

ROBERT SEIDEN SCHOOL OF JEWISH STUDIES
INTEGRATED CURRICULUM RATIONALE

The curriculum of the Robert Seiden School of Jewish Studies at Temple Sinai employs a spiral approach to Judaica subjects and includes the integration of Hebrew from the beginning. The overall program design provides children with a wide variety of Jewish experiences as well as academic exposure to important subject areas like Jewish history, Israel and the Bible. In a spiral curriculum, major subject areas are covered more than once, so that children deal with them at more than one level as skills and maturity increase. For example, primary students study prayer at a "how to" level, learning simply to recite specific prayers and blessings for various occasions. From fourth grade on, they begin to study the same prayers in Hebrew, delving into their meaning, and later still, during b'nai mitzvah preparation, they learn the structure of Jewish prayer services and explore knotty questions about the personal value and relevance of prayer. Similarly, each class spends some time on Jewish holidays as we travel through the cycle of the year, but after grade three, basic knowledge is assumed, and holidays are addressed primarily as they relate to other curricular elements, such as Israel, *tzedakah*, or history.

The goal of our program is that our confirmands will have a clear picture of the rich cultural and religious heritage they affirm in their confirmation service, a broad base of knowledge and experience to draw from in choosing personally meaningful expressions of their Jewishness, and Hebrew competence that will enable them to participate comfortably in Jewish prayer at synagogues, Jewish camps, and other events sponsored by Jewish organizations. The curriculum is structured enough to insure that each child is exposed to several broad areas of knowledge and behavior, but flexible enough to permit teachers and students to find their own special ways of teaching and learning about specific parts of those subject areas.

We firmly believe that parents are teachers, too, and hope that this outline of our curricular goals will help you find opportunities to reinforce in your home what your children are doing at Religious School. We also ask you to help us in two other ways. First, it is important that your child be enrolled in our school at the same time he or she begins public school, and attend as regularly. This is the only way to show a child that Jewish education is also serious and important in his or her life, aside from the fact that a child who comes to us in fourth grade has already missed a great deal of foundational material. The second thing we ask is that you embrace the many educational opportunities that our synagogue and the local Jewish community provide. These can be a tacit element of our curriculum, as when a lesson prepares children to appreciate a Jewish media event, or introduces the role of the rabbi, or teaches what a *sukkah* is. These lessons lose much of their meaning for a child who then *doesn't* see the TV production in question, *doesn't* have the opportunity to see the rabbi in action at services, or *doesn't* build or even visit a *sukkah* during Sukkot. Our curriculum is what we hope to teach in the few hours

your child spends with us - every Jewish experience you can add to it increases the chances that your child's Jewish education will have a lifelong impact.

JUDAICA CURRICULAR ELEMENTS BY GRADE LEVEL

KINDERGARTEN

In our kindergarten, though some students are familiar with Shabbat, holidays and even the synagogue, many are encountering their Judaism for the first time. Thus, special consideration is given to the developing awareness of these children. The Jewish calendar is emphasized: holidays, Shabbat and the cycle of the year. A "learning through doing" approach is employed, allowing children to use all of their senses to learn about the richness of the Jewish calendar - cooking projects are especially popular. Several storybooks and texts supplement these "hands-on" activities. Activity folders relating to holiday celebrations will be sent home at intervals to help you learn with your child and reinforce classroom lessons. Our kindergartners also begin their study of Torah with read-aloud stories from the first part of Genesis: Creation, Noah and the Tower of Babel. They use a wonderful book from Torah Aura Productions' *I Can Learn Torah* series, which goes home at year's end. Kindergartners also begin to learn about Mitzvot (Commandments), using a second set of colorful single-topic activity folders which will also be brought home as each mitzvah is studied.

