

Looking at the Bright Side
Chayei Sarah - 5784

This morning was rough on me. As I learned about the Texas State Board of Education passing – narrowly – the Bluebonnet Learning curriculum, my heart sank, and my stomach felt like it had a rock in it. For those of you that don't know, let me explain this curriculum. It is a kindergarten to 5th grade curriculum in which school districts can choose to adopt – and if they do, they will receive up to \$60 a student from the state. The struggle with the material in the curriculum itself is that it is full of Biblical references, which include Jesus' Sermon on the Mount. The curriculum does not teach about all religions but as Christianity as the *correct* answer with lines that are considered a profession of faith. For months, organizations like the Jewish Community Relations Council of San Antonio or JCRC, have been lobbying for revisions and painstakingly sending these in – fulfilling hundreds of pages of paperwork to do so. Not all of the revisions were accepted and so the curriculum is still not balanced, introduces Christian concepts like resurrection, the blood of Christ, and the Messiah as Jesus at a very young age. The Supreme Court has ruled that public schools can teach about religion but cannot prioritize one over another. This curriculum blurs that line completely, even after some of the changes were accepted.

This curriculum highlights our differences in a style that ranks Christianity as the best, as the truth. It is stated as a fact that Mary had a son, Jesus, that would be the Messiah (with a capital M). It is stated that the Crusades brought about many positive things and ignores the murder of Jews and Christians – it then asks students to think about how they could be Crusaders. There are references to the “Bible” without explaining that some of it is actually from the New Testament and so not everyone's Bible. As Rabbi Nathan said in a Jewish Telegraphic Agency article, “It's not presented as, ‘Here's what Christians believe’...It's presented as, ‘Here's the truth.’ There's a difference.”¹

For a few months now, we at Temple Beth-El have been taking action – and you've probably seen the emails and social media blasts. On Tuesday, after the preliminary vote won in favor of this curriculum, we asked our congregants to write to two State Board members to plead with them to vote no. We didn't ask people to tell us if they wrote the letter, but at our most recent count, we are estimating that 100 people sent a letter in – just from Temple. These letters represented our diverse congregation – there were people from all political backgrounds, genders, sexual orientations, races, economic backgrounds, religions, and ages. On Wednesday, we encouraged our teens send the letters from their email addresses, in which, some, added their own paragraphs about their own dealings with antisemitism and fear that this curriculum would exacerbate it.

The reality is that we love learning about different religions and cultures. Our 8th graders, under the direction of our new 8th grade teacher, David Schlenker, are learning about world religions within the context of Judaism and on Wednesday had the opportunity to learn about the Jewish community in India while making a special dish from that region. In just a few weeks, they will be heading to the Sikh Temple to learn even more. Now, this is different, we are not a public school – this is our supplementary religious school. But, we still hold the tenants of learning, not from a place of how we think we are better as Jews, but understanding our differences. Because to understand our differences, better allows us to see our commonalities.

As disappointed, scared, enraged, and frustrated as I am about this, Ross Halfant reminded me that I need to look at the positives. His list of positives were:

¹ <https://www.jta.org/2024/11/22/united-states/texas-jews-are-deeply-concerned-about-christian-material-in-proposed-public-school-curriculum>

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- 1) We had so many people involved in this from all different backgrounds – including non-Jews who are connected to Temple, like staff or partners of members.
- 2) We engaged our teens in something to show them how easy it can be to contact elected officials to share our voice, even if we didn't "win" this one.
- 3) This is something we can try to attack from the local district level, just like we did for the Chaplain Bill where our members testified in front of their School Board members and asked them to not allow for chaplains to be counselors in the schools, which, in most of the districts was followed.
- 4) Louisiana's law requiring classrooms to display the 10 Commandments has been blocked by a federal judge and will probably move up the chain to the Supreme Court, so the same thing could happen with this curriculum.
- 5) The curriculum was only passed by a narrow majority – 8 to 7.
- 6) We came together, not just as a Jewish community, but as a Texas community to put efforts into opposing this curriculum. Dr. Lisa Epstein from the JCRC worked on revisions and testified twice. Ross and congregant Barbara Baruch also testified twice and Rabbi Nathan once. We worked with organizations of all sizes and backgrounds – and religions – to try to move the needle.

He's right, but it felt like we "lost" this time. Honestly, a reality of lobbying for what we want with elected officials – not everything will be a "win" in the sense that something passes or doesn't pass that we lobbied for or against. Instead, I have learned from my work with community organizing that creating community and uniting for a common cause is a win in and of itself.

In this week's Torah portion, Chayei Sarah, it begins by saying "And the life of Sarah was a hundred and seven and twenty years; these were the years of the life of Sarah." (Genesis 23:1) Part of it seems normal in the sense that this portion discusses the life of Sarah, and it makes sense that it would start out by saying how old she was at her death. But, why, then does it repeat "these were the years of the life of Sarah?" Rashi, a medieval commentator, explains that this phrase wasn't a repetition at all, but it was stating that "all of [her years] were equally good."² It's a really great sentiment, but is it really possible? In just 12 chapters, Sarai was held hostage by Pharaoh after her husband, Abram pretended she was his sister; she was barren; she told her husband to find a new woman to have a baby with so that he would have heirs; she kicked out that new mother and son; she got pregnant at the young age of 90; she found out her husband was about to sacrifice her son; and those are just the highlights. Could she really be happy every day and each of her 127 years be equally as good when she has endured all of this? Nope, probably not happy *every* day or *each* year. The same goes for us.

Rabbi Jonathan Sacks, of blessed memory, explains that "To be happy does not mean that you have everything you want or everything you were promised. It means, simply, to have done what you were called on to do, to have made a beginning, and then to have passed on the baton to the next generation."³

The reality is that this curriculum impacts the next generation – most of us are not in elementary school right now. But, you know what? We recognized that and said that we are willing to fight for the next generations. "Lao-Tzu, the Chinese sage, said that a journey of a

² Rashi on Genesis 23:1:2

³ <https://www.929.org.il/lang/en/page/23/post/37626>

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thousand miles begins with a single step. To that Judaism adds, “It is not for you to complete the work, but neither are you free to desist from it” (Avot 2:16).”⁴

The biggest win from this horrible failure of a curriculum? Watching the teens on Wednesday night learn how to advocate for themselves, their future, and the future of younger children. It was powerful seeing them understand how scary this curriculum could be for themselves, the kids they are madrichim for on Sundays, and everyone else around them. It was heartbreaking to have them connect their current experiences in school with how much it could be exacerbated by a curriculum that emphasizes Christianity and increases the chances of antisemitism. It was empowering to know that Ross and I will be taking these very same teens to Austin in April to be able to speak face-to-face with elected officials about the things they find important. And, finally, it was inspiring as they recognized that they won’t be able to finish the work, but that doesn’t mean they can stop now.

Let us all take that win with us as we move forward to look out for the next generations. Shabbat Shalom.

⁴ Ibid.