened that her aunt must move, as that is where Tía told her stories of her childhood in Cuba and showed her the key to her Cuban casita, kept as a sign of hope. But Tía gives Estrella the key to Seaway to keep the family tradition alive. These texts support students in understanding the multiplicity of Jewish experiences connected to geography, helping to disrupt singular narratives of identity tied only to religion or history but that are shaped by diasporic experience across time and place.

In middle and secondary grades, texts such as *Across So Many Seas* (Behar, 2024) and *Night Owls* (Vishney, 2024) extend this work by tracing Jewish identity across multiple geographic and historical contexts. *Across So Many Seas* follows four generations of a Sephardic family who are forced to flee their homes from Spain to Turkey to Cuba, and eventually to the United States, illustrating how identity is sustained through song and transformed through migration. Set in New York City, *Night Owls* is a paranormal YA romance that follows Clara and Molly, estranged sisters from Jewish folklore, and Boaz, a Jewish medium, as their intertwined lives, loves, and secrets unfold around a historic Yiddish theater. Blending Jewish myth, queer romance, and urban fantasy, the novel celebrates contemporary Jewish life through complex Ashkenazi, Sephardic, and Mizrahi representation, showing Jewish identity as diverse, living, and richly interconnected. These narratives invite students to

examine how language, culture, and history intersect in shaping identity and to consider how diaspora complicates static understandings of belonging and being.

Instructionally, this strand supports critical literacy by encouraging students to question whose stories are centered, whose are marginalized, and how historical movement shapes identity. When used in text sets, these works enable students to identify patterns across texts and develop more expansive understandings of Jewish life as globally situated and internally diverse.

3.3. Intersectional Jewish Identities

The third strand foregrounds the intersectional nature of Jewish identity, making visible the ways Jewishness interacts with other dimensions of identity, including race/ethnicity, sexuality, gender, [dis]ability, and cultural affiliation. These texts make visible the complexity of identity and challenge assumptions that treat Jewishness as singular or uniform and show Jewish characters across multiple identity dimensions. From a HebCrit perspective, these texts are especially important because they resist the flattening of Jewish identity into one social location. They show Jewishness as lived alongside race, culture, sexuality, gender, disability, family structure, and other dimensions of identity.

In elementary classrooms, picture books such as *Joyful Song: A Naming Story* (Newman, 2024) and *Two New Years* (Ho, 2023) introduce young readers to Jewish identity intertwined with race, sexuality, culture, and family traditions. *Joyful Song* follows Zachary as he goes to the synagogue for the Jewish baby-naming ceremony for his new baby sister with his two moms, who are an interracial couple. *Two New Years* follows a Chinese Jewish family celebrating the parallel holidays of Rosh Hashanah, the Jewish New Year, and the Chinese Lunar New Year. Both texts illustrate how multiple cultural identities coexist within single families. They support early understandings of identities as layered, relational, traditional, and cultural, rather than singular or fixed.

In middle grade contexts, texts such as *The Length of a String* (Weissman, 2018), *The Many Mysteries of the Finkel Family* (Kapit, 2021), and *Just Shy of Ordinary* (Sass, 2024) explore questions of family, adoption, neurodivergence, non-binary identities, and belonging within Jewish contexts. *The Length of a String* offers a more complex exploration of Black Jewish identity, adoption, and intergenerational storytelling, creating space for discussions of race, belonging, and family formation. Two sisters with autism start a detective agency in *The Many Mysteries of the Finkel Family*, in a book that infuses Jewish holiday traditions and a mix of Sephardic and Ashkenazi customs, and *Just Shy of Ordinary* centers non-binary Jewish Shai, who struggles with severe anxiety and self-harm, as they attend public school for the first time and negotiate friends, family, and self-understanding. These narratives invite middle grade readers to consider how identity is shaped across multiple dimensions and how belonging is experienced differently based on social and cultural contexts.

