

Executive Summary of the Sunday Program Task Force Report

The Sunday Program Task Force report to the Board of Directors outlines how the mandate –passed by the board—was carried out. The mandate was the following:

In our quest to achieve excellence in Jewish youth education, the board of Congregation Beth Am has convened a task force to accomplish the following:

1. *Research the best models, programs, principles, and practices in Jewish and other supplementary and informal education*
2. *Create a vision for youth education at Beth Am*
3. *Set goals and objectives for the Sunday Program Community*
4. *Assess the Congregation Beth Am Sunday Program in light of research, vision, and objectives*
5. *Recommend changes to enable Congregation Beth Am to realize our goals and objectives*
6. *Analyze and consider how these changes affect all other relevant programming at Congregation Beth Am.*

In the report, each of the six tasks is addressed including a set of findings from assessing the current program. From these findings, ten fairly detailed recommendations were developed. Below is a summary of those recommendations.

Short and Medium Term Recommendations

1. We must take [a set of] steps to improve the quality of teaching and learning throughout our programs. *This is our most critical recommendation.*
2. Our Judaica and Hebrew programs should be more integrated.
3. We should make every effort to create a sense of sacred community in our Sunday Program.
4. In order to better serve our diverse learning community, alternatives/choices should be made available for students.
5. Our K-6th grade curriculum should be reviewed and revised to insure it meets our educational objectives.

Longer Term Recommendations

6. We must create an evaluative process to help us assess our progress in achieving our goals.
7. In order to fund initiatives that further our goals, a strategic plan needs to be developed for increasing the size of the Education Endowment.
8. In order to insure the stability of the program as well as the success of these changes, a plan for the continuity of the Director of Education must be developed.

Implementation of Recommendations

9. An implementation plan should be presented to the Board in May 2002.
10. A status report should be presented to the Board in February 2003.

It is important to understand that at the outset, the task force was completely open to a wide range of options, from continuing the existing program as it is currently configured to totally replacing our current program with another model. As we analyzed the options, it became clear the current program achieved some of our goals but only minimally addressed other goals. However, we did not find another program that seemed to be more likely to achieve the goals we had articulated. It seemed most reasonable, therefore, to adapt and transform our current program to truly meet our goals. This does not mean that five years from now our program will not have changed substantially but that we have chosen, at

least initially, an evolutionary rather than a revolutionary approach to change. The Sunday Program Task Force therefore asks the Board:

- To support, in principle, the recommendations of the Sunday Program Task Force regarding teachers, integration of Hebrew and Judaica programs, community building, alternatives for students, curriculum review and revision, evaluation, and strategic plans for the Education Endowment and continuity of the Director of Youth Education
- To ask for an implementation plan to be presented in May 2002, followed by a status report in February 2003
- To work in partnership with the professional team to communicate these findings and recommendations to the congregation in a way that builds excitement and “buy in” from the community
- To keep youth education on the “front burner” for the near term

Congregation Beth Am Sunday Program Task Force Report to the Board of Directors February 2002

Introduction

In 1991, when Congregation Beth Am created an Education Task Force, education was assumed to mean primarily youth education. Through the innovative work of that task force, it became clear Jewish education was not just for children; the goal must be to become a congregation of learners with lifelong learning as its mantra for all members regardless of age. The strategy adopted meant that the focus first must be on parents and other adults. In the ten years since, due to the efforts of many, Beth Am programs in family and adult education have blossomed and become models for other congregations.

While innovations continue in those areas, the lay and professional leadership determined it was now time to focus on re-thinking youth education at Beth Am. The Board of Directors created a Sunday Program Task Force and gave it the following mandate:

In our quest to achieve excellence in Jewish youth education, the board of Congregation Beth Am has convened a task force to accomplish the following:

- 1. Research the best models, programs, principles, and practices in Jewish and other supplementary and informal education*
- 2. Create a vision for youth education at Beth Am*
- 3. Set goals and objectives for the Sunday Program Community*
- 4. Assess the Congregation Beth Am Sunday Program in light of research, vision, and objectives*
- 5. Recommend changes to enable Congregation Beth Am to realize our goals and objectives*
- 6. Analyze and consider how these changes affect all other relevant programming at Congregation Beth Am.*

Those chosen to be Task Force Members were teachers, parents, and educators:

Barry Asin	Marily Lerner
Sharon Barkoff	Andy Robin
Steve Conston	Donna Seidel
Darlene Feldstein	Saralyn Shapiro
Jeff Greenwald	Ellen Stromberg

Co-chairs: Linda Kurz and Janet Newman
Rabbi Susan Lippe

Other participants: Birgit Anderson, Rabbi Chuck Briskin, Sarah Haselkorn, Rabbi Janet Marder, Jim Heeger, Ilona Shechter, Wendy Tanz, Zvi Weiss, Pam Worth, Rabbi Josh Zweiback

Fulfilling the Mandate

The best way to understand the work of the task force is to review how it fulfilled each charge in the mandate.

1. Research the best models, programs, principles, and practices in Jewish and other supplementary and informal education

Although it was not anticipated prior to the beginning of the Task Force's work, Beth Am joined DrEAMERS (Disseminating and Exploring Alternative Models of the Religious School), an ECE (Experiment in Congregational Education) Consortium, and a project of the Rhea Hirsch School of Education at Hebrew Union College. As with the initial ECE project, we are one of the early participants and thus are, in a sense, "halutzim" (pioneers).

Since one of the primary purposes of the DrEAMERS project is to provide synagogues with high quality information about alternative models and best practices, the Task Force did not need to research models on our own. Given the DrEAMERS schedule, whereby their presentation of models would not be ready until October 2001, the Task Force completed the assessment of our own program prior to our exposure to the models with DrEAMERS. The change of order of the mandate turned out to be very helpful, as we could explore the other models with an eye to what needed improvement in our own program.

Through a two day workshop led by Rob Weinberg, Executive Director of the ECE, the Task Force was exposed to a variety of models researched by educators from HUC. The workshop focused primarily on four models: Congregant-Led Experiential Learning, After School Daycare, Religious School Enhancement, and Flexible Scheduling Arrangements. (Since we already have Shabbaton we did not review the fifth model which was a series of family programs called Shabbat Communities.) Through Dr. Weinberg's presentation, it became clear that while many other congregations are also struggling with how best to educate their youth, our program already includes many of the innovations recently adopted by others. (The project's video is dominated by scenes from our Shabbaton program!) The workshop was most valuable in helping us determine four areas of our program that we feel need most attention: teacher development, integration of Hebrew and Judaica, community building and inclusion of choices/tracks for students. We look forward to the next phase of the project-- communication with other participant congregations. However, it is too early to determine the full impact of DrEAMERS on our work here at Beth Am.

Over the course of the Task Force, members also did "informal" research, talking with family and friends in other congregations to see what other models of "religious

school” are currently being used. And at a meeting following the DrEAMERS workshop, Rabbi Lippe presented three models she had created: Jewish Camping and Retreats, Interest-Based Tracks, and Mitzvah Points Approach. While there was no one model that the Task Force members felt should replace our current one, elements of many of the models, Rabbi Lippe’s in particular, were enthusiastically received.

2. Create a vision for youth education at Beth Am

The Task Force discussed the “vision” issue and concluded there should not be separate vision for “youth” education at Beth Am: the Education Vision created by the professional team and board in 2000 does an excellent job of describing the lifelong learning vision we have for everyone at Beth Am, including our youth. As it begins,

“The primary goal of our lifelong learning program is to create a community at Beth Am in which our congregants will value Jewish education highly and engage in it regularly so that they may become committed, knowledgeable, participating, Reform Jews.”

(See Appendix A for the complete Beth Am Education Vision.)

3. Set goals and objectives for the Sunday Program Community

The Task Force has proposed the following goals for the Sunday Program:

Instill Jewish Literacy

Jewish literacy is a fundamental goal of the program. The more we learn, the more comfortable we are in a Jewish environment

- Knowledge- Help our students build a broad foundation of Jewish knowledge
- Culture- Provide opportunities for our students to experience many aspects of Jewish culture
- Values- Provide opportunities where students can learn and understand Jewish values so they can practice behavior consistent with those values
- Language- Help our students understand and appropriately use key Hebrew terms and prayers

Encourage Living Jewishly-

Judaism touches every aspect of life. Living Jewishly means living on “Jewish time” and maintaining strong connections to the Jewish community locally and globally.

