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Searching for God in 7th Grade:
A Curriculum for Developing Images of the Divine

Rabbi Joel M. Mosbacher

Demonstration Project

In Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements

of the

Doctor of Ministry Program

Hebrew Union College-Jewish Institute of Religion

March 2007

Advisors: Dr. Carol Ochs and Lynne Jones

Searching for God in 7th Grade: A Curriculum for Developing Images of the Divine

Rabbi Joel Mosbacher

Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the
Doctor of Ministry Degree
March 2007

Description of the Question Handled by This Project

It is clear from my learning in the Doctorate of Ministry program that our ideas and beliefs about the power of God evolve, just as our ideas about our parents do. Older children and adolescents don't feel they were lied to because when they were small their parents allowed them to believe that mother or father kept them from all harm. Nor do older children lose all faith in their mother or father when they finally realize that their parents are fallible. And so I believe that we can sustain a loving relationship with God even when we find that God is not the figure we imagined in childhood.

This project addresses the theological and psychological dimensions of this problem as it affects b'nai mitzvah students, including their capacity to achieve greater theological and psychological maturity.

Acknowledgements

Three years as a full-time student again has helped me exercise muscles I hadn't used in quite a while. The journey to this place was long and winding, as such journeys tend to be. It started in many ways nearly nine years ago, shortly after ordination, when Rabbi Shelley Zimmerman greeted me with a big hug at a conference. He quietly encouraged me to consider the D-Min program. At the time, I thought such an opportunity would be far off; I am grateful to him for thinking of me, believing in me, and encouraging me to never stop learning.

The opportunity would have remained just that had I not been given the gift of continued study by the leaders and members of Beth Haverim Congregation in Mahwah, New Jersey. Past Presidents Harvey Weinberg and Ranan Wichler, as well as current President Art Weber, inherently understood that sacrificing some of my time now so that I could complete this program would accrue benefits to the congregation in the long term. No words can fully express my gratitude to them for their trust and support. I am privileged to serve a congregation that takes *kavod harav* (honor for the rabbi) as one of its deeply held values. Thank you for giving me the time to complete this degree; I intend to repay you with my life's work.

To Dr. Carol Ochs and Lynne Jones, my wonderful advisors, thank you for having faith in me and in this project about faith, even when I doubted myself.

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thank you for helping me make time where there was none. I am fortunate indeed to have such terrific partners in this work. Thank you for being my teachers and colleagues.

No one has ever been more blessed than I have been with my life partner, friend, and in-house copy editor. For your understanding, your patience, your support, and your encouragement, Elyssa, I am endlessly blessed. You are my inspiration each and every day. You gave me wings to fly, and then taught me not to be afraid.

And to my boys, Ari and Lev. You are the true inspiration for this particular project. You both inspire me each to day to remember to have a sense of awe about the world. Your questions keep me wondering about God's great universe; your abilities to find a silver lining in every cloud teach me anew how to pray, and your smiles keep my heart melting in a sometimes cold world. Thanks for being so proud of your dear old dad, even if he is in 23rd grade!

In so many ways, I am writing these words because of my parents. Shortly after my father, Lester, died, someone told me that someday, the experience of grief would make me a better rabbi. In that moment, I was viscerally angry at the person for saying so, and I am still not sure she was right. In truth, nothing will ever replace him. But I dedicate this paper to him, and to my brave mother, Bonnie. My father lived his life to the fullest, without regrets, and both his life and his sudden death taught me to strive to do the same. Mom, you have taught me how to persevere these past eight years—not so much with words, but with your own actions. Thank you for teaching me, still. And thanks for not saying "I told you so," even when you were thinking it.

Chapter I: Issue Addressed by the Project

> Enter into prayer slowly. Do not exhaust your strength but proceed step by step. Even if you are not aroused as your prayer begins, give close attention to the words you speak. As you grow in strength and God helps you to draw near, you can even say the words more quickly and remain in His presence. (Green and Holtz, 1993 p. 35)

A. Background and History

I work in a congregational setting where, amongst other responsibilities, I have ultimate responsibility for the training and preparation of approximately 40 students each year as they become b'nai mitzvah, generally in their seventh grade year. I continue working with them into their high school years in a pre- and post-b'nai mitzvah program called Kadimah. In this program, students from 7th to 12th grades take core and elective classes taught by a variety of clergy and teachers.

Their once-per-week training before they become bar or bat mitzvah consists of several parts beginning at the latest in the fourth grade. They are required to attend a minimum of 4 years of supplementary Jewish education classes prior to becoming bar or bat mitzvah, which consist of a combination each year of formalized Hebrew reading instruction and a Judaic history and culture component. The goals of the program are primarily to give them some basic Jewish literacy and competence, and to prepare them with the technical Hebrew reading skills to become b'nai mitzvah.

In my view, our congregational school does a fairly good job with these goals, considering that our students attend only once each week for 2-2 ½ hours. I conduct an interview with the students as they approach their b'nai mitzvah, and among other

information I gather in that interview, I have for five years explored with them their feelings of Jewish competence regarding prayer and the prayer experience.

The kids by and large succeed nicely with the technical tasks of leading the service during as they become b'nai mitzvah, and generally seem to enjoy their religious education. The pastoral issue I see here is that many students come to the day of their b'nai mitzvah frequently expressing a high level of uncertainty about the role of prayer and spiritual connection in their lives. They know that they have learned specific words and prayers for the purpose of "succeeding" on the day they become bar or bat mitzvah, but when I ask them about regular, meaningful prayer or spiritual experiences they've had, they seem almost universally to *not even understand the question*. They often seem disillusioned by the experience overall; in Jewish parlance, they have learned the *keva* of Jewish prayer, but very little *kavannah*; they have learned the traditional words, but not how to put their intentionality, their feelings and emotions, into the process of prayer.

The result as I see it is another cadre each year of b'nai mitzvah who have learned through our program a number of prayers, but, for the most part, who have not learned how to pray. Jewish tradition asserts religiously that becoming bar or bat mitzvah means that a person has achieved a degree of maturity in the Jewish community, and yet their faith development remains stunted in paralyzing ways. A critical analysis of the process might reveal a severe lack of enduring understandings that might inform their Jewish lives in the decades that follow.

Since the summer of 1995 when I was first training as a chaplain intern in the Clinical Pastoral Education program at Jewish Hospital in Cincinnati, Ohio, I have been continually amazed by the disparity between the level of comfort with personal prayer

and personal relationship to God expressed by Jews and non-Jews. Jewish Hospital was Jewish largely in name alone—the daily census was 80-85% non-Jewish, and so most of my encounters with patients were of an interfaith sort. The non-Jews I would visit in the hospital tended to be much more comfortable if and when I would suggest that we pray together. To this day, even when I visit my own congregants in the hospital—even people who I know fairly well—I get quite a range of responses to an invitation to prayer. There are those who welcome the invitation and who launch right in to their own composed prayer. There are those who are familiar with the traditional *Mi Shebeirach* (Jewish healing prayer) and ask me if I would recite it on their behalf. But my completely anecdotal experience in this regard is that the vast majority of people I pastor to—in the hospital, in my office, or in their homes—are unfamiliar or uncomfortable with idea of personal prayer, of personal connection with the Holy One of Blessing.

There are times when I offer to pray with my congregants when I get a truly puzzled look. When I delve with those folks into the reason for their puzzlement, I get a variety of responses. At times, they feel inadequate and unprepared to speak to God in an informal way. Their puzzlement is of this sort: "Pray? What to you mean pray? What do you mean speak to God? It's not Shabbat. It's not High Holidays. We don't have a *minyan* (a quorum required for formal Jewish prayer) here. We don't have a prayer book. What do you mean pray?" This confusion and inadequacy grows, I think, from some sense that the only times when Jews can pray is when they are in a formal, structured, communal prayer setting.

At other times I think, the perplexity grows from a misunderstanding of what prayer is limited to. It takes this form: "Pray? What do you mean pray? If the rabbi wants

to pray with me or for me, does that mean he thinks I am going to die?" This confusion, too, grows from a lack of understanding about the ways and settings that Jews have historically reached out to God. Many Jews are familiar with the idea that there is a kind of "deathbed confessional" called the *vidui*. As many Jews seem to be married to the idea that Jewish prayer only emerges in a formal, fixed setting, so these clients must assume that the only alternative to praying in a formal synagogue service is praying only in the direst of circumstances. Hence the apparent conclusion: "If it's not Yom Kippur and the rabbi wants to pray, I must be near death."

I was raised in a very committed Reform Jewish household, and my entire extended family was and remains very Jewishly involved. I attended religious school three days a week, attended a very Jewish summer camp every year for 15 summers as a camper and on staff. I felt that becoming bar mitzvah was for me a very fulfilling experience. Obviously, I felt so positively inclined towards the role of Judaism in my life that I decided to become a rabbi. And yet I have to say that through it all, and with the benefit of hindsight, I cannot say that I was particularly well-equipped by my Jewish "village" to develop my spiritual, theological side to maturity.

Of course, all of us will pass through moments of deep pain and loneliness in our lives. For many, sustaining an image of a loving God may help pass through the valley of shadows. In my experience as a rabbi, many who turn to God in these moments come to feel a greater sense of autonomy, realizing that their parents are not the only source of judgment or power, and they themselves hold vast storehouses of spiritual strength to cope with the curves that life has thrown them.

Nonetheless, many parents who truly want their children to develop into strong adults have trouble speaking to them about God. They have no difficulty telling their kids stories that they know not to be literally true, but which nevertheless contain deep truths. These same parents encourage their kids to participate in secular expressions of belief in magic; from tooth-fairies to birthday wishes made on a candle, these ideas seem safe to parents who somehow may dismiss their child's belief in the power of prayer or God in their lives. Rabbi Edythe Mencher of the Union for Reform Judaism's Department of Jewish Family Concerns tells the following story from a father (*Reform Judaism, Summer 2006 p. 67*).

> Eventually the kids will find out that we are the tooth fairy. I don't mind if my kids believe in magic that we can eventually show them came from the loving devotion of relatives—but what happens when they find out, as they will, that believing in God doesn't mean that everything they want will come true—there will still be wars and hunger. Won't we have kind of lied to them? Won't they be disillusioned—in God and in us?

Somehow, many adults are comfortable helping children in their evolving feelings about magic. But when it comes to their faith, they are stymied as to how to respond.

Time and again when I speak to congregants and we discuss their beliefs in God, I hear versions of this response: "I wish other rabbis had spoken about God this way." Why is it that many parents, and even more ironically, many religious leaders, have such a difficult time speaking to young people about God? Could it be that they themselves have not considered what they believe? That their faith, itself, is stunted, underdeveloped? If that is the case, it should come as no surprise that a parent or a clergyperson might have difficulty opening up God conversations with young people.

In my congregation, we rarely talk about God. Erich Fromm traces the evolution of the God-idea in his text *The Art of Loving*, following the ways in which ideas about God seem to change even within the Torah itself. He calls it "the maturing idea of monotheism" (p. 65) which begins with matriarchal phases of religion that eventually lead to a patriarchal one, at least in many cultures. Once the patriarchal phase develops, here, too, an evolution takes place, from "a despotic, jealous God who considers man, whom he created, his property, and is entitled to do with him whatever he pleases," (p. 63) into a loving father "who himself is bound to principles which he has postulated; it goes in the direction of transforming God from the figure of a father into a symbol of his principles, those of justice, truth, and love" (p. 64). Ultimately, the most striking development in this evolution involves God's revelation to Moses. Moses tells God that the Hebrews will not believe that he has been sent by God unless God tells them his name; Moses understands that he faces a largely idol-worshipping people who are accustomed to having names attached to their deities. God's response is to tell Moses *ehiye asher ehiye*, which Fromm suggest we might most accurately translate as "my name is nameless."

