

Beth Chai Family School Curriculum

Developed by Rain Zohav, Education Director

Overview

The overall goal of Beth Chai Jewish Family School is to impart a positive Jewish identity to our students through the teaching of Jewish history, culture, values and traditions in a pluralistic manner. All lessons should be structured to encourage the students to think for themselves and to apply their new knowledge to their everyday life. Jewish and Humanist values that should be woven into the lessons as well as taught directly include: taking personal responsibility for our actions, respect for all human beings, co-operation, compassion, courage, integrity, and the importance of working for peace and justice.

Methodology

All classes should include: a review of basic subject matter, the introduction of new subject matter, time for open ended discussion of the topics covered, with respect for a variety of points of view being modeled by the teacher and hands-on, experiential activities that reinforce or introduce the subject matter. Art, music, drama, film and creative writing should all be used to help the students personalize the material. Co-operative learning strategies such as small group projects should be also employed.

Goals in the Teaching of History

We want children to experience a sense of continuity with the past in a way that contributes to a stronger Jewish identity. History should serve as a resource to draw upon to help think through current and future events. It should be interesting and enjoyable in itself, as a set of stories supported by evidence. It should also suggest ideas about how people in the past have addressed challenges that may still arise. Events and famous people emerge out of complex circumstances. It is through exploring these complex circumstances and understanding how they are different from our own circumstances that we enrich our ability to see current events and our place in them.

Some Humanistic Points of View on Teaching Jewish History

(adapted from Sholen School)

In reviewing any and every period of Jewish history, examine:

- A) What was happening *outside* the Jewish community...in the world at large... in the particular country or area of focus
- B) What opposing forces were at play *within* the Jewish community? Some examples:
 - Ancient Times - the monarchy and priesthood *vs.* the peasantry and the Prophets
 - Greco-Syrian period - nobility and priest *vs.* Pietists and rebels; Pietists *vs.* rebels
 - Roman period - Pharisee *vs.* Sadducees *vs.* Essenes
 - Middle Ages - accommodation and alleviation *vs.* escape and resistance

Eastern Europe - Orthodoxy vs. Chasidism vs. Socialism, and Zionism
United States - Jewish Tories vs. patriots, slave holders vs. abolitionists, sweatshop owners vs. unionists, diverse positions on combating anti-Semitism, Israel and Palestine, etc

Emphasis should be placed on resistance to oppression throughout Jewish history rather than accommodation.

Enduring Understandings of Jewish History

Jewish History is the story, backed by evidence, that the Jewish people has survived and even flourished despite many difficult circumstances caused by anti-Semitism.

Basic Jewish values have been essential to overall Jewish survival.

The Jewish values of justice and Tikkun Olam is a key to the motivation of many Jewish organizers, leaders of liberation movements and reformers.

Goals in Teaching Bible

(Adapted from the Sholem School)

For all grades the points should be made that the Bible is the central writing of the Jewish people. These books contain the stories of our ancestors, the laws they lived by and their understanding of the world. They have shaped the lives of our ancestors and the development of Judaism. Within a Humanist context, the Bible is viewed as literature and mythology, written by humans. However, since some of our members and some of our children believe in God or believe that the Torah was at least divinely inspired, authorship of the Bible is problematic for us.

As in other areas of belief or nonbelief, the teacher should strive to present the traditional view, a humanistic view and other alternative views, while leaving it up to the individual student to decide what they believe. The question, "What do *you* think?" should be a regular part of every discussion. All answers should be treated with respect. The teacher is not obligated to share any personal beliefs. This can have an inhibiting effect upon the student's own development.

Our aim in teaching Bible is to make the stories and their characters an integral part of the students' consciousness as these stories have been for generations of Jews. We encourage students to question and interpret the stories, analyzing the actions of the characters, the consequences of those actions and how the students themselves would have acted or felt under similar circumstances. Both universal and particular values should be discussed. The question, "What did you learn from this story", should be discussed with particular emphasis upon the moral lessons and values that may be imparted. These morals and values should ideally be generated by the students and will become more sophisticated with age.

