Inviting God into the Picture

God-image and relationship with God in cantorial students' development.

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CHAPTER I - Statement of Need

"It takes three things to attain a sense of significant being:
God
A soul
And a moment
And the three are always there." (Heschel, p. 84)

When starting to think about this project, my focus was initially on the general

aspects of supervision as offered to seminary students; I began wondering though, if one

could introduce a version of supervision that integrates elements of spiritual

development. Is there room for God and the exploration of spiritual growth in the context

of supervision? I believe there can and should be, and that is what I want to explore with

this project. Ultimately all of the clinical concepts and theories are available to us to serve

as the backdrop for what should be at the core of our work: our relationship with God,

our God-image, and how we allow these to inform and infuse our presence with those to

whom we minister. As Friedman states

"I believe that the efficacy of the pastoral approach resides in our position
in the emotional processes of our community and how we function within
that position, in all aspects of our 'family leadership' and not just while we
are counseling. It has always seemed to me, therefore, that what makes
pastoral counseling 'pastoral' is whether we, the pastors, have listened to
Scripture!   If so, then to the extent we function and grow within the
context of our own souls (a lifetime project!) and abet the emergence of
our own selves (by a willingness to face life's challenges and oneself), our
spirituality and our tradition will spring naturally from our being."
(Friedman, 1985, p. 8)

Even though Friedman refers specifically to the context of pastoral counseling, I

believe this statement applies to ministry and pastoral presence in general as well, since I

understand this to mean that, not only do we have to be steeped in our scripture/tradition,

but even more so in our own ongoing - and hopefully evolving - relationship with God. Our role as clergy is not necessarily defined by what scriptural or liturgical texts we can quote at any given time, but rather by how we live and breathe those texts, our tradition and our own relationship with the Divine.

A. Background

For many years the School of Sacred Music has had a Student Placement program as part of its training. This placement program has a number of goals: to help the students gain practical experience in the cantorate, to provide the students with a source of income and to provide (small) congregations with an affordable cantorial presence. Students are required to serve a minimum of two years in a congregation that is affiliated with the Union for Reform Judaism. The senior clergy (rabbi or cantor) in these congregations is expected to be a mentor to the student during their internship. At this time the placement program does not include any formal supervision for the students integrated into the curriculum, nor does it offer students and mentors any structured way to grow together. Many of the students learn by default, through the "sink or swim" method. Some barely survive, and a few actually are lucky and find wonderful mentors in the senior clergy with whom they work. To date, the School of Sacred Music does not have the resources to train the mentors either; while I clearly see the need for that element as well, since better trained mentors would in turn meet the needs of the students. For the purpose of this project I plan to focus on the more direct needs of the students to process their experience.

Thinking back to my own experience as a student intern during my student years at the School of Sacred Music, 1988-1991, I remember vividly my feelings of total

culture shock, alienation, and being lost in the community where I was placed. While there was a point person in place to handle the logistics of the program as well as crises on either end, nothing was in place to help me navigate this complex situation, help me begin to understand what was happening and offer me tools to handle it better, even less to process the spiritual aspects of this journey. For my first placement I ended up in a situation with a senior cantor who had started her new job at the synagogue only weeks before I arrived. Not only did she need to establish herself first, she was not really available to be a mentor yet. She also was going through an extremely difficult period in her personal life, ending in a divorce. I was not aware of any of this at the time, other than getting this vague feeling that there was no room for me in the picture. Looking back now I can see how my defenses acted up and were expressed through extreme criticism and devaluing of what I saw around me. Even though I thought I was holding it together and "toughing it out," the clergy clearly picked up on my difficulty adjusting. However, I only found out that the clergy had complained to the placement director about my attitude when I happened to see a letter sitting on her desk at the school. There was no formal platform to process this experience and God's place in all of it was never even touched upon. All of this left me with fear and uncertainty about what to do different the next time.

Until recently, this was fairly typical of the situation in most Jewish seminary training, where the culture was "if it is urgent we'll hear about it." Rabbi Nancy H. Wiener, Director of student placement for the HUC Rabbinical program, recounts how about sixteen years ago she started affecting change on a very small scale in the rabbinical school, by offering voluntary drop-in groups. This was a new approach: that

students need support throughout their studies and need to get used to what is normative through regular supervision. Today, all rabbinic students participate in individual and small group supervision at HUC as part of their fieldwork requirement, receive on-site supervision, and regularly have conversations with rabbinic mentors assigned by the seminary. (Wiener 2008)

Jo Kay, director of the School of Education shares a similar experience with her student internships. When she started her work at the New York campus of HUC six years ago there was no formal internship program in place, nor any formal mentoring or supervision of the education students. Today, education students do work in formal internships and are assigned mentors in the field. Kay emphasizes the difference between a clinical mentor in the field, whose job it is to focus on the student's growth and an academic mentor whose job it is to help bridge the gap between theory (classroom) and practice (work in a congregation). (Kay, 2008)

During the past six years, as student placement director, I have witnessed many of our students go through struggles similar to my own, unable to make sense of what was happening in their congregations, puzzled by responses of their congregants or the clergy they work with, wrestling with their own reactions, and wondering where God is in all this. In recent orientation meetings with the second year students examples of this came up immediately. One student expressed confusion about the contradictory messages she was hearing from the rabbi of her congregation and from some of the lay leaders. "How am I supposed to respond?" she asked, "Whose side am I on?" Other students expressed their concerns about feeling overwhelmed, especially by the idea of 'always being on' as the [student] cantor. "How am I going to balance being myself and being the cantor? Can

I be friends with my congregants? It feels exhausting to have to be on good behavior all the time. Congregants are calling me at home about stuff and I am not sure how to say no…" And many struggle with taking on a worship leadership role while they are still trying to figure out what it means to pray: "How am I supposed to pray when there is so much to worry about?" These are just some of the issues that come to the surface.

While I do what I can to put on band-aids, by being available on an ad-hoc basis, it seems apparent to me that adding an element of formal small group supervision to this placement program would greatly increase its value to the students, to the school and to the congregations they serve. At this point the School of Sacred Music does acknowledge the need for better communication skills, as it has added a course in this area to the curriculum. However, the SSM has so far perpetuated the old model of 'crisis management' rather than initiating any form of on-going supervision which would send a new message: it is worthwhile to discuss issues when they are not (yet) crises. This supervision element would provide specific tools and skills to the students to help them become more self-reflective and thus better understand themselves and their reactions to their congregations/congregants, to help them frame issues in the language of our tradition, and to support them as they learn what it means to be a clergy presence in their community.

B. Spiritual Development

While at the College-Institute, our students study many aspects of our tradition: Hebrew, Bible, rabbinic text, history, philosophy, education, traditional and contemporary synagogue music, but for many, exploring their relationship with and

image of God, and developing a personal theology, is often beyond the scope of their studies. Rabbi Elliot Dorff writes:

> "…I lived my life suffused with most aspects of the Jewish tradition without being able to make sense of its assertions about God." (Dorff, 1992, p. 1)

This, I believe, is true for many of us, especially our students who immerse themselves in academia as they gather enormous amounts of information, but generally do not immerse themselves to the same extent in the journey towards a personal theology, a personal relationship with God, in other words, the journey of spiritual or faith formation. The religious school education that formed the foundation for many of our students rarely addressed this topic beyond elementary grade bible stories and learning about Jewish Holidays.

> "We formed our images of God around the same age that we formed images of Abraham's greatness [six or seven years old]. The images are similarly incomplete and structured for a child's consciousness, but though we reexamine the story of Abraham through each yearly cycle of Torah reading, we tend not to reexamine our image of God. We may become adults and hold on to an image constructed out of aspects of our parents, grandparents, first-grade teacher, or even a police officer or other authority figure. Then suddenly, many years later, we might face a major life crisis. We reach for our God image, the one we left hidden in the recesses of our memory. Now our idea of God might seem embarrassing–as irrelevant to our present situation as the teddy bear that we clung to at the time our early image of God was formed. Recollecting this inappropriate and inadequate image, people will sometimes reject God entirely instead of ponder how God might look through the eyes of a mature adult." (Ochs, Olitzky, 1997)

Like many of our congregants, the students may end up with the God image of a young child, while they have developed way beyond that in many other areas of their lives. If we do not challenge those childhood images and encourage our students to invite

God to grow up along with them, how do we expect them to relate to their congregants in this area, and to guide and encourage them to do the same?

> Our relationship to God expresses itself in and through our commitment to our partner, our child, our parents, our community. God is the ordering principle that sets all the other loves in our lives within their right framework." (Ochs, Olitzky, 1997)

As (future) clergy, we are committed to the relationships with our congregants, and our relationship to God should be the 'ordering principle' that sets these relationships in their right framework. It is this specific area that I want to explore in my project: where are the students on this journey towards an evolving God image and how might this image get reflected in their professional interactions.

C: Relevance of my project to ministry in a wider context

Many Christian seminaries have explored the area of faith or spiritual formation in greater depth in recent years. A 1998 position paper of the Lutheran Theological Southern Seminary states

> "At the same time, it was realized that the seminary need an explicit theological context within which to develop formation activities and integrate them into the curriculum and other aspects of the seminary experience… As faculty in a seminary of the church, we are especially conscious of the importance of intentional spiritual formation for pastoral ministry…" (Spirituality and Spiritual Formation)

While we do not use that same language, or necessarily the exact same approach, this element of spiritual and theological development needs a formal place in our Jewish seminary education. The Alban Institute has done work exploring how seminaries train clergy, and what works well. In one article, an overview is given of the various pedagogies used: interpretation, formation, contextualization, and performance.

"Pedagogies of *formation* guide the student into the spiritual practices of a tradition in order to nurture a sense of the holy and shape seminarians in their religious and pastoral identity. Formation can be taught through very intentional means, such as spiritual direction, presiding at prayer and table, or in community worship, but it can also be shown in the transparency that professors bring to the classroom about their own faith and spiritual commitments in relation to the subject matter." (Golemon, 2006)

The article further states:

"…exemplary teachers and seminaries integrate the four pedagogies [interpretation, formation, contextualization, and performance] for student learning: in the classroom, across the curriculum, and in the culture of the school. The patterns of integrative teaching and learning, we found, are keys to effective seminary education because they set up the optimal conditions for students to practice and internalize the integration of the knowledge, skills, and identity they will need in clergy practice." (Golemon, 2006)

We need to create an integrated approach to professional development that pays attention to the spiritual dimension, which encourages and nurtures students' curiosity. This approach will not only be about academia but also about the students' own inner world; an approach that will provide students with the language they need to wrestle with their God image and the theological questions it may evoke, even if they do not have answers (yet), and to help their congregants wrestle with those questions as well.   The Institute for Jewish Spirituality states the following in the description of their program:

"This integrated learning program provides the students with *practices to help them maintain their ability to be reflective rather than reactive, to listen well, to be more patient and open-hearted with their congregants and others in their lives, to be more daring in speaking from their convictions, and to feel closer to God than they have been able to do previously.* (IJS)
In the case of our students, we may need to help them develop–rather than maintain-their ability to be reflective, to be more daring in speaking of their convictions and to feel closer to God.

CHAPTER II

A: Clinical Principles

     The following are clinical areas I anticipate encountering during this process, both

in the individual stories and in the group process. They will also be the lenses through

which I will analyze what took place during the meetings with the students, both in their

processes as well as in my own interactions with them.

- Transference and counter-transference

> "Transference refers to reexperiencing and reenacting in current
> relationships earlier wishes and feelings, and experiences from past
> relationships. This takes place in all relationships but is a particularly
> useful tool for understanding the internal and *unconscious* aspects of
> clients' inner lives as they are lived out in the treatment process."
> (Berzoff, 2004, p.23)

Schwartz (1989) defines transference as the fact that

> "We are not capable of entering into a new relationship as something
> genuinely and completely new. Instead, our experience of people in the
> present is colored by how we have experienced important figures in our
> past. The more problematic past relationships have been and the less
> successful we have been in seeing them clearly, the more likely they are to
> color our present responses in ways of which we are unaware."

As clergy we are not only subject to these common challenges of transference, but we

also will deal with transferences "to a pastoral figure as an authority" as well as "the need

for clergy to be more than human." (Schwartz, 1989, p. 44) And if we look at yet another

statement about transference, it becomes even more apparent why this is such an

important concept to be aware of:

> "Nowhere are such differences more apparent than in the transference—
> the members' responses to the leader: the same therapist will be
> experienced by different members [of the group] as warm, cold, rejecting,
> accepting, competent, or bumbling." (Yalom, p. 41)

While Yalom refers to a group leader in a therapeutic setting, we can easily apply this same phenomenon to clergy as spiritual leaders of their congregations, since most of us have had similar experiences within our congregational settings. If clergy experiences these various responses from/with their congregants, and are unaware of the phenomenon of transference, this might become a source of ongoing frustration and puzzlement, and ultimately, failure.

In addition, we need to be aware of and attuned to the concept of countertransference.

> "A therapist's own sexual and aggressive fantasies and feelings toward the client are called countertransference reactions… Today we know that denying, avoiding, or repressing countertransference feelings interferes with the therapeutic process." (Berzoff, p. 24)

This definition is based on Freud's rather narrow interpretation in the classical psychoanalytical way. During more recent times, "the term has increasingly come to refer to all the emotional reactions of the clinician in relation to the client." (Berzoff, p. 211) While unacknowledged countertransference can indeed become a problem and get in the way of a healthy and productive therapeutic relationship, once identified and worked-through, it can become a useful and crucial tool. A tool thru which the therapist may understand

> " the largely unconscious aspects of the client that emerge in the interaction… Our current, broadened view of countertransference is that it is the most informative source of data regarding the problematic aspects of the client's psychology." (Berzoff, p. 211)

> "In short, countertransference…is today widely viewed not simply as a hindrance, but also as a tool of some value in the therapeutic process." (Gorkin, 1987)

Again, both writers refer specifically to the therapeutic context, but I feel comfortable

applying the same basic approaches to the congregational and/or pastoral context. If

clergy can learn to notice and identify countertransferences, they may then be able to

better identify some of their own issues as well as possibly their congregants' struggles,

feelings, or challenges. In his work on the uses of countertransference, Gorkin (1987)

distinguishes between what he calls "objective countertransference" and "subjective

countertransference." Objective countertransference (or projective identification as some

others would call it) includes those feelings and experiences that the patient needs the

therapist to take in as it were.

> "They need the therapist to take in the split-off, unwanted part and make it
> part of the therapist's self, and they need the therapist to do this without
> becoming overwhelmed by it." (Gorkin, p. 67)

Subjective countertransference on the other hand involves the therapist's own

tendencies and experiences; in my words, his or her own buttons that get pushed because

of possibly unresolved issues. In terms of this project and my role as facilitator of the

group meetings, I will need to be (-come) aware of my own countertransferences as they

may arise in the interactions with the students.

