

Playgroup with God: Curriculum Guide for Spiritually Engaging Families with Young Children

Master of Arts in Religious Education Capstone

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PLAYGROUP WITH GOD

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Introduction

Playgroup with God is designed to allow families with young children to explore God within their homes and find their families' places inside Jewish life. Parents will be able to ponder the big topics on their minds in a safe and welcoming environment while they learn how to connect with God from their own children and through conversation/experiences with other parents of young children. Children will explore their own innate spirituality through play. Families will learn from one another and from their peers, forming a close friendship cohort. Playgroup is a joyful, approachable, inter-generational community experience led by a rabbi or Jewish educator in partnership with an early-childhood educator. Through meaningful engagement and relationship creation, Playgroup will help a synagogue or Jewish community form an engaged cohort of early childhood families.

The unit will explore big ideas such as creation, overcoming challenges, Jewish identity, gratitude, legacy and social responsibility through the lens of Jewish text and tradition. Parents and children will engage in a story-telling educational tool called "Godly Play" and an accompanying "wondering process" together. They will then split up to work on and explore the meaning behind their play. The children will engage with art, music, movement and tactile experiences while the parents will do their own form of spiritual play using resources like text study, media, meditation, guest speakers and conversation to relate to a big topic gleaned from the story. A recurrent theme of the adult discussion will be what the adults can learn from the spirituality of their children. The session ends as parents and children rejoin for ritual, refreshments and socializing.

Jewish institutions have compelling reasons to engage families with young children. Engaging families at this stage of life is a main catalyst for later Jewish involvement. Research shows that these families have many options, they are highly influenced by their peers, prioritize Jewish connections rather than Jewish content and they want high quality programming for their children. (Rosen, 2013) Many parents benefit from parent support groups and yearn to know that other parents go through the same things they do. (Senior , 2014) Providing this shared experience in a Jewish environment can lend support and lead to lasting connections. Many early childhood initiatives shy away from Jewish content in fear of turning parents off, which makes sense because these parents often “lack Jewish knowledge and do not consider Jewish content a draw.” (Rosen, 2013) The Playgroup experience will provide deep and meaningful Jewish content to enrich families’ lives, while still being cognizant of all the market research done on this demographic to meet their social, developmental, and practical needs. God is also an important aspect of religious life that interfaith families can connect on to find common ground with Jewish communal life. This generation of parents is not intimidated by spirituality and the search for meaning, but rather consumes new age philosophy and spirituality as well as parenting advice. One in five Americans considers themselves spiritual but not religious. (Pew, 2009) Rabbi Sid Schwartz writes, “I don’t think synagogues fully appreciate the opportunity presented by the current fascination with spirituality today...Successful congregations will help people understand the trajectory of their lives in some transcendent way.” (Reform Judaism, 2014) Spiritual exploration and questioning in an open-minded Jewish context will be an approachable and meaningful inroad for families of young children to enrich their family lives, and in turn their wider Jewish community.

In preparation for her forthcoming book, *Nurturing the Wow: Parenting as a Spiritual Practice*, Rabbi Danya Ruttenberg encourages Jewish institutions to focus on giving parents a

meaningful spiritual experience through young family programming. She encourages Jewish professionals to ask themselves first, “What is spirituality?” and second, “What is young family programming?” Ruttenberg finds that these two questions posed together often provoke laughter because of the stark difference between the pictures conjured by both respective experiences.

Children are innately spiritual. Rebecca Nye writes, “Children’s spirituality starts with God, it is not something that adults have to initiate.” They are naturally capable of wonder and belief in things they cannot see. During childhood, mystery is viewed as a close and unthreatening friend. The spirituality of adults builds off of our own childhood experiences and can be accessed by tapping into our inner children. Ruttenberg puts this idea in Jewish terms using Abraham Joshua Heschel’s concept of Radical Amazement. Children are masters at seeing the world as constantly new and exciting; spending time with them and seeing the world through their eyes can put everyday life in a new light. Ruttenberg shares the many ways that parents experience this Radical Amazement through their children: wonder at having created them and/or molded them into the people they are becoming; awe at the deep love they feel for another human. Parents of young children come to organized Jewish life spiritually primed as well as overwhelmed. Ruttenberg says it is our job to nourish them through their exhaustion, to give them the language to express the “wow” they are living in their roles as parents. Instead, what they often find, are fun and warm experiences for their children, that ignore adult spiritual needs entirely. Ruttenberg bemoans what she calls the “dinosaur song” phenomenon. “If parents bring kids to synagogue out of obligation and walk away unfulfilled, their children have a poor chance of connecting and being involved in Jewish life.” She urges educators to ask instead what a parent-centered family experience looks like; does programming facilitate Radical Amazement for both parents and their kids?

Guide For the Educator

Godly Play methodology is specific; each aspect of the experience is intentional and rooted in research and theory. While based firmly in Christian theology, it can be adapted for an authentically Jewish experience. This unit will ideally be conducted for parents and their young children, but since families today tend to have kids of many ages, the program should be open to all. Children and adults, from early childhood on, are able to participate in this open experience and should all be welcomed in. Setting an age limit might turn away some families and is not necessary. The unit is designed to foster learning and transformation for the whole family, so it is best if the whole family attends together. The unit was envisioned to be facilitated by two trained professionals, such as an early childhood educator and a Jewish educator or rabbi, in a synagogue setting. However, it can be adapted for many contexts. The two teachers should be people who have experience with children and adults respectively and knowledge of Torah.

The experience begins with the crossing of the *threshold*. “A threshold sets apart but it also provides the way into a different space,” writes Berryman. (27) He believes in the importance of emphasizing the transition from the outside into the Godly Play space. In Judaism, this transition is the transformation from profane to sacred, which takes place every week on Shabbat, marked by blessings and the kindling of light. Playgroup is designed for a Shabbat afternoon, a time when we mark holy time together. In Judaism we mark holy time, and in the Shabbat Playgroup with God, we mark holy space as well. Godly Play begins with a teacher welcoming the participants at the door. The teacher should greet parents and children at eye level and be a calming presence, preparing them for the mood that we hope to establish inside the room.

