

God's Place in the Classroom

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AS THE DIRECTOR of Mizel Jewish Community Day School, populated by students who are both Jewish and non-Jewish, I am faced with the challenge of how to bring God into the classroom. Utilizing a Jewish perspective, each student at our school, no matter their faith, learns the Hebrew language, studies the Torah portion of the week, experiences and celebrates the Jewish holidays and talks about God.

provide an educational environment for our children to consciously explore God in their own lives.

And so I ask myself, how should we bring God into the classroom? We do not force our students to believe in God—that is not our goal. Instead, we focus on God as a vehicle to inspire awe. Dr. Peg Sandel, the head of Brandeis Hillel Day School in San Rafael, California succinctly describes this objective: "We teach about God because it shifts students' attention away from themselves and deepens their sense of wonder, of gratitude and of humility."

Teaching about God begins with text. During Torah study students encounter references to God as well as descriptions of God. Dr. Sandel continues: "When we

stand in awe of human greatness, such as acts of heroism, compassion or caring, or great works of art. One can also be in awe of the natural world, such as the night sky, a beautiful sunset, or a worm (especially among small children, who seem to have a natural predisposition towards awe).

Abraham Joshua Heschel spoke about awe as "radical amazement." He wrote, "Our goal should be to live life in radical amazement...get up in the morning and look at the world in a way that takes nothing for granted. Everything is phenomenal; everything is incredible; never treat life casually. To be spiritual is to be amazed." For Heschel, prayer was not an intellectual exercise, but a way of expressing wonder at the world in which we live and living proof of the existence of a God. He believed that since we were created in the image of God, we become a reminder of God. And so we ask, how will others see God in us?

Yet while we are focused on teaching this to our children at Mizel, so much of society appears to be moving away from God, resulting in a rise in nihilism (the belief in nothing but satisfying one's own gratification) and a decline in spiritual belief. Narcissism, a close cousin to nihilism, is also becoming more prominent, resulting in the diminishment of empathy for one's fellow human beings. The result is a greater disconnect between people and the world around them, leading to less caring and more violence.

Humans are better, happier and more productive when they believe they have a purpose, that there's a plan for them, a higher thing for which to strive. That is why we talk about God at Mizel, so that our children end up referring to themselves or to the world in ways that deepen their sense of wonder. This can engender gratitude and cause them to reflect on their behavior to one another. We strive to create community and family at our school, and we use Jewish values and an ongoing dialogue with God to reach that goal.

This is the pedagogical relevance of God. Descriptions of the divine have the capacity to direct our attention beyond ourselves, beyond our knowledge, beyond belief, beyond nihilism and narcissism and toward a sense of awe at the grandeur of our world. To cultivate awe as a way to look at and live life—this is the role of God in the classroom.

For more information about Mizel JCDS, visit our website: mizelschool.org. ■



Mizel students: Finding God through prayer and community

In Jewish tradition, God is the Creator of all and the ultimate personification of unity, a concept highlighted in our daily recitation of the *Shema*. Our children are thinking about God—His image, His leadership and His involvement in the world. God is part of our culture—both ancient and modern and there is ample room to recognize different approaches to faith and different facets of the concept of "God." What the Day School can do is

think about God as 'above' or 'beyond' or 'infinite' or 'eternal' or as capable of hearing everyone's prayers or as creator, we are using metaphorical descriptors that direct our attention beyond ourselves and beyond the here and now...These descriptions of God can move us to ponder life's grandeur."

In a book entitled *The Significance of Religious Experience*, Howard Wettstein describes different kinds of awe. One can