

# **A Curriculum Guide for *In God's Name***

**by Leah Mundell**

This set of discussion questions and activities is intended to accompany Sandy Eisenberg Sasso's beautiful children's book, *In God's Name*, available from Jewish Lights Publishing. The book is appropriate for kindergarten through second grade, but this curriculum might be best suited for second grade students. Spend some time reading through the book first, then use the book as a jumping-off point for the programs suggested here.

## **Personal Names and Characteristics**

In the beginning, after the world was created, everything was given a name (p.5). Some things are named for their characteristics - what they eat or how they look or what they do - like woodpeckers, anteaters, grasshoppers, or sunflowers.

- Brainstorm with the class a list of names based on characteristics (more ideas - woodchuck, bluebird, tumbleweed, sheepdog)

Sometimes, people are named for their special characteristics, too. Last names often come from a person's profession or the place where they live (e.g. Carpenter, Goldschmidt-Goldsmith, Berliner-person from Berlin).

- Where did you get your name? Does your name have a special meaning in another language? Ask your parents and grandparents about the history of your first and last name.

Note to teacher: Before students begin researching the history of their names, parents must be informed of the activity and provided with resources to assist them. Either invite parents in to explain the project or send a letter home with the students explaining clearly your expectations and providing guidelines. You might offer, for example, to make available a dictionary of Jewish names so that parents and children can look up the meaning of the child's name together. Families may write, illustrate, or tape record the history/meaning of the child's name.

- Each student should tell the class the history or meaning of his or her name or present a picture illustrating the characteristic the name describes or an event from the story of his or her name.

Names play a very important part in the Tanakh. In fact, the second book of the Torah is called Shemot -names- in Hebrew, because it begins with the listing of the names of Jacob's sons, who would become the twelve tribes of Israel.

In the Tanakh, many characters are also named for special characteristics. For example:

Yitzchak - "laugh" because Sarah laughed at the idea that she would give birth at such an old age

Moshe - "draw out," named by Pharaoh's daughter when she pulled him out of the Nile

Gershom (Moshe's son) - "a stranger there," because Moses was a stranger in the land where Gershom was born

In the book *In God's Name*, the people who look for God's name all have special characteristics, whether they be skin or hair or eyes or size or shape (p. 6-8), just like the characters in the Torah. You also have special characteristics. What makes you special?

- Make a list of the things you do well, of the things you like, of the special ways you act.
- Divide the class into groups of two. Have the pairs face each other and draw pictures of each other, taking careful note of eye and hair color and other special features.

The Torah says that all human beings are created "b'tzelem elohim," in God's image (Gen. 1:27). Each of our special characteristics is a reflection of God. In what ways are you like God? How might your special characteristics make you feel closer to God?

- How would you create a picture to show that someone is made in God's image? What symbols could you use? (Provide examples: heart, mind, eyes, etc. You could also place a Hebrew word inside the body; provide possible Hebrew words: chesed, rachamim, etc.)

### God's Names

People have been searching for a name for God for a very long time. Jewish tradition says that God's real name is so special, so holy, that it should never be said out loud. Instead, we each look for names for God that fit our understanding of what God is. Sometimes, in prayers and blessings, we use abbreviations for God's name. One of those abbreviations is the word Hashem, which means "The Name." Another is Adonai, which means "Lord." In the Reconstructionist prayerbook, many different names for God are used to reflect people's different understandings of God's name.

- Look through Kol Haneshamah for different names for God, in Hebrew or English. Discuss why certain names are used in certain prayers. Does God have different names at different times and in different places? For example, in the Birhot Hashahar (morning blessings) on page 152-162, God is called Awakener, The Provident, The Fashioner, The Lamp, The Compassionate, Redeeming One, The Helping Hand, etc. - a different name for each blessing. How does each name fit with each particular

blessing? What other names can you come up with to fit with these blessings? (Take each blessing one by one, making sure that students understand the meaning of each name)

Our understanding of God's name changes as we grow older and have new experiences and ideas.

- Talk to an older person you know about the names they use for God. How have their names for God changed as they have grown older? Use the lists of names of God in Appendix A as a starting point for this discussion. Which names has this person used in synagogue in the past? Which names does he or she use in synagogue now? What about private names for God - are they found on these lists or does this person have his or her own?

All of the people in the book named God according to what God meant to them.

- Think of your own, special name for God. The name doesn't have to be a word; it could also be a dance or a motion, a drawing or a song.

Why were each of the names that the people used for God only part of God? See Kushner's "wind" exercise in "The Idea of God in the Jewish Classroom" (J. Schein and J. Staub, ed., *Creative Jewish Education: A Reconstructionist Perspective*, Chappaqua, NY: RRC Press and Rossel Books, 1985)

- Practice saying the words of the Sh'ma. Find the words that mean God (Adonai, Eloheinu) What does the word Adonai mean? Like the word Hashem, Adonai is really just an abbreviation for all the different names for God. The Sh'ma is like a reminder to the people at the end of the book: **Listen**, everyone - God's name is **all** of your names for God. God's name is one.

