



The Surprise in the Envelope

Alongside the monthly book, PJ Library has sent puzzles, games, and other activities to families. What's behind these special treats?

BY DANNY PALLER, CREATIVE DIRECTOR

A pair of Shabbat candlesticks. A mezuzah on the doorpost. A kippah from Cousin Joey's bar mitzvah. Whether these or other artifacts of Jewish life adorn your home, PJ Library has a few to add: a perpetual Jewish calendar on the refrigerator, a Mitzvah Pack on the coatrack, a *Who Stole Hanukkah?!?* puzzle in the game bin.

These are just some of the many surprise gifts and activities that PJ Library has sent alongside the monthly storybook.

After its first full decade of sending free Jewish children's books, PJ Library began responding to parents' requests for "beyond-the-book" experiences as a means of deepening Jewish engagement in the home. PJ Library mailed one of its first activities in March 2016: a **Passover Question Catcher**. In the Passover

spirit of encouraging children to ask questions, families received foldable sheets modeled on paper fortune tellers — in this case, featuring fun questions for children to ask in preparation for the Passover *seder* (ritual meal). The team made this ready-to-use family activity as flat as a matzah so it could be tucked into the envelope with the book.

Since then, PJ Library has continued creating gifts for families to enjoy and sending them as a surprise in the same envelope as the monthly book. Each piece aspires to meet three criteria:

1. Be relevant. What are parents looking for to enrich the at-home Jewish experience?
2. Make the old new. How can PJ Library renew and refresh the way Jewish rituals or values have traditionally been presented?
3. Be quick and deep. How can a child-centered activity also involve and resonate with busy grownups?

Over the past seven years, PJ Library has developed and mailed nearly 20 in-envelope presents to hundreds of thousands of children. Families used colorful decals to construct their own **family tree**, designed to spark stories and conversations about family history. Kids attached an eye-catching **luggage tag** to a backpack or suitcase, and — inspired by *Tefilat HaDerech*, an ancient Jewish traveler's prayer — inserted their own wishes for summer travels. Families unfolded the **Passover River Ride** at the seder table to retell the dramatic story of the Exodus from Egypt. Kids wore a **PJ Library apron** to cook with family members in the kitchen — creating sweet Jewish memories — and slipped giftable items into their **Mitzvah Pack** to go out into the world to do acts of kindness. Guided by a child-friendly **Perpetual Jewish Calendar**, families learned about the cycle of the Jewish year, and, as a result, kept track of just when to enjoy a special **peel-and-sniff Havdalah**

One of the first in-envelope gifts: the Passover Question Catcher.

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kit, distribute their Persian-style **Purim gift basket**, greet guests with their dangling **Sukkot welcome mobile**, or plant seeds on Tu B'Shevat (Jewish Earth Day) with their **microgreens growing kit**. And most recently, families celebrated Israel's milestone 75th birthday by encountering diverse people and places in the groundbreaking **Israel Trail Game**.

What has been the outcome of all these surprise activities? No surprise, really. Families post their delight on social media and send notes of appreciation. When we survey families, asking about the impact of these gifts, over 90 percent tell us they enjoy them. Children and

A selection of PJ Library in-envelope gifts, including the brand-new Israel Trail Game (bottom right).

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adults alike embrace these creative ways to connect with holiday traditions and customs.

"Passing this along for the game makers in the latest PJ Library book packets: We love them!" shares Shaina S. of Anchorage, Alaska. "The amount of thought and consideration that goes into these are amazing."

What new special gifts are in the pipeline? We're not telling. Would you really want us to ruin the surprise? 📖

TURN THE PAGE to learn how the popular *Who Stole Hanukkah?!* book and puzzle were created! ▶▶