

“Jewish Home Sweet Home” -- Taking Jewish Education on Location by Treasure Cohen

The blue “*shalom*” flag waves from the front porch of the modest, frame house and bids the children welcome. They bounce up the front steps, pausing briefly to wipe their little shoes across the *shalom* doormat and to finger the fancy *mezuzah* on the door-post. The door opens as the aroma of freshly baked *challah* draws them in. They are greeted by a pleasant *balabusta*, frocked in a Jewish star-studded apron, who invites the class of wide-eyed preschoolers into the living room. She takes their winter jackets, and seats them on the carpet in front of her rocking chair. “Shalom! Shalom!” she greets them. “Welcome to our Jewish Home Sweet Home.”

A visit to Bubbe's? A trip to a Jewish theme park? Not either, but a blend of both. These four-year-olds are actually on a field trip to “Jewish Home Sweet Home,” a one week community family education event, sponsored by JEFF (Jewish Experiences for Families) of MetroWest, New Jersey. On their visit they will have an adventure in every room of the house: They will hunt for Jewish symbols, cook in a kosher kitchen, enjoy Jewish books, sing Jewish lullabies, and recite the bedtime shema. After a special shalom snack, they will leave with a goody bag filled with treats, including a shema pillowcase, and a “Jewish Treasures” game, with an explanatory “key” for families.

THE VISION

“Jewish Home Sweet Home” is an example of family education “on location,” an opportunity to bring to life the familiar adage that “Jewish education begins at home.” One of our goals in conceiving this mega-event was to create a comfortable and welcoming venue where families of all backgrounds and affiliations could learn about Jewish rituals, traditions, and celebrations in a natural, hands-on setting. We wanted to offer resources, skills, and props for Jewish home observances and to model the Jewish values of hospitality, tzedaka, and family tradition. Above all, we hoped to suffuse the “Jewish Home Sweet Home” adventure with the warmth, fun and joy of Jewish living so that families would want to bring it home.

PLANNING “HOME SWEET HOME”

That was the vision--conceived by an enthusiastic JEFF Committee of volunteers and staff at the Jewish Education Association of MetroWest. We planned the event for mid-December, following an early Hanukka and before winter break--a time when many Jewish families could use a good Jewish adventure. Our budget was small and our ambitions great. As the project unfolded, there were times when the whole idea seemed impossible and the challenges insurmountable. But thanks to some miracles and the resolve and talents of the “Jewish Home Sweet Home” team, the vision gradually took form.

Our first challenge was to find a “house” for our home. Although some suggested that we could simulate the home experience within the walls of a synagogue or other institution, our dream was to “borrow” a real house for a week. By some miracle, our dream came true when Congregation Beth Torah, a tiny congregation in Florham Park, New Jersey, offered us their building--a three-bedroom house turned synagogue--as well as their partnership in creating this event. In return, they asked only that we program some special events for their families.

Since it had been many decades since the building had functioned as a house, the next challenge was to make it look like a place where people actually live. Some of the transformation was done theatrically, by painting set designs of room arrangements on wall murals. The rest was accomplished by filling the rooms with all the furnishings and props of modern life--furniture, linens, toys, books, plants, electronic gadgetry, and Judaica--mostly borrowed from our own homes.

When we were done, the house was truly an adventure in Jewish living. The kitchen had a kosher look with red and blue pot-holders, towels, and labels designating meat and milk. Alef-bet magnets dotted the refrigerator door and anchored a synagogue bulletin and Jewish calendar. The fireplace mantle displayed Jewish ritual objects for every holiday, and the walls were adorned with Jewish art and family photos. Upstairs soft stuffed Torahs cuddled beside teddy bears on the nursery pillows, and CAJE and JCC T-shirts hung in the closets. Bookshelves in every room spilled over with Jewish literature, and even the computer games had a Jewish identity.

Unlike other family education events that seek to meet the needs of a variety of families at the same time, we had the luxury of planning a week's worth of activities, each of which targeted different populations and needs. Since the space was confined, each event was limited to a number that was manageable and provided a cozy intimacy. We were able to open our doors to Early Childhood field trips each morning, and invite day schools and preschool families in the early afternoon. We scheduled Jewish cooking and craft workshops for older children and the "art of Jewish living" classes for adults in the evening, all taught by artists, gourmet cooks, and a sofer-in-residence. On the week-ends we provided activities for families, including a House Warming-Hanukat-Habayit for our hosts, and a Young Family Shema Pajama Party.

LIVING THE LIFE

For one week our "Jewish Home Sweet Home" committee and staff practically camped out at the event site. We arrived early each morning, chatting over coffee before our company arrived and stayed late into the evening, sweeping up the crumbs and taking out the garbage before we left. Every day, dressed in our "Jewish Home Sweet Home" aprons, we played the part of Jewish hosts and homemakers. By the end of the week, we were no longer playacting the roles of balabatim but had grown into them. We had become "family," bonded by our collective exhilaration and investment in this project.

When the week's program was over, it was bittersweet to dismantle our Jewish home and change it back into a synagogue. We were exhausted, and our real families wanted us back, yet we were riding high on the excitement that the event had generated. We received letters and pictures from children who shared their favorite "Jewish Home Sweet Home" memories--the songs, the stories, the cooking, the treasure hunt, the food. Older children and adults loved creating the Jewish heirlooms that became a part of their ritual lives. The shema pillowcase was a favorite, and some families told us that it became the incentive they needed to include the shema prayer in their bedtime rituals. For months to come, we were to hear how "Jewish Home Sweet Home" had made an impact.

Congregation Beth Torah--our host and partner--was so enthusiastic about the Jewish home project and the effect it had had on their congregation that they offered to host it again the following year, this time in March. This time we created a Passover House and filled it with new adventures in Jewish home-making and family celebration. From kashering to matza balls, from hametz to Seder plates, there were so many opportunities to

celebration. From kashering to matza balls, from hametz to Seder plates, there were so many opportunities to teach about Passover in the home. Tiny tots and experienced homemakers alike came away from “Jewish Home Sweet Home at Passover” with new ideas, experiences, and props for enriching their Passover celebrations.

LOOKING FORWARD

Last week, I received two phone calls about “Jewish Home Sweet Home.” One was from the president of Beth Torah, happily reporting that they had plans to break ground for a “real” synagogue this year and would have to tear down their old “home.” The other was from an Early Childhood director asking when we were scheduling our next Jewish home adventure. With a tinge of sadness and a glimmer of expectation, I wonder whether this will signal the end of our “Jewish Home Sweet Home” or a new beginning. Either way, it has led us to the vision of the Jewish home as the natural venue of Jewish family education.

As a family educator, I have a dream for the future. I would like to turn “Jewish Home Sweet Home” into a permanent, hands-on “house of learning,” where families of all ages, backgrounds, and affiliations can learn how to make a house a Jewish home all year round. Just as the JCC is a center for Jewish community and the synagogue is a center for Jewish learning and worship, so “Jewish Home Sweet Home” could become a center for Jewish family education. Then I could spend every day in my Jewish star-studded apron, welcoming families into our “Jewish home” and enabling them to pass on the home traditions that are at the heart of Jewish family life.

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