



Taking Text to Toddlers

Accenting the Jewish
in Early Childhood
Jewish Education

**For more information
about the Early
Childhood Institute
please contact
Rachel Raz, at
eci@hebrewcollege.
edu or 617-559-8629.**

hebrewcollege.edu

When three angels appear before Abraham's tent in Genesis (Bereshit) 18, the patriarch goes out of his way to show hospitality (*hakhnasat orchim*) to his guests. So, too, do the nursery school children at Temple Shalom in Newton. Inspired by Abraham's example, Temple Shalom's kids make it their business to welcome not only visitors to their school, but also fellow classmates to different areas of the classroom. Likewise, their parents have formed a friendship committee that, among other things, makes telephone calls to welcome new families to the school.

Integrating *mitzvot*, values and traditions from Jewish texts into the learning experience of young children and their families has become increasingly commonplace at Temple Shalom and other Jewish preschools throughout Massachusetts, largely due to Hebrew College's Early Childhood Institute (ECI). Now in its 20th year of training Jewish educators, the ECI serves as an incubator for the transformation of Jewish preschools into leading edge early learning centers that fuse age-appropriate pedagogy with meaningful Jewish content.

"The program's goal is to promote cognitive, social and emotional development or competence, while taking into account how young children learn," says Ina Regosin, Dean of Students and founding Director of the Institute. "At the same time, we seek to foster Jewish competence, identity and commitment in both our children and their families."

Regosin recalls that when the ECI was conceived back in 1986, the Judaic aspect of a typical Jewish

preschool consisted mostly of a Friday Shabbat party and lighting candles on Hanukkah. Jewish community centers, which ran many Jewish preschools, were essentially Torah-free zones. Concerned about ensuring a Jewish future, Regosin sought to reconfigure Jewish preschools to serve as powerful gateways to lifelong Jewish journeys. The early learning centers she envisioned would teach text-based Jewish values and traditions and Hebrew language at a formative age for children, and propagate those teachings to their parents at a time when they were most likely to welcome new practices and commitments. And the physical environment would exude Jewishness, from *mezuzot* posted on doorways to Jewish calendars, art and Hebrew words adorning the walls and Jewish books filling the shelves. In short, the entire preschool community would pulsate with Jewish consciousness.

To realize that vision, Regosin has spent the past two decades developing and running the ECI, which offers an 18-credit program leading to a Certificate in Early Childhood Jewish Education. The flagship certificate program integrates the study of Hebrew language and Jewish values, traditions and culture with developmentally appropriate methods for transmitting this knowledge to children and their parents. In addition, the ECI runs 10-hour, 1-credit ECI Outreach intensives at selected locations in Greater Boston. Since 1997, Regosin has also headed the Early Childhood Directors Institute (ECDI), an ongoing study program leading to a Certificate in Early Childhood Jewish Education Leadership. The ECDI immerses experienced administrators in the study of biblical and rabbinic texts, and in reflection on the connections between Jewish tradition and their role as leaders in early childhood Jewish education settings.

Now training 107 individual educators, the ECI and ECDI have granted certificates to about 90 educators of all Jewish denominations. While both programs are offered at Hebrew College, ECI can also be taken remotely at a central location in western Massachusetts (where tuition is fully subsidized by the Harold Grinspoon Foundation) via in-person meetings, videoconferencing sessions and online coursework—and, since fall 2006, on personal computers around the world through Hebrew College Online. ECI Outreach course modules, typically delivered on-site to entire preschool teaching staffs, are also available to North Shore Jewish educators at a central location in Marblehead (where tuition is fully subsidized by the

ILLUSTRATIONS BY LORA PENNINA SKARF MEYER.



“ECDI was not just a professional or biblical experience; it was also personal. The program reawakened my love of learning Torah.”

—Sara Sinai, ECDI student



Robert I. Lappin Charitable Foundation).

A core element of both ECI and ECDI programs is the expectation that educators will regularly examine their personal relationship to Jewish sources. “You can study something, but you really have to ask yourself, what does this mean to me?” says Regosin. “Because if it’s meaningful to you, then it will express itself more powerfully with children and families.”

True to Regosin’s vision, ECI graduates have brought Jewish texts, values and traditions to life in the classroom and beyond. Taking a page out of the ECI’s “Bible and Israel in Early Childhood Education” course, **Vivian Newman Cert’06**, the Jewish educator at the Springfield JCC Early Childhood Program, helped create a “Martin Luther King Day/Build a Better World” celebration. Newman, the directors of the JCC program and several fellow teachers—all graduates of the Grinspoon-funded ECI distance learning program—designed the event to enable children and parents to use stories from the Bible, teachings from *Pirkei Avot* and the words of Martin Luther King Jr. to help build a better world. “Families visited many different booths, where they learned the importance of being kind to others, welcoming guests and looking beyond the outer appearances of people,” says Newman, citing *Pirkei Avot, Mishnah 4:27*—“Do not look at the jug but what it contains”—as a proof text.

Debra Reisman Cert’01, Judaic Specialist at the North Suburban Jewish Community Center in Peabody, credits her ECI training for helping her focus more on the essential Jewish messages embedded in Jewish holiday art projects. “Now if we make a *lulav* and *etrog*, I make sure I have taught the children why the *lulav* and *etrog* are important to the Jewish people and the holiday,” she says. “I also learned not to be afraid to go to the source when teaching Bible stories. Although we tell the stories according to the children’s level of understanding, it’s important as teachers to be familiar with the stories as they were written.”

