

Beth El School Transition Committee

Final Report to Beth El Board

11 January 2006

1. Introduction and Summary

The committee was constituted in May 2005 to address the broad question, “What kind of school do we want for our community’s children?” The committee’s charter is included as Appendix A of this report. To answer this question, we collected information through

- a questionnaire sent to the entire congregation (results compiled in Appendix B)
- interviews with selected parents of current students (Appendix B)
- interviews with teen graduates of the religious school (Appendix B)
- interviews with directors of other innovative religious schools around the country (Appendix C)

Our discussions were informed and advanced throughout by thoughtful and invaluable input from Rabbi Sager.

The committee’s 14 September interim report (Appendix D) comprised a Mission Statement and a Proposal to hire a Youth Education Director. Our 14 December penultimate report (Appendix E)

- recommended that the school be called the Beth El Talmud Torah.
- included a Job Description for the Education and Youth Director (and explained the change in the position’s title).
- recommended the creation of a Beth El School Board to oversee the Beth El Talmud Torah and the Education and Youth Director. (However, Board discussion at that meeting resolved instead that a Beth El Board of Education will oversee Family & Youth Programming as well as the Talmud Torah.)
- proposed a change from the original charge to “Provide 3 reasonable scenarios/suggestions, describing what the school could ‘look like ...’.” Instead of bringing complete scenarios, the committee would for several groups of attributes for the school, e.g., curriculum, community integration, and school structure, outline options from which the Education and Youth Director and the Board of Education can select alternate building blocks for the school’s programs and structure.

This final report from the School Transition Committee presents the options mentioned above, including further discussion of the school name and the structure and duties of the Board of Education. For the most part, this report does not include our discussions of individual issues. Much of those discussions can be found in our meeting minutes in Appendix F.

The Transition Committee, with the help of Lew Borman, will by February 8 present to the Board recommendations for how best to communicate our recommendations to the rest of the Beth El community.

2. Recommendations

- A. Name** – *Talmud Torah* is the study of Torah. For over a millennium, our morning prayers have included a study portion from the *Gemara on Mishnah Peah* 1.1, listing important *mitzvot* (among them, honoring parents, *g’milut hasadim*, and making peace between people). The passage concludes, “*v’talmud Torah k’neged kulam*” – “but the study of Torah is equivalent to them all.” We recommend that our religious school be renamed the Beth El Talmud Torah, because we want our children to study and develop enthusiasm for all aspects of Torah – the text, the proud history it portrays, its moral and ethical teachings, and the multiple influences it can have on our daily lives.

B. Talmud Torah Curriculum

- i. **Hebrew** – There was a strong feeling among the committee members, which was supported by the responses to the questionnaire to the congregation and the interviews with parents, that the Hebrew language should have a significant place in the Talmud Torah curriculum. There was much discussion about whether this meant the Hebrew of our texts, the Hebrew of our prayers, or modern Hebrew. We concluded that it meant all of them, but we also recognized the limitations imposed by only 5-6 class hours per week. We decided on the following recommendation:

The programs of the Beth El Talmud Torah shall include the use of Hebrew in all feasible ways.

- ii. **Elective courses** – In the 2006 spring semester, students will have several courses among which to choose during the second hour on Sunday mornings – Kriyat Torah (tropes and reading the Torah), Z'mirot (Shabbat songs), and a book group. As much as possible, we want to maintain excitement and interest among our children by providing challenging supplemental materials, including Hebrew enrichment courses. We recommend that:

The Education and Youth Director shall develop elective/enrichment courses to be offered during regular school hours as well as off-campus supplemental classes and activities, distributed geographically through the community. The off-campus programs may include both required and/or extracurricular/voluntary components. Such activities could include home-based and intergenerational programs, as well as *chavurot* for our children.

- iii. **Bar/Bat Mitzvah Training** – We have the highest regard for the current system of having our own post bar/bat mitzvah teens serve as tutors for the upcoming b'nai mitzvah. The Education and Youth Director's responsibilities in this area are spelled out in the Job Description (Appendix E.)

- iv. **Assessments** – After extensive discussion about assessments and their purpose, we recommend:

With the cooperation of the Board of Education, the Education and Youth Director shall develop appropriate goals for the Talmud Torah and institute methods for measuring progress toward those goals. In this process, the Education and Youth Director shall take into account students' different backgrounds and abilities, and design incentives and rewards to enhance the learning environment.

- v. **USCJ Framework of Excellence** – We do not feel that any of our recommendations will in any way jeopardize that certification, which the congregation worked so hard to achieve.

C. School Structure

- i. **Meeting days/hours** – The religious school now meets 9:30-11:30 Sunday mornings and 4:15-5:45 Monday and Wednesday afternoons, a total of 5 hours per week. After discussing advantages and disadvantages of meeting from 9:00-12:00 Sunday mornings, meeting for 2 hours on weekday afternoons, and meeting on only one afternoon per week, we decided on the following recommendation:

The Beth El Talmud Torah shall meet for 5-6 hours per week, as deemed best by the Education and Youth Director, to be divided between Sunday mornings and two weekday afternoons.

- ii. Shabbat and Sunday** – One of our goals for the Talmud Torah is the coordination of the school with the ritual life of the congregation. Having some school activities on Shabbat rather than Sunday is an obvious way to accomplish this. We recognize, however, that we live in a society which pulls our children in other directions on Shabbat mornings. Nonetheless, we recommend that:

The Talmud Torah shall include a Shabbat component, perhaps replacing Sunday for some grade levels or for some weeks of the year. This shall involve both book learning (Torah text study, tropes, etc.) and experiential learning (e.g., *kiddush*, *birkat hamazon*, and *havdalah*.)