In young adult literature, novels such as *The City Beautiful* (Polydoros, 2021) and *Going Bicoastal* (Adler, 2023) invite adolescents to examine how characters navigate overlapping identities within specific historical and cultural contexts. *Going Bicoastal*, for example, is a queer YA romcom that presents two parallel narrative paths—Nat/Natalya spending the summer either in Los Angeles with her mom or New York City with her dad, dating either a boy intern or a female crush, and follow either more or less religious Jewish traditional practices such as Shabbat dinner. These paths, shaped by place, relationships, and identity choices, invite readers to consider how context influences belonging and self-definition. These narratives create opportunities for adolescents to analyze how systems of power and belonging operate across multiple identity markers. From a pedagogical perspective, this strand aligns with culturally relevant and culturally sustaining pedagogies (Gay, 2018; Ladson-Billings, 1995) by affirming students' complex identities and supporting critical

inquiry into how identities are represented and constrained. From a literacy perspective, these texts deepen comprehension and engagement by requiring students to track multiple identity dimensions and consider how they shape character motivations, conflict, and resolutions. In doing so, they position literature as a space for exploring identity as dynamic, relational, and socially constructed.

3.4. Agency-Centered Narratives of Antisemitism

The fourth strand centers narratives of antisemitism, including but not limited to Holocaust literature, through an emphasis on human agency, ethical decision making, and relational responsibility. Rather than focusing solely on trauma or victimization, these texts foreground individual lives, moral choices, and roles of bystanders and upstanders. This broader framing is critical for helping students understand antisemitism as both a historical and contemporary phenomenon. In elementary classrooms, texts such as *Sharing Shalom* (Sharkan, 2024) introduce antisemitism in developmentally appropriate ways by focusing on friendship, misunderstanding, and inclusion. In this picture book, Leila loves going to Hebrew school and learning about her Jewish identity. When her synagogue is vandalized, she struggles with her love of being Jewish and being different until the community and her classmates come together to repair the damage, creating opportunities for discussion about bias, belonging, and allyship. This text can support early ethical reasoning by helping students recognize how exclusion can occur in everyday interactions and how individuals can respond with care and understanding.

In upper elementary and middle grades, narratives begin to bridge historical and contemporary experiences of antisemitism. Texts such as *White Bird* (Palacio, 2019) and *The Do More Club* (Kramaroff, 2023) allow students to consider both historical persecution and present-day responsibility. *White Bird* foregrounds intergenerational memory and acts of courage, helping students engage with difficult history through relational and moral lenses. In *The Do More Club*, Josh is the only Jewish person in his school, which is brought into focus when swastikas are spray painted around the building and Josh starts a club designed to help repair the world, based on the value of tikkun olam taught by his rabbi. This book, in contrast to *White Bird*, brings questions of activism, belonging, and response into a more contemporary register, helping students think about what it means to notice injustice and act in solidarity. Together, these texts support students in tracing continuities between past and present forms of antisemitism while also emphasizing that agency matters in both contexts.

In secondary classrooms, novels such as *Resistance* (Nielsen, 2018) and *The Assignment* (Wiemer, 2020) extend this work by connecting antisemitism to both historical and contemporary contexts and social dynamics. *Resistance* highlights moral courage and underground opposition during the Holocaust, while *The Assignment* centers a classroom simulation that prompts students to critically examine stereotypes, institutional responsibility, and the consequences of reenacting identity-based oppression. As demonstrated by Koss and Greenblatt (2023), classroom engagement with *The Assignment* can support students in identifying antisemitic tropes, developing critical language, and envisioning themselves as allies and upstanders.

Across grade levels, this strand enables ethical reasoning by positioning students not as passive recipients of historical knowledge, but as active interpreters of injustice and agents capable of response. By including both historical and contemporary narratives of antisemitism, this strand resists the reduction of Jewish experience to a single historical event and instead supports students in recognizing patterns of bias, understanding their impacts, and considering their own roles within systems of inclusion and exclusion.

