

The Idea of God in the Jewish Classroom

■■■ Harold Kushner

God is often thought of as an Invisible Presence, and that is precisely the role God plays in most Jewish classrooms. We do not teach about God directly. We rarely have courses in theology for the eight- to thirteen-year-olds in our care. But we do a lot of indirect teaching about God, sometimes in ways that are at odds with what we strive to teach in the rest of the curriculum.

There are two reasons for our not giving a course on God, one good and one bad. The healthy reason is that it smacks of a measure of arrogance to define God and to confidently tell children, with their limited capacity for ambiguity, what God is about, so we hesitate to do so. The less good reason is that many of our teachers either do not believe in God or have never given the problem much thought. They are manifestly less comfortable in that area than in others. (When we interview a teaching candidate, we typically check his or her credentials in Hebrew language, Bible, holidays, customs. We may even ask about her or his personal observance patterns. We rarely ask him or her what s/he believes.)

Yet we talk about God a lot, in connection with the holidays and Bible stories. Do we ever stop and consider the educational implications of what we say? Let me begin with a fundamental premise from which everything else flows: *One of the primary goals of religion is to help people think well of themselves and trust the world around them.* Good religion involves ceremonies, stories, and concepts of God which strengthen people in these directions. Flawed religion tends to teach people to think less well of themselves and of the world. I have seen a highly regarded teacher

in the first grade of a day school divide children into teams for spelling and vocabulary drills, competing with each other to see who could spell a word fastest, with prizes for the winning team. The children undoubtedly learned some vocabulary that day, but some of them also learned that they were dumb, slow, and responsible for their team's losing out. To the extent that this teacher was promoting those reactions in his students with these teaching techniques, he was acting in the service of flawed, and not good, religion.

In the absence of proof as to what God is really like, and in the commitment that we are teaching children a religion for their own lives, not a historical survey about what Jews of other ages have believed, I feel free to measure the acceptability of a theological stance by its fruits: How does this God-concept shape a child's soul? What kind of human being does it impel her or him to become?

By those lights, how shall we evaluate the ideas of God that are implicit in much of our classroom teaching? The notion of a Creator-Father who is everywhere, knows everything, sees everything, may be majestic in its theological sweep and may be buttressed by any number of biblical and talmudic citations, but what does it say to a child?

Tell the average ten-year-old boy or girl that God knows everything he does, that God can even read his mind, and you have turned a normal, healthy child into a furtive, guilt-ridden creature who will spend half the day waiting for God's wrath to fall, and will interpret every illness, every bruised knee and broken toy, as God's punishment for his sins.

Children, like adults, are filled with resentment of authority, jealousy, and anger. Because they are small and more at the mercy of authorities, and because they are less adept than adults at repressing their shameful thoughts, they are very much aware of the parts of their souls that they would rather not expose. Tell them that God knows what they did when they thought no one was looking, tell them that God knows their angry, destructive fantasies about their parents, their teachers, and their little sisters, and what have you done to them?

It was always the genius of the Torah to tell us that we would be judged by our actions, not by our thoughts. When, in the Sermon on the Mount in the New Testament, Jesus rewrites the Ten Commandments and says that hating is the same as killing, that lusting is no different from committing adultery, and envying is the equivalent of stealing, he is shifting the locus of sin from the deed to the thought. By doing so, he makes all of us sinners. We all have angry or lustful fantasies, but we are usually able to keep our hands to ourselves, even if we can't control our minds, our dreams, our imaginations. To say that the thought is as bad as the deed is to make normal people feel guilty. And to tell a child that God sees all, knows all, and holds him responsible for his thoughts is to do the same for him.

How do you answer the child who asks "Where is God?" The reply that usually comes to mind, of course, is "God is everywhere." How else can one express the might and majesty of God? But is that really an answer? To say that God is everywhere, first of all, is to say that God is no place in particular, that God isn't anywhere specific. But worse, to tell a young child that God is everywhere is all too often to provoke silliness. "Ha ha, God's in the closet." "Ha ha, God's in my lunchbox." "Hey, God, are you down there?" I heard of one little girl who had problems going to the bathroom after her kindergarten teacher had told her that God was everywhere, because she was embarrassed to have God watching her.

When a child asks me "Where is God?" I reply that it would be easier to answer her if we could change the question just a little, so that it would now read "When is God?" Asking where God is implies that God is a thing, an object locatable in space. If we could only arrange to be in the right place, we would find God. Or, if we persist in asking "Where is God?", we may end up like the Russian cosmonaut who insisted that, since he had been around the world eighty-six times and had not collided with God, God clearly does not exist.

But asking "When is God?" suggests that God is found in the moment, not in the place. Being in God's presence is not a function of where you are, but of what you are doing. The transmitter of religious sensitivity, whether parent or teacher, would then set as his task the goal of teaching children to identify those moments in their lives when God is present.

