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Contributed by Administrator

In Their Own Words:

Responses to Constructivist Online Teacher Education in the Area of

Spirituality, Ritual, and Prayer in the Jewish Early Childhood Classroom

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"We teachers become the model and our faith the template. No matter what stage or state we are in spiritually, our kindness and goodness create the raw material for the children in our care. We become the touchstone for "grace said before meals"; we become "the family experience". Our Hamotsie, Shabbat, Sh'ma, Havdallah, talk about Mitzvot, our stories from the Torah, and our everyday reactions to life, (the visible faith of significant adults) become the medium in which young children get to experience their faith"(Student, Session 5, 2010).

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## Introduction

Many teachers in Jewish early childhood programs do not have an adequate background in either Judaic knowledge or up-to-date information about theories and practices in the field of Jewish early childhood education (Beck, 2002; Vogelstein, 2002). Teachers, who can come from a variety of Jewish and non-Jewish backgrounds, also do not often have the opportunity to engage in self-reflection and awareness of their own reactions to the material that they may be asked to convey (Vogelstein, 2008; Padva, 2008). The Online Certificate in Jewish Early Childhood Education at Gratz College was developed to help meet the needs of teachers in

Jewish early childhood programs in terms of 1)awareness of fields of Jewish study and how these areas relate to foundational concepts in early childhood education, 2)current thinking in the field of early childhood education at large and 3)a safe place in which to explore their own attitudes, values, and beliefs regarding topics essential to Jewish early childhood education.

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This paper presents the writings of a cohort of teachers who decided to engage in further study of Judaism and their role in the lives of young children in the Certificate program. In this process, they also unhesitatingly plunged into a deep examination of their own beliefs, values and attitudes. This paper, necessarily limited in what the author has learned from this group during the course "Spirituality, Ritual, and Prayer in the Jewish Early Childhood Classroom," attempts to describe aspects of their learning process using their own words, with an overlay of the structural elements that were used in the facilitation of their explorations.

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In the Literature

Several studies have indicated that most teachers in Jewish programs for young children have a low level of Judaic knowledge and/or are not aware of appropriate ways to integrate Jewish learning into the daily lives of their classroom children (Beck, 2002; Vogelstein, 2002, Miller, 2005 ). The educators (both directors and teachers) also have not had sufficient training in engaging parents, or in creating a Jewish community within the school (Hendler, 2002; Vogelstein, 2002; Miller, 2005). The institutions housing these programs frequently do not support the professional development necessary to optimize the opportunities that they can provide nor sufficiently reward teachers who pursue advancing their knowledge and skills. In the area of prayer, specifically, research on the effectiveness of developing classroom practice by working with educators is difficult to find. There are materials for assisting adults in creating prayer experiences for young children that invite adults to examine their own approaches to (Feldstein, 2010; Miller, 1991), but not research on what happens as the result of an intensive course on Jewish concepts to both teachers and their classroom children.

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There does exist a burgeoning area of research on the use of social constructivist learning theory to develop techniques in early childhood education that promote the development of meaning as well as the acquisition of knowledge (Beck & Kosnick, 2006). A review of constructivist learning theory is not within the purview of this paper, but information about techniques that are derived from this approach will be found in the Methodology and Data sections below. These techniques were used in the development of this college course.

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It must also be noted that the work undertaken by the International Research Group on Jewish Education in the Early Years for the University of Haifa and the Van Leer Jerusalem Institute represents an

important step in moving the state of serious study in the field of Jewish early childhood education forward. It is hoped that, with the establishment of this group, the serious research lacunae in our field will be addressed.

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Research Questions

What are the apparent effects of a constructivist theory-based distance learning course about spirituality, ritual and prayer in the Jewish early childhood classroom on teacher attitudes, values, and beliefs, and classroom practices as revealed by journal writing? What reasons might be hypothesized for the appearance or non-appearance of these effects and changes?

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Background

In order to understand the responses of the teachers in context, it is necessary to review the philosophical and structural components of the course that provoked and facilitated these responses.

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Philosophy

Social constructivist learning theory was used to present traditional Jewish perspectives, values, rituals, and concepts in the course content. As stated in Beck and Kosnick (2006),

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"At the school level, social constructivism implies a form of learning in which students are fully engaged, find the process meaningful, and relate ideas to the real world to a considerable extent. Only in this way can they participate in constructing their knowledge and acquire the habits that make them lifelong learners. The teacher fosters a culture in the classroom that supports critical and productive inquiry. There is a strong sense of community and much collaborative learning...This...ensures the depth of understanding and experience needed for knowledge construction" (p.2)

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Throughout the learning experience, students were encouraged to follow their own interests within the general areas of study, to use and share their particular learning gifts, and to apply their learning directly to the classroom. Reflection, productive disagreement, experimentation, and sustaining disequilibrium while learning were also promoted as essential to the learning process (Beck and Kosnick, 2006). The specific skills sets were derived from constructivist learning theory that applied to this study included (DeBries, et al, 2002):

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Observation of the learners to create a negotiated curriculum

Â·Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â
Building on previous knowledge

Â·Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â
Engaging the interests of the learner

Â·Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â
Encouraging questions

Â·Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â
Relying on holistic experience

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Using small and large groups for sharing knowledge

Obviously, several elements that are important to this theory were not included due to time and space requirements, such as the role of collegiality and the impact of the physical environment. These elements certainly played a role in the experiences of the students and the instructor, but will not be reported here.

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Course Structure

The course structure reflects the interaction between Judaism and social constructivism. The course title was Spirituality, Ritual and Prayer in the Jewish Early Childhood Classroom:

Daily Practices and Shabbat. The course description and a list of titles can be found in Appendix A.

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Description of Students

General characteristics only will be included in order to protect the identity of the students. It should be noted that aliases have been ascribed to individuals for this same purpose, and permission to use students' work was obtained in writing.

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The ten students in this course were all women, were of Jewish or other faiths, and ranged in age from 30 to 56. Those that were Jewish had a variety of backgrounds and levels of practice. Â Some were born Jewish, others were Jews by

choice. The institutions at which they worked were Conservative or Reform synagogues or JCCs. While the distribution of these characteristics in the group studied may not statistically reflect the group of Jewish early childhood educators in North America, they appear to be representative of the professionals in the field in general.

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Several factors, however, may have made this group unique. First, each educator had to apply to the Online Certificate in Jewish Early Childhood Education, which included filling out an application and submitting to an interview. The members thus selected agreed to meet once a month, and also to attend several one or two day retreats during the course of the Certificate program. By the time they took this course, these students had already experienced two semesters of work together. The sequence of coursework already undertaken by this group of educators, and their becoming accustomed to the social constructivist approach of the overall program, must be considered when reviewing the results of this particular course.

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Methodology

The journal entries and final projects of teachers (henceforward referred to as students) for a course on teaching prayer to young children were first subjected to selective coding based on the categories below. These categories relate to the specific research question.