The story-telling takes place in a circle. “Circles are a fundamental shape in the world and in our imaginations. When you add sides to a polygon, you move step-by-step towards a circle but you never get there by adding smaller and smaller sides—even an infinite number of sides. A

circle is something else. It provokes a sense of wonder and mystery because of its rounded completeness.” (Berryman, 37.) Jerome Berryman recognizes the important symbolic and cultural roles that circles have played throughout history. By experiencing Torah in a circle, we become a part of this primal tradition around circles. Because the “lesson” is in the center, we show that we are all the same distance from God’s Torah, and the leader does not own the experience. The families are welcomed to the circle by the storyteller, and can be invited to sit in a specific spot, so they feel taken care of.

The methodology of teaching is the opposite of transfer—moving information from teacher to student. What is being taught is not Torah stories or Jewish language, although these aspects are absorbed, but rather the ability to make meaning. Therefore, the families must be participants in the discovery of knowledge. “The meaning needs to be as personal as the limits to our own knowing and being for it to be truly relevant.” (42) The teacher uses artifacts, words and motions to involve the participants in the story—they are not told what to feel, but left to wonder aloud. After the lesson, the community engages in wondering, guided by questions from the facilitator, while still sitting in the circle. “Wondering opens the creative process and draws both the lesson and the child’s life experience into the personal creation of meaning.” The wondering happens with four questions. One: “I wonder what part of this story you liked best?” This question allows the participants to acknowledge that they have feelings and biases about the Torah “text.” Two: “I wonder what part of the story is the most important?” This question differentiates between what participants gain delight from and what is considered central; between thinking and feeling. Three: “I wonder where you are in story? I wonder what part is about you?” This invites participants to become more personally involved. Four: “I wonder if there is any part of the story we can leave out and still have all the story we need?” This question helps participants take ownership of the story and participate fully.

After the story, parents and children are separated in order to offer *responses*. This is when they get to express themselves and offer personal work in order to process the existential issues of the story. The responses suggested in this curriculum guide are just ideas for learning activities that adults and children can engage in. Anything that promotes the wondering process and allows personal expression in a vehicle relevant and meaningful to the group assembled is fair game—get creative and get to know your cohort.

The theme throughout the Godly Play stories, used to tie together the Jewish narrative is “God’s people searching for the elusive presence of the mystery of God.” (48) The goal is to encourage participants to join in this search and in this experimentation with mystery as a lifelong process.

Outcomes

Mission: Spiritually engaging whole families

Priority Goals for Learners

- Form early and lasting connections between Jewish families and between families and Jewish life
- Find meaning and support for the big questions in young families’ lives through Jewish stories
- Grow spiritually and learn from the spirituality of children
- Give parents and children space and tools for spiritual exploration and expression

Enduring Understanding

God and Jewish heritage guide and shape the way our family lives

Essential Questions

- How is my child a spiritual person and what can I learn from him/her?
- How do I live within the tensions of my values and beliefs and how do I hope to educate my children to do so?
- When do I experience something greater than myself and how do I talk about this with my children?
- How am I in conversation with the divine?

KDBB Learner Outcomes

Know

- Find God in 10 Jewish stories
- Understand that parenting is a spiritual practice
- How to get in touch with God by learning from one's children or parents

Do: Learners will.....

- Point out moments during their weeks when they experienced God in their lives
- Choose core Jewish practices to integrate into their family lives on an ongoing basis
- Engage in conversations about God, Jewish values and shared experiences with peers the group will help each other through trials, celebrate small and large moments together, listen and respond to one another

Believe/value:

- Judaism and God enrich family life
- My family and my Jewish community are my spiritual centers
- Developing the social and connected capital of the group in an authentic way is a spiritual experience

Belong

- Parents and children form a safe, comforting group to explore, play and experience wonder
- Parents will find support in peers in the midst of shared experiences and learn from one another

Acceptable evidence of Learning

- Parents will design a spiritually engaging family Shabbat experience to close the unit. The family Shabbat model will be repeated on a regular basis at the synagogue with this cohort and others whom they invite into the process.
- Families will fill a Spiritual Scrapbook with artifacts and reflections of moments when they find God during family time

Learning experiences

1. Godly Play Stories: Each session will open with a Godly Play story experience shared by parents and children. The stories utilize memorized scripts (adapted from Jerome Berryman in order to reflect Jewish language and interpretative tradition), prescribed actions and specific props. The purpose of the pre-planned story telling method is to minimize the educator's role in the story and allow everyone present to enter a zone of sacred play. The story itself becomes a means of communion with God and personal entry into Torah. The storyteller avoids eye contact with participants to model the act of play herself. Everyone sits in a circle as the story is told using props, so a natural climate of a group play is created. The stories are purposely terse and the props nondescript, in order to allow participants' imaginations to fill in the details. Adults and children are treated on the same level during this time. The facilitator plays as small a role as possible, allowing participants to add the content from their own imaginations. Each story opens with a question that encourages the participants to draw on their own experiences. It ends with three-four "wondering questions" from Jerome Berryman's Godly Play guides. The four questions are also simple and on a child's level, but allow for infinitely complex answers.

2. Children's wondering play: After the questions, children will have time to continue the wondering process through play of their own choosing. This part of the program is based on the Montessori method of open choice. All the materials provided will allow children to further reflect on the story, the wondering questions and their answers. This part of the experience is called "response"—it is the child's way to respond to the existential questions posed in the text using language and forms of expression meaningful to each individual. Some children will gravitate toward the props from the story and play with them in a free manner. What often happens is students will act out the story they experienced, adding their own interpretations. The response process becomes a form of living *midrash*—exegesis on the text—children's

responses allow them to join our tradition of adding their own commentary to fill in the gaps of our sacred stories.

