



GESHER: Celebration and Study for Your Family Peninsula Temple Beth El

SAN MATEO, CA

WHO ARE THE LEARNERS? THE TEACHERS?

- Children in grades K-6 and their families. A self-selecting group.
- Members of clergy work with parents
- Teachers hired who had a combination experience with classroom, informal, and experiential learning.
- Able to hire some teachers with significant Jewish background because of Shabbat vs. mid-week plus Sunday morning commitment.

Initially the congregation hoped to have twenty families participate in Geshher. Fifty-five families participated in the first year, some of them joining the congregation expressly to be a part of this program. Families with children in day school also participated, a first for the congregation. Next year the number is projected to be 60-65 families. The Director of Education for K-6 provided training sessions for those teachers who would be working with entire families together in addition to children.

WHEN DOES THE MODEL TAKE PLACE?

- Geshher meets on first Shabbat evening, second Shabbat morning, and third Shabbat afternoon each month.
- Four additional Sunday afternoons each year involving family learning or off-site excursions.
- The program begins with a mini-shabbaton in the fall.
- 4th-6th grade students attend mid-week Hebrew class.
- In the spring, families attend the Family Shabbaton Retreat which is also open to learners in the regular Sunday School program.

Friday night services run from 6:30-7:30 pm. Families attend Shabbat dinner before services at 5:30 pm or

following services at 7:30 pm. Shabbat Day Family Study and Worship Experience meets from 9:15 am – noon and from 3:45-6:00 pm in the afternoon on the second and third Saturday's in the month respectively. With a clear calendar in hand well in advance, parents enjoy the flexibility of the schedule and the varying times and days holds kids interest as well. The new approach to scheduling enabled educator to hire teachers with richer Jewish backgrounds who didn't have the time to commit to a twice weekly model.

WHERE DOES THE MODEL TAKE PLACE?

- All Shabbat meetings take place at the synagogue except two times a year when families participate in Shabbat BaBayit, Shabbat dinner in one another's homes.
- Families meet in various synagogue spaces including classrooms and sanctuary.
- Sunday afternoon learning occurs outside of the synagogue.

Moving learning outside of the exclusively classroom setting proved a key component to the alternative program. While initial Sunday afternoon learning took place at the synagogue, next year some will take place off-site in response to parent feedback.

HOW IS THE LEARNING DESIGNED?

- A combination of family study, adult and child parallel learning.
- Worship component varies depending on the time of day the class meets, but includes Kabbalat Shabbat, Shabbat morning and Havdalah.
- Learning also involves a combination of formal study and action.
- Content organized thematically so that all age groups are learning about the same theme on age-appropriate levels.

- 5th and 6th grade junior book club launching in the coming year.

During Shabbat Day Family Study and Worship Experiences, families meet in small groups with similar age kids. Families begin together, move into separate groups for parallel study of parashat hashavua – adults with clergy and kids with teachers, and then come back together for sharing or a family activity followed by participation in Shabbat worship. Next year the parallel study will focus on Middot with study of Torah woven in as well.

WHY IS THE LEARNING DESIGNED THIS WAY?

- Enables families to connect to one another and the congregation more deeply.
- Worship embedded within larger context of Jewish learning.
- Learning no longer limited by available classroom space, setting.
- Families experiencing Shabbat in real time.
- Multiple learning experiences meet varied needs of learners.

GESHER met the desire of a small but vocal group of parents who were looking for more engagement for themselves, more family connections, and stronger connections to the congregational community. The Education Committee met for two years to research and develop GESHER. Also, a growing student population meant that the congregation would need to move to double sessions of Sunday School in order to find space for all learners. When faced with the choice of replicating the existing model or creating an alternative model, the congregation chose to launch an alternative model.

KEY FIRST STEPS TOWARD IMPLEMENTATION

- Before launching, the Director of Education for K-6 held two community conversations during regular Sunday School for parents to find out about the alternative program.
- Education Committee members attended the community conversations in order to provide the lay and parent perspectives.

- The model was also presented to the Board of Trustees as part of the implementation process.
- A GESHER brochure created and distributed once community became familiar with the program.

The community conversations were a critical first step towards launching the alternative model. They provided an opportunity for an in-person introduction and explanation which could then be followed by a detailed brochure.

GOVERNANCE STRUCTURES PROVIDING SUPPORT FOR GESHER PROGRAM

- Education Committee and Rabbi/Educator initially responsible for creation of program
- Currently Gesher Focus Group, made up of some members of Education Committee and several Gesher parents, meets with the Director of K-6 education to provide feedback and guidance.

The Gesher Focus Group created a survey that went to all GESHER parents. The results of the survey led to the move to Shabbat afternoon meetings each month instead of Sundays and to the adoption of a theme based vs. grade based curriculum for GESHER.

BUDGET/RESOURCES

- In first year, congregation received a Legacy Heritage Innovation Grant.
- Without grant will need to charge Gesher Families more than those in regular Sunday School program.
- Childcare for younger siblings provided for a fee.
- Separate GESHER brochure.
- Additional staffing required to implement program.
- Additional cost for meals and materials.

Grant money in the first year enabled the congregation to charge GESHER families the same amount as those participating in the regular Sunday School program. In the coming year, some costs covered by the grant will need to be passed on to the families.

INTEGRATION OF GESHER FAMILIES AND LARGER CONGREGATIONAL COMMUNITY

- Major holiday celebrations congregation-wide.
- All congregational families able to participate in K-6 Family Shabbaton Retreat.
- Children in grades 4-6 still come for mid-week Hebrew.
- Social events offered for specific age groups outside of Gesher.

Initially, third learning of the month scheduled for Sunday afternoons with half an hour overlap between regular Sunday School and Gesher programs. However, families preferred the opportunity to come together on Shabbat. As a result the third learning opportunity each month is scheduled for Shabbat afternoon.

IMPACT ON LEARNERS, TEACHERS, CONGREGATION

- GESHER parents increasingly involved in synagogue leadership.
- Adults are rediscovering Judaism as a result of being at synagogue with their families.
- Kids more engaged in their learning.
- Increased attendance at Shabbat worship services.
- Program has created positive buzz in larger community about the congregation.
- Some new families joined the congregation in order to participate in GESHER.