Â·Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â
Personal beliefs and attitudes toward spirituality, ritual and prayer

Â·Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â
Discoveries about Jewish perspectives about spirituality and God

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Awareness of the spiritual development of young children

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DevelopmentÂ  of classroom practices based on constructivist learning theory that can be used to support the development of spirituality, ritual, and prayer

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The first three categories will be reviewed as they relate to the first five sessions of the course, which focused on the topics involved. The final category will primarily be explored using entries from the remaining sessions, which were concerned with continuing learning as it was rendered into practice. Finally, a hypothesis was developed in an attempt to explain the interactions between personal beliefs, values, attitudes, and classroom practices based on the data points discovered in the coding(Creswell, 2007).

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Data

Session 1Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â
Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â  Spirituality

The comments in this session, which focused on the meaning of spirituality to the students, related primarily to their initial beliefs and attitudes toward spirituality, ritual and prayer. The following topics emerged out of the coding process.

Many students expressed surprise at their own reactions to being asked to describe what spirituality meant to them. In the process, they discovered feelings and ideas of which they were unaware, and that they then used to reinterpret themselves.

"I guess I have never really reflected much on spirituality although I usually label myself as in the "not religious, but spiritual" category. I was struck with the many ways there are to live a spiritual existence. The working towards social justice feels like how my own spirituality plays out most of the time. I'm working to do good things in my life and help others. ...this bringing me a sense of my own inner peace."

The role of spirituality in making meaning out of life was also a recurrent theme:

"Humans are constantly trying to connect to something larger - it's so hard to think these brief years we have to live all are there are, we want our short time on this Earth to mean something.Â  Thus, our need for meaning-making - to make some kind of sense out of it all, perhaps our need to create order from chaos (another attempt at meaning-making).Â  The elements of mystery and awe make our attempts compelling, joyful, beautiful - in short, are what make us continue seeking the answer to the question â€˜what is it to be human?'"

The use of the everyday world to reach transcendence was marked in the students' responses:

To reach a higher plane of transcendence or immanence ..., we often have to practice more mundane and practical forms to get to the more ephemeral outcome of spiritual fulfillment... We all must find our own spiritual paths, mine happens to be one rooted in concrete details but through the medium of prayer, art, music and human connections.Â  Through these, I am able to experience God and bring the sacred into my life.

This is an important perception for teachers of young children who rely on sensory experience to discover spirituality.

Students also struggled with their perceptions of the conflict between spirituality and religion, and their worry that approaching prayer and ritual would limit rather than support spiritual development:

Â "Spirituality, to me, is a moment of clarity, uncomplicated, when we are as in touch with the wonder, the magic, the beauty of the animating force in the world as a child. Religion attempts to get us there, sadly too often with resounding failure. Approaching spirituality through "acquiring knowledge, constructing knowledge" (Tisdale), or through proscribed prayer, ritual, study, even meditation (Arthur Green) for many of us only serves to intimidate us, distance us; gets in the way of a natural aptitude for d'vekut, (cleaving to god). Sonsino (Jewish Lights Spirituality Handbook, p.9) quotes Dr. Martin Cohen that spirituality is "the effort... to attune to the impulses and rhythms of the universe..." .... A child, unencumbered, seems to have an affinity for God without making any effort at all."

This category of interest continued to surface during the class, with changes in attitude.

Session 2Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â
Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â  God concepts

The comments in this session, which presented Jewish perspectives on God and spirituality, fell primarily into the following category of discoveries about Jewish perspectives about spirituality and God. This was clearly a very challenging topic for the students. They were required only to read, listen, talk, and ask questions, and not necessarily to express a belief system. They were forthright about their personal struggles with concepts about God:

In the last ten years I have had times when I felt very close to God. Other times I have felt as far away as possible. It is a struggle to maintain a balance in the relationship. The pendulum swings in both directions. As my faith grows I then become complacent, and suddenly I cannot relate to G-d, I wonder if it is all for naught. Then when I'm feeling dried up and distant, a warmth, a light, a sense of mystery and wonder wash over me and I find myself again on the journey to experience the Divine.

And also:

I find that I constantly have to mentally

"translate" writing about "G*d" into writings about god!
There is so much that is anthropomorphic and otherwise outside of my direct experience that I feel like a stranger in this milieu. But I have my own ideas and feelings about god, and feel confident talking to children about my excitement and joy about all that "god" is.

Concerns about talking about
God were not limited to personal beliefs. There were many comments indicating worry about constraining children's spiritual development and affecting their relationships with God:

I think I have had a
difficult time in the past talking to children about God because of my â€˜hang ups' about trying to explain something that is not really explainable. I have also wanted to avoid personifying God in anyway, so as not to confuse the children. As a young child, I definitely believed that God was an invisible man capable of being everywhere all the time. As an adult I of course no longer believe that, and I don't think that this â€˜force' or â€˜source' we say is God is at all judging or â€˜watching' me.Â  So, the
challenge for me in talking about God with young children would be to be able to explain such an abstract concept in a way that helps them to relate.

Through the reading and
coursework, the students began to feel that they could address their concerns by using Jewish frameworks about God (such as Torah stories), and by facilitating questions and discussions:

I want the children I work
with, as well as my own children to question... What is God? How can God be everywhere? How can nothing look like God? If I am made in God's Image does God look like me? Does God have a body? Is God a boy or a girl or both?

Even
using these frameworks presented challenges, however:

When I'm with young children,
I feel stuck in my relationship to God. I falter at bringing what I feel deep inside me to the external environment of the classroom. Intellectually, I know that by bringing my own inner spiritual realm to the children I may be in fact opening a door for them in their own spiritual development.Â  The God that can not be defined, the God that is as Lawrence Kushner says in his children's book, everywhere, can not be reconciled with the same concept of God that appears in the Torah flooding the earth, speaking to Moses, etc.Â  For me at least, this is the struggle of bringingÂ  the concept of God to the
children with whom I work.

They
also recognize the intuitive abilities of the children to reach out to God in ways that can be illuminating for adults:

When I asked one of my
students last year, "What is the light on Yom Rishon? The light that we

know the sun and the stars were not created until Yom Revi'i. She replied "Oh... that light, that was just God himself."

Ultimately, the task we face is that of inspiration, not just rote learning. In the process, the children, again, can facilitate the spiritual experience of the adults:

All this being said, I think that getting children to talk about God is easy, getting them to perform religious traditions is also easy, but getting them to have spiritual awareness is challenging. Â To experience transcendence in a conscious way is something that I don't think that young children are capable of - transcendence on a subconscious level is something they do more intuitively than adults - spontaneously dancing when they hear a Sukkot song on a guitar or seeing God as being everywhere - it is the act of teaching spirituality which is difficult - feeling spirituality is something they do already, something that we can't teach, only inspire.