Taken together, these strands demonstrate how Jewish text sets can be used to structure classroom inquiry, enabling students to read across texts, examine identity and power, and develop the critical and ethical capacities that culturally sustaining literacy seeks to foster. When enacted in classroom contexts, these interpretive practices position reading as a site of youth agency, where students not only analyze representation but also name exclusion, confront antisemitism, and imagine more inclusive social possibilities. Additional representative titles by strands and across grade bands are provided in Table 1.

Table 1. Additional Representative Jewish Texts by Strand and Grade Band.

Strand: Contemporary Jewish Life				
	Author	Year	Title	Publisher
Elementary	Goldberg, A.	2025	<i>The Remembering Candle</i>	Barefoot Books
	Salamon, J.	2024	<i>One More Story, Tata!</i>	Minerva
	Weissman, E. B.	2023	<i>Hanukkah Upside Down</i>	Abrams
Middle Grade	Greenwald, L.	2023	<i>Ellie's Deli: Wishing on Matzo Ball Soup</i>	Andrews McMeel
	Levy, J. S.	2024	<i>Finn and Ezra's Bar Mitzvah Time Loop</i>	HarperCollins
	Mackler, C.	2025	<i>Right Back at You</i>	Scholastic
Young Adult	Albertalli, B.	2025	<i>Amelia, if Only</i>	HarperCollins
	Corson, C. J.	2025	<i>It's a Love/Skate Relationship</i>	Storytide
	White, A.	2025	<i>D. J. Rosenblum Becomes the G.O.A.T.</i>	Levine Querido
Strand: Global Jewish Identities				
Elementary	Lehman-Wilzig, T.	2025	<i>The Henna Helper</i>	Apples & Honey
	Mizrahi, A.	2024	<i>The Blue Butterfly of Cochín</i>	Kalaniot
	Sassoon, S.	2024	<i>This is Not a Cholent</i>	Kar-Ben
Middle Grade	Halahmy, M.	2023	<i>A Boy from Baghdad</i>	Green Bean Books
	Hodder, B., & Gilani-Williams, F.	2025	<i>The Button Box</i>	Kar-Ben
	Levine, G. C.	2020	<i>A Ceiling Made of Eggshells</i>	Quill Tree
Young Adult	Gordon, C.	2021	<i>The Poetry of Secrets</i>	Scholastic
	Khubiar, S.	2023	<i>Just a Hat</i>	Blackstone
	Shrum, B. R.	2019	<i>Kissing Ezra Holtz (and Other Things I Did for Science)</i>	Sky Pony
Strand: Intersectional Jewish Identities				
Elementary	Chang, A. R., & Wildman, S.	2024	<i>Miri's Moving Day</i>	Kar-Ben
	Gehl, L.	2025	<i>My Body Can</i>	Apples & Honey
	Matula, C., & Lyons, E.	2024	<i>Mixed Up Mooncakes</i>	Quill Tree
Middle Grade	Cohen, E. B.	2023	<i>Two Tribes</i>	Heartdrum
	Isler, E. B.	2024	<i>The Color of Sound</i>	Carolrhoda
	Lukoff, K.	2025	<i>A World Worth Saving</i>	Dial
Young Adult	Arlow, J. M.	2025	<i>Leaving the Station</i>	HarperCollins
	Levithan, D.	2024	<i>Wide Awake Now</i>	Knopf
	Ramey, S.	2020	<i>It's My Life</i>	Sourcebooks
Strand: Agency-Centered Narratives of Antisemitism				
Elementary	Boxer, E.	2023	<i>Hidden Hope: How a Toy and a Hero Saved Lives During the Holocaust</i>	Abrams
	Churnin, N.	2021	<i>Dear Mr. Dickens</i>	Albert Whitman
	Wind, L.	2021	<i>Red and Green and Blue and White</i>	Levine Querido
Middle Grade	Gitwitz, A., L.	2025	<i>Max in the Land of Lies</i>	Dutton
	Golodryga, B.	2025	<i>Don't Feed the Lion</i>	Arcadia
	Levy, J.	2022	<i>The Book of Elsie</i>	Orca
Young Adult	Albertalli, B.	2020	<i>Yes No Maybe So</i>	HarperCollins
	Littman, S. D.	2022	<i>Some Kind of Hate</i>	Scholastic
	Taylor, J.	2025	<i>The Rebel Girls of Rome</i>	HarperCollins

