INTRODUCTION TO JUDAISM FOR EVERYONE

Name of Congregation: Temple Beth-El
Address: 211 Belknap
          San Antonio, Texas 78212
Phone Number: (210) 733-9135
Number of Members: 1,220
UAHC Region: Southwest Council
Rabbis: Samuel M. Stahl, Barry H. Block, B. Allison Bergman
Outreach Chairpersons: Christina Weinfeld, Leslie Selig Byrd

Brief Description: In the spring of 2001, Temple Beth-El made a simple but significant change to our conversion program by offering our Introduction to Judaism course, the 15-week course required for conversion, as “Religious School for Adults” on Sunday morning during religious school for children. This change has injected new vitality and excitement into what was already a very successful conversion program, and may easily be replicated by other congregations.

In the past, the Introduction to Judaism class was held on a weekday evening every semester. In addition to those attending for conversion purposes, some Temple members usually attended to increase their knowledge of Judaism. At the same time, the Temple had been offering Sunday morning adult education classes on a variety of topics usually running four weeks each. This was set up primarily for parents of children in Religious School (since many are at the Temple anyway), but, with many attending who do not have children in Religious School, overall attendance was very high. Based partly on the large Sunday morning turnout, the rabbis, with input from the Outreach Committee, decided to experiment with holding the Introduction to Judaism class in that time slot, to give people who might not be available on a weekday evening the opportunity to attend the class. By alternating the course between Sunday mornings each spring and Wednesday evenings each fall, people who want to attend have more scheduling options.

Years ago the standard protocol throughout the Jewish community was to hold conversion classes in near secrecy, with conversion candidates essentially segregated from the rest of the congregation. At Temple Beth-El as elsewhere, there was little opportunity for interaction between members of the congregation and conversion candidates. With the advent of UAHC National Outreach Department, the Introduction to Judaism course got its new name and was more widely advertised. We at Temple Beth-El have taken another step by offering the course as our Religious School for Adults course for the congregation at a popular time. In other words, we have totally mainstreamed our conversion candidates.

The mutual exposure has been beneficial to both groups. By including conversion candidates in an ongoing class with temple members, they become a part of the temple family even before their conversion. In developing relationships with temple members, they are welcomed into the Jewish world by those who have a clear sense of their own Jewish identity and can communicate the meaning of their heritage in their own lives. Although other activities are available that are designed to bring Jews-by-choice into the temple family, merging the Introduction to Judaism class with ongoing adult education has enabled both groups to make friendships more naturally during the course of their studies. For many temple members, studying with conversion candidates has de-mystified the conversion process.
Frequent interaction also allows stereotypes about conversion candidates to dissolve, as temple members see the conversion candidates as complex individuals pursuing conversion for a variety of reasons.

**Program Goal:** To build a bridge between the conversion candidates and the general temple community by bringing both groups closer to Judaism through study.

**Target Population:** Conversion candidates, their partners, and all members of Temple Beth-El who wish to deepen their knowledge of Judaism.

**Number of Participants:** Between 8 and 20 conversion candidates (those considering conversion at the beginning of the course, whether or not they actually convert) and their partners attend Introduction to Judaism classes each semester. During the spring 2001 semester, 20 to 30 temple members have attended each class for adult education purposes, a significant increase over attendance in previous semesters.

**Number and Length of Sessions:** 15 classes, generally one class per week, each 2½ hours.

**Staffing Required:** Note that the adult education/conversion program involves time and effort not only by temple staff but also by volunteers from within the general temple membership. Importantly, the efforts of these volunteers increase the mutual exposure between the conversion candidates and members of the congregation.

Temple Staff: Each of Temple Beth-El’s three rabbis teaches a component of the course, with two rabbis teaching a separate part of each class session. In addition to teaching, the rabbis prepare a packet of materials for the course each semester. Each rabbi also meets at least once during the semester with each conversion candidate. Support staff provide a wide range of administrative assistance: they put together the course materials, register the students for the course, order the books, sell the books to the students, and assist with scheduling meetings between the rabbis and the conversion candidates. Custodial staff set up the classroom with chairs and light refreshments.

Volunteers: Members of the Outreach Committee interface with the class at different junctures. Every fall, the committee holds a reception on the first day of class for students in the Introduction class. Beginning with the spring 2001 class, the committee holds a reception during an orientation session for those students in the class who are actively pursuing conversion. The committee also sponsors numerous holiday activities throughout the year targeted largely to the conversion candidates. Committee members, along with other temple members, host conversion candidates at their home for a Shabbat or holiday dinner during the semester. Yachad, our Religious School’s Parent-Teacher Organization, prepares the bagels and juice that are provided to the Religious School for Adults classes held on Sunday mornings. The temple Sisterhood hosts a small reception in honor of the conversion candidates immediately following the conversion ceremony.

**Total Cost of Program:** Most of the cost of Religious School for adults is in rabbinical salaries. Other costs include administrative and custodial staff salaries. Salaries cannot be broken out.

**Source of Funding:** Temple Beth-El Annual Budget.

**Fee for Attendees:** No fee; students responsible only for procuring the books required for the course

**Logistics:** Materials include the books (read at home – students do not need to bring to class); occasional use of bibles and siddurim (kept in the classroom); occasional handouts (distributed in
class). A classroom in the temple is set up by custodial staff. Refreshments include coffee, water, and (on Sunday mornings) bagels and orange juice. Group discussion sessions are also held in the temple, generally in a classroom, and set up with the help of custodial staff and with light refreshments provided.

**Instructions to Facilitator:** Religious School for Adults, as well as the entire conversion program, is run by Temple Beth-El’s rabbinical staff. Each month, the upcoming topics for the Introduction to Judaism course are announced in the temple Bulletin (see attached), so Temple members who want to attend for adult education purposes can pick from a variety of topics.

**Evaluation of Program:** One means of evaluating the effectiveness of the conversion program itself is the completion of the conversion requirements and of course eventual conversion for those who want to do so. A true evaluation of the effectiveness of merging the Introduction to Judaism course with the ongoing adult education will be an assessment of how well and how comfortably conversion candidates become active temple members. In the past, we have informally observed that many of those who came to the temple through the conversion program have become active temple members, serving in leadership roles on various committees, the Board of Trustees, and in our religious school. Many are also active within the wider San Antonio Jewish community. However, with the additional opportunities for early connections between the conversion candidates and temple members through study together, we expect that the process for new Jews-by-choice to become fully integrated into the temple and wider Jewish community will be smoother and more seamless than it has been in the past. We are looking forward to the opportunity to gauge the effectiveness of this major change to our conversion program.

**Follow-up:** Merging the Introduction to Judaism class with ongoing adult education has enabled both groups to make meaningful connections during the course of their studies. As a result, the conversion candidates already find attending Shabbat and holiday services and onegs more comfortable as they see many faces they already know from class.

**Follow-up Opportunities:** Our ultimate goal is the integration between conversion candidates and new Jews-by-choice and the general Temple membership. For new Jews-by-choice, couples in interfaith marriages, and new members of the Temple this may mean involvement or participation in any of a number of Temple activities, including worship, committee or board membership, study sessions, religious school, community service, and social events.