

Washington Hebrew Congregation's Religious School

The Torah often refers to the *Ohel Moed*, the Tent of Meeting in which Moses offered wisdom and God's teachings to the Israelite people. The Tent of Meeting was open to all who wanted to enter; today, the *Ohel Moed* can become our synagogues that are open to all who wish to enter and pray, gather and learn with the community.

Our religious school offers our children their first formal learning opportunities to share in the glorious experience of finding one's place within the *Ohel Moed*. It is through each class and program that a child's mind is deepened with a love for Judaism that will grow as they mature into adulthood.

As in years past, the religious school jumped into programming immediately following the High Holy Days with the celebration of Sukkot. Our 4th graders and their parents went apple picking at a nearby farm to celebrate the harvest festival. Engaging in the traditional harvest as well as the mitzvah of *tikkun olam* (repairing the world), the grade donated 1367 pounds of food to the Manna Food Center. The following week our Religious School linked the concept of a Sukkah (a temporary shelter) to the issue of homelessness as we joined together for the largest-ever game of Carrie-Simon-Says and a mini-Walk-a-thon. With the help of Nell Shapiro and Betsey Bindeman, our school raised awareness and money for the Carrie Simon House. As a direct result of this program, the Carrie Simon House has several new volunteers (including some of our Religious School teachers).

This year, the 4th and 5th grades will engage in two separate informal and experiential programs. The 4th graders participated in a grade-wide retreat day at JBSC where they studied the concept of justice, as it relates to their curriculum on the prophets. The 5th graders will have a Shabbaton (sleepover) at Temple where they will continue to study about the power of names as it relates to their curriculum on life-cycles.

Recognizing the opportunities to learn from our neighborhood, our 6th graders and their parents participated in the second annual walking tour of "Historic, Jewish Washington, DC." This tour provided students and parents with a unique opportunity to learn about Jewish history in our historic hometown. This program is beloved by students and parents alike and may therefore become a staple in the 6th grade curriculum.

Our religious school strives to include parents in learning and worship. This year we will hold four religious school Shabbat services and dinners, each one hosted by a particular grade (2-5). The hosts will serve as Shabbat greeters and ushers, lead the service and stay for a Shabbat dinner. Our K-2 monthly service now includes parents, so that our younger children have the opportunity to worship with their parents and grandparents every month in school. All of these services are led by clergy with Audrey Katz, our fantastic religious school music director.

It is our aim to maintain and build on our successful programs and improve wherever possible. In that spirit, we have changed the name and style of our Family Education programs. Formerly known as "Parent Learning Days," our new Family Education

programs are now called “Family Religious School.” Over the course of the school year most grades have one Family Religious School day, incorporating adult learning with a member of our clergy and inter-generational opportunities for learning (parent and child together). These programs are extensions of each grade’s curricular program and always include an element of community building for the adult participants.

Thus far we have held a Kindergarten and 1st Grade Family Religious School program where we focused on how to talk to our young children about God and a 2nd grade Family Religious School program about Hanukkah. We are always eager to hear constructive feedback from our participants as we strive to meet the diverse needs of our families.

We have continued with our longstanding tradition of grade-wide “Centers Days” in which an entire grade joins together to reinforce and celebrate what has been learned. With the introduction of Hebrew study in 3rd grade this year, our 3rd graders spent their Centers Day by practicing writing Hebrew letters in shaving cream, creating art, and learning prayers. The Kindergarten-2nd graders will learn and recall the story of Hanukkah through dance, song, and art soon.

The Seventh grade Hebrew program was drastically changed two years ago to incorporate individual learning within a classroom environment. Under the direction of a master teacher, the Seventh graders learn at their own pace, continuing their study of prayer and the Hebrew language while also engaging in specific enrichment programs led by our clergy on topics like “Preparing and Delivering a Dvar Torah,” “The Structure of the Worship Service” and others. Our program concludes with a moving commencement ceremony where parents join their students as congratulate them on many years of learning Hebrew, even though their experiential Judaic Studies program on Sunday mornings continues.

Post-Bnai Mitzvah programming is a strong focus of our school. Our talented Director of Informal Education, Ira Miller, coordinates this program for our 8th and 9th graders. Called “*Chavaya*” which means “experience,” our students perform community service, study the Holocaust through the perspective of a teen in the 21st century and also explore issues related to Jewish ethics and values. The retreat program also takes place during these two years, culminating in our Bresler Sexuality Retreat, led by Dr. and Mrs. Charles and Amy Miron.

Our 10th grade confirmation class continues to explore deeper and more substantive topics of study that relate to teens today. All the rabbis and Cantor Bortnick teach courses and various speakers are also brought into the program for further learning. The year culminates in the meaningful and spiritual Confirmation service, held on a Sunday morning in May at Temple. The class is forever a part of WHC’s history as their photo hangs along the walls of our Temple next to those of years past.

For our successes, we are indebted to our team of in-house experts: our artists Marilyn Gidez and Dina Korman help expand the imaginations of our students with their endless creativity! Chris Ney keeps our staff and students plugged in with her phenomenal

computer labs and photography and Rocky Korr reminds us be light on our feet as he dances our young students through the halls of our schools, connecting them Israel. Audrey Katz, our talented religious school music director, keeps our students engaged through singing Jewish music and prayers. Our school is led by Stephanie Tankel, Assistant Principal in charge of Temple and Suzanne Klein Davidson, Assistant Principal in charge of JBSC. Dan Caplan coordinates our 7th grade Judaic Studies program and Ira Miller coordinates our Upper School (8th/9th) program. The religious school is currently under the direction of Rabbi Joui Hessel who serves as Acting Religious School Director.

In the midst of all this programming our Religious School teachers participate in a day of professional development offered through the Partnership for Jewish Life and Learning (PJLL) as well as many other opportunities for further growth. We know our teachers take their work seriously and are thrilled to assist them in their continual development as educators and Jews.