



HEBREW UNION COLLEGE - JEWISH INSTITUTE OF RELIGION

היברו יוניון קולג - מכון למדעי היהדות

New York School
Graduate Studies Program

Doctor of Ministry Project Final Approval

To: The Members of the Doctor of Ministry Faculty

I hereby submit the signatures of approval from my advisors and Dr. Carol Ochs for my completed Doctor of Ministry Project.

The title of the completed Project is:

THE INTER AND INTRA PSYCHIC INFLUENCES ON GOD IMAGERY DURING EARLY CHILDHOOD

I have submitted one unbound copy on 25% cotton paper to the HUC-JIR library for binding.

I have submitted velo or spiral bound copies to my mentors and Dr. Carol Ochs.

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Mar 24, 2007

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Dr. Carol Och's Approval

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THE INTER AND INTRA PSYCHIC INFLUENCES ON
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DARREN S. LEVINE

Thesis Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of
Requirements for Doctor of Ministry Degree

Hebrew Union College-Jewish Institute of Religion
Graduate Studies Program
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PROLOGUE

This demonstration project explores the many influences on a child's God-image development during early childhood (ages 3-6). Through parent education and the exploration of the parent's own God image, I examine the inter and intra psychic influences that influence the way that children come to their understanding of God. By inter psychic, I mean the external influences that family stories, family rituals, surrounding culture, and inter-generational myths have on the developing child. By intra psychic, I mean the internal processes that occur in a child's brain that give shape to their thinking patterns and mental reasoning.

This project will interest the person who desires to know how a child develops an understanding of God. Why does one person believe that God can punish and reward, while another believes that God loves them unconditionally, while another is fully ambivalent, while yet another hates God, etc.? As we will see, the answer to these questions are often the result of a person's earliest influences – from the style of parenting they received, to the messages about God the child receives, to the child's experience of how their family is emotionally, spiritually, and culturally oriented.

This demonstration project has no religious or pedagogic agenda. I am purely interested in the factors that influence a child's image of God during what could be argued, the most formative years of their lives (ages 3-6). I have approached the topic from a psychological and developmental perspective with a focus on such factors as family codes, family systems, the child's experience of their parents during the play stage, the child's resolution of the oedipal phase, and the style of parental authority they experienced. I hope that this perspective will help

parents and religious educators gain new insights into the complex influences on God imagery during early childhood.

Acknowledgements

I wish to thank my professors and instructors at Hebrew Union College – Jewish Institute of Religion and the Post-Graduate Center for Mental Health in New York City for exposing me to a world of ideas that are discussed in this paper and for guiding me deeper into the realm where religion, spirituality, and psychology co-exist.

Thank you to Betsy Stone and Marianne Wickel for serving as my advisors on this demonstration project and for helping shape the vision and direction of this work. I am deeply grateful to the people who participated in my experimental workshop during March 2008. Thank you to Beverly Pimsleur for being my editor.

I want to honor and thank my own parents for the gift of life and their love, support, and nourishment, and to my wife Julia and our boys for the love you bring into my life every minute of the day.

CHAPTER 1: GRANDMA'S HAVING A TEA PARTY IN THE SKY WITH GOD

Goals and Purpose of this Demonstration Project

As a rabbi, I am regularly presented with these types of questions:

1. Rabbi, my daughter came home yesterday and asked me about God. What do I tell her?
2. I told my son that Grandpa is no longer with us, he's with God. But he doesn't understand and keeps asking to see Grandpa. What do I do?
3. The other night my daughter had a nightmare and could not sleep. I told her God would protect her. Was that a good thing to say?
4. I don't believe in God but I want my son to come to his own conclusions. What should I say to him when he asks me about God?
5. Rabbi, the other day little Jimmy here said: "why did God make human beings?" I told him that we would come and ask you, Jimmy, go ahead, ask the rabbi.

I find that most parents are unequipped to answer these questions though they desperately wish they had the tools and resources to do so. I have witnessed highly successful, well-educated, culturally engaged parents lock-up when their child asks about God. They want to respond, but because they themselves may have confusion, ambivalence, or anxiety about their own relationship to God, they freeze. This may leave the child confused, ambivalent, or anxious. Yet given the right tools, I believe that parents and clergy can be helpful to children. In the

clergy/parent/child interaction, this presents a meaningful opportunity to explore the content and the context of these questions.

The goals of this demonstration project are fourfold:

1. To help parents respond to their child's questions about God with a sensitivity to their child's early developmental stage.
2. To help parents understand their own God image and how they are likely to transmit this family myth to the child.
3. To help parents develop a long-range intentional approach to transmitting their family story of God to their child.
4. To offer a context for those working with children ages 3-6 and families in the religious setting, an understanding of the developmental framework when they are presented with questions about God.

Throughout the five sections of this demonstration paper, I will explore the complex influences on a child's image of God during early childhood. In chapter two, I explore both the religious and psychological principles at play and explain the inter and intra psychic influences on the way a person develops a God image. I will explain the theological notions of providence/intervention, supernaturalism, and anthropomorphism within the context of stories from the Torah. Next, I will explore stage development focused on the Oedipal phase, move to a discussion of object relations, present Ana-Marie Rizzuto's theory that God is a special type of transitional object, and finally discuss the influence that family codes (stories, myths, paradigms, and rituals) have on the child's impression of God.

After the background theory is presented, chapter three will outline an experimental agenda and goals for a parenting group under my direction. I will then share the results and outcomes of the parenting group experience in chapter four. Chapter five will discuss my thoughts on the implications this demonstration project has for parents and those working in field of religious education with children ages 3-6 and their families.

This paper begins with an experience that I had while working with a family to help prepare them for a funeral service. It is the story of four-year old Sarah and her experience at her grandmother's funeral. Using Sarah as an example, I trace the many influences that she has in her daily life that may influence the way she thinks about God. From the story her family "tells and teaches" her about God to her parents style of discipline; and from the image she forms about God on the day her rabbi tells a story about Israelite slavery to the emotional health of her family system; and from the way adults behave around her at her grandmother's funeral to the role that her teddy bear plays in her child's life. All these experiences influence how a Sarah, at age four, is developing her image of God.

We begin with her story.

Sarah's Story

We stood in the green room adjacent to the funeral chapel. With five minutes to go before the funeral service, we said the words of *shema*, the Jewish prayer of faith in God's unity. There was a short pause. Then, four-year old Sarah came up to me and said, "Rabbi, where is my Grandma now?" I looked to Sarah, then to the mother who looked at me askance as she said sharply to her daughter, "Sweetie, I told you, Grandma's having a tea party in the sky with God."

What impressions might Sarah have of God in this moment? In a strange funeral home, Sarah recognizes the adults in her extended family and they are all dressed in dark clothes. The adults are talking in whispers, many are crying. Many adults, close family, distant family, people Sarah has never met, try to pick her up without permission, squeeze her tight, say things like: "Your grandma loved you so much, Sarah. Sarah, oh, how your grandma would have loved to be at your consecration next year when you are in first grade. Sarah, you've got to be a big girl today, for mommy and daddy, ok?"

Confused and anxious, Sarah reaches out to the person she likely associates with teacher or school principal, who clearly has authority as he holds everyone's attention with his presence. She asks the Rabbi for a simple clarification to her question about the location of her grandmother, but before the new "teacher" can answer, Sarah's primary influence in her life (mother) repeats the same comment about a tea party that confused her once before. The rabbi knows it's a lie. Sarah does also.

Now, since the rabbi appreciates family systems and parental authority, he places his caring hand on Sarah's shoulder, looks at her with understanding eyes, and smiles. This passive response shows the girl that he agrees with the mother's lie and becomes guilty as an accomplice. This strengthens the falsehood that Grandma is having a tea party like the ones she has with Grandma; but now she's having one with somebody named God in the sky.

Ironically, mother's response tells Sarah more about Grandma than it does about God. A four year-old only knows about things she can see, touch, hear, and hold which puts the idea of God beyond her. She requires concrete images for understanding. Children at this early stage do not have the developmental capacity to understand that things exist even if one cannot see them. Like love, friendship, emotions.

For this reason, when mother says that Grandma and God are having a tea party, Sarah may associate God as a person, since only people have tea parties. God must make conversation; God must have fingers, a mouth, and must drink. But since God is not a person, and cannot do these acts, mother has misled Sarah in terms of Grandma, tea parties, and God. She responded with something about God to Sarah's clear question about Grandma's location, but why? Why did the mother think to use God in her response? What associations does the mother have with death and God and how did they develop?

I thought to myself, Sarah and God are going to have a troubled relationship when she gets older. When her grandmother never returns from the tea party with God in the sky, Sarah may be angry at God and the sky for being last seen with her grandma and therefore likely responsible for her disappearance. Not only will she have a problem with God who she will hear about in many contexts for the rest of her life, she may never want to fly in an airplane knowing that the friendly skies are really not that friendly.

This paper is an attempt to understand the complexities of this interaction for children and parents just like Sarah and her mother.