When I am invited to teach a religious school class about God in one hour, I often begin by handing out crayons and paper, and asking the children to draw a picture of God for me. I get some bearded faces, a lot of men on thrones, an occasional sunrise (Creation, "Let there be light"), or blank paper ("God is everywhere" or perhaps "This is silly"). After I have had the children explain why they drew what they drew, I say: There is one answer I thought I might get, which none of you gave me. I asked you to draw a picture of God, and none of you said "We're not supposed to!" Did you know that one of the Ten Commandments is not to draw a picture of God?

Why are we told not to? Why is that so important that it is one of the Ten Commandments, like not killing, or honoring our parents? Is it because we don't know what God looks like? Is it that God might get angry with us if our picture wasn't nice enough? I explain to children that a picture of God will invariably be limiting. It will show God being this, and not that. Is God a man and not a woman? Is God old and not young? Does God have white skin, and not brown or yellow? (Compare the problems of Christianity, which does not hesitate to show pictures of God in human form, and is now finding out that old people, women, and blacks have trouble relating to a young, white, male, bearded Jewish figure who is supposed to represent God.)

57

Maybe, I suggest, we are not supposed to draw pictures of God because He doesn't have a body, a form, or a shape the way we do. Can you think of anything else, I ask them, that is real but doesn't have a shape or body, so you can't see what it looks like?

The first answer will almost always be the wind. A few moments later, someone will mention feelings, ideas, love, fear, happiness. How can we draw a picture of the wind that will show the wind is real, even though it has no shape? How can we draw pictures of love, of fear, of anger, or of happiness?

For wind, the children suggest, we can show a man's hat flying off. For love, two people kissing; for anger, someone hitting another person; and so on. Are we really drawing pictures of wind or love or anger? We are drawing pictures of what wind and love and anger make happen, of what people do as a result of wind or love or anger.

Now, if God has no shape, if God is like wind or love or anger in a way, how can we draw a picture that would show us what God is, and show that God is real, not just something we made up? We would draw a picture of God in action, a picture of God making things happen (where is that child who drew a sunrise?), of things people do as a result of God.

What kind of pictures shall we draw if we want to show God becoming real in people's lives? A man reading the Torah. A child praying. A person giving charity. (I'm usually disappointed at how long it takes children to move out of the synagogue in their inventory of God-in-action-in-our-lives.) What about a person studying? Or a doctor performing an operation? What about a picture of a child in a store, deciding not to shoplift? Or a person visiting a sick friend?

When is God? The task of the Reconstructionist educator will not be to set out a catechism, a series of answers about God to be learned and memorized. We would do better to inculcate the habit of saying "I don't know" or "That's a good question, the sort of question grownups spend a lot of time thinking about." But if we want to teach children to recognize the reality of God, our task will be to fashion an inventory of moments and experiences in the life of the pupil in which God can be encountered, and let her draw her own conclusions about the nature of the encounter.

The nursery school child who sees bean seeds sprout into bean plants, or who feels proud when given responsibility for caring for the hamster, should be helped to find God in those feelings of wonder and of being needed.

The delight of the young child in seeing the sun reflect off the ocean, or the first snowflakes of winter, should be tied to the blessings for such occasions. Anything that prompts a blessing, *Barukh ata...*, should be seen as an encounter with a present God.

The daily prayers should be studied and translated into the language of the growing child's soul:

Honen ha-da'at means "my mind is growing." I can understand things better than I could a year ago. I used to think that I would never be able to do long division. Now it's so simple.

Hanun ha-Marbeh lislo'ah is experienced in the immense sense of relief we feel when we have disappointed people we love and found out that they can still love us and forgive us. We find it, too, in our own ability to overcome guilt and shame, to stop feeling burdened by a sense of "that's the kind of person I am" and to not repeat the behavior we are ashamed of. Even as a growing body and a growing mind are gifts God gives us, the growing soul, the ability to repent and change what we are ashamed of in ourselves, is a gift from God.

Rofeh holim refers to the experience of the nearness of God when we have been sick and felt awful and then gotten better, or when we have hurt ourselves and been so relieved when the bruise went away day by day. It suggests that God becomes real in our lives in the person of the doctor who helps us, or the researcher who discovered a medicine to make us get better.

When we are afraid to do something new or something hard or something unpopular, and we do it anyway and find out that it wasn't as bad as we feared it might be, we have met God in our daily lives. When we feel good because we have shared with someone, or he has shared with us, we have met God, and we should be taught to recognize and remember the feeling.

God is real. God is not a person, not a thing, but God is real because God makes a difference in people's lives. God helps us grow and learn and love and forgive. God governs the whole world when God makes rainbows and sunsets for the whole world, and God is personal when we have experiences and feelings that no one else has. And God becomes real in the lives of other people when God gives us the strength and the determination to do godly things so that we make the world a place that other people can believe in, too.

Study Questions

1. What is Kushner's approach to teaching about God?
2. How is it different from the way people usually teach about God?
3. Rewrite the *Amidah* to reflect a "when is God" approach to theology as opposed to a "where is God" approach.
4. How might other *berakhot* used in daily life be interpreted to reflect a "when is God" formulation?
5. How can Kushner's approach work with the different developmental stages of children?
6. How do the synagogue and religious school enhance children's experience of godliness and how could this be better facilitated?