FIRST GRADE

Like our kindergarten class, first-graders have a varied curriculum that focuses on three basic areas. In the area of Bible study, first-graders will review volume one stories and receive a second volume of *I Can Learn Torah*, in which they meet the family of Abraham, the first Jew, and follow his adventures. Holidays are encountered in more detail in a set of take-home mini-magazines that include a "Parent Page" for home extension of classroom learning. Stories, songs, games, video and crafts are all used as students continue to explore these important elements of their Jewish heritage. Students also use *Let's Discover God*, a set of materials that introduce basic prayers and important Jewish values, and help the teacher to open an age-appropriate dialogue about God. In addition, first graders will meet the Hebrew letters for the first time in our school.

SECOND GRADE

At this level, students begin a more formal Bible curriculum with *A Child's Bible*, in which they briefly revisit the stories of the beginnings covered in kindergarten and first grade and then continue through the rest of the events recounted in the Torah. A second important strand of their curriculum is learning about the synagogue's multiple purposes and about the work of a synagogue's leaders. For this part of their curriculum, students use games and "sticker lessons" from Torah Aura Productions, as well as a hands-on tour of the *bimah* and interviews with temple staff and lay leaders. A unit on Israel is also included in the second grade

curriculum, introducing students for the first time to the land of Israel and its central role in Jewish history and identity, including introductory Hebrew material/ Another set of Torah Aura lessons and the book *The GREAT Israel Scavenger Hunt* are among the materials used.

THIRD GRADE

This class will continue to study Bible using the second book of the series they started the previous year, *A Child's Bible*, as well as *A Child's Introduction to the Early Prophets*. The second major strand of their curriculum will be a thorough, systematic investigation of all the Jewish holidays, using the textbook *The Book of Jewish Holidays*. Students move beyond the "how to celebrate" phase and begin to understand the "why" of Jewish celebrations and their cyclical nature. Family activity suggestions relating to holidays will also be sent home periodically to encourage reinforcement of classroom materials and create opportunities for children to apply new knowledge. Finally, the third grade enjoys a more sophisticated encounter with Hebrew, using a colorful pre-primer called *Alef, Bet, Gimel, Dalet* that introduces them to the Hebrew letters with stories, vocabulary, and writing and recognition exercises.

FOURTH GRADE

Fourth graders, who are by now (we hope!) familiar with the Jewish holidays, will begin to learn about another set of celebrations that make Jewish families special, using *Journey of a Lifetime* and parts of *When a Jew Celebrates*. Jewish customs connected with universal life events like birth, death and marriage will be explored along with uniquely Jewish observances like *brit milah* and bar/bat mitzvah. A highlight of this curriculum is a special family education event on the theme of Jewish weddings during the spring. This class will also continue their study of Bible, which lays the groundwork for later study of Israel by helping children understand the very beginning of Jewish statehood as they learn about the later prophets and the kings they advised. They are introduced to the beautiful poetic works that are sometimes neglected in the teaching of Bible, and to the prophetic teachings that underlie Jewish ethics, material that will be extended through the textbook *Partners With God*.

FIFTH GRADE

Fifth-graders focus on Israel and on social action. In their Israel curriculum, they learn about the special place of the land in Jewish history and the Jewish consciousness. Their textbook is *Welcome to Israel*, which introduces students to this special place from the "social studies" viewpoint (history, geography, economy) that they are accustomed to in their regular schools. Each chapter also emphasizes a value concept relating to the ideas of Jewish peoplehood and a Jewish homeland, such as "covenant" or "seeking peace." From the idea that "all Jews are responsible for one another" (one concept in the Israel curriculum), the fifth-graders move into an exploration of the Jewish (and wider) community's ways of taking care of people who need help, and do at least two projects themselves to demonstrate their grasp

of the responsibility of *tzedakah*, such as serving a meal at a local shelter. Textbooks for this curricular strand include *Living as Partners With God*, *The Tzedakah Workbook* and *K'lal Yisrael*, an introduction to the structure of Jewish community organizations.

