

portfolio is helping schools to select their model and move towards its enactment. Each school administration is anxious to develop a program that is in keeping with one of the six models defined in the Framework. Our congregational schools are required to move toward full compliance with the new standards. The entire staff of the Department of Education will continue to make themselves available to assist the schools of our member congregations. Professional and lay leadership are eager to raise their schools to new levels and to meet the standards for the new Framework for Excellence. Right now the standards are mandated only for schools with more than 75 students. We will be reviewing and revising the standards for smaller schools in remote communities. We hope that in five years, all of our congregational schools will be part of the Framework and will provide our next generation with a solid foundation on which to build a Jewish life.

We know that we are only at the beginning of a long and developing process, but initial reactions indicate that our institutions are ready and excited about meeting standards based on best practices in institutions that have produced results. It is our hope that our youth will benefit from all of our efforts, growing to become educated, caring Jews and to live meaningful Jewish lives.

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Temma Kingsley, Vice President of the United Synagogue of Conservative Judaism, is the chair of the Blue Ribbon Task Force for Congregational School Standards and the co-chair of the Education Commission of the United Synagogue of Conservative Judaism. She is a retired Jewish early childhood educator and past President of the Jewish Early Childhood Association, as well as of the National Jewish Early Childhood Network.

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## CHAI – Learning for Jewish Life

RABBI JAN KATZEW

### CHALLENGE

**T**he fundamental challenge we face in Jewish life in general and Jewish education in particular transcends any single movement. How can we help episodic Jews who live Judaism from time to time to live fully as Jews who live Judaism all the time? How can we nurture those who are Jewish by choice, who knowingly, passionately, and joyfully identify as Jews? Accepting the premise that we live in an age defined by choice, how can we raise a generation that will consciously choose to learn and live as Jews? All Jewish schooling is supplemental. Jewish families still serve as the primary educational institution in the Jewish community. When the Judaism lived at home is dissonant with the Judaism learned in school, home wins and consequently, too often, Judaism loses.

In the Reform Movement, approximately 120,000 children study in congregational schools, complemented by up to 5,000 that study in day schools. “Does the Reform Movement have a curriculum?” is an important and urgent question. Up until now, we have equivocated.

“Each congregational culture is unique.” “A curriculum is not a document; it is a living portrait, a dynamic shared learning experience.” “Textbooks do not constitute a curriculum.” All of these statements may be true, but they do not tell the whole truth.

Whom are we kidding? We are short on teachers who are as Jewishly literate and competent as they are caring. We lack teachers who are committed to Reform Judaism and who come to class with a clear, cogent, and compelling lesson plan. In the *yeshivat ma’alah*, the ideal class, we would have learners and teachers who are fully present and who understand Jewish learning as central to their lives. But, in our schools and in our synagogues, in our real lives as Jewish educators, the teachers are avocational. They are busy, and despite their intentions, they often do not have the time to develop a well-conceived plan for a lesson, to say nothing of a unit or a year.

At the 2001 UAHC Biennial in Boston, Rabbi Eric Yoffie articulated his clearest vision to date of the Jewish school residing at the heart of congregational life:

Moses understood that while Jews would need an army to defend their land, they would need schools to defend their values. And for the next 3,000 years we built our communities around schools, and as stated in the most famous of our prayers, we took the words that God had commanded us in order to teach them diligently to our children...We know that the school cannot succeed on its own — that it needs the active participation of parents. It also needs the commitment of the entire synagogue, which should be an interdependent learning community of which the school is but one part.

## RESPONSE

We are going to help, and while no school and no class can be taught by remote control, we have developed resources that will meet the needs of teachers and in turn, the needs of students. To respond to the fundamental educational need in the Reform Movement, the UAHC, in partnership with the Hebrew Union College and the National Association of Temple Educators, is developing CHAI – Learning for Jewish Life.

CHAI was designed by:

- UAHC regional educators and curriculum specialists
- HUC-JIR education professors
- NATE educational practitioners.

