

USCJ Guiding Principles for Congregational Learning

Rationale for the Guiding Principles

The USCJ Guiding Principles for Congregational Learning document has been developed to assist USCJ *kehillot* (Jewish communities inside and outside the walls of a synagogue) in planning or adapting an educational program. We hope that these recommendations will provide helpful strategies for all educational programs, with a goal toward cultivating a culture of lifelong Jewish learning for Conservative congregational families.

Conservative Judaism in the 21st century is a voice for dynamic, authentic and meaningful life based on a tradition of values, and we encourage our schools to model this goal as they make curricular and programmatic decisions.

Guiding Principles

The following elements are recommended in establishing learning programs with maximum impact:

- Educational leadership whose dynamic vision of learning is articulated and communicated consistently. This leadership guides planning, hiring, resource selection, faculty professional development, and school operations
- A partnership that engages families within the arena of *kehilla* life. Family education can both enrich Jewish family life and establish families as partners within the *kehilla's* education program. This requires working with families while respecting their unique composition and background. Sensitive and well-structured family learning opportunities encourage parents to serve as role models and facilitators of Jewish learning for their children
- A culture that values the children, parents, faculty and *kehilla* leadership, supporting the goal of nourishing the Jewish soul and developing Jewish identity, maintaining a culture of inclusion for all learning styles, personal needs, and family structures
- A robust and inviting early-childhood program, whether in a preschool setting or integrated within the culture of the *kehilla*
- A congregational school that merges experiential learning (see Appendix A) with 21st Century best practices to engage students and families along a continuum of learning, preparing students for Jewish life beyond high school and into adulthood
- A curriculum that integrates content to define Conservative Jewish life in the modern world -- a purposeful and fulfilling life experienced through a Jewish lens
- A program that provides for vigorous and meaningful adolescent learning through engaging, value-laden experiences with connections to USY and the broader Jewish community
- Members of the clergy are engaged in a meaningful relationship as co-planners, role models, and teachers

- High priority is assigned to ongoing professional development for faculty, with resources to advance and enhance best practices for both educational leaders and faculty members
- Healthy communication is fostered between early childhood, elementary, middle and high school programs to assure ongoing and sequenced learning processes as students mature into adulthood. Transitions through developmental cycles are intentional and assure continuity
- A board or committee dedicated to learning provides oversight and guidance to congregational learning activities, including assistance with policy-making, and direction to the synagogue's educational program

Recommended areas of study

Since USCJ *kehillot* learning varies greatly in structure and substance from congregation to congregation, the areas of study described in the following sections are offered for consideration in building curricula.

While part-time education challenges us to provide in-depth learning in each area of Judaic study, creating discrete units of study and varying those topical units throughout the school year both enhance flexibility and maximize the opportunity to augment content as well as depth of learning.

Spiral Curriculum

The capacity for understanding continues to develop as children grow from early childhood to elementary school, through middle school and into high school. A spiral curriculum begins with the belief that “any subject can be taught effectively in some intellectually honest form to any child at any stage of development” (Jerome Bruner, 1960) and can help to maximize retention of learning.

To create a spiral curriculum:

- Determine age-appropriate content in each recommended area of study, building knowledge and understanding through each contact point along the spiral (i.e. *Bereisheet* [Genesis] is taught in first, third, sixth, and ninth grades, building understanding as students cycle through the grades, encountering developmentally appropriate content, historical background and commentary according to their increasing maturity.)
- Couple learning activities with teaching styles in each curricular area to be age-appropriate and to engage students through each contact grade and age along the spiral

(See Appendix B for additional suggestions regarding an integrated curriculum)

Selections are recommended from the following areas of study:

I. Between People -- A Life Guided by Jewish Values

Rationale: Judaism embodies *mitzvot* (commandments) that inform the way our tradition instructs us to relate to others. A life informed by Jewish ethical values includes:

- Awareness that Jewish values are grounded in God's *mitzvot*, and sanctified by God's covenantal relationship with the Jewish people
- Knowledge that doing what is right can be a source of great satisfaction, takes thought and comprehension, and is grounded in Jewish tradition

Recommended Content and Skill Development:

- Knowledge of Jewish values that can serve as a foundation for students' ethical decisions. These include:
 - *Tzedaka* (Contributing to make the world a more just place)
 - *Kibbud Av v'Eim* (Honoring parents)
 - *Sh'mirat HaLashon* (Guarding speech) *G'milut Hesed* (Acts of loving kindness) *Emet* (Truth)
 - *Tikkun Olam* (Mending the world)
 - *K'lal Yisrael* (Identification with Jews everywhere)
 - *Ahavat HaBriyot* (A loving concern for others)
 - *Bikur Holim* (Visiting the sick)
 - *Limud Torah* (Jewish learning)
 - *B'tzelem Elohim* (All humans are created in the Divine image)
- The study of selections of *Tanakh* (Torah/Prophets/Writings) and rabbinic literature to further inform the understanding of Jewish value concepts
- Participation in *tikkun olam* and *g'milut hesed* within the Jewish and secular communities to demonstrate authentic examples of knowledge leading to action
- Information about the concepts that Judaism shares with other religions, as well as ways in which they differ

II. Between Jews and God

Rationale: Judaism requires *mitzvot* in relationships between people and God. When students acquire an awareness of *mitzvot* as God's commandments, it invites their spiritual connection to Judaism.

Recommended Content and Skill Development:

- Cultivation of a developing personal connection with God. This can be achieved by integrating the values taught in the section "Between People" with the concept of *mitzvot*, a thoughtful and soulful approach to prayer, and the teaching of authentic Jewish text
- The partnership between congregation and home provides maximum potential for students' developing a relationship with God. Knowledge of the history and texts and practice of the *mitzvot* facilitates developing habits of Jewish observance (i.e. Growing Jewishly in the

observance of *Shabbat* includes lighting candles, making *kiddush*, and refraining from prohibited work, as well as understanding the basis for these traditions

- Knowledge and experiences of specific *mitzvot* include:
 - The history, traditions and prayers of the Jewish holy days. Teaching the rhythm of Jewish time enhances student engagement in authentic learning opportunities
 - The history, traditions and prayers of *Shabbat*
 - The sources and rules of *Kashrut*
 - Jewish life cycle practices
 - Ensuring time in class to practice these traditions
 - Family education and programs that foster the practice of these traditions in the home.
- Ability to articulate the importance of *mitzvot* in Judaism

III. Study of Jewish Text

Rationale: The study of Jewish text provides an authentic foundation for all other areas of Jewish connection and belief. Interaction with authentic Jewish text through a modern lens assists students in building their appreciation of Jewish tradition.

Recommended Content and Skill Development:

- A general awareness of what is included in *Tanakh* (The Hebrew Bible)
- Major events in the Biblical narrative from Genesis through Joshua
- Stories about key prophets and the sources of important phrases from *Nevi'im* (Prophetic writings)
- Encounters with sections from *Ketuvim* (later writings) throughout the curriculum, with an emphasis on the *megillot* (i.e. Job, Song of Songs, Ruth, Lamentations, and Ecclesiastes)
- The ability to find meaning in Biblical selections, familiar and new, and familiarity with contemporary attempts to understand and make *Torah* meaningful through commentary
- The ability to explain how these central Biblical ideas are important in Judaism:
 - *Brit* (Covenant)
 - *Tzedek* (Justice)
 - *Am Kadosh* (A Holy Nation)
 - *Sinai* (Revelation)
- *Torah* and *Torah* commentary as expressions of the Jewish people's yearning from Biblical times to develop a relationship with God
- The Biblical and rabbinic origin for the traditions of holy days and life cycle observance
- *Torah* as a source of meaning in students' personal lives
- An appreciation of *Tanakh* as the central, sacred text of Judaism and its importance throughout the world

IV. Knowledge of Hebrew

(See Appendix C for more ideas and best practices in teaching Hebrew.)

Rationale: Hebrew is the historic language of the Jewish people. The *Torah*, *Tanakh*, and rabbinic writings are written in Hebrew. In the lives of our students, Hebrew is the language of prayer and the spoken language of modern Israel. Students who gain facility in the decoding of and in the language of Hebrew gain an appreciation for and a pride in Jewish legacy and tradition.

Recommended Content and Skill Development:

- An awareness of Hebrew as the language of both modern Israel and the Jewish people, past and present
- Students build Hebrew decoding skills best when they begin with the interactive process of learning a simple Hebrew vocabulary reinforced throughout the school. In the process of becoming familiar with spoken and written Hebrew, students will be introduced in the early years (preschool – fourth grade) to:
 - Hebrew words from classroom, home, and community, names of Jewish objects, and meanings of simple Hebrew verbs
 - Whole Hebrew word recognition
 - Hebrew letter differentiation
 - Simple Hebrew conversations
 - Hebrew songs
- Skill in decoding Hebrew phrases and prayers with accuracy and fluency
- Knowledge of the basic vocabulary of the *siddur* and understanding the Hebrew of frequently used prayers
- An understanding that the *Torah* is written in Hebrew and that its meaning is best understood with the ability to recognize words in Hebrew

V. Knowing prayer and praying

Rationale: The ability to enter a *kehilla* anywhere in the world and participate in Jewish prayer becomes a source of pride for students and recognition of their progress in learning. Prayer connects the Jewish people to God and to one another. Through facility with prayer, the Jewish soul can emerge and develop.

