## New Approaches to Supplementary Education in the Reform Movement

**Report of the URJ Census on Supplementary Education Learning Models** 







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### Introduction

In recent years, a growing number of Reform congregations have experimented with new formats for their religious schools. Central agencies of Jewish education in communities such as Boston, Chicago, Kansas City, Los Angeles, Philadelphia, and San Francisco have invested resources in the planning and implementation of these new models, and most of our knowledge comes from evaluations and reports produced by these agencies. The first published research on the models themselves (Aron, 2014) analyzed and categorized the models that were known at the time. Lacking, however, has been data on the overall number of congregations experimenting with new approaches and the direction their experimentation has taken.

The goal of the URJ census on supplementary education learning models was to create a comprehensive (or, as comprehensive as possible) snapshot of current innovations in congregational K-6 supplementary education programs in the Reform Movement. The foundation of the census was quantitative—a survey distributed as widely as possible. This foundation was then built upon through interviews and case studies. After reporting on the method and findings of the census, this report proposes some possible next steps.

## Defining the Models

Before distributing the census, the first step was to identify and define the models of conventional and alternative education that were believed to exist in congregations today. During the spring of 2016, a list of models was created and adapted from categories suggested by Aron (2014) and by the Jewish Education Project's Coalition of Innovating Congregations.

We found that some of the models are **structural**—they pertain to the way learning is configured, such has how time is used, the setting, the learners, and how planning decisions meet particular goals. At the outset, we identified nine structural models:

- Afterschool/Day Care Programs: Supplementary school is combined with weekday afterschool care. There is a combination of free time for play, Judaica and Hebrew learning, and perhaps time to do homework. Parents may select the number of days per week they want their children to attend.
- **Camp Style**: "The magic of camp" replaces the conventional religious school, with either required day camp programs during school breaks and vacation weeks and/or multiple weekend retreats during the school year. These programs are distinguished from the conventional religious school in that they take place primarily outdoors. They are distinguished from the typical synagogue summer day camp in that they utilize curricula that parallel those of the religious school, albeit incorporating more experiential activities. In some of these, camp is supplemented by family programming.
- **Choice Based**: The conventional school has been deconstructed in order to maximize convenience for families and address students' unique areas of interest or skill. Students fulfill requirements by selecting from a variety of learning opportunities that meet at different times and places. The frequency and length of these opportunities may vary.
- **Community Building**: The school structure exemplifies the congregation's commitment to building community among the children. Students are grouped into *chavurot* or tribes. Learning in these smaller groups may take place at the synagogue or in other settings, such as people's homes.
- Conventional Model: Commonly referred to as "religious school," "Sunday school," or "Hebrew school,"

this model is organized around age-graded classrooms for Judaica and Hebrew learning. Students attend classes 1–2 times/week during the academic year. Students may have some options for *chugim*, or special electives, but the major focus is on a core curriculum for each grade.

- **Distance/Online Learning**: Children regularly participate in either synchronous or asynchronous online learning sessions from home. Learning sessions are held in a virtual classroom or can be self-paced. Online learning may or may not be blended with in-person classroom meetings.
- **Family Learning**: Parents learn along with their children in an ongoing program that meets multiple times each month. There may be whole family learning time, age-graded sessions in which parents and children study separately, as well as whole group activities like *t'filah* (prayer) or *shirah* (singing). Learning may take place at the synagogue or in other settings, such as parks or people's homes.
- **Intergenerational**: Younger and older children are regularly grouped together for learning, thus enabling the building of relationships with peers and across generations. Teens may be involved in the planning or take leadership roles.
- **Shabbat Centered**: Learning happens during various parts of Shabbat. Learning is often family-based, and may include time for Kabbalat Shabbat, Shabbat morning *t'filah*, or Havdalah.

Other models are **curricular**—they relate to particular curricular approaches that may be employed in any school structure. At the outset, we identified three curricular models:

- Alternative Hebrew Curricula: Moving away from "decoding," alternative curricula shift the learning to (a) a focus on learning through hearing Hebrew first, performing the actions, and then eventually learning how to read, (b) prioritizing Jewish life vocabulary, and/or (c) focusing on modern conversational Hebrew.
- **Project-Based Learning**: Students participate in long-term projects that allow them to develop a multi-disciplinary and in-depth understanding of a topic or area of Jewish life. Projects require inquiry as part of the learning process and the acquisition of new knowledge and/or skills, and are intended to lead to the creation of something new that can be used in the community.
- **Service Learning**: Learning happens through regular and ongoing community service and social justice work both within and outside the synagogue walls.

