



A GUIDE FOR JEWISH PARENTS

© Bill Aron Photography

# **Religious Issues** *in your* Child's Public School

A Publication of the Anti-Defamation League





This handbook is a publication of the Education and  
Civil Rights Divisions

© 2000 Anti-Defamation League

Printed in the United States

All rights reserved

Web site: [www.adl.org](http://www.adl.org)

# Table of Contents

---

INTRODUCTION	i
--------------	---

---

THE HOLIDAYS	1
--------------	---

---

ACTIVITIES THAT TEACH ABOUT RELIGION	7
---	---

---

POLICIES ON RELIGION IN THE PUBLIC SCHOOLS	12
---	----

---

RELIGIOUS CLUBS	14
-----------------	----

---

CLASSROOM CONCERNS	15
--------------------	----

---

RESOURCES	19
-----------	----

---

# Introduction

**T**HIS BOOKLET HAS BEEN CREATED TO HELP PARENTS DEAL EFFECTIVELY WITH THE CHALLENGES OF RELIGION IN THEIR CHILDREN'S PUBLIC SCHOOLS BECAUSE NO CHILD SHOULD EVER BE MADE TO FEEL LIKE A STRANGER IN HIS OR HER CLASSROOM. The Anti-Defamation League, which was established in 1913 "to stop the defamation of the Jewish people...and to secure justice and fair treatment to all citizens alike," regards a strong separation between church and state as essential to preserve and promote religious rights and liberties. In our increasingly pluralistic society, ADL builds bridges of communication, understanding and respect among diverse groups and provides guidance to educators on issues such as school prayer, Bible clubs and the challenges of religion in the public schools. The questions presented here are actual situations our staff has helped parents resolve.

# THE HOLIDAYS

## Chanukah

**Q** *My daughter's teacher asked me to do a Chanukah presentation for her third grade class. I have mixed feelings. I'm pleased that she is acknowledging that Lisa celebrates a holiday other than Christmas and that being Jewish is "okay." But, at the same time, I'm scared that Lisa will be singled out as being different. In addition, I know there are issues of how religion is supposed to be treated in the public schools. What should I do?*

**A** It sounds like the teacher is laying the groundwork for Lisa to

feel special in a positive way, while simultaneously providing all of the students with an understanding that religious differences are to be appreciated, not rejected. It is also admirable that she asked you to present to the class, rather than placing the responsibility on your daughter. The basic guideline you need to remember is that the public schools can teach about religion as long as they do not preach religion. Adults — whether they are teachers, administrators,

community leaders or parents — must be careful to distinguish between teaching about a religious holiday and actually celebrating that holiday.

Your purpose for this presentation should be twofold. The first goal is to give a brief historical overview of Chanukah through a story. The second goal is cultural. Share how your family and many other Jews celebrate this joyous holiday. (See "Activities that Teach About Religion" on page 7 for some appropriate projects you may want to try.)



© Bill Aron Photography

AN ACTIVITY IN THE  
TRUE SPIRIT OF THE  
WINTER HOLIDAYS  
MIGHT BE  
ENCOURAGING  
THE CLASS TO WRITE  
LETTERS SEEKING  
DONATIONS FOR  
CHILDREN WHO  
LACK TOYS.

**Q** *Last year in my son's fifth grade class, the teacher asked if any of the students were Jewish. When my son raised his hand, the teacher asked him to explain the holiday of Chanukah. My son shared what he knew about the holiday with the class, but I was uncomfortable when my son told me about this experience. When I said something to the teacher, he said that he did not know much about Chanukah, so he always asked a Jewish member of the class to explain the holiday. Is this appropriate?*

**A** It is always problematic when students are put on the spot and asked to explain a religious or cultural tradition: they may feel uncomfortable and may not have sufficient information to be accurate. In asking a student to explain, the teacher also sends a message that Chanukah is too “exotic” for anyone but Jews to understand. There are many great books on Chanukah that the teacher can consult in order to be prepared to explain the holiday.