We note that proper implementation of recommendations C.i and C.ii will require circulating a detailed school calendar prior to the beginning of each semester.

- iii. Class grouping** – the data we gathered was all but unanimous in favoring age grouping in classes. We believe this could and should be relaxed in elective/enrichment classes, which are further discussed later in the report. Accordingly, we recommend that:

As appropriate to specific courses and programs, students shall be grouped by age, ability or interest.

- iv. Location (Durham/Chapel Hill)** – Given the small size of our student body and our desire that the school foster social interaction among our children, we cannot justify a Chapel Hill alternative location for required components of the Talmud Torah curriculum. However, as noted in B.ii above, off-campus supplemental classes and activities should be distributed throughout the community.

- v. Class names** – Consonant with recommendation B.i above (about the use of Hebrew in the school), classes in the Talmud Torah should be designated *Gan*, *Kitah Aleph*, *Kitah Bet*, etc. This action has already been taken. We recognize that these might not be the names the Education and Youth Director would want to use and that they could evolve into other Hebrew names.

D. Family & Youth Programs – The committee acknowledges the importance of family and youth programming in the creation of a strong Jewish identity. Therefore, we recommend that:

The Education and Youth Director shall assume responsibility for all family and youth programming including, but not limited to,

- **scheduling and staffing junior congregations.**
- **the development and implementation of programming for families with children of all ages.**
- **recruitment and supervision of advisors for pre-Kadima, Kadima and USY youth groups.**
- **supervision of the programming for the junior congregations and the youth groups.**

We further recommend that:

Support for this role shall be provided by the Education & Family Programming Chevra described in E ii below.

E. Infrastructure – In our discussions, we recognized the need for two distinct areas of oversight and support for the Education and Youth Director’s responsibilities for the Talmud Torah and other Family & Youth Programming. Day-to-day support of those activities is the purview of the current Education

Committee. But we do not currently have a mechanism in place for policy making and supervision and evaluation of the Education and Youth Director. Accordingly, we recommend the following structure:

i. Board of Education/Va'ad haChinuch

- This body will be composed of parents of students in the Talmud Torah, other educators in the Beth El community, the Rabbi, and perhaps other Jewish educators from the wider Durham-Chapel Hill community.
- It will supervise and make policy decisions for the Talmud Torah and Family & Youth Programming.
- It will supervise and evaluate the Education and Youth Director. Its chair will be the Education and Youth Director's immediate supervisor.

ii. Education & Family Programming Chevra

- This body will be composed of parents of participants in the Talmud Torah and other Family & Youth Programming activities. It may also include other interested community members.
- It will provide day-to-day support for the Talmud Torah and Youth & Family Programming in ways that will include, but are not limited to, organizing volunteers to serve as class parents and to provide other logistical support.
- The chair of the Education & Family Programming Committee shall be a member of the Board of Education.

F. Community Integration – The education programs of our Talmud Torah and our Family & Youth programs are, ultimately, inseparable from the life of the community. The following represent meeting grounds and intersections of learning which should be noted in developing those programs:

i. Sanctuary Life – The Sanctuary is the place where the most treasured skills of tradition and transmission are regularly employed. Therefore, Sanctuary life is the source and venue, as well as the goal of much of our curriculum and activities. Fundamental to our educational goals is the understanding that the Sanctuary itself is the greatest laboratory and educational resource for intergenerational learning and community spiritual development.

ii. Day-School Families – The Lerner Jewish Community Day School students among us pose the challenge of developing a curriculum that meaningfully engages them with more intensive and extensive Jewish education. Taking an even broader purview, we recommend that:

The Education and Youth Director shall develop programs for all Beth El families – with children in the Talmud Torah, Day School, both, or neither – to integrate those families into the Beth El community and to attract potential new members.

iii. Midrasha – The Community Midrasha is the next level of institutional Jewish study in our community. It also represents our post-bar/bat mitzvah students' opportunity to fulfill the mitzvah of *Torah Li'sh'ma*/Torah learning for its own sake. An important measure of our Talmud Torah's success will be high, enthusiastic enrollment in the Community Midrasha. We will be well served to develop, together with the Midrasha, programs that entice and encourage our students to continue their Jewish education.

iv. Hach'nasat Shaliach Tzibbur – This is our one ongoing, truly intergenerational project involving those students who want to develop their skills as *Sh'lichei Tzibbur*/Prayer Leaders. Each

student, together with a mentor, explores various aspects of a particular prayer service, preparing for the celebration of entering the ranks of our more seasoned *Sh'lichei Tzibbur*. We should make certain that our Talmud Torah students pay attention to the enthusiasm and serious work of their “elders,” as well as recognizing the respect paid to them by our community.

- v. **Life-long Learning** – The lesson taught by serious, ongoing learning in the community is this: Learning is a mitzvah for a lifetime; it is the ongoing engagement and investment of mind and spirit in Jewish consciousness. We should develop moments of the celebration of learning for its own sake that involve students of all generations. We should also develop courses of study that are pan-generational, allowing all students to explore the same particular topic in age-appropriate ways.

Respectfully submitted:

- Gisela Baler, Rachel Bearman, Rachel Galanter, Neil Freedman, Amy Newman, Laura Quigley, Orit Ramler, Barak Richman, and Ilana Saraf – committee members
- Rabbi Sager, Abby Zarkin – ex officio members
- David Rubin – chair