## Methodology

In order to gauge the prevalence of both alternative structures and curricular innovations, the authors designed an online survey, which was open for 8 weeks from September through November 2016. Invitations to participate in the survey were distributed to Jewish educators, clergy, and lay leaders through a variety of digital and social networking platforms:

- The URJ's Tent, a collaborative workspace for over 8,500 Reform Movement professional and lay leaders
- The URJ's *Inside Leadership* online publication, distributed via email to approximately 8,500 Reform Movement lay and professional leaders
- The Association of Reform Jewish Educators' (ARJE) newsletter, distributed via email to its approximately 800 members
- The ARJE members-only Facebook group, which has 522 members
- The Central Conference of American Rabbis (CCAR) members-only Facebook group, with 1,335 members

Additionally, individual URJ staff members connected to the project sent follow-up emails to leaders of congregations that had not yet completed the census, and reminders were posted in the above social media platforms. We received 218 responses out of an estimated 630 URJ congregations with religious schools.

Respondents to the survey were given brief descriptions of the variety of supplementary education models and asked to identify the model(s) their congregation offered during the 2015-16 academic year; they were also asked to share some additional details about each of the models they employed.

Although a draft of the survey was beta-tested, several questions may have been confusing or difficult to follow. A significant number of respondents did not distinguish between the partial implementation of a model and a more robust, full implementation. For example, despite the fact that the definition of the family learning model specified that these programs meet *at least twice each month*, respondents who had far fewer family educational programs indicated that they used this model. Additionally, given the idiosyncrasies of each congregation's education program, it was challenging for respondents to identify their model as one type or another. These factors led to over-reporting on the existence of many of the models.

In order to correct these flaws, researchers sought to individually verify the existence of models in the responding congregations by reviewing congregational websites and blogs. In some instances, emails were sent to individual congregations asking about a particular model; in others, a URJ staff member telephoned the educator to learn more. This very labor-intensive work allowed us to correct many of the responses as well as to learn more about the complex nature of the alternative models.

### Challenges We Faced

In defining the models and verifying their existence, we faced a number of challenges:

• There is no standard definition for any of the alternative models. By perusing synagogue websites and conducting follow-up interviews, we learned that many respondents over-reported their use of models. For example, we learned that most of the self-identified camp style models met in the synagogue building at the typical Sunday morning time slot; they were identified as "camp models" because they used elements of experiential learning and "camp-like" terminology, such as *madrich* (counselor) instead of teacher, or *edah* (group) instead of class. In an effort to more effectively distinguish between a camp-style model and examples of good teaching in which experiential learning is embraced—and believing that terminology alone does not sufficiently distinguish the camp model—we limited this category to models that reflected three key elements of "camp": an immersive experience in which students are together for an extended period of time; the use of the outdoors; and a method of grouping students so that they are able to build deep and ongoing relationships with each other. The few camp-style examples identified are day camps held all day for at least one week at a time, programs in which students meet for multiple retreats over the course of the year in place of a weekly class, and/or programs that make significant use of the out-of-doors.

Similarly, programs purporting to fit into the family learning model ranged from what Aron (2014, p.202) has termed "full-strength," in which parents attended with their children every week, to those termed "diluted," in which parents participated in 2-3 stand-alone family education days. Wanting to preserve the distinction between family days and family education, we excluded programs in which parents attended fewer than 6 times a year.

• A survey cannot adequately assess the depth and quality of innovative curricula such as project-based learning or service learning. We know a great deal about some of the programs through articles, videos, and explanations on their websites, but little about many of the others.

• While we tried to define the models according to their structure and their primary goals, we found that goals pointed to more than one model. For example, we initially set out to define a community-building model, but realized that the goal of creating communities of learners is common to many of the models. In addition, a particular congregation's program could meet the criteria of multiple models at the same time, as in the case of a congregation that has a Shabbat-centered model that also includes intergenerational learning.

### Findings

As shown below, survey responses came from schools of varying size (Table 1) in congregations of varying size (Table 2), with the highest number of responses coming from schools with 101-200 students and congregations with 251-500 member units. <sup>1</sup> Larger congregations were over-represented, and small congregations (with 250 or fewer member units) were under-represented. The surveys were completed mostly by professionals, with only 4 of the respondents identifying themselves as lay leaders. The lower response rate from smaller congregations could be attributed to several factors: smaller congregations have few or no professionals and hence less time to respond to such requests; leaders of small congregations may not be sufficiently integrated into the networks of Reform educators to have received a link to the survey; and/or a large percentage (approximately 75%) of the smallest congregations (with 75 or fewer member units) may not have religious schools.