**Q** *From December 1 until Winter Break, almost all of the workbook assignments, handouts, and spelling tests in my son's second grade class are decorated with a Christmas tree, wreath, Santa Claus, wrapped gift, or reindeer. While the content of the*

*exercises is secular, the graphics upset me. How do you suggest I handle this situation?*

**A** First, it is important to note that while Christmas trees, Santas, wreaths, wrapped gifts, and reindeer are commonly used as Christmas decorations or symbols, the courts have decided that they are secular symbols of the season. Nevertheless, their inordinate usage is inappropriate. Talk to the teacher about the plethora of Christmas decorations on the homework assignments. Explain that while you understand that displaying such graphics on workbook assignments is legal, such excessive use makes you and your child feel uncomfortable. Suggest alternative winter decorations, including snow flakes, gingerbread houses, and mittens that may be more inclusive.

**Q** *My daughter's kindergarten class is having a "Christmas Party" on the last day of school before Winter Break. There will be snacks and games, and Santa Claus is coming to the class to bring gifts for all of the students. The teacher has told the parents that if they do not want their child to attend the party, she will allow them to go to the school library. Is this an acceptable accommodation?*

**A** The kindergartners are being told, in effect, "Come to a fun party with gifts, food, and games, or go to the library for the afternoon." While legal, this party is insensitive to those students who do not celebrate Christmas. With a few adjustments, this party can be a positive experience for all of the students. Instead of

celebrating Christmas, the party can celebrate the winter season or a variety of holidays. In addition to having Santa Claus pictures to color, there should also be non-holiday coloring choices. Finally, since receiving gifts from Santa Claus is a Christian tradition, it is inappropriate in the public school classroom. An option that is true to the spirit of the winter holidays might be encouraging children to write to merchants, or other children, seeking donations for children who lack any toys.

**Q** *Sally is a fifth grader at our local public school. This past December, her teacher asked the students to write a composition entitled, "What Christmas means to me." Is it appropriate for a teacher to assign a composition with a Christian theme?*

**A** The teacher's assignment assumes that all children find Christmas meaningful. This is inappropriate because it appears to endorse one religion over another. It is illegal for the teacher, who is an authority figure, to demonstrate a preference for any particular religion. I suggest that you use the situation to increase the teacher's sensitivity to religious diversity and to stress the importance of assigning topics that allow children to choose between a variety of secular and religious projects, i.e., "What Does Christmas/Chanukah/Kwanzaa/Winter Mean to You?"

It is important to remember, however, that there may be a legal difference between an assignment initiated by the teacher and a topic selected voluntarily by a student.

**Q** *Eric is in the chorus at his elementary school. He loved the experience last year, but this year he has a new teacher. She is having the students rehearse for a winter concert. The program seems to consist exclusively of Christmas songs with religious themes such as “Silent Night” and “Come All Ye Faithful.” Eric feels uncomfortable singing these songs. Is the program illegal?*

**A** To check the program’s constitutionality, you need to determine whether there is a balance between the secular and the religious selections. If the music is part of a program that is primarily secular and educational, it is legal. If it seems to be promoting a single religion, suggest to the teacher that this might be a good opportunity



to provide recognition of the holidays observed by non-Christian children. It is as important to remind her that she needs to ensure the comfort of the child who comes from a home where no religion is practiced, or the child whose religion teaches that celebrating any holiday is wrong. Offer to help by sharing appropriate songs. The criteria for selecting the music should be on the basis of its musical and educational value, rather than its religious context.

If the teacher declines to change the program, remember that Eric can be excused without penalty from participating in programming that violates his religious

beliefs, but this may ban him from the fun others are having. Is the teacher aware of the sensibilities of those children who are not “on Santa’s list”?

