

Jewish Children's Folkshul – Curriculum

Folkshul's Educational Philosophy

The primary goal of Folkshul is to foster Jewish identity through learning about the ideas, values, ethics, activities, traditions and celebrations of secular humanistic Jews and providing opportunities for students to practice what they learn. Students should be able in clear, positive terms, to describe what it means for them personally to be a Jew and what it means to be a secular humanistic Jew.

Secular humanistic Jewish values include: love of learning, ethical action, Tzedakah (duty, not charity), social justice, respect for life, love of life, personal responsibility for our actions and their consequences, freedom, universalism, pluralism, the progress of humankind, a sense of Jewish history and community, and a rational, human-centered basis for thought and action.

Ethical action begins in the classroom - the actions and behavior of the teacher and students should embody the meaning of secular humanistic Judaism.

We encourage open discussion of opposing ideas and values and we use the methods of critical thinking to evaluate their relative merits. Teachers guide students towards respect for those with whom they disagree, and towards rational explanations.

We celebrate Jewish written, visual and performing arts as important parts of our heritage, as ways to present our values and as an enrichment of our sense of connectedness and Jewish identity.

We study religious aspects of the Jewish tradition as part of our history, and in age appropriate ways explain how the secular point of view differs.

We relate all that we teach to the Jewish experience and when appropriate relate that experience to a larger world context.

Pedagogy

Folkshul should be a place of joy, where children come to be stimulated by ideas and learning. Classes should **encourage critical thinking** on the part of all children, teaching them how to examine and evaluate ideas and issues in age appropriate ways.

Children come to the classroom with knowledge that needs to be understood and developed.

Carefully constructed lessons should bring out and amplify upon children's previous learning. Children should have time to reflect on and make sense out of their learning. Class discussions may follow fruitful tangents based on student interests

Activities should be **developmentally appropriate**. This means that children will be taught in a way that is appropriate for their age level.

Children need to participate actively in learning. Children, especially before the age of 10, learn best by doing. Lectures should be kept to a minimum.

Children learn in many different ways. Teachers should pay attention to the learning styles of the children in the classroom, so that they can construct lessons accordingly. Parents are encouraged to

Jewish Children's Folkshul – Curriculum

share information with their child's teachers about the child's learning habits. Classes over time should encompass many different activities appropriate to aural, oral, visual and kinesthetic learners.

The classroom should **model and nurture community** and an understanding of the child's role in it. Class activities should involve the whole class with achieving a goal, rather than focusing on competition, and should encourage cooperation and respect. Lessons need to include group work, cooperative learning and teaching of the value of helping other learners. Folkshul teachers should normally not require homework.

Overall Curriculum Objectives

General

1. To foster a positive Jewish identity in students; to teach students about the ideas, values, activities, traditions, and celebrations of the Jewish people from a secular, humanistic, Jewish perspective; and to provide opportunities for students to practice what they learn
2. To relate all that we teach to the Jewish experience and, when appropriate, relate that experience to a larger world context
3. To model ethical action in the classroom through the behavior of the teacher
4. To encourage open discussion of opposing ideas and values and use the methods of values clarification and critical thinking to examine their merits
5. To teach in an age-appropriate manner, adapting subject matter to the cognitive and developmental abilities of the students

Specific

1. To teach students how to express their Jewish identity in secular humanistic Jewish ways and to connect that identity with an increasingly inclusive community, beginning with the family (preK/K) and ultimately embracing the whole of humanity (sixth grade)
2. To acquaint students with Jewish history from the biblical period to the present
3. To help students associate Tzedakah, Tikkun Olam and Social Action activity with a Yiddishe Cup and being a mensch (a good person)
4. To examine and celebrate Jewish festivals, emphasizing the values and ethical principles they express and their historic origins
5. To acquaint students with Jewish culture in various historic settings, including: the priestly culture of Israel, the Rabbinic culture of the Diaspora, the shtetl culture of Eastern Europe, the Haskalah of Western Europe and the immigrant experience of the United States
6. To examine life cycle events - including baby naming, B'nai Mitzvah, conversion/adoption,

Jewish Children's Folkshul – Curriculum

marriage and death - emphasizing both the values and ethical principles celebrated by secular humanistic Jews at these important times and the history of the Jewish practices and beliefs surrounding these events