SIXTH GRADE

At this level students explore the notion of what it means to be a part of the Jewish people - the covenant people - by focusing on the panorama of Jewish history, and the unique role of the Jewish people in world history. From Abraham to Akiba to the Golden Age of Spain, this class will address the question of who we are as a people by finding out about the places we've been and the roles we've played, in every era and on every continent. Textbooks include *Introduction to Jewish History* and *Journey Through Jewish History*, a two-volume series for upper elementary grades, as well as an age-appropriate adaptation of Abba Eban's *My People*. When possible, a visit to the Skirball Center's archaeological dig is a highlight, and a variety of other media will also be used. A smaller curricular unit emphasizes the value of Jewish pluralism as students learn about Judaism's different branches. *Explaining Reform Judaism* will be one text used in this part of the curriculum.

SEVENTH GRADE

Seventh graders study the roots of American Jewish life in two ways. One aspect of their curriculum is the study of their personal "roots" as American Jews, through family history as well as general study of the development of American Jewry, from life in "the old country" through waves of immigration and the evolution of the present American Jewish community. In the second curricular focus of the class, students will engage in discussion, analysis and argument about Jewish ethics, so that as they reach the age of 13, when they become responsible for their own religious commitments (whether or not they have a formal bar/bat mitzvah ceremony), they will better understand the Jewish values we hope will inform their future decision-making. Texts include *Let Freedom Ring*, supplemented by the Immigration Project materials from the Skirball Cultural Center, and *Challenge and Change*. A book of moral dilemmas called *Mah La'asot?* (What to do?) will be the starting point for their study of ethics.

EIGHTH, NINTH AND TENTH GRADE (METIVTA)

Our teenagers at Temple Sinai study together in an "academy" setting called *Metivta*, an Aramaic word related to assembling for the purpose of study and which in another context means "argument." Our rabbi, education director, and various expert teachers from inside and outside our congregation offer eight to ten classes each year, each one lasting a quarter (7-8 weeks). Students choose a new course each quarter. Subjects will range through the panorama of Jewish thought, practice, beliefs, art, history, law and ethics. Our hope is that our students will think and argue, not just study, that they will have sampled enough of Jewish experience by Confirmation to understand that Judaism addresses every concern in life, and

that they will be well on their way to establishing independent Jewish identities and lifelong Jewish commitments. Students are strongly encouraged to commit to three full years of participation in *Metivta* in order to meet the requirements for Confirmation at the end of the tenth grade, but those unwilling to make this commitment are nevertheless welcome to attend. Confirmation currently requires completion of 10 quarters in the 3 years, 9 meeting specific subject requirements, the last of which is devoted to the writing of the group's own Service of Confirmation.

HEBREW CURRICULAR ELEMENTS

Hebrew is taught in our primary grades by using and teaching the Hebrew names of Biblical people and places, and of objects and rituals associated with holidays and synagogue life. In first through third grade, students use various reading readiness tools to become familiar with the Hebrew letters and their sounds, and are oriented to the right-to-left directionality of Hebrew and the vowel system. Our formally sequenced Hebrew curriculum, *Hineni* from Behrman House, focuses primarily on prayer vocabulary, phonetic reading and comprehension and is used by upper elementary students starting in fourth grade. This widely used supplementary school Hebrew program is the product of many years of research, pilot testing, and fine tuning. Available peripheral material helps teachers use the curriculum, and the sequenced textbooks are also available in an alternative format, as booklets featuring individual prayers. We'll sometimes use these booklets to enable our students to focus on the prayers most often included in our services and led by our b'nai mitzvah.

In addition to the *Hineni* materials, teachers have supplemental curricular resources from Torah Aura, which include *midrashim* and Bible stories that address the themes and meanings of the prayers. Also available are the study packets developed by the URJ for its *Mitkadem* Hebrew program. Although prayer-based, the URJ curriculum is too intensive for our basic Hebrew program, but its materials are perfect for providing enrichment and challenge for our strongest Hebrew students.

