

Gift #4: Teen Exploration of God Beliefs

This coming Jewish year of 2016/5777 offers a unique opportunity to engage in personal God talk with Jewish teens in the form of a very late Rosh Hashana (Monday, October 3rd) and Yom Kippur (Wednesday, October 12th). Unlike other years when the high holidays coincide with the very beginning of a religious school year, this year provides an opportunity to devote some time to this critically important part of our Jewish identity after the madness of September living (school and all sorts of other new beginnings) has subsided. Of course, thinking about Jewish identity, Jewishness and our relationship to a force both within and beyond us called God can happen any time. So this unit, designed with confirmants and high school students in mind, could be utilized at any point in the school year and in many different venues (camps and shabbatonim as well as synagogue schools).

This unit is truly “under construction”. I will be teaching it to a group of teens here in Minneapolis this fall. I have received some valuable feedback about it from Rabbi David Steinberg, a Reconstructionist Rabbi in Duluth. My hope is to eventually make the unit richer and more complex by introducing at a later point Jewish liturgy that turns to the created world of nature as the source of finding God’s presence in the world in conjunction with our human aspirations

If you use this unit your feedback would be very much appreciated. Please send the feedback to utschein@gmail.org

The program is designed as a 2-3 hour module that can be adapted to shorter or longer time frames with ease. The flow of the activities and supporting materials is listed below. The resource folder provides two Amichai poems and the “Tel Aviv” prayer by Eli Mohar.

Activity One: God Beliefs

**** I believe God is.....I believe God is not (two sides of a single card; filled out by participants , distributed randomly and read back to group)

**** God-Beliefs (from Creative Jewish Education)

Keyn/lo: checklist of beliefs I hold or don't hold (attached but found in originally in article about Teens, God, and the Holocaust on pages 155-163 of Creative Jewish Education , Schein and Staub, 1984)

Cluster the twenty God beliefs into 3 to 4 groups of those with special affinities for one another and distinct boundaries that separate them from another cluster of God beliefs . Share in small groups and with the class as a whole.

Activity Two: Mordecai Kaplan on God and Human Experience

*** selection from *Communings of the Spirit*

*** *where do I locate the divine within my own experience...moments of God/Godliness*

*** *Tagore poem /I find God (page 755-756 of Kol Haneshemah)*

Note: the Kaplan selection is a fairly left brained adventure asking for definitions and explorations. The Tagore poem is more right-brained and poetic. They can be brought together perhaps by after having both challenged and inspired themselves asking the teens to compose their own "Where do I find God" poem

Activity Three: Getting Edgier, Going Deeper through Modern and Contemporary Hebrew Poetry

**** Yehuda Amichai's prayer Tefilot/prayers*

**** Eli Mohar's A Tel Aviv Prayer*

**** Return now to the very "traditional" prayer Adon Olam (page 132 in Kol Ha-Neshemah). Compare and contrast these two contemporary Hebrew poems. How do they differ in their view of God from Adon Olam? Where does the Kaplan quote seem to stand. Closer to the Hebrew poems or Adon Olam?*

Activity Four: A Letter to my Former and Future Self (Closure)

Use these sentence stems to help students review the learning journey of these several hours:

I grew up believing _____ about God

Now I am not so sure that God _____; but I am even surer that God _____

Some new thoughts I've had about God as I have done this learning are _____

In the future I hope I can explore my beliefs and relationships to God _____

Implementation Notes and Resources for Educators

Kaplan Selection, pages 215-216 from Mel Scult's Communings of the Spirit

I made my position clear to him that while I believe in God as a transcend Being I could not conceive of that Being apart from such phenomena, I could not conceive

of that Being having any meaning for us except through and in terms of human experience. The more real and immediate such experience is of the realities of life the more we can we appreciate the spiritual values that signify God. The experience of reality is, in my opinion, as essential to experiencing God as the harp is for the production of music. The music is not evolved out of the harp but conditioned by it. So our appreciation of the reality of God is not evolved out of our everyday experience but conditioned by it.

After studying this passage ask students to “help Mordecai Kaplan out here. “ He might be saying something quite important but it is not very clear. Challenge them to do the al regel achat/standing on one foot Jewish thing. Put Kaplan’s big idea here into a single sentence , with simpler language, and share with the group.

