

Reimagining Torah School Curriculum

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I. Background: A Patchwork Curriculum

Just over two years ago, I started as Director of Education and Operations at Temple Beth Torah (TBT) in Ventura, CA. Located an hour north of Los Angeles, TBT is a Reform synagogue of 300 families. We operate a congregational school with about 100 students that meet on Sunday mornings and Wednesday afternoons. I took over leadership at the school after a period of some instability related to the departures of the two previous directors. The program I inherited had a rather loose curriculum that reflected multiple paradigms from previous directors and a pattern of teachers following individualized designs in their teaching. While all faculty got along well, they lacked conceptual and spiritual unity in their teaching overall. Significantly, neither parents nor clergy seemed pleased with the program results. I met with many constituents regarding the program and obtained multiple proposals for change. After several meetings over several months, I realized that the proposals did not add up to a coherent direction for change. I needed to pull together systematically a larger group of stakeholders to define a unified approach to a revised curriculum.

II. Defining a Research Question

Fortunately, just at the time I was starting to wrestle with our curriculum concerns, I was starting in the two-year Jewish educator training program offered by the [Mandel Teacher Educator Institute \(MTEI\)](#). At MTEI, I had access to several faculty members who had extensive experience in curricular design and implementation. I spoke at length with many faculty members, in particular Barry Holtz and Sharon Feiman-Nemser, to obtain guidance for how to think about curricular change for our congregational school. I also launched an extensive literature search. I found the literature regarding curricula for Jewish congregations and day schools to be a rich and challenging discourse. Two paradigms dominate this literature regarding key curricular orientations: Jewish Identity

versus Jewish Literacy. Some authors argue for one over the other; others argue for a combined approach.

Shortly after I started in the MTEI program, I had the opportunity to enroll in the Certificate in Jewish Education Leadership program offered by MTEI/HUC-JIR. This program focused on training participants to conduct educational research real time within our actual educational settings. Specifically, we were trained through the certificate program to conduct “action research” within our own classrooms and schools and to use our findings to enrich practice within the field of Jewish education. I quickly found that my concern with optimizing curriculum for my school fit the requirements for an action research project I could pursue. After much guidance from program leaders Miriam Raider-Roth and Lauren Applebaum, I defined a formulation that transformed my impressionistic thoughts about curriculum into a focused research question useful for driving a systematic approach for inquiry and improvement of our school’s curriculum. I defined my research question as: “What do I learn from our stakeholders about what the relationship between Jewish literacy and identity should be in our Torah school curriculum?”

III. Data Collection and Analysis

In order to investigate what our stakeholders thought about the relationship between Jewish literacy and identity, I realized I needed to determine in a systematic fashion the values our stakeholders hold regarding the overall purpose of education in our congregation school. To assess these values, I conducted a Group Level Assessment (GLA). A GLA is a collaborative research process that allows a group to assess status or priorities associated with a particular issue. Once statuses and priorities are clarified, the GLA process facilitates design of a plan to act upon the findings (Raider-Roth, 2019). For our GLA, we convened a group of twenty stakeholders via two Zoom sessions. These stakeholders included teachers, clergy, staff, and select parents. To assess their values regarding our program’s educational purpose, we presented GLA participants with 19 distinct prompts, including such questions as, “in TBT Torah School, we should keep doing,” “if I were the teacher, I would teach about,” “every student

should leave TBT Torah School knowing,” and what do you think our kids will most remember from TBT TS when they are at college?” (See Appendix 1 for a complete list of GLA prompts). Using Padlet to engage participants in our Zoom-based GLA session, we obtained over 300 individual responses to these prompts. After collecting the GLA responses, we then reviewed them as a group and summarized the individual data elements (curricular values) into 19 main values categories, which included such values as community, Jewish identity, Jewish continuity, Jewish literacy, acceptance/safe space, and tikkun olam.

We recognized that 19 categories represented a simplification over the 300 individual data elements but still presented a list too large to be actionable. In our second session, we discussed the categories and further reduced them to five key values categories: Community, Jewish Identity, Jewish Literacy, Teaching Practice, and Student Experience.

As we concluded our second session for the GLA, we reviewed the meanings we believed lay behind these five key values. In brief, we agreed as a group that a general expectation that parents held for Torah School was that teachers should maintain a Jewish community in which their children could grow up and teach their children essentially “how to be Jewish.” We evaluated the five key values as identified above and then reduced them to two primary values that the group believed best represented the values expressed by the stakeholders: Jewish Identity and Jewish Literacy.

