



THE JEWISH COMMUNITY STORY
A Curriculum Written By Steve Israel

The curriculum “The Jewish Community Story” was written by Steve Israel for the Jewish Agency for Israel, and it relates strongly to notions of Jewish Peoplehood. This project was intended as a tool with which to educate young Jews about the importance of community to Jewish identity. The rationale for this stems from the acknowledgement that for perhaps the first time in history, association with the Jewish community has become optional for Jews, and many, in turn, have been distanced from communal structures. The materials included in this curriculum seek to help students understand the history and dynamics of the Jewish community, to help them appreciate the community that surrounds them, and to encourage them to see it as a positive entity that in their deepened understanding and heightened awareness, they might wish to join and in which they might want to play an active part.

The curriculum is made up of four units, which include a total of seventeen distinct lessons/chapters. The four units are:

- Unit 1: Today's Jewish world: Demographics: where are the Jews today and how did they get there?
- Unit 2: The Historical Framework for understanding the community story
- Unit 3: The Dynamics of Jewish Community
- Unit 4: The Community Section: a look at communities around the world.

It should be noted that in its present form, the material has not yet been fully pedagogically developed. Additionally, information on individual Jewish communities may need to be updated somewhat, as it was written several years ago. Aside from these two points, the chapters are rich, detailed, educational, and ready for use.

B' Hatzlachah!

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RATIONALE:

The suggestion behind this program is that individual Jewish life and identity needs to be examined against the background of the frameworks of the collective and throughout Jewish history – especially in the Diaspora – the most important collective framework has been the Jewish community. The subject of Jewish community has long been recognized as an important component of Jewish identity. However, in recent generations the relationship between Jews and their community framework has changed radically. For much of Jewish history all Jews have defined themselves (or more accurately, have been defined) as belonging to the Jewish community. Today however we have a different reality. In the contemporary world Jews must choose consciously and voluntarily to belong to a Jewish community which itself needs to attract people to belong to it by providing services which are seen to answer needs. The community structure in most places has become a framework which struggles to attract Jews. The Jews themselves have become consumers of community services.

It can be suggested that part of the education of young Jews should include an understanding of the history and dynamics of the Jewish community to help them appreciate the community that surrounds them and to encourage them to see it as a positive entity that in their deepened understanding and heightened awareness, they might wish to join and in which they might want to play an active part.



DEVELOPING AN EDUCATIONAL KIT/BOOKLET

To this end the basis of a kit or a book on the subject of the Jewish community story has been prepared for youth and students and the hope is that it can be developed into an educational and/or pedagogic tool which can fill the need of providing perspective on the centrality of the Jewish community in the Jewish story – and especially the Jewish Diaspora story – and of encouraging deepening involvement of the individual with their own community and with other communities around the Jewish world.



EXISTING CONTENTS OF EDUCATIONAL KIT/BOOKLET

Under the auspices of the educational department of the Jewish Agency, the basis of an educational program has been prepared. As it exists presently, the program has seventeen chapters divided into four units.

The first unit introduces us to the Jewish world today, examining it from the demographic point of view. Where are the Jews today and how did they get there? That is chapter one.

The second unit, chapters two to four, attempts to provide a historical basis for understanding the community story. Chapter two deals with the ancient period. Chapter three deals with the medieval period in which the community reached its peak in terms of organization. Chapter four deals with the modern period.

The third unit, chapters five to seven, deals with the dynamics of the community, in a presentation which feeds off the historical framework provided previously. Chapter five deals with the rationale for Jewish community life. Chapter six deals with the structure and institution of the community before modernity and chapter seven introduces the transition to modernity and the changes in the structure and attitudes within the modern community.

The fourth unit looks at the situation in all sorts of different "national" Jewish communities today using a comparative schema of a series of prismatic questions applied to each community in turn which allows easy comparison between the different communities. The communities surveyed in this way are the U.S., Canada, Argentina, France, Hungary, Germany, South Africa, Australia and the United Kingdom. In the case of the last, in addition to the prismatic approach used for all the communities (including the U.K.) a narrative approach has been added telling the story of the community from a chronological point of view in order to allow a different more organic and less analytical approach to the subject of the development of the contemporary Jewish community.

THE EDUCATIONAL APPROACH TAKEN

In order to understand the approach taken, I present an excerpt from chapter two, which explains the strategy taken in the writing of the chapters, two to seven, the conceptual heart of the project.

"In order to get to our goal, which is nothing less than the attempt to understand the community in which we live and our place in that community, we need to leave our present time and place and go on a long journey. This journey will take us to many places in the world and we will roam over thousands of years of time. In a sense we will be on a quest, as detectives, to search out clues and to look for all the information that we need in order to fulfill our task...

We will have guides in our search. At all sorts of points in time and place, we will encounter individuals, leaders and community representatives of different kinds, who will help us understand the twists and turns in the story, offering us glimpses into the lives of their communities. Many are real historical individuals who existed in a particular time and place. Others are "type-figures" – representative anonymous individuals of the kind that indeed existed, but whom we have placed in our narrative in order to stand for a kind of Jew that we needed to meet. All of the monologues and dialogues are our own but represent, as closely as possible, the real historical situation at that time and place. Occasionally, we use a real historical document. When we do, we will make that fact clear and the quote is direct."



SUGGESTION FOR EDUCATIONAL/PEDAGOGIC DEVELOPMENT

At present, the material is written in an educational form but has not been pedagogically developed. As such, it can be published in its present form with only minor modifications and additions to update the material on the individual communities (which was written several years ago) and to add new material on the Russian and Israeli communities which are at present not included. However, the possibility develops of developing it pedagogically in a number of different ways, for different age groups. This can be done in an on-line form or within the conventional structure of an educational booklet or kit. In both forms, there can be a number of activity suggestions for each chapter or section, an educators guide can be added, and extra documents or visuals can be added, while cultural materials (literary, musical, artistic) can be used or developed.



TABLE OF CONTENTS



UNIT ONE: Today's Jewish world

Chapter one: Introduction: why does the modern Jewish world look the way it does: where are the Jews today and how did they get there?

UNIT TWO: The Historical Framework for understanding the Story.

- Chapter two: Going backwards, going forwards: The Jewish People's story, the early period.
- Chapter three: The race is on: The Jewish People's story, the pre-modern period.
- Chapter four: Towards the finishing line: The Jewish People's story, the modern period.

UNIT THREE: The Dynamics of Jewish Community

- Chapter five: Looking for a place to park or weary bones: the place and role of Jewish community in time and space.
- Chapter six: So what did the whole thing look like? The structure and institutions of the Jewish community.
- Chapter seven: How did we get to be us? Changes in the Jewish community after modernity.

UNIT FOUR: The Community Section

What are we trying to do here? Introducing the community section.

- Chapter eight: Community number one: the Jews of the United States.
- Chapter nine: Community number two: the Jews of Canada.
- Chapter ten: Community number three: the Jews of Argentina.
- Chapter eleven: Community number four: the Jews of France.
- Chapter twelve: Community number five – the Jews of Hungary
- Chapter thirteen: Community number six: the Jews of Germany
- Chapter fourteen: Community number seven: the Jews of South Africa
- Chapter fifteen: Community number eight: the Jews of Australia
- Chapter sixteen: Community number nine: the Jews of Great Britain
- Chapter seventeen: Community number nine again! The long version: the Jews of Great Britain