Fromm suggests that the consequences of this maturity "can only lead to one conclusion: not to mention God's name at all, not to speak *about* God." In that way, Fromm continues, "God becomes what he potentially is in monotheistic theology, the nameless One, an inexpressible stammer, referring to the unity underlying the phenomenal universe, the ground of all existence" (p. 67). Perhaps this is one reason why Jews struggle so much to discuss God; we are inheritors of a tradition which urges us not to name or depict God at all.

It is clear from my learning in the Doctorate of Ministry program that peoples ideas and beliefs about the power of God evolve, just as our ideas about our parents do. Older children and adolescents don't feel they were lied to because when they were small their parents allowed them to believe that mother or father kept them from all harm. Nor do older children lose all faith in their mother or father when they finally realize that their parents are fallible. And so I believe that Jews can sustain a loving relationship with God even when they find that God is not the figure they imagined in childhood.

This project addresses the theological and psychological dimensions of this problem as it affects b'nai mitzvah students, including their capacity to achieve greater theological and psychological maturity.

This is a pastoral issue insomuch as the failure to continue to develop their spiritual life impedes their ability to rely on their Jewish identities for comfort, consolation, and strength at one of the most confusing times of their lives, namely adolescence. So, too, such stunted growth will leave them at a loss pastorally as adults, as they face all of the complexities of life.

This is a theological issue because our synagogue, and perhaps many others, is failing to give our kids adequate permission and language to speak to God from their own unique hearts and perspectives.

B. Specific needs to which I plan to minister

I plan to develop and lead a five- to six- week curriculum for our seventh grade students that I will teach within the regular context of our Kadimah program. The curriculum will facilitate the theological and psychological understandings and the skills that will enable the program participants to begin to explore their own relationship to prayer and the holiness in their lives. The project focuses on exploring the history and diversity of Jewish prayer experiences, enabling participants to articulate what obstacles exist in their own lives to meaningful prayer, and empowering them to explore ways to express their needs and emotions in a variety of prayer formats.

C. Relevance of the project to ministry in a wider context

On a micro level, the issues that I am herein attempting to address are relevant to people of all ages—not simply 13 and 14 year olds. When a person's spiritual growth is stunted in some way, his or her spiritual life in general will be impeded, and that hindrance will last a lifetime unless he or she addresses the "blockage" in some way. So in that sense, the learning I do in carrying out this project will help inform how I speak about and teach about spirituality for people of all ages in my congregation. I have already run two mini-courses for adults utilizing *The Many Faces of* God and Ochs' *Our Lives as Torah.* I can imagine running a version of this new curriculum for adults as well, as they strive to develop their God ideas and images.

On a macro level, to my knowledge, many Jewish congregations struggle with these issues. Many congregations struggle to connect their young people in a spiritual way, so that their religious education is as much about substance as it is about form. If

this project proves useful in my congregation, I feel that it may have the potential for useful application in communities other than my own.

Chapter II: The Principals That Will Guide and Inform the Project

A. Religious principles and relevant literature

The Jewish tradition is rich with a wide variety of types of prayer expression. From the fixed prayer language and timing of the rabbinic tradition to the meditation and contemplation of the mystical tradition, from the traditionally masculine God language of much of Jewish history to an increasing diversity of God language, Jews in search of a spiritual home and a familiar prayer language can find it in the tapestry of their own highly variegated sacred tradition.

So, too, though, over much of the past 2000 years, Jewish prayer has become increasingly codified and formulaic, perhaps out of necessity; since the Jews were exiled all over the world after the destruction of Jerusalem in the year 70 C.E., Jews have relied in part on common prayer as a tie that binds the highly diverse Jewish communities of the world.

This project seeks to encourage young people to view that diverse history as their heritage to inherit and to encourage them to embrace that which brings them closest to their spiritual source.

What, after all, is prayer for? I am particularly drawn to the reflections on prayer of thinkers such as Rabbi Larry Hoffman, Dr. Abraham Joshua Heschel, the medieval philosopher Bahya Ibn Pakuda, and Rabbi David Wolpe who provide compelling answers to this ultimate religious question. I feel that these thinkers will motivate meaningful reflection on the power and potential that prayer can have on one's life.

Hoffman writes about prayer as first and foremost "a delivery system for committing us to the great ideas that make life worth living, because ideas that are ritually construed empower us to do what we would never otherwise have the courage to do" (p. 14).

Heschel writes that "the purpose of prayer is to be brought to His attention, to be listened to, to be understood by Him; not to know Him but to be known to Him" (p. 76).

Bahya describes prayer as having parts. "The words of prayers," he says, "are like the husk covering the grain, and reflection on their meaning is like the kernel. Prayer itself is like the body, and reflecting in its meaning us like the spirit. If we merely utter the words of prayers while thinking about matters other than prayer, it is like a body without a spirit, a husk without a kernel, the body is present but the heart is absent" (Green and Holtz 1993, p. 94).

And Wolpe reminds us that the rabbis call prayer the service of the heart. "The sacrificial metaphor is suggestive. Jewish prayer is built upon the idea that an offering isbeing made to God. Something is being given—the fervor and fullness of our souls. 'One's prayer is not heeded,' says the Talmud, 'unless God is approached with one's heart in one's hands (Tannit 8a)'" (p. 180).

These theological concepts of prayer-- that it is meant to give us courage to act in the world; that it is in some ways a call to God to be brought to God's attention; that the words of prayer without the intentionality of the heart is empty; and that prayer is a genuine offering to God-- these are among the consequential ideas that can bring new significance to prayer for young people.

Aryeh ben David writes that "serious prayer needs to be an authentically personal experience." (p. 7) Prayer at its best reaches the depths of our hearts, and the Jewish *siddur* (prayer book) is designed to be the jumping off point for the plumbing of these depths. At times, though, the words of the *siddur* take over and dominate the meditations of our hearts. We can go through the pages of the *siddur* without ever truly personalizing them, without making them our own, without being transformed in any way. In this kind of prayer experience, our hearts are rarely touched, and so it should come as no surprise that we feel no spiritual connection to God.

Rabbi Larry Kushner says that prayer is like the hokey-pokey, and that what it's all about is putting our whole selves in (p 75). The challenge in our lives is to find ways to put our whole selves into prayer experiences, whether that is as a part of ritualized communal prayer, or daily as we go about our lives. Even the ancient rabbis of our tradition, who had no shortage of words to prompt us with in the *siddur*, recognized the need to leave space for silent and personal prayer at the end of the *Amidah*, the petitionary section of the Jewish worship service. The challenge for us is to find that space throughout the worship service, and, at best, throughout our lives.

B. Clinical Principles and relevant literature

There are many psychological theories of children's concepts of prayer. If we divide child development into four stages (5-7, 7-9, 9-12, and 12+ years), as Hood does in his "Handbook to Religious Experience," we see this division of theories. Brown and Tamminen suggest a simple division: from ages 5-9, children believe that God acts directly in the world, and from age 9 and up, children believe that God acts indirectly in

the world. Goldman, on the other hand, suggest that children from ages 5-9 go through a "magical phase," where prayer is the sole cause of events, and God acts immediately; they then progress from ages 9-12 to a focus on "semi-magical" prayer which is still causative, but other forces are shaping the reality at play; finally to a stage from age 12+ where "nonmagical" prayer is relationship, not causation, and kids at this age doubt the efficacy of prayer altogether (p. 155). At this exact moment of development, we in the Jewish community ask them to prepare sacred texts, affirm for the first time publicly their faith, and bestow the title bar or bat mitzvah upon them. It seems an ironic twist, but perhaps an appropriate one. I seek through the project to expand on their ideas about this relationship, and affirm the validity of this point of view as distinct from the causative ideas about God they may have had in younger years.

I am further compelled by the writing of Ann and Barry Ulanov in their *Prayer as Primary Speech,* in which they discuss primary process, projection, and fantasy. In one sense, they suggest, prayer is not something we do; it is a part of who we are—at some deeper level, we are all engaged in inner conversations, not just in words, but images, feelings, values. On another level, prayer is something we do when we begin to address the one who speaks and gradually bring into consciousness the interaction we have with the One who is addressed. The Ulanovs suggest that prayer is a process of listening carefully to that primary speech, of carefully entering the totality of our innermost being. When through prayer we acknowledge and examine images, feelings, impulses and fantasies, we are able to let go of inadequate images and move to deeper understandings (p. 226). It is precisely those deeper understandings that I hope to help these teens reach for. Rather than settling for the increasingly inadequate God images of childhood,

perhaps I can, if nothing else, give the students permission to examine their past images and perhaps, move towards deeper understandings.

So, too, of course, Anna Maria Rizutto (*The Birth of the Living God,* 1981), who discovered that a person's evolving views of God parallel an increasingly nuanced view of other important figures in his or her life. The small child may conceive of a God similar to her own parents—possessing great power and authority to punish or reward, as well as being a source of nurturing care. The school-age young person may view God as a source of rules and structure. The adolescent may view God as an authority figure against whom to rebel. On this view, then, gradually God may come to be viewed less as an omnipotent external force and more as a wellspring of meaning, values, and comfort (p. 177).

Rizzuto describes the God-idea as a transitional object that never goes away, but evolves based on where we are in our lives. Instead of losing meaning, Rizzuto suggests, "God's meaning becomes heightened by the oedipal experience and all other pre-genital events that have contributed to the re-elaboration of his representational characteristics" (Rizzuto p. 178). She argues that God may lose meaning due to rejection, being ignored, suppressed, or being found temporarily unnecessary. But we never fully repress God, Rizzuto suggests, just as we never fully repress any other object. God remains as a transitional object, always available "for further acceptance or further rejection" (Rizzuto p. 179). Because we have a sense that God is always available to us for love, disdain, mistreatment, fear, hatred, or other human emotions, the object God retains its psychic usefulness. Often, though, when the human objects of real life acquire profound psychic meaning, "God, like a forlorn teddy bear, is left in a corner of the attic, to all appearances

forgotten. A death, great pain, or intense joy may bring him back for an occasional hug or for further mistreatment and rejection, and then he is forgotten again" (Rizzuto p. 179).

Rizzuto concludes that God is a transitional object like the teddy bear in that, like the teddy bear, God has "obtained a good half of his stuffing from the primary objects the child has 'found' in his life. The other half of God's stuffing comes from the child's capacity to 'create' a God according to his needs" (Rizzuto p. 179). As Telliard du Chardin writes in *Le Milieu Divin*,

> The life of each one of us is, as it were, woven of those two threads: the thread of inward development, through which our ideas and affectations and our human and religious attitudes are gradually formed; and the thread of outward success by which we always find ourselves at the exact point where the whole sum of the forces of the universe meet together to work in us the effect which God desires (Du Chardin, p. 80).

So, too, the psychic process of creating and finding God never ends in the course of human life. Rizzuto states that the process of re-imaging God follows closely the developmental stages, the psychic defenses and adaptations of human experience, as well as a need for meaningful relationships with oneself, others, and the world at large.

Erich Fromm's writings (*The Theory of Love)* concur with this perspective. Fromm writes that "our need to love lies in the experience of separateness and the resulting need to overcome the anxiety of separateness by the experience of union." He continues saying that "the religious form of love, that which is called the love of God is, psychologically speaking, not different" (p.59).

Fromm suggests, too, that as God-ideas evolved from anthropomorphic to pure monotheistic ones, it made all the difference in how we relate to God. "The God of Abraham can be loved, or feared, as a father, sometimes his forgiveness, sometimes his

anger being the dominant aspect" (p. 62). If this is so, Fromm argues, "inasmuch as God is the father, I am the child. I have not emerged fully from the autistic wish for omniscience and omnipotence." He continues further that in this way, "I still claim, like a child, that there must be a father who rescues me, who watches me, who punishes me, a father who likes me when I am obedient, who is flattered by my praise and angry because of my disobedience." Fromm concludes that "quite obviously, the majority of people have, in their personal development, not overcome this infantile stage, and hence the belief in God to most people is the belief in a helping father," which Fromm calls "a childish illusion" (p. 65).