You may want to contact the local office of the Anti-Defamation League (ADL). The League has helped many school districts develop policies which are constitutional and

**CONSIDER  
ALTERNATIVE WINTER  
DECORATIONS THAT  
MAY BE MORE  
INCLUSIVE,  
INCLUDING  
SNOW FLAKES,  
GINGERBREAD  
HOUSES AND  
MITTENS.**



help school staff be both inclusive and sensitive to the beliefs or non-beliefs of all students and staff. You may want to provide ADL's 2000 publication, *Religion in the Public Schools: Guidelines for a Growing and Changing Phenomenon*, to the school principal as a first step in encouraging the school to rethink what may have become unexamined custom.

**Q** *Right before winter break my son was absent from school for several days. I went to his school to pick up his homework assignments. While I was there, I decided to stop by the office of the middle school principal, with whom I have a friendly relationship. I popped my head into his open doorway to say hello and was startled to see*

*his office decorated with a Christmas tree and a nativity scene. He was not present and I have not yet had the opportunity to speak with him. How should I approach him regarding my concerns?*

**A** You have the challenge of communicating two messages. First, you need to let the principal know that, while you understand and respect his beliefs, displaying a nativity scene on school grounds is illegal since it is an unambiguous religious symbol. In order to maintain the legal separation of church and state, he, in his role as school principal, cannot appear to favor one religion over another or create an environment in which students may feel that he harbors a particular bias that may color his decisions in his role as school

THE FESTIVE  
ATMOSPHERE OF THE  
SEASON CAN BE  
ENHANCED WHEN IT  
REFLECTS THE BELIEFS  
OF ALL OF THE  
STUDENTS.

authority figure. His office should be a comfortable location for students of all beliefs or no religious beliefs.

As for the tree, its religious symbolism is not as clear. Symbols of religious holidays that have acquired secular meaning, such as Christmas trees, may be permissible. Perhaps you could suggest that they include other holiday and seasonal symbols along with the Christmas tree and you may want to offer to bring in some to share. The festive atmosphere of the season can be enhanced when it reflects the beliefs of all of the students.

# Passover

**Q** *Steven, my seventh grade son, is involved in a program in which his history, art, and English teachers team up and provide a coordinated curriculum. They have made multicultural education a priority this year. They know Steven is Jewish and that I have shown an interest in their creative approach. They asked me if I would come into the classroom and present Passover. The teachers really seem to look for opportunities where they can include elements of the world's major religions in a way that is respectful and that fits naturally into their course of study. They are willing to give me a double*

A GREAT PLACE  
TO START WOULD  
BE WITH THE  
SYMBOLIC  
MEANING  
BEHIND THE  
HOLIDAY: PEOPLE  
FIGHTING FOR  
WHAT THEY  
BELIEVE AGAINST  
GREAT ODDS,  
FREEDOM AND  
EQUAL RIGHTS.

*period if I can make the presentation interdisciplinary. Do you have any suggestions?*

**A** You have been presented with a wonderful opportunity. Your own goals for this presentation are many. First, you can

broaden their knowledge about Jewish traditions. Second, you can link the slavery experiences of Jews in Egypt and of Africans in the Americas. Third, you can expand their art history knowledge. Finally, you can contribute to their valuing the importance of women in history. (See “Activities that Teach about Religion” on page 7-11 for some appropriate projects you may want to try.)



© Bill Aron Photography

# ACTIVITIES THAT TEACH ABOUT RELIGION

## CHANUKAH

### *A SHORT HISTORICAL BACKGROUND OF CHANUKAH*

*Chanukah symbolizes the value of religious freedom and the importance of respecting diverse religious faiths. In the year 168 BCE (Before the Common Era), the Hellenistic Syrians, led by King Antiochus, tried to impose the Greek culture on the Jews of Syria by desecrating the Temple and by forbidding them to practice their faith. Judah, the Maccabee, and a small group of Jews fought the Syrian Army. After a three-year war, the Maccabees won and the Jews regained their political and religious freedom.*

**IF YOU'RE INTRODUCING STUDENTS TO CHANUKAH, A GREAT PLACE TO START** would be with the meaning behind the holiday: people fighting for what they believe against great odds. You might want to facilitate a discussion with the students, asking for ideas about other stories with the same message (a secular example might be the book *The Little Engine that Could*). This will open up the class to a more specific discussion of what this message means for Jews.