Different types of art supplies will be available each week. Other options include materials from the natural world, sensory play (such as a water station, foam or sand), movement and yoga, music, nature walks, cooking, picture books, interaction with animals and more. The Godly Play guide encourages engaging children in the task of preparing a meal for the cohort. There should be appropriate types of activities to meet different types of learners and developmental stages. Each week the options will be themed around the story.

3. Parents' wondering play: Parents will continue the wondering process on an adult level as well through age appropriate "responses." The educator will bring texts and discussion questions each week to help the group reflect on a big idea from that week's story and on the role of God in their lives and homes. Learning activities will include, text study (traditional and multimedia) and discussion, journaling, yoga/meditation, guest speakers and arts & crafts. There is also room to find out the cohort's interests and passions and incorporate other activities into the learning. This part of the session will also include the sharing of spiritual scrapbooks (see lesson one) and the planning of a family Shabbat experience.

4. Closing ritual: To close each session, the parents will come back together with children and everyone will have the opportunity to share one thought aloud with the group. Parents will hear from their children and address the intergenerational group in a meaningful way. The whole group will share in havdallah, singing and food—a time to mark sacred time, transition and to form holy community.

Inclusion Issues

The success of this unit depends on its ability to meet the needs of diverse learners and make everyone feel included. The Godly Play stories are not the typical “story-time” where energetic kids (and parents) get singled out, shushed and eventually removed from the group. Rather, it is a shared experience meant to draw everyone in. As participants arrive for the session, they will be greeted at the door of the classroom by one teacher, while another waits for them to welcome them to the circle. They should feel personally included and safe, as well as get the sense that they are crossing a threshold into an elevated space, about to engage in something holy. The facilitator is cast as the vehicle of the story not a performer and those gathered are seen as participants rather than audience. During the telling, auditory learners listen to the carefully chosen words, visual learners watch the props and tactile learners can feel the materials as they are introduced. Each child should be able to get through the story despite their young ages because they each have two teachers and their own parents there to help guide their behavior. The spiritual play component is designed for children to break free and really explore. Children with short attention spans can switch stations as often as they want to. The diversity of activities offered will always include options for every learning style. The young children will be free and encouraged to move their bodies as much as they want. Adults also require diverse learning activities. While their options will not be as diverse each session, the activities will change each week to appeal to diverse interests. The adults will always have materials in front of them for visual learners and hear them read aloud for auditory learners. Extroverts will have the opportunity to express themselves aloud while more introverted participants will have the chance to journal their reflections.

The creation of a safe space and a close-knit cohort also requires facilitators to be mindful of diverse family structures and backgrounds. This must be a program where single parent

families, same sex couples, Jews by choice, older parents and racially diverse families all feel at home. Every voice will be valued and each participant invited to share their knowledge and unique experiences so that the group can learn from its diversity rather than shying away from it. Sensitivity will go into planning each session, excluding materials, activities and language too narrow for a diverse community.

Studies claim that parents of young children are often turned off or intimidated by programs containing too much Jewish content. When programs assume too high a level of Jewish knowledge, they can make participants feel inadequate. One feature of the unit must be its sensitivity without compromising content. Deep Jewish content can be discussed without much Hebrew, in terms that the average adult understands and in media familiar to them. The program must find a balance between being approachable yet engaging. Beginning each session with a Jewish text in terms that young children understand, will ease the parents' fears from the start, lowering their guards to delve into deeper discussion in the second half. Adults as well as children benefit from being handed the language and tools to discuss complex topics.

Many families in the target audience we hope to engage are intermarried. In addition to each individual perspective, we should expect to have a diversity of faith traditions, family experiences and understandings of God present in the room. Many of the parents, both Jewish and non, who attend Playgroup, could have grown up with parochial religious education experiences, in educational ideologies that seek to teach one view of God and discourage exploration. This can be a hard transition and we must be sensitive and prepared for participants who become hesitant with our novel methodologies, shocked by our language or uncomfortable with uncertainty. It can be off-putting to see the stories of the matriarchs and patriarchs that we hold as most holy played out in a sandbox! We should approach families with differing faith backgrounds with openness and view them as a great opportunity to broaden our conversation and hear diverse viewpoints. Discussion of diverse backgrounds and experiences should be

solicited and encouraged, but not singled out. Godly Play provides a unique opportunity to teach Jewish text in a universalistic way. The stories we tell are not direct presentations of the Torah text, but rather *midrashim*—interpretations, rooted in Judaism, but presented as the stories of humanity—“God’s people.” The language is easy enough for children to understand and therefore doesn’t need to be explained to people unfamiliar with Judaism and Hebrew. The Hebrew words and language we teach are meant to be absorbed easily.

Eight Lesson Outline

1. *Bereshit* (Creation)- Our Power, Our Torah

see below

2. Noah and the Ark- God

Core Concepts: God is powerful and mysterious; I am allowed to relate to God in my own way.

Essential Questions: How do we understand God's role in the things that happen in our world and our lives? Who is God to me?

Learning Activities: *God Shopping*—learn interpretations of God from Jewish thinkers and “shop” for our own God concepts

3. The Exodus- Overcoming Hard Times

Core Concepts: We are resilient people with a legacy of survival; God is here for us at difficult moments.

Essential Questions: How do I deal with obstacles and how do I communicate about them with my children? Where is God during my most desperate moments?

Learning Activities: Art

4. Chanukah- Cultivating Gratitude

Core Concepts: Recognizing our blessings increases happiness.

Essential Questions: What am I grateful for? How do I express my gratitude?

Learning Activities: meditation and mindfulness

5. Jonah- Responsibility

Core Concepts: We rely on others and others rely on us.

Essential Questions: How do I hope to improve the world and how do I communicate about this with my family?