4. Resistance Through Reading: Youth (Re)Imagining Inclusion and Confronting Antisemitism

The four strands provide a framework for text selection, but their pedagogical significance depends on what students are invited to do with these texts. Building on the four-strand framework, this section examines how educators can use Jewish texts to support youth agency, ethical interpretation, and critical engagement with antisemitism and inclusion. Reading is one site where young people practice agency, name inclusion and exclusion, and imagine responses to injustice. In this sense, Jewish children’s and YA literature functions not only as representation, but as a resource through which students (re)imagine their own lives and social worlds, taking up the kinds of critical and imaginative work Sciurba (2022) identifies as central to inclusive literacy education. When educators intentionally integrate diverse Jewish narratives into literacy instruction, they create opportunities for students to examine how antisemitism operates historically and socially while also exploring how communities sustain culture, resilience, and solidarity.

Positioning reading as resistance is particularly important in the current educational climate. National reporting documents increased antisemitic incidents in K–12 settings alongside limited educator preparation to address antisemitism or to teach related content with confidence (ADL, 2024; Shapiro et al., 2025). These conditions position humanizing, agency-centered narratives as part of a broader school climate strategy that supports accurate understanding and ethical action (Greenblatt & Koss, 2024). Within this frame, literature discussion becomes a rehearsal space for civic and ethical participation. When students analyze upstander and bystander choices in agency-centered texts, examine the dynamics of belonging and exclusion, and interrogate representation across texts, they practice naming harm, evaluating perspectives, and imagining responses to injustice (Koss & Greenblatt, 2023). Rather than treating texts as isolated curricular moments, educators can structure instruction around a set of intentional practices that support youth interpretation and agency. Table 2 illustrates how these instructional approaches, aligned with the framework described below, can be enacted across grade levels.

Table 2. Instructional Uses of Jewish Texts to Support Youth Agency and Critical Literacy.

Instructional Goal	Elementary	Middle Grade	Secondary
Text Pairing as Inquiry	Pair everyday stories with simple informational texts about fairness and community	Pair narrative texts with historical or informational sources to examine stereotypes and identity	Pair literature with primary sources, media, or historical texts to analyze representation and antisemitism
Literature Discussion as Ethical Reasoning	Identify kindness, fairness, and responsibility in character actions through guided discussion	Analyze character decisions, consequences, and perspectives across texts	Evaluate moral dilemmas, bystander/upstander behavior, and ethical responsibility in historical and contemporary contexts
Developmental Pathways for Agency	Role-play, discussion, and collaborative activities focused on inclusion and belonging	Reflective writing and discussion connecting identity, peer dynamics, and social context	Debate, position-taking, and application of literary insights to school and societal contexts
Critical and Media Literacy	Recognize fairness, representation, and inclusion in stories	Examine how stereotypes form and persist across texts and media	Analyze digital platforms, antisemitic tropes, and representation across online and media environments
Classroom and Institutional Conditions	Establish inclusive norms through discussion and shared expectations	Connect texts to broader classroom practices and community-building	Align instruction with critical literacy goals, communicate with stakeholders, and navigate institutional constraints

4.1. Text Pairing as a Site of Critical Inquiry and Reimagining

One way teachers can support students' agency is through intentional text pairing. Pairing contemporary narratives of Jewish family, friendship, and everyday life with historically grounded or informational texts on antisemitism helps students encounter Jewishness as living, varied, and socially situated rather than as a single historical category. For example, a text such as *The Dubious Pranks of Shaindy Goodman* (Lowe, 2024), which depicts Orthodox Jewish school and community life, can be read alongside brief historical or informational texts on antisemitic stereotypes, allowing students to examine the contrast between lived Jewish experience and the external narratives imposed upon it (Botelho & Rudman, 2009). Such pairings move discussion beyond recognition toward inquiry, inviting students to question why stereotypes persist, how they are sustained across contexts, and how they might be resisted or reimagined.