**AFTER THAT DISCUSSION, YOU MIGHT WANT TO ADDRESS THE SYMBOLISM** of the holiday. Explain that once the Jews drove their enemies from the land, they had to burn oil in the temple *menorah* (candelabra) in order to keep the temple functioning. Only one day's supply of uncontaminated oil remained. Because the oil continued to burn for eight full days, Jews saw this as a miracle and, therefore, celebrate Chanukah by lighting candles on a *menorah* for eight nights.

**ONCE THE HISTORY IS EXPLAINED, YOU COULD FOLLOW UP WITH SOME GAMES** and activities. This will accomplish the second goal of sharing culture in a fun-filled way. One great way to have fun and learn about a cultural event is by sharing food dishes. Making *latkes* (potato

LOOK FOR  
OPPORTUNITIES  
WHERE YOU CAN  
INCLUDE ELEMENTS  
OF THE WORLD'S  
MAJOR RELIGIONS IN  
A WAY THAT IS  
RESPECTFUL AND  
THAT FITS NATURALLY  
INTO THEIR COURSE  
OF STUDY.

pancakes) from the food processor to the frying pan to serving them with applesauce and sour cream is one way to do just that. Another option is to bring in *sufganiot* (jelly doughnuts). Explain that oil is the motif of this holiday, and point out how oil is used in each of these recipes. Comparing latkes to sufganiot is also a great way to bring up the issue of diversity that exists within a particular religious group or ethnicity. Another fun option is to bring in dreidels and demonstrate the traditional game associated with the holiday. Show the class how the spinning top has a different Hebrew letter on each of its four sides: *Nun, Gimmel, Hay and Shin*.

Explain that these letters make up an acronym, which translates to “A Great Miracle Happened There.” (You may want to remind them that the miracle is that the oil lasted so much longer than would have been expected.) In order to play, the players put something into the pot (money, chocolate coins, raisins or nuts). If the *dreidel* stops on *Nun*, the player who spun the top gets nothing. If it falls on *Gimmel*, the spinner gets everything in the center. On *Hay*, the player takes half. Finally, if it lands on *Shin*, the player must add to the pot. Another fun activity is making your own, edible *dreidels*. You can make them by putting a thin pretzel into the top of a marshmallow. Turn the marshmallow, dab peanut butter on the bottom and then attach a chocolate kiss.



© Illustration by Joanna Marcuse

## PASSOVER

### *A SHORT HISTORICAL BACKGROUND OF PASSOVER*

*The symbolism of Passover is found in its emphasis on freedom and equal rights. Passover retells the story of the Hebrew people's liberation from slavery in ancient Egypt. According to Exodus, the Jews were enslaved by the Egyptians. The Pharaoh, who was the King of Egypt, was afraid that the slave population would grow too strong, so he ordered that every Hebrew baby boy be killed. Moses, a baby at that time, would have been killed but was spared when his mother hid him. After his sister Miriam placed him in a floating basket on the Nile, Moses was discovered by an Egyptian princess who raised him as a prince of Egypt. Moses gave up the princely life to lead his people out of bondage to freedom.*

