

## Introducing: The Kehillah Project—3/29/24

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Back in 2020, I taught five five-year-old boys who had never been in school before—by Zoom, of course—and it was an experience. We did art projects, built with different materials and sang many, many movement songs.

One day, we were learning about the *Ner Tamid*, the eternal light, in the sanctuary, and I wasn't sure if the boys were fully paying attention. Zoom school was hard enough for me as an adult; I could only imagine how difficult it was for a kindergartner.

Months later, while scrolling through different pictures on a PowerPoint—out of the blue, pointing to his screen—one of my students yelled at the top of his lungs, “That’s a Ner Tamid!”

These are the moments that I live for as an educator. They’re what I call light-bulb moments—moments when my students realize that they know something, or that they want to continue learning. I am looking forward to many more of these moments in the coming years here at TBE.

In my sermon on Erev Rosh Hashanah, I announced that our clergy and lay leaders felt the time had come to bring our children back to their temple, build relationships with their clergy, strengthen friendships with their TBE peers and learn to bring the beauty of our Reform traditions and values to life.

Now, I am excited to report that we are one step closer to that goal. Our amazing religious school working group, comprised of Jenn Still-Schiff, Joanna Stolove, Kasi Bowen, Ethan Brown and Michael Freeman, has been working tirelessly to envision and create this new program.

In that Erev Rosh Hashanah sermon, I discussed four values that are at the core of our Reform Judaism: *kehillah* (community), *tikkun olam* (repairing the world), *chesed* (kindness) and gender egalitarianism. These values and more are at the core of our new program, The Kehillah Project.

### Why The Kehillah Project?

We learned a lot from surveying and talking to our TBE families, and three things stood out to us: One, our people are searching for community. Two, families want innovative and exciting programming; and three, they believe our core Reform Jewish values, such as inclusivity and gender equality, are important.

That’s why we decided to call the new program The Kehillah Project. This is not your everyday traditional religious school classroom model, so we are not calling it a school. We are focused on building community, *kehillah*, and thinking out of the box to teach our students in a way that is different from the traditional model.

I want to share with you all the things that drove the values of The Kehillah Project mission.

- Community: Children engage with each other across grade levels and develop connections with our congregation through intergenerational participation.
- Inclusivity: Our children recognize that Jewish families are diverse, accepting and welcoming, that this is a place of belonging.
- *Tikkun olam*: Our children are *mensches in progress* and want to repair the world.
- Curiosity, creativity and compassion: Our children want to be at The Kehillah Project because we engage with their interests and meet them where they are.
- Personalized participation in Jewish traditions: Our children bring learning home and families are an intrinsic part of the community.
- Informed choice: Our children are committed Reform Jews, learning to make knowledgeable choices.
- Israel: We develop a deep love for our people and our homeland.

So, what does this all mean? What makes The Kehillah Project different from other programs?

First, we will focus on community throughout our program day. On Sunday mornings, instead of just dropping off a child, we are inviting families—as well as you, members of the TBE community—to join us in song and prayer for the first 30 minutes.

The program will include interactive components, learning and student-led prayers. One week, we might focus on one prayer; and the next week, another—learning and understanding prayer together.

People are likely wondering how we will run this program with fewer students. However, I believe it is a way to focus on building a community.

For me, the best part of my summer camp experience was that we were small enough that we could eat together, pray together and learn together. Campers were able to meet and interact with children from every age group. At larger camps, attendees might only see kids in their age group for the entire month they attended camp. So fewer students can actually be an advantage.

Second, we are creating an inclusive and interfaith family environment. We will be a welcoming and safe space for everyone, regardless of their background.

As I said in my Erev Rosh Hashanah sermon, “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.”

In this program, everyone will have the same opportunities to learn and get the support they need.

Third, we are creating innovative programming that is thoughtfully designed to engage and enrich our children’s Jewish identities. This will include Hebrew Through Movement, a Tikkun Olam Shark Tank competition, learning about Israel through STEM and more. It is important to teach through many angles, allowing students to find how they connect best to Judaism and see that Judaism can be incorporated into everyday life.

Fourth, we are planning quarterly off-site trips that will allow our students to be participants in the larger community. Some examples include taking a *tikkun olam* trip to St. Aloysius Roman Catholic Church in Great Neck, visiting Parker Jewish Institute for Health Care and Rehabilitation to interact with its residents or going to a Jewish museum and learning about our history. Spending time outside of the classroom allows students to engage differently and expand their understanding.

We want our students to call Temple Beth-El home.

As I said on Erev Rosh Hashanah, “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 here for them in times of joy, times of sorrow and every time in between.”

So how can you help?

Become ambassadors for The Kehillah Project: Go to the Learn tab our TBE website and read about the program. Talk to others. Take a flyer and give it to someone who you think might be interested. We are going to hold an open house for temple families on April 9, so people can come, learn more and ask questions.

Join us on a Sunday morning next year and get to know our families. Join us when we have a community-wide event and invite the whole congregation. Yes, this program is for our students, but it is also for them to become part of the larger TBE community.

We want this program to be the place where our children want to be, a place where you want to send your kids and your grandkids. We want to ensure a robust future for Temple Beth-El.

We know that we can do this with your support. I know that our students will have their light-bulb moments and develop a love of learning.

Thank you for listening, and I look forward to working with you all to make this project a success.