Recommended Content and Skill Development:

- Awareness that prayer is a process of both looking within ourselves and reaching out to God
- Attainment of the knowledge and skills to participate in *Shabbat*, holiday, and weekday services, including the ability to navigate the *siddur*, and an awareness of the structure of the prayer service
- Capacity to interpret and personally relate to prayer
- Awareness of why and how the Conservative Movement has made changes in some of our liturgy
- Exploration of the role of prayer in our lives, providing opportunities for:
 - Participation in *minyan*
 - Synagogue attendance on *Shabbat*

- Daily recitation of *Shema*
- Recitation of *HaMotzi* and *Birkat HaMazon* at meals
- Opportunity for students with sufficient experience and practice to attain the skill and confidence to lead *Shabbat* and weekday services

VI. Knowledge about and concern for Israel and *K'lal Yisrael* (The Jewish People)

Rationale: The Jewish people (*B'nai Yisrael*, the children of Israel) and Jewish continuity rely on exploring the ever-unfolding story of the Jewish People, including support for Israel in the 21st Century.

Recommended Content and Skill Development:

- ***The Kingdom of Israel***
 - Awareness that Jews have lived in and identified with the land of Israel for four thousand years
 - A familiarity with the centrality of Israel as found in the *Tanakh* and in *tefillah*
- ***Medinat Yisrael* (The State of Israel)**
 - An awareness of the commitment and drama in establishing *Medinat Yisrael*, including:
 - The personalities and events that contributed to the rise of Zionism
 - Historical events leading to the establishment of *Medinat Yisrael*
 - The *Shoah* (Holocaust) and its history and heroes as one foundation for the establishment of the State of Israel
 - Comprehension of the importance of *Medinat Yisrael*, and ability to articulate reasons for concern and support
 - Awareness and knowledge of some of the modern innovations (i.e. in medicine, technology, computer science, clean energy, agriculture, etc.) that originate in Israel
 - Recognition that Israel is a democracy with a multiparty political system
- ***K'lal Yisrael around the World***
 - Identification with and concern for *K'lal Yisrael*
 - Sense of a shared common history and spiritual legacy with other contemporary Jews
 - Awareness and knowledge of Jewish personalities through the ages and their contribution to the growth and continuity of the Jewish people. This includes historical moments in Jewish communities throughout the world
 - *Kol Yisrael arevim zeh bazeh* (Shevuot 39a) "All Jews are responsible for each other." Jews have a mandate to participate in acts of *tzedakah*, *g'milut hesed*, and political action concerned with the physical and spiritual survival of other Jews
 - Respect for other Jews who understand Judaism differently, and some basic knowledge about the differences between Conservative Judaism and other Jewish movements

Conservative Judaism

Rationale: Students' understanding of the tenets of Conservative Judaism, as practiced in their own congregations, is an important step in building a positive Conservative Jewish identity.

Recommended Content and Skill Development:

Cultivation of a basic understanding of what it is to be a Conservative Jew, includes:

- Knowledge of the process by which the Conservative Movement interprets Jewish thinking, values, *halakhot* (laws) and the *Torah* in the modern world
- Ability to cite examples of specific changes the Conservative Movement has made in liturgy and practice, in addition to an understanding of the rationale for those changes
- Recognition of the *Masorti* (Conservative) Movement in Israel and its relationship to the Conservative Movement in America
- Ability to engage in thoughtful conversation about the Conservative Movement's theology as currently reflected in *Emet v'Emunah*. [Link to pdf of *Emet v'Emunah*](#)
- Additional classic sources on Conservative Judaism:
 - <http://www.uscj.org/JewishLivingandLearning/JewishObservance/TheIdealConservativeJew.aspx>
 - *Conservative Judaism: Our Ancestors to Our Descendants* by Elliott N Dorff, 1996 available at Amazon.com
 - *Conservative Judaism: The New Century* by Neil Gillman, 1993, Behrman House Publishers

Appendix A: About Experiential Jewish Education

Experiential Jewish Education utilizes authentic and meaningful Jewish experiences to teach Jewish history, tradition, culture and values. In Conservative congregational learning, programs that combine interactive methods of text study with experiences connecting students with each other and with the content will enhance the emotional connection to the lesson. These experiences are meant to be as inspirational as they are educational.