If we get stuck at this stage, Fromm suggests, then we never attain a more nuanced belief system. I don't agree necessarily with Fromm's thoughts on the negation of theology, but I do feel his arguments are valid about the development of God-ideas and the places where we get stuck. Ideally, I think, we would develop God-ideas that mature from "the beginning of the love for God as the helpless attachment to a mother Goddess, through the obedient attachment to a fatherly God, to a mature stage" (p. 75). What that mature stage will yield can only be revealed, I think, once we are able to see past the earlier stages.

As significantly, Rizzuto argues that the God-images we develop will, reflecting what we have done, affect our sense of ourselves. As we are all unique individuals, so, too, are our God ideas. We may imagine God as great, as hidden behind some illusory but real door, an enemy, or a frightening mystery. At times, we go through our daily lives for extended periods of time without reaching out to God to either keep us company or to intervene in our lives.

> Like jugglers we sometimes call in our God and toss him around; sometimes we discard him because he is either too colorless for our needs or too hot for us to handle. Some of us never get him out of the magician's box where we placed him in our childhood; others never stop throwing him around, either for pleasure or because they cannot stop touching him in spite of their ability to keep him in their hands for long (perhaps he is too slippery or too dangerous); others are content simply to know that he is there if needed; others find him so fascinating that they want nothing else (p. 180).

If, as Rizzuto argues, our God as transitional object never is fully suppressed, then it is a particularly important challenge to continue to examine that object, to test where it sits in our psyche and to nurture its evolution. All religions create official or more private rituals to facilitate and mark the resolution of critical moments. Generally, these rites dramatize the breaking of old bonds and the formation of new ones between people. By bringing God in as an active participant in the process, ritual provides a new opportunity for the reshaping of God images and the individual's relationship to it. This certainly should be true for Jews in the bar or bat mitzvah process and ritual.

And yet, how often do we really notice the changes and evolutions that take place in our psyches, and in our relationships with others and with God? As du Chardin writes, "Growth seems so natural to us that we do not, as a matter of fact, pause to separate from our action the forces which nourish that action or the circumstances which favour its success" (p. 76).

The challenge, as he puts it, is

> ...to penetrate our most secret self, and examine our being from all sides. Let us try, patiently, to perceive the ocean of forces to which we are subjected and in which our growth is, as it were, steeped. This is a salutary exercise; for the depth and universality of our dependence on so much altogether outside our control all go to make up the embracing intimacy of our communion with the world to which we belong (p. 76).

I hope through this curriculum to help these teens not abandon God as they abandon their elementary years, but instead to examine their foundational beliefs, struggle with them, and begin to refashion them in ways which will allow them to take God with them on their journeys. Dr. Mark Banschick, in *Handbook of Child and Adolescent Psychiatry,* writes about the reality that adolescent individuation can be intimately connected to faith, both in rejection and acceptance. I hope that I can help students explore this connection, in all its complexity, and perhaps to imagine coming out the other end with faith made stronger.

I will be doing intensive work with a group of approximately 12-15 students over the period of a few weeks, and so an awareness of group work is very important to this project. I have been reviewing the work of Irving Yalom in his *Theory and Practice of Group Psychotherapy*. I have focused a great deal on his ideas about what he calls the "corrective emotional experience in the group setting." He quotes Franz Alexander, who outlined his idea that the basic principle of treatment "is to expose the patient, under more favorable circumstances, to emotional situations that he could not handle in the past" (p.20) Alexander's ideas will be, I think, especially relevant in my work with teenagers. The complexities of teen peer-pressure may well be sufficient road-blocks to sharing in the group setting I am trying to establish. Complicating this, though, is the fact that most of the teens I'll be working with may not have had favorable circumstances to deal with the potentially emotional nature of a relationship with the divine. If anything, they have dealt with God ideas on an intellectual plane, in religious school curricula that teach about God as an intellectual concept, but don't delve deeply into what individuals believe. But Yalom teaches that Alexander "insisted that intellectual insight alone is insufficient:

there must be an emotional component and systematic reality testing as well" (p. 24). The group experience I will create in this project will, I hope, provide for a pushing of the students' intellectualized experiences of God into the emotional realm, as well as provide a chance for reality testing. Yalom argues that the group setting might be even more effective for reality testing than individual work, "because the group setting offers far more opportunities for the generation of corrective emotional experiences" (p. 24).

Yalom argues that the group setting contains many potentially productive tensions—"tensions whose roots reach deeply into primeval layers: sibling rivalry, competition for leaders'/parents' attention, the struggle for dominance and status, sexual tensions, paratoxic distortions, and differences in social class, educations, and values among the members" (p. 25). But Yalom continues by pointing out that bringing out raw affect is not sufficient to create deep transformation. For this to occur, according to Yalom, I will need to pay close attention to creating a safe and supportive environment, and work to create sufficient engagement and honest feedback to permit effective reality testing.

Also highly relevant from Yalom's work is his discussion of transference in the group. It will be fascinating for me to observe and to be aware of how the teens in the group perceive my role in the group interaction. How they interact with me vis a vis "parental authority, dependency, God, autonomy, and rebellion" (p. 193) will likely continually be at play under the surface of the group's discussion. At an age where they may be feeling conflicted attitudes towards authority (which, of course, is the same reason why I am so fascinated with their ideas about God!), how will they perceive me as the facilitator of the conversation.

I was compelled in reading Janet Sasson Edgette's *Adolescent Therapy That Really Works* that being candid with the group may well increase the possibilities for connection. While being careful in the sharing that I do in the course, I resonate with Edgette's assertion that I risk becoming opaque to them, which I do not think will be productive. Edgette suggests we explore "how to skillfully and accurately tell our clients more of what we see about them and more of what we think about their moral, interpersonal, intrapsychic dilemmas without suggesting that our way is the only, correct, or approved way" (p. 89). I'd like to offer my thoughts without imposing, in hopes that it will engage the students in the course. Edgette argues that authenticity and candor actually help "clear space for genuine affection and caring to grow when it's not there at the start" (p. 97).

Chapter III: Scope and Methodology of the Project

A. Procedures and activities

In my weekly meetings lasting five weeks per session with 7th graders, I will run the curriculum. I will ask them at each session to reflect on questions and new insights that may have occurred to them since the previous session. Each session will begin and end with spontaneous prayer. In the early sessions, I will offer the prayers; in the later sessions, I will ask participants to offer prayers. The first session will cover the importance of confidentiality, the purpose of the course, brief participant sharing about prayer experiences, and a written survey of prayer experiences. The next session will be given to an exploration of the diversity of Jewish experiences with, and expressions of, prayer. Over the next three sessions, I will expose the students to a variety of ways of thinking and feeling about prayer experiences, ranging from familiar ones to less familiar ones. I will ask them to reflect on their earliest images of God, and the images they currently maintain. I will also present a variety of God images from a variety of Jewish sources. The last session will include a final evaluation, wrap up, and review of the written survey. A full curriculum with lesson plans can be found at the end of this chapter.

I arrived at this format in a variety of ways. For starters, I reviewed my studies with Dr. Carol Ochs in the two courses I took with her during the coursework in the Doctorate of Ministry program. Some of the ideas in the curriculum I culled from exercises Dr. Ochs used with her students in that program. Other activities and ideas came from conversations and e-mail exchanges I had with Dr. Mark Banshick, as well as an as-yet-unpublished curriculum he shared with me from a colleague of his, Ariyeh Ben

David, called *Godfile*. I spoke with Mr. Ben David and received his permission to utilize some of the exercises.

During the course of that time and in the subsequent year, I have utilized some of this range of activities in a variety of congregational settings in my work. In services, in more informal youth settings, in an ongoing parenting class at the synagogue that I teach jointly with a child psychologist, and in a variety of adult education settings, I have been able to see both the power and efficacy of some ideas, and the weaknesses of other ideas I had about how to open this subject matter with my congregants of all ages.

I also was privileged to have the opportunity to experiment with pieces of the curriculum in my work on faculty at the Union for Reform Judaism's Eisner Camp in the summer of 2006. In that setting over the course of two weeks with daily *limud* (study) sessions with young people from ages 10-15, I was able to try out ideas in formal and informal settings.

One of the most fascinating, and perhaps ultimately most translatable aspects of this experimentation, has been my perception that nearly all the exercises have potential usage across a vast age spectrum. Although in this project I am focused on 7th graders in particular, I have used many of these methodologies equally effectively and almost without alteration with children aged 5 and up, all the way to elderly adults. The resulting conversations that have ensued across the age ranges have only reinforced my conviction that "God-talk" fulfills a deeply untapped well of spiritual need in the congregants I serve.

As far as potential problems I anticipate, they fall into two basic categories—time limits and potential reticence.

As far as time is concerned, each session I have with the 7th graders is limited to 45 minutes (and that assumes that the kids come on time) for a maximum of five sessions (and that assumes that no sessions are cancelled because of weather or special programs in the school), and that is not a great deal of time to cover a great deal of material. In addition, I meet with the students at 7:15 p.m. on Monday evenings, after they've already had a long, full day of academic and other activities. This time may or may not be conducive to opening an area of unfamiliar and highly personal discussion.

This leads me to my second area of concern, the potential that the students will be reticent to share their personal thoughts about God in the setting that I create. With time constraints, peer-pressure, and the unusual nature of the exercises and subject matter, I wonder whether and how they will respond.

I will be relying on my previously good rapport with the students, as well as a hopefully well-designed curriculum, to overcome both of these areas of real concern. The following are the complete lesson plans for each session.

Curriculum Lesson Plans

Session 1 The difference between learning prayers and learning how to pray

Goals:

--To introduce students to the goals of the class
--To open the subject matter in an experiential way

Timing:

00:00-00:05 Opening Prayer, Ground Rules (Confidentiality, Respect)
00:05-0:015 Listening, reflecting to David Wilcox's song "Big Mistake"
00:15-00:30 God Questionnaire—each student fills out on their own
00:30-00:43 Discussion—"Who here believes in God?", discussion of the concept of "What kind of God don't you believe in?"
00:43-00:45 Closing Prayer

Explanation of Methods:

--Big Mistake; discuss differences between learning prayers and learning how to pray. Emphasize that this class will be about learning how to pray; reflect on the observation that we rarely do this.

God Questionnaire

*Name:*_____

1. I feel/do not feel close to God because

2. The time of my life when I felt the closest to God was when

And I was years old because

3. I think that God wants/does not want me to be good because

4. The time in my life when I felt the most distant from God was when I was

because

5. My most important duties towards God are

6. What I like the most about God is because

7. What I resent most about God is because

8. Among all the religious characters/spiritual role models I know, I would like to be like because

9. I feel that to obey the commandments is/is not important because

10. I pray/do not pray because I feel that God will

11. I feel that God punishes/does not punish you if you because

12. I feel that the way God punishes people is

13. I feel that the way God rewards people is

14. The most important thing I expect from God is

15. If I am in distress, I reach out/do not reach out to God because

16. If I am happy, I thank/do not thank God because

17. Prayer is/is not important to me because

18. I think that God is closest to those who because

Session 2 What do we expect from God?

Goals:

--Students will make connection between biblical and modern feelings about God
--Students will share what they expect/need/feel about God

Timing:

00:00-00:03	Opening Prayer
00:03-00:10	Clip from "Bruce Almighty"
00:10-00:20	God-image exercise—paper folding
00:20-00:35	Study in pairs, then group discussion of Psalms 48, 63, 60, and 39
00:35-00:43	Share broadly some of the responses from the God Questionnaire
00:43-00:45	Closing Prayer

Explanation of methods

--Show a 10 minute clip from the film "Bruce Almighty" when the main character, Bruce, acting as God, decides to answer the millions of prayers people e-mailed to God by granting them their wishes. Discussion.