CHAPTER 2: RELIGIOUS AND PSYCHOLOGICAL PRINCIPLES THAT GUIDE AND INFORM

Sarah's Sunday Morning

It was a typical Sunday morning. Sarah woke up at 7:30 AM and plopped herself down on the couch in front of the TV. Click. on the display screen comes a choir of people on stage, swaying back and forth in golden robes, passionately singing the words, "God is in me. God loves me!" Sarah changes channels and witnesses a man yelling to the audience in his hall to "Get up! You do not want to be sitting when God arrives!" Sarah changes channels once again and finds her morning cartoon. She is happy.

Just as her cartoon program ends, Sarah's parents emerge from their bedroom. Mother sneezes and father says, "God bless you." The television goes off and the family eats breakfast together. Mother says to father, can you take Sarah to Sunday school today? With a slight reluctance, father agrees, "yes, okay."

On the way to Sunday school, they stop at the market. At the register, father realizes he left his money at home, "God dammit" he says angrily. They leave the items on the counter, return to the car, and head back out into traffic on the way to synagogue. "God saves," says Sarah as she practices her reading off a billboard that they pass on the roadside.

Sarah's father drops her off at synagogue where she is immediately ushered into the synagogue. She takes her seat. Rabbi is talking. "Kids, today we are going to learn about prayer. I want everyone to close your eyes, think hard, and listen to God. Then, without speaking aloud. I want you to talk with God, say a short prayer to God." The rabbi closes his own eyes, waits 20

seconds or so and then says, "I'm proud of you kids, and God is proud of you, thank you, now off to your classes. Have a wonderful day. Shalom."

Now in class, Mrs. Marcus begins, "Kids, find your seats. Today is exciting. We are going to talk about the story of Passover when God sent down plagues and hail and made everything dark, so dark, nobody could see anything. Then, God told Moses to lead the people to freedom. Yeah! Today, we are going to do an art project about the Red Sea when God split the waters and all the Egyptians drowned. Pencils ready? Jonny, please don't throw your eraser at Jenny, God would not like that behavior."

By 9:30 AM, in just two hours, Sarah has heard the following about God. God is in people (TV song), God loves (TV song), God is arriving soon (man on TV), God blesses people who sneeze (Dad to Mom), when people forget something, they are angry at God (Dad's wallet), God saves (the billboard), God listens (rabbi), the rabbi talks to God and that is something people do in synagogue, people pray to God, God can hurt people (Egyptians), God can free people (Israelites), God can split open oceans (Red Sea), God can drown people (Egyptians), God does not like it when kids misbehave (teacher).

Two months later, at her grandmother's funeral, her mother, who has never mentioned God to Sarah before, tells her that Grandma is the sky having a tea party with God. Now, to her definition of God, Sarah can add a person, since only people have tea parties and that God must have fingers to lift a cup and a mouth to drink.

How will children like Sarah make sense of these experiences in terms of their own religious and psychological development? What are the factors? Will Sarah grow up to hate God, love God, believe that God is compassionate, argue that God does not exist, have an ambivalent relationship with God? Will she believe that God has the power to write the Torah? Will she be

able to have a personal relationship with God, pray to God, and listen to God? Will Sarah believe that God can absolve her of her mistakes, protect her when she is scared, or help her get an A-grade on her history test? Will God have no relevance in her life? Will Sarah believe that God is loving and supportive like Heschel's God or more impersonal like Spinoza's God?

To address these questions, we must understand the way children receive and process information during the early developmental phase of their lives. Inter-psychically, we are interested in the external messages a child receives within their family system. We want to understand how the effect that stories they hear at home, at school, and in public, the images they see, the style of parenting they receive, the types of intimate relationships in their lives, the presence or absence of extended family, will influence their God image. To which religious experiences was she exposed and how did her family experience religious community and ritual? What God-image was the family actively or passively transmitting to her through family principles and codes?

Intra psychically, we are interested in how a child processes external messages and where she locates them in her emotional, spiritual, and inner-developmental space. How will the resolution of her Oedipal phase influence her God image? How intensely did she rely on her transition object? How did she receive the love, compassion, discipline, anger, joy, and appreciation displayed in her family? How did she experience her home: calm, safe, and secure, or chaotic, threatening, and unpredictable?

These are the forces, internal and external, that will inform how a child forms their image of God. We now turn to a detailed explanation of these areas of influence, religious and psychological.

Family Systems Theory: The Influence of Family Codes on the way Children Form Their Ideas of The World

Every family has stories to tell. There is the geographic story. How did our family arrive here? Where did the ancestors live and how did they live? There is the social story. What is our race? How does our nationality influence our daily lives? How does the color of our skin affect our social standing? What do we think about sexual orientation and how do we relate to the same and opposite genders? There is the religious story. With what religious order do we identify? What does our religion say about life and death and how to treat other people? Is the way we experience religion extreme or mainstream? How does the religious community celebrate? Is it joyous or somber? Intellectual or emotional? How is God presented in the religious setting? Is God distant, close, provider, punisher, rewarder, defender, healer, friend, or other?

There is the cultural story. How does mainstream culture affect our family system? What are the cultural norms with respect to education, politics, and business that affect our family? There is the human story. How does our family relate to children, siblings, parents, grandparents, friends, teachers, clergy, politicians, strangers, and neighbors? How do we think about health, food, drink, and the physical body? How do we manage our emotional lives, express love, display anger, manage conflict, reward or punish for certain behavior? What is the character of our home: open, supportive, warm, or chaotic and fearful? How do we experience time?

These “stories” serve as the underpinnings of every family system and influence and shape the belief patterns of its family members. They inform the members’ worldview and way of being, even when the story may contradict with reality.

Arnold Sameroff, developmental psychologist at the University of Michigan and author of several books and articles including, Developmental Systems and Family Functioning, writes about the larger effect of family stories on the thinking and belief patterns of the individual within the family unit. He teaches that family codes organize individuals within a family system and affect the outcome of a child's beliefs and attitudes. Family codes serve as guidelines for organizing the family along dimensions of belief, group practices, and interaction patterns. He teaches that each family has four organizing principles: *paradigms*, *myths*, *stories*, and *rituals*.

The beliefs that the family holds about the world which help organize the behavior of individual family members when they are outside the family unit would be considered *paradigms*. Family *paradigms* regulate how the family receives information when the family is together as a group. *Myths* are what families create and believe to exaggerate the roles with the family and provide a sense of continuity across generations. Family *stories* transmit values and orientations to members of the family. They articulate values and roles within a family and can be told or heard by many members of the family. Finally, family *rituals* are practices that the family organization uses to regulate time and cultural identity. The entire family often practices and observes the same rituals.

The organizing principles that are maintained by a family transmit expected ways of behavior to each member. Family members take on the responsibility, knowing and unknowingly, to transmit the family identity to children so "they know who they are and where they came from," may it be historical, social, religious, or cultural principles. When a person thinks "who am I" and "where did I come from" on a cosmic level, they will likely arrive at an answer rooted their organizing principles that are imbedded into them by their family system.

When it comes to God in a person's life, it is no different. The way a person thinks about God is greatly influenced by their families organizing principles - paradigms, myths, stories, and rituals. The stories and myths that families tell about God, and the rituals of (often in the religious setting) family practice, help to reinforce a person's image of God.

For example, in Sarah's case, our four year-old, her God *myth* likely comes from her family's Jewish heritage. In the moment we meet Sarah, the Jewish funeral is the *ritual* that supports and reinforces the Jewish *paradigm*. Since God is one cultural myth that is drawn upon in Jewish life-cycle moments, God will be part of Sarah's family *story* as they collectively experience the death ritual. How God is portrayed will reinforce the *story* and *myth* that informs the God image in her family and in her own self.

In this way, God is one of many ideas in Sarah's life that are influenced by family codes. And at her age, it is mainly her family system that is actively and passively transmitting her ideas of the world. We would consider this the inter-psycho transmission that occurs in a family unit.

In the Jewish religious experience, the Torah is the master story that transmits the character of God. God is regularly mentioned in Jewish prayer, Jewish intellectual thought, and Jewish sacred literature. God is often a central character in Jewish holiday observance, and in family life-cycle experiences. We now explore some of the theological and religious principles that can inform the way God is presented and how individuals may internalize such messages.

Religious Principles

Western religious ideas speak of a god that *can* interact with universal humanity, *can* be in personal relationship with the individual, and *can* know the actions of people. As an example,

in the book of Genesis, when God speaks directly to Abraham, this suggests to the reader that God has divine providence and *can* intervene in life of people. The Book of Genesis reads, "God spoke to Abraham: Go forth from your native land and from your father's house to the land that I will show you. I will make of you a great nation. I will bless you, I will make your name great, and you shall be a blessing" (Genesis12:1-2).

At the Passover Seder, the most highly observed Jewish family ritual, the story in the *haggadah* reinforces the image that God has a special relationship with the Israelites and through God's power redeemed them from slavery. Here, through divine intervention, God witnessed the struggle of the Jewish ancestors and intervened in history to rescue them.