### God and Human Beings

On page 9, the man who tends sheep calls God Shepherd. In some prayers used on the High Holidays, God is also called Shepherd.

- Look at the Yom Kippur prayer "Ki Anu Amecha" (Yom Kippur evening service - Harlow mahzor, p.400; Gates of Repentance, p.279; On Wings of Awe, p.279). What does it mean for God to be a shepherd? How does God take care of us? Are we ever shepherds, taking care of God? How can we help "take care" of God?

On page 10, the tired soldier calls God Source of Peace. One way we can help take care of God is to help God make peace in the world.

- Sometimes we think of making peace as ending world war, but peace really starts with peaceful behavior in our lives every day. Roleplay situations of conflict resolution, e.g. sibling rivalry, classroom teasing, misunderstandings, etc. Let a few kids act out each conflict, then freeze while a team of "mediation experts" comes in to offer suggestions on how to solve the problem peacefully. Make sure all sides of the story are heard and acknowledged. Come to a compromise that everyone can live with.

In the book, each of the people was certain that his or her name for God was the correct one. They were so certain that they refused to compromise or even to listen to each other. Is it possible that people would even fight about having the "right" name for God? In fact, this has happened many times historically. In ancient times, the Jews fought against other peoples in Israel who worshipped a god called Ba'al. At the time of the Maccabees, the Greeks forced the Jews to worship their gods called Zeus and Hades and many others. In Spain in the 1400s, Jews were forced to convert to Christianity and call God Jesus. Even today, in various parts of the world, disagreements over what we call God and how we worship God continue to cause wars.

- How do you think the people felt when no one listened to each other? Have you ever felt this way before? What did you do?\* Why didn't God listen when no one listened to each other?

At the end of the book, the people finally realize that all of their names for God are good. They kneel together by the edge of a lake and see something very special reflecting back at them. The lake was so clear it was just like a mirror.

- Draw your own picture of God's mirror. What would God's mirror reflect in your picture? Perhaps it would reflect natural beauty (a rainbow, a sunset) or people's actions (helping one another, praying) or people's images (hearts, faces).

### **Our Kedusha Moments**

Kedusha means special and unique. We all have our own experiences of special moments; sometimes these moments are related to the work that we do or the people that we spend time with or the places where we live. Each of the characters in the book has his or her own name for God. Each has his or her own reason for praying to God. What would these characters pray for (e.g. the farmer on p.6)? What would a sailor or an artist or a nurse pray for?

One of the central prayers of the morning and evening service is the Amidah, the standing prayer, which is also called the prayer of 18 blessings. The Amidah is divided into sections for all different types of prayers - prayers of thanksgiving, petition and praise.

- In the Amidah, (*Kol Haneshamah: Shabbat Vehagim*, p.294-322; *Limot Hol*, p.98-135) find a prayer that a farmer might pray. Also find prayers for a sailor, artist, or nurse, for example. Why would each of these people find special meaning in these prayers?

- Now, look at the name you chose for God and use this name to create your own prayer. Be creative - your prayer could be a poem, a song, a dance, or a picture.

One way that some people pray is through art itself. The sculptor who calls God My Rock might sculpt as a way of expressing his feelings of Godliness. The importance of artistic expression in Judaism is recognized as a way of beautifying God's commandments. This is called *Hidur mitzvah*.

- Use watercolor, collage, or other media allowing students to represent a time or a place when they felt God/godliness.

Have you ever thought of God as a friend, like the girl on page 23? How can you be a friend with someone or something you cannot see or hear? Friends usually do things for one another; how can we do things for God?

We have already talked about the way making peace helps bring us closer to Godliness. Other acts of helping or caring can also help us connect with God. On page 16, the nurse calls God Healer.

- What other acts of *gemilut hasadim* (deeds of lovingkindness) or *mitzvot* (Jewish responsibility) could you do to bring you closer to God? As a class, decide on three *mitzvah* projects for the year. Try to choose projects that reflect all of the ideas about Godliness you've come up with on your own.

\* From "Sefer Safari: Jewish Experiences for Families," Congregation Ansche Chesed, New York, NY.



## Appendix A

### THE NAMES OF GOD IN TRADITION

- |                               |                                   |
|-------------------------------|-----------------------------------|
| 1. Adonai, "My Lord"          | 28. Former of All                 |
| 2. King                       | 29. Praiseworthy God              |
| 3. Lord                       | 30. Guardian of Israel            |
| 4. The True God               | 31. Shield of Abraham             |
| 5. The Divinity               | 32. Rock of Israel                |
| 6. The Fear of Isaac          | 33. King over the kings of kings  |
| 7. Mighty One of Jacob        | 34. The Name                      |
| 8. El, The God of Israel      | 35. The Holy One, Praised be He   |
| 9. Most High                  | 36. Heaven                        |
| 10. Everlasting God           | 37. Peace                         |
| 11. God Almighty              | 38. I                             |
| 12. God of Vision             | 39. Judge of the Earth            |
| 13. God of the Covenant       | 40. The Awesome One               |
| 14. Everlasting King          | 41. My Rock                       |
| 15. Everlasting Rock          | 42. Eternal One of Israel         |
| 16. Ancient God               | 43. Ever-living God               |
| 17. Everlasting Arms          | 44. Lover of His People Israel    |
| 18. Everlasting Life          | 45. The Ransomer                  |
| 19. YHVH, "He Causes to Be"   | 46. The Redeemer                  |
| 20. I am that I am            | 47. The Guide                     |
| 21. Lord of Hosts             | 48. Our God, God of Our Ancestors |
| 22. Creator of Heaven & Earth | 49. God of Abraham                |
| 23. Holy One of Israel        | 50. God of Isaac                  |
| 24. Shepherd of Israel        | 51. God of Jacob                  |
| 25. The Rock                  | 52. The Mighty One                |
| 26. King of Israel            | 53. The Heroic One                |
| 27. The God of Truth          | 54. Acquirer of All               |