After the follow-up calls and emails, we identified 143 alternative models (Table 3) that are housed in 94 congregations.



# Table 1: Number of Respondent Congregations by Student PopulationN=218

<sup>1</sup> Data on the congregations in the Reform Movement by student population are not available for comparison.

Table 2: Number of Respondent Congregations in Comparison to URJ Member Congregationsby Congregation Household SizeN=218



## Table 3: Number and Types of Alternative Models:N=143



In addition to identifying the types of models that exist in congregational supplementary learning programs, we also sought to determine whether these models are offered as alternatives to a more conventional religious school or whether they replace the conventional model and are the only option made available to families (Table 4). It is not surprising to note that the curricular models—project-based learning, service learning, and alternative Hebrew learning curricula—are mostly offered as the only option; the congregations in question have made changes to their curricular approaches and methodologies and do so for all learners. On the other hand, the structural models are more often offered as alternatives to the conventional religious school. In many of these instances, these alternative models are offered for a specific age group rather than for all of grades K-6. The only structural model that veers away from that trend is the choice-based model. By definition, the choice based model is the "only option" given to families, because the whole educational system is designed to give learners a choice in how they engage in their Jewish learning.

## Table 4: Models Offered as an Alternative or the Only Option N=143 $\,$



### Lessons Learned

- There is a great deal of experimentation underway: More congregations than we thought are attempting to change the conventional religious school.
- **Incremental change:** While a significant number of congregations are transforming their educational offerings in radical ways, utilizing one or more of the above models, many more congregations are making incremental changes, using Hebrew Through Movement, <sup>2</sup> elements of project based learning, and/or adding family days, to name just a few examples. Several congregations stated explicitly that they see themselves innovating within the structure of the conventional model. One educator wrote:

People think that because it is a conventional model [meaning that it meets weekly on Sunday mornings] what happens inside is "conventional" or old school, but what we are doing within the time and within the classrooms has exciting projects, material, and experiences.

While incremental change can eventually lead to transformational change, only those congregations who demonstrated more significant innovation were included in the count of congregations with alternative models. To the extent that we were able to verify the scope and type of innovation, congregations such as these that demonstrated innovation were included in our count of alternative models.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>2</sup> See hebrewthroughmovement.org.

- Vision and goals of Jewish learning. Many congregations have articulated goals and visions for Jewish learning, or are working on creating those. Asked to "describe your overall educational goals for your K-6 learners and families," over 50% of the respondents included all or part of their formal vision statements and goals. Excerpts of these include:
  - "...we are striving to (re)imagine and create a fun, nurturing and dynamic center of living Judaism, with multiple opportunities for authentic Jewish study, practice and observance."
  - "...it is not our goal to complete your child's Jewish education, but rather to awaken the fire that already exists inside your child. We want to give them a taste of a vibrant and complex Jewish experience that transforms them into life-long learners and lovers of Judaism."
  - "Religious School is a spiritual community where...families explore becoming moral, confident individuals in relationship with one another and the world..."

In addition, many congregations articulated social-emotional goals such as

- "...creating a sense of belonging to a Jewish community"
- "...building a strong Jewish connection and community with their peers"
- "...discover[ing] joy and excitement in their learning."

Still, there remains a major focus on building Jewish identity as well as on the knowledge of holidays, Torah, and mitzvot. The goals of reciting prayers and reading Torah for the child's bar/bat mitzvah are still quite prominent.