Following a rather intense discussion among stakeholders about the intentions that underlay teaching Jewish Identity and Jewish Literacy, one parent commented: “I don’t care if my son has perfect cantillation when he chants the Torah at his Bar Mitzvah or can recite the V’ahavta perfectly, I just want him to learn to think Jewish.” This parent’s conception seemed to capture the spirit of the debate, and almost all agreed with him that the phrase “think Jewish” captured our core mission. At this point in the discussion, I was able to introduce a brief summary of current discourse in the literature, particularly ideas advanced recently by Jon Levisohn, a philosopher of education at Brandeis University. Levisohn argues strongly against using “Jewish Identity” as a destination or

goal because he finds it notoriously difficult to define. He also urges educators to rethink common approaches to Jewish Literacy and move beyond thinking about cultural literacy as acquisition of key terms defined in static lists. He advances, instead, that we should transform our thinking about educational goals into more active terms and proposes we use the term “Jewish Doing,” that captures a mixture of the aims of Jewish Literacy and Identity. In a highly instructive paper, he argues that educators aim to train students to become “producers not possessors” of Jewish knowledge and practice. (Levisohn, 2019). This discussion resonated with our group, and they endorsed a plan to orient our program’s curriculum around the two goals of Jewish identity and literacy, the relative proportion of each we would determine during the process of curriculum design and implementation.

IV. From Curriculum to Community

The outcome of the GLA discussion strongly challenged my initial notions regarding the lack of unity and consensus among teachers and staff. It became apparent that the GLA process itself served not only as a values clarification exercise, but also as a dynamic exercise in community formation. Upon completion of the GLA sessions, stakeholders we had brought together to consider, assess, and prioritize core values for our curriculum formed, in addition, a working group committed to the process of seeing those values put into action. This group formed as an unexpected consequence of our process, a group that could be defined in the language of Miriam Raider-Roth as a Relational Learning Community – a community of stakeholders joined together to care for each other and collaborate on the ultimate aims of our Torah School program.

We had initially thought that to implement a truly responsive curriculum for our school, we would have to develop it from scratch. Yet after discussion with mentors at MTEI, I came to see that to build a curriculum from scratch required effort and resources beyond what we could provide. With guidance, we decided that we could find a predefined curriculum that embodied our twin goals of instilling Jewish literacy and identity. We realized that creativity could come in how we selected and implemented

modules from a defined curriculum. We chose to implement a modified form of the URJ's Chai curriculum and are working as we go through the year to adapt it to our needs and expectations.

Upon reflecting on our group's journey, I realized that we had started out under my direction looking for a new curriculum that would bring greater unity and sense of shared purpose for the teachers. As we held multiple discussions on how we might reform our program, it became obvious that we had too many diverse opinions and directions and needed to form a larger representative steering group. We elected to use the GLA process to elicit the core values held by a select group of stakeholders, including teachers, clergy, staff, and parents. These values then served to guide our decisions regarding curriculum. In the end, we could see as a group that the process needed to start first with determination of values and then definition of curriculum – and in the process of following this exercise, we became a community of stakeholders, a group familiar enough with each other and sufficiently engaged to jointly define not only a curriculum but also further improvements for our congregational school.

V. Next Steps

As we move through this current school year, we are working with both the new stakeholder group we have defined to provide guidance and direction for our school and the revised teaching plan based upon the URJ's Chai curriculum. We recognize that curriculum is an evolving project, so we want to monitor progress and results for what we have implemented so far and then make adjustments for the upcoming year based upon what we learn. Accordingly, we plan to hold a follow-up GLA in early June to assess the results of the school year that will have just ended. We will then over the course of the summer work to incorporate adjustments and new ideas into our curriculum and teaching plans.

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APPENDICES

Appendix 1. Complete list of GLA prompts.

- In TBT Torah School, we should keep doing
- In TBT Torah School, we should stop doing
- In TBT Torah school, we should start doing
- If TBT Torah School had a superpower, it would be
- If I were the teacher, I would teach about
- Every student should leave TBT knowing
- What does TBT look like today?
- What might TBT look like tomorrow?
- If TBT were a meal, what would students want on the plate?
- What would your dream Torah School look like?
- Reasons parents resist sending their kids to TBT's TS are
- What do you think kids will most remember from TS when at college?
- What do you think kids will wish they had done in TS when they are at college?
- How could we make TBT Torah School more like Jewish summer camp
- Our kids feel most connected to Jewish community when we do what at TS?
- One value I hope will guide our teachers at Torach School this year is

- Is it important to learn about Israel? Why or why not?

Appendix 2. List of 19 agreed upon values after evaluation of all GLA responses.

- Community
- Jewish Identity
- Jewish Literacy
- Classroom Management
- Accommodation
- Experiential Learning
- Project Based Learning
- Costs
- Reasons to Attend TS
- Motivations to Attend TS
- Barriers to Attend TS
- Facilitators
- Connections
- Acceptance/Safe Space
- Agency/Choice
- Engaged Teaching
- Tikkun Olam
- Curriculum