CHAI is designed for:

- education committees
- congregational boards of directors
- parents of children ages 3–14
- families with children 7–14
- teachers who have little or no prior training.

CHAI is designed to:

- provide students with a balance of *torah*, *avodah* and *g'millut chassadim*
- provide a shared Movement-wide curricular core for one hour of class per week, giving each congregational school time to build its own unique identity
- provide teachers with a complete, developmentally appropriate, Judaically authentic lesson

address the entire family as Jewish learners

- provide a self-paced Hebrew learning program that formulates Hebrew as a living language of the Jewish people
- invest congregational leaders in their own learning to model lifelong Jewish education.

CHAI – Learning for Jewish Life adapts a powerful educational tool called “Understanding by Design,” by the Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development, to suit our needs as Jewish educators.

Over the next five years, we expect to develop a curricular core for children in grades 2–7 which will be shared by Reform congregations throughout North America, a core that preserves the independence of each synagogue and promotes the interdependence of the Jewish community. We believe that every child who comes to a Jewish school should find a home in *Torah*, should be at home in a sanctuary, should be able to make her or his home into a sacred space, and should live what he or she learns. CHAI resources provide for achieving balance in Jewish life – among mind, heart, and soul; among knowing, feeling, and doing. At all stages of Jewish life, knowledge is requisite, but knowledge is complemented by attitude and completed by action. We want our students, youth and adult, to know, love, and live *Torah*, and we can achieve that sacred goal by providing texts and contexts that allow children and adults to find a home in Judaism that is as deep as it is open.

Since *Bereishit*, Hebrew has been elemental to Jewish life, and we are committed to providing our teachers and their students with the most creative and effective Hebrew learning tools we can devise. Called *Mitkadem* – Hebrew for moving forward and making progress – our program promotes individualized learning in heterogeneous classes. This means that students will be in the same room with their age peers, but they will likely be on different pages or even on different levels. The Reform Movement has become increasingly serious about the significance of Hebrew, but until now, the UAHC has not offered a comprehensive program of Hebrew learning for youth that is sound in terms of language acquisition theory and best practice, that embraces Hebrew as a sacred Jewish language through *Tefillah* and *Torah*, and that enables parents to be active partners in the process of Hebrew learning. “Hebrew is the perfect language to express the central concepts of Judaism,

Jewish thought, and the way we talk and think of God.” This quote from the *Mitkadem* rationale expresses an enduring understanding about Hebrew. It reminds us not only what we are teaching when we teach Hebrew but why we are teaching Hebrew. *Mitkadem* treats Hebrew as a living language, and therefore includes grammar and other linguistic devices, but emphasizes the unique role of Hebrew in Jewish life, especially in *Tefillah* and *Torah*, prayer and sacred texts.

A distinguishing if not defining characteristic of *Mitkadem*, and indeed all of the resources associated with CHAI – Learning for Jewish Life, is flexibility. Whether classes meet once, twice, or three times a week, these lessons will fit unique schedules. Whether a student begins Hebrew language in grade 1 or 4, the CHAI resources will enable the learner to proceed at her or his own pace, depending upon intrinsic and extrinsic motivation, parental support, native intelligence, and the intensity of the learning. After gaining decoding skills and the self-confidence that accompanies making progress, students will move ahead to learn aspects of Hebrew grammar, vocabulary, and reading and spoken comprehension. One of the greatest acts of resurrection in modern Jewish life has been the rebirth of the Hebrew language, and we need to share in the celebration by giving the next generation of our people the tools to learn it, and then, we hope, to love it.

CHAI is intended to facilitate lifelong learning; therefore, its components reach beyond the student in school and into the areas of family, parent, teacher, and board education.

Complementing the curriculum core and reinforcing the values of *torah*, *avodah* and *g'millut chassadim* in a conscious attempt to bring them home, each year-long curriculum includes three sessions specially designed for families to learn with and from each other. These family sessions offer great flexibility to the educator in order to meet the unique needs of each community. Since educating families is qualitatively different from teaching children alone, we have developed a comprehensive, user-friendly guide to create and support a significant family education program in each congregation.

