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THE GIFT OF EXPLORING THEOLOGICAL QUESTIONS

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In a deliberately provocative article entitled “*Who Needs Theology?*”^{*} Neil Gillman, a teacher at the Jewish Theological Seminary writes:

A recent encounter with a rabbinical student forced me to confront a reality that I had long tried to avoid. We were discussing God: How do we know about God? What can we say about God? and the rest, when the student’s hand shot up. “Why are we discussing all of this? What we need from you is some practical help on how to get Jews to have a kosher home or keep Shabbat. Theology is irrelevant.”

Needless to say, I was somewhat surprised by this question from a rabbinical student. It’s not that I don’t realize that talking about God is a personal and difficult undertaking at any stage of one’s development. But difficult and personal though such discussions may be, they seem critical to the work of rabbis and Jewish educators. Kashrut and keeping Shabbat are not ends unto themselves. They are means to finding holiness in our daily lives, to perhaps even experiencing a/the divine presence.

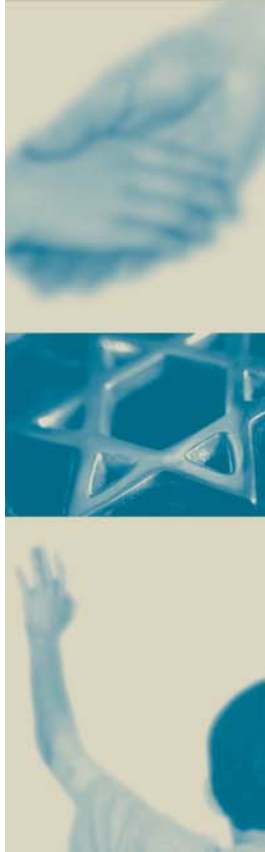
I read this article on my return flight from the RAVSAK (Jewish Community Day School Network) conference, where I’d just participated, with a group of colleagues, in a discussion group that focused on talking about God in our schools. We had wondered whether we made enough opportunities for children to explore their questions about and conceptions of God. We had observed that even our youngest students could explore theology and grapple with relatively sophisticated concepts of God, even as they wrestled with the view of God as a “character” in *Torah* texts. We had explored approaches to creating opportuni-

ties to support reflections about God. Interestingly, since all of the people around the table were familiar with *With All Your Heart*, the MJDS *siddur*, there was agreement that it contributes to helping students address questions about God.

I thought again about the rabbinical student in Gillman’s essay as I was reading student report cards this week and came upon comments that described a student’s “strong spiritual sense” and observations that “he shares questions about God and *t’fillah*,” Certainly, narratives that include these references suggest that we value the exploration of theological questions at MJDS.

Why is it so important to talk about God? If we study *Torah* and participate in Jewish rituals, questions will inevitably arise. In a school whose educational program is built upon encouraging student questions, we can’t sidestep the difficult ones. Noted psychologist Robert Coles, who has studied the spiritual life of children observes that children explore a relationship with God whether they are raised in religiously observant or secular homes. At our fifth and sixth grade retreats, we offer students the opportunity to anonymously ask any questions they might have. The questions submitted invariably fall into two categories: concerns about sexual development and questions of theology.

The MJDS community offers your children the gift of an environment that welcomes dialogue about God. Because people’s concepts about God vary tremendously and change with age, because we as adults can’t offer responses with certainty, we acknowledge and expose our vulnerability helping the children see that we can live with complexity and even uncertainty. This, I believe, is another gift



that has additional positive implications.
Professor Gillman concludes his essay by writing:

Theology is not only an academic discipline; the sheer experience of living everyday life forces all of us to confront theological issues. It is the responsibility of the rabbi or educator to raise these private ruminations into conscious awareness.

We agree and welcome the responsibility with all the complexities presented. We're fascinated by the questions our students raise about God. We invite you to join these conversations with your children! We think you'll be happily surprised and pleased by the depth of their thinking.

-Ray

*This article appeared in *Sh'ma* a publication of Jewish Family and Life!, funded through the Steinhardt Foundation whose chair, Michael Steinhardt will be the featured speaker at the MJDS Benefit on April 9th.

A valuable resource for parents exploring this theme is David Wolpe's *Talking with Children about God*.