The Torah also presents God with super human powers that can send down hail, split open a sea, and affect natural order of the universe. Such super naturalistic episodes happen throughout sacred literature, for example when God splits the Red Sea: "Moses held his arm over the sea and God opened up the sea with a strong wind all night and turned the sea into dry ground" (Exodus 14:21).

We read another example of a super naturalistic God in the book of Isaiah where God has the ability to change the direction of the sun. "'Behold, I will cause the shadow of the dial, which is gone down on the sun-dial of Ahaz, to return backward ten degrees.' So the sun returned ten degrees, by which degrees it was gone down" (Isaiah 38:8).

The Bible also presents a God who is able to *hear* prayer, to turn His *face*, to *speak* in parables and dreams, and to reach out with an outstretched *arm*. Such anthropomorphic representations of God can be found throughout the Torah, in particular whenever God speaks to his prophets. "And God said to Moses, "I will come to you in a thick cloud, in order that the people may hear when I speak with you" (Exodus19:9).

Divine intervention, supernaturalism, anthropomorphism are three central theological ideas that influence and affect the way a Jewish family and Jewish individual imagines God. These ideas present themselves when a family observes a Jewish ritual, attends a Jewish ceremony, reads Jewish literature, and considers Jewish history.

Presented with each of these images of God, the young child in a Jewish family seeks to find psychic understanding. To them, this God appears to be a person with a face and arms who is able to hear and to speak. This God has super-human powers and can move oceans and change the direction of the sun. And finally, God can intervene in the life of a human being, just like God did in Abraham and Moses' lives. If God is a person, God must be like superman, so the child thinks. And though God can save people, God also hurts people. The child wonders: should I respect God, love God, or fear God? This is made even more confusing for the child age 3-6 because they do not yet have the ability to think abstractly and are therefore continually looking for real parallels in their own lives to whom they can attach their image of God.

The young child will look for concrete examples of people or things they have in their immediate radius that have similar characteristics of the God images they see and hear about. They reason, whom do I know who intervenes in my life on a daily basis? Who is the most powerful person I know that can make anything happen? Who reaches out to me with an outstretched arm when I need their comfort or support? And in their absence, what other resources do I turn to in order to fulfill my needs?

For most children, it is mother, or father, or both, who is/are the most powerful, most providing, and most caring person/people in their life and so it would not seem unusual for a child to believe that their mother or father were God, at least God-like. And in their absence, who satisfies better than teddy bear or security blanket? It seems that in the intra psychic reality of a

young child, the relationship a child has to parent and to their transitional objects, most influence their early formation image of God.

We now turn to developmental psychology to better understand this early childhood experience.

Psychological Principles

Erik Erickson identified eight developmental stages in a person's physical, social, and psychological evolution. The stages travel from birth to older adult and with each successive stage building on the former and each having it's own developmental task. The following chart outlines Erickson's major developmental stages.

Basic Stage	Psychosexual Stage	Ages	Basic Conflict	Important Event	Summary
1. Infancy	Oral-Sensory	Birth to 12 to 18 months	Trust vs. Mistrust	Feeding	The infant must form a first loving, trusting relationship with the caregiver, or develop a sense of mistrust.
2. Early Childhood	Muscular-Anal	18 months to 3 years	Autonomy vs. Shame/Doubt	Toilet training	The child's energies are directed toward the development of physical skills, including walking, grasping, and rectal sphincter control. The child learns control but may develop shame and doubt if not handled well.
3. Play Stage	Locomotor	3 to 6 years	Initiative vs. Guilt	Independence	The child continues to become more assertive and to take more initiative, but may be too forceful, leading to guilt feelings.

4. School Age	Latency	6 to 12 years	Industry vs. Inferiority	School	The child must deal with demands to learn new skills or risk a sense of inferiority, failure and incompetence.
5. Adolescence	Puberty	12 to 18 years	Identity vs. Role Confusion	Peer relationships	The teenager must achieve a sense of identity in occupation, sex roles, politics, and religion.
6. Young Adulthood	Genitality	19 to 40 years	Intimacy vs. Isolation	Love relationships	The young adult must develop intimate relationships or suffer feelings of isolation.
7. Middle Adulthood	Procreativity	40 to 65 years	Generativity vs. Stagnation	Parenting	Each adult must find some way to satisfy and support the next generation.
8. Maturity	Generalization of Sexual modes	65 to death	Ego Integrity vs. Despair	Reflection on and acceptance of one's life	The culmination is a sense of oneself as one is and of feeling fulfilled.

The Play Stage and the Oedipus Conflict

We are interested in the developmental phase that Erickson termed the Play Stage (ages 3-6) because this is when children enter a period "rich with imagination and creativity, ushered in by locomotion and language" (Berzoff, 1996). During this time, a child develops increasingly sophisticated language and seeks concrete definitions to words, ideas, and concepts. This is when a child begins to dialogue with parents, friends, teachers, and as they discover the world, they attempt to affix meaning to the words and concepts they hear and recognize.

It is during this phase when a child begins to question everything around them. The Play Stage is when a child may ask a string of seemingly endless questions about basic ideas.

Mommy, why is the ice cream pink? Because it has pink coloring in it. What is pink coloring?

It's like a crayon for food. There are food crayons? Do food crayons that make ice cream taste yummy? No. It's the sugar that makes ice cream taste yummy. Can I put sugar in my broccoli to make it taste yummy? Etcetera, etcetera, etcetera. This rapid fire questioning is not the child's attempt to disturb or irritate the parent; the child is sincerely looking to understand how the world works.

Enter God as a word into the child's universe and he wants to know what God is just like any other word that needs definition. It's for this reason that we focus on this developmental stage. We want to understand the worldview of the 3-6 year old child and the complex influences that work to give definition to the child's words and ideas. From here, we will begin to better understand the factors of influence on a child's journey to define the term God.

"This is a time of family romance and conflicts between what a child may want in fantasy, and what he or she may have in reality. It is during the Oedipal stage that Erickson sees children's modes of action as "On the make, the attack, and the conquest", and it is within this stage that children face the ego-psychological tasks of identifying with their parents and their society's values" (Berzoff, 1996).

Since the child looks to the parents and their society to help them define ideas and concepts, it is likely that the word God will appear. This could happen within the home setting, school, television, a friend's house, or in a book. It's now when the child will likely turn to the parents to help give definition to the word God. Mom, what is God? Who is God? Where is God? To the 3-6 year old child, these are innocent and simple questions and they are looking for a simple definition like they would when they ask why about the color of ice cream. The color of ice cream is not a cosmic or deeply personal question to most adults, but the God question is personal and complex which is difficult to define at any age, let alone for a 3-6 year old. Suffice

it to say that the difficulty a parent has in defining the term God for the child is one of the first signals to the child that God is a complex idea.

Another important factor during age 3-6 is the child's experience what Freud termed, the Oedipus complex. The Oedipus conflict for the child is "being in love with the one parent and hating the other are among the essential constituencies of the stock of psychical impulses which is formed (in childhood) and which is of such importance in determining their symptoms" (Kahn, 2002, p. 36).

As Fraiberg (1959) teaches, the 3-6 year old child is a magician, in the psychological sense. Seeking reason and rationale in their unstable world, which is controlled by adults but where they do not have the language or maturity to articulate their fears and illusions. In part response to their fears, guilt, and shame, a child may lash out at their parents through a complex pattern of projection. They project their own internal fears outwards, often onto their parents.

Fraiberg writes: "The love attachment in early childhood to the parent of the opposite sex and its many ramifications in the conflict with the rival parent – the aggression, the guilt feelings and the form of its resolution – was given the name "Oedipus Complex" . . . It's a day-dream without any possibility of fulfillment, now or ever. It is a dream of love that must end in disappointment and renunciation for all children" (Fraiberg, 1959, p 204).

The complex drama of hatred, shame, guilt, love, and fear eventually resolves itself around age 5-6 when the child realizes they cannot take their parents' place and "it is as if the child says, "since I cannot take my father's place, be my father, I will be like him," and now begins to model himself after his father or mother. Normally, this is the outcome for boys, with a parallel process of identification with the mother in the case of girls.

Take a four-year old boy as an example. On a feeling level, he is a mixed bag of emotions that rise and fall during every day to the bewilderment of his parents. He is constantly testing boundaries and acting out for attention though it is playing out in his subconscious. He loves his father, but there are times when he feels hatred. It's not uncommon for a boy to tell his father to go away, I am going to be with Mommy alone. A boy may try to enter the parent's bed in the morning and evening and say, "this is where I am going to sleep, next to Mommy." A girl may put on Mommy's clothing and make-up and sit on Daddy's lap and say, "you like me more than you like Mommy, right?"

