



What do planting a tree in Malibu, sharing a Shabbat dinner, acting out a Purim spiel, meeting a Holocaust survivor, cooking with Sephardic spices and perfecting the v'ahavta prayer all have in common? Ask a JEWELS student – one of the 58 youth who are currently participating in the innovative Jewish education program of Valley Outreach Synagogue. From Westlake Village to Encino, eight JEMs (Jewish Education Modules) meet in private homes where young people from first through seventh grade learn Hebrew and connect with their Jewish heritage through games, stimulating discussion, song, dramatic role play and other experiential activities. JEWELS, (which stands for Jewish Education through Wisdom, Ethics, Hebrew Literacy and Service), aims to revolutionize the traditional Hebrew-school model by literally moving it outside the box and into the home, where there are no classroom walls, desks or traditional teaching methods.

Judaic wisdom and ethics come alive as students personally connect with Jewish history, the Torah, holidays, traditions and mitzvot. For example, students share photos and documents of themselves and their family members in an effort to understand how Judaism defines and celebrates various life-cycle events. The similarities and differences between Jewish cultures are explored while preparing traditional dishes made with authentic Sephardic spices. Themes of tolerance, advocacy and community are discussed as a Holocaust survivor shares her story. In preparation for holidays such as Purim, JEWELS students bake hamantashin, act out Purim spiels, prepare mishloach manot (gift baskets), chant from the megillah, make masks and perform songs, prayers and skits during the annual VOS Friday night Purim service.

Hebrew literacy is a critical aspect of the program, enabling students to develop a strong foundation in preparation for their Bar or Bat Mitzvah. For half of each two hour class, students learn how to read, write and speak Hebrew, eventually mastering the prayers that they will deliver during their Bar/Bat Mitzvah service. Since language skills are best acquired through repeated practice, students recite their lessons daily by calling into the Hebrew Reading Line – a system that allows

teachers to monitor the individual progress of each student and provide direct feedback during the next class session. Students are grouped according to their current level, and lessons are individualized if necessary. Additionally, Bar & Bat Mitzvah aged students are given a special prayer workbook and a CD of all chanted prayers.

Throughout the JEWELS year, students

- **Mitzvah Program** –Younger classes identify and participate in a class mitzvah project, while B'nei Mitzvah students study and practice various mitzvot, culminating in a personal project in honor of their special day.
- Becoming a bnei-mitzvah can be the beginning of a lifetime commitment to developing and improving your relationship with G-d, with yourself, your family members, friends, your community, and even with the world. By performing a variety of mitzvot, or sacred acts, now and in the future, you can make the power of this one day last throughout the rest of your life.

In addition to the scheduled weekly classes, JEWELS offers families opportunities to connect and participate in local community events. Whether it be a relaxing family retreat in Malibu, an educational field trip to the Museum of Tolerance, a raucous Chanukah party, planting trees for Tu B'shvat, or Walking for Darfur, together JEWELS students and their families are redefining Jewish education in the 21st century.

The success of the JEWELS program is evidenced by the smiles on our students' faces and the love of Judaism in their hearts. As one JEWELS mother expresses, "I am thrilled with the dedicated teachers who are really inspiring my children. When I pick my kids up from class, I can't wait to hear what they learned. They are always eager to share. The JEWELS program is a blessing for our family."