

Evoking the Indefinable: Spirituality in the Classroom

Barbara Carr

“*Kol haneshamah te halel Yah*” (Let every soul praise God) is the charge and the challenge to any Jewish educator. We study, we celebrate, we perform *mitzvot*, we distribute *tzedakah*, and through it all our souls are, hopefully, praising God. We walk into our classrooms and look at the faces in front of us, no matter what their age or level of knowledge, and each of us wants that outcome. We want this because inevitably, with sincere soulful praise of God, comes that magical, indefinable thing called spirituality.

This is written for Reconstructionist educators who seek that outcome with every lesson. I write with admiration and awareness of your efforts, because I teach as well as administer a school. My words are designed to trigger your natural skills and gifts, not to program your classes. My approach is non-traditional with infinite respect for the tradition. For example, the traditional Hebrew blessing “*La’asok be’divray Torah*” can precede this interpretive translation. I hope you find something here that works for you.

I. PRAYER MOMENTS TEACHING CHILDREN HOW TO “BRING PRAYERS HOME”

Goal: To develop a regular prayer experience that is part of the student’s everyday life.

Time: Ten minutes at the start of each class.

Age: Any age but proven successful with third, fourth, and fifth graders as well as their parents.

Each class opens with a fixed language prayer which I wrote when I began teaching. It is: “Blessed are you, God, who has brought us here today to learn, to pray, and to grow together. We give you thanks, Amen.” The children memorize this quickly and it is both a ritual and a mantra. We then move into what I call “Prayer Moments.”

At the beginning of the year we discuss why we pray. We analyze the purpose of prayer (help, strength, thanks, etc.) as well as the more abstract idea of having a conversation with an Other.

I then ask the students to think of something that has occurred in their lives the past week that they might want to acknowledge in a prayer moment. It can be very simple such as being grateful for getting an A on a spelling test, or heartbreaking, such as expressing grief over the loss of a favorite pet. The one requirement is that they think it through and really believe it is a “prayer moment.”

As the year goes on and our concepts about prayer become more sophisticated, I require a global prayer as well as a personal one. This is much tougher for the students but moves them closer to communal prayer. I almost never criticize the prayer content, but we sometimes work as a group on rephrasing a prayer idea.

As a teacher, your task becomes one of shaping. You are introducing two parallel concepts of prayer. Personal prayer, which requires very little shaping, and communal prayer, which requires a little more. You can be helpful in terms of language. If a prayer moment is giving thanks for beating the tar out of an opposing soccer team, you can reframe the prayer for the student by suggesting they give thanks for having the strength and the good fortune to come out ahead on that particular day. Communal prayer can be reinforced by language, but also by having the class recite the communal prayer together. The student who has created the prayer says his/her first line, and then the rest of the class repeats it. This is a powerful editing tool, since the rest of the class will not hesitate to express their feelings if they don't think the prayer fills its task of being "global."

As your students get more comfortable with this concept, they start to have some ownership of the prayer process. Again and again I have had parents report that their children bring this activity home, and the door becomes open for a whole new level of spirituality in their lives.

II. PRAYING IN COMMUNITY—A PARENT-CHILD EXPERIENCE

Goal: To analyze our traditional prayers and develop a comfort level with communal prayer.
 Time: Two hours.
 Age: Fourth grade and older.

Many families are uncomfortable with liturgical prayer. The purpose of this parent-child class is to take a look at both traditional and non-traditional prayers, most of which were taken from *Kol Haneshamah*, and to establish a level of comfort and understanding with the whole idea of Jewish prayer. The class includes guided exercises and a lengthy resource guide which I compiled both from the prayerbook and from sources as diverse as Danny Siegel and Chief Seattle. You should put your own resource materials together that reflect your individual congregation and its place on the traditional/non-traditional spectrum.

Each family grouping (often both parents attend) is given some ground rules and then sent off on their own to pursue their task. I have included just a few of the exercises to give you a flavor of the experience. As with all our congregation's parent-child experiences, the goal was a new level of spiritual communication between parent and student.

The entire class takes about two hours, with an introduction by the teacher and closure by the teacher. The real work is done by the families after you have set the stage.

Here are some examples of the exercises the parents and students go through together:

Adult: Tell the child how you feel about being told exactly what to do. Give examples of when you like it and when you don't.

Child: Tell the adult how it feels to be told what to do without being told why you have to do it. Say something more than it feels crummy. Explain, if you can, when it's o.k. to be told exactly what to do. Does it ever make you feel safe?

Adult: Recite the following words to the child: "*Twas brillig, and the slithy toves did gyre and gimble in the wabe: All mimsy were the borogoves, and the mome raths outgrabe.*" (Thank you, Lewis Carroll.) How did that make you feel?

Child: Recite the following words to the adult: "*David Meleh Yisra'el, Hay, Hay, Vikayam.*" Now, how do you feel? Like singing? **Together:** Talk about language for a minute. Talk about it's power. Does language make you feel like you have more power? Do you know what each of you just said? Even if you don't know what either of the sentences mean, did one feel better than the other? Why do you think that is?