- Home-based learning: The census uncovered a model not included in our initial list. At least 10 congregations currently offer options for individualized or small group learning in students' homes, with a teacher hired and supervised by the congregation, who travels to various homes to teach a set curriculum. The goals of this model include creating community among small groups of students and offering flexibility for families according to mutually convenient schedules. (Note: home-based learning is distinguished from homeschooling, in which the parent(s) set and teach the curriculum.)
- **Hebrew**: While many congregations are employing sound-to-print methodologies such as Hebrew Through Movement in their programs, they have not yet fully transformed the way they approach Hebrew education. With very few exceptions, sound-to-print methodologies appear to be additive rather than a replacement for several years of instruction in decoding. Of the approximately 50 respondents who indicated they employed a sound-to-print curriculum, more than half of them still introduce decoding in grades 3 or 4.
- **Growing awareness of learners with disabilities**: Congregations are hiring inclusion specialists in order to address the needs of learners with disabilities. In their comments on the survey, four respondents noted that they were in the process of creating this new position in their communities. During our validation process of checking congregational websites, we found at least eight additional congregations that noted the presence of inclusion specialists on staff. We do not know exactly how many congregations already have designated inclusion specialists, but believe that this is a trend to watch.
- Hebrew and Judaica integration or separation: There remains an ongoing debate about whether Hebrew and Judaica learning should be integrated or separated. On the one hand, the desire to offer a holistic education and create stronger relationships between teachers and students has led to integrated curricula. On the other, the use of new models creates a need for segmenting the curriculum and hiring appropriate teachers to teach particular subjects or to employ certain teaching methodologies.

These findings and general observations deepen our understanding of the landscape of congregational supplementary education in the Reform Movement, as well as the issues and challenges congregations face when pursuing innovation. Yet as noted above, each congregation is unique in articulating its own vision and goals, and in shaping educational structures that fit within its culture. In an effort to convey a sense of this variety, we have drawn brief profiles of five different alternative models of supplementary learning (see Appendix).

### Questions We Wish We Had Asked

By design, the census was limited in scope. To not discourage people from participating, we kept it brief and were unable to ask questions that required more thoughtful, open-ended responses. Findings from the census confirm that learning more about the unique experiences of congregations would require further research. Additional research questions would fall into these areas:

- Program development: What processes did congregations use to design new models for their education programs?
- Teachers: Who are the teachers? What skills or experiences do educators look for when hiring teachers? How are teachers trained and supported?
- Curriculum: What are the curricular foci, and how are the curricula developed?
- Learners: How do students in the alternative model compare to those in the conventional one?
- Evaluation: How are congregations assessing the success of their education programs? What criteria are most important to them: engagement, attendance, knowledge gained, the rate of retention, and/or other desired outcomes?
- Congregational impact: In what ways has this model had an impact on the congregation beyond the immediate participants and their families?

### Next Steps

The URJ sees innovation and experimentation as critical to strengthening congregations. Its staff has already begun to use the information in this survey to promote innovation in congregations and inspire further experimentation in Reform congregations.

The Family Learning Active Learning Network, which includes 16 congregations with alternative family programs, meets once a month to discuss common issues and concerns. The URJ will continue to create new Active Learning Networks, small groups of congregations that already employ or are interested in introducing alternative models. Further support of innovation in congregational education is on the horizon. These networks will help congregations share curricular resources and do joint problem solving. It is our goal that their conversations will add to our knowledge base in the critical area of congregational education.

We hope that this report will be of use to you in your congregational communities. We invite you to study it with your congregational leadership as a way of entering into your own conversation about how you might either begin or continue to experiment with your K-6 supplementary education program(s).

### References

Aron, I. (2014). Upending the Grammar of the Conventional Religious School. *Journal of Jewish Education*, 80(3), 193-228. doi:10.1080/15244113.2014.937193

*Model Elements Chart* [xlsx]. (2014). New York: Jewish Education Project. A resource of the I\*Express Coalition of Innovating Congregations.



For congregations interested in experimenting with their education programs, the following resources are available to help guide your process:

The Toolbox: Resources to Experiment in Congregational Education. Hebrew Union College-Jewish Institute of Religion.

Congregational Education Models: A Tool for Exploring the Landscape.

### Profiles in Innovation

#### Profile #1: Family Learning

### Beyachad Congregation Emanu-El, San Francisco, CA

Congregation Emanu-El in San Francisco is a large congregation, with approximately 2100 member units and a large religious school of approximately 450 students in grades K-6. Beyachad began in 2011 as a pilot program for families with children in grades 3-6; its goals included community building, parents modeling continued Jewish learning, and creating a positive Jewish learning experience. Approximately 40% of the eligible families are enrolled. In fact, Beyachad is now so popular that it could not accommodate 3rd graders in the 2016-2017 school year.

Beyachad meets 15 Sunday mornings and one Saturday evening per year. At least one parent is expected to attend with each child. Heather Erez, former director of youth and family education, notes that "in the beginning of the year, the parents will decide which one 'has to go.' Halfway through the year, they argue about which one 'gets to go,' and by the end of the year both parents are attending with their child because they are so enthusiastic about the program."

