Congregation Sons of Israel

*Note: This description includes material created by Dr. Amy Sales of the Cohen Center for Modern Jewish Studies at Brandeis University as part of the documentation of results of The RE-IMAGINE Project of New York.*

*As you look at each model, we encourage you to keep the following questions in mind:*

* *What aspects of this model align with your visionary description?*
* *What does not?*
* *What intrigues you about this model?*
* *What questions do you have about this model?*

**Background**

Congregation Sons of Israel is in Long Island. Affiliated with both the United Synagogue of Conservative Judaism and the Union for Traditional Judaism, Sons of Israel offers a traditional approach to Judaism and has about 460 member households. The congregation has a conventional religious school that meets three days a week (two weekday afternoons and Sunday morning) for a total of six hours of instruction. There are approximately 150 students enrolled in the religious school pre-k-11.

**Creating a Vision**

Congregation Sons of Israel was a participant in the second cohort of congregations in the RE‑IMAGINE Project of New York, starting in summer 2004. As part of this project they created a vision for education at the congregation. While the project nominally targeted K-7 education, the RE-IMAGINE Task Force decided to keep their existing model of children’s education and instead focus on building a community of learners congregation-wide. This is reflected in their vision statement.

***Congregation Sons of Israel Education Vision***

*We, at Congregation Sons of Israel, aspire to create dynamic and innovative educational programs that ultimately will provide positive Jewish living and learning experiences to enable our diverse synagogue family to strengthen its Jewish identity and enrich its Jewish life.*

*We affirm the power of a shared, multi-generational learning partnership among our Congregation’s professional staff, parents, children, and adult members to inspire a greater sense of community through an atmosphere of acceptance and belonging. We strive to convey our religious beliefs, practices, and love of Israel to our children so that faithful adherence to Judaism is perpetuated throughout the generations.*

**A New Model of Education for the Congregation**

The Task Force saw as a major goal bringing together the disparate demographic groups in the synagogue. These groups included religious school families as well as other populations, specifically Israelis, day school families, and families who no longer had children in the religious school. They wanted to create events and programs that would encourage all members of the community to become more involved in learning and in the life of the congregation. The model, called Pa’am b’Chodesh (once a month) had three tracks – *Torah v’Tikkun Olam (*Jewish Knowledge/Jewish Action), Shabbat, and *Olameinu* (Our Jewish World). Each track would create a monthly program that would bring diverse groups together to live and learn.

**Implementing the New Model**

The RE-IMAGINE Task Force reformed itself into a Pa’am B’Chodesh committee with a subcommittee for each track, and in 2006-07, the committee planned two events in each track, for a total of six events. The *Torah v’Tikkun Olam* group organized a Hanukkah celebration and a Passover event in which “turned the entire building into an Exodus from Egypt experience.” Both events were tied to the theme of *tikkun olam* through the inclusion of*hesed* projects, collecting coats for the poor and toys for local hospitals. The *Olameinu* group organized a Jewish bus tour of the Lower East Side and a Klezmer concert at the synagogue. The Shabbat group created a special Friday night service and a Shabbat morning learning program.

Pa’am B’Chodesh continued to evolve. One change was to plan more events tied together in thematic “series,”such as the Israel education program in 2008-09, which included an Israeli movie night for adults and a Hebrew Ulpan.

In 2008-09, the Pa’am B’Chodesh committee and a newly-hired family educator set out to increase religious school involvement in Pa’am B’Chodesh events. The Shabbat subcommittee took over the planning and implementation of *Shabbat Kef* (fun Shabbat), a program that meets after junior congregation on Shabbat mornings. Its purpose is to encourage Shabbat participation for all families with children in 2nd through 7th grades, including religious school families and day school families (of which Sons of Israel has approximately 30). Families share a traditional Shabbat lunch followed by an educational activity, such as a Hanukkah treasure hunt or a game of Jeopardy or Hollywood Squares with questions geared towards an upcoming holiday or the weekly Torah portion. The Pa’am B’Chodesh committee also planned a Hanukkah program with activities for religious school families.

**A Pilot for 4th and 5th grade**

In addition, with encouragement from their ECE consultant, the education director and a teacher from the religious school created a new “mini pilot” within the religious school for 2008-09. The mini pilot, designed for the religious school’s 4th and 5th grade classes, centered on Tu B’Shevat, *tikkun olam,* and environmentalism. It consisted of three sessions between January and March for parents and students learn together. The school faculty added pre- and post-program classroom learning as well. Classes studied The Giving Tree\_\_ in Hebrew. Parents engaged in parallel study, examining Judaism’s relationship to ecology. At home, parents and children used recycled items to create instruments for an orchestra (“trashy music”). They also brought items for re cycling and then used the redemption money to plant a garden. Feedback from participants was positive, and professional and lay leaders said they believe the program built community among families and connection to the congregation.

**Evaluating the Model and Pilot**

Sons of Israel collected feedback about the pilot in several ways. Religious school teachers and the education director ask for feedback from religious school students, and Pa’am B’Chodesh committee members often attend events themselves, giving them first-hand knowledge. Further, since the first year, the family educator has been eliciting participant feedback about Pa’am B’Chodesh events by passing out questionnaires after events that do not occur on Shabbat. Parents and children were also surveyed after the Tu B’Shevat mini pilot.

The response to the Tu B’Shevat “mini-pilot” was very positive. Parents and children enjoyed the Sunday program and the common theme, and parents “loved” the learning, a text-based piece that they did on their own. They considered it “fun and creative.” Parents also contributed their ideas and expressed enthusiasm. The time commitment (two Sundays mornings from 9:00-11:00 plus working with their children at home) was not onerous, and none of the parents complained. The program fell short of 100% participation, but absences did not exceed normal and usually had a legitimate explanation.

More broadly, Sons of Israel learned several lessons from its experience with RE-IMAGINE:

1. Programs need a thematic thread—a substantive purpose to tie the various parts together. In retrospect, RE-IMAGINE leaders characterized their early Pa’am B’Chodesh efforts as popular but “too piecemeal,” “fragmented,” and “sporadic.”
2. The most successful programs involve serious learning, which requires the support of the religious school faculty, the rabbi and the educator.
3. Although leaders of the Pa’am B’Chodesh committee continue to be concerned about integrating various segments of the broader Sons of Israel community, they also now recognize the opportunities for children’s and family education.

Lay and professional leaders also learned more about running programs. They learned that few congregants would come out on a Tuesday or Thursday evening, but many would attend an event on Sunday. They discovered that parents love “the actual learning, the text-based piece they did on their own.” They were pleasantly surprised at the level of parent and child enthusiasm despite the time commitments involved on Sunday mornings and at home. They believe they saw impact: Parents got to know each other and “friendships developed” and this, in turn, translated into greater unity in the classroom.

**Moving Forward: 2009-10 and Beyond**

For 2009-10, RE-IMAGINE leadership at Sons of Israel decided to focus Pa’am B’Chodesh solely on the Shabbat track, combining cognitive learning and skill development with experiential learning. Furthermore, they plan to concentrate more on the religious school students, with a secondary focus on day school students and a tertiary focus on other congregants. A new, three-part Shabbat program will have a *havdalah* celebration hosted by the religious school’s younger grades, a Friday night service led by the older grades, and a Shabbat morning in May in which all grades will come together to lead the service. There will also be Sunday “Shabbat fairs” with activities such as making Shabbat challah covers. Shabbat Kef will also continue, although it will meet less frequently.