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Smoothing The Rocky Middle Passage



"Middle-school kids have opinions and they want to voice them," said Debra Kerschner, left, Project Etgar coordinator. At right is Alex Weinberg, creator of Siddur Sim Shalom Remix 2.0.

by Merri Rosenberg
Special To The Jewish Week

Middle-school students are a tough group to teach. Neither as pliable as elementary school students, nor as independent as high school students, these 'tweens and young teens require a compelling approach to keep them motivated and enthusiastic.

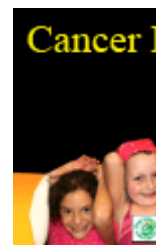
Two relatively new programs — Sim Shalom Siddur Remix 2.0, designed for day-school students, and Project Etgar, developed for sixth, seventh and eighth graders in Conservative congregational school settings — are designed to do just that.

A collaboration between the Melton Research Center of the Jewish Theological Seminary and the United Synagogue of Conservative Judaism, Project Etgar offers "a coherent curriculum that attends to the middle-school journey these kids are going through," said Deborah Miller, associate director of the Melton Research Center at JTS. "They need to be



taught and learn in ways that are different from younger children, or high school students. They're busy forming their own identity; they're less their parents' children." And it's not their parents' Hebrew school experience, either.

When they study kashrut, students shop for food, cook a meal and serve it. As part of the unit on bikkur cholim, students visit those who are ill and prepare get-well baskets for community members who are leaving the hospital. Or when it's time to learn about the Amidah, a central prayer of



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the liturgy that invokes collective Jewish ancestors, the teacher shows a clip from Disney's animated film "The Lion King," which features "The Circle of Life." "What's the deal with ancestors?" said Miller. "This provides an experience where the kids can share and reflect what it means to be connected to their ancestry, and what our ancestry teaches us about relating to God?"

To help students develop a personal Jewish identity, the curriculum provides opportunities for them to grapple with some challenging issues.

The recently launched Israel unit uses a variety of texts, including the Talmud, Tanach and contemporary Israeli Supreme Court rulings, to engage students in such issues as the Arab-Israeli conflict, poverty and the struggle within Israel between the secular and religious communities.

"We have a unique curriculum that makes the voices of Israel heard," said Miller. "We're not just celebrating the glories of Israeli daring and the kibbutz. It's looking at 'how does Israel define itself as a Jewish state?' What is the role of Judaism in a Jewish state where so many are secular? Israel is a complex place. These students have a stake in understanding Israel — many don't have any idea of the politics there, so this is a peek in."

The program was initially launched in January 2002 at eight schools around the country; there are now 25 Conservative congregational schools that use it. The curriculum features units on tefillah/prayer, family education and community service.

Because of the special needs of middle-school students, teachers play a slightly different role in carrying out the curriculum.

"Teacher training is critical to the success of the program," explained Debra Kerschner, coordinator of Project Etgar. "These are students who've been in religious school for a number of years. They like that it's interactive. Middle-school kids have opinions and they want to voice them. The teacher is not a 'sage from the stage'; instead, she's a 'guide from the side.' There's little lecturing. You need to have teachers who love middle school."

She added that because so many religious school teachers do it as an avocation, not a profession, having a script provided by the Etgar curriculum helps them with their jobs. That's been the experience for Nancy Parkes, education director for Temple Israel Center in White Plains, who uses the curriculum with her sixth graders.

"The biggest advantage both for our teachers and students is the training specifically for Etgar educators," she said. "The teachers feel very, very prepared teaching this, which benefits the educators and students. Every single lesson plan is done for our teachers. All the lesson plans are cooperative. For the most part, the students enjoy it. There was a learning curve in the beginning when the students worked with chevruta [partners] or in small groups. They're engaged."

Maintaining that same level of engagement was the idea behind Siddur Sim Shalom Remix 2.0, which began as Alex Weinberg's master's thesis for his long-distance learning program of the William Davidson Graduate School of Jewish Education at the Jewish Theological Seminary.

Designed to promote middle-school students' encounter with prayer, Weinberg said he developed this interactive siddur as "a reaction to some situations I had as a school director. I'd create fun, moving prayer experiences for kids and then it would be lost." When they learned the prayer about light, Weinberg, who is currently the director of the Rosenbloom Religious School at Chizuk Amuno Congregation in Baltimore, would fill the room with candles.

"I want them to have a conversation with the text," he said. "Prayer is the tool that saves our community. This needs to get out there. It all weaves together with solid, real skills to approach tefillah in a meaningful way, so they have an entirely different connection with God and their communities. It takes away the barriers."

While the outside of the siddur looks conventional, inside it's something else entirely. Designed like a scrapbook — yet one that contains every prayer — students can add their own experiences and memories, respond to challenging questions that Weinberg has developed to accompany the prayers, and engage with the siddur in a way that enables each of them to "create a personal theology."

There are sections labeled "What is Next," where students might be asked to design an acrostic using their names to describe what they're thankful for, or list actions that would enable people throughout the world to live in peace. Or when they read the Psuke D'Zimrah — the section of the morning prayer that focuses on music — the activity "Take it to the Text" asks them to consider why music is important when we pray. In the "Key Thoughts" section, students might be asked to consider how to praise God, or to think about God's works and how to "help" with accomplishing them.

Weinberg's innovative approach impressed the Rabbinical Assembly (the Conservative movement's rabbinical arm) enough for that organization to grant him approval to use the text for his student-based siddur, which was launched in September 2006.

"Alex is one of the most creative people I know in Jewish education," said Rabbi Steven M. Brown, dean of the William Davidson Graduate School of Jewish Education and director of the Melton Research Center for Jewish Education at JTS. "He's out of the box. This creates active learning. He understood the principles we were teaching. This is an

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