

God Talk For Children

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Seated on the floor of a classroom at the Germantown Jewish Centre, I am part of a circle made by the six- to eight-year-old members of the Centre's mini-*minyan*. We are surrounded by tables in our classroom-made-*davening-place*. We have just used them for our jumping and spinning versions of *Birhot Hashahar* and *Pesukey Dezimrah*. The head, eastern-most table holds our Torah, which we will examine during the Torah reading portion of our service. *Barehu* and *Shema* are behind us. We began our special Shabbat Amidah by stepping into God's palace. Now, seated close together on the floor, we will have our "God talk."

This week I begin by humming *Ma'oz Tzur*. The children join in the tune, someone provides its name and we collectively wonder why are we singing a Hanukah song at Sukkot time. We put that question on hold, and I ask, "What is a *tzur*?" "A rock," someone answers. "Okay, what is a rock?" Three seconds of deep thought precede wildly raised hands. Everyone wants to speak, and everyone gets a chance to share an idea. A rock, we determine, is: strong, hard, very old, unbreakable, heavy, permanent.

"Who or what is the 'rock,' the *Tzur Yeshuati*, the supporting rock, we sing about at Hanukah and we read about six times in today's Torah portion?"

"God."

"What? You mean God is a rock? How can we talk to a rock?"

"God is not a rock. God is **like** a rock."

"Uh-huh, how? What do you mean?"

The conversation proceeds as a serious, heart-felt discussion, with each child contributing and empathizing with each other. Sharing moments when they've felt God's presence, the children are calm and thoughtful. The icing on the cake comes when a new mini-*minyan* member mentions that he is feeling God right now—in our discussion.

Teaching children about God is in some ways like teaching children about fun. Anyone who has shared quality time with children knows that a child's sense of the miraculous, of the wonder of existence—that which many adults equate with the ineffable power that makes for salvation or God—is extremely strong. Children are naturally spiritual, and one of our goals as teachers (and parents) should be to "nurture every child's innate spirituality." (See *Something More*, by Jean Grasso Fitzpatrick, for more about this idea.)

On the other hand, a child's natural spirituality is often either dissipated or squashed in the process of growing up. One way to try to prevent this terrible loss is to bring as much as possible of the child's intuitive God knowing feelings to consciousness. **Talk** about God with children; **experience** and **identify** Godful experiences with children, and their miraculous minds will store ideas and feelings about God in a retrievable and useful way.

This past summer, at the JRF (formerly FRCH) Family Camp, *Dorot*, Debby Schein and I had an opportunity to try some of our God teaching ideas with a small group of five- to eight-year-olds in an organized fashion. We met with our group for a one and a half hour period on each of four days. We organized our sharing experiences around four areas in which we hoped to demonstrate God's presence. They were:

- a) God in community (and organized religion);
- b) God in other people;
- c) God in nature;
- d) God in ourselves.

We also decided to introduce the subject we would be covering during camp time in a dramatic fun way that we had seen Jeffrey Schein use very effectively. We spread outrageous rumors that an extremely important visitor would be coming to the first meeting of our group.

At the midpoint of our first session (God in community) I raced into the bathroom to change from my Shabbat skirt into a long robe, a paper towel beard and a silver crown. I then hobbled in on a walking stick, carrying a plunger as a scepter. Displaying the appropriate astonishment, Debby asked the children if they had any idea who it was that had miraculously decided to visit them. Stifling giggles, the children all agreed that we were trying to make them think that God was visiting. Debby and I then highlighted the biographical details of the God ideas I was meant to embody. In conclusion, I emphatically declared, "I am God. I am (**absolutely**, of course) an **old man** who sits far away in heaven. I can be mean and do bad things to all sorts of good or bad people. Being God, I follow you everywhere and read your mind all the time. . . ." (at which moment everyone present joined me in the appropriate culturally correct conclusion of my absurd description)—NOT!!!