Freud teaches that the final resolution of the Oedipal complex is during the same phase as when the child forms his understanding of God. "The Oedipal phase closes with a change of the paternal imago: from now on, the paternal representation-exalted, sublimated, and merged with the memory traces of the primeval father-become the representation of God. Thus, the Oedipal complex, the formation of the superego, and the formation of the inner world eventuate in a final psychological process, namely the transformation of the parental imago in the God image (Meissner, 1984)."

In Freud's own language, "of all the images of childhood, which, as a rule, is no longer remembered, none is more important for a youth or a man than that of his father . . . A little boy is bound to love and admire his father, who seems to him the most powerful, the kindest, and the wisest creature in the world. God himself is after all only an exaltation of this picture of a father as he is represented in the mind of early childhood" (Rizzuto, 1979, p31).

In short, "The father figure cannot be divorced from its mythopoetic function: It provides a prototype for the deity" (Meissner on Freud, 1984, p. 69).

For example, we might assume that a child, who witnesses parental rage in the home, may fear God as they fear their own father. A child that is severely punished for their behavior may believe that God is a punishing God. A child with one weak parent and one dominating parent may be ambivalent towards God and be unsure what God can or cannot do in the world. A neglectful parent may evoke the belief that God is distant and unreachable. A fully present and attentive parent may evoke the image of a loving God. A child who "has everything" may believe that God cares about and responds to their narcissistic needs. These conclusions are obviously too simple, but they speak to the parental influence on the way young children evolve an understanding of God, according to Freud.

As satisfying a picture as this may be of the development of the God idea in the intrapsychic level, Ana-Marie Rizzuto, author of The Birth of a Living God, teaches that Freud's structural approach is limited. She believes that children have multiple representations, among others, of their mother, father, and siblings, not just the father as it pertains to the development of the God-idea" (Rizzuto, 1979). To understand what she means by "multiple representations," we need a background in the field of object relations, to which we now turn.

Object Relations Theory

Object Relations theory emphasizes interpersonal relations that are formed mostly in the primary family and especially between the mother and the child. An object can be a person, a thing, or memory, but refers to the image that a person holds in their psychic realm of the "actual" person, thing, or memory. Object relations theory explores the "relationship" that a person has to the objects in his life, may they be external, internal, or transitional.

External objects are actual things that a person invests with emotional energy. People, places, and things can be external objects when they are present in the worldview of the person. For example, a child has a relationship with his toys, his bike, the food he likes and dislikes. He also has a relationship with his parents, who are also external to him.

Just as he has external relationships with all the things in his life, he also has an internal relationship with his toys, his bike, his food, and his mother. Internal objects are memories, mental images, ideas, and fantasies - inner representations - about a person, place, or thing. For example, children have a mental image of their mother as the primary caregiver. In this case, the child brings the mother into the mind's eye and has a relationship with mother, whether or not she is present or absent.

The third category of object is called the transitional object. A child's teddy bear or security blankets are examples of transitional objects. These type of objects "hold" the psychic space for the child when the external object is not present. In this case, the child is not relating to the teddy bear as a cute and cuddly doll. The teddy becomes the object that with the child transfers his feeling and in return is comforted by the teddy. This must be understood on the psychic level and is best articulated by the D.W. Winnicott, one of the leading contributors to the field of object relations.

"Transitional objects and transitional phenomena belong to the realm of illusion, which is at the basis of initiation of experience. This early stage in development is made possible by the mother's special capacity for making adaptation to the needs of her infant, thus allowing the infant the illusion that what the infant creates really exists. This intermediate area of experience, unchallenged in respect of this belonging to inner external reality, constitutes the greater part of

the infant's experience, and throughout life is retained in the intense experience that belongs to the arts and to religion" (Winnicott in Rizzuto, 1979).

Understanding the theory of object relations and the role that transitional objects play for the 3-6 year old are key ideas as we move into the next phase of this demonstration project. As we will now see, it has been argued that God plays the same function as that of the teddy bear or security blanket and that they live together in the same in the same psychic realm. We now turn to the work of Ana-Marie Rizzuto and "The Birth of a Living God."

"The Birth of the Living God"

Rizzuto takes issue with Freud in one key area. Whereas Freud argued that the parent was the near exclusive influence on the child's image of God, Rizzuto suggests that it is far more complicated. She argues that each developmental stage presents the person with a new set of ideas, fantasies, and images of God that must be reconciled. Whereas Freud taught that a person's God idea was established at the point of Oedipal resolution, Rizzuto teaches that the God representation will always be more complex and multifaceted than the primary object exclusively. She contends that a child age 3-6 has multiple influences: mother, father, siblings, extended family, clergy, teachers, etc. Each of these influences the child's image of God.

"If this reasoning is correct, we can no longer talk about God in general when dealing with the concept in psychoanalytic terms. We must specify whose God we are talking about, at what particular moment in that person's life, in what constellation of objects, and in what experience of self as context. The God representation changes along with us and our primary objects in the lifelong metamorphosis of becoming ourselves in a context of other relevant

beings. Our description of a God representation entitles us to say only that this is the way God is seen at this particular moment of a person's psychic equilibrium" (Rizzuto, 1979, p. 52).

Rizzuto contends that God is a special type of object representation created by the child in the psychic space where transitional objects exist – the realm of illusion. She concludes, "Throughout life, God remains a transitional object at the service of gaining leverage with oneself, with others, and with life itself. This is so, not because God is God, but because, like the teddy bear, he has obtained a good half his stuffing from the primary objects the child has 'found' in his life. The other half of the stuffing comes from the child's capacity to 'create' a God according to his needs."

With respect to the child, age 3-6, we can assume that the relation they have to their transitional object will be similar to their image of God as their lives evolve. In what way are they attached to their transitional object? What type of security does teddy offer? Does teddy talk? Does teddy listen? Does teddy love? Does teddy have needs? Does teddy get angry?

How a child internalizes their transitional object will likely influence their intra psychic image of God that will stay with them through life. (see addendum I which offers a complete scale of Rizzuto's work along all developmental phases.)

CHAPTER 3: THE DEMONSTRATION PROJECT - METHOD AND APPLICATION

About The Jewish Community Project (JCP Downtown): New York City

JCP began three years ago in Lower Manhattan as a response to the unmet Jewish needs of the families living in Tribeca, Soho, Battery Park City, and the West Village. Since 2003, there has been a major residential housing boom in these neighborhoods and the human and social services are now trying to play catch up to the growth in housing and population. New schools, new community centers, new parks, new cultural and religious communities are taking root and beginning to create opportunities for education and social and cultural outlets.

There are approximately 600 families on the JCP mailing list. JCP is an emerging community in New York and we are experimenting with new models of involving people in Jewish life. We do not have membership or a dues structure. Rather, every person who wants to be involved in the project is considered a member. The great majority of the members are young families, parents in their 30's and early 40's with children up to age eight.

The parents in my community at JCP are some of the most well educated, bright, creative, over-achieving and dynamic people in this generation. They represent a very narrow demographic: the young urban family with a high income, recently living in an up-in-coming neighborhood and looking for like-minded friends and sense of local community. Many of them have full careers and full lives outside their parenting role and most have foreign workers caring for their children from 8 AM – 7 PM, Monday through Friday. They expect the best of

themselves and they want the best for their children, at home, at school, in their activities, and in their religious community.

The high majority of JCP families are not religiously observant. They do not attend regular worship services. They do not regularly observe Jewish traditional rituals in their home although they will honor Hanukah, Passover, and the High Holy Days. Many of them would say that they have a strong Jewish cultural identity and they want their children to be exposed to Jewish customs, rituals, and stories so that "they have a sense of who they are, culturally as Jews."

In terms of God, they know that Jewish stories involve God and that God is part of Judaism, but when it comes to talking to their children about God, they are unequipped to respond to their children's questions and inquisitiveness. Not that God is a foreign topic, just not part of the central dialogue within the typical JCP family.

This demonstration project is an attempt to help them and their children.

Experimental Workshop with the parents of JCP Downtown

In the context of an experimental workshop, nine parents with children 3-6 attended two group sessions where we explored the influences that parents have on their children's image of God. All the parents had children currently enrolled in the preschool at the Jewish Community Project (JCP Downtown).

What follows is the outline for each session, followed by a detailed description of what occurred during each session, concluding with my own reflections and assessment.

Session A: The God of the Parent

1. Group Introductions: Establish trust and confidence in the room
2. Set Induction: Sarah's story
3. Introduction: Purpose of this Demonstration Project and goals of the Two-part session
4. Ask: what is one question you feel ill-prepared to answer your child when they bring you a question about God? Parents introduce themselves in a circle, share their children's names and ages, and offer the question they feel ill prepared to answer.
5. Mention: Parents have a great influence on how their children will come to know God. Discuss Family Systems. Explain the concept that the ideas a parent has about God will likely be transmitted in some way or another to their child. Mention that parenting style may also influence how a child comes to know God. Discuss Freud.
6. Mention: If family systems are true, how to you want your child experiencing God at age 30? How are you going to actively or passively transmit your God image to your children?
7. Homework: to think about your own image of God and how you may have received that notion from your own family system of origin.