Sunday morning begins with parents and children participating together in a "morning meeting" and group-building activity related to the subject being covered that day. Teachers vary, depending on the week and the subject matter, with the clergy often joining in as well. Parents will then gather for an adult learning experience while the children work on another activity in grade-level groups. The children are rarely asked to sit in classroom-style learning for more than 20 minutes, and parents for no more than 60 minutes.

The Beyachad curriculum rotates each year, and most of the learning is project-based. Previous themes have included Israel and Jewish history of the Bay Area. The 2016-17 curriculum focused on the *Eilu D'varim* prayer and Jewish values. Activities included meeting for a hike at sunrise, learning about the blessing of marriage through interaction with a newlywed couple, and discussing the Jewish traditions of mourning. The conventional religious school curriculum also has a thematic rotation; next year will be the first time the two curricula overlap.

Finding the right kind of teachers has proven to be one of the challenges of Beyachad. When adults are included in the learning, the teachers must be ready to engage with them as well as the children. Often that means there is a need for teachers with more experience and a deeper knowledge of specific subjects.

Physical space is also a challenge. With the addition of more learners, the programming has had to be restructured to make the most of the space available. Taking the Beyachad families on learning experiences outside the classroom has been one solution to this problem.

There are generally four types of families who enroll in Beyachad: engaged families who are already involved in the Emanu-El community, families who prefer the shorter time requirement, and new families who arrive in the 4th or 5th grade and find this a great way to integrate into the community. After the conventional 3rd grade program,

some students who are very physically active or may learn better with a parent are also encouraged to enroll. There is a requirement of 70% attendance, but no consequences for missing sessions and no avenues to make up missed sessions.

The successes of Beyachad center around the community that it builds. Families who met at Beyachad sit together during Shabbat and holiday services. Adults who had previously only come to the temple to pick up their children at religious school have now created a micro community in the midst of this large congregation in a large city. Attendance rates of families who move from the conventional program into Beyachad improve. Even when they have a week off from Beyachad, parents will often drop off a younger child at the conventional religious school and spend that time with their 4th/5th grader.

#### Profile #2: Camp-Style Program

#### Machane Jehudah The Temple Congregation B'nai Jehudah, Overland Park, KS

B'nai Jehudah, a large congregation with over 1000 member units and 230 children in the religious school, is eager to evolve in response to current trends, and unafraid to try new formats, in order to help people find meaningful Jewish connections. The Machane Jehudah camp and family learning program initially began 10 years ago as a 4th grade family program, when the conventional religious school model was not working for several families. When Dayna Gershon, director of education, joined the community six years ago, she expanded it to include a camp program component as well. With the support of a curriculum writer from the URJ, Dayna created a two-week summer camp program for students entering grades 3-6. In addition to attending camp, parents sign on for monthly Sunday family programs. Machane Jehudah is an alternative to the conventional religious school; families that participate in Machane Jehudah do not attend the weekly Sunday religious school.

In the first year of the program, there were 23 campers; in the second year, 38 campers. Now, there is an average of 35-40 campers enrolled each year, approximately 25% of the total population in the temple's education programs. Students must attend all 2 weeks of the summer program and the monthly Sunday family programs with at least one parent.

In the best sense of camp style, Machane Jehudah provides both meaningful and substantive Jewish learning with an experiential and interactive mode of teaching and learning. The curriculum is designed to ensure that during the years that the students are part of Machane Jehudah, they will achieve similar learning goals as those participating in the conventional Sunday school program, but engage in that learning in a more experiential manner. Children are outside most of the day, in their group's tent, on the sports field, or in the Mitzvah Garden. According to Dayna, "one of the overall goals is to make them want to go to Jewish sleepaway camp and youth group." To that end, the day is structured like that of a sleepaway camp. It begins with *t'filah* (worship). The groups are then split up into rotations such as *limmud* (learning), sports, and garden work. The 3rd and 4th graders have Aleph Bet lessons, while the 5th and 6th graders learn group leadership in *kehillah* (community). There are art and music electives as well as field trips, such as visiting a home for the elderly and participating in an outdoor challenge course.

Dayna's goal when she first started the program was to eventually use alumni from Machane Jehudah as staff, and this year she reached that goal. All staff have been involved in the camp in previous years as either counselors/teachers or campers. Some staff also teach in the religious school. Dayna considers the fact that former campers, who are now high school students, have returned as counselors is an indicator of the success of this program.