Cantorial students will have been exposed to these concepts and will have a

beginning awareness of these dynamics following their communication and interpersonal

skills course during the second year. This project, however, will focus on the

presupposition that if indeed 'our experience of people in the present is colored by how

we have experienced important figures in our past' then this would apply to all of our

relationships, including the one with God. Our early relationships with parents and other

important childhood figures will color our view of and relationship with God. And, at the

same time, our image of God may color how we see others in general, and mentors, teachers, or congregants in particular. In other words, the question I want to explore is 'does the students' relationship with God become part of transference in their professional relationships?' The following quote from Yalom's book gives me an indication why this may be the case:

> "Transference is a specific form of interpersonal perceptual distortion…For many patients, perhaps for the majority, it is the most important relationship to work through since the therapist is the personification of parental images, of teachers, of authority, of established tradition, of incorporated values." (Yalom, p. 44)

I believe God for many of us is just that: a personification (as a matter-of-speaking) of authority, of established tradition, of incorporated values. Thus, clergy as well as the people we work with, are constantly involved in working with or through some version of transference when it comes to our image of and relationship with God.

- Parallel process

This phenomenon was initially referred to as *reflection process*, and meant that

> "a given emotion evoked in the supervisor *may* be a reflection of what was earlier evoked in the therapist by the patient" (Gorkin, p. 223)

Parallel process refers

> "to the means by which the supervisory dyad enacts one or more key dynamics also alive in the treatment dyad." (Frawley, p. 170)

In other words, when therapist and client are working through certain issues, especially if these issues not yet brought to the surface of consciousness, these same issues may arise in the interactions between the therapist and the supervisor. Parallel process can be at work in both directions (from supervisor to therapist to patient as well as the other way), and can also be operative in daily life.

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> "Parallel processes, like transference and countertransference matrices and identifications, including projective ones, are basic components of relational life traversing all interpersonal settings." (Frawley, p. 180)

Over the course of the past 6 years, I have become increasingly aware of this phenomenon of parallel process on some basic levels. Students have often brought in issues or challenges that also played a role in my own personal therapeutic process at the time; and I have found it fascinating and enlightening to explore this in my own therapy. I am also aware that this entire project is in some way a form of parallel process: my own journey of exploration regarding God and my personal God-image played a major role in selecting this as a topic. (I would venture a guess that this is the case for many demonstration projects!). And thus, whatever will take place during my meetings with the students is definitely part of my own continuing process of exploration. Gorkin (1987) writes about parallel process in his chapter on "countertransference in supervision". He explains that elements of the patient-therapist relationship may end up in the therapist-supervisor relationship, and vice-versa. While I am not sure how much of this I will be able to identify if/when it takes place during the meetings with my students, it can be yet another lens through which to analyze the interactions of the group. Questions I would ask might be "Are these responses the same responses the student would have given to their own students?" "Is the dynamic in the group in any way a reflection of the dynamic this person might have experienced in the situation they describe?" Frawley suggests the following questions:

> "(1) What is the relational pattern currently in play in the supervisory relationship?; (2) what does it tell us about the relationship between this supervisee and this supervisor and their work together?" (p. 196)

While this project deals with a reflection group, and not a traditional therapeutic or supervisory dyad, I believe these questions may still be helpful tools in my explorations.

- Developmental stages

As far as I can tell, the various psychodynamic theories of human development – at least in western culture - have a certain element in common. And that is that an infant ideally grows from a being that is entirely dependent on its parents (its mother in particular) into a healthy adult who is able to be independent while staying connected. In Erikson's view, psychological health would be described "in terms of the ways in which a person (1) masters her environment, (2) has a unified personality, and (3) perceives herself and her world accurately." (Berzoff, p. 104) In the words of Object Relations Theory, it is "the process whereby people come to experience themselves as separate and independent from others, while at the same time needing profound attachment to others." (Berzoff, p. 127) In order to be able to develop in this way, an infant needs to feel safe and cared-for; in Winnicott's terms "the mother needs to have the (good-enough) capacity to create the world in such a way for the baby that she feels held, safe, and protected from dangers without and protected as well from the danger of emotions within." (Berzoff, p. 137) If indeed the child is allowed to grow up in this safe "holding environment", and the relationship between parents and child is based on genuine attachment while at the same time respecting and encouraging individuality, than the child's 'True Self' can emerge and flourish.

How do these concepts play a role in relation to the development of a God-image, especially from the perspective of object relations theory? Rizzuto (1979) summarizes this as follows:

> "…throughout life God remains a transitional object at the service of gaining leverage with oneself, with others and with life itself. This is so, not because God is God, but because, like the teddy bear, he has obtained a good half of his stuffing from 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."

She further states

> "Whatever the case, once created, our God, dormant or active, remains a potentially available representation for the continuous process of psychic integration." (Rizzuto, 1979)

From the perspective of Margaret Mahler's theory of separation and individuation, the child's earliest development plays a crucial role in his/her later capacity to internalize an object that will give him/her a sense of security and comfort. As Mark Banschick looks at the expulsion from Eden through the lens of Mahler's theory, he states

> "Mother provides, ideally, the "Garden of Eden" for the eventual development of the child's growing capacities. The child develops past symbiosis by experiencing this strong sense of a consistent "other" in its life—a sense that mother is usually there for its needs. In the healthy child, this essential sense of security eventually stabilizes as the memory of mother's love is internalized and becomes self-soothing." (Banschick, 1990)

So, if the mother (or parent) indeed provides the infant with the experience of Eden - or in Rizutto's words, provides a positive part of the 'stuffing' - and from there the child can develop a God-image that builds on this sense of security, then this should allow the child to grow up with a consistent sense of an internalized God.

As a child develops and grows up, she will need to hear her feelings reflected by others, expressed through language, in order to learn how to verbalize and express those feelings herself. In a similar manner the child will need to be exposed to verbal expression when it comes to God language. One of the goals of this project is to find out if/how students experienced this, either in their early childhood and/or during the present period of their seminary training.

- Basic trust

Erikson describes basic trust as "an attitude toward oneself and the world derived from the experiences of the first year of life." (1980) He further states that religion is deeply related to this matter of basic trust and that

> "It seems worth while to speculate on the fact that religion through the centuries has served to restore a sense of trust at regular intervals in the form of faith … All religions have in common the periodical childlike surrender to a Provider or providers who dispense earthly fortune as well as spiritual health;" (p. 66-67)

While I would argue that this surrender is necessarily childlike, I do believe that faith demands a certain amount of surrender, and thus trust. I also do believe that a person can indeed develop this trust (and faith) later in life, even if they did not have the ideal experiences in the first year or two of life. Some will do this through intense therapy; others might find alternate ways to "re-parent" themselves so they can rebuild their sense of basic trust.

- Shame and guilt

A child who was shamed a lot in his early years may end up having trouble with autonomy and authority, both internal and external.

> "His precocious conscience does not let him really get away with anything, and he goes through life habitually ashamed, apologetic, and

afraid to be seen; or else, in a manner which we call 'over-compensatory,' he evinces a defiant kind of autonomy." (Erikson, p. 73)

This would make it extremely difficult for the grown-up child to allow God to truly see him. And if he could allow God to do so, it would most likely be as an authority to be feared and/or defied. Moving into the next stage of development, Erikson describes the formation of the conscience, and the guilt feelings that come along with it.

"He now hears, as it were God's voice, without seeing God." (p. 84)

The development of guilt feelings in the best of circumstances will lead to an increased sense of responsibility and the ability to function within a community with rules and institutions (such as a religious institution for example). In the worst of circumstances it may lead to resentment and anxiety, not necessarily the most positive ingredients for a nurturing relationship with God. I do not believe that as religious leaders we would ever want our congregants to relate to God solely out of guilt; however, there is a certain element of fear and awe that does play a role in our tradition. One of the things I will explore in this project is to what extent this sense of guilt does or does not play a role in the students' experience.

- Identity

Once the child reaches adolescence, the formation of a consistent personal identity will impact on their experience of God:

"Who am I? Do I believe in the God that I have been taught about in Church or Synagogue? What do I reject or, perhaps, accept? What is meaningful to me?" (Banschik, 1992)

These are crucial questions for our students to ask themselves. As I mentioned earlier, not because I believe they need to have all the answers right away, but because I

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do believe that they need to develop the language and become more comfortable asking, and wrestling with, the questions. Especially since we can anticipate our congregants coming to us with those same questions.

> "According to Erikson, a stable identity appreciates both the self and the world as generally consistent and effective. The experience of God usually represents the experience a person has of either himself or the world at large. A quixotic God often is appreciated from the standpoint of a confused self or unstable world; a grossly punitive God reveals latent fears of retribution either from an unkind world or from a destructive torturing superego… Even when an adolescent rejects God, it is important to know the nature of the God object that is being rejected." (Banschik, 1992)

This rings true of conversations many of us may have with (adult) members of our congregations. When one rejects God, there has to be a God to reject in the first place. And thus, when people say to us "we don't believe in God because he has done …" clearly, they acknowledge in some way the existence of this God who may not have answered their prayers.

- Defense strategies

Defense mechanisms will be yet another lens through which to analyze what transpired during the meetings.

> "A defense mechanism is a manipulation of perception intended to protect the person from anxiety. The perception may be of internal events, such as one's feelings or impulses, or it may be of external events, such as the feelings of other people or the realities of the world." (Kahn, p. 122)

Defense mechanisms are healthy and important aspects of our ego functions.

> "Defenses are always attempts to preserve the psychic integrity and survival under the pressure of stress and fears." (Berzoff, p. 80)

Examples of defenses are: repression, denial, projection, splitting, idealization and devaluation; any of those might come up during the meetings. For example, projection

might play a role when students (or facilitator) assign certain feelings or statements to someone else, while in fact those feelings are theirs. Splitting may be used to separate the good and bad parts of self or others, by thinking in "either-or, black and white" terms. One of the things I am curious about is to what extent those defenses might also play a role in the way God is perceived: when God is either all-powerful or nothing, all-present or absent, is that a form of splitting? If a person states strongly that he/she hates God and wants nothing to do with any divine presence, is that a form of reaction formation or denial?

When people communicate in a new group setting one may expect a certain amount of trust issues and thus people might censor themselves when they share. Censoring in and of itself is neither a good, nor a bad thing to do. As with all other defenses it all depends on how we use it, to what extend we are aware of it, and whether or not it hinders us in our functioning. In Richard Schwartz's words, censoring as well as other defenses are "parts" that protect the "Self."

> "In addition to this collection of parts, at the core of everyone is a Self, which is the seat of all consciousness. From birth this Self has all the necessary qualities of good leadership, such as compassion, perspective, curiosity, acceptance, and confidence. As a result, the Self makes the best internal leader, and will engender inner balance and harmony if it is allowed by the parts to lead. A person's parts are organized to protect Self at all costs…" (Schwartz, 1995)

What Schwartz labels Self seems similar to what Winnicot calls the True Self.

> "The True Self cannot emerge if the child feels she must be exclusively attuned to the needs of others in the family system and if she needs to be a certain way in order to be recognized and acknowledged. The highly individuated True Self will not emerge when the environment fails to be genuinely attuned to the child's uniqueness. What happens instead is that the child may develop a False Self, one that seeks to suppress individuality and molds itself to the needs of others. This False Self, trying so hard to be

responsive and to take care of others, ultimately becomes overly compliant." (Berzoff, p. 140)

One of the goals of addressing this particular subject of God-image with my students is to try and encourage the True Self to emerge more fully, both for my students as well as myself; to increase the students' awareness of their True Self, and to trust it more. As part of that process, we need to recognize the defenses for what they are: parts of ourselves that can help us to stay whole. When we as clergy can be more fully present with our own True Self, we have a much better chance at being fully present with those we minister to as well.

- Supervision models

Though the group I will be meeting with is not a supervision group in the literal sense (and certainly not in the psychoanalytical way!), I do believe that there are aspects of supervision models that are relevant, especially if this elements of this project may become part of ongoing supervision in our program. In terms of a supervision model, I envision the "Supervisory-Matrix-Centered (Relational) model" as presented by Frawley-O'Dea and Sarnat (2001). While their approach is geared towards supervision in the psychoanalytic context, and assumes a supervisory dyad, I do think that the relational model can be applied to the group setting in which I will be working.

> "In a relational model, the supervisor's authority derives from her capacity to participate in, reflect upon, and process enactments, and to interpret relational themes that arise within either the therapeutic or supervisory dyads."

I acknowledge my limited training in, and experience with formal supervision; however, I do have a fairly clear sense of my role as "an involved participant with more expertise, but no absolute claim to knowing what is "true…" In addition, my role is not that of a

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didactic teacher, but rather that of "a Socratic asker of questions who encourages an experiential engagement in the process of supervision." (Frawley-O'Dea, p. 27)

As far as group models, I consider this group a 'reflection group' which most closely might follow the template of a 'support group' as outlined by Rabbi Simkha Weintraub: 'A group that shares common experiences/concerns, where the purpose is to give/get support and/or information; a professional will act as the facilitator, and may or may not choose to self-disclose as part of the process. The group process as such is not central to the experience, but may come into play if appropriate.' This group is not a self-help group nor a psychotherapy group, but rather a reflection group, and that will be made clear to the students.

B: Theological Principles

- Is God immutable or ever changing?

At the beginning of the Exodus story Moses encounters God at the burning bush and asks God the following question:

> "When I come to the Israelites and say to them: 'the God of your fathers has sent me to you,' and they ask me, 'What is his name?' what shall I say to them?" And God said to Moses, "*Eh'yeh asher Eh'yeh*." (Exodus 3:13-14, JPS)

My own personal understanding of God is definitely a work-in-progress, but the image or 'name' I am most comfortable with at this point in my life is the one quoted above, the one that implies that God too is evolving. This suggests that there are two understandings operating parallel in my current thinking: the psychological understanding that my God-concept is still changing and the theological principle that God is evolving as well. In

addition, I continue to change and evolve as a person, a teacher, mentor, musician, and thus, even if God were immutable, my relationship with God would be an evolving one.