Learning Activities: group *tikun olam* (healing of the world) project

6. The Exile and Return- Jewish Identity

see below

7. The Great Family- My legacy

see below

8. The Ten Commandments- Setting Sacred Boundaries

Core Concept: Our family is elevated by marking sacred time in community, the rules that govern our home help us to live holy lives.

Essential Questions: How will we continue to mark moments of holiness in our home? How will we continue connecting with holy community?

Learning Activities: community Shabbat experience

List of resources for planning and teaching curriculum

- A list of learning materials to support the curriculum
 - Eskenazi, Tamara Cohn. *The Torah: A Women's Commentary*. (2007) URJ Press, New York, NY.
 - Fields, Harvey J. *A Torah Commentary for Our Times*. (1995) UAHF Press, New York, NY.
 - Bennett, Roger. *Unscrolled: 54 Writers and Authors Wrestle with the Torah*. (2013) Workman Publishing Company, New York, NY.
 - Artson, Bradley. *The Bedside Torah: Visions Wisdom and Dreams*. (2001) McGraw Hill, New York, NY.
 - Berryman, Jerome. *The Complete Guide to Godly Play, Volume 2: 14 Core Presentations for Fall*. (2002) Morehouse Education Resources.
 - Berryman, Jerome. *Teaching Godly Play: How to Mentor the Spiritual Development of Children*. (2009) Morehouse Education Resources.
 - Kveller.com
 - Work of Rabbi Michael Shire, Hebrew College (Book to be released soon)
 - Feldstein, Paula. *The Tot Shabbat Handbook*. (2009) URJ Press, New York, NY
 - Senior, Jennifer. *All Joy and No Fun: the Paradox of Modern Parenthood*. (2015) Ecco Publishing
 - Rosen, Mark I. *Family Engagement: Research Review and Policy Implications*. (2013) Meeting of The Alliance, Chicago, IL, August 15, 2013.
 - Rosen, Mark I. and Wertlieb, Donald. *Inspiring Jewish Connections: Outreach to Parents with Infants and Toddlers*. (2008, Zero to Three) Zerotothree.org
 - Rosen, Mark I., et. Al. *Jewish Early Engagement in New York*. (2010) UJA Federation of New York.
 - Cohen, Treasure. *Nurturing Spiritual Growth in the EC Classroom*. (CAJE Vol. 5 2007)
 - Bossov, Nancy. *Oseh Makom: Making a Holy Place for Young Jewish Children*. (CAJE Vol. 5 2007)
 - Schein, Jeff and Deb. *The 100 Languages of Children Meet the 70 Faces of Torah*. Jewishrecon.org
 - Nye, Rebecca. *Children's Spirituality: What it is and Why it Matters*. (2009) Church House Publishing.
 - Gopnik, Allison. *The Philosophical Baby: What Children's Minds Tell us About Truth, Love and the Meaning of Life*. (2010) Picador.
 - *Parenting as a Spiritual Practice*, Rabbi Danya Rutenberg (NYT) (Book to be released in 2016)
 - Askbigquestions.org (Hillel International)

3 Full Lessons

Lesson One: *Bereshit*—My Power, My Torah

Relevant Unit Enduring Understanding

God dwells within the people in my family and the way we live

Relevant Unit Essential Questions

1. How is my child a spiritual person and what can I learn from him/her?
2. When do I experience something greater than myself and how do I communicate about this with my children?

Relevant Unit KDBB

Know: find God in a Jewish story

Know: parenting is a spiritual practice

Do: Create and reflect on family rituals to acknowledge the holy within their homes

Believe: My family and my Jewish community are my spiritual centers

Belong: Parents and children form a safe, comforting group to explore, play and experience wonder

Belong: Parents will find support in peers going through similar things and learn from one another

Lesson Core Concepts

Like God, we possess the holy power of creation.

Parenthood teaches valuable and valid spiritual lessons; parenting is a Torah of its own. .

Lesson Essential Questions

How am I a creator?

Why was I created?

How is parenting a spiritual practice?

Evidence of understanding

Children will wonder at the story of creation and use the materials to create something new.

Parents will articulate their answers to the essential questions in written and verbal form.

Learning Tasks (1 hour 45 min)

1. Story (30 min)

- Greet each family at the door by name and get each participant name-tagged. Welcome them to a circle on the floor
 - What is the best thing you ever created? (share answers)
 - Tell the story (adapted script) with Godly play props (deck of cards and felt runner)
 - Wondering questions:
 - I wonder which one of these days you like the best?
 - I wonder which day is the most important?
 - I wonder which day are you in?
 - I wonder if we can leave out any of these days and still have all the days we need?
- Are there any days you want to switch?

2. Spiritual Play (1 hour):

Children: Stay in the Godly Play classroom and choose their work, they are free to switch—play with the story materials, various art supplies, movement station, raw materials from the story

(water, dirt, feathers, grass), animal toys, creation storybooks and an option to go on a nature walk on the grounds. They then help make the refreshments for the whole group.

