



*For Parents:
A New Holocaust Education Program*

We are very excited to bring a new program for teaching the Holocaust to our religious school. We will be using a comprehensive, age-appropriate curriculum based on stories of Jewish resilience. The program includes all ages, from Kindergarten through 8th grade, including Yom HaShoah programming.

What is new about this program?

The new program has several features:

1. **It is designed to be age-appropriate and non-traumatic.** At each age, we present only the aspects that the students can handle. We expect them to come out of these lessons sad but not traumatized.
2. **It is designed to tell the stories using the victim's voices, not merely the propaganda of the perpetrators.** The movies and information put out by the Nazis had an agenda – to dehumanize the Jews. When we look at the diaries of the victims and the stories told by survivors, we see a very different story – the story of Jews holding onto their culture and their humanity in the face of terrible evil and total chaos.
3. **It puts the people in their context.** Rather than presenting the idea of 6 million faceless people to whom horrible things were done, we present individual stories which include who these people were before the war and what happened to them after. This humanizes our story.
4. **It is thematic, rather than historical.** We concentrate on the spiritual resistance of trying to maintain a normal life in a world of chaos. Most importantly, we focus on how they worked to maintain their children's education and their Jewish practice.

Our key lesson in this program is that **the Holocaust is something that happened to us but it does not define us as Jews.** Rather, **understanding how they held onto their Judaism enriches our Judaism.**

Why do We Need to Talk to Young Children about the Holocaust?

We all acknowledge that we must remember what happened during the Holocaust. There are, of course, many reasons to remember: to guard against it ever happening to anyone again, to remember the lost families, to remember the lost cultures, to enhance our own practice of Judaism through an understanding of how they fought for theirs.

What is less clear is how we should teach it to our children. Many of us remember how difficult it was to learn about these horrors and the effect it had on us. Few of us want that for our children. When is the proper age to start discussing this? We do not want to traumatize our



students at any age. Trauma does not lead to learning but rather shuts it down. Everything we teach must therefore be age-appropriate.

We have chosen to follow the lead of Yad Vashem and the Teach the Shoah Foundation. The proper age to discuss the depth of the horror (the mass-murder, for instance) is high school. However, if we wait until high school to discuss the Holocaust at all, we give our students no foundation on which to lay this horror, leading to shock rather than understanding. We therefore must start discussing aspects of the Holocaust at a much younger age.

Discussing the Holocaust with young children takes careful planning. At the youngest ages, we can teach about ghettos and the loss of home or freedom, without teaching about the loss of family, which is much more difficult for them. The lessons we will be using are carefully aimed at each age group, designed to present age-appropriate material without being traumatic. By using these materials, we will give our students the foundation they need to be able to handle the more difficult material they will get in the high school program.

Our New Holocaust Program

- Grades K to 1: *To my dearest Tommy, for his Third Birthday in Terezin* (moving to the ghetto)
- Grade 2: *My Doll* (children in hiding)
- Grade 3: *I Wanted to Fly Like a Butterfly* (hiding with non-Jews)
- Grade 4/5: *Circles* (Jewish practice during the Holocaust)
- Grade 4/5: *Children in the Ghetto* (life in the ghetto)
- Grade 6: *Responsa from the Kovno Ghetto* (rabbinic responses to difficult questions)
- Grade 7: *Through Our Eyes* and *Return to Life* (overview of life before, the isolation of the Jews with the yellow star, the ghettos, the labor camps, and life after the war)
- Grade 8: *The Daughter We Had Always Wanted* (children hiding by pretending to not be Jewish and issues of Jewish identity)
- Yom HaShoah programs:
 - Grades Pre-K to 2: *Say Something* (an anti-bullying program)
 - Grades 3 to 5: *Keeping the Memory Alive* (a poster-session designed to allow the students to respond to what they have learned)
 - Grades 6 and up: *Light from the Darkness* (a seder-like ceremony designed to commemorate the Holocaust by focusing on its lessons)



How to Talk to Your Children about the Holocaust

As we begin to talk to your children about the Holocaust in Religious School, you can expect that they will bring home questions. Here are some pointers as to how to deal with some of these questions.

- **Most importantly, be open to all their questions and emotions.** These are difficult issues, and it is essential that they feel comfortable discussing them with the adults in their lives. If we make them feel like they cannot ask questions, already difficult issues will become traumatic. Be open to discussing what they have heard in class and listening to their feelings. Don't be surprised if one of the feelings they express is anger.
- **Try to keep your answers age-appropriate.** Remember that we are not trying to upset our children or make them cry. Remember also that it is not necessary for children to know the whole story at every age. They will learn the whole story eventually.

You may find that some of the questions they ask do not have age-appropriate answers, (e.g. if they have heard something from older students). The best way to deal with this is to answer the questions with short, flat answers (e.g. "Yes, that's true."). These types of answers, if delivered in a flat tone of voice, tend to discourage further questions. It is important to always answer the questions, however, and not give them the idea that they have brought up something that is shameful or too scary to discuss.

- **With younger children, try to maintain some safety nets.** Examples of safety nets (depending on the age of the children):
 - The stories we tell the younger children are about survivors – the children in these stories survived these experiences, grew up, and are mostly grandparents now.
 - This happened a long time ago, in a faraway land.
 - The children in the stories for the younger students (grades K-3) still had intact, loving families. Even the children living in the ghetto or in hiding (grades 4-5) had parents who loved them. Remember that an intact family and loving parents makes an enormous difference to the security of a child.
- **Do not ask your children to try to understand how it felt to experience these things.** We and our children cannot understand the incredibly difficult experiences these people went through, and the attempt is traumatic. Ask instead how they think the people in the story felt. This teaches empathy while maintaining distance.
- **Feel free to come to us if you have questions about how to deal with something your child brought home.** There are many additional sources and materials we can provide you with, along with support and help from our trained teachers and program leaders. Please do not feel as if you have to deal with these issues alone.