4.2. Literature Discussion as Ethical Reasoning and Resistance

A second instructional move involves structuring discussion around ethical reasoning rather than recall alone. Agency-centered texts such as *White Bird* (Palacio, 2019), *Resistance* (Nielsen, 2018), and *The Assignment* (Wiemer, 2020) offer opportunities for students to analyze bystander and upstander behavior as historically and socially situated choices shaped by fear, power, and relational responsibility. When students trace characters' decisions, weigh alternatives, and connect those choices to present-day school contexts, literature becomes a space for rehearsing ethical judgment. In this way, students use texts not only to learn about the past, but also to imagine what action, solidarity, or interruption of harm might look like in their own lives.

4.3. Developmental Pathways for Agency and Interpretation

These practices take different forms across grade levels. In elementary classrooms, this work begins through developmentally appropriate connections between everyday Jewish life and broader questions of care, fairness, and belonging. Picture books such as *Challah Day!* (Offsay, 2023), especially when paired with age-appropriate discussion of kindness, community, and standing up for others, can help young children understand inclusion as something enacted in daily relationships. Through discussion, role-play, or collaborative activities, students begin to imagine classrooms in which difference is recognized and valued.

In secondary classrooms, teachers can extend this work through explicit critical literacy and media literacy scaffolds. Students can examine how antisemitic tropes have circulated historically and how they continue to appear in contemporary and digital contexts. This preparatory work gives students language for recognizing harmful representations and allows them to return to literary texts with greater interpretive precision. It also supports connections between classroom reading and broader sociopolitical contexts, including online environments where misinformation and stereotypic amplification may occur. Media literacy scholarship supports this move by emphasizing analysis of authorship, evidence, platform influence, and representation, especially when identities are mediated through digital circulation (Hobbs, 2011, 2017; Hobbs & Moore, 2013).

4.4. Classroom and Institutional Conditions for Transformative Literacy

Supporting youth agency also depends on broader classroom and curricular design. When Jewish representation is distributed across the year rather than confined to a single unit, students encounter Jewish identity as part of the ongoing fabric of diversity rather than as an exceptional topic and understand Jewish people as contemporary, not solely historical, subjects. When educators articulate clear rationales for text selection, connect

instruction to critical literacy goals, and communicate proactively with families and school communities, they create conditions that support inclusive curriculum.

These structures matter because youth agency does not emerge from texts alone. It depends on whether students can engage difference thoughtfully, question bias safely, and imagine more inclusive forms of community. Such conditions align with broader guidance in emphasizing proactive planning, educator preparation, and sustained attention to antisemitism within educational contexts (ADL, 2024). Taken together, these practices show how the four strands of culturally sustaining Jewish literacy can support youth in reimagining both texts and lived worlds. Contemporary narratives affirm visibility and identity; global and intersectional texts expand students' sense of belonging; and antisemitism narratives anchor ethical inquiry. Across these practices, students are not only interpreting texts but also repositioning themselves in relation to dominant narratives, imagining alternative possibilities for belonging, and rehearsing forms of resistance that extend beyond the classroom. These practices require intentional preparation and support, underscoring the importance of equipping educators with the knowledge and pedagogical strategies needed to facilitate discussion of antisemitism and inclusion. At the same time, the enactment of these practices is shaped by broader curricular, institutional, and political conditions that can both support and constrain inclusive literacy instruction.

5. Teaching in Restrictive Climates: Practical Moves That Protect Inclusion

The enactment of culturally sustaining Jewish literacy does not occur in neutral contexts. Teachers increasingly work within curricular, political, and institutional environments that may constrain how identity, diversity, and antisemitism are addressed in classrooms. These conditions make it especially important to articulate instructional approaches that are both pedagogically sound and professionally sustainable. These instructional decisions highlight the role of educator knowledge, text selection, and institutional context in shaping how Jewish literature is taken up in classrooms.