7. To examine in depth the issues and causes of oppression and resistance to oppression, and within this context to consider the Holocaust. The emphasis will be on exploring the value of rights and specifically the idea of defending the rights of others so that the rights we defend will be available in the future to everyone, including us

8. To examine the historic and contemporary importance of Israel. To recognize the primary importance of the secular movement in the establishment of modern Israel, and to be aware of the tension between the ideal that Israel represents and the reality that Israel experiences. The curriculum should espouse neither a pro- nor an anti- Zionist perspective, but should strive to present a multifaceted picture of Israeli history and contemporary Israeli life, including the problems facing all its diverse peoples

9. To examine how secular humanistic Judaism fits into the larger Jewish and humanistic communities - both secular and religious

10. To help each student answer the question, "Why (or why not) be part of a secular humanistic Jewish community in general and the Folkshul Jewish community in particular" and "Why (or why not) be part of any Jewish community?"

11. To acquaint students with Hebrew and Yiddish to enable them to savor the sense of their people's language, to participate in cultural treasures, and to build bridges to the history of preceding generations

12. To acquaint students with traditional and contemporary Jewish music and dance. To share and learn songs espousing the values we cherish- in English- as well as Hebrew, Yiddish and Ladino

Primary Grades Curriculum Objectives

The primary grades (Kindergarten through Second) celebrate being Jewish and expand the students' understanding of what it means to be Jewish and humanistic and secular. Classroom activities will emphasize our Jewish community and its culture including its customs, celebrations, values, songs, dances, foods, stories, heroes/heroines, etc. The students will be encouraged to create bonds with their classmates, their school and the larger secular Jewish community. The secular, humanistic Jewish values of love of learning, ethical action, Tzedakah, social justice, respect for life, love of life, personal responsibility for our actions and their consequences, pluralism and a rational, human-centered basis for thought and action will be emphasized throughout.

The curriculum will focus in a spiral fashion on the secular observance of Jewish calendar cycles (weekly, monthly, and seasonal), holidays and life cycles and on the daily practice of Jewish values. Each grade will use stories and other materials about a particular time period so that students are exposed to a wide range of Jewish thought, practice and literature and begin to get a sense of Jewish past and continuity. Stories of heroes and heroines living their Jewish values are encouraged to give a sense of pride and to provide role models.

Jewish Children's Folkshul – Curriculum

Kindergarten: The Jewish Life of Our Community

Kindergarten begins to expand the students' understanding of how they are Jewish, and how secular, humanistic Jews live their values. The students will explore the customs, practices, meanings and symbols for the secular celebration of the Jewish holidays and Observances. They will discuss the customs of each child's family to begin creating bonds with their classmates and to learn about pluralism and the acceptance of differences. They will explore how to be good family members, friends and classmates. The preferred source for curriculum material will be literature and other materials about modern times (Haskalah to the present). Descriptions of Biblical events will be limited to what is needed to understand secular celebrations. More complete descriptions and telling of Biblical events and stories will occur in Second and Third Grades.

First Grade: Living Our Values

First grade emphasizes how Jews express their values in their daily lives. Students will be exposed to heroes and heroines who exemplify positive Jewish values. They will look for examples within their family and friends, teachers and classmates. They will also explore the values and heroes/heroines associated with secular Jewish holidays and observances. The preferred source for curriculum material will be literature and other materials about post-biblical times up through the Middle Ages. Students will also explore what it was like for Jews to live during those times.

Second Grade: Marking Time

Second grade expands the students' understanding of how Jews mark time including when a day begins, calendars, life cycle celebrations and seasonal holidays. Students will explore the accuracy of the calendar and the relation of holidays to natural events (the seasons, full moons). Students will examine the antecedents of our seasonal holidays in Canaanite and other stories and celebrations. The preferred source for curriculum material will be literature, including the Bible, and other materials about Biblical times. Students will also explore what it was like for Jews to live during those times.

Intermediate Grades Curriculum

The intermediate grades (3 through 6) place the students' sense of Jewish identity, developed in Grades K-2, into historical context. The curriculum focuses on the history of the Jews and the development of secular humanistic values during that history. It emphasizes the positive aspects — Jewish achievements and contributions, and customs of daily life—but also considers the negative aspects, such as persecution and poverty. It provides an historical timeline for students to put events in a chronological perspective. It gives students a sense of their own Jewish identity as part of a rich and long tradition.