Inspiring requires a careful self-examination of the teacher as a model for children and their families, however. This is a role that is challenging for these students, who believe in a constructivist approach. How does one provide both structure that is needed for guidance, and the openness necessary for finding one's own path? This, of course, is one of the ultimate challenges of using a constructivist model for teaching tradition:

In a play/experience-based learning environment, one "inspired" by Reggio ideas and methods promoting a Jewish agenda seems a fundamental contradiction. I understand that the Reggio philosophy takes children where and who they are, within a socio-cultural context, to deepen their understanding and participation within that environment Â-- and that is where the Jewish element comes into play in our schools.Â  However, for so many families, embarking on a Jewish education for their very young children is also a first step in their own (re-)connection to Judaism.Â  So which perspective does a preschool teacher take regarding God and spirituality?Â Ultimately, the teacher's point of view, emphasis or interests often becomes the de facto standard in the classroom - no matter how objective, inclusive or non-judgmental the teacher seeks to appear.Â

The self-awareness and knowledge that the students were investigating appears to be necessary work for Jewish early childhood educators in constructivist classrooms.

Session 3Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â
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In this session, the purpose was to have the students think about what the term ritual denotes, and how rituals, either Jewish or personal carry meaning for them. The overall category

was: personal beliefs and attitudes toward spirituality, ritual and prayer. According to the students' responses, ritual included general characteristics, as well as specific content.

The opportunity to reflect on ritual allowed the students to realize the power of repeated, meaningful acts in their own lives, whether connected to Jewish practice or not.

My ritual of sitting in the back yard each morning is life-affirming, and brings me closer to the Divine, although I would not necessarily call it religious. It's my way of greeting the life around me, and giving thanks for being a part of it.

A number of students related to ritual through the routines that they engage in with family members. In their work, it became apparent that the rituals were not mindlessly performed, but carried a lot of intentional connection with family members. The routines themselves eventually symbolized these connections.

In the morning my daughter always comes into our room and gets into bed with us. We cuddle and enjoy the brief moment of calm and togetherness before getting ready for our day at work and school. At night we have a bedtime routine that involves reading books, writing down her favorite part of her day in her journal, singing songs, then tucking her into bed. We also eat breakfast as a family every morning...It's almost like a dance how when we are out of bed, we automatically flow into our breakfast/morning ritual/routine.

Food, care, and ritual go together even when families have older children:

My husband said his mother always made him breakfast and put together his lunch...Â  So I gave it some thought, and decided this would be my gift to my children - a memory of care and support and love - all wrapped up in a recyclable brown paper bag ... and a reusable tote...Â

Interestingly, physical exercise was described as a ritual by a number of students:

I have used my ritual of dance to organize my thoughts and to prove to myself that I can attempt just about anything. Building strength in my body has strengthened my conviction. It has given me confidence to make changes, take chances and to become more in touch with what I want, what I can do and who I want to be. I truly value my time in the studio when I reach that special place between the music the moves and my mind. When I finish dancing I feel refreshed, and at peace. Life seems a little less chaotic.

Each of the students indicated that they felt that ritual was indeed important to them, while not all of the rituals were connected

specifically with Jewish life. However, there was a recognition that rituals allow humans to stop and reflect on what is of significance to them, to recenter themselves and to connect to others. As such, adults need to provide children with the opportunity to develop the disposition to engage in rituals:

Teaching children about ritual is important, but more important is practicing this kind of higher seeking with them; giving them the foundation, the inclination, the provocations and their responses, and embedding these into their very selves... As someone who has been informed by another kind of practice, and who cherishes the foundation that my parents established in me, I am convinced of the value of instilling in my own children, and in the children in my classroom, this gift of a certain propensity to seek higher meaning.

The students saw ritual as being of significant importance, even if they weren't yet all convinced of the efficacy of religious ritual.

Session 4Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â
as an adult experience

In this session, students dealt with challenging issues involved in prayer, which included the categories of personal beliefs and attitudes toward spirituality, ritual and prayer, discoveries about Jewish perspectives about spirituality and God, and discoveries about Jewish prayer and ritual

The instructor felt that it was necessary for the adult students to take one more look at how they and others in their contexts related to prayer as an adult experience before attempting to explore how they might engage children in both ritual and prayer. The resulting comments indicated a wide range of responses to both the challenges and benefits of prayer. This topic also gave us another chance to review concepts and feelings about God.

Several students did not find traditional prayer to be useful for themselves, although they understood how they "worked" for others:

Personally speaking, I often struggle with prayer as a practice in my spiritual life, and struggle even more with prayer as it is recited collectively during the services.Â  There are times when I do feel like the prayers I'm chanting are taking me inward, into a heightened sense of intimacy with what I would describe as my soul... As has been the case with me, I think for many adults the prayers in the traditional siddur that are always said the same way, in the same cadence, there is no moving beyond the words.Â  For some, collective recitation becomes dry, and feels tedious and becomes laborious.

The students' relationship with God could strongly affect the prayer experience:

I think for some people, traditional prayer is what suits them... I on the other hand do not necessarily feel that this suits me. I believe in mindfulness, and intention. I do not feel the power behind the prayers I was raised in synagogue with...I just personally do not find them powerful for me. I tend to be a spontaneous pray-er. I pray in the moment when I am moved to do so. Perhaps this has something to do with the fact that I don't use the word 'God' when I think of praying, or giving thanks.

Others found that communal prayer did speak to them. In fact, for some, the traditional structures provided the necessary support for adults to have a spiritual experience:

The readings suggest (as does my personal experience) that for adults prayer is work... Â We follow a script which is based on spiritual talk. Â We don't talk to God through our personal petitions, but through the repetition of the script which is prayer... Â For so many of us adults who are able to have internal dialogue about whether God exists, etc., we need something which is a ladder to bridge our skepticism - a ritual or routine which keeps us grounded so that we can get ungrounded. Â Spirituality is work, but work which ultimately is about letting go - a contradiction in itself.

Some students found that particular settings released the power of prayer: Â

Being in nature had a great impact on how I connected with God and my community. I first connected with the melodies of the prayers. The music set the mood of the prayers. The words and their meaning came later. I became aware of my emotions when I recited these prayers and how they evoked these feelings. Sometimes I will find myself humming one of the melodies when I am feeling wonder or awe. It is during these times that I am unable to verbalize what I am feeling but the melody just fits the moment. I guess that could also be prayer.

Ideas about God abounded in their writings, from clear statements of connection to further musings about God's nature and their own relationship with God:

I am struck by the concept in our reading of prayer as a way of learning how to identify with god [sic]. I also think adults who find prayer meaningful use it as a way to feel not alone...I would call that feeling loved. For some people, I think there is a lack of trust about allowing themselves to feel loved like that, comforted by a presence, and I suspect that has a lot to do with a distrust of all the messages we receive regarding some judging guy in the sky either liking you or not.