A subset of family education aimed at the adult members of the family, adult education sessions offer parents the opportunity to realize that in Judaism “homework is the

essence and schoolwork the supplement.” The parent curriculum considers the challenges of living a consciously Jewish life that is as liberal and tolerant as it is rich and deep. For parents of preschool age children, CHAI provides a variety of sessions designed to be welcoming and embracing, to make it clear that the youngest members of our community are a treasure who serve as guarantors for the Jewish future.

To assure teacher education, we have developed two online courses, one for new teachers who have less than three years of experience and one for experienced teachers who may wish to consider acting as mentors. These courses consist of eight 90-minute lessons and are taught by respected educational leaders. Classes will be limited to 25 participants and will cost \$100 per teacher. We consider this a serious opportunity for teacher recruitment, development, and retention. The online courses, including a special course for teachers in Reform Judaism, can be accessed at [uahconline.ecollege.com](http://uahconline.ecollege.com). We will also be holding special CHAI retreats for teachers and educators at three UAHC camps during the summer of 2002.

In order for Jewish education to succeed, we need to build partnerships, and none is more vital than the one between professional and volunteer leaders. In two separate but complementary guides, we have endeavored to guide synagogue leaders through a process that helps clarify the integral roles they play in building a community of learning, learned Jews. Again, our aim has been to give maximum flexibility to each congregation and to realize that while some synagogues would want to create a board retreat around issues in Jewish education, others would strongly prefer to devote up to half an hour of each board meeting for a year to Jewish education, and still others would prefer to devote quarterly meetings entirely to education matters. Whatever the method that suits a congregational culture, it is our intent to support congregations in taking Jewish education seriously as a primary function of congregational life, indeed as a vital organ in Jewish life.

## ANTICIPATION

CHAI represents a significant policy shift in the educational practice of the UAHC. It involves acknowledging and respecting the decentralization of Jewish learning. It requires an investment in human resources even more

than print and online resources. It accepts the premise that our relationship to educational theorists and practitioners is one of mutual dependence. Arguably above all, CHAI is predicated on the belief that the congregational school deserves to be a source of accomplishment and joy in Jewish life for everyone connected with it, i.e., everyone who is a member of the congregation.

CHAI – Learning for Jewish Life will grow as congregations provide feedback on its various elements. The curriculum core will develop as we form realistic expectations of our teachers and students. The online and onsite teacher training programs will respond to the needs of faculty from diverse backgrounds, while the resources for families and parents will address their unique needs. Our hope is that congregational schools will become even

more vital as the educational heart of the synagogue community. Quality curricular resources are necessary but insufficient to yield quality learning. Other variables include the students, the teacher, and the culture. CHAI is an exercise in evolutionary cultural change because it seeks to improve the status quo by building on the existing structure. CHAI ultimately depends on the reservoir of goodwill with our congregational partners. Its success will be determined by the number of congregations willing to adopt it and then adapt it to fit their needs. In the next year, we will focus on three congregations in each of the 13 UAHC regions, and together we will learn how to give CHAI – Learning for Jewish Life a life of its own.

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**Editor's Suggested Discussion Guide:**

- Both Katzew and Kingsley introduce their articles by describing the shortcomings of the Jewish education currently offered in congregational schools. To what extent do you find that these critiques apply to your local synagogues?
- Both of these national initiatives have carefully crafted a balance between local and central roles in upgrading congregational education. In what ways does each initiative achieve this balance? To what extent does each initiative mandate, encourage, reward, suggest, guide, support, and/or envision change for its congregational schools?
- What will it take on the national and local levels to have these initiatives adopted and implemented?
- What do you see as the potential impact of each of these initiatives? What will be the ripple effects of these changes?
- How is a curriculum different from a set of standards?