Temple Sinai's students in Grades 4 through 7 have two sessions of Hebrew weekly, one during Sunday morning classes and a second on Wednesday afternoons. Two focused exposures to Hebrew weekly enable steady progress and retention of the material. All Wednesday sessions (and many Sunday sessions also) include a short prayer service (*tefillah*) for all grades. This leads to the comfort and familiarity with the service that is crucial as our students prepare to participate in and even lead communal prayer for the rest of their lives.

While our most advanced students do more, our fundamental aim is that, by the seventh grade, each child will have a basic understanding of the prayers s/he is to lead and the Torah and Haftarah portions s/he is to read (or chant) by the time s/he is ready to become a bar or bat mitzvah, in addition to the reading fluency to do so

both competently and comfortably. Since input gathered from congregant families indicates that bar or bat mitzvah is the goal of Hebrew studies for a large majority of our students, this goal seems both realistic and relevant for our setting.

While we'd like to be able to teach our students modern Israeli Hebrew, that goal requires many more hours than we have, both weekly and overall - most language experts indicate that *minimal* speaking ability in a second language requires about a thousand hours of instruction in an intensive setting, and a student in our school logs about 350 hours of Hebrew in four years of perfect attendance. At least half that time must be spent teaching specific prayer skills and vocabulary students need to conduct a service as they become bar or bat mitzvah, material which overlaps only slightly with modern conversational Hebrew. For these reasons, we've chosen *Hineni* as the best option for the needs of our congregation.

HEBREW CURRICULUM SEQUENCE BY GRADE LEVEL

SPECIAL NOTE: We expect that eventually all students will study Hebrew with their age-mates in their grade level classes on both Sundays and Wednesdays, but we accommodate those who did not begin Hebrew until after the fourth grade or those who cannot attend all sessions. These students meet with a separate teacher during the same time that Hebrew is being taught in their regular classes on Sundays and some Wednesdays, so they can get the extra attention needed to help them catch up.

ALEF (Grade 4) Our beginning readers spend most of the first year learning to combine the (already-familiar, we hope) Hebrew letters and vowels using either *Shalom Uvrachah* or *Ot La-Baot*. Both of these colorful, attractive primers use a “key word” approach so that as soon as two or three letters are learned, students can already assemble words whose meaning they know. The choice between the two books lies with the fourth grade teacher each year.

BET (Grade 5) In their second year, students complete *Hineni* Book 1, which introduces the opening prayers of the Shabbat morning service, from *Bar'chu* through *Mi Chamocha*, plus *Ma'ariv Aravim* from the Friday night service. The basic structure of blessings and a number of the blessings most often used in home celebrations, such as those for Sukkot, Hanukkah and Pesach, are also presented. Prayer themes are linked to Jewish values, and students are introduced to the “root” structure of Hebrew. Students also get to see some of these familiar prayers in their original context – right in the Torah. In studying and learning to read these prayers and blessings, students also acquire 70 key prayer words, as well as 17 roots, prefixes and suffixes.

GIMEL (Grade 6) In *Hineni* Book 2, students will be aiming to master five of the seven long blessings that make up the Shabbat *Amidah*, and selected prayers from the Friday evening Shabbat service. Prayers are again related to Jewish values and students are asked to think critically about what the prayers seem to be asking or telling us. The variations in prayer texts that are used in different streams of American Judaism are presented and used to teach about Jewish diversity as well as

the need for mutual respect between adherents of varying practices. Students learn 90 key prayer words and 30 roots, prefixes and suffixes to help them grasp the meaning of the prayers.

DALET (Grade 7) This class completes Book 3 of *Hineni*, which ends the series with the prayers of the Torah service, the concluding prayers, and the special prayers related to waking and sleeping, such as *Hashkiveinu*. More sophisticated questions encourage deeper thinking about both the prayers and the underlying Jewish values. New elements include 99 key words and more than 30 roots, prefixes and suffixes. A special feature of this textbook is a chart of all the prayers in the Saturday morning service, which provides a better understanding of the structure of our services and an encouraging graphic illustration for students that allows them to see how much they have learned.