Several note that one's engagement with prayer changes as

one develops, a topic that will be covered more thoroughly in the next session on the spiritual development of children:

I know that recently for me during prayers at high holidays or when I go for Shabbat has become more meaningful. The songs have had more meaning for me even though the words haven't changed just because of personal life experiences...With each personal significant event whether good or bad, I think prayer becomes more gratifying for me.

One student wrote particularly eloquently about why prayer did NOT have meaning for her, or for most of the people that she knows. At the end of her entry, however, she stated:

But even those of us who are not as "natural" at it come to the idea that putting something in place in life, a placeholder - to save a time (like Shabbat) in which you pause to regain contact with the higher part of life, to remind you not to just endlessly trundle along, but that there is something else, that you are something else, that others seek this too, that you can seek it together, simultaneously, that this very seeking is the thing you're seeking - is worthwhile. For us, prayer is a mysterious, beckoning part of this seeking, a possibility to try out.

One of the goals of this course was to have students reach the conclusion that prayer held these possibilities, but they needed to discover this potential for themselves. Another goal was for students to realize their importance in conveying the capacities Â of prayer to families. One student wrote:

As families come together for their children's sake over Jewish preschool ceremonies, they might discover the surprising satisfaction of participating in ancient rituals and adopt elements from the liturgy's framework (sometimes unknowingly) as part of their own mealtime, bedtime or playtime habits. Children, with their innate spirituality and natural sense of awe, might just lead their significant adults in "taking the first step toward God..."

This examples are but a few of the musings of the students on their relationships to prayer. Through their work and interaction, it seemed that they were beginning to see that prayer, while challenging, might be rendered meaningful in the classroom. In the next session, the students learned more about how prayer, ritual, and ideas about God could be made accessible to the children that they taught.

Session 5Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â  Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â  Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â
the early years

Comments and observations in this section focus on the category of the awareness of the spiritual development of young children

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Based on
their comments, until they had enrolled in the Online Certificate of Jewish Early Childhood Education, the students had not been aware of this area of study. Although the basic concepts had been studied in an earlier class, the topics of this course gave us the opportunity to go more in depth in terms of how young children of particular ages respond to ideas about God, to the use of sensory experiences, and being a member of a group. In addition, students began to pay closer attention to ideas of ultimate meaning and value that young children were exploring. Examples follow.

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Students
looked at ways to both encourage questions and explore expressions of ideas about God:

I want the
children in my care to feel safe in their exploration with spiritual ideas and images of God. I want to support them on their journey and also let them know it is okay to ask questions. I want them to know there is more than one way to interpret events and their ideas are valid and important... I often ask the children "what do you think?", or "why do you think this
happened or is this way?" I like to give them the power to work things out with their words and minds. I want them to ask questions too. By asking the questions it lets them discover new things and challenges me to discover new things as well. I often discover that a child opens my mind to a new way of thinking about something.

The implications for the classroom environment in
terms of the sensory experiences that were available were noticed:

It's
inspired me to make our classroom setting more magical and mystical. I also want to bring in more nature and reflect more on God's creations with the children.

The connection between
beauty and spirituality mentioned in session one was made more explicit:

Â I want to be mindful too of "awareness
sensing" - how I can stimulate the mysteries of a child's world with aesthetics.Â

Students were already using "circle time" to
create the sense of a group; now they could see that the feelings of connection ran even deeper:

Knowing that the children teach can form their own spiritual identity based on the mutual experience of a group, gives me a lot of optimism that all the time and effort we put into circles that include prayers and songs like Thank You God, are creating a valuable spiritual experience for the children, not just planting seeds for the future. Â

There was true respect developing for the seriousness of the spiritual seeking of the young child:

I already intuitively knew that children have mystery sensing, the feeling of awe they so often express, but I did not realize how seriously their search for values and deeper meaning can be. Â

As students became more comfortable with the concepts of spiritual development, they also became more relaxed in talking about spirituality, prayer, ritual, and God:

This is the first year I have felt comfortable reading books to the children that contain G-d.Â  Where I was hesitant before, I realize now that emphasizing my own rational way of viewing the world may have hindered earlier class's potential to wonder and feel that sense of awe that can lead to spiritual experience.Â Now I strive to provide the space for the entire classroom community, including myself.

Thinking about the children's development allows the adults to reflect on their own growth. It appears that the work of the students also may be having an effect on other adults in the school, and even school culture:

As I reviewed the reading material for this session I realized that I have a deeper spiritual connection to the daily classroom experience. This includes the teaching team, the curriculum, and above all the children. [In the past, we] shied away from everything that had to do with G-d, except for Shabbat, and that was rushed and by rote...what resonated most with me was the section dealing with culture and â€˜what must be provided' in order to foster spiritual development and awareness.Â Â  How we respond to children's questions, how we create a space for children, their families, and ourselves to ask questions and share sacred moments sets the tone and provides a safe environment for discovery.

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Sessions 6-15Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â  Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â
to practice

In these sessions, students focused on specific Jewish

practices in the areas of ritual and prayer. Techniques and approaches that are used in constructivist-based programs were discussed in terms of selecting and designing experiences to engage children in these practices ( DeVries, et al, 2002; Ismat, 1998; Fosnot, 2006). The following processes will be noted in the creation of classroom experiences:

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Observation

â€¢Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â
Building on previous knowledge

â€¢Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â
Engaging the interests of the learner

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Relying on holistic experience vs. cognition only

Â·Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â
Encouraging questions

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Using small and large groups for sharing knowledge

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This article will cite a few examples of the use of the concepts explored above and their infusion into the learning and practices of the students in their classrooms. Also very relevant to this study was the use of the techniques above in engaging children in specific Jewish content. In particular, the students attempted to:

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Deepen the meaning of blessings

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Add daily morning blessings and prayers

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Extend the weekly Shabbat experience

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Include families in Jewish experiences

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Advocate for more Jewish spiritual content in their institutions

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Process and content interacted in ways that enhanced each area.

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Processes

Observation

Students, as in common among early childhood educators, tended at first to report what they did specifically and what the children did in general. The instructor continued to ask the students to describe the children's actions and words as precisely as possible. Students were often surprised by what they discovered, and made decisions to change practices. The importance of observation in general appears to have been reinforced:

I'm always watching and noticing how the children and parents are reacting, participating, looking content or uncomfortable - simply to gauge how their connections to the rituals is developing, if they're understanding the process, if the children's attention span is waning (and anticipating what I can leave out, substitute or speed through), and if the group as a whole is hanging together.Â  Purposefully observing (as best I could while leading the blessings), however, caused me to take more specific mental notes.

The following discovery lead directly to a change in practice:

Today I asked the children at our end of day Shalom circle if they know why we say the Sh'ma. One answered, "So we know it's the end of the day." Many others just didn't know. So, it is obvious to me that we need to spend some more time with this prayer; talking about what it means, and saying it twice during the day rather than once.