Clearly Reisman’s young charges are getting the message. She notes that some parents report that their children are teaching them about Jewish holidays and Bible stories, or insisting on saying *hamotzi* before eating bread. “When I see the messages that the children tuck into our ‘Western Wall’ on Israel Day,” notes Reisman, “that says it all.” Those messages include “I love you God,” “I want to go to Israel” and “I like *shalom*.”

ECI Outreach is also driving a distinctly Jewish message home. At Gan Yeladim, a JCC Early Learning Center in Newton, the entire teaching staff has studied the commandment of honoring one’s parents. In a series of two-hour workshops facilitated by **Allison Cook MAJS’04**, they explored the commandment’s origins in Exodus and Leviticus, rabbinic commentary on the challenges of fulfilling it and potential ways to integrate it into children’s learning experience. In the process, ECI Outreach strives to honor the teachers as well. “They’re often unsung in the grand scheme of things,” says Cook, a Harvard-trained educator. “Learning with them and giving them an opportunity to learn and grow in their own area of expertise is a way to honor them.” Cook recalls several “aha” moments in which teachers declared, “Oh, that’s where that comes from” or “I never thought of it that way before” or “I can link that text to the classroom”—moments of deep learning that they could share with their peers and pass on in the classroom.

Also energized by a deeper appreciation of classical Jewish texts, participants in the Early Childhood Directors Institute have invigorated their preschools with a new Jewish spirit. A spirit that goes beyond merely celebrating each Jewish holiday as it comes along, stresses **Sherry Grossman MAJS’02**, a key shaper of ECI and ECDI programs and former Early Childhood Education Director for the Jewish Community Centers of Greater Boston. “There’s so



“The program’s goal is to promote cognitive, social and emotional development or competence, while taking into account how young children learn.”

—Ina Regosin, Founding Director of HC’s Early Childhood Institute



much more to Jewish life than that,” she says. “But to go deeper, you have to be confident yourself, to step out and share the conversation.”

Sara Sinai, a recent ECDI student who directs Gan Yeladim and plans to complete her M.J.Ed. this year at Hebrew College, has done just that. “ECDI was not just a professional or biblical experience; it was also personal,” she observes. “The program reawakened my love of learning Torah.” And inspired Sinai to share that love with her staff. “I have challenged myself to do a *devar Torah* before every teaching team and staff meeting,” she says, “and challenged every team leader to give a *devar* or *limud* (lesson) with a common message on Jewish practice.”

Sinai, who studied the story of Joseph and his brothers in a series of ECDI sessions, has incorporated some of its lessons at Gan Yeladim. For example, a class of two- and three-year-olds used the story to explore how to respect a friend. “Joseph turned away so his brothers wouldn’t see him cry, which raises the question: when do you turn away and when do you speak up?” says Sinai. “Our family educator, **Beth Reisen MAJS’oo**, taught the story here with puppets. We then talked to the kids about how to show kindness and respect to each other when someone hurts their feelings.”

Johanna Perlin, Director of the Nursery School at Temple Shalom in Newton, who earned her ECI and ECDI certificates in 2000 and 2005, respectively, has also used drama to translate her ECDI studies into action. Last year, after learning about the giving of the Torah at Mount Sinai, she instructed one class to make large cardboard tablets emblazoned with their own “Ten Rules” on how to get along, and another class to construct large tissue paper flowers to represent the flowers that grew at the base of Mount Sinai. “One morning, we didn’t tell the children that I had laid the flowers at the base of a hill in the playground,” Perlin says. “Our rabbi came to the base of the hill and said

he was Moses, and asked if they were ready to receive the law. He had them read the Ten Rules, the shofar was blown and the children said, *na’aseh v’nishma* (we will do and we will hear).”

While focused primarily on improving the quality of children’s Jewish education, ECDI grads have also strived to engage parents in the endeavor through take-home guides, newsletter updates and integrated family learning activities. For example, a few years ago, **Lisa Ridge Kritz Cert’oz**, Director of the Erna and Julius Hertz Nursery School of Temple Israel in Sharon, invited parents to walk with their children along an interactive floor map of Israel. “To my amazement,” she recalls, “parents made comments like, ‘Oh look, I was on that kibbutz’ or ‘My favorite place was Jerusalem.’ Instantly, they became the teachers.”

Ultimately, the benefits of a Jewishly rich preschool experience may be immeasurable. “There are certain aspects of Judaism that we can really grasp and appreciate at certain ages,” says Allison Cook. “For young children, there’s a rich Jewish language to talk about how you behave with other people. Welcoming of ritual, routine and play, a child’s world can plug into Judaism so beautifully.”

Ina Regosin concurs, stressing the profound influence that an early childhood Jewish educator can have on young children and their families. To underscore the point, she cites a talmudic principle that has guided ECI throughout its first two decades: “To teach another person’s child Torah is like bringing that child into the world.”

—Mark Dwortzan

Reprinted from L’Bogrim, Hebrew College Alumni Magazine, Winter 2007.