Parents: go to a separate room with the facilitator:

- Introductions for first class: what's in a name (15 min)
 - How did you choose your child's name?
 - What do you hope to get out of our time together?
- Godly Play Debrief (10 min)
 - What did you see and experience during Godly Play? Did you hear anything that surprised you? Did you say or feel anything that surprised you?
 - How do our children experience God? Where did they learn about God? How do we communicate about God with them? Where is God in our homes?
 - What is the purpose of Godly Play?
 - What questions does the creation story bring up for you?
- Why was I created? (25 min)
 - Read Your Torah, from God Was in this Place and I didn't Know it by Larry Kushner
 - What is your Torah?
 - There is Torah that parents know that isn't always reflecting in our tradition. The rabbis and scribes who wrote our sacred texts were often not in the trenches doing the work of raising a family. How has parenthood affected your Torah?
 - Read Parenting as a Spiritual Practice:

<http://parenting.blogs.nytimes.com/2013/09/04/parenting-as-a-spiritual-practice/?r=0>

- Do any of her experiences resonate with you, how?
 - Did any of your usual places, habits or relationships suddenly feel different once you became a parent? What about your Jewish ones?
 - How has parenthood changed you?
 - Ruttenberg writes, “holding a sleeping child felt much more like worship than reading psalms most days.” How is parenting a spiritual practice?
 - What would your snapshot of a moment of prayer through parenting be?
- Journaling (5 min): Remember the first question—what is the best thing that I ever created? Visualize that thing. Like God, we have the holy power of creation. Journal about how you use your power as a sacred creator. What are the blessings and responsibilities of this power?
 - Close (5 min): How is what we discussed and wrote about connected to the Bereshit story?
 - Pass out Spiritual Scrap Books and introduce the idea – families are invited to keep spiritual scrapbooks. They will use the pages to record moments that feel awe-inspiring, transcendent and special within their home. The entries can include collage, keepsakes, art by children and parents, handprints, photos or whatever else they can think of! At the beginning of each session, parents will have the chance to share pages from the past two weeks.

3. Marking Time (15+ min): Parents and children gather in an open area

- Havdallah, singing
- Refreshments and socializing

Lesson Seven: Exile and Return—Jewish Identity

In this lesson, parents and students begin together with a Godly Play about the destruction of the Temple in Jerusalem and the Babylonian exile, followed by the return of some Jews to the Land of Israel to rebuild the Temple. This story brings up the themes of Jewish particularism and will lead to an exploration of each family's Jewish expression, how parents conceive of their Jewish identity.

Relevant Unit Enduring Understanding

God dwells within the people in my family and the way we live

Relevant Unit Essential Questions

1. What are my beliefs and how do I hope to pass them on to my children?
2. When do I experience something greater than myself and how do I communicate about this with my children?

Relevant Unit KDBB

Know: Find God in Jewish stories

Do: Create and reflect on family rituals to acknowledge the holy within our homes

Believe: Judaism and God enrich my family life

Belong: Developing the social and connected capital of the group in an authentic way is a spiritual experience

Lesson Core Concept

I am empowered to form my own Jewish identity and to pass Jewish identity on to my children

Lesson Essential Questions

What does being Jewish mean to me?

What do I want to teach my child about Jewish heritage?

Evidence of understanding

Parents will create a Jewish identity page in their spiritual scrapbooks.

Learning Tasks (2 hours)

1. Story (30 min)

Greet each family at the door by name and welcome them to a circle on the floor

What are you willing to stand up for? (share answers)

Tell the story (adapted script) with Godly play props

Wondering questions:

- oI wonder which part of the story you like the best?

- oI wonder which part is the most important?

- oI wonder where you are in the story?

I wonder if we can leave out any part of the story and still have all the story we need?

2. Spiritual Play (1 hour)

Children: In the Godly Play classroom children will have half the time to do open play with art supplies, movement station, a sensory station of sand and water (the raw materials mentioned in the story) and pretend games with props including cloth Jewish ritual items. Students will take turns moving through a crafts station. They will be given large pieces of paper, finger paint and craft materials to make their own Temples and be encouraged to talk about the process and what they create. The children will be invited to help set up and prepare the refreshments for the whole group at havdallah.

Parents: in a separate room with a facilitator

Weekly check in (10 min)

Open forum for parents to share what is on their mind this week, parenting challenges faced

Debrief Godly Play experience (5 min)

What did you see and experience during Godly Play? Did you hear anything that surprised you?

Did you say or feel anything that surprised you?

What questions did the story bring up for you?

Set induction (10 minutes): If someone were to follow your family around for a week, how would they know that you are Jewish?

I am Jewish (30 minutes):

Introduce the project of I am Jewish, a collection of Jewish identity manifestos from a wide variety of Jews around the world, collected by Daniel Pearl's parents. The book is a memorial to their son honoring his last words, "My father is Jewish, my mother is Jewish, I am Jewish."

spread around the room are clippings of different Jewish identity manifestos spanning the different perspectives of the book: "identity", "heritage", "covenant, chosenness and faith", "humanity and ethnicity" and "tikkun olam (repairing the world) and justice", laid out among images selected to symbolize different Jewish, spiritual and human scenes.

Participants walk throughout the room and select the images and texts that speak to them and their Jewish identities. They can then glue the images into their scrap-books to create a "Jewish identity" page.

Share: everyone will share a piece of text or image that struck a chord with them in helping to define what being Jewish means.

Close (5 min): How is what we spoke and collaged about related to the story we heard about the Israelites returning from exile to build the Second Temple?

3. Marking Time (15+ min): Parents and children gather in an open area

Havdallah, singing

Refreshments and socializing

Lesson Eight: The Great Family

Children and parents will experience a Godly Play about Sarah and Abraham seeking and finding closeness with God. The story ends with them passing this legacy on to many generations all the way down to you and me. From this story, the group will wonder about their place in the chain of God's people and about the legacy they leave behind. Parents conclude the unit by studying and writing ethical wills to their children. We will also look at our group legacy by beginning the conversation about group experiences that can continue after the unit ends, as a source of connection and transcendence for us and other families with young children in the community.

Relevant Unit Enduring Understanding

God dwells within the people in my family and the way we live

Relevant Unit Essential Questions

What are my beliefs and how do I hope to pass them on to my children?

What experiences could we create to nurture our spirituality?

Relevant Unit KDBB

Know: Parenting is a spiritual practice

Do: Create and reflect on family rituals, acknowledging holy within their homes

Believe: My family and my Jewish community are my spiritual centers

Belong: Developing the social and connected capital of the group in an authentic way

Lesson Core Concept

My family and community are links in a chain of legacy.

Lesson Essential Questions

What do I want my legacy to be?