--Initial exercise: Each student receives one piece of neutral colored construction paper and some colored pencils. The students each fold their paper into quarters, and then draw God images in each quadrant corresponding to:

1. their earliest memories of what they felt God was like
2. what they felt when they were 8
3. what they feel at this point in their lives now
4. how they imagine they'll feel when they're "old"

Participants share their drawings, discuss unique as well as common themes.

--"Name that Psalmist's Tune"--Studying Psalms in *chevruta*—even people of great faith have doubts, reach out to God, ask for things, wonder why their prayers aren't always answered. Psalms 48, 63, 60, 39

--What is the psalmist's emotional state in each?
--How does he feel about God?
--Have you ever felt the way this Psalmist feel?

--Usage of God Questionnaire—Having collated their responses (no names attached) I will share with them the class's responses to each question. Brief discussion.

Session 3 Seeing our lives as Torah

Goals:

--Students will understand what it might mean to see our lives as sacred
--Students will share of their own experiences of the sacred

Timing:

00:00-00:03	Opening Prayer
00:03-00:13	Guided mediation
00:13-00:33	Sharing our sacred stories
00:33-00:43	Writing exercise—Our Lives as Torah
00:43-00:45	Closing Prayer

Explanation of methods:

--Mindfulness exercise: guided meditation

> In the beginning, God created the heavens and the earth. And the earth was unformed and void, and darkness was on the face of the deep, and *ruach Elohim*, the Wind of God, was hovering over the face of the water. Genesis 1:1-2

We are told in the Torah that we are created *b'tzelem Elohim*, in the image of God. One way that we might envision God is as the spiritual wind that animates our world and is also a part of each and every one of us. Perhaps one of the best places to begin searching for God, therefore, is within ourselves, within the breath of God that has been placed in each of us. With that in mind, I want to do a breathing exercise with you. Feel God's presence in you, warming you, comforting you, guiding your actions.

--In pairs: Tell personal stories. Listen to each other's story as if it were sacred text. Then ask: How was God present in that story? Hard to see God in the future: often it is only in retrospect that we see God's presence in our lives. Like Moses only seeing God's back. Redo exercise, recalling a story from the last 24 hours. Can we see that God was present in the last day?

--Writing exercise: In what ways do you see your life as Torah? What is the purpose of life? What power is it that truly guides our lives?

Session 3
Writing exercise: YOUR LIFE AS TORAH

In what ways do you see your life as Torah?

What is the purpose of life?

What power is it that truly guides our lives?

Session 4 If you build it, God will come

Goals:

--Students will see importance of actively seeking God
--Students will see how traditional prayers attempt to speak to our deepest needs

Timing:

00:00-00:03	Opening Prayer
00:03-00:08	Guided meditation
00:00-00:15	Show clip from film "Field of Dreams," discuss importance of preparing oneself to be ready to hear God's call
00:15-00:43	Writing the Godfile
00:43-00:45	Closing Prayer

Explanation of methods:

--Guided meditation: Standing this time. Take three steps forward. Being aware of your feelings—clouds. Three steps backward. You're now standing in the same physical spot, but spiritually, you're in a different place. Surrounded by others, together with a community, yet at this moment, totally alone.

--Show film clip from "Field of Dreams" when Costner hears a voice for the second time. How would you feel if you heard God's voice? Would you respond? Do what you were being asked?

--Writing the Godfile (exercise by Ariyeh Ben David). Divide students into *chevrutot* and have each pair study one of the prayers—*Avot, Kaddish, Modeh Ani* , respond to the questions. Review findings as a larger group.

1. Get to know the text of the prayer.
2. Imagine yourself in the presence of God.
3. Let your mind react to the words of the prayer.
4. Stay with a few words or phrases.
5. When your mind wanders, pay attention to where it has decided to go.
6. Be available for the experience of something new.

Chevruta study of *Avot, Kaddish, Modeh Ani*

1. What does the text say?
2. Are there deeper meanings in the text?
3. What feelings/thoughts does the text bring up for you?
4. When is this particular prayer recited and why?
5. What theology might the rabbis be implying by the use of this prayer?

Session 5 Allowing a personal God into your prayers

Goals:

--Students will reflect on some of the traditional names for God
--Students will understand why there are so many names for God
--Students will endeavor to find/create a name which speaks to them personally

Timing:

00:00-00:03	Opening Prayer
00:03-00:13	Students fill out God Questionnaire a second time
00:13-00:25	Share two stories, discuss their meaning
00:25-00:35	Each student composes a prayer with their new name for God
00:35-00:45	Closing discussion, sharing of prayers

Explanation of methods:

--Share two stories

Sandy Sasso: "In God's Name" Read the book aloud to the students.

There once were five blind men who came upon an elephant. The first one walked into something large and firm, and said, "My friends, an elephant is like a wall." The second man, however, had stumbled upon a different part of the elephant, and responded with a laugh, "What are you talking about, old man? An elephant is not like a wall; it is like a fire hose!" The third man yelped in pain. "Ouch!" he cried, "an elephant is not like a hose at all; it is like a knife, and a very sharp one at that!" The fourth man shook his head. "Ah, but you are all wrong!" he exclaimed. "Clearly an elephant is only a skinny little piece of rope." Whereupon the fifth man piped in, "No, no, no! An elephant is like a tree trunk, and I think mine is moving!"

MESSAGE OF STORY: Like an elephant, God is greater than any of us individually can grasp or understand. Each of us at best has only a glimpse of the reality of God. But if we take all our images and combine them, we would come to a truer vision of the nature of God, who is one.
Throughout our history, Jews have used a variety of metaphors, similes, labels, and names to describe the indescribable reality of God. None of these is complete; none is perfectly accurate. God is God is God, but the names we use affect how we think and feel about God. Today we'll look at a few of them to see what deeper insight we might find in them, and then we'll take some time creating our own names for God.

Discuss traditional names for God, why are there so many?

Avinu—Our father
Malkeinu-Our king
Hamakom—The place

Hakadosh Baruch Hu—The Holy One of Blessing
Hashem—The name
Ein Sof—Never Ending/Infinite
Shechina—The Dwelling Place
Shomei'a Tefilah—Who Hears our Prayers
Ro'i—My Shepherd
El Yeshuati—God my redemption

--Creating our own names for God

If you had to create a new name for God, one that expresses an important characteristic of God, what would it be?

B. Assessment of outcomes

If the sessions allow the participants to explore more deeply their own thoughts and feelings about prayer, I hypothesize that they will feel more significance in the formal prayer experiences in the synagogue, in the classroom setting, and ideally outside as well. If the students report both deeper and more frequent prayer moments, this will be further evidence to underscore this hypothesis. I will utilize an observational method. I will look at and discern what is happening to the members of the group to see how they relate to God as the course progresses (Yalom, p. 130). I will also administer a scaled-down version of Anna Maria Rizutto's "God Questionnaire" at the beginning and the end of the course to see if there are any marked changes in the way students are reflecting on God. Verbatim reports of these sessions can be found in Chapter 4 of this paper.

Chapter IV Results

As I looked forward to carrying through this curriculum that I had planned, I entered with some trepidation. While I enjoy working with and teaching kids, 7th graders have always been a challenge to me. And while I felt I had planned and thought through the curriculum well, I knew that I would treading on ground that was largely unfamiliar to these students. I was aware that there is no telling what would actually happen once I began to take my students on a highly unfamiliar journey. I knew that they were unaccustomed to speaking deeply of God in the classroom, and imagined that they were similarly unaccustomed to speaking of faith in a deep way in their family settings. What remained a mystery was how deeply their internal reflections about faith had permeated and penetrated their own souls.

I was determined to be open to whatever would come from the students. I was also determined to be aware of what their own searching considerations gave rise to in my own personal work in spiritual direction.

In the second "mini-mester," I was able to run the curriculum in its entirety over the course of the sessions, but I did find myself wishing I had much more time than I had initially expected to need to run all of the aspects of the curriculum.

I was heartened to find meaningful conversation and, I believe, impact over the course of the class sessions. I deeply enjoyed the conversations we engaged in during the course, and I felt highly engaged and connected to the students. I feel that as I look back at each student, they each grew in their self-understanding during the five sessions, which was a big part of their ability to grow theologically in an expansive way during that time. The students were deeply respectful of each other in our time together—so much so that

it was surprising to me. I feel that this was due, in part, to both the relevance of the material to their own lives and the safe atmosphere we were able to create together.

I observed real gains in the students' ability to reflect more deeply than they previously had about their spiritual beliefs and how they might inform their every day lives. The course clearly challenged their belief systems, and even challenged misconceptions that some students had about "proper" ways to believe. Their silence after R8 (see page 45) in the first verbatim confirmed in many ways what I had anticipated—that they were unaccustomed to discussing the specifics of their own faith in this religious school setting, if at all. Where some of them may have been inclined initially to be dogmatic about their belief or non-belief (see Danny in Verbatim 1, beginning on page 44), the course seemed to give them permission not only to explore alternative ideas about God, but on an even more fundamental level, permission to question and challenge altogether in ways they seemed at the beginning not to feel authorized to do (see David2 on page 48).

I administered the Rizzuto Questionnaire to the students at the beginning and at the end, and found the students by and large were reflecting more deeply by the end. What was surprising to me was how forthcoming they were in their responses to the questions (see Appendix A, beginning on page 74).

I found an interesting atmosphere and energy in the classes and in the school more generally, in my openness about the fact that I was utilizing this teaching opportunity to develop my project for the Doctor of Ministry program. As I discussed the project and the curriculum with my teaching colleagues, they seemed excited by the prospects for opening new dialogue with students, and I heard from them as the weeks progressed that

the students felt engaged by the curriculum and in many ways transformed by the discussions we had. This was a completely unexpected and overlooked source of assessment, and while I did not anticipate it in Chapter 3 of this paper, it ended up being an invaluable additional source of information about gains from the project.

My time with the students was in the first half of the evening, and the students then each went on to an elective session in the second half of the evening. I heard initially unsolicited feedback from other faculty members who taught a variety of such electives that the impact of the discussions we had had in my class carried over in interesting ways to their courses. One teacher was running an elective on current events which required students to bring in news articles they felt had some Jewish connection. The teacher reported that Jeffrey seemed to be making a point of looking for articles related to the role of faith in the public arena. A teacher who was facilitating an art curriculum was pleased as the weeks progressed to be engaged in a developing dialogue with Marissa about the traditional prohibition about depicting God in artwork. Another instructor told me that in her elective on ethics and Judaism, David began to express increasing interest in the consideration that God was the source of Jewish ethics.

I am pleased to report that two months and more after the sessions have ended, students in the course continue to engage with me formally and informally on matters of faith much more frequently, and on a much deeper level, than any previous group of students I've had the privilege to work with. Other faculty members have reported what more than one has characterized as "real spiritual growth" from several of the students in the course, and I have witnessed this myself. The students are at once less satisfied with

"stock" answers to faith questions, and more comfortable bringing in their ideas about God to discussions that may have otherwise skirted issues of faith altogether.

Similarly unanticipated, I have heard from parents of some of the students to an unusual degree of frequency and detail. They reported during the class and continue to indicate how intensely the students felt engaged by the subject matter. More importantly, the participants seemed more inclined to bring both their growing understandings and emerging questions about God and faith home to their family settings, and this has opened challenges for parents about their own God ideas. I have spent extended and increased periods of time doing genuinely pastoral work with Shari's, Lisa's, and Jeffrey's parents. What often begins as versions of the question "my son/daughter is bringing home questions I don't know how to respond to about God" has evolved more often into opportunities for the parents to reflect more authentically on their own beliefs, doubts and wonderings about the divine.