Students were specifically asked to observe what happened in classrooms during the saying of Brakhot. One student responded that the children in one group were giggling, wiggling, and saying the blessing before snack very loudly. The student observer noted that this large group performance did not seem to have much internal meaning. However, later that same day, she watched a child correctly saying and acting out all of the blessings for Shabbat in the dramatic play area, smiling and paying careful attention, all on her own! This student planned on paying a lot more attention to snack time in the future.

Another
student used observations to understand children's readiness to talk about God:

The
children have been bringing God up on their own during small group activities. This was one reason I chose this book to read, as it would possibly build on their curiosity and ideas about God. They enjoyed what pieces of the book I read to them, and kept asking for â€˜"one more page" before I left for my lunch break.

The
role of observation in changing classroom experiences will be made even more obvious in the section below on specific approaches to Jewish content.

Building
on previous knowledge

Students
began to see, through their study of Jewish prayer and ritual, the confluence of daily life and the creation of meaning from a Jewish perspective. For example, children's natural interests provided a basis for B'rakhot, the very noticing of details and the enjoyment of existence:

One of my
kids always brings me teeny tiny little things on the tips of her fingers. "Look whadeye find," she tells me, right as I am trying to get that darned snack on the table, or transitioning 12 kids through the halls to the courtyard. Each little bead, or leaf, or sparkle, or sticker, or even a smushed piece of dust, to [Elly] is a wonder "such as this in the world".

The student herself had been entranced by the blessing
that concludes "Who has such in His universe."

Another teacher who wanted to introduce morning blessings
based the introduction on everyone's experiences (teachers and children):

I have begun
to ask the children questions about what they do when they wake up in the morning I have had some very interesting responses...Both myself and my co-teacher have talked about what we do and see when we wake up in the morning

The
potential of prayer for expressing happiness and gratitude through song was related directly to a classroom moment. One teacher asked the children:

We were
singing Jewish words that meant Let us have song to fill our mouths as full as the sea and long ago the Jewish people sang this when they were so happy and grateful.Â  What happens in your life to

make you want to sing?Â  I remember when [Brian]
was playing legos and sitting there singing while he played.Â  Do you remember that?

Students
also asked children to talk about other experiences they had had that were then
tied into the prayers and rituals that the students wanted to introduce.

Engaging the interests of the learner

Attention to preparation for ritual
and prayer continued established interest based on observation and experience. Spending
time getting ready for B'rakhot and Shabbat experiences seemed to make a big
difference to the involvement of the children:

At the morning circle I introduced
the idea by way of our pictorial schedule.Â
The children noticed the lunch card contained a smaller story card on
top.Â  This was to show that a story would
happen during lunch, versus after, which is usually the case. This was the only
visual difference, but it gave me a way to introduce the idea of having a
Shabbat lunch together as one group, sitting at one table.Â  We talked about how people gather on Friday
nights for Shabbat dinner in homes, and that since we are not together on
Friday nights, it would be fun to gather for a Friday lunch. The response was
one of enthusiasm.Â

Participating in changing the environment could be
particularly exciting!

The portion
of preparation that continues to be the most rewarding and exciting for the
children is moving the furniture together.Â
This entails them each taking an area on three of the four sides of the
long table with me at the head. I give instructions, and we move it together.
It is very serious, but now that we've done it three or four times I'm noticing
some group humor emerge during the process (this group loves humor, and they
enjoy experiencing it together).

Relying on holistic experience vs. cognition only

Words and cognition were used
to capture but not contain spiritual moments. Â Sensory experience, as noted earlier as
important for children's spiritual development, was often emphasized:

Because we promote
experiential learning through play, the environment is rich in potential.Â Â  As is appropriate for toddlers' concrete
understandings and knowledge formation, the classroom includes many Jewish
ritual objects just begging for experimentation, new insights and traditional
explanations.

Obviously,
blessings over food have a built in sensory component as well. One student combined noticing what would be eaten with allowing children to dramatize the source of the food (e.g., a tree for borai pri ha'adamah). Others have had the children hold up the food that they are excited about before saying the blessing.

Shabbat provided many
opportunities for using the senses to engage with ritual and prayer. This student focused on handwashing:

Washing hands in warm soapy
water is something kids love. It is sensory, comforting, warm and wet, smells good, feels very good...I wanted to incorporate it into Shabbat preparation, and perhaps find a much nicer vessel and pitcher than a plastic tub to do it in.
Both of these rituals, preparing the table and washing hands, have a narrative content that assists children in thinking about Shabbat as a special ritual we partake in that makes us happy and content. Additionally, children participating in these rituals have a sense of the role they are to play to contribute to the joy.

Some teachers went further in
exploring the kinesthetic potential of ritual and prayer, with an expectation of significant results:

The V'ahavta
Deuteronomy 6:5-9 is a full body prayer in my opinion.Â  It talks about loving God with all your mind and body and strength.Â  I would like to
physicalize it for young students - have them act out love, mind, body, etc...The movements they came up with reflect the full body references of the prayer and the love and enthusiasm that we are commanded to feel for God's words...It is my hope that through this process they felt a little of the immanence of God's presence in the world. Â Â

The importance of using a
holistic approach to ritual and prayer seemed to be well-accepted by the group. For example, one student wrote:

From this course (and my own
teaching) I have learned how possible it is for young children to achieve real spirituality.Â  In some ways, it is easier
for them to merge their bodies and minds when they experience anything including transcendence... the way we as educators introduce any new prayer or ritual must be done in a way that makes it accessible to young children, not just logical to us.

Holistic
experience not only supports learning, but the expression of personal meaning as well:

[We need to] support the

children's growing desire to participate in the blessings and rituals - not as social performance, but as self-discovery and an expression of their own connection to what is happening in the moment [such as] Shabbat.

Students
therefore realized that ritual and prayer, and connecting to ideas about God, did not depend on rote words and rituals. The children could engage in them in a holistic way, with their "whole" beings.

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Encouraging
Questions

The students appeared to
truly appreciate the invitation to both themselves and the children to ask questions.

Today I was teaching my
kindergarten Hebrew school class and I was telling the story of God creating Adam. I mentioned that God took the earth (Adamah) to form the first boy and girl and then breathed life into them. One little girl asked," But how could they be made of the earth we aren't made of the earth?" A boy answered, "We really came from other animals." Another said. "No, we came from clay and I have a book at home that tells how God did it." We all wondered how it could be that we are bones and blood and skin now and not earth. One little girl commented that "Maybe we just have a bit of the earth in us so we will know we are part of it." Oh so very insightful at age five! What could I say to that other than wow! You guys have some great ideas. [The coursework] helped me just sit and listen to what they wanted to know and what they needed to figure out. I did not feel that I need to explain anything just give them the space to talk about it among themselves with a little guidance to keep them on track.

