



PJ Goes to Camp

Sending a child to overnight camp for the first time can be hard. PJ Library helps make the choice easier.

BY LISA TRANK

Lauren Gell remembers the moment she learned the transformative power of Jewish camp. Her then-7-year-old daughter, Frankie, had just finished her first summer camp session at Tamarack Camps in Michigan, and she could hardly contain her enthusiasm.

“She bounded off the bus and told us that she had the time of her life and she was going for the whole summer next year,” Lauren recalls. Lauren and her husband, Jared, had been a little nervous about sending their younger child to camp since she had never slept away from home before. “We didn’t know which way camp would go,” Lauren shares. “But Frankie felt like she was a part of something and felt loved. She came back a different person.”

Outdoor activities, close friendships, Jewish communal celebrations — Jewish overnight camps offer a range of opportunities and experiences.

PHOTOS COURTESY OF KELLY RUBANENKO AND B'NAI B'RITH CAMP OREGON

Jewish summer camp is a treasured experience for many children — one that fosters Jewish learning, a strengthened sense of identity and cultural pride, and, often, a lifetime of joyful memories and friendships. But like Lauren, many parents hesitate that first year, questioning whether camp will be right for their child. That’s where PJ Goes to Camp — an initiative that offers an incentive to help families choose Jewish overnight camp — comes in.

Every October, PJ Library books arrive with a special sticker affixed to the envelope, encouraging families to sign up for PJ Goes to Camp. In partnership with the Foundation for Jewish Camp’s One Happy Camper program, PJ Goes to Camp provides up to \$1,000 to defray the cost of overnight camp for first-time campers.

This summer, more than 1,170 children throughout the US and Canada are experiencing Jewish overnight camp for the first time with the support of a PJ Goes to Camp grant. Over the past 13 years, PJ Goes to Camp has awarded more than 8,000 grants totaling \$8.1 million to broaden access to the joy of Jewish camp.

The benefits are quantifiable. According to the Foundation for Jewish Camp's 2022 Census Report, some 92 percent of camp families said overnight camp made their child feel part of the larger Jewish community and peoplehood. As adults, campers are 21 percent more likely to feel that being Jewish is very important, according to *Camp Works*, a seminal Jewish camping industry report that established the importance of camp and its long-term positive impacts.

"The mission of PJ Goes to Camp is to introduce the wonder of Jewish camp to new campers who might be considering camp. It makes Jewish camp more attainable and accessible for families and starts them on a lifetime of camping memories," says Sarah Eisinger, director of JCamp 180, a program of the Harold Grinspoon Foundation. "We know that first-time campers who receive One Happy Camper incentives, including PJ Goes to Camp, overwhelmingly return to camp for a second and third year, so this targeted investment in first-time campers is both great for families and for our Jewish ecosystem."

Helping Campers Find Their Camp

In the 1980s, compelled by his desire to help kids build lifelong Jewish connections, philanthropist Harold Grinspoon wanted to make the Jewish camp experience more accessible and started a program offering tuition assistance for Jewish summer camps in Western Massachusetts.

By the mid-2000s, word had spread. Jerry Silverman, the then-director of the Foundation for Jewish Camp, reached out to expand Harold's efforts nationally, eventually creating the program that would become One Happy Camper.

Where does PJ Goes to Camp come in? Despite the array of opportunities for



Above: Kids at a Jewish overnight camp take part in Havdalah after Shabbat. Below: Campers often form lasting friendships.

PHOTOS COURTESY OF CAMP RAMAH IN WISCONSIN AND CAMP YOUNG JUDEA – TEXAS

support through One Happy Camper and individual camps, not all families may have a local opportunity or fit the criteria. PJ Goes to Camp is there for them, ensuring that families enrolled in PJ Library have an incentive to help them choose Jewish summer camp for the first time.