**IF YOU'RE IN A MIDDLE SCHOOL, YOU MIGHT WANT TO START WITH WHAT THE STUDENTS ALREADY KNOW.** Generate interest by beginning with some universal connections. Begin by asking what they recall about ancient Egypt. Or ask the class for a definition of slavery. Brainstorm the different examples of slavery that they've studied in history class. Compare and contrast the slavery of the Hebrews in Egypt and the slavery of the Africans in the Americas. You might want to bring in a tape of the gospel song "Go Down Moses" since it links both experiences. Another approach uses art as a focus. Start by bringing in various prints depicting religious events. This could lead to cross-cultural discussions of the Spring-season holidays. It could also lead to a discussion of how art has depicted events and ideas of cultural importance throughout the ages. A third approach could use music as a background. Bring in a tape of traditional Passover songs, perhaps even accompanied by copies of the lyrics for all of the students. The words and meanings of such traditional songs as "Chad Gadya" and "Dayenu" offer a wonderful starting point for the story of Passover. Or, you could make the discussion a truly inclusive one. If you bring in three or four distinctive *Haggadahs* (children's, feminist, interfaith, etc.), you can discuss with the class the variety of ways in which the story of Passover is told. Try to find differences and similarities in the wording. Point out that the style of the story may change, but the symbols of the holiday

remain constant. Perhaps the students could come up with ideas about why the authors chose to include different selections in their *Haggadahs*.

### **IF YOU'RE WORKING WITH YOUNGER STUDENTS, YOU MIGHT BEGIN**

by asking the students if any of them have seen the Dreamworks animated movie "Prince of Egypt." Tell the students that the movie is a version of the Passover story that you are here to tell today. Ask them what they remember from the movie. If there is a globe or map in the classroom, have them identify Egypt and Israel.

You could also bring several *Haggadahs* and explain that there are various ways to tell this story just as there are with some fairy tales. But point out that this is not a fairy tale: it is what the Jewish people consider a part of their history. Using



© Sharon Faulkner Photography

the *Haggadah*, briefly go through what a *Seder* entails, stopping to tell the story and explain all the symbolic items on the table, including those on the *Seder* plate. For a more contemporary approach, consider including some of the newer traditions, such as Miriam's Cup, which holds water, unlike Elijah's cup which holds wine. Explain that we would not have been able to celebrate freedom without the help of such brave women as Miriam, Moses' sister, who stayed by the water's edge to ensure baby Moses' safety. Another tradition that many new *Seders* include is a prayer that is said in memory of the six million Jews who perished during the Holocaust.

Once the history is explained, you could follow up with some games and activities. This will accomplish the second goal of sharing culture in a fun-filled way. One activity will have the class constructing pyramids. They will love having a hands-on experience with another culture. The teacher will be pleased that this is a good small motor activity and an early exposure to geometry. Prior to presenting this activity, you will need to prepare construction paper squares and triangles. You will need five 5" squares. Leave one as is. Fold the other four in half to form rectangles and then

(while holding the rectangle by the fold) cut it from the lower right to the upper left, producing four folded triangles plus plenty of recyclable scraps. For each child in the classroom you will need to clip together a square (the pyramid's base) and four triangles (the sides of the pyramid). In class, the children can construct their pyramids by using the square as the foundation and taping each triangle to the base to form the pyramid's sides. If sand is available, they can place some glue on their structure and sprinkle sand on it to add to its "authenticity."

**OF COURSE, NO MATTER WHAT THE AGE GROUP, THE WAY TO A CLASSROOM'S HEART IS THROUGH ITS STOMACH.**

Another great way to have fun and learn about a cultural event is by sharing food dishes. Bringing in a family *Seder* plate with the symbolic foods will also provide an opportunity to explain the significance of each of the symbols. Engage all the senses by providing a sampling of each of these foods to the students so that they can actually get a "taste" of Passover. It would be an added dimension if you could provide a variety of *charoseth* to demonstrate how regional foods and traditions have modified this aspect of the holiday. Another fun project has the students making their own snack by creating cream cheese and jelly *matzo* sandwiches, or making *charoseth* using equal measures of almonds, dates, pecans, golden raisins and a splash of kosher grape juice. Grind all of the ingredients well in a food processor. Have the children form the mixture into balls and roll in cinnamon to make it look like a muddy brick. Explain that this is a treat that originated in Morocco, in the north of Africa. Another fun activity incorporates the tradition of searching for the *affikomen*. Share with the class how children are kept involved in what can sometimes be a long evening with a hunt for the *affikomen* (hidden at the beginning of the evening, the *affikomen* is the middle of the three symbolic pieces of matzo). Hide an *affikomen* in the classroom and award a prize to the student who finds it. A wonderful way to incorporate all of these activities into your visit would be to break the class up into groups, so each group could complete a different project simultaneously.