Recent reporting indicates that many educators devote limited time to Jewish topics and seek additional support for teaching about antisemitism and Jewish identity with accuracy and confidence (Shapiro et al., 2025). At the same time, broader debates about curriculum and inclusion have created uncertainty around how and what topics related to identity, bias, and social justice can be introduced (Learning for Justice, 2023). Within these constraints, educators must make intentional decisions about how to design instruction that is both responsive to students and aligned with institutional expectations.

5.1. Planning a Yearlong Arc of Representation

One foundational move is to plan for Jewish representation across the academic year rather than confining it to a single Holocaust unit, isolated lesson, or inclusion of a holiday or cultural tradition. In practice, this may involve placing two or three Jewish texts or excerpts in different units so that contemporary Jewish life, global identities, intersectional experiences, and antisemitism narratives each appear at least once. For example, a contemporary novel might be included in a unit on identity or coming of age, while a picture book or short text might be integrated into a unit on community or belonging. This approach positions Jewish identity as part of the ongoing fabric of diversity rather than as an exceptional or crisis-based topic.

5.2. Pairing Texts to Support Inquiry and Connection

Intentional text pairing supports students in examining identity across contexts. Teachers can pair contemporary narratives that center everyday Jewish life with historically

grounded or informational texts that invite inquiry into personhood, choice, and context. This pairing strategy is consistent with reviews that caution against trauma-only approaches to antisemitism, allowing students to consider how lived experience and social narratives interact. Such pairings invite students to ask why certain narratives persist, how they are sustained, and how they might be challenged. This approach moves discussion beyond recognition toward inquiry and aligns with critical literacy goals.

5.3. Naming Learning Goals and Using Selection Guidance

In restrictive contexts, clearly articulated learning goals provide both instructional focus and professional grounding. Teachers can frame lessons around specific critical literacy outcomes, such as identifying stereotypes and misinformation about Jews, analyzing upstander and bystander behavior, and evaluating sources. Explicit articulation of these goals strengthens both instructional coherence and public justification. Explicitly naming these goals connects instruction to established literacy standards and strengthens the rationale for including Jewish texts.

Text selection also plays a central role. Teachers can draw on resources such as the Association of Jewish Libraries and curated university children's literature guides to vet texts for accuracy, avoid common tropes, and ensure intra-Jewish diversity ([Association of Jewish Libraries \[AJL\], 2022](#); [University of Illinois Urbana-Champaign Library, 2023](#)). Using shared criteria such as breadth beyond holidays, attention to everyday life, and representation of diverse Jewish identities supports both instructional quality and coherence.

5.4. Structuring Discussion and Supporting Ethical Reasoning

Structured discussion practices help create classroom environments in which students can engage with complex topics thoughtfully. Teachers can use discussion protocols that guide students to trace character decisions and connect those choices to contemporary contexts and situations. Establishing norms for respectful dialogue that protect dignity, address misinformation directly, and use evidence as support elevates student interpretation. This is consistent with culturally responsive practice and helps keep dialogue focused on humanization and learning ([Wilkinson et al., 2017](#)).

5.5. Integrating Critical and Media Literacy

Teachers can further support student understanding by integrating critical and media literacy into literary study. This may include naming antisemitic tropes, accurately examining how they have circulated historically, analyzing how they appear in contemporary discourse, and considering how digital platforms influence which narratives are amplified. Students might compare representations across texts and media sources or evaluate how authorship, evidence, and platform shape meaning, and propose concrete upstander responses aligned with classroom norms and school safety expectations ([Koss & Greenblatt, 2023](#)). These practices help students connect classroom reading to the broader sociopolitical contexts in which they encounter information ([Hobbs, 2011, 2017](#)).

5.6. Communicating Rationale and Building Institutional Support

Sustaining inclusive literacy requires attention not only to instructional design, but also to communication and institutional context. Teachers can strengthen this work by developing clear rationales that link text selection to standards, critical literacy goals, and school commitments to safety and inclusion. Such rationales may draw on national data and policy guidance to explain the need for accurate and developmentally appropriate instruction on Jewish identity and antisemitism. They can also make visible how selected texts support specific learning outcomes, including students' ability to analyze bias, engage in discussion, and apply ethical reasoning.

