

# Synagogue schools are teaming up

Mergers have started to become more common

**By Ann Green**

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Several synagogues in the Greater Boston area have merged or are planning to merge their religious schools.

As demographics change, with Jewish populations moving to different cities and towns, some congregations find that such mergers make better use of their resources than maintaining separate schools.

"We benefit from the resources of three great congregations," said Erin Gubert, associate director of Ma'or, a collaboration of Brookline's Temple Emeth, Congregation Mishkan Tefila of Chestnut Hill and Temple Reyim in Newton. The name Ma'or, or "illuminations," uses letters from the Hebrew names of the three congregations. Grades K through

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## Mergers among Greater Boston synagogues becoming commonplace

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5 meet at the Jewish Community Center in Newton. "We are separate from the JCC," explained Gubert. "We rent space there." Grades 6 and 7 meet at Hebrew College.

Ma'or started in the fall of 2013 with a focus on creating community, making learning relevant to students' lives and giving students a chance to pursue their interests. Grades 2 through 5 have choices in some of the classes they take: They include "Can Your Dog Have a Bar Mitzvah?" a course on kindness to animals; and "Sacred Pages," a class in which students make their own Haggadot.

"The merger has gone well and everybody has been great," said Gubert. "Kids are having a great time and are meeting more children from more schools. Each school brings its best practices to the endeavor." New programs include Israeli dance, a band that specializes in Jewish music, and a Holocaust class for 7<sup>th</sup>-graders that culminates in a trip to the United States Holocaust Museum in Washington, D.C.

"We want each child to have strong bonds with their own school and with Ma'or," said Gubert. "This is an exciting opportunity and a first for Newton."



Ma'or is a religious school that draws from congregations in Brookline, Chestnut Hill and Newton.

The religious schools of Temples Beth *Emunah* of Brockton and Beth Am of Randolph have joined to create the B'Yachad ("together") South Area Religious School. "Both congregations have similar goals and mindsets," said B'Yachad Director Beth Goldstein. "This collaboration gives students the opportunity to have different educational opportunities and to meet new people." The synagogues draw from communities south of Boston including

Braintree, Stoughton, Randolph, Brockton and Mansfield. The collaboration encompasses grades K through 7 (high school programs having merged previously). Special programs included student participation in the "World Wide Wrap," which included learning about tefillin, putting them on, and – in the case of the 5th grade – making their own, as well as a study of Jewish funeral rituals that concluded with a trip to a Jewish funeral home.

"Before school started, families painted classrooms as part of our effort to create community," said Goldstein. "They now have a sense that they are really one school." Classes meet at Beth *Emunah*, while special events and holiday programs are held at Beth Am. "This was a great opportunity to create new a curriculum and work with new teachers," said Goldstein. Helping to keep things running smoothly is a committee of parents – made up of three represen-

tatives of each congregation – that works with Goldstein. "We meet once a month," she said, "and they are very helpful and supportive."

Temples Beth Shalom and Ner Tamid, both in Peabody, are located just a mile apart. The congregations recently announced that they will be combining their Hebrew schools for grades K through 7. They had previously combined grades 8 through 10 for a two-year pre-confirmation and confirmation class. Beth Shalom is a Reform congregation and Ner Tamid is Conservative.

"We are optimistic that this will work out well," said Cantor Jeri Robins of Beth Shalom. "While our goal is to instill in the children a strong Jewish identity, as clergy we also have opportunity to break down barriers between movements that might be based on preconceived notions. We already have some common curriculum."

The merger will be implemented this fall. The school will be housed at Beth Shalom, but it will be a shared religious school.

"It's exciting," said Robins. "This is a great way to share traditions and provide perspective where there might be distinctions in practices. There are fewer differences than you might think."