

Beth Chai Family School

6th Grade – Alternative or Supplementary Curriculum

Overview of Jewish History

Using the Historical Atlas of the Jewish People, create a timeline
Examine the question: “What are major themes of Jewish History?”

- Knowledge, literacy
 - trade, skills
 - expulsions
 - adaptability
 - Tikkun Olam
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- In depth units on the Rabbinic period, resources from Jewish Humanists and “Please Pass the Torah”
 - In depth unit on the Golden Age of Spain, tracing the Sephardic communities and their contributions
 - In depth unit on the Holocaust, with emphasis on survival and resistance (this was done 2000 -01 with some 5th graders in the class who will be in 01-02 6th grade, so may not want to repeat)

Overview of Jewish sacred texts

1. Torah, Talmud, mystic writings, modern commentaries “Our Sacred Texts” as a resource (This year this is part of the Ben Mitzvah class- should we leave it there, or introduce here?)

Holidays from a textual and historic base as they occur in the year

Read Torah passage that describes the holiday, or the traditional book that is read on the holiday

Rosh Hashanah / Yom Kippur passages that describe the blowing of the shofar: Lev. 25:9, and 23:24 and Num.29:1.

The traditional text for Rosh Hashanah is Abraham’s willingness to sacrifice Isaac., Genesis 22.1 -19. If you choose to discuss this passage it is important to differentiate between Christian, Muslim and Jewish interpretations of this very difficult text. The Jewish understanding is that this text is a clear statement against child sacrifice. In all my years of attending High Holy Day services I have never heard a rabbi defend Abraham’s willingness to sacrifice Isaac. Either Abraham is portrayed as having failed the test -he should have argued with God as he did in the case of Sodom and Gomorrah, or he is simply delusional in thinking that God asked this of him because child sacrifice was practiced in Ur where he came from (Mesopotamia). Clues imbedded in the text are: when Abraham says, “God will provide the sacrifice”, the fact that God has already promised to make Abraham’s descendents “as numerous as the stars, etc” in a previous passage which would be a little difficult if he sacrifices Isaac, the fact that this promise is reiterated, but nothing added to it (faint praise) the intervention of the angel and the

appearance of the ram. Christianity and Islam take from this passage an interpretation of Abraham's unflinching belief in God. Questions for discussion: Do parents ever sacrifice their children? or wish to? Wars? their own ambitions? or their own dreams? needs? Is unflinching obedience or belief a good thing? Examples of positive and negative aspects of faith.

The Book of Jonah is traditionally read on Yom Kippur. Some themes for discussion: the reluctant prophet - when have we wanted to run away from things we know we should do? What happened? Did we eventually do them? What was the outcome? Is a "good" outcome always satisfactory? The issue of repentance from a Humanist point of view. See our High Holy Day liturgy - i.e. we have the ability to judge our own lives, to repent, make amends, and change our ways.

The Torah passage that prescribes the three pilgrimage festivals, Pesach, Shavu'ot and Sukkot is found in Exod. 23:15 -16. Strassfeld writes, "In Biblical times, Sukkot was the most important festival of all; in fact, it was referred to simply as ha-hag-'the festival' (e.g. 1 Kings 12:32). Pilgrims would come from all over Israel up to Jerusalem to observe the colorful and elaborate temple rites, which included a large number of sacrifices each day (see Num. 29). As the holiday of the biblical period, Sukkot was chosen for the consecration of the temple by Solomon (1 Kings 8)." It was also the occasion of the reading of the Torah in front of all the people every seven years (Deut. 31:10-13).

Questions for discussion: Why do you think this holiday was so important to our ancestors? (hint: they were shepherds and farmers), Why did this change? What kinds of meaning and importance can this holiday have for us today? (hint: we are still dependent on the earth - the sukkah is a powerful symbol of that dependence)

Hanukkah - an interesting assignment might be to have the students read the Book of the Maccabees and try to find the description of the miracle of the oil. Divide up the texts. They will find that it is not in there! This can lead to some very interesting discussions about history and the making of symbols. See Strassfeld, *The Jewish Holidays, a guide and Commentary*.

Tu B'Shevat will generally be celebrated with either a class or congregational seder. This holiday originated in Talmudic times.

Purim. Students might find reading the Megilat Ester in the original very interesting. Or pick some selected passages.

Passover. The first 15 chapters of Exodus contain the Passover story. Much of it is quite accessible. You might want to skip the genealogies. An interesting assignment might be to compare the Torah version with the Prince of Egypt version.

Shavu'ot. Although in Biblical times Shavu'ot was an agricultural holiday, later it became associated with the giving of the Ten Commandments. Exodus 19. Questions for

discussion: If you had to make ten universal rules for living what would they be?

Place origin of holiday on timeline

Hebrew

Optional self-paced programmed reading book (this year)

Eventually - read Beth Chai blessings, traditional blessings

Basic vocabulary, conversational, values, words to do with Jewish practice

Eventually - Read and understand selected short phrases, texts from Torah, Talmud,
modern Hebrew