# POLICIES ON RELIGION IN THE PUBLIC SCHOOLS

**Q** *I serve on the Advisory Council at my children's school and we have been asked for input in developing some guidelines for dealing with religious holidays at school. We council members have a variety of attitudes toward religion in the schools. We seem to be divided into three schools of thought. The first group wants to avoid any mention of any kind of religion. The second group feels that*

*without an understanding of religion children will fail to develop a sense of morality. The third group wants to make sure that children understand the role religion has played in history and culture. In addition to these diverse perspectives, we know that the beliefs and practices of parents at our school range from highly religiously observant to totally secular. How are we going to reach a consensus and come up with a policy that is both workable and constitutional?*

**A** This is a chance to make a real difference at your school. Your group has framed the challenge

your school faces in terms of legitimate perspectives that need to be considered in crafting a policy. Include representatives from each of the groups in the decision making process. Consider scheduling an open council session or a town meeting so that all concerned parents can voice their opinions. Begin with some ground rules that ensure the council members and the audience know that everyone will be heard and respected. Your school district may already have developed a written policy outlining what is permitted and what is encouraged. If such a policy does not exist, a number of civil rights groups would be happy to be of service.

THE CHALLENGE THAT  
SCHOOLS FACE IS IN  
CRAFTING POLICIES  
THAT CONSIDER ALL  
LEGITIMATE  
PERSPECTIVES.



The Anti-Defamation League, for example, has collected sample policies on religion in the schools that may save you the trouble of re-inventing the wheel. Go to [www.adl.org](http://www.adl.org) on the Web and call your nearest office.

U.S. Secretary of Education Richard W. Riley distributed a number of documents to all of the nation's public schools in Fall 1999. They included "A Teacher's Guide to Religion in the Public Schools" and "Teaching about Religion in American Life" that have been published by the First Amendment Center with the endorsement of a broad range of educational and religious groups. These documents can be obtained by calling 1-800-830-3733 or at [www.freedomforum.org](http://www.freedomforum.org).

**Q** *Two years ago, at my oldest son's high school graduation, the salutatorian concluded her remarks with a very Christian prayer. Our entire extended family was present and many of them were deeply offended. When I spoke to the principal after the ceremony, she told me that as long as the prayer was student led, it was permitted. Our younger son will graduate this June and I am apprehensive. Our family is already debating whether they will all attend, whether my son should go through with the ceremony, and whether there is any legal recourse. What do you suggest?*

THE BASIC PRINCIPLE, REAFFIRMED MOST RECENTLY IN DOE VS. SANTA FE INDEPENDENT SCHOOL DISTRICT, IS THAT SCHOOLS MUST AVOID SCHOOL-SPONSORED RELIGIOUS ACTIVITIES, INCLUDING PRAYER AT GRADUATION AND AT FOOTBALL GAMES.

**A** The basic principle, reaffirmed a most recently in Doe vs. Santa Fe Independent School District, is that schools must avoid school-sponsored religious activities, including prayer at graduation and at football games. This area of the law is changing rapidly, so encourage the principal to check with her district's legal counsel or ADL for assistance.