Third Grade: Archeological and Mythical Origins of the Jews

Third grade introduces the students to the beginnings of the Jewish people up through the conquest of Israel. Students will explore the current scientific hypotheses about the origins of the universe, humans and Jews. Students will then examine the biblical myths Jews created to explain where they came from and the reasons for their holiday, cultural and legal practices. Issues to be addressed may include: What was the culture of the Jews and their neighbors in ancient Israel? How do the myths compare with current historical and scientific knowledge? Who are the major individuals in the mythical origins?

Jewish Children's Folkshul – Curriculum

What is the mythical family tree? What are the ethical values that are demonstrated and / or violated in the stories?

Fourth Grade: Ancient History

Fourth Grade introduces students to ancient Jewish history, cultural contentions and values (particularly social justice) from the time of the judges through the Macabbis and creation of the two Talmuds. Students will examine the changes that occurred to a centrally controlled priestly religion in Israel followed by the changes to a locally controlled Rabbinic/Torah-centered religion of the Diaspora. Since much of the Bible was written during this period, students will examine how the realities and politics of this period got translated into stories about a much earlier time. They will also critically examine the internal inconsistencies that arose because of multiple writers or groups of writers with different agendas. Issues to be addressed may include: How did certain texts come to be “The Bible”? When were they written? What was left out? What can we know or speculate about the intentions of the authors? Is there evidence for Jewish polytheism? How did the Jewish polity interact with the major powers of the Mediterranean region? What do the Dead Sea Scrolls tell us about diversity within Judaism? Why was one splinter group of Jews (Christians) so successful within the Roman Empire? When and how did the Talmud become so authoritative? What happened to the Jews (Sadducees / Samaritans / Karaites) who rejected the Talmud? What did the rabbis offer in exchange for adherence to the oral law (immortality of the soul and an afterlife)?

Fifth Grade: Middle Ages to Democratic Revolutions

Fifth grade introduces students to Jewish history from the Middle Ages to the Democratic revolutions with an emphasis on the development of a powerful intellectual tradition that gives rise to our modern Jewish secular humanism. Students will be introduced to the wide dispersal of Jews, their economic successes and hardships, shtetl life and the role of education, religion and intellectual inquiry in preserving the sense of peoplehood among the Jews of the Diaspora. Issues to be addressed may include: What were the economic bases of Jewish life in the dispersion? Were Jews treated differently in Muslim and Christian countries? What were the intellectual traditions that developed in this period (Rashi, Maimonides, responsa)? What was distinctive about the history of the Jews in Spain (Golden Age, Inquisition, expulsion)? How did religion and ethnic identity relate to each other in this period? What were the most important written texts in this period and what did they mean to the Jews? How did the Jews live in the shtetl? How did the Haskalah change Jewish life?

Sixth Grade: Modern Times

Sixth grade introduces students to the history of the Jews in the modern age, including emancipation in Western Europe, involvement in and creation of various social movements (Zionism, socialism, Yiddishkeit, trade unionism), immigration to the United States (including the immigrant experience and the labor movement), and the establishment of the State of Israel. Issues to be addressed may include: Why did Jews decide to emigrate to the U.S.? To Israel? What does it mean to establish a Jewish state? How were and are different kinds of Jews and non-Jews included and excluded? What political movements did Jewish immigrants in the US become involved in, and why? How did Jewish life and religion change when people moved to the US and to Israel? How did the American Jewish experience in this period compare to the experiences of other groups in the US and with Jews in Palestine/Israel? What were the origins, ideals, and actuality of the Kibbutz movement? What was its relation to shtetl values? What has become of it today? How has the Middle East conflict affected Jews in Israel and elsewhere (Intifada, peace movement, effect of occupation on Jewish soul, influence of articulate, educated Israeli Arabs)

Jewish Children's Folkshul – Curriculum

Upper Grades Curriculum

Throughout the primary and intermediate grade curricula, secular and humanistic Jewish values have been identified, largely through the media of culture and history. In the upper level curriculum, these values are examined directly and in depth to enrich the students' understanding, to explore how these values both distinguish secular, humanistic Jews from and connect them to other types of Jewish communities; and to begin the process of determining whether and how these teachings are personally relevant.