Proactive communication with families, administrators, and school communities further supports this work. Sharing instructional goals, explaining text choices, and situating lessons within broader commitments to inclusive education help position Jewish representation as part of established educational priorities rather than as an isolated or reactive addition. These practices contribute to transparency and can reduce misunderstanding around the purpose of inclusive literacy instruction.

At the same time, individual teacher efforts are shaped by broader institutional conditions. System- and state-level debates about how antisemitism is defined and addressed in schools remain ongoing, and educators are often asked to navigate these questions without clear guidance. In this context, institutional support becomes critical. Partnering with librarians, school leaders, and community organizations can help align resources, establish norms for civil discourse, and ensure that instruction is supported by a shared commitment to student safety and belonging.

This institutional layer does not replace classroom practice; rather, it strengthens it. When teachers are supported by coherent policies, shared language, and aligned resources, inclusive literacy work becomes more sustainable and less vulnerable to disruption. In this way, communication and institutional alignment function as essential conditions for ensuring that Jewish representation remains consistent, meaningful, and responsive to students' learning needs.

Taken together, these approaches demonstrate that teaching in restrictive climates requires both pedagogical intention and strategic design. When educators plan across the year, pair texts thoughtfully, structure inquiry, and communicate clearly, they create opportunities for students to engage Jewish narratives in ways that support humanization, critical interpretation, and ethical reasoning. When these practices are supported by clear rationales and institutional alignment, they become more sustainable and less vulnerable to disruption. Even within constrained contexts, literacy classrooms can remain spaces where students not only examine bias and question assumptions but also imagine and rehearse more inclusive forms of community.

6. Discussion and Conclusions

Across the theoretical frameworks, text set design, and instructional practices presented in this article, a consistent throughline emerges: Jewish representation in children's and young adult literature is not simply a missing component of inclusive literacy but a conceptual test case for how diversity itself is defined within literacy education. This review has argued that Jewish children's and young adult literature occupies a paradoxical position within contemporary diverse books discourse. While diversity initiatives have transformed publishing, curriculum design, and literacy scholarship, Jewish identity remains inconsistently recognized within these frameworks (Greenblatt & Koss, 2024). The result is not merely a representational gap, but a narrowing of the interpretive possibilities available to young readers.

The frameworks synthesized in this article, including mirrors and windows (Bishop, 1990; McNair & Edwards, 2021), culturally relevant and sustaining pedagogies (Gay, 2018; Ladson-Billings, 1995; Paris & Alim, 2017), critical literacy (Freire, 1985; Lewison et al., 2002), and youth studies (Quijada Cerecer et al., 2013), collectively emphasize that literature functions as a site of humanization, interpretation, and ethical inquiry. Sciurba's (2022) question of how texts help youth reimagine their lives clarifies why Jewish inclusion matters within this landscape. When Jewish narratives are absent or narrowly framed, students lose opportunities to engage Jewish identity as culturally complex, historically situated, and socially meaningful. At the same time, literacy frameworks lose a critical

lens for examining how religion, ethnicity, race, diaspora, and antisemitism complicate simplified models of diversity.

The four-strand framework proposed in this article extends these theoretical commitments by offering a structure for selecting and organizing texts that reflect the heterogeneity of Jewish life across contemporary, global, intersectional, and antisemitism-related narratives. As demonstrated in the text set examples, these strands are most powerful when enacted relationally through text pairing, dialogic discussion, and critical and media literacy practices. In these contexts, Jewish literature functions not only as representation, but as an interpretive resource through which students examine identity, analyze bias, and develop ethical understandings of belonging and responsibility, particularly when Jewish narratives are positioned as part of broader conversations about diversity and inclusion (Association of Jewish Libraries [AJL], 2022; Botelho & Rudman, 2009).