The Hebrew words *Eh'yeh asher Eh'yeh* can be translated in a number of ways, "I am that I am"; "I am who I am"; "I shall be who I shall be"; "I shall be what I shall be." Fromm (1956) interprets God's answer as

> ""I am becoming that which I am becoming." "I-am-becoming is my name." The "I-am-becoming" means that God is not finite, not a person, not a "being." The most adequate translation of the sentence would be: tell them that "my name is nameless"." (p. 58)

The commentary in *Etz Chayim* expands on this concept

> "I, God, am in the process of becoming; neither I nor human understanding of Me is yet complete. And you human beings, fashioned in the image of God, are also in the process of becoming." (p. 330, ed. Kushner, Harold)

The fact that this name of God is not only a verb emphasizing "being" rather than "doing", but a verb in the future tense (in the original Hebrew), implies for me that we will have to contribute our own energy and commitment to figuring out who or what this God is. '*Eh'yeh*' leaves lots of room for interpretation, development, growth, change, evolution of our God image. Rabbi Levi Yitzchak of Berditshev teaches

> ""I will be what I will be" means that God is always beyond the horizon; the moment you think you understand God, you are wrong. God deliberately chooses the future tense, to tell you that it's not what I am now – but what I will be; there is more, deeper to understand. You reach for the *ehyeh*, and God will recede further…" (Polen, 2007)

Thus, God is that which we don't yet understand. Whatever concept we have arrived at, it is not the end. As Polen teaches further

> "Religious maturity means: never shaming what came before. If that's how humans began their religious quest, that's holy… How do we know

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what people might believe 100 years from now? They may look back [to our times] and wonder, "How did they believe that?" just like we do now…." (2007)

We should never shame those beliefs that came before us – or for that matter, the beliefs that came earlier in our own lives, or the beliefs we hold now. This poses an important question for this project: What if a student's God-image has not evolved beyond their childhood image, and seems 'immature'? Does this image work for them at the present time or not? One answer may be found in the traditional morning prayers, where the following words are recited:

> *V'chulam m'kablim ol malchut shamayim zeh mi zeh v'notnim r'shut zeh la zeh l'hakdish l'yotzram…*- and all of them receive upon themselves, from each to each, the yoke of heaven's rule, and lovingly they give to one another the permission to declare their maker holy… (Kol Han'shamah, p. 295)

This describes the choruses of angels giving each other permission to praise God "each in their own way." What a profound and beautiful image this provides, giving every person permission to relate and pray to God in their own ways as well.

- What do we call God?

As early as biblical times, God was known to the people of Israel by a variety of names, including: *Adon* (Lord), *El*, *Elohim* (God), *Tzur* (Rock), *Av* (Father), or *Melech* (King).

> "All of these names were used to help people relate to the ways in which God touched their lives. Similarly, a friend's proper name might be Sarah, but you might also refer to her as "my friend," "my confidante," or "my cousin"." (Sonsino, 2002)

If indeed people relate through these names to God's role(s) in their lives, then the names reflect their images or representations of God. In the 10 commandments we are given the following guidance about this:

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> "I Adonai am your God who brought you out of the land of Egypt, the house of bondage: You shall have no other Gods besides Me. You shall not make for yourself a sculptured image, or any likeness of what is in the heavens above, or on the earth below, or in the waters under the earth." (Ex. 20:2-4)

Elaine Goodfriend explains in her commentary on this portion (*Yitro*)

> "…the worship of God through fixed representations limits the range of the Deity's attributes." (*The Women's Commentary*, p.417)

And Carol Ochs writes

> "A graven image is one that is long-lasting, that cannot be easily erased or changed. The commandment is not so much oppose to images themselves as to *inflexible* images. What we need are images that grow with us as our life experience transforms us. What was appropriate at one time will need to be modified at another." (Ochs, 1997)

In other words, these readings of the first commandment challenge us not to let our image of God be 'etched in stone' or not to let it remain the same over time.

This concept is reflected in the development of our liturgical language as well. Our Progressive tradition in particular has evolved in its language of prayer as we evolved as a Movement and a People. In the various Reform prayer books we find God referred to, among other terms, as: Lord and Father (Union Prayer Book), Eternal One, eternal power, source of life and light (Gates of Prayer), Holy Blessed One, God of our ancestors, Source of peace (Mishkan Tefilah). The Reconstructionist prayer book *Kol Haneshamah* goes even further and interprets the Hebrew word *Adonai* (literally 'my Lord') differently in each blessing of the *Amidah*: Ancient One, Almighty One, Awesome One, Gracious One, All-Knowing One, etc. In *The Book of Blessings*, Marcia Falk creates new language as well and refers to the Divine as *eyn hachayim* ('the source of life'), *ma'yan chayeinu* ('the flow of our life'), or *eyn hashalom*, ('eternal wellspring of peace'). These are all ways to address the need for a dynamic and evolving God

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representation, rather than a 'graven image.' In addition, a clear message is given to the ones who pray from these texts: there is more than one way to see God. All of this has implications for the way we look at our tradition, and even more so, for the way I will look at the God images of the students I work with.

- God beyond understanding

As was mentioned earlier in the quote from Rabbi Levi Yitzchak, our tradition holds that God is beyond our understanding, and that our language can only express or capture limited elements of the Divine. Even one of the most commonly used 'names' for God (the four-letter name י ה ו ה, or tetragramaton) circumvents actually naming God, rather it creates an 'unpronounceable name.' However, language often tends to be what we have at our disposal when communicating with our congregants. In order to be able to communicate about God in their professional lives our students need to develop at least some basic language that will enable them to express their thought process, their feelings, their explorations. As God is beyond understanding, the focus of this project is definitely not to find clear answers, but rather to help and encourage the student to start to formulate questions.

- We are created in God's image

The creation stories in Genesis remind us that God created the world through language: "And God said, "Let there be light!"—and there was light." (Gen. 1:3) Each act of creation is preceded by the words 'And God said' and is followed by God naming that, which just was created. "God then called the light Day, and called the darkness Night, and there was evening and there was morning, [the] first day." (Gen. 1:5)

Genesis also reminds us that we were created in God's image. "God now said, let us make human beings in our image, after our likeness;" (Gen. 1:26) Based on this, we strive to embody God's attributes (*midot*) and to live our lives as God's partners in the ongoing creation and repair of the world. Thus, how we view God and God's attributes will directly impact how we act in the world, how we interact with others. If God has the power to create an entire world through language, and we strive to embody that attribute, then we at least need to be aware of the power that language can have in our lives. This includes the language we make use of to speak about the divine as well as the language we use in our every day lives when we interact with God's creation.

CHAPTER III

I will plan a series of three meetings of 1 ½ hour each, with a group of no more

than 8 students. The meetings will take place on Thursday evenings from 5:45 – 7:30 and

will include a brief time for dinner, which will be provided by me. While the students

will be invited to join this project on a voluntary basis, I will ask them to commit

themselves to all three meetings in the interest of continuity and validity of assessment.

The group will be open to all cantorial students. (See letter below/appendix.) As soon as

I confirm participation of the students, I will send them the initial 6 questions, with the

request to bring their answers to those questions to the first meeting. Students will be

asked to sign a release form (see appendix) and I will explain how the recordings of the

meetings will only be used to serve as a basis for the write-up of chapter 4; I will reassure

the students that no real names will be used in the final paper, only pseudonyms.

The goals for these meetings will be:

- To increase the students' comfort level with God talk

- To expose the students to a variety of God images

- To raise and/or expand the students' awareness that God images may/can evolve
  and to encourage them to be open to that process.

- To explore the impact of their God images on their professional interactions.

As part of the beginning of the first meeting I will collect the answers to the six

questions that were sent out to the students beforehand. I will also invite the students to

do a 3-part drawing, reflecting how they 'see' God: 1st - as a five-year old child, 2nd -

today, and 3rd - 20 years from now. I will explain that the idea is to do a quick, gut response drawing and not spend too much time thinking about it, or tweaking the drawing for artistic value. These three drawings will become the basis for each of the three sessions as well as a way to explore which of the attributes of God are reflected at the various stages, and how do these color the students' being in the world and their professional interactions.

As we explore the attributes of God and how they are reflected in their God image and their professional interactions, I plan to use text as one avenue of exploration.

> "Nonetheless, as is true of all other objects, God cannot be fully repressed. As a transitional object representation he is always potentially available for further acceptance or further rejection. It is this characteristic of being always there for love, cold disdain, mistreatment, fear, hatred, or any other human emotion that lends the object God its psychic usefulness."
> (Rizzuto)

This expression of the full range of human emotions in relation to God is found beautifully expressed in the Psalms. I plan to take a traditional psalm in the first session, a contemporary poem in the second session and then invite students in the third session to 'compose' their own psalm (or at least the opening phrases of one), taking this biblical model as a vehicle to express the entire range of human emotions in relation to God. One specific goal for the writing of the 'personal' psalm would be to connect it to their future image of God: what would the student like to express to, ask of, share with God, in order to move towards that future image?

Each session will open with a moment of prayer and will includes time for reflection, leaving room for the participants to fill in their God language/imagery

MEETING # 1 – OUTLINE

Goals:

- To explain the DMin program and project to the students

- To create the basis for the subsequent meetings through the three-part drawing

- To use psalm text as a tool for exploring God language and imagery

- To create a welcoming and non-judgmental space for the students to express and

  explore their thoughts and feelings in relation to God

At 5:45 dinner will be served, and we will spend about 15-20 minutes eating together,

preceded by *Motzi* and followed by short version of *Birkat hamazon*.

1. Welcome, read text from *k'dushah d'yotzeir*:

וְכֻלָּם פּוֹתְחִים אֶת פִּיהֶם בִּקְדֻשָּׁה וּבְטָהֳרָה, בְּשִׁירָה וּבְזִמְרָה, וּמְבָרְכִים
וּמְשַׁבְּחִים, וּמְפָאֲרִים וּמַעֲרִיצִים, וּמַקְדִּישִׁים וּמַמְלִיכִים : אֶת שֵׁם הָאֵל, הַמֶּלֶךְ
הַגָּדוֹל, הַגִּבּוֹר וְהַנּוֹרָא, קָדוֹשׁ הוּא. וְכֻלָּם מְקַבְּלִים עֲלֵיהֶם עֹל מַלְכוּת שָׁמַיִם זֶה
מִזֶּה, וְנוֹתְנִים רְשׁוּת זֶה לָזֶה, לְהַקְדִּישׁ לְיוֹצְרָם בְּנַחַת רוּחַ, בְּשָׂפָה בְרוּרָה
וּבִנְעִימָה, קְדֻשָּׁה כֻּלָּם כְּאֶחָד עוֹנִים וְאוֹמְרִים בְּיִרְאָה :
קָדוֹשׁ, קָדוֹשׁ, קָדוֹשׁ, יְיָ צְבָאוֹת, מְלֹא כָל הָאָרֶץ כְּבוֹדוֹ.

> "And all open their mouths in holiness and purity. With song and melody,
> they bless, they praise, they magnify, they raise aloft, and sanctify, and
> proclaim sovereign: The name of God, the regal, grand and awesome one!
> Holy is God! And all of them receive upon themselves, from each to each,
> the yoke of heaven's rule, and lovingly they give to one another the
> permission to declare their maker holy. In an ecstasy of spirit, with pure
> speech and holy melody, all of them respond in awe as one, and cry:
> "Holy, holy, holy is the Ruler of the multitudes of heaven. The whole
> world overflows with divine glory!" (Kol Haneshamah, p. 264-266)

2. Explain project/Dmin, collect responses to the questions that were sent out

   beforehand

3. Explain/invite students to take 5/6 minutes to do the 3-part drawings

4. Invite students to tell the group about their drawings, no more than 5-6 minutes each

5. We will focus on God as seen at 5 years old: what led them to that image? What attributes of God are reflected in that image? Thinking of a person in their professional life, how would that 5-year old God image communicate with that person? We will take time for these imaginary dialogues and possibly role play this with two people, having the student respond as their five-year old God image…

6. I will ask the students to read Psalm 30 to themselves and take some time to reflect on the God imagery.

א מִזְמוֹר שִׁיר חֲנֻכַּת הַבַּיִת לְדָוִד׃
ב אֲרוֹמִמְךָ יְהֹוָה כִּי דִלִּיתָנִי וְלֹא־שִׂמַּחְתָּ אֹיְבַי לִי׃
ג יְהֹוָה אֱלֹהָי שִׁוַּעְתִּי אֵלֶיךָ וַתִּרְפָּאֵנִי׃
ד יְהֹוָה הֶעֱלִיתָ מִן־שְׁאוֹל נַפְשִׁי חִיִּיתַנִי מִיׇּרְדִי [מִיׇּרְדִי] בוֹר׃
ה זַמְּרוּ לַיהֹוָה חֲסִידָיו וְהוֹדוּ לְזֵכֶר קׇדְשׁוֹ׃
ו כִּי רֶגַע בְּאַפּוֹ חַיִּים בִּרְצוֹנוֹ בָּעֶרֶב יָלִין בֶּכִי וְלַבֹּקֶר רִנָּה׃
ז וַאֲנִי אָמַרְתִּי בְשַׁלְוִי בַּל־אֶמּוֹט לְעוֹלָם׃
ח יְהֹוָה בִּרְצוֹנְךָ הֶעֱמַדְתָּה לְהַרְרִי עֹז הִסְתַּרְתָּ פָנֶיךָ הָיִיתִי נִבְהָל׃
ט אֵלֶיךָ יְהֹוָה אֶקְרָא וְאֶל־אֲדֹנָי אֶתְחַנָּן׃
י מַה־בֶּצַע בְּדָמִי בְּרִדְתִּי אֶל־שָׁחַת הֲיוֹדְךָ עָפָר הֲיַגִּיד אֲמִתֶּךָ׃
יא שְׁמַע־יְהֹוָה וְחׇנֵּנִי יְהֹוָה הֱיֵה עֹזֵר לִי׃
יב הָפַכְתָּ מִסְפְּדִי לְמָחוֹל לִי פִּתַּחְתָּ שַׂקִּי וַתְּאַזְּרֵנִי שִׂמְחָה׃
יג לְמַעַן ׀ יְזַמֶּרְךָ כָבוֹד וְלֹא יִדֹּם יְהֹוָה אֱלֹהַי לְעוֹלָם אוֹדֶךָּ׃

Psalm 30 (JPS translation)

1. A psalm of David. A song for the dedication of the House.
2. I extol You, O Lord, for You have lifted me up, and not let my enemies rejoice over me.
3. O Lord, my God, I cried to You, and You healed me.
4. O Lord, You brought me up from Sheol, preserved me from going down into the Pit.
5. O you faithful of the Lord, sing to Him, and praise His holy name.
6. For He is angry but a moment, and when He is pleased there is life. One may lie down weeping at nightfall; but at dawn there are shouts of joy.
7. When I was untroubled, I thought, "I shall never be shaken,"

8. for You, O Lord, when You were pleased, made [me] firm as a mighty mountain. When You hid Your face, I was terrified.
9. I called to You, O Lord; to my Lord I made appeal,
10. "What is to be gained from my death, from my descent into the Pit? Can dust praise You? Can it declare Your faithfulness?
11. Hear, O Lord, and have mercy on me; O Lord, be my help!"
12. You turned my lament into dancing, you undid my sackcloth and girded me with joy,
13. that [my] whole being might sing hymns of praise to You endlessly; O Lord my God, I will praise You forever.