They found that they as
adults needed to keep investigating their own thoughts and feelings in order help the children develop their own:

Moreover, when adults are
asked to consider their own earliest joys, confusions and explanations for the mysteries of life, they can recognize bits of their own spiritual evolution. And, perhaps, they will begin to understand the importance of pulling back a bit from telling-showing-giving every answer to every question Â-Â-- just enough to encourage the blossoming of children's naturally developing spirituality in a personally meaningful way.Â  To support

and enrich, but not to prejudice.Â
Although children sometimes think we have all the answers, we don't - THEY do. It is essential to give children their own thoughts and voices back.

Of course, questions continue to be an important part of the observation-experimentation-evaluation-planning cycle for adults:

Together we'll ask questions such as how can we bring in more joy?Â
More reflection? How can we engage our students in the beauty of Shabbat aside from doing the blessings by rote, singing the same old songs, and trying to maintain order on the carpet?

Using small and large groups for sharing knowledge

One of the sessions leading up to the final projects emphasized the use of small groups for investigation and then bringing the results to the large groups. At least two students used this approach in a very deliberate way. In each instance, the students facilitated a kinesthetic development of a blessing or prayer. In the first instance, the children worked on HaMotzi:

Before lunch, the children who made up the actions stood in front of the group and demonstrated the actions and told of their classmates what the actions meant. We have done the blessing this way many times. Sometimes the children will request to say the blessing with the motions. While I was working for a co-teacher in our afternoon program I witnessed one of the children from my class showing another child from another class the motions that went along with the blessing. This was a moment when I knew she understood the blessing because she was choosing to share her knowledge with others.

The student who worked on the Shema and V'Ahavta also started with a small group:

Building on the success of our sign language Shema - where movement helps children remember and understand words in another language, I worked with a few of my students who are 4-5 years olds to come up with their own physicalization for the prayer. They were creating and expressing their own ideas, using some fundamental concepts that they had already learned (such as, motions can represent ideas/words).Â Â

Finally:

I think that teachers in general would have more success with engagement in prayer with young children if they promoted a small group approach. Often, the interest that the small group is able to maintain attracts others, who, at that point, also become genuinely involved.

The use of the interest of
small groups to provoke an investigation by the larger group is a basic
technique employed in schools informed by social constructivist learning theory
(Beck & Kosnick, 2006).

Jewish
content

Exploring
ideas about God

Students continued to work on
talking to children about God. Â Although
still careful and concerned about indoctrination, there was a sense of honoring
the ongoing efforts needed to encounter ideas about God:

As I began this process of
thinking about how to introduce more prayer, and God moments into my classroom
I was faced with some intense realizations about my own struggle with God talk.
I realized that I have not encouraged much exploration about God in the
classroom in the past. I did not discourage it, I just have not consciously
provided the space for it. It had always felt like a heavy topic, one that I
didn't feel equipped to handle. I also have my own issues about how God is
talked about, and I felt conflicted about perpetuating an idea that I didn't
agree with. Specifically, I do not think of God as a being, that hears or can
see me, or can punish me. However, I do believe that I am part of something
much bigger and mysterious, and that we all have a part to play. I experience
gratitude, awe, and amazement in the adventures I have within this reality.
This feeling of being connected to something larger, feeling special, and
consciously engaging in moments of awe is what I would love to experience with
the children in my classroom.Â  Once I
became aware of what my own thoughts and hold ups were about God talk, I was
able to accept them, and move towards providing a safe space for the children
to go through their own process in beginning to think about God.

The
structures of Jewish practice and the meanings that had been explored for
prayers and blessings played a role in allowing teachers to become more
comfortable with talk about God:

I have felt that by beginning
our day with the Modeh/ah Ani, and the Sh'ma we are starting our day of
learning in a more grounded manner. It gives us a foundation for creating more
God talk in the classroom. I feel more comfortable now than I did at the start
of the semester, engaging in prayer with the children, and even mentioning God.
I hope to keep on being a supportive learner alongside the children as they
continue to grow and experience the awe of the wonders God created.

Eventually,
the entire group eventually became convinced that God-talk was necessary at some level. For example:

After the readings however, I
am more aware of the need and responsibility to facilitate the space for children to have their own experience developing their spirituality. I respect and understand that part of my job as a teacher and a parent is to allow for the opportunity to learn all that they can learn, to take in all that we expose them to, in particular ways in understanding how amazing and wonderful the universe and life are. I absolutely wish to help keep children's minds and hearts wide open to possibilities and wonderment. In order to do this, I must allow 'God talk' to happen naturally... I realize now that I don't have to respond to [a child] in a way that gives her definitive answers or truths. I just need to allow her the space to talk about it, and inquire, and for me to respond with honesty and a tone that implies God is something worth talking about.

Deepening
the meaning of blessings

Blessings
appeared to be a part of every classroom in which the students worked before they took part in the class. However, the nature of the experience of these blessings seemed to change during the course of the semester. After a long conversation at the snack table about when blessings were said, a student made the following observation:

Some of the things I noticed
about this conversation are the children were able to connect blessings with actions. Most of the answers the children gave during our conversation were blessings that have an action associated with them; eating challah, lighting candles, lighting the shamash. The children also recognized blessing as giving thanks and sending good thoughts to our friends who are ill.

Talking
about blessings naturally led to more interest in God:

When we explore the blessing,
talk about what the words mean, and the reason for saying the blessing it becomes real for the children. Children learn from imitating behaviors of those around them. I found that almost all of the children knew the words to this particular blessing but did not know why we were saying it or what the Hebrew words meant in English. When we discussed the blessings the blessings became more meaningful and we also explored our partnership with God. We talked about God creating the wheat but humans need to take what God provided us with and turn it into something else. Bread could not be made without either of the partners. These discussions heightened our awareness of the wonder we experience every day. It also illustrates how we all have a role in the creation of our world.

It appeared that the children
were finding ways of making meaning through saying B'rakhot. One of the students who had worked first with a small group and then with her class

reported:

While I was working for a
co-teacher in our afternoon program I witnessed one of the children from my class showing another child from another class the motions that went along with the blessing. This was a moment when I knew she understood the blessing because she was choosing to share her knowledge with others. I feel most of the children in my class have a solid grasp of what they are saying when they say HaMotzi. The blessing has become a part of them.

Another
observation supported the above assumption:

I started this project with a
different plan but what emerged in the process is a solid foundation for the children to build on. I think the children understand what they are saying, are more actively engaged in what they are doing and are more focused. They have brought it from rote to real.

