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The Search for God in the Jewish Classroom

*Teaching students what, how, and why to believe
is both necessary and impossible. Judaism
demonstrates that we are up for the task*



WHEN LOUISIANA governor Jeff Landry recently signed into law a statewide requirement that all public classrooms display the Ten Commandments, social media rose to the occasion with some very amusing memes. My favorite, which presented a Louisiana second-grader purportedly on the verge of committing adultery, but “now he definitely won’t,” reminds us how the law misses the mark in trusting that prominent positioning of the Ten Commandments in schools will affect the students’ behavior. The wall hangings will surely familiarize Louisiana’s youth with the list—just as an outdated map that hung in my middle-school history classroom taught me the countries that once made up Africa—but the assumption that such signage

will result in students' greater adherence to these precepts places far too much burden of responsibility on placards and posters. Consider, after all, that the many artistic renderings of Moses carrying the tablets of law, found throughout the world, including in Washington, D.C., have not deprived the scandal sheets of fodder. As much as décor matters, at least as part of the "hidden curricula" of norms, values, and beliefs conveyed in both the classroom and social environment, those who worry for the souls of Louisiana's students should perhaps continue to worry, and those who fear religious coercion on the part of the government can probably breathe a sigh of relief. The experience of setting alone is not sufficient to teach faith.

The very term *faith* is enough to give the heebie-jeebies, as it were, to many adult American Jews, especially those who are not Orthodox. Faith and conversations about what it means to believe smack of Christianity, with its focus on belief over practice, and a particular preaching, missionizing Christianity at that. Even conversation about having faith, or being part of a community that believes, seems off-limits. Rather than focus on faith per se, then, we do well to infuse all aspects of the Jewish curricula with elements of faith education, allowing the relevance to permeate throughout.

Jewish educators, clergy, and parents who care about instilling in the next generation actual tenets of belief—in God, Torah, and the observance of the commandments—must reflect on what it means to teach faith. They may well begin with how the synagogue (*beit kneset*), a place of expressing one's faith through prayer, differs from the study hall (*beit midrash*), or even the classroom, where Judaism is explored via debate, interpretation, discussion, and even contradiction. It is faith expressed in discourse. Tellingly, artful representations of Moses's tablets are not uncommon in the synagogue; inasmuch as the place is designed for prayer, any depiction of the Decalogue above the *aron kodesh* (holy ark) is likely

intended to evoke reverence for the approach to the Divine. In contrast, study halls, rather than engraving the list in stone, invite students to investigate the “Ten Commandments,” beginning with the imprecise translation for what the Torah calls *Aseret ha-Devarim*, or “ten utterances,” and moving on to their context, the way these texts shed light on others, and more. Classroom study of the Decalogue goes beyond the reverence of worship to the task of probing one’s own beliefs. For example, discussion may well veer into the eternal dispute over whether “I am the Lord your God,” the first of those utterances, constitutes a commandment, as Maimonides thought, or whether it is a prerequisite—prologue to the rest, as thought Nachmanides, for how can one be commanded without first believing in the One who commands?



But can faith in God be commanded? If one does not intuitively believe in the Divine, how can a command supplant that lack of belief? And practically, how can faith be taught in school?

Simple faith (*emunah peshutah*) surely comes more easily to those whose philosophical worlds are less cluttered by mitigating ideas. Young children, for example, can jump or glide straight into belief. Early-childhood teachers tell the kids that every time they say “Amen” to another person’s blessing, they create an angel. The teachers feed the children’s imaginations (and self-esteem) when they explain that the kids’ kindnesses and performances of mitzvot add bricks to the Heavenly Temple that will be rebuilt on earth one day if we only do enough mitzvot and kindnesses. And the children respond with sincerity and urgency in performing those actions, with no whiff of the scientific inquiry they may initiate, as they grow, to check the teachers’ accuracy. The Haredi world that

allows a tunnel vision to God and what He wants from His Chosen People accommodates a comparable simplicity as well. Those who are able to find a direct simple faith, whether because of age, culture, or even just personal disposition, may have an easier time not only finding God, but also talking about Him than do those whose systems of belief are complicated by contradictory ideas and the inherent incomprehensibility of the Divine to humanity.

But teaching faith in a way that is too simplistic crowds out the nuance of Jewish experience—the complicated discussions of competing ideas that have permeated Jewish belief since the Talmudic sages began debating ideas of faith, and since Torah scholars of a philosophical bent, such as Maimonides and Nachmanides, confronted the fundamentals of faith. Jewish education is replete with complex discourse, not the least of which is about the Ten Commandments.

Those rabbinical models of dispute can therefore be converted into a new model of faith education. The many arguments among the scholars in the study halls and classrooms throughout millennia of Jewish learning and intellectual creativity are faith manifest. Moreover, those study-hall discussions bring students to articulate, and then internalize, Jewish beliefs, as they question and probe for truth. The hammered-out nuances of sincere exploration lie at the heart of faith within a Jewish context—attending to the questions, rather than presuming answers that can be hung on placards. The alternative—boiling faith down to black and white—risks losing the complexity of Jewish faith, and also risks losing those who would believe.