Session B: The God of the Parent – The God of the Child

1. Three minutes free write –what did your parents believe about God – what did they teach you?

2. Round the room responses to the question: How do you establish your parental authority with your child?
3. Discuss the influence of parenting style on a child's development. Developmental theory (Freud) suggests that the parental introjects a child has of his parents will heavily influence his internalized God image. Example, a parent whose leading style is unconditional love will likely have a child who later believes that God loves them unconditionally. A parent who regularly implements a reward and punishment technique to establish behavior may set the stage for a child who believes that God "rewards and punishes" based on their behavior (see chapter 2, psychological principles section)
4. Explain the idea of family codes and family systems and their influence on idea development.
5. Discuss: What is your family myth about God and how is it influencing the way your respond to your child's questions about God? Parents are the transmitters; as such you need to discover what you believe so that you know what to teach.
6. Discuss: How to you want your child experiencing God at age 30 (since 30 is the approximately the median age of the participants)? How are you going to actively or passively transmit your God image to your children?

CHAPTER 4: RESULTS, OUTCOMES, AND NEW UNDERSTANDINGS

Six weeks prior to the group sessions, I contacted approximately 15 people. I sent the following invitation to parents who send their children to the JCP Preschool. I knew all of the parents, some better than others. I was looking to create a group of self-reflective people, conscientious parents, who came from as diverse a religious background as I could find. The invitation email read as follows:

Dear Connie,

I want to invite you to be part of an experimental parenting group that I am going to run on the first 2 Thursdays in March from 9:05 - 10:15 AM at JCP. I am looking for 8-10 people to commit to the two sessions on March 6 & 13. I am writing my doctoral thesis on the inter and intra psychic influences on the way 3-6 year-old children develop their image of God. I'm studying the way kids begin to think about God during their formative early years because age 3-6 is the most impressionable time in a person's life and when thinking patterns begin to establish for a lifetime.

In each session, I will present for approximately 15-20 minutes and then we will move into approximately 45 minutes of group interaction and discussion.

For you, my goals are:

1. To understand better how to talk to your own children about God in your own voice.
2. To understand better how your parenting style will impact the natural way your child could think about God later in life.
3. To understand better your own God image and how that was formed, developed, and

rooted in your own life.

You do not need to have a deep personal belief in God or be able to clearly articulate your "relationship with God." Often God is very personal and very difficult to find the right language to articulate clearly. To add to this, we in the Western world are often ambivalent about God in as much as we know God is central to western religion, culture, politics, and thought.

This is parenting education, not adult Jewish learning. Perhaps you will learn something of your own God image formation but this group is designed to help parents understand how a child locates their God ideas in their brain and how parenting styles can affect the process.

Since I'm looking for 8-10 parents for this group, please respond to me ASAP so that I can move down the list to others if you cannot join. I realize it may not be convenient for everyone - partners will be able to share the ideas we discuss in our sessions at home. When I complete the written work, I will give each participant a copy of the demonstration project if you are interested.

Please ask me any questions you may have, by email or phone.

Thank you,

Darren

Initial Responses to my Invitation

- Six people responded yes within 24 hours to my email. One asked if she could bring her friend and forwarded my email to her immediately. Within one hour, we had another participant.

- Three people responded that they were too busy to attend but they felt it was an interesting topic and wished me best of luck with my demonstration project
- Two people responded no with the justification that they were not religious people and were not that interested in knowing how to teach their child about God. I contacted each person by phone and tried to explain that the sessions were more about parenting education to help parents respond to their children's questions about God from a healthy psychological place. Both parties kindly replied no.
- Four people never responded to my first e-mail. I followed up the next week with another email to them directly. Two declined because they claimed they were too busy. Two others apologized for not responding earlier. and said they wanted to join.
- We had our nine participants.

Two days before our first session, I sent the following email to establish the context of our first meeting.

Dear Connie,

I'm very much looking forward to seeing you this Thursday morning and I want to thank you in advance for carving out the time to enter into this discussion.

We're going to explore the many complex factors that influence the way our children think about God and during their early childhood years, to discuss the ways that parents can be helpful in raising God issues with kids.

For example, is it healthy for child development to tell a scared child at bedtime that "God is watching over you so there is nothing to worry about?" When grandpa dies, what do

we tell our four-year-old child? That he's happy now and with God?

To these questions, there are no right and wrong answers. Yet there are particular issues that we parents should be sensitized to when dealing with God during the stage of life when are children are between 3-6.

There's nothing to read or prepare for either of our sessions (3/6 and 3/13). Just bring yourself, your ideas, and your questions. While I wish we could open up this group to more people, we need to keep it to this list in order to create enough space for everyone to participate.

See you on Thursday.

Darren

Session I, Thursday, March 6, 2008

Nine participants and I met at 9:10 AM following preschool drop-off. We sat on chairs in a circle. I began by sharing my own story:

“As a synagogue rabbi, I officiated at many funerals. I observed that many parents were deeply concerned about how to raise the topic of death with their young child and whether or not to bring the child to the funeral. I would tell them there is no right or wrong answer to this question but that each family needs to best understand their child and make a decision that would best meet their family’s needs and expectations.”

I told them Sarah’s story where her mother said that the deceased grandparent was now in the sky having a tea party with God, and said, “I knew six years ago when I witnessed this

interaction, that I wanted to some day create some opportunities for parents with young children to explore the issue of God and to do my own research into the topic."

At that point, I asked the group the following question: "What question do you think your child may ask you about God that you feel ill-prepared to respond in a helpful way?"

Their responses follow (names have been changed):

Barbara (children ages 4 and 9 months)

"When my mother was dying, my daughter was two and I was taking her on trips back and forth to Germany to visit her. When she died, I was afraid to even address the question of death with my daughter. I said grandma was sick and died. Now, she thinks when I get sick I am going to die. She is also afraid of old people. When my mother died, I told her that she is in heaven. She asked, "where is heaven?" I said, "you can't see it but it's up in the sky." Now when she's on the swing and goes really high she says that she is dying and going up to heaven. Then she asked one day, "Where is God?" I said, "Everywhere." Where is everywhere, she responded, and this kept on going. I told her that God is watching over us, and sees when we are good and bad. This preoccupied her for a long time."

Earl (children ages 4 and 2 – married to Shira who is also a participant in this group)

When my daughter asks about God, I don't think about all the psychological stuff, though maybe I should. I just follow my gut. I say, "there is an energy in our consciousness that we call God." In terms of death, I say, "we have a physical body and light within our soul – our physical body has a beginning and end. But our soul is forever. Who we are is our soul, which never dies, but our body does die and has an end. So, I guess I really don't have any questions.

Connie (child age 4)

My daughter has not yet raised any of these questions. Who is God? What is God? I guess she will ask those questions some day and I'd like to know what to say. My daughter is adopted and sometimes when she asks where she is from, I tell her that God brought us together. She really responds to that.

Nora (children ages 3 and 11 months)

I'm going to make an observation. I'm very surprised that kids are bringing up the issue of God. For me, it was my teen-age years when I first started thinking about God. That was when one of my grandparents died. But kids, asking these questions at age four, it's surprising. For my daughter, I assume the questions will start coming up when her grandparents die, when she says, "when is saba coming back." I guess I will need to know how to answer that.

Lisa (child age 5)

She asks, "what is God, who is he? She asked recently, why did MLK (Martin Luther King) die? Is he with God? Is MLK alive? Someone at her school said he was dead after they studied the section on his life and she cried. Every weekend when we come back from our place on Long Island, we always pass those cemeteries in Queens. She always asks who is there? I say dead people who are sleeping forever. I just don't know what the right religious answer is because we are an interfaith family. I am Christian and we are raising our daughter Jewish, so when I respond, I don't want to give her the Christian answer. I want a Jewish one.

Dina (children age 3 and 18 months)

Last week I caught myself say "Oh my God." The kids said, "where?" From that moment on we say, "Oh my Gosh" instead. I took a goldfish from the benefit last week and soon it will be floating. I know we will put it down the toilet but that is where we put kackie he will say. Once I went to a seminar on this and they said to be as straightforward with kids and tell them in concrete terms what we know. It helps. He now has a friend whose mother died and he is going to ask someday, where is his mom? But it hasn't happened yet.

Klara (children age 3 and 6 months)

My own grandparents, well three of them, are alive but my Papa is having open heart surgery and I'm wondering how I am going to talk to my son about it if he dies. I'm Jewish but we are not raising our child Jewish. I think God is a nice cop-out when you need a nice answer, a parental figure. I am, pardon the expression, a Hitler Jew. Jewish because of DNA, but my grandfather was a decorated German War Hero in WWI and then the Nazi's betrayed him and all the Jews. Today, I don't want to betray the trust of my husband who is not Jewish by teaching our son about the Jewish God. So as you can see (nervous laughter). I am all confused.

