

## Bringing Our Kids Home: The Importance of Reform Jewish Education

Imagine walking into a Jewish space—a synagogue, a shiva minyan, a High Holiday service—and feeling out of place. Despite going to Sunday school and maybe Jewish summer camp, neither the language nor the vocabulary seems familiar to you. Maybe it's Orthodox—or maybe even Reform. But whatever it is, all you know is that you don't feel comfortable enough to participate in whatever is going on.

I'm guessing many of us feel this way, even if we're reluctant to admit it out loud. But if you do feel this way, you're not alone. I have heard this fear expressed by friends who, like many of us, grew up in the Reform Movement. Their anxieties follow a similar pattern: They found themselves in a situation where they felt uninformed about Judaism or Jewish topics, and this made them feel like maybe they were not “Jewish enough.”

If some of us feel like this as adults, I'm guessing it has something to do with our experiences with Jewish education as children. But whether we forgot what we learned back then or never learned it at all, we can all agree that we want our children and grandchildren to feel more positively about their Jewish education by the time they become adults.

One of my favorite things about Reform Judaism is that our approach to religion is based on choice through knowledge or informed choice. I love how Reform Judaism emphasizes the importance of learning about the meaning of actions and prayers so that we can make knowledgeable decisions about our Judaism. Allowing someone to discover how they relate to Judaism themselves gives them authority over their own practice. So, as a rabbi and a Jewish educator who believes that Reform Judaism can add richness and meaning to a person's life if they're willing to embrace it, the question I'm most interested in is: How can we give our children an education that will help them make confident, empowered and informed Jewish decisions throughout their life?

Our movement first adopted the notion of choice through knowledge as a core Reform principle back in 1976. Reflecting on how much Reform Judaism had changed and grown since its founding in the late 19th century, the leaders of our movement declared that “within each area of Jewish observance Reform Jews are called upon...to exercise their individual autonomy, choosing and creating on the basis of commitment and knowledge.”<sup>1</sup>

At the time, Rabbi Eugene Borowitz, Reform Judaism's leading theologian, explained that, in contrast to Orthodox Jews who look to outside authorities to tell them how to practice, most modern Reform Jews “feel *they themselves* should make the decision as to what they ought to do as Jews—and that *this* is the right way to be Jewish today.”<sup>2</sup>

I believe that Rabbi Borowitz and the others advocating for choice through knowledge as a core religious principle had it right but, sadly, I think the Reform Movement as a whole is coming up short when it comes to the “knowledge” part. Reform Jews look to programs like religious school and camp to educate our youth so they will have the knowledge to decide for themselves what is meaningful to them and what is not. But how many children and adults in our community walk into temple or some other Jewish setting and don't know the language and vocabulary being used by other Jews performing *Jewish* actions at *Jewish* times in a tradition established *by Jews*? The answer is: far too many. And it's not *their* fault; it's *ours*—because we haven't done a good enough job teaching them what they need to make *truly* informed choices.

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.ccarnet.org/rabbinic-voice/platforms/article-reform-judaism-centenary-perspective/>

<sup>2</sup> Eugene Borowitz, *Reform Judaism Today: Book One: Reform in the Process of Change* (New York: Behrman House Inc, 1983), 39.

The secular educator E.D. Hirsch, who developed the idea of a “core literacy” for American elementary school students, believes there is a shared background knowledge that every student needs to have to succeed in school and society. He developed a grade-level curriculum for American elementary school students to introduce them to the cultural norms, vocabulary and ideas that people need in order to function well in American society. Hirsch’s curriculum is a good model for what I would like to see in the Reform Movement. Known as “knowledge-based schooling,” this model focuses on teaching and learning broadly shared information which “builds strong foundations for later learning and opens doors to effective participation and mutual understanding in the wider society.”<sup>3</sup>

We need a Core Knowledge Initiative in the Reform Movement. I believe a core-knowledge curriculum for Reform Judaism will create lifelong Jewish learners who will feel comfortable and confident participating in Judaism throughout their lives. I think this core knowledge should include the values, traditions and customs of Judaism, as well as the skills to learn more about topics one’s curious about.

We have all heard the popular phrase, “give a person a fish, they will eat for a day; teach a person to fish, they will eat for a lifetime.” The great Jewish philosopher Maimonides says that the highest level of *tzedakah* is to give in a way that enables the receiver to become self-sufficient.<sup>4</sup> To me, giving Reform Jews the ability to make knowledge-based choices is similar. If we just give them specific information for a particular situation and tell people what to do, they will be able to make the one decision that is needed at that very moment; but if we teach them what it means to be constantly learning and how to gain more knowledge, they can make decisions in the future when they are faced with new experiences. Judaism teaches us how to mourn, how to celebrate, how to help others. Giving people the knowledge to do these things on their own—and to know how to find out if they don’t yet know—will create self-reliant Jews who can use their Jewish knowledge and skills to bring Judaism into their everyday lives.

We will also give people the ability to find out how they connect to Judaism and why Judaism is important to them. Choice through knowledge allows you to find the Judaism that feels authentic to you. If you don’t develop a broad-based knowledge of what’s out there and experiment with different ways of practicing, how can you decide what aspects of Judaism you relate to and what is meaningful to you?