The idea for this part of our program, which proved to be great fun for all of us, came directly from reading Harold Kushner's extremely helpful book *When Children Ask About God*. Rabbi Kushner stresses the idea that one of the primary responsibilities of Jewish educators is to help children eliminate dangerous misconceptions about God that could greatly inhibit the development of a positive and growing relationship with God. I would also recommend that Rabbi Kushner's wonderful article, "The Idea of God in the Jewish Classroom," become required reading for **all** teachers at Jewish schools.

GOD IN COMMUNITY

Our first meeting took place on Shabbat morning after the entire camp community had completed *Shaharit* services. It was an opportune moment to discuss finding God in the times when a community of Jewish people are doing Jewish things. Reminding everyone of the song we had

hummed and sung early in our services, we asked everyone if they knew why we had put our *talitot* over everyone's head while we all sang *Mah Tov*. We translated the words of the song together, and then Debby and I told the story of Balaam's unwilling creation of this important song. Why is this song so important to us? Whose tents were so good? Why do they matter to us? *Mah Tov* is one *tefilah* that links us to all the Jews of the past and thereby links our God to their God.

But . . . the song does have some problems. Whose tents were they? "Ya'akov's and Israel's—same person different name." What important half of the Jewish population are not included here? Yes—Sarah, Rivka, Leah and Rahel. They were there too. We then experimented by inserting the *imahot* instead of Ya'akov and Israel and also tried singing about couples instead of individuals. At this point the special guest described above appeared.

After "God" left, we talked briefly about establishing connections with the Jewish people of the future by continuing our traditions. We ended with a rousing dance and twirl to the sounds of "*Am Yisra'el Hay*."

GOD IN PEOPLE

This session began with *Hiney Mah Tov* sung several different ways and a short discussion about the specialness of brothers and sisters. We then identified the good things that people do for each other as *mitzvot* and quickly realized that *mitzvot* come from God. So **whenever** a person is doing a *mitzvah*, God is there with that person. When we learn about police and firefighters saving people and about Moses being a great leader, we can recognize that it is God who has given these people the power to do these God-like things.

We can learn a lot about God by having friendships. Caring for other people and accepting their love helps us to understand how God cares for and loves all creatures. We ended this session by reading Barbara Cohen's beautiful book *The Secret Grove*. The children were moved and happy.

GOD IN NATURE

A gorgeous camp setting made this idea self-evident to all of us. On our nature walk we touched touch-me-nots and watched their seeds shoot out, ate blackberries, and collected a variety of pond plants and animals to create a mini-pond near our cabins. We collected samples of nature's abundance and used these samples to make shadow pictures on photosensitive paper. We spoke little during these 90 minutes, but we experienced much and formed delectable enlightening memories.

GOD IN ME

At the beginning of this session, we talked about what makes people human and whether we'd change into a different animal if we could. We talked about free will, making choices, and our unique ability to knowingly copy aspects of God's behavior. We talked about the individual things that make each

one of us different and special. In the spirit of *Elul*, we talked about the new things we were able to do this past year and how the coming New Year would give us a second chance—to learn from our mistakes.

OUR GOD BOOK—A CONCRETE REMINDER

At our second session the children each put together an eight-page book to use to record their experiences of the week. Different projects were suggested at the conclusion of each session and materials were provided. For God in community, we provided various small shapes of construction paper, scissors, and glue, and suggested the possibility of a tent scene. We also provided traceable Torah, *magen David*, and tablet shapes. For God in people, we suggested portraits or action scenes illustrating *mitzvah* doing. The God in nature page became a collage of found treasures and a photosensitive print. For God in me the children created personal crests which listed likes, dislikes, etc., and included some samples of traced anatomy.

FINAL FUN FOR EVERYONE

At our final session we invited our families to see our production of Florence Freedman's beautiful book *Brothers*. We changed the story to *Sisters* but in other respects, were true to the inspiring legend. The parents *kvelled*, and we finished with a round of "*Hiney Ma Tov*," grateful that the God visiting us at the week's end was **NOT** a distant, grouchy, bearded, old, white man.