Evidence of understanding

Parents will begin to formulate ethical wills to their children.

Children will artistically depict where their idea of the legacy they have inherited.

Learning Tasks (1.5 hours)

1. Story (30 min)

Greet each family at the door by name and welcome them to a circle on the floor

Opening question: I wonder if there was a time when something happened to you that you didn't think was possible. Something that really surprised you. Something that if someone told you beforehand it was going to happen, you would have laughed because you would not have believed it. (share answers)

Tell the story (adapted script) with Godly play props

Wondering questions:

I wonder which part of the story you like the best?

I wonder which part is the most important?

I wonder, where are you in the story?

2. Spiritual Play (1 hour)

Children: In the Godly Play classroom, children will have open playtime in stations. They can move between an art station, movement station, a sensory station of sand and water (the raw materials mentioned in the story), make believe with props and a big fort building station.

Students will take turns rotating through a crafts station where the prompt will be to depict where they come from. They will have the option to choose from many raw materials and craft supplies to create their work. The children will be invited to help set up and prepare the refreshments for the whole group at havdallah.

Parents: in a separate room with facilitator.

Weekly check in (10 min)

Open forum for parents to share what is on their mind this week, parenting challenges faced

Set induction (10 min):

Before class I will have emailed them Becoming my Mom By Mary Lou Quinal (NY Times, 2012). Pass the article around to refresh memory.

Do you have moments when you think, “I am becoming my mother/father?” What non-physical things did your parents give you? How did these things get transmitted to you?

Intro to ethical wills (20 min)

There is a little known Jewish tradition called “ethical wills,” in which parents leave children a written, spiritual and moral legacy. In addition to leaving behind a document outlining which physical possessions were to be passed on to which person, the deceased also left instructions and wisdom regarding the values he or she would like to pass on.

The end of Genesis is often cited as the first example of an ethical will. The patriarch Jacob gathers his twelve sons around him on his death bed and addresses and advises each man individually according to his own unique personality and needs.

We have examples of Jewish ethical wills throughout the ages—they are included in the Talmud and in medieval writings. Today we will be looking at some more modern examples of Jewish parents writing ethical wills to their children.

Study excerpts from different ethical wills with two-family chevruta group

What are common themes?

How would you feel reading this from your own parent?

How can an ethical will be beneficial and meaningful for a child to read and for a parent to write? How can it be harmful?

Share some answers with group.

Writing our own ethical wills (10 min)

As we have seen, ethical wills need not be one's last words from the deathbed. Just as we don't wait until we have a reason to believe we are nearing the end of our lives to make a financial will, we needn't wait until we are past our prime to carve out some ethical and moral lessons we hope to pass on to our children. The process of outlining an ethical will can be as much for our own benefit as for our children's. Just as praying for something can help define what we want and then inspire us to make it a reality, writing down what we want to pass on to our children helps us define our values for ourselves and then allows us to make them pillars of our homes.

In our spiritual scrapbooks, families can take time to sit together and begin to outline what their ethical wills to their own children would be. Feel free to brainstorm, list or write out your thoughts.

Group Legacy (10 min)

Throughout the day, we have been talking about legacy—what we inherited from past generations and what we hope to instill in the next. It is my hope that this group we have created here together will also have a legacy that lives beyond this afternoon in each of your family lives and beyond this circle through each of you.

Go around and share one thing we are taking away from our unit.

Note on Next Steps

Facilitators can use this opportunity to begin a discussion about next steps for the community of families emerging from this unit. You might identify some leaders to facilitate a discussion about what the next steps should be.

Repeat the Shabbat experience designed by the cohort on a regular basis

Have an outreach event hosted by the current participating families

Discuss who in their own extended networks would benefit from this chavura and how we will invite their participation

How can we leverage social media

What are some unmet needs and how will we meet them?

What do they want moving forward?

How can we support their families as they grow?

Annotated Bibliography

1. Berryman, Jerome W. (2009) *Teaching Godly Play: Mentoring the Spiritual Development of Children*. Morehouse Education Resources.

Jerome Berryman is the minister who invented the Godly Play methodology and created the corresponding curriculum. He argues that play is a universal instinct, that it cannot be faked, and that while some consider it “not real,” he thinks it is more real than ordinary experience. “It helps us work out new solutions to old problems and become re-created—which is very real.” (13) In seminary, he was put off to find that the education of children was largely left out of his training. What little there was seemed based on the ideology that children are empty vessels to be filled, that clergy must get the doctrine correct and then convince children to believe it. Berryman disagrees and thinks that children already know God and what they need is an “appropriate language to construct their own personal meaning about that reality.” He finds that play is the best way to empower children to try out their innate spirituality to practice expressing the divine they experience. Children experience an “imminent self awareness.” We cannot force them to connect to a religion or a God unless it is acknowledged by their inner authority.

Berryman cites the work of Dutch historian Huizinga, who found that in the human species, culture is a form of play, especially for children. If play is essential to the culture, then in order for the community of children to be authentic, it must be a playing culture. He imagines God as being at play in the community of children and cites several Jewish sources to support the centrality of play to religion. He suggests that Shabbat—built into God’s creation in its perfection—is a form of play because it leads to rest and renewal. Like Shabbat he sees play as a “dynamic and redemptive time.” (19) Berryman’s goal for children who move through his curriculum is to be exposed to traditional Christian language, be rooted in tradition and emerge open to their religious futures. The educational methodology is based on the Montessori method

in that they are free to choose their own work within a child-centered environment and their progress is not measured or observable.

