

Rabbi Zamore's Message for September, 2014

Religious School and Synagogue: Two Intertwined Partners

What happens in Vegas stays in Vegas. However, what happens in the religious school effects us all. It is easy to perceive synagogues as two parts: religious school and the rest of the activities, including services, adult education and programs. However, these two modules are not stuck together by chance, randomly inhabiting the same building. Synagogue religious schools are a vital, integral part of the greater community and the same applies the other way. It is important that each of us feels bonded to and responsible for the other, no matter where we fall on that golden dividing line of actively raising children or not. When we do not view ourselves as one community, we fall into the trap of seeing the Jewish community as a provider of a product; one which must be customized to our particular family and needs.

When we are done educating our children, we leave the synagogue, because what we needed has been provided. Job done. From the other side, those who do not use the religious school can fall into the other trap of believing that the religious school with its expenses is a drain on those who do not use its services. The JCNWJ has a unique financial set up for the religious school since we are no fee religious school. Membership includes religious school whether or not one takes advantage of it.

I have heard some refer to this set up as a gift to the families and I recognize that it is. However, I ask that we also see the other side. The religious school families' membership in our community is also a gift and their children are certainly the greatest gift of all, because they ensure our Jewish future.

The concept of a singular gift does not represent reciprocity. Instead, it has the potential to create a lopsided power dynamic. One may mistakenly believe that the giving of the gift demands gratitude from the recipient. However, a healthy, balanced relationship is based on shared power and mutuality. Therefore, each religious school family can be grateful for the gift of fee free education, but each non-religious school member must be equally grateful for a synagogue with members of different ages, especially the children who are our future. I commend the members of the JCNWJ for the on-going commitment to the fee free religious school and to our balanced community.

Therefore, in that spirit I share some important news from the religious school, as it enriches all of us.

The religious school families have already been informed of a major curriculum change. Now I would like to share this important shift with the rest of our synagogue.

After much thought and study, we have created a new curriculum to address the needs of this newest generation.

The new Hebrew curriculum will achieve these important goals:

- To provide an integrated learning system that brings students from basic letter recognition and decoding skills to fluency with reading prayers out of our prayer book *Mishkan Tefillah*.
- To provide individual learning to better accommodate all learners.
- To provide grades 4, 5, 6 with a text to help them transition to *Mishkan Tefillah*.
- To help all the students connect to the meaning and context of the individual prayers.
- To have a Hebrew learning system that includes on-line learning for homework, so that students can productively review Hebrew at home whether or not there is a Hebrew reader homework helper at home.
- To better track the progress of students from year to year until bar/bat mitzvah.

In other words, these resources will help our students, from our youngest to oldest, learn as individuals and to connect as individuals to our traditions and prayers.

For our Jewish Studies curriculum, we now will have a rotating curriculum that ensures the students will learn new, engaging material every year. Each year builds on the last, so that the students will learn the foundational information needed from holidays, synagogue, history, Israel, ethical values, and the variety of the Jewish community. Again, the curriculum emphasizes personal connection to the material.

Here is an overview of all our goals for the Jewish Studies curriculum:

- To provide an integrated learning system that brings students from kindergarten through 7th grade with each year's knowledge building on prior years' studies.
- To use a curriculum that offers the fundamentals of a Jewish life while providing variety, challenge, and connection to the students.
- To have a curriculum that gives the maximum support to our lay teachers.
- To provide text books that are engaging and contemporary.
- To create a curriculum that rotates through multiple years, allowing for our multi-grade classrooms.

Our teachers are very excited and grateful for the new resources. In a recent meeting, we studied the curriculum to prepare for the school year. Everyone was bubbling with excitement over the possibilities these changes bring us. It is important to know that the fees for the books have gone up a considerable amount due to the curriculum

changes. While we have a fee free religious school, we would never underestimate the impact of any extra cost to our families and their budgets. However, we hope every member of this community will understand the need for fresh materials and more comprehensive resources to support our children's education. We know this year will be filled with exciting new discoveries as we dive into our new curriculum; we also know that the changes will enrich every member of our diverse, beautiful temple family.

Wishing each member of our community a new year filled with Jewish learning and discovery, health and happiness. May the new year be a sweet year. Shanah Tovah!

L'Shalom,

Rabbi Mary L. Zamore

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