One challenge of the overall program is that there are parents in the community who like to send their children to the conventional religious school so they can have Sunday mornings free; this may limit the number of families who choose Machane Jehudah. Like other alternative models, families who chose Machane Jehudah are clearly self-selecting.

After five years of running Machane Jehudah, Dayna is ready to evaluate it and again experiment with it. In the coming year, she is preparing for one change: the incoming 6th grade will no longer be part of the program, just 3rd through 5th grades. After five years of running Machane Jehudah, Dayna is experimenting with some changes in the 6th grade. The synagogue has created a new pre-b'nei mitzvah program, and one of its goals is to deepen the sense of community among all 6th graders. Therefore, they are beginning to offer some of the special programs that were previously limited to Machane Jehudah students to 6th graders in the conventional religious school and the local day school as well.

#### Profile #3: Distance Learning/Hebrew

#### One-on-One Hebrew Temple Micah, Washington, DC

Temple Micah, with approximately 590 member units and 125 students in the religious school, has a regionally-diverse membership, with some families travelling up to 45 minutes to get to the synagogue. Given this challenge, the educators decided to use technology to their advantage. They began a one-on-one Hebrew tutoring program about 8 years ago. According to Rabbi Josh Beraha, director of education, they began with the assumption that much more could be accomplished with one-on-one language learning, an assumption that has been borne out.

Beginning in 3rd grade and continuing through 7th grade, all students in these grades have a once-a-week, 15-minute video conference (Skype, Facetime, etc.) session with a Hebrew tutor. The student is paired with a tutor in 3rd grade and ideally remains with that same person throughout the years of their Hebrew education. Many of the tutors live in the community, but not all of them; since all the teaching is done virtually, the synagogue is able to hire the right tutors to do the work, even if they do not live in the area. In 5th through 7th grades, students have an additional hour of classroom Hebrew instruction during Tuesday religious school.

The primary goals for the program are to develop a primary level of Hebrew literacy and a love of the Hebrew language. Students can work at their own pace, and tutors have the freedom and flexibility to use different learning materials and methodologies. According to Rabbi Beraha, "Whatever the tutors can do to get the student to engage with Hebrew, from prayers to newspapers—it's more about the relationship with the language and with the tutor than about adhering to a specific curriculum." As part of the program's informal assessment, tutors submit notes and progress reports to the religious school staff. Parents still have an expectation that their children will be able to read from the Torah for their bar/bat mitzvah; the congregation ensures that they will be able to meet that expectation.

The advantages of the program are the convenience it affords families and the one-on-one relationships that are built between the students and tutors over a number of years. Rabbi Beraha has noticed that in many instances, the tutors develop closer relationships with the children and understand much more about their home life than a conventional religious school teacher, because the tutors have a weekly "peek into the kids' homes and home life." Additionally, taking Hebrew learning out of the weekly religious school curriculum opens up more time for other learning and community building.

The program is expensive, though, as it is costlier to pay for one-on-one tutors than classroom teachers. The scheduling process can also be burdensome. The tutors are expected to be available for scheduled sessions with students on Mondays through Thursdays, 4:00-9:00 pm. While the tutors do their own scheduling, it can get complicated to schedule make-up sessions when appointments are missed.

Rabbi Beraha admits that "we have not found the silver bullet of Hebrew fluency," but for most children, the one-on-one program does reach its goal of building primary Hebrew literacy and language enjoyment as well as giving the students an ongoing relationship with a Jewish adult.

#### Profile #4: Service Learning/Family Learning

### FLAME

### Community Synagogue of Port Washington, Port Washington, NY

Community Synagogue of Port Washington, New York, is located in suburban Long Island and has approximately 700 families. There are currently about 400 students in the congregation's education programs, averaging 60 per grade in grades K-6. Approximately half of all 4th and 5th graders are in the FLAME program.

FLAME, an acronym for Family Learning and Mitzvah Education, began in the fall of 2009. Two years earlier, Shari Isserles, director of education, led a congregational educational task force through an 18-month process to learn about innovations in other congregations and decide on the best program framework for the community. Ensuring parent involvement, addressing the needs of elementary-school-aged children, and creating a lessstructured program were some of the goals that emerged. Working within these parameters, Shari created FLAME.