I was able to run the curriculum twice in succession for two separate sets of 7th graders. I have chosen to focus in this chapter on what happened in the second run-through of the curriculum, because the first set of classes was interrupted in several ways that are not germane to this paper (illnesses, holiday and programmatic interruptions, high absences among students), which made sustained evaluation of gains and losses difficult to assess. Upon reflection, I was able to use the first run-through as an opportunity to try out methods and timing for the sessions, and evaluate in ways that allowed the second session to run more smoothly and effectively.

I feel that use of multi-media from popular culture was a particularly effective tool in the curriculum in bridging what students previously perceived as a gap, even a

chasm, between their faith lives and their secular lives. The discussion that followed the viewing of the *Bruce Almighty* clip was particularly enlightening to me in this regard. The students were, I think, surprised that popular culture could raise meaningful and engaging faith issues for them, and vice versa. For some, they began to see the faith issues that were raised by pop culture in ways they had previously overlooked. Kevin asked if we could find time to view the film *Dogma* as a class. While we ran out of time and sessions in the context of this course, his suggestion and the feedback from the use of multi-media here has led me to consider the possibility of having a kind of film festival which would focus on the intersections between faith and pop culture. Similarly, a fascinating and wonderful discussion arose in an impromptu fashion during a break at Kadimah one night recently. I came upon a group of seven or eight students, including Rebecca, Lisa, Steven, and Marissa, debating the extent to which some song lyrics on a popular local radio station were tinged with the faith tradition of the particular rock band.

My concern about time limits expressed in Chapter 3 indeed came to fruition. There was, in fact, almost never enough time to cover all the materials I planned in each session. And quite often, there was not even enough time to let individual discussions fully play out to the extent that I would have liked. Going forward, should I run such a curriculum again, I cannot see having less than an hour per session at the very least, and a minimum of seven to eight sessions to really get the most out of the discussions and activities.

My previous concern about whether students would be willing to share their personal views about God ended up being less of a concern overall. It could have simply been the nature of these individual students, but by and large I found the participants

willing to share both their certainties and their doubts with very little nudging from me. Most of these students had been together in religious education for the past four to six years, and had a comfort level with each other that surpassed my expectations. The students were perhaps wary at the beginning, especially with regards to spontaneous prayer, but as the sessions progressed, they opened up relatively easily even to the unusual nature of the exercises. I feel that I was often more anxious than they were about whether a given exercise or discussion would proceed in the way I had envisioned it!

All in, with feedback from students through the exercises, the Rizzuto Questionnaire, feedback from other faculty and parents, and my own observational work during and after the course, I feel that students made great gains in the development of God-ideas. Through the method of inviting students to share spontaneous prayers to open and close the class, and in the outcome of the exercise in which students developed their own names for God, I feel confident that students were able to experience deeper prayer moments in an informal setting. The change from students' unwillingness to offer a prayer in Session 1, through Shari's hesitant prayer in Verbatim 2 after I "volunteered" her, through the beautiful prayers that Steven and Marissa offered in Session 3, there was a great development in their willingness to create their own prayers. What became abundantly clear to me, at the same time, is that the need they felt to pray was really just below the surface; once they were willing to give voice to their feelings, the prayers nearly leaped out of their souls in ways that moved all of us.

What I really failed to be able to gauge, though, was whether these discussions led students to feel more significance in their formal prayer experiences in the synagogue. I had intended in early versions of the curriculum to ask them to attend a certain number of

public prayer services during the period of the course and to evaluate them in terms of how they moved or failed to move them spiritually, but I simply realized that we would have no time to really reflect together on those experiences during our class time.

Following are verbatim reports of each session. Some are reports of entire sessions; others are parts of a session that seemed particularly germane for the purposes of this paper. I received permission to record these class sessions, which was immensely helpful and critical to my observational evaluations.

This is a very brief snapshot of the students in the course and some general observations I made during our work together:

Danny—skeptical from day 1—focus of Verbatim 1
Daphne—naïve, seems in a dream, bright, curious, open to new ideas
Amanda—on the fence—not willing to "just play along," shy about sharing what I feel might be stronger feelings of agnosticism
Steven—smart, curious
Marissa—skeptical, a bit confrontational, wants to be heard
David—earnest, wants to believe God has a plan
Lisa—new to the group, unsure what to believe—brother w/Aspegers Syndrome; particularly concerned with the question "why do bad things happen to good people?"
Jeffrey—ready to grow into his belief—not yet sure what new normal is
Rebecca—smart but doesn't want folks to see it—plays "dumb blond," has a lot to say
Shari—opening prayer Verbatim 2—very quiet thoughtful
Ian—very smart, could be a rabbi someday
Kevin—gear head, goofy, can't get a read… depends on the day!

Verbatim Reports of sessions

Verbatim---Session 1

This conversation took place in the first session of my second class with 7th graders in Kadimah. We began with prayer in which I asked God to help us have open hearts and minds as we began our learning together. We then discussed ground rules about the importance of confidentiality and the need to respect the varied opinions which would no doubt be shared in the group. The group then had begun to fill out the God Questionnaire for about 15 minutes and had had a hard time staying quiet and working on their own. The group I had been working with previously had taken the questionnaire much more seriously; I had a sense that I needed to shake things up with this group.

Rabbi1: So I have a tough question for you. How many of you would say that you believe in God.

Eleven out of twelve students raise their hands. Danny does not.

R2: Fascinating. Danny, can I ask you a question?

Danny1: Sure.

R3: What do you mean when you say you don't believe in God?

Danny2: I mean, I can't see or hear or touch Him; I can't prove he exists scientifically. So I don't believe he exists.

R4: Great. Can I ask you another question?

Danny3: Yeah, sure.

R5: Do you believe that love exists?

Everyone giggles.

Danny 4: *sheepishly.* Yeah, I, I guess so.

R6: Really? I'm surprised. Can you point to love? Can you touch it? Can you prove it exists? *Laughter again---Danny laughing too.*

Danny5: No, I guess I really can't.

R7: Thanks for letting me push you a bit. Look—I know that that God Questionnaire wasn't easy. In this class we're going to do something radical—something that shouldn't be radical in a synagogue. We're going to talk about God. Here you are—how many years have you been in religious school?

The students indicate a range between four and eight years.

R8: Between four and eight years. And I've noticed something weird—something that stunned me when I thought about it. We don't talk about what we believe as Jews so much. We talk **to** God. You all are coming up to becoming bar or bat mitzvah. We've taught you lots of prayers to pray to God. But how many discussions have you had in religious school where the teacher asked you what you **believe**?

*No one raises their hands. I walk over to the whiteboard, on which I've written a bunch of questions scattered around a central question: "What kind of God **don't** you believe in?"*

R9: For those of you who said you do believe in God: Let me ask you this: do you feel that God is very near—all around us—or far away, removed, distant—maybe in heaven, but not all around us.

The students begin to speak quickly—to each other at times, just out loud at other times, as if they're thinking things through out loud.

Daphne1: God is definitely all around us, helping me when I need it.

Amanda1: I don't know if I believe there's a heaven.

Steven1: I'm not sure I understand the question. What do you mean?

R10: Well, some people believe that God is all around us—interacting, noticing what we do, some even say making things happen. And others feel that God is distant,

removed from the world. *I take off my watch and throw it on the table*. Some believe God is like a watchmaker who just got things started and then isn't involved in the day to day workings.

Marissa1: I think God is far away.

Daphne 2: Why do you think that?

Marissa2: Because I haven't heard God's voice. Have you?

Daphne 3: I feel that when I'm not sure what to do, I feel that sometimes I hear God's voice helping me figure it out.

David1: I'm not sure—I feel like everything happens for a reason—like maybe God has a plan.

Danny6: I believe that.

R11: Believe what?

Danny7: That everything happens for a reason.

Lisa1: But you said you don't believe that there's a God. If there isn't, who makes the reason?

Danny8: I don't really know. I just believe it.

R12: Good; there's something there for you Danny.

Lisa2: I'm not sure what I believe.

R13: That's a totally fine place to start. I noticed that for a bunch of questions on the questionnaire, some of you wrote, "I don't know" as your answer. That's totally fine—as a starting place. In this class, and in Judaism, it's okay not to know. It means you have your doubts and wonderings. It means your human. But it's not enough to stop there.

Jeffrey1: I used to believe that if I was good, God would reward me.

Lots of agreement around the room—lots of students saying, "yeah, I used to believe that, too."

R14: And now?

Jeffrey2: Well, I know that it doesn't work that way.

Lisa3: Yeah. The world doesn't work like that. Like, on those questions, it said something like "I believe that God punishes." Well, I don't understand how that works. Did my brother deserve to be punished with Asperger's?

Rebecca1: And if God is good, why did he invent the nuclear bomb to destroy the world?

Marissa3: But do you think that God created the nuclear bomb?

Rebecca2: No, I guess not. But why did God let that happen?

R15: You guys are raising great questions—questions like "why do bad things happen to good people?" In this class, we're going to ask these questions of each other, and see if we can come up with any answers that we can believe. See, I've got this idea that when we're little, we have an idea of how God works. Call it the "Santa-Claus" God, to mix a metaphor. We believe when we're small—"if I'm good, God will reward me." And then we get older, and some people still believe that, but a lot of us don't really believe it. So what happens? If you stop believing what you believed when you were five, and you don't replace it with any belief at all, then I think people conclude that they don't believe in God. And here's what I think. I think that they just don't believe in **that** God—the God who rewards and punishes. It doesn't mean that they don't believe in God—just not that God. *Lots of nodding. It's very quiet. I feel they're getting my point.*

David2: We don't usually talk about this stuff.

R16: I know. That's why we're doing it here and now. You guys are at age where being Jewish is really becoming your heritage. You're thinking on a higher level about everything—about school, friendships, your parents. All I'm asking is that you think at a higher level about what you believe, too. We'll pick it up next week. Let's end, as we began, with prayer. Does anyone want to offer a prayer? *No one offers.* Well, I'll be glad to. Dear God, Holy One of Blessing, thank you for our time together, for giving us a sense of respect for our friends so that we might have a respectful and powerful conversation here. May we remember as we go from this place that when we meet other people and truly listen to them, we are in some ways hearing your voice. Amen.

Verbatim from Session 2

I showed a clip from the film *Bruce Almighty* when Bruce decides to grant all of the prayers he's received in his e-mail inbox, and the chaos which follows. The following verbatim discussion ensued.

Steven1 I love that film. I wish we could watch the rest!

Jeffrey1 Me, too.

Rabbi1 What do you take away from that scene?

Lisa1 That it wouldn't be so easy to play God.

R2 What do you mean by that?

Lisa2 Well, I guess that if it really worked that way, if God really heard all of our prayers, then it would be a mighty big task to try to answer them all individually.

Ian1 Well, they do call him "The Almighty"!

Everyone laughs.

R3 Lisa, do you think that God answers our prayers?

Lisa3 I am not sure… I pray all the time for my brother, and he doesn't get better.

Steven2 I don't know if I believe that God responds to our prayers one by one. At least not directly.

David1 I am not sure I believe that, either, but I still pray. I want to believe that God answers prayers.

Lots of agreement around the table.

R4 Do you think you believe in a different way than you did when you were younger?

Amanda1 I know I believe "differently" now.

R5 I'm so glad you said that. I think that we all believe differently now than we did when we were much younger; I think we'll believe differently when we're "old" than we do now. I'd like to do a different kind of exercise with you now.

I ran the exercise where I asked the students to fold their paper into quarters and depict their God images at various stages of their lives: 1. their earliest memories, 2.) what they believed when they were 8 3.) what they believe now and 4.) how they imagine they'll feel when they are old. I asked them to tape their pictures onto a bulletin board when they were finished. Many students drew a version of an old man with a long white beard in the first box. Danny drew question marks in each box. There was a wide range of pictures in the other boxes, some abstract, some very concrete. Daphne, Steven, Jeffrey, Shari, Kevin, and Ian drew vastly different pictures in each square, implying that their views had changed greatly, e.g. Lisa drew an old man in box 1, a question mark in box 2, a broken heart in box 3, and a whole world 4. others like Amanda, Marissa, and David drew similar pictures from box to box. Rebecca drew four successively wider scale views beginning with a close-up of something you couldn't see, so that by the time she got to box 4, you could see that each picture had been a wider and wider scale view of the world. We discussed the wide variety of views the students depicted.