Ariel (children ages 5 and 3)

My three year old recently asked when are we going to see my grandmother (died last month). I said that we are not because she is dead. My daughter asked what does it mean to be dead? How does somebody take a bath when they are dead? She wants to know the physical stuff. My sons first experience with death was when he was three and he witnessed a friend's grandfather collapse in front of him. He ended up dying. So, I want to know all the questions

about death. Now he asks, "how did my goldfish die? He's also very interested in cemeteries. And a few weeks ago, he came home from school and said, "another kid was talking about Jesus and someone said he was God, is he?" So, there are a whole lot of issues coming up for me.

Shira (children ages 4 and 2 and married to Earl)

My daughter talks about God all the time. I talk about God all the time. Everyday. She asks about death – her own and mine. When am I going to die, she says. Where is God? Can I see God? I talk about form with her. She gets that her actions affect the world. If she sees someone crippled, the question comes up, how could that happen if there is a God? She knows the heaven thing. She gets into tears when she thinks about me being dead. I guess I want to know about death and dying and God consciousness in general. I want her to stay towards the light. We take a spirituality class for kids at the Kabbalah Center. They don't talk about God. They talk about light and dark and to listen to the voices in our heads. Yesterday I said, why didn't you pick up the food that you threw on the floor? She said, the ego in my mind didn't tell me to. So she gets it.

Assessment of Session I:

Based on their comments, most parents seem to believe their children are looking to them to resolve answers about God (Earl seems to be the one exception). Parents feel it is their responsibility to have the "right answer" for their children so they won't make an irreversible error in their child's development.

Parents were looking for the "right responses" to their children's questions. My sense is that this group of parents did not want to "emotionally damage" their children. My hope is that

they will learn is that there is no one "right answer" to these questions. Just like all abstract and philosophical questions about the meaning of life, their best answer is already within them and this answer will transmit their family's myth about God. While it is not the focus of this group, we will consider offering related sessions to help these parents get at the answers to their own questions about life, death, purpose, God, etc., since their own responses have the greatest single impact on their children's developing ideas to these same questions, albeit less sophisticated.

As the responses show, parents were more focused on death than on God. When posed with the frame, "what question do you think your child may ask you about God that you feel ill-prepared to respond in a helpful way," many of their responses focused on death. This raises the question: do children naturally associate death with God or do parents transmit that association to children? It would seem that the ultimate meaning of life questions (what is death? what is the purpose of my life? is God in my life?) require a level of maturity and depth that is beyond the scope of a young child. It begs the question, were parents projecting their own "questions about God" onto their children?

When presented with a question about death from their children, why did these parents make associations with God? Did they think their child could make sense of this association? Did they mention God as an answer of convenience because they had no other response? Or, did they actively want to impart the lesson that God and death are associated according to their family story? Perhaps it was something else? In a vacuum, would a child naturally associate God with death or is this an idea imposed by the adults onto the child's life?

Perhaps when a parent is presented with a question relating to death from their child, their unconscious anxiety about their own death arises or the death of their own parents. Beneath the layers of their own conscious understanding, they fear the impact of their own inevitable death

on their children. This would understandably create tremendous anxiety. After all, what parent ever wants to think or consider what life would be like for their children without parents to care for their needs. This may be even truer for parents of young children where the levels of dependency for mere existence are so critical.

As we observed in many of the parents' responses, they brought God into the equation when presented with a question about death. One can only imagine that here, as Rizzuto teaches, God is providing comfort to the anxious parent just as God is meant to in God's psychic role as a transitional object. As Rizzuto states above, "throughout life, God remains a transitional object at the service of gaining leverage with oneself, with others, and with life itself."

This is one understanding, certainly my own interpretation, of the reason why many of the participants responded to my question about God with thoughts about death. It may have been my own influence by having lead with Sarah's story (Grandma is having a tea party with God), which linked God and death. I had not anticipated these responses but I feel that it deserves some further investigation with this group and I plan to explore in our second session.

I intend to introduce this theory with my group with the following statement, "I was thinking back to our first session and to some of your responses to my initial frame. I asked, "What question do you think your child may ask you about God that you feel ill-prepared to respond in a helpful way?" I noticed that many of your responses had to do with death – how to talk about the death of a loved one with your child or how to describe what happens at a cemetery. I'm very interested by this. Could you help me better understand some of those responses? Could we explore this for a few minutes together? What do we make of this – if anything?"

Session II, Thursday, March 13, 2008

(6 of the 9 participants were waiting in the room before the session was set to begin. The three seats surrounding where I sat during the previous session were empty as I sat down. Someone joked, "nobody wanted to sit near the teacher today – nobody wants to get called on, huh? I paused, smiled, and said, "it's all good material." They had a collective laugh. Within another minute or so, the remaining participants arrived.)

1. Darren: Good morning and thank you again for all being here. In a minute, I'm going ask to complete a short free-write. But before we begin, I want to respond to Ariel's question from last week as I promised. She asked at the end of our session why we spent so much time talking about death when the topic was God. I promise to get there by the end of our session today. But I'd like to start elsewhere unless there is anything outstanding we need to address right now. Can I ask you to take three minutes and write on the following question: "what did your parents believe about God – what did they teach you?"

(These are their responses)

2. Barbara: The question of God did not come up – both of my parents are not affiliated with any religion. However, my grandmother told us she believed in God but did not connect it to any religion. She rather had an agnostic approach.
3. Earl: I do not recall talk of God. It was more about community. I have recently initiated discussion about God with my parents and was initially surprised with their views and beliefs.
4. Connie: I have no specific recollection of being told anything specific about God. Though I do specifically remember going to *shul* with my family from a very young age, my

grandparent's *shul*, going to Sunday school and celebrating the holidays. So it was more about my religion – Jewish – than it was about God.

5. Nora: God was never specifically talked about in an active way yet it was all around us growing up. Don't recall my parents ever speaking about God. I think this is probably true of a lot of people who grew up in Israel.
6. Lisa: We went to Church every Sunday. God was introduced to us through Sunday school Bible stories, prayer, and song. God was a forgiving, accepting, inclusive idea. We were also told that God lives within each of us.
7. Dina: Growing up, we did discuss the idea of a higher power, but more than that, it was tradition, culture, and destiny. God as a being was more so a way of explaining how such enormous things (as in creation) could have occurred. A lot of questioning came up surrounding the Holocaust and where God was then and why things happened the way they did. Zionism was a very strong idea in our home and my grandparents eventually stopped going to synagogue.
8. Klara: We didn't think about God at home at all, really. Not through any deliberate avoidance as far as I could tell – it just was not part of the context of our family. I went to Hebrew school because I asked my mother if Jesus loved me (the Catholic kid next door) and had a bat mitzvah because my friends were doing it. We lit the Hanukah candles and sang songs, but didn't have any other religious activities in the house. When my great-grandmother died we never spoke of an afterlife or her "looking down on us" or anything along those lines, but often speak of her fondly. God was a benign thing important to other people.

9. Ariel: I didn't quite remember so I had to ask my mom and it did sort of remind me – God is all around, all knowing of everything and protecting of us – for example if something bad were to happen, she would say – God was protecting us from something worse – not a lot at all from my dad – death didn't really occur for us (close family) until I was in high school – I shared a room with my grandfather who was orthodox and influenced my feelings of religion (if not God specifically).
10. Shira: Patriarchal, loving, personalized, "God is bowling" for thunder, Holocaust but still full faith Jewish God – takes care of you maternal but paternal in right and wrong – sees everything I do – tied to religion. Father – not religious – he didn't speak of it much – mother's domain – not too much being a freethinker – guilt in the mix.
11. Darren: (after I shared their responses aloud) As part of the process of understanding what we are transmitting to our children in terms of God is first understanding what was transmitted to us – or at least our experience of it. The reason why I we began here today is so that we hear one another's framework as we move towards a place of understanding our own.
12. Connie: (raises her hand wanting to share) I see how this can be helpful, but I want to know what to teach my child. Like what does Judaism say about God because I want my daughter to have an understanding of the Jewish God or the Buddhist God. I'm really not sure. But I don't even know what Judaism has to say about God and I am raising a Jewish kid and she is going to ask so what should I say. I don't want to mess her up and teach her something wrong.
13. Darren: In telling our family stories, there is no right or wrong. I'm approaching this topic not from a Jewish framework but rather from a family systems perspective. I don't

feel equipped to teach you about the Jewish God and what to say to your child because I only know what the idea of Jewish God means to me and how I want to teach my child about God. My point is that your daughter is going to learn about God from you directly and indirectly. Directly by the stories you do or don't tell about God, religion, culture, holidays, customs. And indirectly by the type of environment you create for your daughter at home. It's a less obvious way to come to the answer you are seeking. It's not about right or wrong when we talk to kids about God, it's about having a control over the story we want to tell them and proudly sharing it.