FLAME brings 4th and 5th graders and their families together once a month in Sunday morning family learning sessions and scheduled social action programs. Children must attend with at least one parent on 7 Sundays out of a possible 9. Students also attend weekly conventional classes on Tuesday afternoons, but do not attend the regular weekly Sunday school program. The goals of the FLAME program are parallel to those of the conventional religious school, with a curricular focus on Torah and Israel.

An important element of the FLAME program is its focus on *tikkun olam*, repairing the world. Families engage in hands-on social action projects throughout the year and are expected to attend a set number of Social Action Days. About 12-15 project opportunities are offered per year, and families need to complete 4–5. There are always at least 2 at-home projects that can be done on a family's own time and not with the group. Some examples include volunteering at the Hebrew Union College Soup Kitchen, baking at Ronald McDonald House, or making teddy bears to donate to a children's hospital. Shari often hears from parents that they want opportunities for their kids to give back and recognize how fortunate they are. According to Shari, "It is great to see parent and child working on a project side by side. And, for many of the projects, FLAME families can bring the whole family, so we end up with a family of 5 making a Thanksgiving basket together."

A typical Sunday includes time for the entire group of children and parents to gather together, time to engage in learning in smaller family groups, as well as parallel learning for children and adults. There is little overlap between the conventional religious school teaching faculty and the FLAME faculty, who are primarily senior staff and clergy more equipped to create profound learning experiences for the children and the adults together. There is a particular focus on text study: "The goal is to keep the learning not over the kids' heads or beneath the parents." There are also optional opportunities for FLAME families to take part in social gatherings that enhance the formal learning aspect of the program, such as potluck Shabbat dinners or a trip to a Jewish Museum in New York City. There is a "clear buzz" and a "nice feeling" created by the families when they are all together.

FLAME's popularity is evident. Space is limited and there is often a waiting list. Families with younger children are now joining the temple because they have heard about the FLAME program and want to be part of it. The program's success has created some challenges, particularly in promoting reflection, which is a key aspect of service learning: "In the first year of FLAME, we started with only 8 families, and this gave us the chance to really reflect thoughtfully with the participants. Last year, we had 72 families in FLAME. While I love to see so many families opting for the program and engaged in Jewish learning and service, the larger numbers have made it very hard for us to do any reflection at the end. We try to start most projects with a little learning piece and a blessing, but we usually just thank everyone at the end."

The experience of being part of FLAME also has a positive impact. Shari has found that families have very positive attitudes about Jewish learning and want to stay engaged in the congregation after they age out of the program. The post-b'nei mitzvah retention rate is increasing as FLAME graduates are enrolling in the congregation's youth and teen programing.

#### Profile #5: Project Based Learning

### Deep Dive Congregation B'nai Brith, Santa Barbara, CA

Congregation B'nai Brith has 800 households and about 120 families enrolled in the Jewish learning programs—210 students in grades K-12. In December 2014, Rabbi Stephen Cohen, in consultation with the congregation's leadership, decided to set education as his top priority based on the realization that Jewish education is the primary reason why young families join the congregation. The task force came to the conclusion that what makes education work is, according to Rabbi Cohen, "good teachers, experiential/project based learning, and a sense of community in the classroom." In September 2016, after 2 years of research, travel to other congregations, and work with a consultant, Rabbi Cohen and his team launched the transformed religious school curriculum that now includes the "Deep Dive" experiential learning component.

Grades K-5 participate in a project-based learning curriculum with each grade focusing on a separate project that links to Jewish texts and Jewish values, and includes a social action/social justice component. For example, 1st grade covers "Animals and Judaism," 2nd grade "Our Bodies and Judaism," 3rd grade "Nature and Judaism." According to Jen Lewis, director of Jewish learning programs, the classes "learn about Judaism through a series of deep dive units spanning 4-5 weeks each, based on one primary text, one mitzvah/value, and one long term project to engage the students and foster understanding." For example, 2nd graders learn about Judaism with a deep dive about feet. A quote from Exodus about Moses removing his shoes leads to a text study about holy ground and a "Holy Ground" photo project. A mitzvah project is tied to the theme with a community-wide shoe drive for Soles4Souls.

Successes of this new curricular model included increased student engagement and participation in activities that have a real-world impact. In the first year of implementation, the school leadership was challenged by the fact that the limited time allocated for each dive didn't allow time for critiques and multiple drafts. Additionally, implementation was challenging for some new teachers. But enthusiasm is so high that the creators of this curriculum are excited to keep making improvements.



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