

# Mishpacha Mitzvah: A Program Combining Intergenerational Learning, and Family Strengthening

## Introduction

We live in a world of stratification. Parents drop their children off at school where kids lead immensely rich lives of their own. Parents go off to work, only to finish their day picking up and dropping off their children to still more daily programming. Grandparents often live in other cities, and great grandparents, if living, are often somewhere else altogether. The time that multiple generations spend in one place each year is literally miniscule compared to the time in which everyone is separate and either by choice or force, everyone is doing their 'own thing.'

There is a very real need to forge connections between generations of family members. The benefits of inter-generational engagement are vast. Beyond the immediate physical care that can be provided from one generation to the next, deeply enriching family wisdom and foundational stories enrich family dynamics. The young learn about growing older, and the old learn how to remain younger longer.

This project seeks to explore how congregations might offer an opportunity for families to cultivate inter-generational richness in their lives through learning about the Shabbat Morning Prayer service in an inter-generational setting. The program outlined below is the scaffolding through which further sessions can be crafted to result in a rich educational experience that fits the specific needs of individual congregations.

## Priority Goal

The goal of this program is to bring grandparents, parents, and children (and further generations if living) together in an effort to strengthen relationships, learn across generations, increase positive family identity, and provide families with a rich, positive, shared-experience. Participants will learn and engage a number of prayers in and pieces of the Shabbat morning liturgy which will lead (if they are comfortable) to a Mishpacha Mitzvah (an event similar to a bar or bat mitzvah, in which each generation of a family would be involved in leading a Saturday morning synagogue service). Also similar to many bnei mitzvah programs, in addition to weekly learning sessions/ programming, families will also design or take part in a mitzvah project. During each session, family members will record their findings (a capturing or documenting of something that each generation shares in some way) in a family prayer book—a scrap

book of comments and thoughts on each prayer that will serve as the family's own commentary on the prayer service for generations to come. After this program, families will have the foundation for further engagement, not just amongst themselves, but also in the synagogue community (increased fluency and comfort with prayer). This program should involve lay leaders, clergy—including, if available, a cantor.

### Age Group

As an inter-generational endeavor, age ranges obviously vary. It is important to note, however, that age restrictions do not exist in this program. Even if participants are too young (infants or toddlers) to participate in anyway, parents are encouraged to bring them to sessions. Conversely, participants who self-identify as being too old to participate should definitely be encouraged to attend—this program is for their benefit! And as always, health and safety must be a prime concern for all involved.

### Organizational Setting

Because the program's focus lies in tefilah, this programmatic exploration is designed with congregations and synagogue-communities in mind. This is not to say that it would not or could not work elsewhere. Given, however, the aging nature of many progressive congregations, synagogue-communities provide the general assumptions for the framework of this program.

### Rationale

In an online article at Grandparents.com, Georgia Witkin, Ph.D writes:

We humans are built for family life. In a crisis, or after a disaster, it's always family that gets us through. Children must be fed, dressed, and taken to school, so we rally and we do it with a smile. In fact, studies have found that the more we act like everything is okay, the more we actually believe that everything is going to be okay. Family living forces us to have regular, face-to-face contact, which reduces isolation and wards off depression. The predictable routines of family life reduce stress; the act of nurturing, researchers have found, triggers innate biochemical stress-antidotes. Multigenerational living can have clear benefits for kids as well. They get to experience a "chain of love," learning that more than one adult can care for them, and seeing that if anything should happen to their parents, their grandparents will be there

for them. Grandparents can help children get through illness and survive their parents' divorce. They can help when working couples can't get home for dinner or bedtime, and when single parents are overwhelmed. They can give kids the undivided attention that parents and siblings sometimes can't because of all the demands on their time. Even if a family doesn't have three generations under the same roof, the presence of grandparents in the lives of children can be critical. One of several similar studies of teen life found that adolescents who have daily contact with at least one grandparent are less likely to use recreational drugs. Why? Most likely because grandparents provide lots of conversation, encouragement, and problem-solving advice, and help kids stay focused on their future. (Witkin)

While Witkin writes mostly about multigenerational living, many of the benefits of multigenerational interaction are congruent to her findings. While the benefit of constant contact of co-habitation may not be present, inter-generational engagement and interaction provides immense benefit. This program seeks to provide an opportunity, within a Jewish educational context to cultivate many of these benefits for participants. By creating an environment of multigenerational learning and engagement in the congregational setting, both families and synagogue communities stand to benefit.