Psalm 30 (Stephen Mitchell)

I thank you and praise you, Lord,
    for saving me from disaster.
I cried out, "Help me, Dear God;
    I'm frightened and have lost my way."
You came to me in the darkness;
    You breathed life into my bones.
You plucked me from the abyss;
    You healed me and made me whole.
You rescued me from despair;
    You turned my lament into dancing.
You lifted me up; you took off
    My mourning, and you clothed me with joy.

Sing to the Lord, you who love him;
    Thank him from the depths of your hearts.
For though he may seem to be absent,
    In his presence is eternal life.
Tears may linger when night falls,
    But joy arrives with the dawn.
Therefore my soul blesses him
    with every breath that I take.
My song will thank him forever,
    And my silence will be filled with his praise.

7. I will ask the students to respond to the two translations and notice the different

nuances in the language used. Questions to explore:

How would their five-year old respond to this psalm?

Do they respond differently to the different translations?

How does/doesn't this God imagery resonate with the students?

8. Closing with a brief moment for silent reflection and then a short quote by Heschel:

"It takes three things to attain a sense of significant being:
      God
      A soul
      And a moment
And the three are always there."

Assessment of this session:

- To explain the DMin program and project to the students

    o Are there many questions? Do they seem to understand my reasons for doing this program and choosing this project topic?

- To create the basis for the subsequent meetings through the three-part drawing

    o Are they able/willing to do the drawing at all? What are the images? Are they able to stay with the 5-year old God-image? Is it a useful focusing tool?

- To use psalm text as a tool for exploring God language and imagery

    o Are they able/willing to engage with the text? To respond to it? What is their ability to verbalize what resonates or doesn't resonate?

- To create a welcoming and non-judgmental space for the students to express and explore their thoughts and feelings in relation to God

o How is the flow of conversation? Do they feel at ease? Are the students able to suspend judgment of each other?

MEETING # 2 – OUTLINE

Goals:

- To explore the second of the three drawings, the students' current view of God

- To explore the nature of students' professional interactions as related to their current God image

- To engage with a contemporary poet's view of God and God-image

- To create a welcoming and non-judgmental space for the students to express and explore their thoughts and feelings in relation to God

1. Dinner + blessings

2. Opening prayer by Naomi Levy

> "You have filled the world with so many good and wise people. Grant me the humility, God, to seek out many teachers. Give me the courage to ask for help, the ability to distinguish wisdom from folly, the willingness to embrace new thoughts.
> May my learning lead me to insight, to reverence, to love, and to You. Amen."

I will explain briefly that this is really my personal prayer, as I am learning from the students during this process, and want to be open to new thoughts and insights along with them.

3. Drawing # 2 - We will focus on God as seen today: what led them to that image?

What attributes of God are reflected in that image? Thinking of a person in their professional life, how would this God image today communicate with that person? We will take time for these imaginary dialogues and/or role-plays.

4. Text study: *God Full Of Mercy* by Yehuda Amichai

> God-Full-of-Mercy, the prayer for the dead.
> If God was not full of mercy,
> Mercy would have been in the world,
> Not just in Him.
> I, who plucked flowers in the hills
> And looked down into all the valleys,
> I, who brought corpses down from the hills,
> Can tell you that the world is empty of mercy.
> I, who was King of Salt at the seashore,
> Who stood without a decision at my window,
> Who counted the steps of angels,
> Whose heart lifted weights of anguish
> In the horrible contests.
>
> I, who use only a small part
> Of the words in the dictionary.
>
> I, who must decipher riddles
> I don't want to decipher,
> Know that if not for the God-full-of-mercy
> There would be mercy in the world,
> Not just in Him.

5. I will ask the students to take some time and then respond to this poem. Questions to explore:

How do they respond to the God language/imagery in this poem given their current God image? How does/doesn't this God imagery resonate with the students?

6. Time for reflection and a closing psalm by Debbie Perlman:

EIGHTEEN

Roadmaps

From the center, Eternal Guide,
You watch our steps
As we move on diverse paths.

The route is ours;
The map is Yours.

Give us eyes to look beyond the next step,
To search for the horizon.

The scene is ours;
The vista is Yours.

Give us ears to identify the passwords,
To filter out the clamor.

The message is ours;
The code is Yours.

Give us hands to part the thicket,
To push aside the undergrowth.

The tree is ours;
The forest is Yours.

Give us feet to hurry past confusion,
To stride along straightways.

For we are the walkers,
And You, our Guiding Light.

We are the explorers,
And You, our Native Land.

We are the travelers,
And You, our Welcome Home.

Assessment of this session:

- To explore the second of the three drawings, the students' current view of God

  o Is this drawing different from the first one?

  o Does the conversation about this drawing include any new/different material from the last session?

- To explore the nature of students' professional interactions as related to their current God image

    o Are the students able to engage in the role-play, where they act out the "God" part, and the facilitator the "other person"?

    o Are the responses from the "current God image" different from the responses to the 5-year-old God?

    o If so, how?

    o If not, why not?

- To engage with a contemporary poet's view of God and God-image

    o Are they able/willing to engage with the text? To respond to it?

    o What is their ability to verbalize what resonates or doesn't resonate?

    o Is any new material brought up that was not discussed in the previous session?

- To create a welcoming and non-judgmental space for the students to express and explore their thoughts and feelings in relation to God

    o See session 1.

MEETING # 3 – OUTLINE

Goals:

- To explore the third drawing and its implications for the students' spiritual growth

- To create a new "psalm text" as an avenue for exploring God language and imagery

- To complete the final questions and reflect on the process

- To create a welcoming and non-judgmental space for the students to express and explore their thoughts and feelings in relation to God

1. Dinner + blessings

2. Opening prayer

3. Picture # 3

   We will focus on God as envisioned twenty years from now. What led them to that image? What attributes of God are reflected in that image? Are there any attributes they might want to assign to their current God image? What do they think will need to take place in order to get to that next God image?

4. Composing a new "psalm" opening, thinking about how to address God in light of the future picture – in other words, how do they want God's presence maybe to help them move/not move, change/not change….

5. Final questions, reviewing the earlier answers and possible changes

6. As the closing I will invite the students to offer (a) closing prayer(s)

Template for the three-part drawing:

I　　**God when I was 5 years old…**

　　　　　　　　II　　**God today…**

　　III　　**God 20 years from now…**

<u>Assessment of the project in general</u>

To assess the students' journey, I plan to use the following series of questions, based on materials from Dr. Carol Ochs's class on spiritual guidance.

1. What image or idea of God actually influences or affects your present behavior, feelings and choices?

2. Is God distant or near? How do your ideas about what God is like seem to help or hinder your spiritual growth and maturity, your personal development and your sense of self?

3. How have you experienced God? What made you conclude that this was God?

4. What kinds of experiences of God are you longing for? Why?

5. How did parents, teachers, authority figures and friends present God?

6. How does your relationship with God impact your interactions with congregants/students?

7. What have you discovered about God and/or your image of God through our meetings these past couple of weeks?

8. Have any of your recent interactions been influenced in any way by the conversations we have been having?

9. What new insights and feelings do you have now, when you reread your original responses to questions 1-6?

Questions 1-6 will be given to the students prior to the first meeting, and they will be asked to bring in their answers. As part of the final meeting, students will be asked to

answer questions 7-9.   This is one way for me to assess the students' journey, and see if anything has changed during the process. One of the challenges will be to put their drawings and the answers to the questions side-by-side, and see if their narrative matches their drawings. If they don't seem to match, then this might have a number of reasons. There could be a gap between their actual inner experience and their perception of it, or their idea of what it 'should' be maybe. There could be a lack of vocabulary to describe the inner experience, whereas the drawing doesn't require words and might be a more direct way.

Another area I will focus on is the usage of vocabulary: is there any change from the initial answers to the questionnaire, throughout the conversations during the meetings, to the final responses? While three meetings is not a lot of time to get a thorough chance at growth, the meetings will be spaced apart, with enough time in between the second and third meeting to allow for some processing and integrating. Whether or not any shift can or will occur in such a short time span, I am not sure. But one of the goals of this project is to begin exploring.

In terms of the specific goals, here are questions approaches for assessment of each of the goals.

- To increase the students' comfort level with God talk
    - Was there any evidence of growing comfort?
    - What was the students' comfort level at the beginning of the process?
    - Were they engaged in the conversations and exercises?
- To expose the students to a variety of God images

- To raise and/or expand the students' awareness that God images may/can evolve and to encourage them to be open to that process.

- To explore the impact of their God images on their professional interactions.

  o Were the students able to enter into the role-plays and/or imaginary conversations?

The following invitation will be sent out to the cantorial students.

Dear students,

As many of you know I am in the process of completing my Doctor of Ministry degree here at HUC. Rather than a doctoral thesis, this program requires the completion of a "demonstration project," which includes both a written and a practical element. My project focuses on exploring the development of a God image by our students (you!), and how this God image may be reflected in your professional interactions (with congregants, students, mentors, etc.).

I am excited to invite you to be part of this project. Your participation will entail the following:

- Three meetings of 1 ½ hour each in which we will explore our images of God through, among other modalities, text, drawing, prayer and reflection. Participation is limited to 8 students, and names will be accepted on a first-come-first-served basis.

- No homework or tests, the only requirements are your open mind and curiosity, and a willingness to explore how you view and talk about God. You will be asked to answer 6 questions before the first meeting. These questions will be sent to you as soon as your participation is confirmed.

- The meetings will take place on:
  Thursday December 3, 5:45 – 7:30 pm
  Thursday December 10, 5:45 – 7:30 pm
  Thursday January 14, 5:45 – 7:30 pm
  (Dinner will be served ☺)

- While your participation is of course voluntary, in the interest of the validity of the project I do need you to commit to all three meetings.

- In order to be able to accurately reflect our conversations as I write the final chapters of the Thesis, I will need to ask your permission to record our meetings. Rest assured that these recordings are only to be used for the writing of this project, and will not be used in any other ways or for any other purpose. In the final project descriptions, no (real) names will be used either.

- Please RSVP by November 10.

I look forward to exploring and learning together!

RELEASE FORM

Project title	**Inviting God in to the Relationship**
Course/Study #	**Doctor of Ministry**
Institution	**Hebrew Union College**
City/State	**New York, NY**
Date	December 3, 2009 – January 14, 2010

Yes	No	I give my permission for...
		this session to be (audio) taped
		the transcript to be used in the above mentioned project, with pseudonyms only
		my drawings to be reproduced in the final project, under pseudonyms only

(name of interviewee)

_____
(signature of interviewee)

(signature of interviewer)   *(date)*

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Chapter IV

Meeting 1

After sending out the invitation to be part of this project to all thirty-one cantorial

students, eight students expressed interest; five of them were unable to participate

because of scheduling conflicts. Three students committed to be part of this project.

Student A, 40 years old and in her second year; student B, 24 years old and also in her

second year; and student C, 30 years old and in her fourth year. The first meeting took

place as planned on December 3, 2009. I started the formal part of our meeting with a

reading of the words from the *Yotzeir* prayer (see page 30), explaining the imagery of the

angels giving each other permission to "praise God in their own way" and how that is an

inspiration for this project. I then asked the students to complete and sign the release

forms, and collected the responses to the questions that I had sent out earlier. (See

Appendix A) The responses were substantial and honest and gave me some wonderful

insights into the students' worlds. Student A's response to the first question for example

illuminates the challenging concept of God's omnipotence:

> "God is near. I definitely believe that God does not micro-manage our
> lives; neither directly causing or healing our specific pains. But in an
> ethereal way, I think God provides something in response to our prayer
> that is conducive to healing. I do believe (and I know this can be a
> paradox) that there is a correlation, some sort of reward and punishment
> on this earth though. Even if that reward is just feeling good and positive
> and confident and loved. And even if the punishment is feeling tortured
> and indecisive and incomplete. I also am aware of how unfair this claim is,
> since there are wonderful, kind people who suffer terribly. It does not
> make rational sense, but I feel God has something to do with this life."

Student C responded to the question "What kinds of experiences of God are you longing

for? Why?" by saying

> "I long to know that it's all "worth it." I want to be told that yes, there is a purpose to life, and to my life in particular. I struggle with the 'big questions' and just want some reassurance that this life isn't all for not [naught]. I am resigned to the idea that there will not be some divine sign or message, and so I look for this message to come from others."

She expressed a strong desire to experience the Divine and to receive some certainty that her life is worthwhile. Student B responded to the question "Is God distant or near? How do your ideas about what God is like seem to help or hinder your spiritual growth and maturity, your personal development and your sense of self?" by describing her experience with the *Mi Shebeirach* prayer:

> "God is both near and distant...it depends on the moment. In terms of spirituality, I feel very near to God during the *Mi Shebeirach*. It is a prayer that has always seemed very personal to me. For many years, I felt that my prayers to God were specifically protecting my grandfather. Of course, I was aware of his mortality, but I believed it all the same. In the past few years, I've come to realize that it has more so developed my relationship and my belief in God. The prayer does more to comfort me than to heal my grandpa."

This tells me that she is aware of the connection between prayer and her relationship with God; it also shows me that she can describe her own evolving awareness about the role and effect of prayer in her life.

I spent a few minutes describing the Doctor of Ministry program and explaining my thinking about the demonstration project. There were no questions; the students seemed to understand my reasons for doing this program and choosing this project topic. They were eager to be part of this project. As student A said, "This is right up my alley!"

I then invited the students to do the three-part drawing to create the basis for the subsequent meetings. All three students took a few minutes and were willing to draw and able to come up with their images. The students seemed to have no problems doing this and worked quickly. In other words, I did not notice any resistance to this activity.

Whether or not there was compliance due to the transference to me I am not sure. They definitely came into this project expecting to be asked to participate and were apparently ready to do so. Given the fact that I am their teacher/mentor in other situations, there probably was a certain amount of transference to authority going on.

Each of them came up with distinctly different drawings for each of the three stages. (For the actual images, see Appendix B)

Student A shared how she vividly remembered her early childhood image and drew a cloud with eyeballs. Her current image was a drawing of the seashore, the expanse of the sea, both internal and external. For her image twenty years from now she drew a picture of a new- born infant, explaining that—as a doula—she so often had experienced the moment of birth and the first breath of the new-born, as God's breath giving life; she described in detail how the baby as it were 'inflates' from its crumpled up position.

