

The Blessing of the Children

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WHAT DO YOU HOPE FOR YOUR CHILDREN? That question guided the creation of a new PJ Library in-the-envelope activity on the Blessing of the Children, the blessing parents have traditionally given their children on Shabbat evening.

I grew up in a home where Friday nights included blessings over candles, wine, and challah. But no one ever blessed me. That moment had to wait until I became a bar mitzvah. After I read the Torah – in a voice higher and squeakier than I feared possible – the rabbi draped his prayer shawl over my head and intoned (believe me, that’s the right verb) a blessing. He was not my favorite person, and the experience was uncomfortable.

Years later, when my wife and I held a newborn at our own Friday night table, we felt a desire to give him a blessing. We felt so blessed to have him. We wanted to return the favor.

So each week we’d hug our son and say the Blessing of the Children, the same blessing my congregational rabbi had recited. But it felt completely different. It felt intimate and genuine. We’d say the traditional words – the oldest blessing Jews have, dating back over 3,000 years – and then add our own whispered wishes.

The ritual stuck and picked up steam (we have four children, all young adults), and now my children ask us for a Friday night blessing, sometimes even calling in from Peru or India or who-knows-where to get their blessing over WhatsApp.

With PJ Library’s Blessing of the Children activity, we invite parents to take a cue from Jewish tradition – not only to bring in Shabbat to catch one’s breath after a busy week, but to do it in a thoughtful and personal way. Whether your Friday night dinner is roasted chicken or takeout pizza, there’s an opportunity to draw your children close, to let them know that you see them, and, in traditional or improvised words (or both), to say

what you appreciate about them, what you wish for them, and what you’ve noticed this past week or hope for in the coming week. This is a tradition all parents can find value in, no matter their level of observance.

To make this family activity accessible to a wide range of parents, we offer language options – the traditional blessing in Hebrew (quite ancient and mesmerizing), a classic translation (“May God bless you and keep you”), a contemporary version, and tips for adding or substituting your own wishes for your children.

And because it’s often easier being the blesser than the blessee, we’ve also created something for restless kids to hold and use at that moment – a sort of “mindfulness tool.” It’s a series of

beautifully illustrated unfolding panels, each depicting a different scene of a parent blessing a child. We can imagine this tool becoming a weekly family-whisperer: It’s time for my blessing.

Our Blessing of the Children piece encourages families to take a traditional Shabbat ritual and make it their own, furthering PJ Library’s goal of supporting meaningful Jewish experiences in the home.

