

SYNAGOGUE LIBRARIES

Reading Programs in a Religious School Setting

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Introduction

The publication of Judaic children's literature is booming. At the same time, our children are products of the video generation. How, then, can we encourage children to read more – and, in addition, get them to read and enjoy publications with Judaic content? This problem can be addressed directly in a Jewish day school curriculum on a day-to-day basis. In the one-day-a-week religious school setting, however, getting students to read "Jewish" books is much more difficult. Time is at a premium, as teachers cram as much instruction as possible into the short school day. And yet, literature is a nonconfrontational way to allow students to develop positive feelings about themselves and their Judaism.

At Temple Sinai in Atlanta, Georgia, we have attempted to introduce our students to Judaic literature through three different year-long reading programs. The congregation is twenty-four years old, with a membership of 520 families. The library became functional when the synagogue building was completed in 1973. There are approximately 3,500 volumes in the collection, including 1,000 volumes for children or young adults. There is a part-time staff librarian during the week, plus a school librarian on Sunday mornings. Two hundred-plus students, from grades K-7, attend religious school for 2 and 3/4 hours on Sunday. Children preparing for their bar/bat mitzvah also attend Hebrew school one afternoon per week. (Older students are on a different track and meet another day.)

The Programs

1. Double Mitzvah Reading Program¹

An eight-rung paper "ladder" is placed on the library wall. When a child reads a book, a paper ribbon with his/her name is hung on the bottom rung of the ladder. With each subsequent book read,

his/her name rises a rung on the ladder. Students are told that they are doing a double mitzvah, as when they reach the third and eighth rungs, a donation will be made in their honor to the Jewish Braille Institute. Thus the children help themselves by reading, and help others at the same time. Those who finish the program have their names placed in the "clouds" above the ladder and receive a certificate (see Figure 1). (The same certificate is used for programs 2 and 3.)

This year we recycled the Mitzvah Ladder as an "Ecological Jacob's Ladder," with birds, butterflies, owls, etc. for each grade level. Next year we plan to draw a kibbutz, with each grade represented by a different crop or animal.

2. People of the Book

This program is more complicated than the first. Children in each grade level are required to read a different number of books (more in lower grades, fewer in upper grades). In addition, the students are required to read a specific number of books in certain subject categories. Lists of recommended books are prepared, and the books are marked with color-coded dots indicating grade level. When a student reads a book, a "gingerbread" figure with his/her name is placed on the library wall (see Figure 2). As additional books are read, parts of the body are colored in. When the figure is completed, it is placed on the "People of the Book" scroll (similar to a Torah scroll) at the top of the wall.

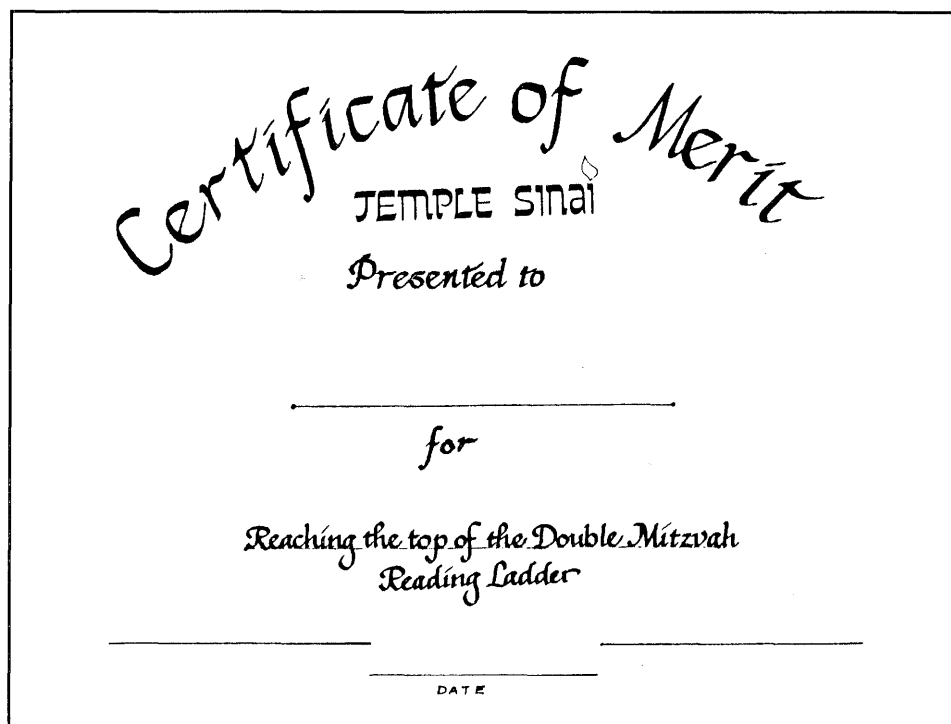


Figure 1

3. Sinai Speedway – Reading Road Race

A multilane speedway, with starting gates on the left and finish lanes on the right, is placed on the library wall. When a student reads a book, a race car with his/her name is placed on the track. With each subsequent book read, the car moves across the track. Once again, students at different grade levels are required to read different numbers of books. Cars finishing the program are lined up across the finish line in the winners' area. The instruction sheet for this program is in Figure 3.