For her five-year old image, student B drew a bearded man on a throne, and described later during the session in great detail exactly what he looked like: tall, thin, white haired, with a bright red floor-length velvet robe, on a velvet and dark wood throne. For her current image she wrote the word "is" and explained that she did not have an image. For her God twenty years from now she drew a heart, explaining that she would hope God to be physically closer somehow.

Student C also drew a man on a throne in the sky for her five-year old image, less detailed as far as appearance. For her current image she drew "specks" and explained that for her right now, divinity is in the spaces "in between" people. Twenty years from now she would like to see God as the sun, ever present, warming, glowing.

The activity of drawing was a useful focusing tool; it encouraged the students to identify their God images in a very concrete way.

Asked to describe attributes of this "five-year old" God image, students needed more time to think, then came up with some words. My intention was to elicit more descriptive terms that would help describe in more detail the nature of their five-year old God image. Student C mentioned king, ruler, all-powerful, in charge. Student B mentioned "grandfather-like." When I asked, "What does that carry with it?" she responded "kind, unconditional love." Student A stated: "everywhere, all present, sense of magic, literally God could stop the clock and turn back a day;" she then described a memory of praying really hard to God after a bad family outing (we were all complaining…), and praying to "do the day over again," and waking up the next morning thinking, "wow, did it happen?"

> "There must have been a belief that God can really do that… I was a little scared; maybe it will happen… what is worse, if it does happen? Or if it doesn't? Am I really that powerful that I made this happen? What if it happened and I am the only one who knew? I had a day more in my life than everyone else? I really believed that it could happen."

As the student mentioned herself, there was a strong sense of magic in her description of this experience, both on the side of God and of the child! Not only did she believe that God had the power to turn back time, she imagined that she herself had the power to make God turn back time by praying really hard. This is a beautiful example of the kind of magical thinking that is common in early childhood.[1] Student C expressed a similar belief in magic as she described her five-year-old God:

> "I really believe that when I was 5, God was the thing that controlled everything, there was not a personality; if I wanted something then that's who you go to."

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[1] Selma Fraiberg, *The Magic Years* (New York: Fireside, 1996)

Next I explained the idea of role-play and asked the students to think of a person, having a conversation with God, as in their five-year old God-image. This seemed to be much more complicated; given the questions from the students (how the 5 yr old would respond? or how the God of the 5yr old would respond?), it was not clear how this was supposed to be played out. I re-explained and asked if this was a tough one to think about. I can now see that I was not entirely clear about this exercise, and had neither a specific goal nor criteria for assessment. This approach clearly influenced my ability to bring students into the exercise. If I had thought it through more clearly, I might have been able to anticipate the challenges a bit more, and I might have thought of alternate ways to introduce and explain this exercise, or chosen a different approach all together.

Student B: "It's difficult because I don't remember thinking about God as interacting, God was there, but I don't think I prayed to God."

She seemed to interpret this exercise as playing out her own childhood conversation with God, or rather, the lack there off, and thus found it difficult to imagine that anyone could have a conversation with "the man on the throne."

Student C: "I absolutely did, but it wasn't an interaction of a response, it was an encounter but not verbally; I could tell the person what to do with my 5-yr old image of God."

Student A: "I had an interaction recently with a woman, who was in mourning for her father; I think she would be comforted, I am feeling this more than I am thinking it; The cloud – she would be comforted, she would think it's ok, he's still here, with me, he's ok, I think she would be comforted."

JW: Did the cloud ever say anything back?

A: "Not words, a hug, swallow her with an embrace, maybe the cloud is just mist that moves through."

JW: Is there a sense of response in other ways from this God who "just sits"?

C: "Yes, request and granting of request; when I was little and went on a flight, I would do the night before what I thought was praying: yelling really loud inside my head to God, because God is really far away so you have to yell really loud! And I would ask God to keep the flight safe and all that stuff; and it got to the point that if I did not do it, and something would happen, I was scared it would be my fault; it's ridiculous, I am 30 years old, but I still do it!"

C then shared a story of a congregant going thru tough times; if the wife would try to engage with this God, she would ask just somehow to get help keeping this family together, and the response would be,

"Either with hands or with sheer will, somehow keeping the family together; I don't know how this God does it, but that doesn't matter, because this God, he does it."

B didn't remember asking for anything or begging for anything:

"God just sat on his throne; if you had asked me, "Does God exist?" Yes. But I couldn't tell you what God does or what God thinks or what I thought of God. I don't think I wanted a world without God. God somehow brought order, God was there, that's what I needed to know. Like grandpa – he is there when you need him, that's all you need to know. He's going to be there if you need him."

Looking at the transcript, I realize that I interjected a few questions of my own; given the goal of creating a safe environment for them to explore, I am not entirely sure if this helped or hindered. It might have helped by moving the conversation along and giving the students other possible ways to think about the issues. It might have hindered by keeping them from trusting their own thinking, and instead having them follow my lead. However, it was never my intention to be a completely silent observer. As I mentioned on page 22, "I do have a fairly clear sense of my role as an *involved participant* with more expertise, but no absolute claim to knowing what is 'true…'

I realized that the role-play did not really work out; apparently it was too difficult for the students to enter into the role of 'God.' We then spent some time reading the two translations of Psalm 30 (see page 31-32) and I asked the students how they responded to the different God images. As I reread chapter 3, I realized that I stayed with their response as they are today and did not ask them to respond through their five-year old eyes. Again, staying with the five-year old God image did not prove to be a helpful tool here, though the five-year old did show up somewhat indirectly in student B's response below. They responded in various ways; some found the Mitchell translation more personal, less formal, others thought it was not as powerful as the more traditional translation.

Student B had a strong response to the God imagery, which did not fit with her personal

image: "I don't like the God of Exodus, and this reminds me of Exodus God, fiery, angry smoky God who gets pissed of at a moment's notice; I don't like that God and I don't connect with that God and I don't want to get to know this God; I feel like there are emotions being put out, telling me what to feel and I don't like that because I *know* what I feel and it doesn't line up with these feelings; I think I have also to some extent kept part of that 5yr old image, of God just sitting, not being active in my life – I will talk to God and I'll have a slightly one-sided conversation with God, and I don't see God as coming in and directly doing things in my life, which is why I think this doesn't work for me; God does not do this, that is not part of God's job description

Student C raised the issue of anthropomorphizing God and her difficulty with speaking about God in the third person, which "makes it a single, solitary being":

"I don't like anything that makes God a singular entity, thing; the statement "God gets angry" doesn't make sense; of course God doesn't get angry, there is no "it" to get angry!"

Student A mentioned,

> "I used to think that God doesn't micromanage, but I do feel that there is an activity in my life. I remember as a kid when my conscience talked to me – that is God talking!"

Overall, they actively engaged with the Psalm texts, responding strongly and personally to some of the God imagery, and verbalized quite clearly what did or did not resonate. The flow of the conversation was slow at times, and it took some effort on my part to sit with the silences and not jump in too soon. The students seemed to feel at ease with each other, and did not appear judgmental; they were at times a bit hesitant in verbalizing their thoughts and feelings about God.

Meeting 2

One week later we had our second meeting, opening with a prayer by Naomi Levy (see page 35); this time we started by looking at the drawing of their current God image. The students seemed more actively involved in the conversation and there were fewer/shorter silences during the recorded conversations. I followed my intention (as stated on page 36) as we explored their current God image, and asked them to think about what led them to this image. Two of the students said the rational part of their brains sort of kicked in, and they simply told themselves "This is not true, God is not a man sitting on a cloud." Which then led them to question, "What is God?" Student C shared her struggle with the word God:

> "When someone says, "God did this," I picture the man/person God and I don't like that, that's why I use the divine, or a spirit, spirituality or something, it opens it up to get away from that 5 year old person, because that person is still there in the back of my mind and I can't get rid of it, but my logical mind says you got to rename it. It still happens, when that 5yr old image comes in, "no, go away, you aren't real!""

Clearly both B and C acknowledged still having some of their five-year old image of God present in their current thinking and both were able to identify and name it. When I asked the students if we maybe lose or gain something in this transition, student B responded, "I think we gain something; I think it switched when I started to experience God rather than just imagine God." And she described an experience during her early teens when she heard *Kol Nidrei* played by a cellist in her congregation,

> "It was a moment of 'How could God **not** be present,' 'How could this magical moment be without God?' It's just too special for there not to be some sort of divinity right now."

Student A described her experience of God on the beach at sunset, and shared that she really has no problem with her 'cloud-with-eyeballs' image of God, or any other images, "I am ok with all of it, because God is really not a cloud or the sun." She referred to the story of her son almost drowning (see questions and answers in Appendix A) and described her strong feeling of God's presence hovering over the house in the days following the incident. When I asked her about her statement of this being a 'reward", and what if God forbid the outcome had been different, would it have been punishment, she couldn't really answer.

I asked the students again to think of *midot*, or attributes reflected in their current God image (see #3 page 36), this time explaining a bit more that this could include any adjectives. Student C responded, "I just know that "King," "in charge of everything," those are gone; I'm not sure what is instead."

Student B said, "God just is." When I asked her how this was different from the five-year old image of God just sitting, she responded that it wasn't that different for her. The moments when she felt God as a warm, hug-like presence, those are rare.

"I think much more often it's the same sort of God – when I was 5, God sitting on a cloud, and now, I know God exists, and I can't give a characteristic to that"

She quotes a scene from the movie *Evan Almighty* and wonders if God is indeed what provides us with the moments, but we are the ones who have to utilize the moment. This is why she has a hard time connecting to some of the imagery in the prayer book, which describes God as "doing." While 'providing moments' does equal a certain amount of 'doing,' I believe the student was trying to make a distinction between God as a 'puppeteer' who pulls the strings and leaves no room for us to make our choices, and God who offers us opportunities but leaves room for us to take action, or even to take notice.

Student A: "I think my image has expanded, it has not become more rational, it has become less rational; at peace with understanding the work of God, whatever that means. Not words, there are just no words"

As far as the goal for this activity (to explore the second of the three drawings, the students' current view of God), all three students' drawings were definitely different from their first ones. In the conversation about the drawings, new material surfaced, such as rational thinking, experiencing rather than imagining God; yet at the same time, the five-year-old God image was clearly still present in their descriptions.

I decided to give the idea of role play another try and invited the students to think of someone in their lives who would have a conversation with God as they see God today. C commented that this means assuming that God speaks, and she doesn't assume that. However, she could describe the interaction:

"I can explain how that interaction would happen, but can't provide it;
I can be myself and explain how the congregant would see the reaction of God, but I cannot give God's response."

Maybe it was too awkward for her to actually step into the role of God, not only because she doesn't assume that God actually speak, but there might also be such a weighty quality to that idea, that it was safer to describe it than to enter into the role play.

I then proceeded to role-play the person, trying to elicit further responses from the student.

C: "for example there is tension in between classmates – I would say, God reacts to human interactions and the more **you** strive to fix or support your relationship with someone else, the stronger God's presence becomes; it's all about what **you** do."

JW: "But cantor, how do I know that?"

C: "You'll feel it; as your relationship grows, and as **you** put in the effort, the more you work at it, the more you'll be able to bring God into the relationship; God is there but you have to put the work into."

JW: "Yes, but I don't know what that means. I have such a hard time getting it – people talk about God, "you'll feel it, you'll know it…" How do I know that's really God and not my meds working? How do I know?"

C: "You don't…"

JW: "Can't you give me something more tangible?"

C: "I don't know that I can (this is honestly what I would say!) but what I **can** tell you, is that when you make that connection with another person, and they connect back at you and you look at them in the eyes, take a moment, and see if you feel anything; and if all you feel are two people smiling at each other, then maybe God is in that smile; and if you feel that some sort of reparation happened than God is in the reparation. And if you can sense a presence in between the two of you that goes unspoken, but that was unfelt before, then God is in that presence. That is really all I would know how to say."

When I tried another hypothetical conversation, playing a woman who talks to the cantor about her feelings of hypocrisy as she prepares for her kid's Bar Mitzvah, student

B uses the example of love to help me understand that God is still there, even though I may not experience or feel God in those moments.

> "You know you always love them in the end no matter what. Maybe God is sort of like that, maybe God is there all the time, but you can't always feel it; but somehow there has to be some part of you that knows that God is there, even thought you don't always feel it, the same way you know you always love your kids, but you don't always feel it; and if you take that knowledge with you in to the service today, even though you can't feel God in every moment of the service, but God is somehow still there; it will make things a little bit easier."

When asked if it would be ok to be pissed at God for now, B answered absolutely, and A added, "that is totally because God is not a person whose feelings get hurt when you don't like God anymore; wrestling with God is part of our tradition."

During this exercise, the students clearly were not able to stay within the role of God. The goal was to have them speak as God to an imaginary person (played by me) who would want to talk to God about some issue or other. What happened was that they were unable to step into the role of God, and chose to speak about what God would say to the person, or relate what they would say to the person. We moved from them having a conversation between the God that they imagine and a hypothetical person, to relating their God image to someone who comes to them for counseling. I can see how this may be due to my own uncertainty / ambiguity about this exercise, as well as my desire to engage the students and elicit responses.

The original goal was to explore the nature of students' professional interactions as related to their current God image; though the students were able to engage in a role-play, they were not able or comfortable to act out the "God" part. Their responses were not that different from those in the fist session, since even then they spoke more from their current God image then from their five-year old one.

We then transitioned to reading the poem by Yehudah Amichai (see page 35) and processed their responses. One of the overall goals for the project was to expose the students to a variety of God images (see page 29) and the questions I wanted to explore were: How do they respond to the God language/imagery in this poem given their current God image? How does/doesn't this God imagery resonate with the students?

A and C perceived anger, since God kept all mercy for himself. B mentioned that it could serve as the preface to "why bad things happen to good people" since

> "…it seems like it is a question of 'Where is the mercy?' all these horrible things have happened in my lifetime, I have done all those things to give mercy to other people, but I don't feel any mercy, where is it? It is a question I cannot answer that with my definition and relationship to my God."

C struggled with the image as well and it did not fit with her current image of God:

> "I feel like on the surface this is talking about the man in the clouds who kept all the mercy inside and did not give it to us; And my God **is** the mercy in between people, compassion, and all those things that float around us that we can choose to use or not, but they are there!
> I love this because it helps to explain why, not why, but how this creator God that we are taught to understand, could allow for tragedy, but it doesn't match. Interesting too – 'full of mercy' - to be full of something, that doesn't necessarily mean that you give it to others…"

Based on her drawing of the "specks in between" and her explanation of "God being the mercy in between people," Student C has a hard time relating to the image painted by the poet of a God who "keeps the mercy to himself." She also talked about the original Hebrew prayer for the dead (*Eil Malei Rachamim*) and questioned whether we ask for mercy for the deceased, or for the mourners who are left behind.