# RELIGIOUS CLUBS

**Q** *What are the guidelines regarding students praying together publicly or having religious clubs at public high schools? My children attend a high school where children are gathering together in the morning at the flagpole to conduct Christian prayers. This was started a few months ago by a couple of members of the football team. Now 30 students gather each morning to pray. They are handing out fliers to students as they enter the school encouraging them to join in. Some of the non-Christian students feel pressured to join them. Additionally, the*

*school recently added a “Christian Club” to its list of after-school clubs. Are these activities legal?*

**A** Students are free to pray alone or in groups as long as the activity is student initiated and does not disrupt other students or compromise their learning environment. The prayer gatherings at the flagpole are legal, and if the school has no policy against distributing fliers, then the distribution is okay also. Remember that teachers and administrators are not allowed to join the flagpole prayers. Since your children are feeling uncomfortable and pressured to join the prayers, please

contact the principal to make her aware that other students are feeling socially pressured to join the prayers at the flagpole.

As to your question regarding the religious clubs, the Supreme Court has declared that the Equal Access Act is constitutional. That means if there are any non-curricular clubs permitted on the secondary school campus, e.g., a Chess Club, then a Christian Club is also permissible. Your child is free, therefore, to start a Jewish Club. Remember that the act has been interpreted as being applicable in secondary schools only and only applies to student-initiated, student-led clubs.

# CLASSROOM CONCERNS

**Q** *My 17-year-old son will be taking advanced placement English literature in the fall. His summer reading list includes passages from the Bible. I am very concerned about this. Isn't it true that public schools are not allowed to require students to read religious texts?*

**A** This is an area where it is important to differentiate between teaching religion and teaching about religion. It is also important to distinguish between a literature course focusing on the Bible as literature (its language and major stories) and the Bible in literature (how

writers have used Biblical language and stories to create memorable allusions). It is appropriate for students to discuss biblical literature as a part of our literary and ethical teachings, but not as religious doctrine. If the teacher presents religious experiences with respect and is inclusive of a variety of religions and reminds the students that there is no single Bible (the Hebrew Scriptures

differs from the various Christian Old and New Testaments), this can be a worthwhile learning experience.

**Q** *My daughter Judy is a sixth grader who is learning the history of the world's major religions. While we were initially enthusiastic about the intellectual breadth of such a course, we are now concerned. Yesterday she came*



© Sharon Faulkner Photography

*home upset after hearing her teacher explain that Jesus died on the cross to save all mankind from sin. The teacher went on to remind the class that they had read about the progress of religious beliefs from pagan gods to the Hebrews' monotheism to finally reaching Christianity. My daughter actually said, "Why are we still Jewish?" How do I handle this?*

**A** Let's presume that this teacher has crossed the line unwittingly between teaching about religion and proselytizing. Make an appointment to meet with her and explain that when a teacher implies that one religion is superior to others, it causes children who are of another religion or who are of no religion to feel inferior. Proselytization violates the Establishment Clause

of the First Amendment and is illegal.

For many years, textbooks avoided the subject of religion, deeming it too controversial. Recently, textbook publishers have begun to include the role that religion has played in the human experience because some scholars have asserted that the omission of religion leaves gaping holes in history. Moreover, some parents feared that entirely eliminating religion denies their children the moral foundation that they need to become responsible citizens.

Teaching about religion is still a relatively new subject, and many teachers have received no training on how to deal with religion in the classroom in a way that neither promotes nor denigrates religion. There are excellent resources available to help

teachers avoid these pitfalls. ADL offers free classes for educators on "Teaching About Religion in the Public Schools" and the First Amendment Center publishes, *A Teacher's Guide to Religion in the Public Schools*.

Parents and teachers should collaborate on expectations for children's behavior. There is a general consensus that certain values such as kindness, personal responsibility, and honesty should be promoted in schools. But religious education must be left as the province of the parents.