- Life- Provide opportunities where students can experience many aspects of living Jewishly, i.e., calendar and life cycle

- Faith- Create an environment where students can explore Jewish faith, theology and spirituality
- Pride- Create opportunities where students can find personal reasons to be proud or happy to be Jewish and to be members of the Jewish people.
- Meaning- Create opportunities where students can find personal meaning in the Jewish people's history, culture, language, faith, and texts.

Create Appropriate Structure

Program structure affects possible range of opportunities. We need to develop a structure that creates and sustains community, experiential learning, inclusivity and innovation.

- Community- Create structures and experiences that build community among students and their families
- Experiential Learning- Create structures and experiences that offer opportunities for hands-on exploration
- Inclusivity- Create opportunities for the range of learning styles of the students
- Innovation- Create an environment which supports innovation and experimentation

Build a Reflective Learning Community-

In order to fulfill our goals the Sunday Program community must continue to strive for excellence and develop self-reflective evaluations.

- Evaluation- Create an infrastructure for regularly evaluating the program in terms of our educational goals
- Participation- Create an evaluation system that encourages community participation

4. Assess the Congregation Beth Am Sunday Program in light of research, vision, and objectives

The Task Force assessed the current Sunday Program in a variety of ways. First, we broke into groups and analyzed the strengths and weaknesses of the program. Each of the groups (core values/mitzvot, Jewish knowledge basics, community building, family education/participation, and structure) discussed what was working, what was not working, and how the program could be improved in that particular area.

Additionally, an Open Forum for Parents was held on a Sunday during both sessions of the program. Although there was a small turnout, the feedback we received was very helpful and confirming of many of the issues we felt needed to be addressed. The Open Forum was followed by a Parent Survey sent out to all families in the Sunday Program. (See Appendix B for a summary of the results.) Often, from the parents' perspective, the teacher was the critical factor: if the parent thought their child had a "good" teacher, they were pleased with the program. If the teacher was "not good", they were very critical of the program. The results of both the forum and survey suggest a range of opinions and attitudes though some common themes emerged:

- Program strengths: teachers, Rabbi Lippe, Tikkun Olam projects, enrichment (art, music, dance)
- Improvements needed: community building, communication, teachers, curriculum
- Suggestions: integration of Sunday and Hebrew programs, mentoring of new teachers, creation of grade level Havurot

We also felt it was very important to get feedback from the teachers in the program, so we arranged for every teacher to be interviewed by a member of the task force. This input was incredibly valuable to the task force, but perhaps equally important, the teachers realized they are part of the process and their opinions are valued. (See Appendix C for a summary of the teacher interviews).

Note: Rabbi Lippe and the Sunday Program teaching faculty are making continual improvements in response to emerging challenges so that the existing program already includes some solutions to issues raised by parents and teachers.

Based on our program assessment, feedback from parents and teachers, and research of alternative models, our findings were the following:

- **Teachers:** *The quality of our program is most directly related to the quality of the teaching.* Beth Am does not invest enough time, resources, and energy into recruiting, training, and retaining good teachers.
- **Curriculum:** The curriculum for Sunday Program is not adequately developed. We suggest a review of the curriculum in light of our Lifelong Learning Map and educational objectives.
- **Hebrew Integration:** Our Judaica and Hebrew programs are not well integrated. This separation creates arbitrary boundaries between subject matters that are inherently connected.
- **Structure:** Our program structure does not support the diverse needs of the many kinds of learners in our program. Students are not offered the types of choices that might enable them to pursue the kinds of subjects they love or learn in the ways they find most helpful.

- **Community and Communication:** Our surveys indicate that our families desire a community that is warmer, a place where students form long lasting friendships. We need to put more energy and thought into how we build a sense of sacred community.
- **Synagogue/Family Partnership:** There is often a disconnect between the type of Jewish life we model and teach in our program and what actually happens in the homes of our congregants. Judaism, in many cases, is not lived in the day to day lives of our families. We need to better support our families so that Jewish life can flourish and deepen in their homes.
- **Youth Education Integration:** Sunday Program is perceived by many to be isolated from the other youth education programs of the congregation. We need to make stronger connections between our formal and informal education programs as well as between Hebrew, Shabbaton, and the Sunday Program.
- **Education Funding:** We do not currently have adequate funding to make some of the changes we think will be necessary to realize our vision.