Seventh Grade: Oppression, Resistance, and the Power to Effect Change

Seventh grade studies intolerance and prejudice and the actions that individuals and groups can take to counteract these forces. Students will examine historical and contemporary examples of the indignities and inhumanity that flow from intolerance and prejudice with an emphasis on the Holocaust. Students will seek to understand from a secular, humanistic perspective just why intolerance and prejudice are wrong; to gain insight into the kinds of cultural, political, and economic circumstances that foster these wrongs; and to develop strategies for changing those circumstances. Students will explore examples of resistance such as the Warsaw Ghetto, Bielski Partisans and American Jewry during 1930's; examples of righteous Gentiles such as Raoul Wallenberg and the Dutch; and examples of compliance such as that of many shtetl rabbis.

Eighth Grade: What is a Jew? What is a Secular, Humanistic Jew?

Eighth grade focuses on what it means to be Jewish and where secular, humanistic Jews fit within the larger Jewish community. Hence, one major component of the curriculum for this year is a summing up of the beliefs and principles of secular, humanistic Jews identified during the historical and cultural studies of the preceding grades. A second major component consists of comparing these beliefs and principles to those of other Jewish groups: religious (e.g., Reform, Conservative, Orthodox, Hasidic, Reconstructionist, Lubavich); secular (e.g., Sholem Aleichem, B'nai B'rith); political (e.g., Zionist, socialist, labor unions); and youth groups (e.g., Hillel). A part of this study will include a family tree (history) of the various groups and field trips to the meetings and celebrations of some of them. At the end of Eighth grade, students will pick the topics for the ninth grade.

Ninth Grade: Personal Relevance

Ninth grade will critically explore one or more topics selected at the end of eighth grade and reviewed at the beginning of ninth grade that is of particular interest and relevance to the students. Possible topics might be Jewish ethics such as those relating to sex, abortion, environmentalism, civil and political rights; Israel; Jewish identity through film, literature, and other forms of media and art. Students can be expected to engage in both individual and group research and presentations to the full class for discussion and debate, examining traditional and contemporary Jewish treatments.

Jewish Children's Folkshul – Curriculum

Social Action Curriculum Objective and Goals

- The objective of the social action curriculum at the Jewish Children's Folkshul is to connect our students to the long Jewish tradition and history of social action and other aspects of Tikkun Olam. Folkshul develops an awareness of social needs, a commitment to act, and the skills for acting to address those needs. We approach this through a secular humanistic philosophy that emphasizes independent and critical thought, the power of human beings to effect change, respect for the dignity of people and for the environment, our responsibilities to others, a feeling of community and the satisfaction we get from helping others.

Social action is composed of social service and working for social justice. Where social service focuses on alleviating the immediate manifestations of social injustice, working for social justice focuses on eliminating the underlying causes. Social service cleans up a park instead of lobbying for more staff; it brings food to a food pantry rather than working to eliminate the need for a food pantry. The strength of social service is that it provides recipients with immediate help and our students with a first hand awareness of social problems. The strength of working for social justice is that it provides recipients with longer-term solutions and our students with a sense of what is necessary for institutional change. In younger grades, social action should focus mostly on social service while in older grades it should focus more on working for social justice.

Goals:

- Students will develop a commitment to social action.
- Students will relate their social action efforts to Jewish history and to the Jewish tradition of working for social justice and other aspects of Tikkun Olam.
- Students will see social action as a mitzvah (duty) and not as a matter of charity (an optional gift).
 - Students will learn to imagine how the world might be improved, to see social justice as a vision of an ideal to work for and toward and not necessarily to accept things as they are.
- Students will develop skills to identify social injustices and their sources, both immediate and underlying.
- Students will develop the social action skills of communication, education, leadership, organization and the ability to seek and create imaginative solutions.
- Students will develop a sense of the variety of methods to achieve social justice goals.
- Students will recognize that a small social action project contributes to the larger goals of social justice and other aspects of Tikkun Olam.
- Students will learn primarily by doing.
- Folkshul will have community projects so that parents, teachers and other members of the community can act as role models for the students.