The class engaged in text study around 4 Psalms.

Verbatim Session 3

Rabbi1 Can I have a volunteer to open the class with a moment of prayer?

No one moves; a few giggles begin. A few students even blush.

R2 Shari, would you help us begin with a prayer?

Everyone looks at Shari; I can sense the relief other students feel that they weren't called upon.

Shari1 What should I say?

R3 Well, perhaps you could say what you're thankful for, and what you hope to get out of our time together today.

Shari2 *Hesitantly, then quickly.* Okay. I'm thankful for being alive and I hope to have fun in class tonight.

R4 That was great—thanks so much for being brave. I'd like to ask you to share your words one last time—this time, saying it like it was a prayer.

Shari3 Okay. *Slower this time.* O God, I am thankful to you that I am alive, and I pray that we will have fun in class while we're here.

Spontaneously, most of the kids in the class say, "Amen."

R5 Thanks so much, Shari, for getting us started with a beautiful prayer. Tonight I'd like to do something a little different with you. When I'm finished giving you instructions, I'd like to ask you to find a partner and go and sit near them. Once you've found your partner, I'm going to ask that you take turns. The first person is going to tell as story from their life—any story—it could be a big or small story—but it has to be a true story from their life. And the other person is going to listen to the story as if it were a

sacred, holy text. After the first person finishes telling their story, you'll switch roles. Any questions?

Steven1 Does it have to be something that happened to me? Could it be something that happened to somebody else?

R6 It has to be a story in which you were a participant. A true story that you were present for—not something you heard about from someone else or on TV. Got it? Good. All right, go.

Students break up into pairs, share stories. This takes approximately 10 minutes for everyone to finish.

R7 Okay, so now I'd like to go around the room and share, but in a particular kind of way. I am going to ask each of you to share, **not** the sacred story the other person told you, but rather to tell us where you think God might have been in the other person's story. Now, I understand that you might say something that the rest of us won't understand, because we didn't hear the story. That's okay. Don't tell us the story; that's only for you and your partner to know for now. Only tell us where God was or might have been in their story. Ready? Okay. Ian, why don't you tell me where God was in Kevin's story.

Ian1: All right. God was on the ball field in Kevin's story.

R8: Good. Kevin, do you understand what Ian meant?

Kevin1: Yes.

R9: Good. So, where was God in Ian's story?

Kevin 2: God was in the hospital with his dad.

R10: Good. Does that make sense to you, Ian?

Ian2: Yes.

R11: Great. Let's keep going. Shari, where was God in Lisa's story?

Shari 4: God was on the bus.

R12: Do you understand what she meant, Lisa?

Lisa 1: Yes, I do. In Shari's story, I think God was in the teacher.

R13: Good. Does that make sense, Shari?

Shari 5: Yes.

R14: Good. Let's move along. Danny, where was God in Rebecca's story?

Danny1: In Rebecca's story, God was in her, helping her know what to do.

Rebecca1: Yes, I understand. In Danny's story, God was in the fruit.

Everyone laughs.

Danny 2: She was right! *Giggles again.*

R15: I told you the rest of us might not understand; all that matters in that Danny understands... Okay, Daphne, where was God in Jeffrey's story?

Daphne1: God was in his twin brother.

Jeffrey1: Yes, I think you're right. And in Daphne's story, God was in the sunrise.

Daphne2: Got it—that fits.

R16: Good. You're getting the hang of it. Amanda, where was God in David's story?

Amanda1: I'm not sure God was in his story.

R17: Fair enough. David, any guesses as to where God might have been?

David 1: In my shoelaces?

Everyone laughs.

Amanda2: Yeah, actually that could make sense!

R18: And David, where was God in Amanda's story?

David2: In the airbag.

Small gasps from the other students.

R19: Wow. Amanda, does that sound right?

Amanda3: Yes, it does.

R20: Good. Steven, and Marissa, we're up to you. Steven, where was God is Marissa's story?

Steven2: God was in the text message.

Marissa1: Yep, that could be right. And in Steven's story, God was in his helmet, keeping him safe.

Steven: Yeah, I guess so…

R21: Great, guys. Thanks so much for thinking and feeling about this. I want to try this activity one more time. This time, you're going to switch partners and share a story that happened in the last 24 hours. Okay? Go.

Students switch places and tell stories. One asked if they could tell the same story if the first one had happened in the last 24 hours. The students share again in a similar way. God was in the pompon, the rock that missed the window, the knowledge of right and wrong, the peer pressure to do the right thing, the shade of the tree, the warm blanket, the advice of someone's big brother, the phone call from a friend, the football, the swish of the basketball hoop, the donut, the sky.

R22: Great sharing, folks. So how did it feel to tell your stories?

Rebecca2: It felt awkward at first. I'm not used to telling stories like that spur of the moment.

Daphne3: Yeah it was weird, especially the first time.

Kevin3: But I felt like, well, really listened to. I can't describe it.

Amanda4: I know what you mean.

R22: That's terrific. How often do we really feel "listened to" like Kevin said? What a rare thing. It's so rare that we almost don't know what to do when it happens. What idea do you think I was trying to get across in asking you to share in this way?

Marissa2: Maybe that we need to listen to each other carefully?

Lisa2: Yeah, like our stories are really important?

Ian3: And one more thing, I think—maybe that God is in our stories all the time.

R23: Can you say more about that?

Ian4: I'm not sure.

Daphne4: Yeah, like I don't think we really think about God being a part of our stories anymore.

R24: Like God was in the Torah, talking to people left and right, telling them what to do.

Daphne5: Yeah.

R25: I agree, we don't think that way usually. But the amazing thing is, you had no trouble seeing God in each other's stories, unusual an assignment as it might have been. So what would happen if you made looking for God a priority, something you tried to do on a regular basis? I'll bet you'd find God more often. There's even a passage that

each of you reads as you become bar or bat mitzvah, something like "the Eternal is near to all who call upon God…"

Three kids interrupt me in unison.

Marissa, Steven, and Ian: "To all who call upon God in truth."

Big laughs.

R26: Yes, that's exactly it! So here's your homework. Are you ready? This week, I want you to practice calling upon God. Look for God. And bring back a story for next week in which you sought out God. You don't have to have **found** God necessarily—just look for God. All right? *Agreement all around.* Okay. Would someone please offer a prayer for us as we end our class tonight? *A pause, and then Ian raises his hand tentatively.*

R27: Thanks, Ian.

Ian5: Thank you God for letting us be together, and for allowing us to see you in our stories.

Everyone in unison: Amen.

Verbatim on opening prayer from Session 4

Rabbi1 Would someone help us begin with prayer?

A few shuffles, some students avoid my gaze. One student speaks up.

Steven1 I'll start.

R2 Thanks, Steven.

Steven 2 I'd like to thank God for the opportunity we have to be together each Monday evening, to learn from each other and from Rabbi Mosbacher. I pray that we'll have another good class together, and find new ways to reach for You.

I have to admit I was deeply moved by Steven's prayer... after a moment of reflection, the students all said, "Amen." I did the same.

R3 Thanks so much Steven. Today, I'd like to hear about some of your efforts...

Marissa interrupts.

Marissa 1 Could I offer a prayer, too?

R4 Sure, Marissa. Go ahead.

Marissa 2 I'd like to ask God to give my mom strength after this difficult week.

She stops abruptly and begins to cry a bit. The class, almost reflectively, says, "Amen."

R5 Thanks for sharing that blessing, Marissa. Do you want to tell us about the difficult week your mom had?

Marissa 3 Sure, I guess... She was diagnosed with breast cancer.

Sounds of shock, then lots of "I'm sorry" and "that's awful" all around the table.

Amanda 1 I'm so sorry to hear that, Marissa.

Marissa 4 Thanks. It's been pretty awful.

Amanda 2 I have to say, though, that I don't understand why you wanted to offer a prayer, though. After all, what kind of God lets your mom have cancer? Why would you want to pray to that God?

Marissa4 *crying a bit more.* I don't know, I guess I just felt like I needed to pray.

Lisa1 I've felt like that sometimes, when things are really tough with my brother.

R6 Felt like what?

Lisa2 Well, maybe, felt like both Marissa and Amanda. At the same time, I felt like I wanted or needed to pray, and at the same time felt like why would I pray to a God who let this happen?

R7 I've had conflicted moments like that in my life, too. But did you listen carefully to Marissa's prayer? Can you tell me what she prayed for?

Silence for a moment as students try to remember.

Jeffrey1 I know she didn't pray for her mom to get better…

R8 You're right, although she might feel like praying for that, too.

Shari1 I think she said something like "I pray to God for strength for my mom after this difficult week."

Marissa5 Yeah, that was it. Thanks for listening.

Shari2 And there's a big difference between those two prayers. She didn't pray for her mom to be healed. She prayed that her mom would get strength.

Jeffrey2 Yeah—she didn't put the healing responsibility on God. But she did ask God for something different.

Amanda3 I guess there's a difference there. I'm still not sure it makes any difference in the end. I'd still be mad at God.

Danny1 Me, too.

R9 She's right here-- should we ask her? Marissa, are you mad at God?

Marissa6 I guess, a little bit. It's all still new—I feel like I'm in shock. But yeah, I'm angry that this happened. My mom didn't deserve this… no one deserves this.

R10 But even though you might be mad at God, you still felt like you could pray?

Marissa7 I think so; I'm not sure I really think that God "did this to her."

Ian1 So you prayed that she'd have strength to face whatever happens.

Marissa8 Yeah, I guess that's it, really.

R11 There's a prayer in our *siddur* that I like. It says, "prayer cannot mend a broken bridge or water a parched field, but prayer can heal a broken heart and water an arid soul…" I wonder what that sounds like to you.

Steven1 It sounds like a prayer I could say and believe.

Ian2 It works for me.

Shari3 Yeah, like Marissa's prayer, it means you can pray for strength to heal even if you're not sure God will flat-out heal you.

Ian3 I like that.

R12 Marissa, how are you feeling right now?

Marissa9 Like I'm glad I spoke up.

R13 I am, too. Is there anything you all want to say to Marissa?

Steven2 I wish you lots of strength.

Lisa3 I wish your mom lots of strength.

Jeffrey3 I pray for healing for her.

Danny2 I'd like to just say "Amen" to Marissa's prayer.

Everyone says Amen.

Verbatim from Session 5

Rabbi1 This is the last night of this session. I'm hoping it will be another great one as I've really enjoyed being on this journey with all of you…Would someone be willing to help us open in prayer?

Ian1 I'd be willing to.

R2 Thanks, Ian.

Ian2 Dear God of blessing, we thank you for the chance for us to be together. I pray that this evening's class be filled with learning and fun, and may we all gain a lot from being together. I also ask you to bring healing to anyone in our families or friends who are ill.

Everyone says amen. I ask each student to fill out the God Questionnaire one more time. I share the two stories—Sasso's In God's Name, and the story of the 5 blind men and the elephant.

R3 What's the message of these stories?

Marissa1 Don't mess with a big blobby thing in the dark?

Laughter all around.

R4 Good. What else? Let's start with the story of the five blind men.

Jeffrey1 Depending on who you ask, you'll get a different story about the same thing if you ask a bunch of people.

Rebecca1 You can't really experience the whole elephant all at once.

Some laughter.

Daphne1 What do you mean?

Rebecca2 I mean it's so big, you can't really take it in all at once—even if you can see, you can't really take it in all at once—it's just so immense! Just like God, I guess.

R5 And what is the message of *In God's Name*?

Danny1 That people call God by different names.

Daphne2 That people call God different names depending on how they see God.