Observations

1. For a reading program to be successful, library time must be incorporated into the Sunday curriculum. We allot twenty-minute periods, and classes are scheduled for library visits on a rotating basis. The library period includes a story and time for checking out books. The librarians are able to expose the students to the library and its resources during these visits. Every effort is made for this to be an open, upbeat, and pleasant experience. Children are encouraged, but not required, to check out books. Bibliographic skill-building is not taught.

2. Be prepared to expend time and energy to make a reading program work. In the first place, it takes a good deal of time to plan and set up the program. It must be well thought out in advance. Secondly, once the program has started, the book-keeping takes time. The students expect records to be up-to-date, and they look for their names on the wall chart.

3. Devise a system to validate that the student has indeed read what he/she says has been read. We do not require a conventional book report, but use a simple "book review" form for each program. The forms used for the various programs are in Figures 4-6. Such fill-in-the-blank forms provide us with enough information to confirm that a book has been read and that the student has thought about its content. Although we want this to be an easy program for the students to deal with, we monitor what they read so that they do not select books below their grade level. In fact, we challenge them to stretch themselves and read at a higher level.

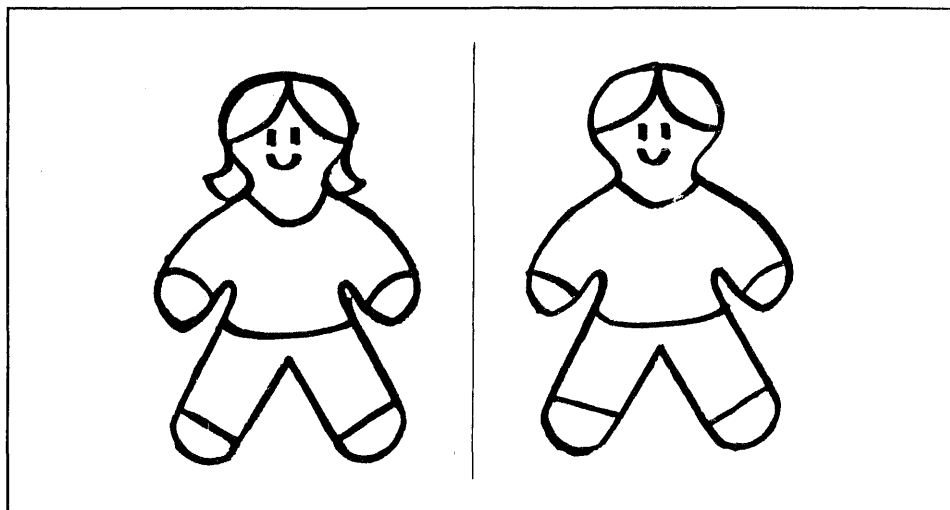



Figure 2. "Gingerbread" figures used in People of the Book Reading Program.

TEMPLE SINAI LIBRARY



**SINAI SPEEDWAY
READING ROAD RACE**

"Drivers start your engines!" The 1990-1991 Temple Sinai Reading Program is ready to begin!! Zoom your way through a year of good reading as you speed along the Sinai Speedway in the great Reading Road Race !!! Follow your progress and that of your classmates and friends as you drive to the checkered flag.

1. To enter the race you must read a book from the Temple Sinai Library and return a completed book review form. The forms are available in the Library. We require that the book be on your reading level and of Judaic content. Completed book review forms are required for all books read during the race.
2. Students at each grade level are required to read a certain number of books. As you complete books during the year, your progress in the race will be shown on the Speedway which is located in the Library. Cars are color coded as to grade.
 - K = 8 books (yellow)
 - 1 = 7 books (purple)
 - 2 = 6 books (green)
 - 3 = 5 books (red)
 - 4 = 5 books (blue)
 - 5 = 4 books (orange)
 - 6 = 3 books (brown)
 - 7 = 3 books (peach)
3. When you have read the required number of books and returned book review forms for them all, you will cross the Finish Line and be a Sinai Speedway - Reading Road Race WINNER !!! All winners will be invited to a special party at the end of the school year.

Figure 3

4. Progress in the reading program should be presented in a visual manner. This allows a student to follow his/her progress and to see how he/she is doing in relation to other students. We use an eight-foot-wide section of wall in the library for this purpose. Such creative charting catches the attention of the students, as well as that of parents and other library patrons.