2. Nye, Rebecca. (2009) *Children's Spirituality: What it is and Why it Matters*. Church House Publishing.

Rebecca Nye also writes from a Christian context, exploring the spiritual experience of children. She argues that children are primed and engaged in spiritual life, but well-meaning religious educators squelch their experience of God by trying to impose adult concepts and methods upon them. She calls this the “infotainment approach” and finds it destructive. It leads to the misconception that faith is about having efficiently categorized religious knowledge and leads adults to judge a religious institution by how good a show it puts on. Nye argues that childhood spirituality starts with God and they do not need adults to initiate it. Much of childhood has the potential to be spiritually arousing—children have a natural capacity for awe, they are comfortable with mystery and experience it as a daily friend and they are used to the ineffable. For these reasons, adults can stand to learn from the spirituality of children. Adult spirituality builds upon childhood spirituality, many adults had formative spiritual experiences in childhood and can reconnect to God by seeing the divine through their own childhood eyes or the eyes of children.

3. Senior, Jennifer. *All Joy and No Fun: the Paradox of Modern Parenthood*. (2015) Ecco Publishing

In Jennifer Senior’s book she responds to many studies that find a negative correlation between happiness and parenthood by conducting social research about the needs and inner lives of parents by attending parent support groups and observing and interviewing parents in their

homes. She concludes that parenting brings about “joy”—a concept close to divinity, but on a daily basis is draining and gets in the way of ordinary satisfaction. Senior concentrates on a concept called “flow;” the neuro-biological state that results from really being “in the zone” in any given activity. Adults derive a lot of satisfaction when they achieve flow in work, hobbies and relationships, but children are not capable of this state and their natural dispositions and needs constantly preclude flow being achieved by those around them—namely their parents. Among her findings, Senior identified the profound emotional effect of parental support groups on the parents and how much they came to rely on the advice, comradery and emotional support of their groups. The book concludes with the concept of “joy” in parenting. Senior describes the statement of a grandmother named Marilyn who attends the support group because she is raising her grandkids. She is the one who came up with the idea of distinguishing between happiness and joy. “Happiness is more superficial...having my kids brought me this deep sense that I’ve done something worthwhile in my life’ and then she started to cry. ‘Because when all is said and done, and I ask, *What was my life about?*—Now I know.” Senior concludes that the numbers do not tell the whole story, and children bring about something more: purpose. She points out that our society pursues this thing called “happiness” that is superficial, and parenting makes people reassess their definition of happiness, instead of feeling enjoyment all the time, they feel overall fulfillment in the long run and are supplied with many moments of sheer joy.

Lesson Appendices: Story Scripts

Story Script- Lesson One

Supplies: set of creation cards (Godly Play Foundation), felt runner

Did you know that there are some creations that are so huge that we don't notice them everyday. We are so used to them, that we don't always stop to think about how they were created. They are so important to us that we can't imagine life without them. To understand these creations, let's go back to the beginning.

Bereshit bara Elohim et haShamayim v'et haAretz. In the beginning, God created the sky and the earth. But, in the beginning there really wasn't much there. (slowly roll out the black, felt runner from my right to left, so that the audience will "read" the days of creation from left to right)

In the beginning there wasn't much, but darkness. (sweep hand from right to left across runner)

Then, on the first day, God said "*vayehi or*" let there be light, and there was light. Now, I don't mean just the light in a light bulb or just the light in your car lights at night. Not just this light or that light, but God created all the light that is light. The light that all light comes from. (day and night tile)

Then God said, "it is good." There was evening and there was morning, the first day. (when speaking, "it is good," place hand on card as if blessing it)

On the second day, God gave us water. Now I don't mean just the water in a water glass or the water in a bathtub or shower. I don't even mean just the water in a river or a lake. I don't even mean just the water in the ocean, or the water than comes down from the sky in rain. I mean all of the water that is water. This is the water that all the rest of the water comes from.

God divided between the waters above and the waters below.

When God saw the water, God said *tov*—it is good. And that was the end of the second day.

On the third day, God gave us the gift of the dry land. God divided the water the land and gave us the gift of green and growing things.

When God saw the dry land and the green and growing things, God said, “tov” it is good. And that was the end of the third day.

On the fourth day God gave us the gift of the day and the night. God gave us a way to distinguish between day and night. Here is the great light, the *or* that rules the day, the sun, and here are the lights of the night, the stars and moon.

When God saw the day and the night, our way to keep time, God said, *tov*, it is good. And that was the end of the fourth day.

On the fifth day God gave us the gift of all the creatures that fly in the air. Not just the birds but all of the creatures that fly. And all of the creatures that swim in the water. All of them.

When God saw all of the creatures that fly and all of the creatures that swim, God said *tov*, it is good. And that was the end of the fifth day.

On the sixth day, God gave us the gift of all the creatures that walk upon the earth: the creatures that walk with two legs, like you and me, and all the creatures that walk with many legs.

When God saw the creatures that walk with two legs and the creatures that walk with many legs and all the gifts of the other days, God said, *tov meod*, it is very good. And that was the end of the sixth day.

On the seventh day, God rested and gave us the gift of a day to rest and to remember all the great gifts of all the other days.

There is nothing here (blank card) because people go to different places to remember the great gifts. You can put something there to show your favorite place to remember. It might be your backyard by a tree, in a synagogue or in your home. It might be in the mountains or by the ocean or a lake. I don't know where your place is. Only you know.

Story Script—Lesson Six: The Exile and Return

Supplies: desert box, wooden people, chain, blue yarn, blocks

This is the desert. The desert is a dangerous place. There is no food or water there. People can die in the desert. When the wind blows, the shape of the desert changes. You can lose your way. The sun is so hot that people wear many clothes to keep the sun from burning their skin. When the wind blows, the sand stings your face and hands. People need protection from the blowing sand. At night, it is cold, and you need many clothes to keep warm.

The desert is a dangerous place. People do not go there unless they have to.

This is Jerusalem, the capital of our people. Here is the *kotel*, a very old wall. Inside the wall is the Temple built for God. Here are the people of God. They knew that God was in the temple, but they also thought that it was the only place where you could pray to God. People thought that they were safe there but they were not.

