
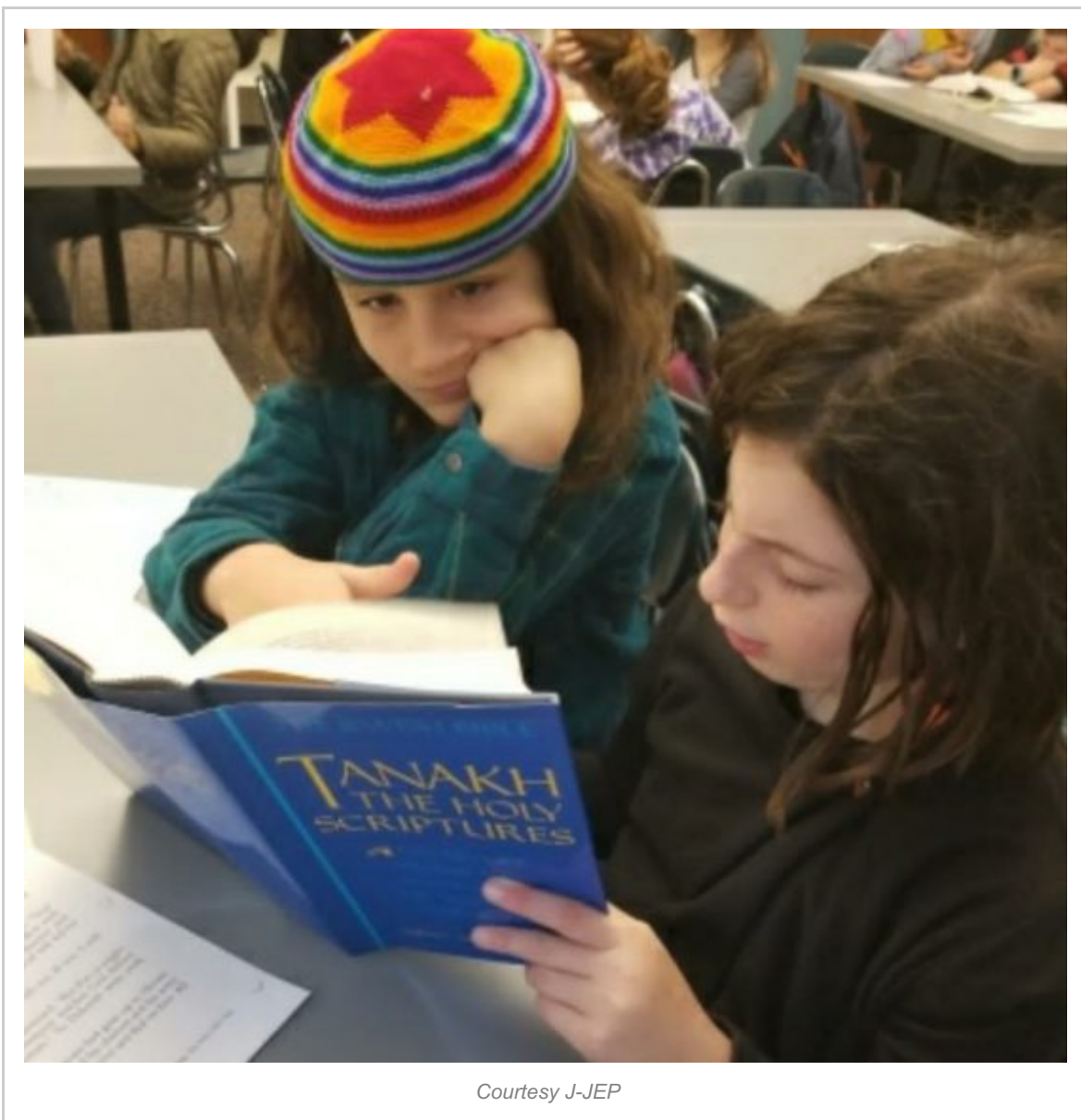


BadgeQuest: Discover, Play, Create

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Courtesy J-JEP

By Liron Lipinsky

[This article is the sixth in a [series](#) written by participants in the Senior Educators Cohort at M²: The Institute for Experiential Jewish Education.]

The findings of the 2013 Pew Research Center *A Portrait of Jewish Americans* national study propelled leaders of Jewish organizations to critically analyze how to engage young Jewish children in Jewish life, specifically by focusing on Jewish identity formation. Among other initiatives, Jewish supplementary programs attempt to accomplish these goals. According to data collected by the Jewish Federation of Greater Pittsburgh, 60% of local Jewish children in grades K-7 receive their Jewish education at a supplementary religious school. Pittsburgh's Joint-Jewish Education Program (J-JEP), where I work, may well be the only opportunity the program's Jewish youth have to engage with peers in a Jewish context. However, for most J-JEP participants, total program hours are only an average of four hours per week. When compared to a 24/7 Jewish overnight camping experience or Jewish day schools, supplementary religious education is often considered a flawed experience due to the limited amount of time students have to engage with Jewish ideas.