> "If we are dead, aren't we already with You (God), so why not give the mercy to those who are left behind?"

Student A thinks the speaker/poet might feel guilty for surviving,

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"He does not understand why he survived; like he is standing at the side of all the action, but is not in it, doesn't have a lot of power because of that– he has been cleaning up after things, but is not really involved."

The students were clearly willing and able to engage with this contemporary poet's view of God and God-image and connected the poet's words to some of the original prayer language he refers to. They brought up some new material that was not discussed in the previous session, such as student C's response about God "being the mercy in between people" rather than God "keeping the mercy to himself."

Since the students expressed how tired they were after a long day at the end of finals week, I took a few moments to finish up, inviting the students to take a few moments of silence. Then we read the Debbie Perlman poem together (see page 36), which offers imagery for God that emphasizes the idea of partnership between us and the Divine.

Meeting 3

Our final meeting took place after the winter break; this gave the students a three-week hiatus and time to let our conversations sink in a little. I opened the session with a few moments of silence rather than a spoken opening prayer. We then focused on the third drawing, exploring what led them to that image, why it is that God doesn't look like that now.

Student B said that this was the hardest one to draw, and that she wasn't very happy with what she drew. She drew the heart because she wants God to be closer, other than that she did not know how to answer this one. When asked about the difference this image and her current image "is", she responded, ""is" is more of a general surrounding, rather than… no, that's not right either, because God is a part of me, but more so I guess."

Student A talked about her image (newborn infant) and how she realized now that it may reflect the fact that in twenty years her kids could be having babies; she also spoke of the simplicity it symbolizes, and about the desire to gain more of that simplicity as she ages. Just like she sees in her grandmother, that there is more of an acceptance of the world, less judgment and struggle with the things that we think are important now, but turn out not to be in the long run.

Student C shared the following insight:

> "I am seeing this very clear correlation between who I am as a person now and who I want to be as a person in the future, with how I see God now and how I want to see God in the future… and I see them as being almost the exact same thing… Everything I drew about the image of God is also about me. Something I have been thinking about a lot lately, and over the break"

She continued to describe the desire to be able to just "be" more, and think less, allow for God's presence rather than worry about it as much. We discussed her image of the sun and the potential it has to do damage. Other than pushing those thoughts away, she raised the issue that humanity is responsible for much of that potential damage. Student B then commented that

> "Maybe that's where *tikun olam* fits in, that is the purpose for *tikun olam*, to begin fixing our world and rebuild our relationship with God; a relationship can't be static, it can't just be always there, you have to work on it on both sides, to make it good and healthy."

This led me to ask her how "God who just sits there" can be actively involved in this relationship, if it is to be two-sided.

B: "I don't know, I knew you would ask that! Well, I think that there are miracles in the world and that God is many times responsible for those miracles, and that is maybe part of God's end of the relationship. And the miracle might not directly affect you, but it its part of the relationship."

Student A remarked that she sometimes imagines God having a good giggle and God saying something along the lines of

> "God, they complicate this really so very much, I am just here, and they're making themselves crazy; I am just here and I'll always be here, for them… And they are wrestling with themselves so deeply over me, and it's simpler than that…"

She sees herself yearning for the clarification, wanting to feel content with how she feels about God at a given time; and then of course it may change again, because things happen in life, and you keep re-clarifying, which, according to her, keeps you alive living Jewishly.

This was actually the first time one of the students engaged in the way I had hoped for in the role-plays, giving voice to God's thoughts and feelings. Rereading the transcripts now, I wish I had followed up on this; I probably could have used it as a jumping off point to invite the students to stay with it and explore this further.

I invited the students to write their own "Psalm", expressing anything related to the God image twenty years from now, what they would like to say to, or ask from God, to help them get to that future place. Again, they each wrote without hesitation, and were open and willing to share their words with the group. (See Appendix C for full text)

After sharing her writing, student C showed the most discomfort through her body language, slouching under the table as if she wanted to be out of sight. As she said "I am so not about writing poetry and drawing!" Yet, she did each of those and actively participated in the discussions. Interestingly, each of the students in some way expressed a desire to live in the present, to be fully present, simply to be.

When I asked the students if they could each share one word to describe God, student C responded "a big sigh" (no word). Student A mentioned "presence," and student B said, "present."

As the final part of the meeting, I asked the students to respond to Questions 7-9 (see page 40), as well as one additional question I added, asking them for feedback or comments in general. The responses were positive, and included surprise at learning about themselves as well as about God, a strong desire to have these kinds of conversations on a more regular basis, integrated into the curriculum, a sense of feeling a little bit more comfortable speaking about God, having some more language and tools, more of an awareness of people's different ways of experiencing and expressing God. (For full responses see Appendix D)

When I asked the students about their experience with a group this small, the feedback was mostly positive. They acknowledged that they would not have had the same amount of time and attention to explore their thoughts and feelings if there had been more people. One student commented that "more people would have meant more input, more discussion," the others felt good about the intimacy of the group. This appreciation of the intimacy of the group also confirms that the goal of **"creating a welcoming and non-judgmental space for the students to express and explore their thoughts and feelings in relation to God"** was indeed achieved.

Overall, all three were happy to have been a part of this experience, and left feeling somewhat more equipped to explore their relationship with God, and to talk about it with others. The responses to the final questions indicated that the sessions did indeed increase the students' comfort level with God talk. The students were very aware from

the beginning that God images may evolve, their drawings showed this right away. However, they did find that elements of the early childhood God are still present in their current thinking. Exposing the students to a variety of God imagery through poetry and traditional texts was a valuable exercise since it certainly expanded their potential vocabulary in terms of God talk.

Chapter V

In this final chapter I will attempt to lay out my overall understandings of the clinical and theological principles as they played out during the project. It seemed most logical to use the organization as I set it up in chapter II, realizing that the principles are in no particular order.

A: Clinical Principles

- Transference and counter-transference

Examples of transference can be seen in the way some of the students described/drew God. As student B stated,

> "God somehow brought order, God was there, that's what I needed to know. Like grandpa – he is there when you need him, that's all you need to know. He's gone be there if you need him"

Clearly, as a five-year old girl, her image of God was based on the presence of her grandfather. The relationship with her grandfather was transferred onto God, or, as Rizutto would say, became part of the stuffing

> "…because, like the teddy bear, he [God] has obtained a good half of his stuffing from primary objects the child has "found" in his life." (p.179)

In B's answers to the pre-meeting questions she described her present image as:

"God seems to alternate for me between parent-like figure and a friend. I try to be a good person because I occasionally feel as if God is looking over my shoulder, keeping me in check. "

In student C's description of God, the words 'King,' 'Ruler,' 'All-powerful,' 'in charge.'

Both students' descriptions indicate the transference of aspects of authority figures to the representation of God.

Student A expressed that one of the reasons she came to Cantorial school was,

"…that it is really important that I have to be able to articulate everything about Judaism, God, Torah, spirituality, whether I like it or not, what is it what is it not, I owe it to myself as a Jew, and a mother to my children, my community, to have the words, to figure it out. I have 5 years to say it out loud, to figure out what I believe first and to find the words to express that – before I graduate."

This seems to me an example of the expectation and/or wish to be the authority as described by Schwartz:

"As clergy we are not only subject to these common challenges of transference, but we also will deal with transferences "to a pastoral figure as an authority" as well as "the need for clergy to be more than human." (1989, p. 44)

I have to admit that I did share with the students that there was no way I had it all figured out when I graduated, and that I am still working on it. This may in effect be an example of my own countertransference, coming from the assumption that my students would expect me to have it all figured out already!

I wonder about any transference to me as an authority in my role as teacher/facilitator, and I believe one example I mentioned in chapter IV could be considered a possible occurrence of transference. When I described my realization that I interjected a few questions of my own and the possible consequences of those interjections (see page 52), the possibility of having hindered the process could be

interpreted as transferential: the students would tend to follow the teacher's lead, because I am the authority, rather than trusting their own process.

As I listened to the recordings of the sessions and reread the transcripts, I realized that there were several examples of countertransference that played out in the meetings. When the flow of the conversation was slow at times it took quite some effort on my part to sit with the silences and not jump in too soon. This is a familiar source of discomfort, which sometimes causes me to jump in, fix, and advise, in ways that may not always be the most helpful or productive for the situation. I realized this happened when the role-play did not fall into place and I injected a few questions to move the conversation along; I then proceeded to role-play the person, trying to elicit further responses from the student. How did we move from them having a conversation with the God that they imagine to relating their God image to someone who comes to them for counseling? I believe it was probably easier and safer for me (as well as for the students) to allow the students to stay with what was comfortable, rather than sitting with my discomfort caused by their discomfort. Given the goal of creating a safe environment for the students, I am not entirely sure this helped or hindered. They did engage comfortably with me, but maybe it took a little longer for the students to start asking questions of each other.

In addition, thinking about the challenges around the role-play, the shift in comfort level that occurred may actually be an example of projective identification; a clinical principle I did not write about in chapter 2, but now realize may have been at play here. The students may have picked up on my discomfort with the role-play activity, and may have internalized some of that as their own.

- Parallel process

Questions I wondered about in chapter II were "Are these responses the same responses the student would have given to their own students?" "Is the dynamic in the group in any way a reflection of the dynamic this person might have experienced in the situation they describe?"   Reading through the transcripts I believe that some of the dynamics and interactions in the group may indeed reflect dynamics and/or interactions the students would have with their congregants or students. The struggle to find language as well as the resistance to certain language (the use of the word "God") played out both ways.

If indeed "elements of the patient-therapist relationship may end up in the therapist-supervisor relationship, and vice-versa." (Gorkin, 1987) then I wonder whether elements of my relationship with the students, especially as it developed during those meetings, may end up in their relationships with the people they work with. At this point, I have no way of knowing that.

- Developmental stages

While I did not describe this aspect of early childhood development in the section on clinical principles chapter II, it struck me during the project how many examples of magical thinking came up during our conversations. Student A's story, asking God to turn back time after a bad family outing, is a beautiful example of magical thinking:

> "The child who lives mid-way between the world of magic and the world of reality does not see that pone world excludes the other: The two worlds exists side by side; reason is not affronted by the appearance of a monster in the living room or cannibal ants in the cozy kitchen. The sense of reality is not yet strong enough to judge and exclude certain phenomena from the picture of the real world." (Fraiberg, p. 126)

While this kind of magical thinking is entirely normal and appropriate for a five-year old,

it is interesting to observe how much of that same magical thinking remains present

throughout adolescence and adulthood when it comes to God images.

Student B:

> "I think I have also to some extent kept part of that 5yr old image, of God
> just sitting, not being active in my life – I will talk to God and I'll have a
> slightly one-sided conversation with God, and I don't see God as coming
> in and directly doing things in my life, which is why I think this doesn't
> work for me; God does not do this, that is not part of God's job
> description."

Student C's description of God as a "person" to whom she yelled for help incorporates

elements of magical thinking, such as the idea that the child has the power to either do it

right or wrong:

> "I did not think about this God in those moments; I was very confused – I
> 'd go to synagogue, and we prayed to a person, or at least, that what it
> sounded like "You, please do this for us…" so if I was scared or worried
> or anything, I would ask this 'person' to help; it would be like screaming
> inside my head "please, please, please" and if it did not work, it was
> because I did it wrong or did not yell loud enough, or did not want it badly
> enough… but there was no like, God controlled everything at all times,
> just when there was a fear or anxiety or a need."

This sense of magic also showed up in the following statement shared by C,

> "…either with hands or with sheer will, somehow keeping the family
> together; I don't know how this God does it, but that doesn't matter,
> because this God, he does it."

Student A talked about her image (newborn infant) and how she realizes now that

it may reflect the fact that in twenty years her kids could be having babies; she also

speaks of the simplicity it symbolizes, and about the desire to gain more of that simplicity

as she ages. Just like she sees in her grandmother, that there is more of an acceptance of

the world, less judgment and struggle with the things that we think are important now,

but turn out not to in the long run. This seems a beautiful example of what Erikson

would call the stage of "integrity vs. despair," the desire to just "be." While I did not specifically base any of this project on Erikson's work, I was surprised to find that all three students in one way or another expressed the desire to grow towards this future stage of life. All three referred to the idea of simply "being," living in the present, worrying less about the insignificant things in life, returning to a sense of basic trust.

- Basic trust

All three students demonstrated a deep sense of faith and trust that God is indeed present in their lives. As student B stated,

> "If you had asked me "Does God exist?" Yes. But I couldn't tell you what God does or what God thinks or what I thought of God. Very confident that God existed…"

An example of this sense of basic trust can also be seen in the third drawing from student A, where she drew a new-born infant. This is the image of a human being who has no choice but basic trust in order to survive. It is telling that she, as well as student C, expressed a desire to grow into persons who can simply trust and be. Whether this means that one or both experienced basic trust and wants to return to it, or that one or both may not have had the experience but now knows that this is something to look forward to, I am not sure.

- Identity

What surprised me during this project were the observations of two of the students that they learned about themselves through exploring their God images. As student C stated:

> "That my image of God, or what I want God to be, directly correlates to how I view myself, or what/who I want to be. I am seeing this very clear correlation between who I am as a person now and who I want to be as a person in the future, with how I see God now and how I want to see God in the future… and I see them as being almost the exact same thing…

So the way I am seeing God in the future is the sun; the sun exists, and you don't question that, the sun is everywhere, and you can feel a comfort; it is an ever-present thing that you can choose to acknowledge or not; but it is a comfort, it is not invasive, but it is there. I am thinking of feeling the warming rays of the sun. Knowing that God is around, and that is what I am hoping for, just sort of feeling that God is there. And I am looking at who I want to be, and hope that it's going to be less than 20 yrs! As a person I want to be more present and less logical, have less of a need to rationalize, to get past that. Everything I drew about the image of God is also about me."

And as student B said during the last session:

"I came in feeling confident that I know what my views were about God, felt a very stable relationship with God; and especially after the first session I remember feeling shocked that I had learned more about my God image and about myself and then consistently each time – and this I didn't expect – I expected that I would probably learn more about God through this process, but I did not expect to learn more about my self through talking about God."

This was an unexpected outcome for me, finding that these students were clear about the connection between the development of their God image and their own identity development.