Ian3 Or maybe they call God different names depending on what they need from God at any one moment.

Marissa2 But why are there so many names for God?

Rebecca3 Maybe because God is so big, like the elephant—no two people see God in quite the same way.

R6 And is that okay, do you think? For God to have so many different names, to be perceived so many different ways?

Kevin1 I guess so.

Lisa1 We do have a lot of names for God already.

R7 Like what? Let's brainstorm the names for God you can think of in the prayer book or in the Torah. *Students list Adonai, Elohim, Shechina, Avinu, Malkeinu, Hashem, Hakadosh Baruch Hu.* So if there are that many names for God in our tradition (and there are a whole lot more!), it must be okay for us to each see God differently.

Marissa3 Like the men in the story of the elephant, and also like "In God's Name."

R8 So here's the deal. Your mission this evening, should you choose to accept it, is to come up with a new name for God that speaks to you. There might be a traditional name that you like, too—that means a lot to you. That's great. But tonight, in the spirit of this class, which has mostly been about giving you guys permission to explore what you

really think and feel about God, I'd like to ask you to come up with a new name for God, and a prayer using that name. You can draw or write the prayer. Got it? *Some nods, some glassy stares. I explain a little more, and each student gets to work with construction paper and colored pencils. Following are the names and prayers each person came up with:*

Ian: Maker of Gears. Blessed are you, Oh Maker of Gears, for making everything fit.

Shari: My Protector—Blessed are you, my Protector. You protect everyone and everything.

Kevin: All In One—Blessed are you, Oh All in One. You do so many great and sad things and you created all living things. You are like a puzzle that has pieces of your names and personalities.

Rebecca: Creator of all things Good. Dear creator of all things Good, thank you for making the world a good place for us to be. I promise to try to make it better.

Jeffrey: The Protector of our World. Oh Protector of our World, please protect this messed up world we have today.

Danny- Nothingness. I don't know if you are, or if you are not. I hope you are, but I can't see the elephant.

David: Everyone—Blessed are you, oh Everyone, because you have pieces of everyone inside you.

Steven: Gift Giver—Thanks, Gift Giver, for giving us all creations.

Amanda: Prime Will—Dear Prime Will, you have the prime will and the meaning of life. Please tell us what it is.

Daphne: Creator of the People—Blessed are you, Creator of the People, because you make everyone individual and unique.

Lisa: The Perfect One—Blessed is the Perfect One, the one who created the world.

R9 What beautiful prayers and names for God! I'd like to say Amen to each of your prayers!

Lisa1: Rabbi, what name would you use? And what would your prayer be?

Everyone mumbles agreement—they want to hear what my prayer would be.

R10: Oh, well, thanks for asking! Let me think for a moment. I guess that in this moment, I would call God: Out of many faces, One. Oh God of Many Faces, you have helped us in this class understand that although you have many faces, each reflected in the diverse people in this room, you are One. Please give courage to each and every one of us to continue, to never stop even when we have doubts, to always explore and reflect about what You mean in our lives, and how we might be nearer to you.

Everyone says Amen.

Chapter V Discussion

> To pray is to regain a sense of the mystery that animates all beings, the divine margin in all attainments. Prayer is our humble answer to the inconceivable surprise of living. It is all we can offer in return for the mystery by which we live. Who is worthy to be present in the constant unfolding of time? Amidst the constant meditations of the mountains, the humility of the flowers—wiser than all alphabets—clouds that die constantly for the sake of His glory, we are hating, hunting, hurting. Suddenly we feel ashamed of our clashes and complaints in the face of the tacit glory of nature. It is so embarrassing to live! How strange we are in the world, and how presumptuous our doings! Only one response can maintain us: grateful for witnessing the wonder, for the gift of our unearned right to serve, to adore, to fulfill, it is gratefulness which makes the soul great.
>
> Heschel, *Man's Quest for God,* p. 5

In the following pages, I hope to show the implications of the results of my project, the ways in which my paper might contribute to the theological and psychological bases I laid out earlier in the paper, and finally, the manner in which this project might contribute to ministry in a larger context. I intend to do so by attempting to explain the congruence and, where appropriate, incongruence between my earlier clinical pastoral expectations and the actual outcomes. I also hope to link the outcomes to the needs and aims I identified in Chapter 1, and to link the outcomes to the religious and clinical principles I discussed in Chapter 2.

With regards to the balance between *keva*, the fixed traditional words of prayer, and *kavanah*, the intentionality behind the prayers we utter, I began with my observation that our b'nai mitzvah students all too often learn the former and rarely experience the latter, at least in the formal religious school setting. I have begun to think of this inadequacy of our school as comparable to the occasional story one hears in the news of a young person who completed the New York Regent's exam and yet, it was later

discovered, does not know how to read. I have come to believe it to be an embarrassing shortcoming of many supplementary, and perhaps even many day school Jewish education experiences, that students could emerge from a complete cycle of training in traditional public prayer practice and yet feel unable to express the prayers of their hearts.

In this regard, I feel that the curriculum I ran with the Kadimah 7th graders was successful in meeting a perceived need. The course allowed students to explore their internal spiritual life more deeply than had ever been probed in their religious education; it gave them permission to explore their theological ideas and share them in a safe atmosphere; and it gave them permission to express their heartfelt prayers in their own words, even using their own creative God language. Whether this has changed their enduring understanding about how prayer might work for them in their everyday lives remains, I suppose, to be seen. I will look forward to following their spiritual journeys in the months and years ahead. I would like to think, though, that the curriculum has exposed them to ideas that they otherwise might never have experienced in a Jewish context. The experience of watching the students give voice to their personal prayers has certainly been a powerful one for me, and I hope it is one that will stay with them despite the limited time we had together.

Just as important as I set my goals for this project was the importance of communicating to the students that personal theology is an ongoing process; that what we believe when we're very young may well change and evolve as we grow into maturity and beyond, and that such evolution is both natural and healthy. This change is, in fact, what allows us to maintain a relationship with God as we go through the many kinds of experiences which living life entails.

Furthermore, this evolutionary change takes patience and exploration; without reflection, we rarely develop spiritually. As the Or Ha-Meir teaches,

> Do not think that the words of prayer as you say them go up to God. It is not the words themselves that ascend; it is rather the burning desire of your heart that rises like smoke toward heaven. If your prayer consists only of words and letters, and does not contain your heart's desire—how can it rise up to God?
>
> Green and Holtz, p. 51. Or Ha-Meir 5:31c

So it is with us; we must come to understand that the words of prayer themselves, and the ways we relate to the divine, do not rise to God automatically. We must ever listen to our heart's desire and direct it God-ward in order to connect with the Holy One of Blessing.

This theological reflection is more than waxing philosophical; it is the work I hope I was able to do together with the students in my course as we reflected together on how their ideas about God have changed and most likely and most healthfully will continue to do so. As these students approach and pass the milestone of becoming b'nei mitzvah, they are growing into religious responsibility in ways we would not expect them to take on when they were younger. I set out to help the students in the course find their own emerging spiritual voices during the class to match the growth of that ritual and ethical responsibility. I believe that the students were able to emerge into their own, recognizing the deep well-springs of both spiritual strength and spiritual need they feel, and the permission to surface it all and offer it up to God. Indeed, the thoughts of Bahya ibn Pakuda and Rabbi David Wolpe I referenced in Chapter 2 echoed in my ears as I heard students essentially uncover the husks of their prayers to find prayer itself. If Wolpe is correct, and one's prayer is heeded if one approaches the Holy One with one's heart in one's hands, then there were definitely moments during the project when God

heeded the pleas of my students. These were moments of moving congruence between my expectations and the results of the project. I believe that my students did begin to feel that prayer is a genuine offering to God. As Heschel speaks so eloquently, "the issue of prayer is not prayer. The issue of prayer is God" (Heschel, p. 75). Now the challenge indeed is Hoffman's challenge—to take the strength the students find in prayer and to empower them to do what they would never otherwise have the courage to do. There were moments in the classroom, especially surrounding Marissa's opening prayer in Session 3, when I felt Hoffman's challenge was played out in the classroom itself. Marissa was able to truly speak a heartfelt prayer, and the other students in their response to her, in their spiritual "amen," found the courage to bring her strength and comfort in ways that probably never would have happened had she not uttered her prayer aloud in community.

In the student's review of both the Psalms and, perhaps even more importantly, of some of the traditional prayers they had grown to learn by heart, through our work together they were able to personalize them. They were able, as Ariyeh ben David urges, to begin to make them their own, and hopefully to begin to be transformed by them.

During the past few months, I have, as I mentioned in Chapter 4, also found confirmation of my expectation that the parents of these students would be challenged in difficult ways by the spiritual growth of their children. This is, perhaps, the most important implication of this project for future ministry in my congregation. It is good to start movement and change with young people, while they're still spiritually open and malleable. But having begun the work with my students, it has become increasingly clear to me that the search for God is alive and well in the adults in my congregation as well. I

have already begun to utilize the psychological and religious theories, as well as some of the methods I have developed and borrowed for this project, to help a wider population of congregants explore their own spiritual connections.

As I reflect on the theological basis on which this project was built, I think I was indeed privileged to see some of it play out in the conversations I had with students.

I am not sure whether to call it true incongruence or simply unrealistic planning, but I cannot honestly say that I was able to help students reflect on their formal prayer experiences to the extent that I would have liked. The session in which we examined some of the prayers was effective to a certain degree in beginning this work, and I will follow each of them as they approach their bar or bat mitzvah ceremony itself to explore the extent to which this reflection was effective. But again, given more time, I would go deeper to explore the efforts that Kushner and Hoffman call us to, to reflect on the extent to which we give our whole selves over to the act of communal prayer. I would like to invite students to consider in more structured ways how communal prayer moves them closer to the divine, and the ways in which it might do so even more intensely given the proper frame of mind. This examination will necessarily remain for the next opportunity I have to teach this material.

From the perspective of the clinical pastoral outcomes I expected, here, too, I found some, but not complete, congruence. In the exercise in which I asked the students to reflect on the various stages of their theological ideas, some students shared a sense that they had felt differently about God in different stages, while others seemed to see little or no change in their God-ideas. I cannot say whether this was a function of a less than perfect method (which is entirely possible), the particular small sample of students I

worked with, or if it reflects a real difference with the theories of Hood, Brown, Tamminen, and others I examined in Chapter 2. Overall, their drawings and other reflections in the course seemed most closely aligned with Goldmann's theories, which speak about a magical phase from ages 5-9, and then on to a semi-magical phase, and finally from age 12+ to a non-magical phase. There was definite congruence between the reality of these young teens and my expectation based on Goldmann's theory that my students would be at a transitional stage in their faith development. Most students seemed to be straddling two theological worlds-- not totally ready to give up on the semi-magical phase, and yet drawn almost inexorably towards the non-magical phase. As if becoming a teenager were not already challenging enough, it seems true that, theologically, too, the spiritual ground under their feet is trembling. At times, they seem lost between what they don't believe anymore and not yet fully believing something to take its place.

