Talking to Our Jewish Children About G-d

\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_

Educating our children about religion can be challenging because of its abstract nature. However, one of the principle ideas parents must convey to their children is that different culture and ethnic groups have their own name for G-d. It may be a unique image of G-d, where their G-d can be found, and their own understanding of how human beings communicate with G-d. The overarching idea here is that experiencing G-d may be a highly personal, sacred process different than our own.

# Science and Religion

As you know, we have a great understanding of the physical world, the world we can see, touch and smell, and to a lesser extent, an attitude or understanding of the not so visible world which we call the ineffable; the world beyond what we can see. This understanding naturally leads to the comparison between science and religion. We need to teach children the difference between science and religion. The enterprise of science is the practice of gathering objective data/facts, knowledge and developing theories to help humans control and predict the outcome of their lives, and the occurrence of social events in the social world. Science is an experimental process, a rational process for understanding the mysteries of the world. What we do not understand suggests that there are limits to science.

Religion, in comparison, needs to be explained to Jewish children as being an essential element in their lives. It is sort of needed for human survival and it serves a vital function in their lives. Children need to be taught that it isn’t an issue of believing in religion or science; rather it is an opportunity to harmonize science and religion; to develop an understanding that can accommodate both revelation and the truth of science. The tendency is to polarize things in the world; meaning it has to be one or the other. As parents we need to stress that accepting both is the preferred attitude to adopt. We can explain that science teaches us how the world works and Judaism (our faith) teaches us how to act, determine what is and isn’t important and what to hope for in the world.

## The Sociological Attitude Toward Religion

Religion is an institution which provides meaning through a set of beliefs, practices, and rituals that are defined as sacred. It is an institution of shared beliefs and practices created by human beings as a response to forces that they cannot understand rationally and that they believe give ultimate meaning to their lives. Parents need to explain to their children that Judaism is their culture group and that it unites them as a vital, proud people sharing a common heritage, history, and G-d. In addition, a whole system of belief is available to them to honor and practice which inspires them to do good in the world. The essential element conveyed here is that Judaism is a faith of action—and that our G-d is a G-d of action who performs miracles.

Another emphasis parents must convey is that Judaism compels us to ask how does my religion function in my life. Judaism functions to provide us with certainty in an uncertain world; it provides us with the propensity to do good, to hope, pray, experience consolation, feel inspired and renewed, and it provides us with compassion and hope as we face life’s disappointments. This explanation of the function of Judaism focuses on what religion does for the child/individual rather than what religion is. I am not suggesting that we de-emphasize educating our children about what Judaism, but educating our children about both aspects of their faith is the desired objective.

Children may struggle accepting that despite having an all loving, caring, understanding and everpresent G-d, there still exist uncertainties in the world. Again, human beings cannot explain why certain tragedies and unspeakable events occur in the world. Our reliance on science may explain why physical events such as a tsunami or earthquake occurs and thousands of lives may be lost. However, we’re more at a loss justifying explanations for why bad things happen to good people. Children need to understand that Judaism provides us with ways for dealing with the unknown and that we need to sustain our faith and belief in an all loving G-d. We undoubtedly learn and come to painfully accept that we don’t understand everything. Other examples of events we cannot understand include untimely deaths or evil in the world.

# Helping Children Develop a Belief in G-d

The sustainability of our child’s belief in G-d comes from parents reinforcing that what we believe about G-d affects how we live our lives, how we view ourselves, others, and the world. Children must be taught that as Jews, we need to model through our behaviors our Jewishness; activating our desire to help the less fortunate, to be charitable, do acts of kindness, be trustworthy, faithful, and honor the Ten Commandments. By doing so, we demonstrate to our children our trust in the goodness of the world and in how each of us can make a difference in the world. It demonstrates to children that we are not alone, that G-d commands us to behave in this honorable way. It also consistently reminds our children that life happens at the level of individual movement—right, ethical action creates goodness. The cultural glue uniting all Jews is their duty to action—which reinforces we all belong and are anchored to our Judaism. By aligning our values and attitudes with G-ds expectations of us, we are reminding our children that Judaism obligates us to socially conform to G-ds precepts to lead a righteous life. All of these elements remind children that they are significant instruments of change in the world; that they matter to others and they have the power to make others feel like they matter. Parents need to remind their children that they are never alone in the world; that G-d is and will always be present in their life and that G-d loves them absolutely.

Another parental role includes parents sharing that they themselves have an absolute and unwavering belief and confidence in the existence of G-d. We start by describing how this wonderful world, with all of its grand design and order could not have come to be without a master Creator. Here, we can begin explaining that some scientific evidence may exist for explaining how the world came to be, and we can offer other theories accounting for the advent of humanity and civilization (Darwinism, the Big Bang Theory, etc.) It’s perfectly fine to introduce competing theories explaining the origins of humankind. However, reinforce that Jews believe that G-d created us in his image and that it represents acceptance with unwavering faith. Faith is what drives Jews to be good; to be moral and challenged to do commandments. Parents need to teach children to be good, and to believe in G-d means to believe in a G-d who asks us to be good to one another.

As parents, we need to teach and inculcate in our children the belief that what we do in this world and in their lifetime is the real measure of a righteous life. By teaching our children how to behave morally, to fulfill commandments and help the needy we instill in them feelings of worthiness, security, and we help them develop a positive self-image. Furthermore, as parents we must remind our children that they were created in the image of G-d. Being created in the image of G-d does not mean that G-d has a body. As difficult as it may seem, we need to

explain to our children that being created in G-d’s image means that they are unique human beings; it speaks to their particularities, their unique and creative talents, their special and unduplicated private self, that special spark and gem that contributes to their total unique being and identity, to that special soul within them. The Baal Shem Tov said “There are no doubles” and G-d intended it to be that way—no two human beings are alike.

It may be difficult convincing young children of the observable, concrete and physical presence of G-d. In other words, we cannot get our telescope and look far into the heavens and find G-d, with a long, gray beard, righteous and sitting in a large armchair pondering things. According to Judaism, G-d is nonphysical. This however does not mean or should it suggest that G-d is invisible. G-d is not invisible because invisible implies that G-d has a body which we cannot see. The preferred thinking is that G-d is intangible, without form. Further, G-d is neither female or male. To be male or female suggests a body, and remember, G-d is nonphysical; G-d has no body. One way you can begin to explain this concept to your children is to use the following analogy. Ask your child where love is. He/she may not be able to point to love. All we know is that love is also intangible. We can feel it and know it is a powerful force in our lives; but it isn’t located in any one area. So, G-d, like love, works through all of us

The goal is to help your children focus on what G-d does—how he is a G-d of action and Judaism is a faith of movement. With regard to questions such as where did G-d come from, parents can respond with G-d has no parents. G-d was not created but is the chief architect-- Creator; and that G-d always was and always will be present in the world. In Judaism G-d has always been, G-d is, and G-d will always be.