- Defense strategies

Student A shared the story of her son's almost drowning, both in her answers to my initial questions, and at various times during the sessions. She described the intense experience of God's presence right after the event, and acknowledged,

"It changed my life. God was there. And I can't even say God was there to save Coby, as much as I think God was there and dealt with this incident to show me God was in my life and reward me for my belief and practice."

When I asked her about her statement of this being a 'reward", and what if God forbid the outcome had been different, would it have been punishment, her answer was evasive:

> "It's all touchy feely and nice; sometimes people turn to God in tragedy and sometimes people turn away."

This was definitely a challenging question, and apparently too threatening for her to think about. The vagueness of the answer seemed to serve as a deflection.

Students B and C both commented how at some point in their lives the "rational parts of their brain kicked in."   This is a beautiful illustration of the parts Richard Schwartz writes about:

> "A part is not just a temporary emotional state or habitual thought pattern. Instead it is a discrete and autonomous mental system that has an idiosyncratic range of emotion, style of expression, set of abilities, desires, and view of the world." (1995, p. 34)

Both students described this rational part of themselves as an inner voice that told them to change directions in how they imagine God. Student C describes it as follows:

> "I think the rational part of my brain sort of kicked in; there is no man sitting on a cloud, that doesn't make sense; you have power of a decision, a thought, you are not a playing piece – rethink this! … That's why I use the divine, or a spirit, spirituality or something, it opens it up to get away from that 5 yr old person, because that person is still there in the back of my mind and I can't get rid of it, but my logical mind says you got to rename it."

Student B described it this way:

> "I think I also had a fairly rational reaction – that is not true; God is not a person, God is a presence; that's why I couldn't draw a picture for today, I had to write a word (which is also not adequate), 'is', couldn't draw a picture; I couldn't pin God to one space like I could when I was 5, there is no way for me to try."

For both, rationalizing might serve as a protection against the earlier God imagery, which their more grown-up selves no longer deem acceptable, as C expressed in the answers she wrote before the first meeting

> "Admittedly, that juvenile image of God on the cloud who controls all still creeps into my mind, and I find myself asking for things – safety, peace,

etc, even though most of my brain and soul disagree with this image. It is frustrating that this still happens, and causes me to question my spiritual growth and maturity."

Yet, student B contradicts herself later on in the same session, when she states,

"I think it switched when I started to experience God rather than just imagine God."

To the best of my knowledge, thinking, while extremely useful at certain times in life, can easily get in the way of experiencing. When the student described that "It switched" when she started to experience God, it leads me to believe that her rational thinking actually may have taken a back seat in order to allow her to experience God.

Student B responded very strongly to some of the emotions expressed in Psalm 30, not only through her words, but even more so through her tone of voice, which was strong and almost sounded defensive:

"I don't like the God of Exodus, and this reminds me of Exodus God, fiery, angry smoky God who gets pissed of at a moment's notice; I don't like that God and I don't connect with that God and I don't want to get to know this God. I feel like there are emotions being put out, telling me what to feel and I don't like that because I *know* what I feel and it doesn't line up with these feelings. "I cried to You and You healed me", no! The antibiotics healed me! It's not how I think; I don't agree with those statements, makes it difficult to connect."

This makes me wonder whether she might be defending against certain strong feelings she herself has and won't allow for, such as allowing the vulnerability of deep trust and faith in a God who could heal, or the depths of fear and pain that are expressed in the psalm. She might also be defending against the possibility of someone else imposing their feelings on her. Due to the short-term nature of this project, as well as the fact that it was a group process and not individual spiritual direction, there was not really a way to explore this in depth. And that leaves me with just an educated guess.

- Supervision models

During the first meeting we spent some time reading the two translations of Psalm 30 (see page 31-32) and I asked the students how they responded to the different God images. As I reread chapter 3, I realized that I stayed with their response as they are today and did not ask them to respond through their five-year old eyes. This leads me to ask at least two questions: How important is it for me, as the leader to stay with the task as defined and to try to focus the conversation in the ways I had originally planned to? Was I simply trying to do too many different things all at once?

The second question is probably the easiest to answer; looking back it seems now that there were too many goals. I guess I lost track of staying with the five-year old God image as a focusing tool when the role-play did not work out as I had planned. When we then transitioned to reading the psalm texts, I don't really remember making a conscious decision to leave the five-year old behind. This may be an example of my being a well meaning, but relatively inexperienced group facilitator. On the other hand, I do wonder about the importance of staying with the script, rather than going "with the flow" as the session unfolds. Even though this type of project demands a clear setup with planned activities and measurable outcomes, I wanted these sessions to feel as natural as possible, and tried to implement my planned outlines while leaving room for spontaneity.   I realize this is not something I wrote about, most likely because it seems so obvious to me, and is so much part of who I am and how I work. I also realize now, that I am still in the process of balancing my own gut instincts with the advice of my two (very different!) advisors in this project.

> "It is true that students often feel more secure approaching every clinical encounter strictly 'by the book,' and are frequently so afraid of making mistakes that they stifle their own capacity for therapeutic intuition and

emotional connection with their clients… You must be able to let your instinct be your guide, maybe to the point of mild wackiness." (Dattilio, 2006)

This is definitely one of the learnings I am taking away from this project, and from this program as a whole: the absolute necessity to trust that I know what I know, and learn to trust my own instincts.

B: Theological Principles

- Is God immutable or ever changing?

One of the goals for this project was to raise and/or expand the students' awareness that God images may/can evolve and to encourage them to be open to that process. Based on the fact that each of them produced three distinct drawings during our first session, some level of awareness was clearly already present. Each of them presented a different drawing for each stage of life, and spoke of God in different terms. While this may not entirely answer the question whether God is immutable or not, it does establish that the students' God images certainly were not immutable. In the end, this turned out to be the question to ask, more than the original one I had anticipated.

- What do we call God?

This question was one of the toughest to answer for the students (as well as for many of us). Language kept coming up as a stumbling block and a limitation. As student A said when I asked for attributes:

> "Maybe God causes the revealing to happen to us, and that is the revelation. Not words, there's just not words!"

Asked to describe attributes of this "five-year old" God image, students needed time to think, then came up with some words. Using the word "attribute" may have limited their thinking. This possibly happened because I meant to use the term "attributes" loosely, and they may have heard it in its more traditional or normative sense, because of its association with Maimonides' list of 13 attributes. It seems that my attempt to invite the students to use descriptive terms for God kept running into this wall, the limitations of language, or possibly, the limitations of their language. One of the goals of the project was to increase the students' comfort level with God talk. In order to increase this comfort level, we have to have access to language to express our thoughts and feelings about God. Student C expressed it most strongly, as she spoke about her issues with the word "God" in response to reading Psalm 30:

> "Talking about God in the third person makes it more of a person, being. But saying 'you' makes it less so – I can say 'you' to my car, 'you' can be anything; but saying he/she makes it a single solitary being…
> I have a lot of difficulty with God language as it stands, and this is just another form of it; I don't like the word God at all, at all!"

She preferred to use the word "Divinity," and was able to express what attribute she would like to give to God twenty years from now: *Ein Sof* ("no-end", a kabalistic name for God as the "infinite No-thingness"). This same student expressed in her response to one of the final questions:

> "I think that now that I have been able to articulate and talk about my image of God, I am more comfortable using the word "God" as a description rather than a name."

This response indicated a significant change in her thinking, especially given the limited scope and timeframe of this project.

- God beyond understanding

And that term, *Ein Sof*, leads directly to the idea of God being beyond understanding, beyond naming. Student A's answer to the question "Is God distant or near?" shows me how for her God is indeed beyond understanding:

> "God is near. I definitely believe that God does not micro-manage our lives; neither directly causing or healing our specific pains. But in an ethereal way, I think God provides something in response to our prayer that is conducive to healing. I do believe (and I know this can be a paradox) that there is a correlation, some sort of reward and punishment on this earth though.... I also am aware of how unfair this claim is, since there are wonderful, kind people who suffer terribly. It does not make rational sense, but I feel God has something to do with this life."

As she says, "It does not make rational sense," and yet she believes that God has something to do with this life, that God does play a role in how our lives turn out. During one of our discussions about whether God does or doesn't 'do' things for/to us, B quoted a scene from the movie *Evan Almighty*

> "…where God is a person that shows up and talks to people, and he is talking to Lauren who has just left her husband who thinks he is Noah; she is very upset; God comes and is speaking to her and talks about prayer and asks 'Do you think that God just brings a family closer? Or does God provide the opportunity for your family to grow closer?' I really like that image of God providing moments and it's very much up to us to figure out what that moment is and how to utilize it."

She too wonders to what extent God actually does everything for us, or whether God provides us with the moments, the opportunities, and we are the ones who have to utilize those moments and opportunities. This is, she says, why she has a hard time connecting to some of the imagery in the prayer book, which describes God as "doing." To me this is another example of God being beyond understanding.

The final four questions I asked the students to answer at the end of the last meeting were meant as a means to evaluate whether the goals as stated on page 29 were

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achieved or not. I believe the answers to the final questions affirm that the first three of those goals were met, at least to some extent. The responses to the final questions were positive, and included surprise at learning about themselves as well as about God, a strong desire to have these kinds of conversations on a more regular basis, integrated into the curriculum, a sense of feeling a little bit more comfortable speaking about God, having some more language and tools, more of an awareness of people's different ways of experiencing and expressing God. (For full responses see Appendix D.)

C: Implications for further ministry

The obvious implications for the work we do in training future clergy, is that we need to find more ways and more creative ways to integrate these kinds of conversations and explorations into our curriculum. As student C expressed in her final comments:

> "This has been a wonderful experience. I only wish that I knew how to pull it into the rest of my life – instead of letting it fall away."

As student B expressed in the answers to the original questions:

> "I have not had a conversation with congregants yet about God. I'm comfortable talking about it with young children, but not with adults yet."

If as a seminary we aim to train future clergy who will not shy away from speaking of (and to) God, then we want our students to become comfortable with talking about God, whether it is with children or adults.

Group Size and Composition

Three female students committed to be part of this project. When I asked the students about their experience with a group this small, the feedback was mostly positive. They acknowledged that they would not have had the same amount of time and attention

to explore their thoughts and feelings if there had been more people. Student C

commented that "this was more comfortable, enough room to finish my thoughts; but,

more people, more opinions, more ways to open my mind." Student A felt good about the

intimacy of the group,

> "With more people, we would not have been able to explore our own stories so deeply; I enjoyed the intimacy, and that we could also admit personal things we would not have had the time/space for with larger group."

These statements also confirm that the students experienced a certain comfort level

within the group and felt safe to share their feelings and experiences. Overall, I believe

this would not change the way I might approach a similar project in the future. Though

the discussions might have been richer with a larger, more diverse group, I felt the

meetings were worthwhile and the students' final responses confirmed that the process

deepened the explorations of their relationship with and image of God. One thing that

would have made this experiment even more interesting, but was logistically not possible,

was to do this with a combined group of rabbinical and cantorial students. That would

definitely be something I would want to try for a potential future project. The gender

balance of a future group might well have a significant impact on the dynamics within the

group, and the possible outcomes of the discussions.

Role-Play

The role-play activity did not quite work out as I had intended, since the students

did not seem able to play the role of God. I can now see that I did not have a specific

goal nor criteria for assessment for this exercise. My own uncertainty clearly influenced

my ability to bring students into the exercise. If I had thought it through more clearly, I

might have been able to anticipate the challenge a bit more, and I might have thought of alternate ways to introduce and explain this exercise, or chosen a different approach all together. I am also aware now that I enabled the students to stay with the Cantor-congregant dialogue, rather than steering them back to the dialogue where either of us played God. While the general comfort level seemed good, it definitely shifted when I tried to engage the students in role-play. This invites me to look at my own comfort level once again, with role-plays in general, and especially when it comes to speaking directly to God. If I am honest, I have to admit that I do not have a ton of experience doing role-play, or acting for that matter; in addition, my own relationship to God, as well as my sense of ease expressing that relationship to others, is still evolving. This, I guess, is where my basic version of parallel process played out, and maybe I was too much of a student-participant rather than a facilitator. I do think role-play may have been a more effective tool in the hands of someone with either more experience in this, and/or a greater comfort level.

When we moved from them having a conversation between the God that they imagine and a hypothetical person, to relating their God image to someone who comes to them for counseling, I can see how this may also be due to my desire to engage the students and elicit responses. Sharing their own God concepts would not necessarily be a goal for future clergy counselors, when congregants come to them for counseling. Rather, the goal would be to help the congregant discover their own God concept(s), or at least their own questions about God.

Yet at the same time, there may have been another issue at play. In the case of student C for example, it may simply have been too awkward for her to actually step into

the role of God. Not only because she doesn't assume that God actually speaks, but there might also be such a weighty quality to that idea, that it was safer to describe it than to enter into the role-play. Actually allowing herself to play God would have required a certain lowering of defenses that probably was too much for this person at this junction in her process.

> On the other hand, student A said the following during the third session:
>> "I think sometimes that God must sort of giggle a little bit and think, "God, they complicate this really so very much, I am just here, and they're making themselves crazy; I am just here and I'll always be here, for them… And they are wrestling with themselves so deeply over me, and it's simpler than that…""

This was actually the first time one of the students engaged in the way I had hoped for in the role-plays, giving voice to God's thoughts and feelings. Other than a natural development over the course of the three meetings, and a possible increased level of comfort, I am not sure why she was able to do so at this time in the process. Rereading the transcripts now, I wish I had followed up on this; I probably could have used it as a jumping off point to explore this further, and I am afraid I did not recognize that in the moment. I think one way this could have worked better, is for me to have prepared some scenarios ahead of time, possibly creating different scripts that might have helped the group jump in. But then again, that would have meant having them follow my scenario rather than creating their own. Another thing I would do differently (if I were to try role-play again) is to spend more time laying the foundation. I believe trying to do this in the first session may have been to soon, and that did not create a basis to work on for the next sessions. It probably would have been better to spend the first session on just the five-year old image, stories, and possibly some follow up on the initial set of questions. Another approach that might have been more helpful and more productive, would have

been to invite the students to speak to God as their five-year old selves, rather than asking them to play another person having the conversation.

All of those observations would lead me to ask myself the following questions if I were to do a similar project in the future: Am I willing and comfortable engaging in any of the activities that I am planning for the group? How aware am I of my own eagerness to supply answers? Can I sit with the silences during the session and not jump in? What does that bring up for me? How can I make even more room for the students to have/share their own experience without injecting my own? Am I a participant observer or a facilitator?