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Appendix A

God Questionnaire—Answers from First Group

*Name:*_____ *Name of person asking questions:*_____

1. I feel/do not feel close to God because
-because I've never had a serious injury
-He is always there to keep him safe
-I feel like he wants me to be a good person
-He's usually there for me
-He helps me a lot, I think
-He supports me and God keeps me who I am
-He is everywhere
-He's there when big things happen

2. The time of my life when I felt the closest to God was when
And I was years old because
-I was 5 and I fell down the stairs and nothing happened
-when I was 12 and my dog died
-I was 9 when I started Hebrew school
-I was 12 and I was very sad because my dog died, and when I got my new puppy
-I was 11 and I was in Hebrew school and we prayed to God when the Torah was out
-I was 5 and my brother was born
-I was 11 and he saved me from a surgery I didn't want
-I was 9 and my grandpa died and he was supporting me for the next few days
-I was 10,11, and 12 and I was at Eisner camp because of its atmosphere
-I was 7 and he helped me get up when I was down
-I was 10 after my grandma died
-I was 6 and my dad fell down the stairs and was temporarily paralyzed but still lived

3. I think that God wants/does not want me to be good because
WANTS:
-I can make the world a better place
-I could do good deeds for other people
-He always helps me make good decisions
-God wants people to be moody like being good or misbehaving so it's our emotions I think that control whether or not we should behave
-He has chosen a positive course in life for me so far
-God is just and fair so that is what he expects of people
-he helps me make the right decisions
-he wants me to set a good example for my brother and sister
-no one is perfect
-it's with the commandments

-I can do great things
-I'm a good person inside
-he knows about karma: what goes around comes around

4. The time in my life when I felt the most distant from God was when I was because
-when I was entering public school because I had a hard time getting to know people
-I was getting bad grades because he wasn't helping me feel confidant
-when I was hurt because he hadn't helped me that time
-my grandpa died because I felt that God didn't try to save him
-when I broke my wrist and I was in pain and I thought God would protect me
-It was thundering and the house felt like it shook
-when I got stitches the 5th time and I felt like I had already had enough stitches
-when I was in trouble because He didn't help me help me out with the problem
--my dog died: it was so sad
-when I was sad because I thought the world was going to end
-when I was 10 and my parents told me my grama died
-when I was 10 and he let my great-grandmother who I was very close with die. He wanted her for himself and I think that was so selfish!

5. My most important duties towards God are
-acting kind and being a dedicated Jew
-being good to other people
-to be the best I can be: to try my hardest
-to do good things for people who deserve them: to come to Temple
-to respect God and never think bad of God
-trying to succeed in life
-to act good
-to keep the world religious and a great place to live on
-to be a righteous person to myself and others
-being safe and doing the right thing
-to obey the commandments
-to respect everyone and be kind

6. What I like the most about God is because
-that he created the world although it may not be perfect, the world is still a good place
-when he helps
--that he's so helpful: he's always there to help people who do the right thing
-how he cares about us and how he gave us supplies and shelter to live
-everything: he makes me feel good
-that God always listens: He cares about me
-His way of making peace: it brings a lot of people together
-sometimes He helps us when we are in need

-I can talk to him because he is the only one I can share secrets with
-that all thru technology, the Big Bang theory, and evolution, people, including me, still believe in You.
-that He is kind and very forgiving
-that sometimes He helps you; He knows what's best for you
-that He's always there; I feel that I always have someone to talk to when I'm lonely

7. What I resent most about God is because
-that he hardly interferes
-when he lets something bad happen
-that I know he can't control everything I wish he could
-separation; I wish there was some way to know if you reached him
-He hasn't always been there; I don't know why
-when I think He's going to be there but he's really not; when I need a miracle and nothing happens
-that sometimes He's too violent; he wants sacrifices from animals
-that He may not be a real person; He's like an imaginary friend
-He lets hunger, disease, war in the world—it's His job to prevent this
-that He lets war go on; I want it to end
-that He sometimes doesn't help you; He doesn't think it's good for me.
-that He takes people away; I hate having my loved ones die and leave me

8. Among all the religious characters/spiritual role models I know, I would like to be like because
-God, because I could help other people
-Noah, because he likes animals
-my dad, because he is the one person who helped me the most through my troubles and he is my God to me
-Jacob, because that is my name and he is cool
-Noah, because he helped a lot of animals
-ML King Jr. because was a good speech writer
-like God, to help people out
-Moses, because he was a great leader
-Jacob because he was very kind and loving
-my mom, because she knows a lot about Judaism
-Moses because he was brave to lead our people to freedom

9. I feel that to obey the commandments is/is not important because
IS:
-it completes me
-as a Jew, it feels right
-it has been done forever
-they are the best guidelines to life
-they were made for a reason and they are fair

-I feel I should act good
-that's a good way to be a good person
-God must have made them for a reason
-these things will lead you in life
-they are the rules of life
-I feel if I don't I'm disrespecting my religion

NOT:
-I feel that people should be free and at times obey and at times not obey, and people should live how they want

10. I pray/do not pray because I feel that God will
Forget me
Sometimes, because I feel that God might grant my request or make a miracle
God will help me with my questions
-Sometimes I pray, but other times I don't because I'm afraid God will reject my needs
-God will help me when I need it
--Do not, because God won't answer
--do, because it will make God happy
Sometimes because I feel that God will respect me

11. I feel that God punishes/does not punish you if you because
Murder because you are destroying one of God's creatures
If you do something bad
If you do not listen to the commandments because it's what he said
Doesn't because God feels that you understand what you did wrong

12. I feel that the way God punishes people is
By not caring for them
Sometimes good and sometimes bad
By giving them bad luck and not what they want
Having bad things happen to them
God takes something worthy away for a certain amount of time

13. I feel that the way God rewards people is
By making good things happen and having them feel happy
By helping them out in their everyday life
Having good things happen to them
God gives something worthy to you

14. The most important thing I expect from God is
To bring a savior in time of need
To help me once in awhile along the way

To help us and punish us to make sure we do the right thing
Treating good people good
That he's always good
To understand if I do something bad and be forgiving (same person said they don't believe in God or pray!?)

15. If I am in distress, I reach out/do not reach out to God because
I believe he will listen
He could possibly help me
He's like a parent
It will make me feel good
Sometimes I think that he helps me

16. If I am happy, I thank/do not thank God because
I think that is what he'd like to hear
I don't, because he knows that he's helped me
I feel good inside
He has helped me
He may have done it
There's a reason for everything

17. Prayer is/is not important to me because
It makes me feel closer to God
Sometimes—I pray in time of need
It's asking God for something
I don't really believe in him
I do it for God
We are talking to God and God is listening

18. I think that God is closest to those who because
Are unhealthy and poor because they are the people who are sick and don't have a lot of things
-those who respect him because he wants to be treated with kindness and the people who are kind should get rewarded
-those who listen to him, because they're the ones who do what he says
-to those who need him because he will help
-appreciate him because he will respect them

God Questionnaire Answers from Second Group

*Name:*_____ *Name of person asking questions:*_____

1. I feel/do not feel close to God because
Because I pray often and give respect at the Temple
God affects everything good or bad that happens in my life
I go to temple and pray to God
Do not
Sometimes
God is always close to me because he's always there when I need him (2X)
He keeps me safe
Do not because I don't go to temple often

2. The time of my life when I felt the closest to God was when
And I was years old because
The Chanukah flames burned brightly and I felt God was there
when I was 7 and I broke my arm and God saved it from being hurt worse
when my dad was on a plane on 9/11 and he came home safely
when I was 12 and I got down from the roof without being harmed
--when I was 7 ½ and he told me that I was not going to be hurt when I fell off my scooter
--When I was 12 and I was on Kingda Kan because it was high up and I felt closer to him
--when I was 10 and I hit my head on the ground and I didn't pass out
--when I was 11 and my grandpa was sick and I went to temple and I prayed for him

3. I think that God wants/does not want me to be good because
We were created to do good
God gives you the knowledge to do good and expects you to use it wisely
He expects the best of his people. He has the highest expectations of me.
He has to teach me things and then be good so that he can see I've learned
He knows that I try my hardest and can do things if I try
I can make the world a better place
He will reward me later
I am like his child, and, like any parent, he wants his child to do good

4. The time in my life when I felt the most distant from God was when I was because
When I was doing wrong because I let God down and betrayed his trust
NONE
--At a dance because I didn't know anyone and I tried to make friends but couldn't and God could've been there for me and helped

--when I was rock-climbing and I was asking God for help and he didn't help me and I hurt myself
--at my grandpa's funeral; I was telling God I didn't want him to die but he did
--My grandma died
--Someone else mistook me for their kid and tried to take me home
--when I was feeling guilty because I felt like I was going against God's orders

5. My most important duties towards God are
Respect all of God's creations
Trying my hardest at whatever I do
Doing my best at whatever I do
I don't have any
Not to swear
To follow my instincts and do what is right
To respect how he is making my life
Following commandments
Praying
To do what he tells me to do

6. What I like the most about God is because
God is loving and forgiving
God gives you the knowledge to do your best
That God is not known and not exact and he's always there
God keeps me alive
God is never mad at me
He helps me in life
That he is nice; that he helps me
I always feel safe
His protection—he makes me feel safe
God is all-powerful and all-kind

7. What I resent most about God is because
Nothing—God has done nothing bad
How you can always ask questions and never get an answer (2X)
God doesn't help me
God doesn't do what I'm hoping for
He doesn't always keep people alive; he makes their lives pass on
That he doesn't follow my rules; I think it's mean
Invisibleness—I can't see him
That you can't hear him—it's hard to talk to him

8. Among all the religious characters/spiritual role models I know, I would like to be like because
God because God is all powerful
Moses
Miriam
Miriam—she was strong and needed women
?
Miriam—she was a good prophet
Moses because he was strong against a power that was greater than his
Santa Claus—he's cool

9. I feel that to obey the commandments is/is not important because
What's the point in having them if you don't obey them?
Otherwise God wouldn't have given us those words
Those were G-d's most important words to us
It makes the world a better place
It makes me feel better about myself

10. I pray/do not pray because I feel that God will
Do not because I do not have to
Do—God will get me what I want
God will make sure to listen to us
God will listen to me
I feel closer to God

11. I feel that God punishes/does not punish you if you because
If you do not obey him
If you learn from your mistakes
If you do something wrong; because then you learn from your mistakes
If you disrespect him—he will teach you a lesson

12. I feel that the way God punishes people is
by not giving them what they want
by doing small things for small problems, and big things for big problems
if you kill someone
By not listening to their prayers
By giving them a nightmare

13. I feel that the way God rewards people is
By giving them what they want
By listening to them if they ask for help and are not greedy
By showing them right and wrong
By listening
Making them feel better about themselves

14. The most important thing I expect from God is
To keep me alive long
To always be watching me
To always be looking down
To always care what I have to say
His safety

15. If I am in distress, I reach out/do not reach out to God because
I don't reach out
If it's a small problem I don't reach out, but if it's a big problem, I do
I want help
I reach out because I feel he will listen
I know he will help me

16. If I am happy, I thank/do not thank God because
I don't thank God
He brought me a good day
G-d was good to me
I feel he helped me be happy
He makes me happy

17. Prayer is/is not important to me because
It is a way of showing me being Jewish
It is saying that I am proud
God listens

18. I think that God is closest to those who because
Are really religious
Who believe in him
Those who reach out and acknowledge that he is there
Those who respect him and don't take advantage of him
Those who pray—he has an idea of what they need in life
Those who praise him—he gives them rewards

Appendix B Results of paper folding exercise from Session 1

	Age 5	Age 7-8	Now	When "old"
DAPHNE	Rabbi holding Torah	Woman Rabbi holding Torah	Life force	Life force
LISA	Old man in clouds as a marrionette	??	Broken heart	World
AMANDA	Man in the clouds looking down at the world	A ghost-looking force hovering over the world	A ghost-looking force hovering over people	A ghost force all around us
STEVEN	People as God's impact on the world	People	God is everywhere	God is everywhere
MARISSA	Person	Person w/mustache	Bald person	Old man w/ long beard
SHARI	In life-cycle	Everywhere	In nature	In nature
IAN	A man in a cloud	A cloudy man nearby	God looking down at the seder	An old man with a long white beard
DAVID	In the sky watching over us	Everywhere	A person	Takes forms of different people
JEFFREY	Angry shouting between parent and kid	Bone	In me	In me
RABBI	Old man in cloud	In my dead grandparents	In a divine scale	In a tree
KEVIN	A door	A cloud	A glistening face in the sky	A speaking voice
DANNY	?	?	?	?
REBECCA	An unclear picture	A further away unclear picture—maybe a map?	A map of north America	The world