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 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.

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

One of the first in-envelope gifts: the Passover Question Catcher.
PHOTO BY JILLIAN REARDON
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 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?

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

PHOTOS BY LYNSAY HANNAH, STEPHANIE COHEN, AND BRIAN ACH