**Q** *My nine-year-old daughter has begun wearing a Magen David to school (she now wears it all the time). Her teacher spoke to me privately when I came to pick her up from school and suggested that this*

*might not be a good idea. Can you help me resolve this?*

**A**You need to find out why the teacher is concerned about your daughter's necklace. Are students allowed to wear crosses? Does the teacher know what the Magen David is? In the past, Jewish stars have been mistaken as Satanic symbols or gang symbols. Does the school have a dress code that forbids jewelry? Even if it does, this dress code may not hold up against a free exercise right unless the school can demonstrate a compelling interest. If

the school does not have a prohibition against jewelry, the teacher might be concerned because the student has been harassed by other students about it. Talk to your daughter and find out if classmates have asked her about the Magen David and what she has discussed with them. Encourage her to tell you if anyone ever teases her or harasses her about the necklace. If the teacher is concerned because it marks the student as "different," encourage the teacher to help her students value the differences among their classmates. A wonderful in-service

and curricular program for her to consider is ADL's A WORLD OF DIFFERENCE® Institute which provides resources and strategies that demonstrate that differences should be respected, not hidden.

ENCOURAGE  
THE TEACHER TO  
HELP HER  
STUDENTS VALUE  
THE DIFFERENCES  
AMONG THEIR  
CLASSMATES.

**Q** *Our children's elementary school has developed a new policy to encourage better student attendance. They are awarding a Perfect Attendance Award to the student who has not missed school during the year. I'm concerned because there are several holidays that we celebrate which will occur during the regular school*



*calendar. I don't want my children to feel conflicted between going to synagogue and going to school.*

**A** In many schools, perfect attendance awards reward just that – perfect attendance. Therefore, students who are absent because of serious illness, religious observance, or funeral attendance are ineligible. Many schools have made adaptations to the award that you might suggest to your school. Some schools offer a monthly award for perfect attendance, thereby allowing students who need to miss a school day one month to win the award the next month. Another variation on the theme is to offer an award for perfect attendance first semester and another for second semester. Finally, a handful of schools have redefined “perfect” attendance to

allow for two or three absences or less. This not only allows Jewish students some leeway with regard to the Holy Days, but also ensures that sick children stay home rather than infecting the class and the teacher. There are times when we need to explain to our children that sometimes two good things (following the dictates of our religious practice and obtaining recognition in school) are in conflict. You may want to assure them that there are other ways of gaining recognition in school that you would be proud of their obtaining.

**Q** *We are observant and our beliefs include modest dress. My daughter is in Middle School where they have required dress for physical education. She asked the teacher if she could wear sweatpants and a long-sleeved tee shirt in lieu*

*of the requisite uniform. The teacher denied her request. How should we handle this?*

**A** First, find out if there are other clothes that can be worn that are more modest. If the school allows none of these, sit down with the physical education teacher and the principal and discuss your concerns. Many administrators are concerned that if they allow one student to wear different clothes, this will open the door to other student requests. Explain to the school that your daughter isn't making a frivolous request, but that your religion mandates this accommodation. While the school may have a legitimate health and safety interest in having students exercise in specified clothes, your daughter's free exercise of religion interest will most likely prevail.

# Resources

---

Kolatch, Alfred J., **The Jewish Book of Why**, Middle Village (NY): Jonathan David Publishers, Inc., 1981

---

Mandelkern, Nicolas D. & Weber, Vicki L., **The Jewish Holiday Home Companion: Parents' Guide to Family Celebration**. West Orange (NJ): Berhrman House, 1994

---

Nathan, Joan. **The Children's Jewish Holiday Kitchen**. New York: Schocken Books, 1995

---

Schechter, Ellen. **The Family Haggadah**. New York: Viking: Penguin Putnam Books for Young Readers, 1999.

---

Telushkin, Rabbi Joseph. **Jewish Literacy: The Most Important Things to Know About the Jewish Religion, Its People, and Its History**. New York: William Morrow & Co, 1991

---

Zalben, Jane Breskin. **Pearl's Eight Days of Chanukah**. New York: Simon & Schuster, 1998.

---



Anti-Defamation League  
823 United Nations Plaza  
New York, NY 10017  
(212) 885-7700  
[www.adl.org](http://www.adl.org)