5. Recommend changes to enable Congregation Beth Am to realize our goals and objectives

It is important to understand that at the outset of the Task Force we were completely open to a wide range of options, from continuing the existing program as it is currently configured to totally replacing our current program with another model. As we analyzed the options, it became clear the current program achieved some of our goals but only minimally addressed other goals. However, we did not find another program that seemed to be more likely to achieve the goals we had articulated. It seemed most reasonable, therefore, to adapt and transform our current program to truly meet our goals. This does not mean that five years from now our program will not have changed substantially but that we have chosen, at least initially, an evolutionary rather than a revolutionary approach to change.

With that said, we believe much can be done in the near term to bring us closer to our vision. While structural changes will improve the program, the Task Force concluded that the most important component for change lies in the quality of the teaching and, hence learning, which results. Moreover, a strong teaching staff is a prerequisite for the success of all the other recommendations.

In addition to focusing on teaching, we identified three additional priority areas to focus on in the short and medium term: Integration of Hebrew and Judaica, Community Building, and Alternatives/Choice. We have also included a set of longer term recommendations and two recommendations regarding implementation.

Short and Medium Term Recommendations:

TEACHERS

1. *We must take the following steps to improve the quality of teaching and learning throughout our programs:*
 - a. Create a much stronger sense of community among teachers by providing settings in which teachers can work together and learn from each other. Possibilities include faculty retreats and in-service days. (To be initiated, Summer 2002.)
 - b. Develop a Congregation Beth Am Institute for the Advancement of Teaching. We hope to create a program that will provide meaningful professional development and Judaic study opportunities for teachers at all levels of experience. (date to be determined)
 - c. Design a program that will enable teachers and madrichim to work more closely together so as to realize fully the tremendous potential our madrichim have to serve as positive Jewish role models for our students. This program would also enable teachers to plan more engaging lessons with students working more actively in small groups. (Summer 2002)
 - d. Create a Teacher Resource Center: Our teachers need a room of their own where they can plan, research, shmooze and “hang out.” The Center should have computers with internet access, a telephone, and a library of teacher resources including educational journals, curriculum materials and lesson plans. (Fall 2002)
 - e. Continue to recruit a quality teaching staff from inside and outside of the congregation. (Ongoing)

INTEGRATION OF HEBREW AND JUDAICA

2. *Our Judaica and Hebrew programs should be more integrated.*
 - a. Our first step should be to create cultural compatibility among all of our youth education programs (Sunday Program, Shabbaton, and Hebrew Program). This includes using a common Hebrew vocabulary across the programs, bringing teachers from all programs together more regularly, creating learning opportunities so that every teacher in our education program has basic Hebrew skills, and instituting classes on American Reform Judaism for teachers who grew up abroad or outside of the Reform Movement. (Initiative to be launched in Summer 2002)
 - b. Develop a common in-service program for our entire teaching faculty (Summer 2002)
 - c. Create an experimental Hebrew-Judaica program for both Sunday Program and Shabbaton 6th graders and their families which would combine Hebrew, Judaica, and Shabbat prayer and celebration. (Fall 2002) (See Appendix D for a more detailed description.)

COMMUNITY BUILDING

3. *We should make every effort to create a sense of sacred community in our Sunday Program.*

- a. We suggest initiating an all-school retreat- weekend for all students, faculty and professional team. Our high school students should help staff plan the retreat. (Spring 2003)
- b. Grade-level Kevutzot (groups): Program to encourage families with kids of the same age to get together, i.e. to celebrate Shabbat and chagim. (This year's third grade is our pilot class, beginning with the community mitzvot program in Winter 2001-2)

Community building is currently being enhanced through existing initiatives of the Director of Youth Education and YEAC (Youth Education Advisory Committee) which include grade level retreats and Shabbat experiences, and Movie Nights. The above proposed experiential Hebrew-Judaica program and focus on building a stronger teacher community would also support these efforts.

ALTERNATIVES/CHOICE

4. *In order to better serve our diverse learning community, we suggest that alternatives/choices be made available for students, particularly in grades 4-6.*

- a. A pilot program which includes opportunities for students to choose among a number of electives should be made available, starting with our oldest students. (Spring 2003)
- b. Introduce students to Jewish culture and the larger community through variety of electives including studio arts, performing arts, Tikkun Olam.