The section on resistance through reading further illustrates how these interpretive practices position students as active agents. Students do not simply receive narratives, but use them to name exclusion, interrogate representation, and consider how they might respond to injustice within their own communities. This aligns with research on youth engagement and participatory reading cultures, which demonstrates that young people actively construct meaning across classroom and digital contexts, including networked spaces such as BookTok (Garcia et al., 2015; Jenkins & Ito, 2015; Martens et al., 2022). At the same time, these spaces reveal that visibility alone does not guarantee representational diversity, reinforcing the need for critical media literacy that helps students analyze whose stories are centered and why.

As the section on teaching in restrictive climates makes clear, the enactment of this work is shaped by broader institutional and political conditions. Educators often navigate constraints related to curriculum, time, and public discourse, requiring intentional instructional design, clear articulation of learning goals, and institutional support (ADL, 2024; Shapiro et al., 2025). These findings also underscore the need for more robust attention to teacher education and professional learning. Educators require support not only in selecting diverse Jewish texts, but in facilitating discussions of antisemitism, identity, and bias in ways that are developmentally appropriate and pedagogically grounded. While a full examination of teacher preparation is beyond the scope of this article, this work points to the importance of preparing educators to engage Jewish literature as part of culturally sustaining and critically oriented literacy instruction. These conditions do not eliminate the possibility of inclusive literacy, but they do shape how it is enacted. Even within constrained contexts, the practices outlined in this article demonstrate that literacy classrooms can remain spaces where students engage in humanizing, inquiry-driven work that supports critical interpretation and ethical reasoning.

Reframing Jewish literature as central to inclusive literacy expands the conceptual scope of diverse books scholarship. Rather than treating Jewish representation as a marginal addition to existing diversity frameworks, this article suggests that Jewish narratives illuminate broader questions about how literature enables young people to interpret injustice, challenge erasure, and imagine more inclusive communities. Supporting youth engagement with these narratives is therefore not peripheral to literacy education, but integral to its humanizing and democratic purposes. It is a pedagogical commitment to ensuring that students have the narrative resources necessary to question injustice, recognize complexity, and imagine more inclusive futures within their own educational and social worlds.

7. Future Directions

While this review has outlined key conceptual and pedagogical directions, several areas warrant further empirical and theoretical investigation. Future research should exam-

ine how Jewish children's and young adult literature functions within literacy classrooms and youth interpretive practices. Studies are needed on how students engage Jewish texts across grade levels and instructional contexts, especially in relation to identity development, ethical reasoning, and responses to antisemitism. Additional work should investigate how integrated instructional designs, including text pairing across historical and contemporary contexts, support student learning over time, as well as how educators navigate institutional constraints in implementing this work. Research on digital youth cultures and curriculum policy can further illuminate how Jewish narratives are circulated, interpreted, and positioned within broader literacy frameworks. Such work would clarify how Jewish literature supports not only representation, but also youth resistance, the reinterpretation of dominant narratives, and the reimagining of more inclusive educational and social futures.

Author Contributions: Both authors worked together in the writing of this article. Conceptualization, M.D.K. and D.G.; methodology, M.D.K. and D.G.; software, M.D.K. and D.G.; validation, M.D.K. and D.G.; formal analysis, M.D.K. and D.G.; investigation, M.D.K. and D.G.; resources, M.D.K. and D.G.; data curation, M.D.K. and D.G.; writing—original draft preparation, M.D.K. and D.G.; writing—review and editing, M.D.K. and D.G.; visualization, M.D.K. and D.G.; supervision, M.D.K. and D.G.; project administration, M.D.K. and D.G.; funding acquisition, M.D.K. and D.G. All authors have read and agreed to the published version of the manuscript.

Funding: This research received no external funding.

Institutional Review Board Statement: Not applicable.

Informed Consent Statement: Not applicable.

Data Availability Statement: No new data were created or analyzed in this study. Data availability is not available for this article.

Conflicts of Interest: The authors declare no conflicts of interest.

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