Counting Our Blessings: Facilitator Guide

A Shabbat blessings scavenger hunt for families

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At a glance

Families spend about 45 minutes outdoors on a Shabbat afternoon, counting blessings at a series of stops, then build a small tent out of what they gathered: a reminder that a community is its people, not its building. The hunt is self-guided and needs no staff in the woods. It was written for about 20 families with kids ages 3 to 8, at a camp with woods and a lake, but it works anywhere with trees, fallen leaves and loose stones. Each family finishes on its own time; there is no group closing.

Part	What happens	Time
Kickoff	Everyone together: the six things to say, cards and bags handed out	3 min
Everyone starts	A minyan of treasures	5 min
Your choice	Any of eight stops, in any order; most families reach three or four	12 min
Next to last	Jacob's pillar, at the stone pile by the tent spot	5 min
Last stop	Build our tent at the tent spot, sing Mah tovu, and celebrate	10–15 min

Leave daylight. Start at least 90 minutes before sunset, so the last tents go up in daylight.

Each family carries one bag and one ring of 12 cards. At every stop they put a small token in the bag. At the end, everything in the bag becomes building material for their tent, so every tent is built out of the blessings that family counted.

Phones stay away except for three family selfies: at family faces, at Shabbat rest, and at Jacob's pillar.

Before the day

Most of the setup is in the week before; the last five items happen on site before kickoff.

At home

☐ Print one set of 12 cards per family, plus three or four spare sets. Cardstock holds up best in damp woods.

☐ Cut each sheet along the dashed line, punch a corner, and put each set on a ring or binder clip, in order.

☐ One paper bag per family.

☐ A rope, or a row of sticks, to mark the tent spot.

On site, before kickoff

☐ Walk the area. Look for poison ivy vines on trunks, check the boundaries, and decide how close to the water families may go.

☐ Mark the tent spot: flat ground, room for about 20 shoebox-sized tents in a row, and loose sticks and bark within a short walk.

☐ Pile flat stones beside the tent spot for Jacob's pillar, ones a child can lift with one hand. If the loose stones are mostly at the shoreline, gather a bucket or two from there.

☐ Open your Shabbat morning service with one simple setting of Mah tovu, sung twice, so it's in everyone's ears before the hunt.

☐ Have the leaders build the first tent at the tent spot. No family arrives to an empty row, and it shows the size and spirit families are aiming for.

Kickoff script

The kickoff takes about three minutes. With nobody in the woods afterward, this is the only chance to say these six things, so say all of them.

1. **The idea.** "There's a teaching that we should say a hundred blessings a day. Most of us don't notice a hundred things in a day. Your family's job is to notice."
2. **The song.** Sing Mah tovu together once more, in the same setting you used on Shabbat morning. Each family will sing it alone at its own tent. Families who still don't know it can sing Hinei mah tov instead; the tent card offers both.
3. **The shape.** "Everyone starts with the minyan card. Then do as many of the eight middle stops as you like, in any order. The stops aren't places to find: do each one right where you're standing. Finish with Jacob's pillar and then your tent."
4. **The gathering rule.** "Take only what has already fallen. Nothing gets picked, pulled, or broken off a living plant, and leave the mushrooms alone. We are guests here."
5. **The boundaries.** Name the edges out loud and point to them. "At the water, look from the shore. Little ones hold a grown-up's hand near the edge."
6. **The tent spot.** Point to it, to the first tent, and to the stone pile. "Whenever your family finishes, come here, empty your bag, and build. When your tent stands, you're done."

Say this too: "If you can't find what a card asks for, use something else. An acorn can be a pebble. Change any stop to fit your family, and if a stop doesn't work, skip it."

When to teach the songs

Six of the cards invite families to sing, and nobody will be there to lead them. Teach the songs in the services and gatherings before the hunt, so families have already sung them by Shabbat afternoon. Use the same melody every time, and let whoever leads the singing know which one.

When	Songs	Why
Friday night, first gathering	Shehecheyanu	The first night of a retreat or camp weekend is a natural Shehecheyanu moment. Sing it in full, from *Baruch atah*, the way the leaf rain card prints it.
Kabbalat Shabbat	*Az yeranenu kol atzei ya'ar* (Psalm 96)	The forest band card quotes it as something "we sing on Friday night." If your service includes Psalm 96, point out the line about the trees singing.
Shabbat morning, opening	Mah tovu, sung twice	It's traditionally the first thing said on entering a sanctuary, and it's the song families sing alone at their tents. This is the most important one.
Shabbat morning, during the service	*Kol han'shamah t'hallel Yah* (Psalm 150); *Etz chayim hi*	Psalm 150 closes the morning psalms; Etz chayim hi is sung as the Torah returns to the ark. Both are already in most services, so just make sure they're sung, not skipped.