Adding
daily morning blessings and prayers

In addition to working on
blessings of appreciation for food and sensory experiences, many of the students became very interested in including prayers with their morning circle times. They related the use of these prayers to the children's own experiences, as mentioned above, and to using those experiences positively:

...morning blessings afford an
opportunity to think about the day ahead, and thinking and planning at this age are newly emergent skills we spend a great deal of time supporting so the children can scaffold their knowledge.Â
Morning blessings in my experience are joyful, and while modah/eh ani and elohai neshama are traditionally about gratitude that the breath or the soul have returned, they are also about being grateful for oneself and I really like the idea of teaching the children to be grateful for themselves as well as other things in their lives... The children can imagine themselves waking up and greeting themselves in the morning.

Morning prayers also gave
students the chance to think about how to connect what they have learned about sensory engagement, young children, and spirituality:

I felt even though the
Modeh/ah Ani is traditionally said upon waking up in the morning in one's bed, that it would be appropriate to say it at school, because in a way we are â€˜waking up' to a new day of learning at school. Upon arriving at school, we engage our senses in a way that is particular to the environment. We open our eyes to see what is put out for us to engage with, we touch the materials, listen to the voices, and perhaps smell something yummy. While our senses engage, we feel good inside. We are happy to be with our good friends. This is a good moment to give thanks for being alive. Once we acknowledge our special self, we can enter into the group.

An interesting realization
came out of the study of morning blessings that resulted in a reorientation of prayers and B'rakhot throughout the day for the children:

We used to recite the Shema at
our afternoon circle just before singing Shalom Chaverim. I thought it may be a good idea to say it in the morning when we are first coming together as a group, and when it is traditionally said. This way we can begin the day as a group, seeing our class as a whole family under one roof and under one God. I see this prayer as a unifier. A prayer that not only brings us close to God, but also closer together. As we go about our day following this prayer, we continue to call attention to God's amazing gifts through mitzvot, saying the Hamotzi, and possibly the Shehechianu.

Extending
the weekly Shabbat experience

Many students chose to focus
their classroom investigations on Shabbat. Although almost universally celebrated in Jewish schools, Shabbat often devolved into "edutainment," rote performances, or, at worst, a series of management issues. One student realized that she wanted more for the children from the Shabbat experience in the classroom. She preferred to work in small groups with the children before Friday, and then continue into Shabbat in a way that would be accessible but not rote:

[The] group needs to be
brought back to basics. Just acknowledging the group and knowing to take a couple minutes yourself to just relax and think brings a great structure. The class feels refreshed , not rushed. Children feel important and the teacher feels good about what they have done. I want to have a basic discussion starting with the candles and what saying the prayer means to them.

Another
student observed:

[This] was a typical Children's
Shabbat for us. The children enjoy it, despite the chaos. We as teachers are relatively OK with it, knowing it's Friday, and the week is almost over. Everyone seems anxious to retire for the weekend. In my opinion, it does not qualify as a prayerful or spiritual experience for anyone involved.

After
making changes in the Shabbat experience that she provided, this student noted:

Shabbat is more than a series
of prayers and blessings. In a sense it is a way of being with one's self and others for a period of 25 hours...we have changed how we are having Shabbat in the classroom.Â  As we are making the
Shabbat experience the majority of what we do each Friday starting in the morning, the children have begun internalizing the significance of the day in

its distinction from the previous days in the classroom.Â  Shabbat preparations have become the focus of the Friday curriculum.

Another student also aligned the classroom Shabbat practices with the ideas that she had discovered in the coursework. She developed a flow to her classroom Shabbat practice that involved the children's direct participation, even to song-writing. After reviewing the structure, she noted:

Making a transition from the secular routine to the sacred act of communal prayer (for children, from playing/working to a different kind of activity) moves to Kavvanah: directing one's heart to god during prayer/contemplation of the meaning of each and every word spoken. Following the rules gets us to the heartfelt.

It seems that the students understood at this point that ritual does not mean rote, and that even young children can sense the transcendent. In fact, in facilitating young children's spirituality, we recognize our own.

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Including families in Jewish experiences

In fact, students indicated the importance of communicating what they had learned about young children and spirituality to parents.

I am realizing more clearly my responsibility to the families, not just the child. I can help support the child outside of the classroom by communicating to the families what we are learning together with their child at school. This happens through documentation, conferences, and newsletters. We as teachers can bring the parents' attention to the wonder and amazement their child is expressing to various things. We can explain the meanings of what is happening for them, so they as parents have a more clear understanding of the spiritual component of development. We can also fill the gap between school and home, so the parents feel part of the classroom community, and have opportunities to engage in the wonder and excitement the children get to experience as well.

There was feeling that parents were aware that "something" was happening in terms of spirituality in the classrooms:

After the ritual is over, we open our doors to let the parents come in. The change is evident to parents when they look at their children: the children are clearly in a different state, in a hush: it is palpable, and the parents can see it. This is

absolutely because of what this course has brought out of the Shabbat leader, and how that permeates the children: How (to quote one of my colleagues), "going back to basics, or creating a foundation, and then building it up little by little as we explore our own spirituality and the background of prayers and rituals, makes us really know what it is we are doing. And the kids know that we know, and are transported."

Advocating
for more Jewish spiritual content in their institutions

At
this point, the students became aware that more attention was needed in their institutions regarding how to talk about spirituality, ritual, prayer, and God:

The only question that comes
up for me right now is - how do I - or do I - bring up god talk when the families of the children are uncomfortable and would prefer I didn't?Â  This is consistent with the [institution] I work for, which seems conflicted and does not bring up god [sic] except in reference about the holidays.

Several
students, as mentioned above, decided to take an active role in enhancing the spiritual life of their school communities.

God is a core concept in
Judaism and yet we've been washing over it for many many years. I look forward to sharing these concepts at a staff meeting.

Finally:

As
I've been learning about what constitutes meaningful prayer experiences for young children this semester,Â  and the
criteria necessary for creating those kind of experiences, I began to examine more closely where we have been falling short in both the classroom and throughout the greater school.Â

The students themselves had
become advocates for spirituality, ritual, and prayer in the institution and the early childhood program as well as the classroom.

Review of results

These
students had already proven their seriousness and commitment to professional Jewish education through their performance in previous courses. This material, however, was particularly challenging. Some students felt that they might be spiritual but not religious, not spiritual OR religious, and that ritual might be constraining rather than liberating. This was not true of all, and to the

credit of the group, they all supported each other's explorations during the opportunities that they were together (not reported in this paper). Ultimately, through her writing, each student seems to have constructed an approach to spirituality, ritual, and prayer that was her own while being responsive to Jewish tradition as well as the collegial work of the group. This is a narrative study - in fact, most of the narration has been in the students' own words - and is not statistically significant. However, this anecdotal evidence suggests a hypothesis. Using (and modeling) constructivist theory by starting with students' experience and reflection on that experience, engaging them with particular kinds of questions, evoking feelings as well as ideas, inviting all kinds of questions, supporting direct investigation and encouraging continued learning all within the framework of authentic Jewish study may have had profound results on these teachers' beliefs, values, and attitudes - and classroom practices. These practices may have in turn affected families and their school communities.