While J-JEP participants' level of satisfaction and average attendance already exceed all expectations, our challenge, therefore, is to encourage J-JEP students and families to extend and integrate their Jewish learning beyond the hours they are in attendance at J-JEP, into the rest of their week.

BadgeQuest is a digital badging system created by J-JEP in consultation with technology expert Sarah Blattner of TAMRITZ. The goal of *BadgeQuest* is to encourage J-JEP participants to engage with Jewish learning and personal and spiritual growth beyond the classroom. *BadgeQuest* builds upon students' learning at J-JEP by creating self-exploratory experiences that catalyze a culture of curiosity and discovery through a Jewish lens in their hours outside the classroom. To achieve the goal of increasing the hours students engage with Jewish ideas, *BadgeQuest*:

- Scaffolds and **incentivizes** learning via a digital token/badge system
- Requires **interaction** with peers via collaborative projects outside classrooms
- **Celebrates** learning as children achieve badges at an annual event
- Provides parents and children a **shared Jewish vocabulary**

Teaching and learning is a progression at J-JEP, and the *BadgeQuest* program parallels reading strategies and methodologies taught in secular classrooms (text to text, text to self, text to world). Progress is measured by the amount of time our participants spend exploring Jewish values as they earn tokens and badges, demonstrated by "artifacts of learning" submitted as blog entries on the *BadgeQuest* online platform. These items can be written or take the form of video blogs, physical mementos, and pictures that demonstrate a child's experience with eight Jewish values, each represented by a badge.

To earn a badge, a participant must first earn the three tokens **Discover**, **Play** and **Create** for each Jewish value. The **Discover** token is based on learning that begins in the J-JEP classroom. This is where children *discover* the origin of a specific Jewish value through sacred texts and/or children's stories. As students understand the value as expressed in texts, they earn the discover token.

Students then embark on quests and missions to observe, find, and *play* with the Jewish value in their daily life: in a math class, on the soccer field, at the dinner table with their families, or elsewhere. Submitting the experience of their learning on the online platform earns them their second token, **Play**.

After students *discover* and *play* with the Jewish value, they **Create** a plan to actualize the value in the way it impacts their community to earn their third token. They *create* this plan by themselves or through a collaborative project with peers. Collaborative projects encourage participants to look at the Jewish value as it relates to the larger world.

BadgeQuest expands students' understanding of Judaism beyond the limited amount of time students spend at J-JEP. It provides a basis for internalizing concepts and creating a plan for action. And finally, *BadgeQuest* helps students answer what it means to be a Jew and to live an ethical and value-driven life.

Knowing that parent engagement and shared vocabulary enhance the likelihood of participation and motivation outside the classroom, parent education sessions on specific Jewish values are held concurrently as the J-JEP educators introduce them to students in their curriculum. Quickly, parent participation increased from one session to the next, exceeding expectations and generating enthusiasm and eagerness for more parent education opportunities, shifting parent engagement from observers to participants.

During the early development and research phase of *BadgeQuest*, I thought about having badges for meeting specific content and Hebrew-level benchmarks. I realized, however, that doing so would be too narrow and often come with various expiration dates. Why would anyone work toward a *Rosh Hashanah* badge in December? What *really* is the “value added” if a student mastered the reading of a specific prayer or handful of vocabulary words? J-JEP's goal is to prepare students to live Jewishly and not just be Jewish in certain places or on particular days of the week.

While continuing to think through the content of the badges, I was also a participant in the M² Senior Educators Cohort where I delved deeply into the role that Jewish values play in impacting the formation Jewish identity; specifically, how students' self-exploration of a Jewish value enables them to internalize that value in a personal way, without imposing it directly on them. That's when it came together for me – the notion that badges had to be centered on Jewish values – an enterprise that is exploratory in its very nature – rather than on specific content. *BadgeQuest* encourages organic interaction with Jewish values, regardless of one's learning style, family structure, or type of Jewish observance.

BadgeQuest makes Jewish learning accessible and relevant in our students' lives. The children all start off from a similar place, in the classroom, and then are inspired to explore Judaism through their existing world and structure. Their world becomes a place where Jewish values come alive as they see and experience how Jewish values can apply anywhere in their lives. And the best part is that it's not limited to four hours per week.

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Applications for Senior Educators Cohort 3 have launched! Visit www.iej.org for more information.