### Enduring Understanding

Multigenerational interaction and learning in a Jewish prayer framework benefits families, strengthening bonds and increasing health and wellness.

### Essential Questions

1. The following questions serve as guideposts for the construction of this program of learning. They attempt to address multiple learning goals, knowledge bases, and skill sets.
2. What can I, as a participant, learn about prayer from another generation?
3. How can we, as a family, bring benefit and help to others? (i.e. the mitzvah project)
4. What things can I discover about my children or parents that I didn't know before?

## Sample Mitzvah Projects

A number of possibilities and ideas are available regarding multigenerational service projects. For the purpose of this program, engagement in such projects are meant to strengthen inter-generational bonds through working towards shared goals thus giving an opportunity outside the classroom environment to further the goals of the course. Of course, families may elect to participate as a group in any number of volunteer opportunities available in their communities. The following, however, are samples of creative mitzvah projects and how such projects might be integrated into the synagogue-community.

### Holiday Cook Books

Several families are needed for this project. Each family is given one or more Jewish holidays to plan recipes for. Older generations help provide recipes for heirloom holiday dishes or holiday recipes that are traditional to their family. Children then use desktop publishing programs (with the help of other family adults) to design and create small cookbooks. All generations should come together to “test” out each recipe before publication. Each “cookbook,” will then be published in the synagogue’s newsletter prior to the pertinent holiday.

### Mitzvah Safari

Families are given several disposable cameras and are tasked with photographing each other performing various mitzvot over the course of most of the length of the program. Such mitzvot might include visiting the sick or visiting a nursing home, cleaning up litter, working at a soup kitchen, or volunteering with an organization. One or two weeks before the end of the program, families then have the opportunity to create a display in a public space at the synagogue with the pictures they took. Each generation can participate in design, construction, caption writing, etc. regarding the creation of the display.

## Sample Session

### Lesson Overview:

Beginning with the beginning, families will learn about the mah tovu prayer as a welcoming piece of liturgy. The lesson is 45 minutes in length—in a synagogue’s meeting space or classroom setting. This lesson also presumes the use of Mishkan Tefilah. If other siddurim are used, please be sure to make necessary adjustments. This learning session should be prefaced with one or more introductory sessions in which class goals and hopes are shared, mitzvah project options are outlined, and participants can engage in learner–community building.

### Core Concept:

The prayer, Mah Tovu is an important introductory piece of liturgy and also offers a point of entry for intergenerational dialogue.

### Essential Questions:

Where does the Mah Tovu prayer appear in the service? And, how do we use it?

What does the prayer’s text mean?

What does Mah Tovu mean to me, as a learner?

What does Mah Tovu mean to my family members?

### Performance Tasks And Evidence of Understanding:

Learners will read (or listen to) the prayer in both Hebrew and English.

Learners will learn or sing along to a congregational melody of the prayer.

Learners will share their own thoughts or stories about welcoming others into their homes.

Learners will record some of these thoughts or stories in their Family Prayer Book

### Activities:

1. Specific set inductions should vary based on class demographics. Regardless of induction, however, the class leader will introduce the

prayer Mah Tovv to the participants—situating the prayer’s place in the morning service and explaining its general meaning. [5–7 minutes]

2. A cantor or song leader will teach the preferred congregational melody to participants [5 minutes]
3. Participants will take turns reading (and/or listening and explaining when/where necessary) the prayer from Mishkan Tefilah, page 192 [10 minutes]
4. Class leader will hand out dapim with the following leading questions: “Where did I grow up or where am I growing up? What do I or did I like best about it? Tell about a time when I welcomed someone special into my home.” (Dapim should leave plenty of space for participants to record their responses. Each family will keep their daf and use it to create/populate their Family Prayer Books. Design of the daf should appear in-line with the culture of your synagogue–community and include the logo of your synagogue).
5. Each family will take 20 minutes to work through the daf. Each generation should share and help others to do the same. Each generation should also take turns recording responses if possible.

**Materials Needed:**

Copies of Siddur Mishkan Tefilah

Dapim for Family Prayer Books

Pens or pencils

Appropriate music etc. if a cantor or song leader is not available.

## Bibliography

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