5. Entry into the reading program should be voluntary. Compulsory participation may be self-defeating and negate the stated purpose of developing positive feelings towards the library and reading. We recognize all who enter the program at the end of the school year with a certificate; those who finish the program are rewarded with a party.

6. Do not expect as much response from the older children as from the younger students. Those older students who are "readers" will read, but do so for their own purposes. If we have done our job, these students will have acquired a positive feeling regarding the library as well as basic knowledge of what it contains. We encourage our older students to use the library for researching term papers and preparing projects for their day-school classes.

7. Statistics indicate our programs have been successful. In our second year, 46% of the student body participated in the program, and 35% of those participating finished the program. The third year, 51% of the student body participated, 33% of those participating finishing. We consider these percentages indicators of success because (a) without the programs the students would read far fewer books, and (b) not all books read are reported to the librarian.

Temple Sinai Library	
READ A BOOK / DO A MITZVAH PROGRAM	
Book Report Form	
Name of Student: _____	
Grade: _____	Teacher: _____
Title of Book: _____	
Author: _____	
Rate the Book:	<input type="checkbox"/> Fantastic! <input type="checkbox"/> Just So-So <input type="checkbox"/> A Good Read <input type="checkbox"/> The Pits
Why: _____ _____ _____	
OPTIONAL:	
Pick ONE of the following to complete your report. Use the back of this sheet or additional paper, as necessary:	
1. Write a letter to the main character commenting on events that occur in the book.	
2. Draw a comic strip depicting the story told in the book.	
3. Write about the reaction of a space traveler who in the year 3001 found this book and read it.	
4. Write a brief account of the story to replace the one found on the flyleaf of the cover.	
5. Draw an ad that would entice others to read the book.	
6. Interview a character in the book and either turn in an audio tape of that interview or write up the interview as it would appear in the newspaper.	

Figure 4



PEOPLE OF THE BOOK

BOOK REVIEW FORM

Fill in all blanks possible & return to the library.

1) YOUR NAME: _____

2) GRADE: _____

3) AUTHOR: _____

4) TITLE: _____

5) TIME OF STORY: _____

6) PLACE: _____

7) MAIN CHARACTER(S): _____

8) WHAT YOU REMEMBER BEST ABOUT THE BOOK: _____

9) RATE THE BOOK: ___ INCREDIBLY GREAT
 ___ A GOOD READ
 ___ NOTHING TO GET EXCITED ABOUT

10) SUBJECT AREA: _____

Teachers have been cooperative and bring their students to the library at unscheduled times to check out books. Parents have been supportive of the library's involvement in the school program. In evaluating the three programs, we found the first one too unfocused and the second one too complicated to administer. Profiting from our experience, the third program was the best balanced in terms of its attractiveness to the students and its ease of administration. We plan to continue the three programs, with modifications to make them as attractive as possible to the children and as easy as possible to administer.

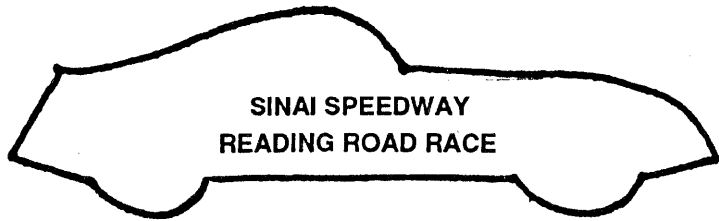
Conclusion

Catching the attention of children attending a once-a-week religious school in a noncompulsory program takes creativity and ingenuity. Plans must be thoroughly thought out, realistic, and flexible. In the case of a library reading program where the intent is to support and supplement the curriculum, this is a true challenge. We at Temple Sinai have endeavored to do this, keeping in mind our goal: to enhance in a positive and pleasant manner the breadth and depth of the student's Jewish knowledge, and in the process stimulate his/her interest in Judaic literature and literature in general.

Note

1. Adapted from "Read a Book; Do a Mitzvah," by Lillian N. Schwartz, *Judaica Librarianship* vol. 4, no. 1, (Fall 1987 - Winter 1988), p. 100-101.

Figure 5



**SINAI SPEEDWAY
READING ROAD RACE**

BOOK REVIEW FORM

NAME: _____

TEACHER: _____ GRADE: _____

TITLE: _____

AUTHOR: _____

What was most important that you learned from the book? _____

What did you like the most about the book? _____

What did you like least about the book? _____

Would you recommend the book to a friend? Yes ___ No ___

Why? _____

Sara S. Deitch holds an M.Ln. degree from Emory University. Since 1988, she has been staff librarian at Temple Sinai Library (Atlanta), with which she has been associated since starting there as a volunteer in 1968. Ms. Deitch invites librarians interested in starting a reading program to write her in care of Temple Sinai, 5645 Dupree Drive, Atlanta, GA 30327.

Figure 6