Of course, there is much we do not know. For instance, can these results be repeated? If so, are there quantitative ways of measuring change and development? What would be different if the class were offered face-to-face rather than online? What actually happened in the classrooms that could have been recorded? Are there measurable differences? Will the teachers want to continue this kind of intensive learning for themselves and translating their discoveries into classroom possibilities? And, ultimately, are these results consistent with both constructivism and Judaism, and is such consistency desirable? These are questions for future research.

## Conclusion

In spite of what still needs to be learned from the conjunction of constructivist learning theory and Jewish early childhood education, some of the final comments of the students indicate the potential that may exist in this relationship. This paper will conclude with the voices of the students who so sincerely gave of their time, their energy, and themselves to engage with the ideas that were offered to them in the coursework:

In the end, having researched and explored opportunities available from adding just two new prayers, I have more confidence in my emerging abilities as a prayer leader and have hope that families might begin to sense a something more deeply spiritual through the Jewish ritual experiences I bring into the classroom.Â  Instead of going through the motions, I am now creating the service with kavanah.

What can a child use out of it? What a child needs is a "right orientation" to life, to walk out the door every day with the mindset/heartset to give and get the most out of every day, to be protected from harm unknowingly or unwittingly or even intentionally for whatever reason put out there by other people, by life: to make a child resilient through religion in the broadest sense: a deeper connection that can't be jostled, or if jostled, can be righted. I thought it was a connection to god, but I'm thinking it's a connection to religion itself, the whole thing. Reading through the services in "Pray Tell" shows me a way: running your life like a service: preparing to be in a holy state, getting into a holy state,

coming down from it (to get some stuff done -- but actually, you get stuff done better if you stay connected to god): doing this all the time throughout the day.

The course "Spirituality, Ritual and Prayer in the Jewish Early Childhood Classroom" took us on a journey through thirteen sections in which we studied children's spiritual development and deconstructed Jewish ritual and prayer. Throughout, we were asked to reflect deeply on our own spirituality, and in so doing, evolved as people and as teachers. In the near future I would like to document our new Shabbat with photos on boards that explain how it was, and how it is now. I will include a paragraph on how I changed as a leader. Additionally, I can apply what I've learned from this course is to other prayers: I look forward to deconstructing and designing a children's Sh'ma and a Mezuzzot project.

In the end, all of this is preparing little children for all of what it takes to be Jewish, for that matter for what it takes to be a good human being later on. If this is done right by teachers, we are laying the foundation so that the ongoing process of building a Jewish identity has a strong base, and the process itself will feel natural (not superimposed).

"I have learned much from my teachers; from my colleagues more than from my teachers; and from my students more than all." Ta'anit 7b

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Appendix A

Course Description

Spirituality, Ritual, and Prayer in the Jewish Early Childhood Classroom

The search for spiritual meaning begins in the earliest years of life. In this course, current theories of faith and spiritual development will be discussed to provide essential background knowledge for students who wish to facilitate this search for young children, their families, for colleagues, and for themselves. The primary focus will be on the expression of spirituality in Jewish life. As such, this information will be descriptive rather than definitive, and will be used to explore meaningful experiences in prayer and ritual, as well as maximizing the spiritual content of daily life in the early childhood classroom. The daily service will be examined for content and methods that are relevant to young children. Criteria for evaluating ritual and prayer experiences for young children in Jewish contexts will be developed, using the daily service as a platform. As a culmination, the Shabbat experience will be explored in order to allow students to synthesize their own prayer and ritual experiences for young children. Throughout the course, we will discuss methods of addressing issues

that arise for adults (teachers and parents) when exploring spirituality, ritual and prayer. Finally, spirituality, ritual and prayer will be considered for their power in inspiring a sense of community within the early childhood program setting for adults and children alike.

Topics were sequenced in an attempt to maximize the interplay between the constructivist approach and Jewish content:

â€¢Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â What IS spirituality, anyway? Can we define it, or describe it? What does it mean to each of us? Is there a Jewish perspective on spirituality?

â€¢Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â What are the connections between spirituality and God? How do we consider God's role in our own lives? Is there a particularly Jewish view of God?

â€¢Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â What does ritual have to do with spirituality? How does ritual connect people to each other, and to God?

â€¢Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â How can prayer be spiritual? Do Jewish views of prayer allow it to be a ritual that develops spirituality?

â€¢Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â What do studies and research tell us about how people develop spiritually? How does this information fit with what we know about Jewish concepts of spirituality, God, ritual practice, and prayer?

â€¢Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â What do we know about how young children usually think about God? What should be our considerations and concerns, particularly in a Jewish context? How can adults - parents and teachers - talk with them about God?

â€¢Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â What are b'rakhot (blessings)? How do we use them in daily life?

â€¢Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â How can we truly celebrate the blessings of Shabbat that we sing about in the early childhood classroom? What can Shabbat mean?

â€¢Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â With what we have learned about spiritual development, the power of ritual and the relevance of prayer, how can we further facilitate an engagement with Shabbat in a spiritually fulfilling way?

â€¢Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â What do we need to do to set up a group experience for young children that is conducive to meaningful prayer? Can we use the Shabbat experience as an example?

â€¢Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Can the daily prayer service be made relevant to concepts of faith and spiritual development in young children?

â€¢Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â The children may be ready for prayer - what about their families? How do issues of spirituality, ritual, and prayer affect the sense of community that can be created in the Jewish school environment?

â€¢Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â As we come to the end of this course, what do you think should be the roles of spirituality, ritual and prayer in the Jewish early childhood classroom? How do your ideas fit into the context of your institution?

Information was presented to
students in the form of PowerPoint presentations that provided ideas while suggesting provocations for further thinking, readings in texts that included Judaic learning as well as child development and early childhood education, and websites with contrasting viewpoints.

Ritual and prayer were
studied using a traditional ÞØÑâ êäÙÜÔ (matbe'ah tefilah - format), with a presentation of traditional meanings. At the same time, individual and collaborative interpretations were strongly encouraged. Participants used their own backgrounds and values for reference, and the context of their schools for developing practice.

Students were asked to
respond to the material in several ways. Every week, a journal response was required that was based on the current (or a closely associated) topic. In addition, threaded discussions (asynchronous) took place during the week in which students discussed a question posed by the instructor, usually interacting with each other. Sometimes assignments included classroom observations of children involved in prayer and/or ritual. The final project involved choosing a prayer, a ritual, or a set of prayers/rituals to modify or introduce

to children. Students were required to follow a set format in presenting this final project that follows the outline generally used in constructivist classrooms for producing documentation displays (Carter & Curtis, 2000).Â  In addition, this cohort of students participated in meeting together as a community of practice (CoP) once each month. Data for this paper was limited to journal entries and final projects.

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