14. Connie: I know, I guess I need to take a class on Judaism and see what Judaism says about God.
15. Darren: Lets change gears a bit. I want to talk with you about your child's teddy bear. I'm toying with a theory about God that plays a role similar to what a teddy bear or safety blanket plays for your child. I'd like to get a sense of your child's object, what it is, how they use it. (We spent ten minutes going around the room for people share their child's object, which was a combination of teddy bears, blankets, dolls, and one milk bottle).
16. Darren: The teddy bear, the soft pillow, the blankie, these are what psychologists call transitional objects. They serve the place of the primary love object when she or he is absent. These objects seem to provide a sense of safety and security to a child. My own three-year old son has a bear and he needs to hold it to fall asleep at night. When he's tired in the afternoon, he signals that he is ready to sleep when he says, "I want blue bear – where is blue bear." When he is very upset, blue bear calms his inner storm and helps to order his anxiety. How are we doing so far? (Nods of approval)

17. I'm entertaining the idea that God plays a similar psychic role throughout our lives in the similar to the role that a teddy plays in the life of a child. Just like a teddy provides comfort to anxiety and fear, I'm wondering if God provides a level of comfort from fear and anxiety as we become more mature. In this way, God is also like a transitional object, though very unique. How are we doing so far? (Nods of approval)
18. So, now that we have established these two thoughts, lets turn time back one week and with your permission, I'd like to spend a couple of minutes exploring aloud what happened in this room. Last week I presented you with the question: What question do you think your child may ask you about God that you feel ill-prepared to respond in a helpful way?" Most of your answers dealt with the issue of death (death of a family member, dead people, and cemetery). Can you help me unpack this? Did I unfairly influence you by telling you the story of Sarah and her grandmother having a tea party with God? Or could it have been something else?
19. Connie: Well, I started by asking "what is God" and then we talked about the death stuff. So I'm not sure.
20. Klara: What was most interesting to me is that I felt that last week it was so obvious that we were talking about ourselves and our own stuff about God. Did anybody ever see the movie, *The Picture of Dorian Gray*? It's about a man who never ages but every time he does something wrong or bad, a picture up in his attack grows older and gets uglier. Then, finally, he goes up in his attic, smashes the mirror, and he drops dead right there. I think that is what happened last week. I think we were all talking about ourselves and looking into our own mirrors.

21. Lisa: I do remember us talking a lot about God. I don't know if you set us up or influenced us, not sure. (No other responses. I pause, look around the room inviting comments, no one speaks)

22. Darren: That is helpful thank you. Let me push this a little more and you tell me if there is anything here. I'm wondering if this theory that I am working relates here. If God serves as a comfort to people, just like teddy does, and if the responses you gave were "more about you than your kids" – then maybe our death comments are the real, deep-seated anxiety that we as parents feel in our own lives. For me, as a parent with two young boys who are totally dependent upon me, I think one of my greatest fears is my own death. If one of the boys died, I would be shattered and it would be the darkest moment in my life. But the thought of my own death, that is scarier because I fear the idea that my boys would have no parent. And have to continue living without somebody to provide for him or her in the way that Julia and I do. So, I was wondering if when the words "children, God, questions, most difficult" were presented here in the same sentence (selfish and narcissistic), we unconsciously answered from a place of our own fear using God as the comfort, safety, attachment object, in the same way a child uses a teddy. Is there anything to this thought here that you care to respond to?

23. Shira: This is so rich and so close to home. I mean it's all so real to me. Heavy. God is freedom to be me. I feel freedom so deeply. I paid every last penny I had on therapy so that I could be free. I frickin rode a Harley around New York City so that I could seek out that sense of freedom as a woman of flesh. I was in Israel, studying in the yeshiva with a full on skirt down to the ankles and *shomer nagi'a* (observant of the Jewish laws of personal purity). I am an artist needing to be free and to unleash that which holds me

back (begins to cry). This is so groundbreaking, death, God, freedom, you know what I mean? (A long pause in the room to take in her emotion).

24. Ariel: Well, it's certainly true that I am much more responsible now that I have kids. I remember when we first had our baby, we got to the street corner and I said to Bob, "no, we can't cross because it's a red light."

25. Birgit: It's true that growing up in my home, I felt that the first time my mother brought up God when death happened. So yes, I see there is something there but I need to think about it more.

26. Darren: (long pause waiting for other responses). Well this was very helpful (I look at my watch). Oh, look at the time, I'm over. This is going to feel rushed because so many important ideas have been shared in this room. I wish it could go on and I'm sorry it can't for today. I'm going to send around an email to you tomorrow or Monday trying to bring a better sense of closure to this session than time permits now. Let me say thank you for going there with me and with each other. If you want to stick around and talk, I would be happy to do so. If you want to set up some time for another day, also happy to do so. My door is open to you. And if you would like to read a copy of my demonstration project, let me know and I would be happy to share it with you. You made it happen and you are a big part of it, and I thank you. Oh, it really feels hard to wrap this up. So, lets say good-bye for now, but I promise to touch base with you soon. (Nobody stood up to leave). Okay, (with a smile) now I'm going to have to call security to get us moving.

(The room cleared out slowly, some people said good-byes to each other, three people came up to me to ask if we could continue, how important this is, how we opened up so much and feel

like it's all hanging out there and need better closure. I told them to please write me an email or call after they had a chance to think about it and share with me what they might want to do next.)

Assessment of Session II

I felt a distinct energy in the room at the beginning of the session – a certain desire to pick up exactly where we left off the week before. However, I felt the energy darken in the room, when I asked the group to work individually for a few minutes. Perhaps this new element of working individually derailed the energy of the group. Whatever the reason, I noticed a change. Perhaps my request of completing the cards gave it a sense of “This is an official study and we are Darren’s mice” rather than the opening of a group learning session. Or, reflecting further, they felt betrayed on some level since I actively chose not to continue the session from where we left the previous week like I had committed.

Perhaps they felt my own agenda working inside me – like we had much to accomplish so sit back and put on your seatbelt. Reflecting on the verbatim, I clearly dominated the session and felt I did too much teaching and not enough group leading (lines 13-25). I had much in a short session. I wanted to achieve the original goals of the second session AND carve out time to explore my assessment of the first session.

In line 22, I wonder if I projected too much of my own story into the group experience. As I mentioned during the session, my wife’s father died when she was age eight and it was the defining moment in her life. This influences my own family unit as my wife – my children’s mother, my co-parent, - has parental death as one of the primary stories of her life.

While I feel that I unduly influenced the God-death association by leading with Sarah's story in the first session, this is not to diminish the real need for these parents to explore how they are going to talk to their children about death in addition to how they are going to talk to their kids about God. Though I recognize that I may have conflated the issue for them.

Having passed through this experience, I now feel the need to explore my own interpretation that one of the greatest fears for parents of young and dependent children is our own death. This may be true more for me than the group of parents. In reflection, the thought that my greatest fear is my own death (A) BECAUSE I am now a parent of dependent young children (B) needs further exploration. I'm not sure if B is a result of A. Perhaps my greatest fear is my own death, period. It seems a bit self-centered to say, "If one of my boys died, I would be shattered and it would be the darkest moment in my life. But the thought of my own death, that is more scary because I fear even more, the idea that my boys would have no parent." For I want to think that faced with the question of my own death or my child's, I would choose to let my child live over me.

RESULTS, OUTCOMES, AND NEW UNDERSTANDINGS

At the beginning of this project, we identified four goals:

1. To help parents respond to their child's questions about god with a sensitivity to their child's early developmental stage.
2. To help parents understand their own God image and how they are likely to transmit this family myth to the child.

3.To help parents develop a long-range intentional approach to transmitting their family story of God to their child.

4. To offer a context for those working with children ages 3-6 and families in the religious setting, an understanding of the developmental framework when they are presented with questions about God.

Now, at the conclusion of this project, we can assess if our original goals were met by exploring the outcomes on the participants in these sessions:

1. The participants understand there is no "right or wrong" answers to their children's questions about God

Some of the participants entered the workshop looking for the right answer to their children's questions about God. They learned that the right answer rests within their own capacity to understand their concept of God and how they wish to transmit that understanding to their child. There is nothing "wrong" with telling Sarah that grandmother is in the sky having a tea party with God if that is the family story that mother wants to transmit to her children. Obviously, there are implications by telling this very story to Sarah, but many family codes have long-term implications on children within the family system. The goal is not to have the "right" answer to a child's questions about God. Rather, it seems important for the parents to have a general idea of what they want for their child in terms of a later relationship and understanding of God in their lives and work towards that goal throughout childhood.

As we witnessed during the first session, parents were seeking the right answers to their children's questions about God, death, cemeteries, etc. I believe they left the second session understanding there is no right answer. They may not yet know for themselves how they will answer, but they know it is less about an answer from the outside, as it is an answer coming from within after a period of self-discovery.

2. The participants understand the many influences on their children that will contribute to forming their idea of God during early childhood.

The participants now understand the many influences on their children's image of God formation. There are family codes – the stories, myths, and rituals that families tell and what rests at the core of a family's belief system and worldview. These inter-psychic influences are rooted in the generational stories that exist within each family, their religious identity, their social and cultural standing, the type of education they create for their child. An African American boy who grows up in a middle class home in Texas, attends a Baptist church each Sunday, and has an authoritarian father and weak mother will have a very different image of God than a Chinese born Jewish girl who lives in Boston who attends a Reform Synagogue weekly with her two moms.