Child: Why do you think all *berachot* begin the same way? Do you think the blessings would be better if they were different every time?

Adult: Do the introductory words of the blessings matter to you? If you were raised as a Jew is there a comfort level in the Hebrew words? Can you explain that to your partner? If you were raised in the Christian tradition, can you talk a little bit about litany and how that feels? If you were raised with no religious background, try and imagine how these things would feel, and respond.

Adult: Why do you think that community is important for prayer? Try and come up with an example of when you needed people around you.

Child: When do you most want to share something with people? When do you need people? Give some personal examples.

The family units then go on to write their own communal prayers. They are often breathtakingly powerful. We read them aloud, communally, and the classroom becomes a sanctuary. I have also used the prayers for Shabbat services, with the students leading the congregation. It's a spiritual experience that leaves everyone moved.

III. FRAMING QUESTIONS—OPENING YOUR STUDENTS' SOULS

Goal: To empower students to accept that they have religious ethics and ideas.

Time: 10 minutes / intermittent classes.

Age: First grade and up.

We have a great advantage over secular school teachers. We are supposed to talk about big questions and have some big answers. The reality is that the big questions are easier to come by than the

answers. Small children respond very well to big questions and give you an opportunity to have them start feeling like a spiritual path is open to them. They also often have the big answers that escape the jaded adult in us.

There are dozens of opportunities in the course of teaching Judaism to veer into areas that are spiritual. Little children love the story of Samson, and questions about what is really strength can take you to wonderful places. David and Goliath open the door to whether size is as important as people may think. The wonderful book *Does God Have a Big Toe?* by Marc Gellman and Oscar de Mejo is a huge classroom favorite and grounds for endless discussion.

The real key to opening up small children to their own spirituality is to just point them in the right direction and take them seriously. I have listened to a four-year-old child discuss the Ten Commandments with a seriousness worthy of a *yeshiva buher*. We just have to let ourselves, as their teachers, acknowledge their capacity to be religious beings.

IV. BRINGING GOD INTO THE CLASSROOM WHAT CAN BE MORE SPIRITUAL THAN THAT?

Goal: To open up discussion of God's presence with a Reconstructionist spin.

Time: Two one-hour classes.

Age: Fourth grade and up.

Children love to talk about God. As Reconstructionist educators we are forced to confront the many facets of God and have that make sense to our students. Since scholars are still debating this one, you need to be sure you're able to talk about your own beliefs before opening up to your students. It doesn't matter if you don't know for sure, but you must be comfortable sharing your uncertainty with the students. This is an impossible topic to discuss insincerely. One way to begin exploring who, what and when is God is to give students the opportunity to explore sources that speak about God.

The Creation God: If the student comes into the classroom with one clear image of God, it is this one. The God of Creation is a universal image, and we as teachers have to acknowledge and accept that image and then build on it. Our task is to introduce the evolving God through quotes from the *Tanah*, ancient tales and modern stories. If we do this well, our students become open to endless spiritual possibilities.

We can begin this process, after acknowledging the Creator-myth with the wonderful quote of Jacob's: "Surely the Lord is present in this place, and I did not know it!" (Genesis 28:17) We then can go on to Jacob's renaming in Genesis 32:29 and play with the idea of "wrestling with God." Through all of this we can talk about listening for the "still small voice" (and the derivation of Jiminy Cricket!) as well as Harold Kushner's wonderful image of "when is God" as opposed to "what is God."

As the God idea continues to evolve in our discussions we can utilize the rich Hasidic tradition. My students respond strongly to the Hasidic tale about the child of a Rabbi who wandered in the woods so often the child's father became worried. When asked why the child always went into the woods, the child replied that he went there to find God. The father reasonably responded that God was the same everywhere, but the child countered with the absolute clincher, "But father, I am not."

We then are ready to explore the myriad facets of God as portrayed in *Kol Haneshamah*. This God ranges from the presence evoked by the powerful words of the Shema to Rabindranath Tagore's words that God is found "in the merry shouts of children at play,/ In the lullaby the mother sings, rocking her baby to sleep,/ In the slumber that falls on the infant's eyelids,/ And in the smile that plays on his sleeping lips." That God, that all-encompassing presence that brings meaning to existence, is the God we want our students to meet, to get to know, and to whom they will sing praises.

The siddur can be overwhelming to the students, so I copy prayers and stories down and hand them out for their notebooks with my own margin notes which I try to keep lighthearted. Our students will go anywhere we take them, we just have to be willing to go along.

From this kind of study we are able to demonstrate concretely that the God concept is an evolving concept, that our intellectual development demands a different understanding of God than the God presented by the ancient texts, but that at each step along the way God has met our needs. We must avoid being too analytical, however. As teachers of Judaism, we are also obligated to nourish the wonder, the amazement, and the power, that God evokes. We each enter our classrooms with hopes high. May we never be disappointed.