God is a Four-Letter Word

Blank stares. Forty campers, each with glue stick in hand, lying on the floor of the dining hall surrounded by thousands of bits of construction paper. I have just instructed them to complete the phrase, “To me, God is...” and to illustrate their answers using the construction paper. Although a few kids are working diligently, most are frozen above a blank piece of paper or acting out with their friends. Even in this non-judgmental, non-graded camp environment where individuality and freedom of expression are encouraged, the campers are terrified of giving a “wrong” answer. Insecurity heightens the tension in the room, while the campers attempt to complete a nearly impossible personal challenge: talk about their ideas of God. Reluctantly, resistantly, they begin to work.

Although these campers felt unsure of themselves and this task, their reluctance to talk about God did not begin when they rolled out of their bunk beds that morning, or even when they pulled up to the gates of camp a few days earlier. The roots of this fear of talking about God began much earlier. Parents, often struggling with their own questions about God, too often ignored their children’s deeper inquiries about the meaning of life, failing to use the G-word in their homes. Teachers, lacking even their own personal connection and comfort with ideas of God, avoided You-Know-Who (The-One-Who-Must-Not-Be-Named) by limiting class discussions to Bible stories and reading scripted comprehension questions.
Administrators have designed curricula around books such as *Partners with God*¹ and *I Have Some Questions about God,*² without giving their teachers the tools to engage in meaningful and organic discussion with their classes. Students, burning with existential questions, rarely raise their hands, fearful of ridicule by their peers or a formulaic and unsatisfactory answer from their teacher. Our supplementary schools have made God taboo.

But, so what? If our kids grow into contributing members of the Jewish community, does it really matter if they feel a connection to God? We are so concerned with intermarriage, young adult engagement, and synagogue revitalization, that frank discussions about God in our supplementary schools are often eclipsed by the more sexy issues of group survival facing the Jewish community today. However, we are also facing a God crisis in our Reform communities.

As the younger generations turn toward more internal and informal modes of practicing their faith,³ they also turn away from traditional forms of Judaism. Put another way, Rabbi Eric Yoffie, president of the Union for Reform Judaism, explained, “Younger people are looking for transcendence and holiness. They’re looking for God, even if they don’t believe in God.”⁴ Unfortunately, many Jews have sought this spiritual connection outside the Jewish community. As one Jewish

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³ *OMG! How Generation Y Is Redefining Faith In The iPod Era.* Reboot: www.rebooters.net
woman explained to Rabbi Yoffie, “Today, all my friends are Buddhist.” Moreover, this contemporary quest for spirituality and a connection to God has moved beyond the walls of the synagogue and into the virtual world. On Facebook, a popular forum for younger generations, there are no less than 163 separate groups dedicated to Jewish spirituality, most unaffiliated with any formal congregational life. If we do not begin to address these spiritual yearnings within the walls of our synagogues, our congregants will seek spiritual fulfillment elsewhere, often outside the Jewish community.

Although it is important to address issues about God and spirituality when our congregants are old enough to make personal decisions about their faith; if we do not address our students’ spiritual development and fulfillment from a young age, we miss a significant opportunity to teach Jewish youth how to engage with God and build language and context for making those discussions comfortable and normalized early on. Because most of our supplementary school teachers have been socialized into the “God as taboo” culture in their own supplementary school experiences, it is not surprising that so many of our teachers are “reluctant to enter into discussions of theology” with their students, and equally as important, with one another. If we cannot articulate our own beliefs in God and how God relates to our identity as Jews, how can we expect the same from our students? The Reform Movement’s CHAI Curriculum emphasizes religious content, including God, and “has invested heaving in the new curriculum and has hired a large staff of regional

5 Yoffie
6 Wachs, Saul P. and Michael J. Schatz. Report on an intervention designed to Facilitate Change in the Culture of Prayer and Education for Prayer in a non-Orthodox Day School. Network for Research in Jewish Education. 2009.
personnel who help congregational schools.” However, even the finest curriculum, articulated in the best ways, can only go so far. If our teachers lack appropriate God language and comfort in talking about God with their students, then a curriculum cannot reach our students beyond the words written on the page. This, in turn, severely limits potential for spiritual development because students have no means by which to explore and challenge personal beliefs.

