

Dealing with the “God” Question

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One of the challenges in Humanistic Jewish education is how to answer students’ questions concerning the concept, figure, and importance of “God.” If they have been raised their whole lives as committed Humanistic Jews, they will still have their own questions as well as questions asked of them by other children (some friendly questions, others not). And if the students and their parents are new to your school or community, they probably have even more questions in this area. These are challenging issues for adults to address – to translate our philosophy to a child’s language and conceptual ability is that much more difficult.

This short list of 6 FAQ’s (Frequently Asked Questions) by students on the “God” question is intended to help teachers with students, and parents with children as well. The answers to the questions can be a guide for teachers, or even the basis of a lesson plan. Two concise answers are offered to each question – one aimed at children under 7, the other at children between 8 and 12. Clearly, just as the questions may be asked in several different formats, the answers should be adjusted for specific questions and family situations. For example, a particular family might have chosen your community as a compromise between two religious perspectives, or one partner might be religious while the other is not (religious Jew + Humanistic Jew, religious Jew + secular Christian, Humanistic Jew + religious Christian). And “heaven forbid” these answers be repeated verbatim – the more they are expressed in your own words, the more convincing they will be.

The best advice I can offer is to be honest (one of our basic principles), to be affirming of even the most challenging questions (after all, everyone has the right to make up their own mind), and to be as clear as possible. I have avoided condescending answers like “weak people need it” or “we’ve evolved past that primitive stage,” and in general created answers that address the question in a clear and respectful way. Every member of Humanistic Judaism, even the youngest, has the right to understand our shared values and beliefs.

1) “Do you/we/I believe in God?”

CHILDREN UNDER 7

I prefer to say, “I believe in you.” I can see you, touch you, hear you, and care for you. I don’t know if the idea of “God” is just an idea in your mind, or something real. Remember that it’s OK to say “I don’t know” if you really don’t know something. But I DO know that if I help you, you’re happy, and if you help me, I’m happy. So let’s look at what we KNOW, and see if that’s enough for us.

CHILDREN 8-12

We don’t know if there’s a God or not. So we prefer to focus on what we DO know – we know that being good to other people is good for them and good for us, and we know that we can learn about the world from our experience and other people. We don’t know if a God answers prayers, so WE have to work to make the world better so that we KNOW it’s getting better. Some people believe there’s a God, and some people believe there’s no God. We choose to focus on what we can do in the meantime!

2) “Should I pray? What do I say if other kids ask me what I pray for?”

CHILDREN UNDER 7

“Praying” is another way of saying “I hope” that something happens – I hope that my mommy comes home soon, I hope that everyone gets along. Sometimes, though, hope isn’t enough – if I just “hope” that I get what I want, I can’t be sure it will happen. Sometimes we need to work to make what we “hope” happens turns into what really happens. You can tell them, “I hope and work for good things for my family.”

CHILDREN 8-12

“Praying” is like wishing or hoping for something – the difference is that prayer usually asks someone or something else, like “God,” to make it happen. But just like wishing and hoping, prayer can’t make sure that we get the good thing we’re looking for. Thinking something in your brain doesn’t change the real world. On the other hand, when WE work to make our hopes into reality, we KNOW that we’re making it happen, and we get the credit for doing it. If other kids ask you about praying, you can tell them, “I hope AND I work for good things in the world.”

3) “_____ told me that we can’t be Jewish if we don’t believe in God”

CHILDREN UNDER 7

“Being Jewish” means that you are part of the Jewish family. Your mom is still your mom, and your grandpa is still your grandpa, even if you have different ideas. What are some of the things about us and things that we already do that are Jewish? (holidays, songs, names, congregation, foods) You see? Being Jewish is not what you think, but who you are and what you do. You can be happy to be a proud member of the Jewish family.

CHILDREN 8-12

Being Jewish is like being part of a family. Just like your family has family traditions, favorite family foods, and family jokes, or your school has a school mascot and school colors, the Jewish family has Jewish food, Jewish jokes, Jewish traditions – all of those together add up to what we call “culture.” You can be part of Jewish culture in a lot of ways – some of them use the idea of God, and some focus instead on the Jewish people and what they’ve made. Being Jewish is not what you think, but who you are and what you do.

4) “_____ told me that I’m not a good person because we don’t believe in God”

CHILDREN UNDER 7

Being a good person is about doing good things. You can do good things because you believe that a God told you to, or you can do good things because you want to help other people. We do good things all the time (recall an example), and we didn’t have to talk about God to do a good thing. What you do makes you a good person, so if you do good things, you ARE a good person.

CHILDREN 8-12

What makes you a good person, what you think or what you do? I think that what you DO decides if you’re a good person or not. I know people who believe in God who are nice, and

some who are mean. And I know people who don't believe who are nice, and some who are mean. If you care about other people, and you work to help them, then you're a good person.

5) “My grandparents/neighbors/kids at school told me that my family is going to Hell because we don't believe in God/Jesus”

CHILDREN UNDER 7

Lots of people believe lots of different things. It's OK to believe something different from someone else – they believe one thing, and we believe something different. And you don't have to worry about what happens a long time from now – it's more important to pay attention to what we do today and tomorrow. You have a family that loves you and that takes care of you today. Be a good person today and tomorrow – that's plenty!

CHILDREN 8-12

Some people think that they are right all of the time. They are sure that they know exactly what happens after we die, and what we have to do now. We prefer to let everyone make up their own minds about what might happen or how to live their lives. What we DO know is that it's very important to be a good person and to live a good life in THIS life, because it's the only life we KNOW is real. Don't worry about what happens in the distant future – what can we do TODAY?

6) “Why do so many other people/Jews pray to/believe in God, and we don't?”

CHILDREN UNDER 7

Lots of people believe lots of different things. It's OK to believe something different from someone else – they believe one thing, and we believe something different. We know that we can help each other, and make each other happy, and that's enough for us. We can say “I don't know” when we really don't know and using what we DO know we can do a lot of good things. We believe in people, and that's enough for us.

CHILDREN 8-12

If we all thought the same thing, life would be really boring because we would have nothing to talk about! Just because a lot of people think something is right, that doesn't mean that it's true – most people thought that the world was flat for a long time, but today we've learned that it's round. Other people have the right to make up their own minds about the idea of a God, and we can decide for ourselves. For us, it makes more sense to look at what we can know about the world instead of what we can guess. And we can say “I don't know” when we really don't know.