CURRICULUM

5. *In conjunction with other Jewish educators and teachers, the Director of Youth Education will review and revise our K-6 curriculum to insure that it meets our educational objectives.*

- a. The goals identified in this report and the Lifelong Learning Map can provide general guides for this task.
- b. This task will take some time to be completed. The completion date is a function of how much time the Director of Youth Education has to put into the project as well as the amount funding available to hire other educators to assist. Rabbi Lippe has begun this work by re-writing the 3rd and 6th grade curriculum this past year. (Completion-to be determined)

Longer Term Recommendations

6. *We must create an evaluative process that will help us assess our progress in achieving our goals.*

- a. Areas to evaluate would include more “measurable” factors such as student attendance, student literacy (are they learning what we hope they are learning), teacher competence, as well as less measurable ones such as quality of community that is being built, etc.
- b. Instruments such as Empowerment Evaluation could help us determine, as a community, to what degree we are achieving our goals

7. *In order to be able to fund initiatives and programs that will enable us to achieve our vision, a strategic plan needs to be developed for dramatically increasing the size of the congregation’s Education Endowment.*

8. *In order to insure the stability of the program that these changes will require over the long term, the Executive Committee, Senior Rabbi, and Senior Educator should formulate a strategic plan that will enable us to ensure continuity in the staffing of the Director of Youth Education position. Further, this same team should work together to insure that the Director’s responsibilities are formulated in such a way as to make the implementation of these initiatives possible.*

Implementation of Recommendations

9. *We recommend that the Board of Directors ask the Senior Educator and Director of Youth Education to report back to the Board in May 2002 with an implementation plan.*

10. *We recommend that the Board of Directors ask the Senior Educator and Director of Youth Education to report back to the Board in February 2003, regarding the status of the implementation of these recommendations.*

Note: The Senior Educator of the congregation, while not a formal member of the Task Force, participated in creating these recommendations and supports them fully.

6. Analyze and consider how these changes affect all other relevant programming at Congregation Beth Am.

Diagram 1 illustrates the education programs of Beth Am from the perspective of youth education. The complexity of the diagram is not surprising: this was not a system of programs developed at one time, but the result of creating isolated programs run by different professionals over many years. As in many other organizations, when new programs were created, old ones were not abandoned; sometimes this was done deliberately, as in the case of Shabbaton (created as an alternative to the Sunday Program), but more often new programs evolved without

evaluating its relation to, or impact on, other programs. So although this systemic problem was outside the purview of the Task Force, we became aware of how important it is to think of youth education as a “whole”.

The recognition of this general problem in our education system was in fact, one factor that contributed to the appointment of Rabbi Zweiback to the new position of Senior Educator. In this new role, he will be able to take steps (in partnership with other professional team members and lay leaders) to “rationalize” the existing fragmented system into a more integrated and coherent set of education programs, particularly in the youth education area.

This piece of the mandate was included to insure that intended and unintended consequences of change would be carefully considered before instituting the changes. At this time, however, we cannot fully assess what might be the full impact of our recommendations. Rather, it is incumbent upon us to keep this fact in mind as we proceed with the implementation.

Conclusion

We respectfully ask the Board of Directors 1) to support, in principle, our recommendations so we can actualize our goals for youth education at Beth Am, 2) to ask for an implementation plan to be presented in May 2002, followed by a status report in February 2003, 3) to work in partnership with the professional team to communicate these findings and recommendations to the congregation in a way that builds excitement and “buy in” from the community, and 4) to keep youth education on the “front burner” of the board’s agenda for the near term.

Over the last several years, there has been much discussion in the Jewish community about “continuity,” with education as the solution for ensuring the vitality of Jewish life. As you know, Beth Am has been at the forefront of that movement as it continues to expand its opportunities for adult learning. Yet, if Jewish continuity is truly important to Beth Am, now it is time for our congregation to focus on its children. As Rabbi Yoffie so clearly stated at the 2001 UAHC Biennial,

[Youth education] is the key that opens the door to the grand adventure of Jewish learning and Jewish life. And we will not rest until our schools are a place where our children hear God’s voice and see Torah as a tree of life.