While our children do have access to ideas about God through the internet and social media like Facebook, without the proper navigation tools, our students will become lost in a sea of mixed-messages about God. Our synagogues must create a fully organic exploration of God and spirituality for our children, providing a foundation for private exploration about God. Although the subjects we teach, such as Torah, liturgy, Israel, may be subtly infused with ideas of God, unless we make a serious effort to introduce open and direct discussions of God into the supplementary school classroom, God will remain a taboo. We must now welcome God into our classrooms, making the following two changes to create a supplementary school environment in which God is an accepted and encouraged topic of conversation:

1) **Introduce a God-concept toolbox for teachers**

Although Jewish tradition offers a variety of God concepts, they are often difficult to understand, and even more difficult to explain in child-friendly terms. Robert Coles, author of *The Spiritual Life of Children*, explains that “as boys and girls get older, they may well puzzle over religious or spiritual matters in progressively

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more subtle ways – call upon ideas or information unavailable to them earlier, not usable at eight but quite accessible at eighteen.”

Too often, if our teachers do possess some language to talk about God, it is not at the appropriate “faith development” level.

One of the most challenging aspects of including God as a central concept in supplementary school classrooms is that there are few right or wrong answers about God, especially in the context of liberal Judaism. In order to facilitate open and meaningful conversation about God in our classrooms, our teachers must be equipped with not only an awareness of and a comfort with a range of statements and questions about God, but also with a repertoire of appropriate responses.

Therefore, we must first provide our teachers with what I am calling a “God-concept toolbox.” In this metaphorical toolbox would be a variety of language and methods for discussing God with their students. The toolbox should be filled with student phrases ranging from, “I don’t believe in God – I’m an atheist,” to “I’m not sure what I think about God, but he seems like a good guy,” to “I talk to God every time I pray.” Questions should also be included in this toolkit, such as, “How do we know there is really a God?” and “Why does God punish good people?”

After we have established the questions that will open conversations about God, we can fill our teachers’ toolkits with specific responses about God from Jewish tradition. However, we must also help them to feel comfortable discussing God openly with their students. One way to develop this aspect of the toolkit is for us to

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9 *I Have Some Questions about God.*
discuss God with our teachers, and to encourage the teachers to discuss God among themselves. We must bring God into professional learning by discussing our personal beliefs in God with our faculty and allowing them to explore these ideas with one another. The more educational leaders and teachers can talk about God and struggle with their own theologies among their peers, the more at ease they will be discussing God with their students.

2) Co-Teach with God

God should not simply be a unit complete with a book and posters to hang on the wall. Instead, God conversations should be embedded in our supplementary school curricula. Too often, God is relegated to the realm beyond the walls of the classroom, in the sanctuary, outside in nature, or at summer camp. However, our students need to feel comfortable discussing God in a more academic setting, where they can describe and challenge their beliefs in a more structured environment.

Because God is a central pillar of Judaism, we can easily incorporate God into every unit we teach. For example, in a unit about Israel, we can discuss how Israelis perceive God, and how their views are similar to or different from our ideas of God as Americans. In a Tanakh unit, we can talk about how God is portrayed in the Bible, and how we reconcile both the positive and negative characteristics of God. God should not be a separate unit in the curriculum; God should be integrated throughout the entire curriculum.
It is possible to create an environment in which our children are comfortable talking about God. Although the campers mentioned at the beginning of this essay originally had a difficult time expressing any ideas about God, by the end of 14, hour-long sessions exploring various ideas and beliefs about God, they were much more able to articulate their ideas clearly and comfortably. One 15-year-old wrote, “I guess I believe that God is not only a force, but also God is in nature and is a feeling of peace, and is something that cannot be described.” Another 10-year-old camper wrote, “To me God is nature, the moon, the stars, and the sun.” People of any age are capable of talking about God. If our teachers can model their own theology in class and draw upon their God-concept toolboxes, it is possible to transform blank stares into probing exploration and heated debates, resistance into encounter (or at least curiosity), and insecurity into confident Jewish God-talk.