Judaism places high importance on values such as *chesed* (kindness), *tikkun olam* (repairing the world), *kehillah* (community) and gender egalitarianism. I’d like to explain why I think these values should be part of every Reform Jew’s core knowledge.

From a young age, people are taught to be kind to others, to care for those around them. Our matriarch Rebecca embodies the value of kindness when she gets water for the servant of Abraham and his camels after noticing that they were tired and thirsty. Rebecca did not want anything in return; she saw someone who needed help, and she went to help. It is easy to be nice to someone when you want something in return; it is harder to be kind to someone when you know you will get nothing back.

*Tikkun olam*, repairing the world, is at the center of Reform Judaism. This includes protecting the earth’s biodiversity and natural resources, working to ensure the rights of every human being and continuing to pursue peace throughout the world. Our movement states that “these acts bring us closer to fulfilling the...call to translate the words of Torah into the works of

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<sup>3</sup> <https://www.coreknowledge.org/our-approach/knowledge-based-schools/>

<sup>4</sup> *Mishneh Torah*, Laws of Gifts to the Poor 10:7

our hands.”<sup>5</sup> I feel it’s so important for our children to learn they are part of a world that is so much bigger than they are. I believe it’s the temple’s job to teach them to feel concern and empathy for people beyond their immediate circle—and to do something about it. That’s why social justice projects should be at the center of our programming, helping to create a better world for the next generation.

And, finally, the value of *kehillah*, community: Judaism is not a religion that we can practice individually. There are rules and laws about being in a community for prayer, for mourning, for learning. Gathering together is a hallmark of Judaism. I believe in the power of community. I want you to feel at home in our community here. I especially want our children to feel at home at the temple, and I want them to know that the Jewish community is there for them in times of joy, times of sorrow and every time in between. Judaism teaches the basic lesson that a community of people who know you and care about you is stronger than the sum of its parts. We are not simply a collection of individuals; we are a family. I want our kids to feel that *now*, and I want them to feel it throughout their lives.

Gender egalitarianism is another core Reform value. Reform Judaism places high importance on equality and equity. As I said in my first sermon, I want young girls to know that they can study Judaism the exact same way as their male counterparts. I want them to learn that they can take their future and their Judaism into their own hands like the daughters of Zelophehad did and stand up to those who are telling them otherwise.

I want to ensure that every single child has access to Jewish education: education that will teach them what it means to be Jewish and how to bring that Judaism into their everyday lives; education that will not discriminate because of gender, race or any other status; education that is inclusive, empowering and inspiring for all our children. It is up to us for the future of Judaism to ensure that every student succeeds. I am determined to give our students opportunities to learn that Judaism values them for who they are, that they can connect to Judaism in many different ways and that the Jewish community is a safe place for them to explore, grow and be their authentic selves.

To ensure these Reform Jewish values are at the center of our kids’ education, I am excited to announce that we are planning to bring our children home, back to Temple Beth-El. You may know that for the last few years, we have been part of a joint religious school with our friends down the street at Temple Israel. This partnership has been great for our congregation in many ways, especially as we navigated the unique challenges of the pandemic. We are deeply grateful to Temple Israel for welcoming us warmly into their building and teaching our children. But now the time has come to rebuild our youth-education program here at TBE—and to refocus on the core values that define us as a Reform Jewish community.

This transition will happen in two phases. We’re starting with our teens. Next month, we are launching Beth-El Temple Youth (or BETY, for short). My goals are for our teens to feel at home in our beautiful temple, build relationships with our clergy, make friendships with each other and do community social action projects that bring Reform Jewish values to life.

I need your help to make our teen program a success. If you are a parent or grandparent of a teen, please encourage them to participate. Teens: I want to get to know each one of you, and work with you to create something that excites you—and you want to be a part of.

Phase Two of our transition is to bring our kindergartners through seventh graders home for the 2024–25 school year, beginning next fall.

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<sup>5</sup> <https://www.ccarnet.org/rabbinic-voice/platforms/article-statement-principles-reform-judaism/>

It is a major undertaking to design a youth-education program from scratch, and the opportunity to do it is one of the things that made me want to come to TBE. I am so excited to tell you that we already have some incredible people in place to lead this important work. Jennifer Still-Schiff from our board of trustees and Joanna Stolove, a religious school parent who is one of TBE's emerging young leaders, will be cochairing a working group to research, imagine and create an amazing new program that will meet the needs of our students and our families.

Beginning after the High Holidays and throughout the fall, our working group will hold roundtable discussions, one-on-one conversations and town-hall meetings to ask for your input on what our new education program should look like. Your ideas and aspirations are critical to our process, and we want you to be involved every step of the way. Stay tuned for more information about how you can participate.

Next fall, we will launch our new program on *our* campus. I expect that it will continue to evolve throughout the first few years as we learn what works for our students and our community, but one thing will remain constant: Youth education at TBE will always be based on the values that are core to who we are as Reform Jews.

I am excited to go through this process with you, brainstorming and creating a new education program *here at Temple Beth-El* that is right for us.

Choice through knowledge and our core Reform Jewish values are vehicles to connect to Judaism. By placing them at the center of our youth education program, we can create lifelong learners and students who feel safe, confident and fully at home in their Judaism.