Elements of the Learning Environment to Consider when Implementing the Tools of Experiential Jewish Education:

- Consider the opportunities and constraints of your environment or learning space. Is it suited to engage students in achieving your learning goals? What will a student notice (i.e. see, hear, taste, and smell, including technology and other resources) that can aid your objective? (For example, if you are in a classroom, consider arranging the chairs in a semi-circle instead of rows so learners see and better engage with each other.)
- Consider eliminating distractions that might interfere with your educational goals (i.e. perhaps your students should not face the window, unless you feel that helps with the educational experience). Determine any adaptations to this environment to better work toward those goals
- Select active learning experiences that both take advantage of this environment and meet your educational goals. Active learning is a process whereby students engage in activities (i.e. reading, writing, discussion, or problem solving) that promote analysis, synthesis, and evaluation of class content. Consider a game, partner discussion, or class debate
- Match the teaching style to the chosen environment and interactive activity. Do not be afraid to move your learning to a different space if you determine that it is not well suited to your educational goals!

Adapted from Mark S. Young, Managing Director of The Leadership Commons of The William Davidson Graduate School of Jewish Education at the Jewish Theological Seminary

Techniques to Support Experiential Jewish Education

- Question students using “thinking” verbs (“explain”, “compare”, “contrast”, “analyze”).
- Be the guide on the side. Create activities that require students to do the research and thinking to determine answers by themselves or in teams. Problem-based learning is an example of this type of planned learning activity.
- Teach students to paraphrase what they have heard.
- Create activities that help students transfer knowledge from one area of learning to another.
- Integrate across the curriculum. (See Appendix B: Curriculum Integration.)

Appendix B: Curriculum Integration

An integrated curriculum provides connection points across areas of study and between previous and new learning, enhances the process of learning, and maximizes the effectiveness of learning time.

In the world of Jewish learning, curricular integration may occur as follows:

- Multidisciplinary integration (i.e. in the study of holidays where, in a holiday lesson, educators integrate areas of *Torah*, Jewish history, Judaic customs -- including music, foods, and symbols -- blessings and prayers)
- Interdisciplinary integration (i.e. lessons are organized to combine reading/Hebrew decoding practice, writing, art and oral communication)

Appendix C: Key Elements in Developing Hebrew Decoding Skills

Children learn to read in their native tongue through authentic patterns of language acquisition, spending years building a vocabulary of understanding, so that when written words are introduced, there is immediate recognition and comprehension. This foundation eventually leads to an ability to “sound out” or “decode” words that are unfamiliar, allowing children to read words they have not seen before.

In Jewish schools, the teaching of Hebrew “reading” is complicated by an *alef bet* that is unrelated to the English alphabet, with letters that often resemble one another. The closer we can approximate the natural process of language acquisition to teach a language that is not native to our students, the more successful our students will be.

The following tips can help to make the teaching of Hebrew a joyful experience:

- Base the teaching of Hebrew decoding on the desire to attain Hebrew for meaning by introducing interactive Hebrew activities that are fun and engaging
- Reading begins as an oral process. As early as possible in the learning program, begin to build a Hebrew vocabulary. Create a classroom Hebrew word list that is used during each class session. One recommended curriculum to accomplish this goal is *Hebrew through Movement*. www.hebrewthroughmovement.org
- Teaching Hebrew decoding is most effective when delayed until the third grade, after having established a vocabulary of classroom Hebrew words. The human brain stores words as sounds, and does not store them as “print”
- By second grade, begin to introduce whole word recognition of the Hebrew vocabulary words students have mastered orally. Place Hebrew signs around the school and in classrooms, surrounding students with the language so Hebrew both looks and sounds familiar
- Early in the process of teaching Hebrew decoding, introduce activities that encourage letter differentiation. Because Hebrew is an ancient language, letters are variations of a square. Exercises that help students recognize the differences between letters facilitate decoding (i.e. which letters have an opening on the left? Which letters have a line across the bottom? etc.)
- Teach the names of both letters and vowel signs, and refer to them by their proper names. They are equally important in Hebrew decoding
- Look-alike letters are best taught separately from each other. Allow students to master one of the look-alike letters before introducing the other (i.e. introduce the *dalet* (ד) first and practice for mastery, using the *dalet* (ד) with a variety of letters, vowel sounds and vocabulary. Wait several weeks before introducing the *resh* (ר) with its vowel sounds and vocabulary
- Students decode longer words most easily by “chunking,” or dividing the word into syllable segments. The most effective way to “chunk” is by introducing the *shva* (:) in its syllabification role.
- Practice makes perfect. Schools can maximize decoding practice by providing teamed



reading opportunities. Encouraging students to practice just five minutes each day improves Hebrew decoding skills dramatically!

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