God is the main character of most of the stories, poetry and chancels. The characteristics of God change throughout the Bible. These different characterizations about God can be a

springboard for many interesting discussions. Once again, teachers need to model respect for all beliefs, including a traditional one. However, the very presence of varying concepts of God, points to a pluralistic tradition within Judaism. From a Humanist perspective, humans attribute to gods traits that are highly regarded in their time. We can learn a lot about our ancestors needs, wishes and values by studying the different images of God presented in the Bible. What traits do we regard highly? Does any concept of God reflect these traits?

We aim to foster literary, anthropological and historical analysis of the Bible. In many cases the actual books used will not include all the interpretation that we would wish. Therefore it is incumbent upon the teacher to do the necessary research to fill in the gaps and provide context. It is highly recommended that every teacher invest in a copy of: *The Torah: A Modern Commentary*, with commentary by Plaut, Bamberger and Hallo. This resource provides comparative literature, historical information, modern poetry inspired by the texts and commentaries by a wide variety of people.

Talking About God.

In many aspects of Jewish culture, including Bible stories, holidays and traditional prayers, the concept of God is very central. While many Humanists do not believe in God (or at least not in the simplistic concept of God that they may have been taught) at Beth Chai we wish to both teach our children the Jewish traditions and encourage them to think for themselves. It is our goal to model respect for all beliefs or nonbeliefs. This can best be accomplished if traditional material is presented as such, i.e. “The traditional Jewish prayer over the Shabbat candles is...”, Humanist materials is presented as such, “At Beth Chai we say the prayer over the candles like this...”, and other alternatives are also presented, “Some people say the prayers like this...”.

Tone of voice is important here. Teachers should be careful to use a respectful tone when presenting each option. It will also be helpful for teachers to read the summary of Fowler’s faith development work included in this curriculum to know how to present concepts of God in age appropriate ways. It is generally not recommended that teachers share their personal beliefs, unless it is part of a wider discussion and only used as one possible answer.

The Holidays

Learning about and celebrating the Jewish holidays is an integral part of the any Jewish education. The holidays are an expression of the particular Jewish experience within a universal setting.

Goals in the teaching of the Jewish Holidays:

- We want our students to live a rich Jewish life by celebrating the Jewish holidays in ways meaningful to them and their families.

- We want them to know the symbols, history and deeper meanings of the holidays.
- We want the holidays to become a context for discussions of Jewish values and a model for how to live a life of integrity, generosity and goodness.
- We want the holidays to provide a sense of joy and connection with family and the Jewish People.

A Word About Miracles

At the youngest grades (K/1) it is still appropriate to teach about the various miracles, perhaps with a simple preface of “Tradition says that...”. The child’s view of the world at this age is still magical. It is not necessary to “debunk” at this age. It is also not necessary to defend. The teacher can ask the students what they believe. The time to discuss miracles from a more sophisticated point of view is when the children themselves start asking, “Did this really happen?”. Teachers should consult Fowler’s faith development and other supplementary materials to determine age appropriate responses.

2nd -5th graders will most likely be interested in rationalistic explanations, such as “The Israelis were able to cross over the sand banks of the Red Sea because they were poor slaves with light weight clothing and sandals, while the Egyptians in their heavy armor got bogged down”. More value based and interpretive discussions can happen as soon as students are ready to answer such questions as; “What do *you* think was the real miracle of Chanukah, or the Exodus?”. (Possible answers: that they fought at all, that liberation from slavery actually happened). “What is this story trying to tell us?”, is another useful open -ended question.

By 6th grade, a historical approach should once again be taken. Students should know that the Rabbis inserted the story of the miracle of the oil into the Talmud because they were so deeply disturbed by the militaristic aspect of the Maccabbes victory. (It is not mentioned in the Book of the Macabees). Values should be emphasized. A discussion about definitions of “miracle” can be useful. Ask students to discuss with their parents the idea of miracles. An open-ended approach needs to be taken here as elsewhere as various beliefs exist in our community.