Afterwards, you might explore the following questions

1. *In general, do you agree with Kaplan’s assertion that one can only know God through human experience?*
2. *If there is a “magic to music” beyond the harp that produces it what is the “magic of God” even beyond our most exquisite human experiences that are the spiritual harp that allows us to experience and think about God?*
3. *Flip this on its head: If the experience of God requires human experience, why does Kaplan suggest that human experience alone can’t provide for the experience of God?*
4. *Could one say the same about love, beauty or justice that they also depend on human experience yet have a life beyond them?*

Where Do I Find God by R Tagore

Where the mind is without fear and the head is held high
Where knowledge is free

Where the world has not been broken up into fragments
By narrow domestic walls
Where words come out from the depth of truth
Where tireless striving stretches its arms towards perfection
Where the clear stream of reason has not lost its way
Into the dreary desert sand of dead habit
Where the mind is led forward by thee
Into ever-widening thought and action
Into that heaven of freedom, my Father, let my country awake

Hebrew Poems

Here is a link to a short bio of Yehuda Amichai

[http://www.poemhunter.com/yehuda-amichai/biography/;](http://www.poemhunter.com/yehuda-amichai/biography/)

There are two poems by Yehuda Amichai

Amichai, "Tefilot"

אָנִי אֹמֵר בְּאַמוּנָה שְׁלֵמָה
שֶׁהַתְּפִלוֹת קִדְמוּ לְאֱלֹהִים,
הַתְּפִלוֹת יִצְרוּ אֶת הָאֱלֹהִים
הָאֱלֹהִים יִצְרוּ אֶת הָאָדָם
וְהָאָדָם יוֹצֵר תְּפִלוֹת
שִׂיוֹצְרוֹת אֶת הָאֱלֹהִים שִׂיוֹצֵר אֶת הָאָדָם

I say with perfect belief

That prayers came before God

That prayers created God

And God created human beings

Then human beings created prayers

And prayers created God who in turn created the human person

It seems that the simple assumption that God created human beings has become much more complex here. Who creates whom in this poem? What is the power of prayer that it can play a role in both the creation of human beings and of God? Amichai is clearly being poetic here but is there a way in which he might be violating laws of logic and consistency in terms of who is creating whom and what?

Tel Aviv Prayer

Eli Mohar/Yoni Richter

Translated by Ora Nitkin-Kaner

My God – here we have no Kotel;

we have only the sea.

But since you dwell in all places

surely you are here, too.

And so, when I stroll the length of this beach

I know you are beside me and I am good.

When I suddenly see a tourist, lovely and tan

laying out on the sand revealingly

I cast her quick glance, and stop in wonder

and I trust you won't only forgive me

but you will enjoy, too.

Surely I look for my own sake

but also a little for yours

because I know you are within me

as I am within you.

And perhaps I was created

so that in me, you might see

the world you created

through fresh eyes.

The “Tel Aviv” prayer has some sensual imagery (a woman in a revealing pose) which is actually interpolated into the prayer by the English translation and not in the original Hebrew. One translator may have sensed an allusion in the Hebrew that he made explicit in the English.

Educators should use their digression about whether the hinted sexuality can be handled well by their students. It also is arguably a sexist prayer in that the man does the gazing (potentially objectifies the woman). It is interesting to speculate whether the poem would work as well if a woman gazed at a well-tanned man in a revealing pose on the beach or if the gaze was exchanged between two people of the same gender.. In the end for Mohar God is not divorced from but rather part of this very sensuality. Another choice the educator might make is to focus only on the first stanza and the rich suggestion that Israelis typically focus on the Kotel as the site of prime spirituality and God presence whereas Moher thinks it is equally accessible in Tel Aviv.

The questions then put to the student to consider might be:

1. What does it mean to shift one’s awareness of God from a place of historical national memory (the Kotel) to a facet of the natural world (the sea)?
2. Is it possible for both to play a role in one’s relationship with God? How?

Now turn to Adon Olam (page 132 in Kol HaNeshamah) How is God pictured in these poem? The same or differently from the Amichai and Mohar poems? How might you characterize the different experience of God that Amichai and Moher seem to have from that of the poet who wrote Adon Olam? Are there any similarities?

Also to consider: Kaplan’s selection provided the idea that all God experience existed within the matrix of human experience. Do Mohar’s or Amichai’s idea reinforce this idea? Challenge it? Take it to a different level? In general, how would you characterize the differences between the three poets/theologians?

*Appendix: GOD-BELIEFS**

- 1) I believe that God created the world and directs the happenings in it.
- 2) I believe that God has no power to interfere in the affairs of people.
- 3) I believe that the world came into being by accident.
- 4) I believe that God is aware of what I do.
- 5) I believe that God can answer prayer.
- 6) I believe that God punishes evil.
- 7) I believe that God intended us never to understand certain things about the world.
- 8) I believe that my concepts about God differ from the Torah's concept of God.
- 9) I believe that even if there were no people, God would still exist.
- 10) I believe that God decided what is good and what is evil.
- 11) I believe that God gets involved in human affairs when God wants to.
- 12) I believe that God rewards good.
- 13) I believe that God exists independently of, and outside of people.
- 14) I believe that prayer is an attempt to talk to God.
- 15) I believe that the Torah is the word of God.
- 16) I believe that God listens to prayer.
- 17) I believe that "God" is a term that people use to describe their best hopes for humanity.
- 18) I believe God exists only inside of people.
- 19) I believe that praying can benefit the person who prays, even if God doesn't listen.
- 20) I believe that "God" is an idea people use to describe those things beyond human understanding.
- 21) I believe prayer can have an effect on people's lives regardless of what they think about God.