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| 55. The Living Lord                              | 80. He Who Caused His Name to<br>Dwell in This House                 |
| 56. Rescuer                                      | 81. Our Father, Our King   |
| 57. Reviver of the Dead                          | 82. Our Shepherd   |
| 58. Father of Mercy                              | 83. Mighty One of Israel   |
| 59. The Merciful One                             | 84. Our Healer   |
| 60. The Merciful                                 | 85. Mentor   |
| 61. The Holy God                                 | 86. The Living God of Majesty  |
| 62. The Place                                    | 87. Sovereign  |
| 63. The Might                                    | 88. The Compassionate One  |
| 64. The Faithful One                             | 89. The Patient One  |
| 65. The Lord of the Universe                     | 90. The Bountiful One  |
| 66. He Who Spoke the Universe<br>Came Into Being | 91. The One Who is<br>Forgiveness                                    |
| 67. Our Father in Heaven                         | 92. The Generous One   |
| 68. The Infinite                                 | 93. The Eternal  |
| 69. The Possessor of Will                        | 94. Hidden of Hiddens  |
| 70. Hosts  | 95. Ancient of Ancients  |
| 71. King of Compassion<br>and Mercy              | 96. The First Cause  |
| 72. Rock of Our Lives                            | 97. World-Soul   |
| 73. The Good One                                 | 98. Absolute Spirit  |
| 74. He Who Is Merciful                           | 99. Absolute Rest  |
| 75. Maker of Peace                               | 100. The Power that Makes for<br>Salvation                           |
| 76. "Thankworthy" God                            | 101. The Power That Makes for the<br>Fulfillment of All Valid Ideals |
| 77. The Holy King                                | 102. Lord, Man of War  |
| 78. Master of All                                | 103. The Lord Who Hides His Face                                     |

FROM: Higher and Higher: Making Jewish Prayer Part of Us by Steven Brown, United Synagogue of America, 1979.



NAMES OF GOD IN KOL HANESHAMAH

- |                              |                                |
|------------------------------|--------------------------------|
| 1. The Indivisible           | 29. The All Knowing            |
| 2. Celestial                 | 30. The Living One             |
| 3. The Presence              | 31. The One Who Is             |
| 4. The One                   | 32. The Everlasting One        |
| 5. The Unseen One            | 33. The Just One               |
| 6. The Utmost                | 34. The Magnificent            |
| 7. The Wanderer              | 35. The Light                  |
| 8. The Uncreated             | 36. The One of Sinai           |
| 9. The Ancient of Days       | 37. The Anointed               |
| 10. The Eminence             | 38. The Awesome One            |
| 11. Giver of Words           | 39. Source of Life             |
| 12. Bright One               | 40. The One Who Dwells in Zion |
| 13. The Unending             | 41. Deliver                    |
| 14. The Imageless            | 42. Majesty                    |
| 15. Source of Wonder         | 43. Inexpressible              |
| 16. The Great One            | 44. The One Who Sees           |
| 17. The One Who Calls        | 45. The Mighty One             |
| 18. The Source               | 46. Grandeur                   |
| 19. The Unnamable            | 47. The Gracious One           |
| 20. The Matchless (One)      | 48. Infinite                   |
| 21. The Revealed One         | 49. The Righteous One          |
| 22. The Sublime One          | 50. The Redeemer               |
| 23. Wise One                 | 51. The Essence                |
| 24. Eternal Law              | 52. The Ineffable One          |
| 25. The Truthful (The Truth) | 53. The Fountain of Life       |
| 26. The Radiance             | 54. The Compassionate          |
| 27. The Omnipresent          | 55. The Ultimate               |
| 28. The Beautiful            | 56. The Enduring One           |

NAMES OF GOD IN KOL HANESHAMAH

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|------------------------|-------------------------|
| 57. The Many Named     | 65. The Faithful One    |
| 58. Ancient One        | 66. Harmony             |
| 59. The Incomparable   | 67. The Omnipresent One |
| 60. Kind One           | 68. Beloved One         |
| 61. The Caring One     | 69. The Holy One        |
| 62. Reviver            | 70. Source of Life      |
| 63. The Beneficent     | 71. Guardian            |
| 64. The Cause of Being | 72. The Eminence        |
|                        | 73. Dear One            |

FROM: Kol Haneshamah