How are Jewish educators to meet these challenges?



Eighteen years ago, under the auspices of ATID, the Academy for Torah Initiatives and Directions, Rabbi Jason Knapel and I developed a cur-

riculum to incorporate Jewish thought into the regular Jewish-studies classroom. That is, instead of teachers solely teaching courses in Torah or Jewish Law or even Talmud, courses clearly worthy subjects in and of themselves, they could prompt students to expand their philosophical chops, encouraging them to see the threads connecting the material. In the study of *Bereishit* (Genesis), for example, raising the question “What is the purpose of creation?” should be natural, and recourse to the many sources that address this question (we suggested four different approaches) impresses upon students its relevance to their studies across disciplines. Similarly, classes in Jewish law may easily give rise to discussion of the meaning of the mitzvot (for which myriad sources are available) as well as the question of what it means when we say that the Torah originated in “Heaven” (or with God). Simply setting the stage to facilitate students’ working through the implications of the vast amount of information they are taught should have a salutary effect on their beliefs, ideas, and perspectives on the world. When teachers can enrich their curricula in these ways, the students — and their spiritual growth — benefit.

Moreover, trusting that nearly everyone is educable and nearly everything can be taught does not mean that the classroom is the right setting for all education. Many elements of Jewish education are not classroom-based, whether through prayer services, Shabbatonim, informal discussion, and indeed, the personal conduct of students’ teachers, as demonstrated, by Shira Weiss, in her 2006 Yeshiva University doctoral dissertation, “Letting God In: The Spiritual Development of Modern Orthodox High School Girls.” All these elements, Weiss showed, are essential to the formation of Jewish identity and a spiritually rich sense of Judaism. Another Yeshiva University dissertation from 2009, Chana Tannenbaum’s, “Gender Differences in the Perceived Religious Influence of Yeshiva Programs,” attests to the fact that students’ involvement in academic studies is rarely

a driving force in their religious observance or spiritual motivation. (Both Weiss and Tannenbaum focus on girls' spiritual development, but their findings are salient in this context for boys as well as girls.) It is not that school-wide programming has no influence on students' religious life. To the contrary! But the kind of influence that rouses students' interest and willingness to try religious practice on for size entails active engagement by Jewish educators in ways that go beyond formal curricula and personal pronouncements of belief, perhaps to an awareness of their potential as role models. Unsurprisingly, Doug Oman and Carl E. Thoresen also found that religious education involves more than classroom instruction. As they explained in their now classic 2009 article, "Spiritual Modeling: A Key to Spiritual and Religious Growth?" in the *International Journal for Psychology of Religion*, religious traditions are often best transmitted via observation of those who exemplify the given religious tradition—or, as we might prefer to call them, role models. (The Talmud itself suggests as much, and in the most mundane of contexts. Rabbi Zeira hears Rabbi Yehudah instruct his servant in the bathhouse and acclaims him as a role model for how to speak in that setting: "Had I come only to hear this [from him], it would have been enough for me" (Shabbat 41a).

Finally, one's overarching perspective is also likely to affect how one relates to questions of faith. A recent discussion between Rabbi Yitzchak Blau and Rabbi Scott Kahn on the Orthodox Conundrum podcast ("Hareidi Messaging in Modern Orthodox Institutions") acknowledged that those who are not Hareidi may have less propensity to the more intimate relationship with God that can emerge from one's simple faith, but that, as Blau put it, God essentially lurks in the background of everything we do; it is all at His behest. In setting up a world with "incredible resources," the Divine fundamentally provokes those who pay attention to connect to Him.

I, for one, am not terribly upset that our schools focus on practice

and exegesis and heritage, rather than drive our children toward a blind faith. Because even if simple faith has its advantages, insistence on specific beliefs smacks of the brainwashing that made George Orwell's *1984* famous, and is, I believe, anathema to Judaism. Worse, see the militant youth of radical Islam's death culture for a system of faith that is fundamentally inserted into children who have no choice to opt out. Though the usual day-school curricula may risk free-thinking students, it also yields those who delve deeply and in wide-ranging ways. Personal grappling with a deep-rooted belief system is much preferred, to my mind, to a faith system that does not allow for choice.

Formal Jewish education in the modern era would benefit from the addition of education oriented around a Jewish system of belief, especially in the communities where "simple faith" is not easily achievable, and *faith* itself may be a loaded term redolent of evangelism. But more, we members of the Jewish community would do well to turn our own focus to the Divine, open ourselves to the bounty that faith provides, and teach our children of those incredible resources that God has provided. Judaism is rich and sophisticated and will bear up under the weight of a discourse about Jewish belief. And the reminder that God is foundational to all Jewish education is a useful prod to expand the horizons of those in and out of the classroom. That said, the Jewish focus on faith is likely to remain integral to Jewish education, rather than become its focus, and to that, I will note, with thanks to Robert Browning, that one's reach should exceed his grasp, or what's a heaven for? *