The Assyrians came and attacked Jerusalem. It was a terrible time. People fought and some starved. Finally, the Assyrians went away.

Then the Babylonians came and they did not go away. Their king wanted Jerusalem for himself. They broke down the walls and burned the Temple built for God.

They took many people away. Only a few were left in the land.

The soldiers marched God's people away from Jerusalem. They looked back at the smoke of the burning city and wondered if they would ever see it again. As they walked through the desert, they had to get up when the soldiers said. They had to eat what the soldiers said. They had to go where the soldiers said. They had to go to bed when the soldiers said. They grew weary and some died. It took a long time.

They were in exile. They could not go home.

They sat down by the river and sang sad, sad, songs. They dreamed of Jerusalem and the Temple, but they could not go back.

They even faced toward Jerusalem when they said their prayers.

Slowly, God's people began to understand that God was in this place too. When they gathered to remember and tell their stories, God was there. When they prayed, God was there.

One day, a new king became in charge. He allowed God's people to go back to Jerusalem. Some went with Ezra to rebuild their Temple. Then more came with Nehemia. They rebuilt the walls around the city.

Then the people of God were no longer in exile. They could go home again. Do you know what happened? Not all of them went home.

Now they knew that God was in the strange and foreign land. Some of them stayed, because God was there too.

Story Script Lesson Seven: The Great Family

Supplies: Two blue pieces of yarn, wooden figures, rocks for 2 alters, sand, 2 blocks

- This is the desert. So many wonderful and important things happened to our people in the dessert. We can't fit the whole desert in our classroom, so here is just a little piece of the desert. **(open up desert and spread out)**
- The desert is a dangerous place. It is always moving, so it is hard to know where you are. There is little water, so you get thirsty and you can die if no water is found. Almost nothing grows in the desert, so there is almost nothing to eat. In the daytime it is hot and the sun scorches your skin. In the night it is cold. When the wind blows, the sand stings when it hits you. People wear many clothes to protect them from the sun and blowing sand. The desert is a dangerous place. People do not go into the desert unless they really have to. **(move the sand around)**
- On the edges of the desert people lived in small villages and then cities, gathered along rivers. Haran was one of these cities. **(lay out two blue strings and place a block next to them)**
- The people of Haran believed that there were many gods. There was a God for every tree, every rock, every flower. There was a God of the sky, the clouds, the water and the land. The world was alive with gods. **(touch the block of wood)**

- But there was one family that believed that all of God was in every place. They did not yet know that, but that is what they thought. Avram and Sarai were part of that family.
(**stand 2 figures next to block**)
- Sometimes Avram would go out to the edge of the desert and look out across the sand and into the sky. (**move Avram**) Then God came so close to Avram, and Avram came so close to God, that he knew what God wanted him to do. (**hand cup**) God said *lech l'cha*—go out. God wanted Avram and Sarai to move to a new place. They wondered what the new place would be like, and if God would be there.
- Avram and Sarai went out into the desert. They left the river behind and there was no water to drink. (**walk Avram and Sarai away from river**)
- They finally came to a place called Schem. Avram climbed up a hill and prayed to God (**Move Avram**) and God was there, (**hand cup**) so Avram built an alter to mark the place. (**use rocks for alter**) Then they went on. (**walk Avram and Sarai**)
- Next, they came to a place called Beit El. Avram prayed again (**Move Avram** away) and God was there too (**cup hand**), so he built another alter to mark this place. (use rocks for **alter**) God was not just here or there (**point to two alters**), All of God was everywhere. (**spread hands out**)
- Avram and Sarai went on (**walk them**) and made their home near Hevron, at the Oaks of Mamre. (**stop them, place wooden block**)
- One night, God brought Avram outside. (**move him**) He looked up into the sky. God came so close to Avram and Avram came so close to God, that Avram knew what God was saying. (**hand cup**) “You will become the father of a great family, and Sarai will be the mother. The members of the great family will be as many as there are stars in the sky and grains of sand in the desert. (**sprinkle sand**)
- Avram laughed. He and Sarai were very old. God’s promise sounded impossible. But as a sign of the promise, God changed their names—Avram was to be Avraham and Sarai was to be Sarah.
- When Sarah heard the news, she laughed too. (**cup hands over Sarah**) They were too old. But you know what happened? Avraham and Sarah had a son! (**bring new figure**) Avraham and Sarah laughed and laughed with joy, and they named their son Yitzhak, which means laughter.

- When Yitzhak was grown, old Sarah was very old and full of years and she died. **(lift and reverently turn Sarah over in palm)** Avraham buried her in a cave by the trees. **(put her behind me)**
- Avraham was lonely. He missed Sarah very much, but he had one more thing he had to do. He sent his most trusted helper back to Haran, the land of his people to find a wife for Yitzhak. **(trace the route back through all the stops with finger)**
- When Avraham's helper stopped by a well, he met Rivka. **(put Rivka near 1st block)** She offered him some water to drink. Rivka was as brave as she was kind. When she heard about Avraham and Sarah and Yitzhak she decided she wanted to be part of the Great Family.
- So they went out, into the desert, past Schem, past Beit El, toward Hevron. **(walk the two figures past the blocks and alters)**
- Yitzhak saw them coming and he went out to meet Rivka, **(slowly move Isaac toward Rivka until they meet)** and she became his wife. **(they then go back to join Avraham together)**
- Old Avraham was now very old and full of years. **(raise Avraham and turn over in palm)** He died and Yitzhak buried him with Sarah in a cave by the trees. **(put him behind me)**
- Then, Yitzhak and Rivkah had children, and their children had children, and those children had children. This went on for thousands and thousands of years until your grandmothers and grandfathers had children. Then your mothers and fathers had children. **(look at them)**
- Now you **(gesture with hand)** are part of that great family which has become as many as the stars in the sky and the grains of sand in the desert. **(scoop up a handful of sand and let it slowly trickle out)**