Next, there is the child's experience of the parenting they receive. If there is truth to the Freud's idea, "of all the images of childhood, which, as a rule, is no longer remembered, none is more important for a youth or a man than that of his father . . . A little boy is bound to love and admire his father, who seems to him the most powerful, the kindest, and the wisest creature in the world. God himself is after all only an exaltation of this picture of a father as he is

represented in the mind of early childhood.” I would extend this concept beyond just fathers and sons, but to children and parents of both genders. To Freud, the greatest influence on a child’s image of God is the parent – as we have discussed in the intra psychic sections of this paper.

3. *The participants became aware that they might assume their own questions of God were the same as their children’s (projection).*

During Session I we asked: “what is one question you feel ill-prepared to answer your child when they bring you a question about God?” As we have discussed in the assessment section of Session I, we witnessed the majority of responses related to questions about death, afterlife, cemeteries, and the like. Since a child during the play-stage does not yet have the capacity to think abstractly about permanence and absolutes as we have discussed earlier, it would seem unnatural for a child (age 3-6) to associate God and death. We concluded as a group during our second session that the association of God and death is a mature way of thinking and probably not on the process level during early childhood.

The important lesson here is the awareness that parents might have the tendency to project their own abstract ideas onto their children. While it may be true that the majority of participants remember the first time they began to think about God was around the death of someone close to them, this likely occurred in a much later developmental stage when abstract thinking was more available to them.

4. *The participants learned that other parents share a difficulty in talking to children about God as a reflection of their own uncertainty about God in their lives.*

While the participants entered the workshop seeking answers to their children's questions about God, I believe they left understanding that they themselves needed to seek some of their own answers about their relationship with God. Many entered with a variation on the question: "what does Judaism say about God so I can tell my child when they ask?" They left the second session aware that they could not answer that question for their children until they answered it for themselves.

5. *The participants understand it is their responsibility to teach their children about God and bring their child into a relationship with the divine.*

Participants left the second session understanding the role that family codes and parenting style play in the development of the God idea during early childhood. With the realization that there is no "right" answer to a child's question of God and with the understanding that their children are receiving their messages and cues about God, it becomes apparent that it is their responsibility to teach their child about God. They may not think they have the tools to accomplish this parenting task, but they now appreciate the role they play in their children's overall relationship with God.

6. *The participants wish to continue working together as a group to continue our explorations of parenting life.*

The participants have a desire to continue and so do I. It was clear to me at the conclusion of the second session that a number of important issues and questions were raised that need more exploration and resolution. The day after our final session, I sent an email to the group thanking them for their participation and inquiring if they would wish to continue. Several participants expressed interest in continuing with the issues raised and others, which we intend to do in the early spring of 2008.

CHAPTER 5: IMPLICATIONS OF THE DEMONSTRATION PROJECT

Implications for Parents

Children receive their world-view from family codes (stories, myths, paradigms, rituals), which serve as the fabric of a family system. These codes teach a child about all the various dimensions to their emotional, physical, spiritual, and social self. In this way, God is a family myth whose story is told in the language of the family and in the manner in which the family approaches life, death, purpose, and ultimate being. From this, we understand that one of the major tasks of the parents is to transmit the family story, and God is one aspect of the story. This is the inter-psychic influence of God imagery on the child.

This demonstration project has also raised the idea that parenting style may influence their child's idea/image/relationship with God. As we mentioned above in Freud's own words, "of all the images of childhood, which, as a rule, is no longer remembered, none is more important for a youth or a man than that of his father . . . A little boy is bound to love and admire his father, who seems to him the most powerful, the kindest, and the wisest creature in the world. God himself is after all only an exaltation of this picture of a father as he is represented in the mind of early childhood." The way a child experiences parental love, discipline, attention, reward and punishment, guilt, soothing, etc. serve as the intra psychic influence of God imagery on the child.

Implications for Religious Educators

Religious educators have the challenging task of transmitting the institutional language of God to their students while at the same time being sensitive to the developmental stage of their audience. The sensitive and aware educator will take the clues from the parents when dealing with an individual family unit. The challenge is greater when presented with the task is to teach one biblical story or another to a group of children. When dealing with children ages 3-6, the religious educator must remember, as Fraiberg (1959) teaches, "the 3-6 year old child is a magician, in the psychological sense." They may hear a story about Abraham raising up a knife against Isaac and may incorporate that into their own psyche as an experience they are destined to have with their own parent. There is no one prescription for religious educators about how to approach their teaching, other than with sensitivity and the charge to study and understand developmental learning stages. This same sensitivity should be applied when counseling young children

This demonstration project may enable the religious educator to think about the relationship that people have with God from a new perspective. The underlying concept in object relations is that a person has a "relationship" with the external, internal, and transitional objects in his life. In this way, a person has a relationship on a psychic level with everything in their lives, including God. For the religious person who believes in the concept that people have a relationship with God, they now have another lens with which to approach the idea of relationship, albeit an internal process. This gives new meaning to the questions, "what is your relationship with God?"

ADDENDUM

Rizzuto outlines Erickson's eight stages of development in relation to a person's transitional objects and titles this diagram. "The Individuals sense of self and the successive recreations of his transitional objects (see the following page)." Though this demonstration project focuses on one of the eight stages, we think it would interest the reader to see how the intra psychic experience of a person plays out over a lifetime.

In her introduction to the diagram she writes, "Like Erickson's, my diagram portrays human life as a *gradual unfolding of the personality through phase-specific psychosocial crises*, each stage representing a component that comes to ascendance and finds its more or less lasting solution at the conclusion of its stage. The diagram presents the relation between the unfolding sense of self and the concomitant transformation and continuous creation of the transitional object. The central thesis is that God, as a transitional representation needs to be recreated in each developmental crisis if it is to be found relevant for lasting belief.

ERIKSON'S

	Trust versus mistrust		Autonomy vs. shame and doubt	Initiative vs. guilt	
Stage of development (Freud)	Oral		Anal	Phallic	Oedipal
Prevailing experience for sense of self	Bodily sensations	I am me if mirrored	I am me with you (self-object).	I am wonderful. I can do great things.	I am attractive. You should love me first.
Type of object	Ministrations, play, and mirroring		You are with me.	You are great, powerful. You can do anything.	You are lovable and exciting.
Type of God	Experienced through the senses	Mirroring	Self-object	Idealized parental imago	Aggrandized parental imago
God representation which allows belief	I am held, fed, nurtured. I see me on your face. (You make me in your image.)		I feel you are with me.	You are wonderful, the Almighty.	You are love. You love me.
God representation which leads to unbelief	I am not held, I am hungry. I feel uncared for. I cannot see me. (You are not making me.)		I cannot feel you are there for me. I despair.	I thought you were omnipotent. You failed.	You do not love me. I do not count.
Example of religious experience	Schizophrenic patient while masturbating: "My penis is my God."	"I am me in the mirror."	"God is in me and I in him."	"God is a miracle worker."	"God is great."

TERMS

Industry vs. inferiority	Identity vs. identity diffusion		Intimacy and generativity vs. isolation and self-absorption	Integrity vs. despair	
Latency	Early adolescence	Late adolescence	Adulthood	Senescence	Death
I am a child. I will grow up and be and do like you.	I am in a vast universe. I am me: I have an inner world	I will make room for me in the world. I will find and give love	I am I have I give I take I work I love	I have lived. I have done well and failed. I accept both.	I am dying. I am. I was. Will I be?
You are my parent. You are big and powerful. You protect me	You are limited. You have faults. Let me be me.	Teach me to be a man, a woman. I found you. You, my beloved	Now I understand you. I am an adult too. new objects	I remember you. We were together.	We have been together—remember? Are you there, my dead ones?
Less aggrandized parental imago	Conceptual ideation mixes with multitude of representations from other stages. Inestimable shifting.		Emotional distance from representation. Critical reassessment.	The representation is questioned. Does it represent the existing God?	Doubts: Is God what I thought he is? Is he there?
You are my God, my protector.	You are the maker of all things. You are the beloved and the loving.		You are. You let me be me	I accept you whatever you are. Basic trust.	Whatever, whoever you are, I trust you.
You are destructive. You won't spare me.	You are unjust. You permit evil. You suffocate me.		You think I am a child. Let me be me.	You never gave me anything.	You are not there.
I do not need you. I have other protection	I don't need you. I have myself. I found love. That is enough.		Life is all right	Life makes sense.	I was. That is enough for me.
"God the Almighty is our heavenly Father."	"God is my creator." "I don't like that he permits evil, pain, and suffering."	"God is my beloved" (mystics).	"God is subtle but not malicious."	"The ways of the Lord are mysterious."	"Into your hands I commend my spirit." Basic trust.

Fig. 8. The individual's sense of self and the

successive recreations of his transitional objects

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