When	Songs	Why
Shabbat lunch or song session	*Kol ha'olam kulo*; Hinei mah tov	Kol ha'olam is on the narrow bridge card. Hinei mah tov is the backup on the tent card; most families know it, but one more round doesn't hurt.
Kickoff	Mah tovu, once more	A quick reprise in the same setting, so it's the last song in everyone's ears as they head out.

Don't teach anything new at the kickoff. It's only three minutes, and a new song there won't stick.

The stops

Twelve cards: a cover, one opener, eight to choose from, Jacob's pillar, and the tent. The full wording is on the cards themselves; this is the summary for leaders who get asked "what's this one about?"

Card	What families do	The blessing and its source
A minyan of treasures (everyone)	Find ten different things on the forest floor and count them out loud	*Mah rabu ma'asecha*, "How many are the things You have made" (Psalm 104:24)
Hold on to the tree	Stack hands up one trunk, littlest at the roots	*Etz chayim hi*, "a tree of life to those who hold fast to it" (Proverbs 3:18)
The forest band	Find sounds with two sticks; echo a kid's rhythm; play loud for a count of 10	*Az yeranenu kol atzei ya'ar*, "all the trees of the forest will sing" (Psalm 96:12)
Family faces (selfie)	Secretly make a family member's face from leaves and sticks; guess whose is whose	*She'asani b'tzelem Elohim*, "who made me in God's image" (morning blessings)
Leaf rain	Throw armfuls of leaves up and catch them	Shehecheyanu, said in full from *Baruch atah*, for a moment that has never happened before
From hand to hand	Pass an acorn or something similar around a circle, leaf to leaf	*L'dor vador*, "from generation to generation"
The narrow bridge	Lay a stick bridge between two trees and cross it holding hands	*Kol ha'olam kulo gesher tzar me'od* (attributed to Rebbe Nachman of Breslov)
Shabbat rest (selfie)	Lie or sit back and look up for about a minute; count the living things you spot or hear	*Kol han'shamah t'hallel Yah*, "Let everything that breathes praise God" (Psalm 150:6)
Blessings close to home	Each person finds something that reminds them of a blessing in their own life and shares it	*V'al nisecha sheb'chol yom imanu*, "for Your wonders that are with us every day" (Modim, in the Amidah)
Jacob's pillar (everyone, selfie)	Stack stones, naming one good thing from today with each	Jacob names the place Beth El, "the house of God"; any place can become one (Genesis 28:10–19)
Build our tent (everyone)	Build a shoebox-sized tent from the bag and the ground, beside the other tents; together the tents are the community	*Mah tovu ohalecha Ya'akov*, "How good are your tents, Jacob" (Numbers 24:5), or sing Hinei mah tov

The games on the cards are not for winning. Each one gives a family a reason to stay with a blessing a little longer.

Questions families will ask

Most questions come from parents who want to do it right. The answer is almost always yes, and whatever works for your family.

They ask	You say
Where are the stations?	There aren't any. Do each stop wherever you're standing.
Do we have to do all of them?	No. The minyan first, Jacob's pillar and the tent last; do as many in between as you like.
We can't find an acorn (or a big tree, or two sticks).	Use anything close. An acorn can be a pebble.
My toddler won't do this one.	Skip it, or let them do their own version.
We don't know the song or the Hebrew.	Sing Hinei mah tov instead, or say the English. The card has both.
Is it okay to use phones?	Only for the family selfies the cards ask for.
What goes in the bag?	One token from each stop. It all becomes part of your tent.
Can we take the tent home?	It stays at the tent spot, next to everyone else's. Take a picture of it.

Safety notes

The cards already build these in; leaders should know why.

- **Water.** Families look from the shore. The pillar's stone pile sits by the tent spot so nobody ends the hunt at the water's edge.
- **Nut allergies.** Acorns are tree nuts. Every card that names an acorn also offers another object.
- **Poison ivy.** It climbs trees as a fuzzy vine and can cause a rash even with no leaves on it. The tree card tells families to skip those trees.
- **Mushrooms and living plants** stay where they are. This is rule 1 on the cover card.
- **Sticks.** The forest band card says sticks are for tapping things, never people.
- **Stones.** Pillar stones should be ones a child can lift with one hand, and the card says never to throw them.
- **Ticks** stay active from spring through fall, until a hard freeze. Remind families to do a tick check afterward.

Afterward, and adapting it

After the last family finishes, a leader photographs the whole row of tents. It makes a good picture for a newsletter or a slideshow later in the weekend. Families do their own tick checks.

Before you run it, decide on these for your own site:

- **The tent spot.** Flat ground with room for a row of small tents, loose sticks and bark nearby, and a landmark name the kickoff can point to.
- **The boundaries.** Which landmarks mark the edges, and how close to any water families may go.
- **The photos.** Whether families share their selfies afterward, and where.
- **Weather.** A covered spot where the hunt and the tent build could still happen in rain or snow.

Printing the cards. The PDF prints on letter paper, landscape, two cards per sheet: six sheets per family set. Print in color, at actual size (not “fit to page”), and cut along the dashed line.