As PJ Goes to Camp's popularity grew, demand outpaced the number of grants, and a waitlist formed. To meet the demand, Harold reached out to philanthropic partners with a simple question – would they lend their support to grow PJ Goes to Camp, to get more kids into Jewish camps? Funders such as the Goldrich Family Foundation and the Klaff Family Foundation replied with a resounding "yes." Together, these funding partners made a commitment to help bolster the Jewish future.

Ensuring Camps Are There for Campers

When the pandemic hit in 2020, Jewish overnight camps, like much of the world, shut down. Families wouldn't be attending, and camps were poised to incur a financial loss. It was an existential crisis. Foundations, federations, individual donors, camp families, and others committed to Jewish summer camp marshaled their resources to help the camps weather this unprecedented time. Sparked by a matching grant from the Harold Grinspoon Foundation, some 32,000 donors lent their support



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over the course of three years to ensure summer camps would long outlast the strain of the pandemic.

The good news? Jewish camps have not only survived but rebounded stronger than ever. To ensure that strength into the future, the Harold Grinspoon Foundation last fall announced a new \$25 million matching grant that will provide support for more than 100 nonprofit Jewish overnight camps over the next five years. The Forward Together grant initiative will help fund the staffing and infrastructure camps will need for generations to come.

For PJ Library families whose children are growing up — and who are on the cusp of making their next Jewish decision — One Happy Camper and PJ Goes to Camp offer a doorway into a vibrant Jewish experience.

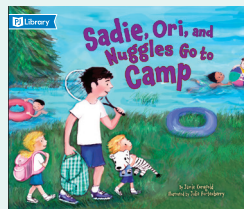
And for the Gell family, whose 11-year-old son, Teddy, also attends Tamarack Camps, Jewish summer camp continues to play an important role. “[It] reinforces Jewish values and strengthens our family’s sense of our Jewishness,” says Lauren. “Frankie is so happy there. She feels safe. She feels at home.”

Lisa Trank is a Colorado-based writer and an alum of the Wilshire Boulevard Temple Hess Kramer/Gindling Hilltop Camps located in Malibu, California. She attributes her strong and positive Jewish identity and many lifelong friendships to this formative experience.

WANT TO LEARN MORE?
Visit pjlibrary.org/camp.

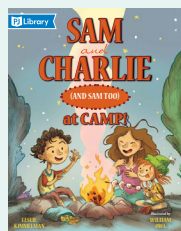
Want to support Jewish camps?
Find out if the camp you love is part
of the Forward Together grant and
join us in helping camps thrive!

PJ LIBRARY BOOKS THAT FEATURE CAMP



Sadie, Ori, and Nuggles Go to Camp
Age: 4 years

For the first time ever, Ori is going to sleepaway camp — and he’s feeling nervous. Can he bring Nuggles? Or will the other campers laugh at him? Sadie helps him out.



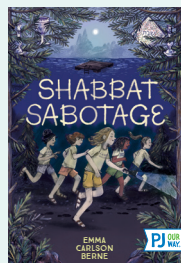
Sam and Charlie (and Sam Too) at Camp!
Age: 6 years

Best friends Sam and Charlie are heading to sleepaway camp for the first time. Luckily, they’re going to the same camp! They’re in for many adventures — and a few lessons.



Sami's Sleepaway Summer
Age: 7 years

Though her family doesn’t seem to see it, Sami is absolutely certain she’s not a “sleepaway camp kind of kid.” Will a four-day, three-night minisession at Camp Cedar Lake change her mind?



Shabbat Sabotage
Ages: 9 to 12 years

It’s Maya’s first time at summer camp, and she’s got a secret she’d rather her bunkmates didn’t find out about. But she’s not the only one hiding something ...



The Sun Will Come Out
Ages: 9 to 12 years

Eleven-year-olds Bea and Frankie have been planning their first summer at Camp Shalom forever. But then Frankie gets into horse camp! How will Bea replace her best friend for a whole summer?