

Collaborative Family Giving at Temple Isaiah

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The room was filled with the sounds of students and parents in spirited conversation. Spread out in front of them were small cards with pictures of items like a cell phone, water, clothes, flowers, and more. At each table, groups were debating which items constituted a “need” and which were merely a “want.” Sometimes it was easy to determine in which category to place a picture. Other times more discussion was necessary. “You don’t NEED a cell phone,” a parent reminded their child. “You do need to have some clothes,” acknowledged a fifth grader, “but they don’t need to be new or the most popular brand.”

Welcome to the Temple Isaiah Fifth Grade Family Giving Circle! Three times each year, parents and guardians join their children during Kulanu (Temple Isaiah’s youth education program) to study Jewish texts related to tzedakah, engage in conversation, and wrestle with how to prioritize giving.

These conversations serve as preparation to engage in the important work of deciding how to allocate Kulanu Tzedakah funds. Working with their teachers, the fifth grade students researched and selected charities that they thought were the best recipients for the tzedakah funds. At the final session, student groups presented their chosen organizations to peers and parents. Robust conversation and voting resulted in selecting three great organizations to receive over \$1,000, a portion of Kulanu’s total tzedakah money, collected from families throughout the program. We are pleased to announce the three grantee

organizations: [St. Judes](#), [Meals on Wheels](#), and [The Children's Cancer Foundation](#).

This year marked the completion of our second Fifth Grade Family Giving Circle. The program grew out of our existing family education model, which is designed to: build meaningful community and foster relationships through consistent grouping, structured conversation and activities, engage families in Jewish learning that extends beyond the synagogue and impact their daily lives, empower our students to work together to make a significant decision on behalf of our school and have a positive impact our surrounding community.

This second iteration of the program saw some significant changes from the first year:

- Parent feedback made it clear that three sessions is more realistic than four.
- Families used to work at home to research and select a charity to pitch to their small group. It became clear that this assignment fell largely on parents without meaningful student involvement, so we moved this process to take place in the classroom with teacher support.
- Groups work at a different paces—some come to quick agreement, others could debate the whole session without reaching consensus. This leaves some circles hanging around with nothing to do. We attempted to alleviate this issue in two ways: adding suggested times to our table instructions to help keep discussion-heavy groups on track, and supplemental activities to keep our quicker-moving groups engaged.

These changes paid off—feedback from kids, parents, and teachers was excellent. As we look ahead to the future, we will bring more structure to the process of charity selection and adjust

the timeline to allow for students to hear directly from individuals connected to their selected organizations.

As we learned, “We are obligated to be careful with regard to the mitzvah of tzedakah to a greater extent than all [other] positive commandments, because charity is an identifying mark for a righteous person” (Maimonides; Mishneh Torah). I am so grateful to be part of a community that supports experimenting with new models of learning, with parents willing to invest the time in their children’s Jewish education, and where learners (of all ages) engage with text and one another seriously and respectfully.

Here is some of the amazing feedback we received on the program:

- “Definitely keep this program! So much more meaningful than sitting through a lecture or designing a tzedakah box.”
- “I learned that giving is really important and I should do it more often”
- “[The best thing about my giving circle was] building a closer relationship with my peers and having their insight in important discussions.”
- “This activity helped fuel home conversations about which organizations we would like to support and why. It made us more thoughtful as a family about giving in general.”