

There's always plenty going on at PJ Library. Here's a quick roundup of the latest news and events.

BY PJ LIBRARY STAFF

PJ Library Family Camps Create Jewish Connection

CHALLAH BRAIDING AND ISRAELI DANCING.

Shabbat songs and s'mores under the stars. These and other cherished Jewish summer camp activities are not just for kids — they are staples of PJ Library family-camp weekends that invite children, parents, and even grandparents to unplug, play, and create meaningful Jewish connections.

Each year, Jewish camps across the US host intergenerational weekend retreats in partnership with PJ Library, offering families the chance to experience the joy of Jewish camp together and build new relationships in their local Jewish communities. These family-camp weekends feature a distinct PJ Library flavor with built-in storytime and creative book-related activities.

"We're trying to make overnight camp experiences more available and accessible to PJ Library families, to give them a taste of what Jewish overnight camping is all about," says Marcy Lewis, program director for PJ Library of Greater Phoenix, a program of the Center for Jewish Philanthropy of Greater Phoenix. "Family camp is an opportunity to bring books and Judaism to life and to introduce a love of Jewish camp to a new generation."

At Camp Daisy & Harry Stein in Prescott, Arizona, where Lewis and volunteer coordinator Laura Drachler have organized PJ Library family camps since 2017, families can take part in kid-friendly Shabbat services, art projects, zip lining, and sports. Lewis and Drachler design each camp weekend around a favorite PJ Library book. Last year, families received a copy of *10 Things I Can Do to Help My World*, made crafts with recycled objects, and packed care kits for distribution by a local charity.

In addition to rock climbing, tie-dyeing clothes, and boating on the lake, Ramah



Families enjoy camp activities and storytime at PJ Library family-camp weekends around the US.

PHOTO COURTESY OF RAMAH DAROM

Darom's annual "Book It to Shabbat" PJ Library family camp in Clayton, Georgia, offers families a chance to dive deeply into Jewish values. Each camp weekend features a theme plucked from the pages of PJ Library books that camp organizers curate in partnership with PJ Library Atlanta. For one year's theme, the mitzvah of *hashavat aveidah* (returning lost items), families played hide and seek, took part in a scavenger hunt, and enjoyed an immersive StoryWalk® featuring the PJ Library book *A Hen for Izzy Pippik*.

"We focus on experiential play because we recognize how critical these moments are for [kids'] Jewish development," says Eliana Leader, director of the Kaplan Mitchell Retreat Center at Ramah Darom. "Ultimately, we want to inspire greater participation in the Jewish community."

That goes for grownups too. Adults-only social activities that allow parents to connect with new friends are a highlight of many PJ Library family camps. "Parents speak highly of the ability for their kids to roam and play safely while they're having a cup of coffee with somebody new," says Elizabeth Kaplan, former community care director at Camp Laurelwood in Madison, Connecticut, which will host two PJ Library family camps in 2024.

What's the impact of these family-camp weekends? Many families return year after year. Some sign their children up for overnight camp. And many form relationships that last long after the glow of the campfire fades. "Anytime you have this kind of experience together," Leader says, "it's a bond that takes you somewhere further."

To find a PJ Library family camp near you, contact your local PJ Library program professional: pjlibrary.org/pj-near-you.

—By Rachel Zaimont



PHOTO BY DANI FINE PHOTOGRAPHY

Investing in Jewish Professionals

PJ Library is more than books — in communities around the world, PJ Library brings families together for engaging encounters that connect participants to Jewish life and to one another. [Editor's note: See the article on page 8 for more!] But those connections don't just happen on their own. Family-engagement professionals at Jewish organizations who help bring PJ Library to communities across the globe often create these crucial opportunities. In May, PJ Library hosted its annual conference just for them.

The 2023 PJ Library International Conference, held in Springfield, Massachusetts, brought together more than 180 professionals representing 90 communities and eight countries. For three days, attendees took part in professional development sessions exploring how to intentionally connect with parents of young children, support families in building relationships with their local Jewish communities, and foster a sense of belonging. "Thank you for the thought and intention behind this conference," wrote Hilary Kamin, managing director of leadership and engagement at the Jewish Federation of Greater Houston. "I filled my cup with program ideas, fundraising tips, and new ways to engage our families."

—By Cheryl Glantz Nail

Summer Book Swaps Across New York

"What can I do with the books my kids have outgrown?" This is one of the most frequently asked questions at PJ Library (after "Is it really free?" — and yes, it is!). As children get older, they are no longer pulling the board books they once loved off their bookshelves, and in New York City, extra storage space is scarce.

To help families refresh their libraries with age-appropriate titles, PJ Library held four book swaps this past summer across New York so families could exchange gently used books. The series began on the Upper East Side at 92NY's Shababa program, then traveled uptown to Fort Tryon Park for an appearance at Ukulele Shabbat, hosted by YM&YWA of Washington Heights & Inwood. Continuing north, Westchester's Temple Beth Abraham hosted the third book swap, and the series concluded in Brooklyn at Park Slope Jewish Center's Stoop Shabbat. In total, attendees exchanged or donated more than 1,500 books.

"There is nothing we love more than connecting families raising young children while also connecting them with PJ Library," says Meara Ashtivker, director of PJ Library in New York. "We look forward to hosting more book swaps next summer."

—By Allison Glazer

Picture Book Summer Camp

Every year, PJ Library sends 99 unique titles to kids ages 0-8 in North America. That's a lot of books! It takes great authors to write the wonderful Jewish stories that families



PHOTO BY ROFA SHUHRATZOD

reach for again and again. That's why, for the second August in a row, PJ Library offered emerging writers the chance to hone their craft at its Picture Book Summer Camp, a five-day retreat at the Highlights Foundation campus in Pennsylvania. The group of 20 authors (selected through a competitive application process) learned about story development, workshopped manuscripts, and discussed Jewish content and themes. "I truly think my trips to Picture Book Summer Camp have changed my life and the trajectory of my career," says writer Jan Epstein Schwaid, who attended the 2022 and 2023 retreats. "I learned so much about the craft and business of picture books. Delving into Jewish topics — and the way we approach them with kids — inspired me deeply." Interested in attending? The 2024 application will be online in March.

—By Patrick Coyle