Goals

One of the original goals was to explore the nature of students' professional interactions as related to their current God image; I had hoped to find out whether/how their God image might color their professional interactions. I do not think I was able to explore this in concrete ways. As I mentioned earlier in this chapter, I believe that this may have been too much to expect given the limited time we had together. At this point I would say that this is not a goal for a short-term project like this. Just exploring God imagery and language, and inviting the students to become more comfortable talking about God and their experience of God, is probably more than enough for three 1½-hour sessions.

Use of texts

While I felt that reading the various texts (psalms, poetry) added to our exploration of God language, I was not sure in the end whether I used too many different texts throughout the sessions. All of the texts offered very different God imagery, which

fit the original goal of exposing the students to a variety of God images. However, it may have been too much exposure without adequate time to process in more depth. It may also have been an aspect of my own eagerness to share poetry and language that resonates with me. If I were to do this kind of a project again, I would think much more carefully about this, and ask myself what each of the texts would add to the students' experience. There seems to be a fine line between inviting people to explore God language in their own words and having them do so through other people's words.

And yet, in spite of all the challenges inherent in finding words to speak about God, we continue to do so. And we continue to do this within whatever limitations our language creates for us. What is the purpose of speaking of God? The words of Rabbi Elizabeth Sarah state it in a beautiful way:

> "When Moses met God in the wilderness, God eluded his grasp, but he did not miss the message of the encounter: Although he felt terrified and unequal to the task, he had to return to Egypt and lead the slaves out of bondage. The purpose of speaking with God is not to delude ourselves into thinking that we can finally capture the essence of God with our limited human language. The purpose of speaking of God is to acknowledge that God is, and will continue to be, in and around us, speaking to us, with us, and through our lives – and urging us to act." (Sarah, 1995)

This last sentence reminds me why I chose to do this project in the first place. I need to acknowledge that God is around us and speaks to us and through us. I care deeply about conveying that to my students and to all students who are being trained to become clergy and pastoral presences in their communities. This is the reason we owe it to ourselves and to our communities to offer our students as many opportunities as possible for speaking with God, and for speaking of God.

Appendix A   Responses to Questions 1 – 6, sent out before the first meeting

<u>Student A</u>

1.   What image or idea of God actually influences or affects your present behavior,

feelings and choices?

> Whatever I read about now, in Liturgy, or class studies, doesn't seem to effect
> what I believe deep in my core, which is sometimes too ethereal to put into words.
> I still feel God is everywhere and follows me, yet doesn't stir up the tiny details of
> every day. Yet at the same time, definitely responds to my prayer--so there's a
> paradox.

2.   Is God distant or near? How do your ideas about what God is like seem to help or

hinder your spiritual growth and maturity, your personal development and your sense of

self?

> God is near. I definitely believe that God does not micro-manage our lives;
> neither directly causing or healing our specific pains. But in an ethereal way, I
> think God provides something in response to our prayer that is conducive to
> healing. I do believe (and I know this can be a paradox) that there is a correlation,
> some sort of reward and punishment on this earth though. Even if that reward is
> just feeling good and positive and confident and loved. And even if the
> punishment is feeling tortured and indecisive and incomplete. I also am aware of
> how unfair this claim is, since there are wonderful, kind people who suffer
> terribly. It does not make rational sense, but I feel God has something to do with
> this life.

3.   How have you experienced God? What made you conclude that this was God?

> I have experienced God, and great power in that within the universe, whether it is
> speaking very intensely about someone and having that person appear to you
> again after many years, or having strange coincidences happen, I believe that is
> God also. In particular, about 4 years ago, my younger son fell into our pool in
> Florida. Luckily within a few minutes I found him floating, face up in the pool
> and was able to revive him, but if I was just a few minutes later, he would have
> died. For the next several weeks I felt God's presence hovering over the house,
> and with me. It was powerful and intimidating. I couldn't find the words to pray
> adequately. It changed my life. God was there. And I can't even say God was
> there to save Coby, as much as I think God was there and dealt with this incident
> to show me God was in my life and reward me for my belief and practice. To
> almost show me that God was there all the time, that miracles were everywhere,

but most of the time we didn't identify them.... because a true miracle (one where we say, ah truly, thank God) is enough to make your heart stop since it literally defies death. Maybe we shouldn't be asking for miracles so much for proof, God is with us all the time. When we ask to see that miracle, we are also requiring God to show us a very horrible tragedy. It is difficult, dangerous, and unnecessary. It is simpler to believe. Without question, God was with us that day.

4.   What kinds of experiences of God are you longing for? Why?

See above story

5.   How did parents, teachers, authority figures and friends present God?

I don't remember getting instruction from my parents about this. We talked about it in my Hebrew school, but it was all sort of nebulous until I started exploring Judaism more as an adult. We had a traditional wedding, but still, when I became a wife and mother, and gradually as a family we were returning to *Kashrut*, and Shabbat, and synagogue life; it started after my wedding and continued progressing. I discovered my adult sensations and opinions by myself, I don't think my parents did a good job with this at all, and I don't recall what I was led to believe in Hebrew school. It was a Conservative *shul*, so I seem to recall that it was just understood that we all had buy-in. Now my faith is very strong. Though my husband asks why, if my faith is so strong, why I don't hold more traditionally to *halachic* things, or what the Torah says. So I see how powerful our own personal tradition is: sometimes the answer to him is simply; because that's what I grew up doing. Perhaps it is the same for belief, and it takes a lot for an adult to spend the time and attention to reformulate what they think.

6.   How does your relationship with God impact your interactions with

congregants/students?

I believe, and I am confident in that. Sometimes I sense people's discomfort with their own beliefs or lack of; and it is interesting in how they feel they need to explain or justify. I have had congregants come up to me and ask if I have always had such a deep faith in God, or comment that I have such an intimate relationship with God. I think it's really interesting; I am wondering how I appear when I am on the *Bimah*, what am I doing or what do I look like that transmits that. Because often, in front of 200 people, I am trying to create an intimacy for myself to connect with the liturgy, to make it alive for them. But it brings up the question: how close is praying to pray; to actual prayer itself. Also having more and more experience praying regularly makes me more comfortable saying these words and really believing and understanding what they say.

Student B

1.   What image or idea of God actually influences or affects your present behavior,

feelings and choices?

> God seems to alternate for me between parent-like figure and a friend. I try to be
> a good person because I occasionally feel as the God is looking over my shoulder,
> keeping me in check. On the other hand, God feels like a friend. We talk more
> often when I'm frustrated (occasionally resulting in my getting pretty angry).

2.   Is God distant or near? How do your ideas about what God is like seem to help or

hinder your spiritual growth and maturity, your personal development and your sense of

self?

> God is both near and distant...it depends on the moment. In terms of spirituality, I
> feel very near to God during the *Mi Shebeirach*. It is a prayer that has always
> seemed very personal to me. For many years, I felt that my prayers to God were
> specifically protecting my grandfather. Of course, I was aware of his mortality,
> but I believed it all the same. In the past few years, I've come to realize that it has
> more so developed my relationship and my belief in God. The prayer does more
> to comfort me than to heal my grandpa.

3.   How have you experienced God? What made you conclude that this was God?

> My first clear memory of experiencing God was on Yom Kippur. Perhaps it
> wasn't an experience with God as much as an awareness of God's presence. It
> was the first time I was singing in the synagogue choir. This particular year the
> synagogue hired a cellist to play for Kol Nidre. I had sat through amazing
> rehearsals watching a congregant (who had been a member of the Philadelphia
> Orchestra) coach this musician. It was beautiful. The night of Kol Nidre, the
> cello played the first note and I was blown away. It was one of the most gorgeous
> sounds I had ever heard. How could God not be present in that sound?
>
> My other moment was in the Negev Desert. I was alone in […] at dusk into
> nighttime. I watched the stars come out and I have never seen such a gorgeous
> scene. I think that I experience God in the most pure moments.

4.   What kinds of experiences of God are you longing for? Why?

> I'm pretty happy with my experiences with God. I suppose that I wish I had
> experiences a little more frequently. And more when I'm praying.

5. How did parents, teachers, authority figures and friends present God?

   I really don't remember. I'm sure we must have talked about it, but I have no idea how the conversations went.

6. How does your relationship with God impact your interactions with

congregants/students?

   I think that because I have a pretty strong relationship with God, it makes me much more willing to talk about God. I teach second grade and we've had several conversations about God and praying. I absolutely love hearing what my students have to say about God. I have not had a conversation with congregants yet about God. I'm comfortable talking about it with young children, but not with adults yet.

Student C

1. What image or idea of God actually influences or affects your present behavior,

feelings and choices?

   I really don't like the term "God." I find that it has become a name, and so anthropomorphizes The Divine in some way. I prefer to think of God/The Divine as a force that exists in nature and especially between people. I seek out those moments of connection with others and, while not always successful, try to sense divinity in those interactions.

2. Is God distant or near? How do your ideas about what God is like seem to help or

hinder your spiritual growth and maturity, your personal development and your sense of

self?

   The Divine is always everywhere – we just have to want to sense it. We can heighten it or we can diminish it, but I don't know that we can extinguish it entirely. This is a concept of The Divine that I'm working with now, and it is helping me to better understand and connect with others and myself. Admittedly, that juvenile image of God on the cloud who controls all still creeps into my mind, and I find myself asking for things – safety, peace, etc, even though most of my brain and soul disagree with this image. It is frustrating that this still happens, and causes me to question my spiritual growth and maturity.

3. How have you experienced God? What made you conclude that this was God?

I experience The Divine in those quiet moments when I look around, either at nature or other people and think; wow. This is all part of something much bigger, and so beautiful. It hits me like a ton of bricks that there's some sort of force at work and just how mind-boggingly incredible it is.

4.   What kinds of experiences of God are you longing for? Why?

I long to know that it's all "worth it." I want to be told that yes, there is a purpose to life, and to my life in particular. I struggle with the 'big questions' and just want some reassurance that this life isn't all for not. I am resigned to the idea that there will not be some divine sign or message, and so I look for this message to come from others.

5.   How did parents, teachers, authority figures and friends present God?

I don't recall ever discussing God with anyone until university. Even then, I was just told to reject everything that I once believed about God and come up with my own image.

6.   How does your relationship with God impact your interactions with

congregants/students?

I try to find The Divine in my interactions with the prayers and with people. I have been told that when I am leading prayer, the congregants can feel that I am talking to God. I don't know if that's entirely true, but if it helps them to pray, then I guess it is a step in the right direction.

Appendix B – Drawings done on December 3, 2009

Student A

I   God when I was 5 years old…

(cloud)

II   God today…

III   God 20 years from now…

(newborn) infant

Student B

| I | God when I was 5 years old... |

| II | God today... |

is

| III | God 20 years from now... |

| I | God when I was 5 years old... |

Bearded man
on Clouds
(Looks like a
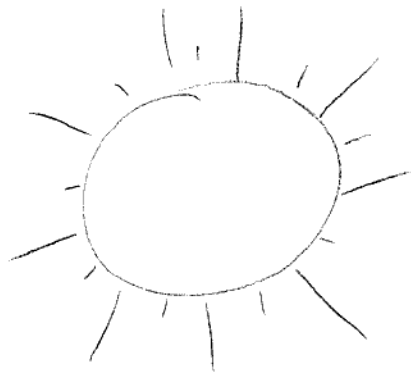Santa)

| II | God today... |

| III | God 20 years from now... |

Appendix C   Reflections on God 20 years from now, written at the end of the third meeting.

Student A

     To know more than you've ever know
     To feel the sound of music in your core
     To hear the heartbeat of a baby inside you
     To yearn for nothing except the happiness of others
     To feel cradled within the right groove in the universe, in the right direction
     And hear God's voice in sun shining on leaves and birds flying in formation.
     Children screaming in joy watching snow fall
     And other miracles every single day + moment
     To slow time, to gather wonderful moments,
     images that all reflect back at God's creation.
     Always the quiet small place of peace
     inside me that grows and allows me to see with open, clear eyes
     And I pray to love with as much clarity as I feel.

Student B

     For many years I have lived in the future.
     When I get to drive…
     When I get to vote…
     When I get to go to college…
     When I get to go to cantorial school…
     Living in the future is exhausting.
     I would rather live in the present.
     Live my life
     rather than
     plan my life.
     I don't know how my relationship with God
     will look in the future.
     I hope I will find more ways to appreciate God.
     I hope I will find more ways to talk to God.
     I hope I will find more ways to become closer with God.
     And in the future, I will concentrate on my present
     and develop my present relationship with God in whatever form it takes.

Student C

     Calm, warm, content
     Seeing beauty, feeling life, the big picture
     The days, the weeks, the months, the years –
     They just are, and we just are
     Gone are the "can't" s, gone are the "no" s
     My life, my time is and will be
     You, and we, do. You and we can. We just are.

Appendix D   Responses to Final Questions at the end of the third meeting

1. What have you discovered about God and/or your image of God through our

    meetings these past couple of weeks?

Student A:

More of an affirmation that most of us have similar images in our mind's eye. We

feel more similarly than different in the deep place in our heart – though we may use

different images to express it.

Student B:

Clarification, which I honestly did not think possible. Each week I left with an "Ah-

ha" moment. I learned that my thoughts about God when I was little haven't so much

changed as evolved. My image has matured. I originally said that God is "looking

over my shoulder, keeping me in check." I think I felt this also with "old man in the

sky" image. I <u>love</u> that the image has grown up with me. It's actually very

comforting.

Student C:

That my image of God, or what I want God to be, directly correlates to how I view

myself, or what/who I want to be.

2. Have any of your recent interactions been influenced in any way by the conversations

    we have been having?

Student A:

Something that is ongoing and more in the last few weeks is the sense to help people when I see they need assistance – just an awareness that I must fulfill my humanity by being a human being, and helping where I can.

Student B:

I have thought a lot about it in teaching 2nd grade. By thinking about how I felt at that age, I'm trying to be conscious of how they might be feeling.

Student C:

Yes! Simply the awareness of the different ways people view and accept God has opened me up to understanding.

3. What new insights and feelings do you have now, when you reread your original responses to questions 1-6?

Student A:

I'm considering more that perhaps God is less involved in the details of my life than I thought – (not yet certain). I need to take a more active role teaching my children about Judaism and how to feel about God, what to think Jewish history – everything! Or else they won't have a sense of anything in their core. But I still pray to pray, pray that I will be present in my prayers, sensitive to the words, music, and people.

Student B:

I'm realizing now that God is much more consistently present than I realized. I thought (and spoke) about God in moments. Those moments were just especially strong for me.

Student C:

I think that now that I have been able to articulate and talk about my image of

God, I am more comfortable using the word "God" as a description rather than a

name. I see some of the struggles I have on the paper and I am now more able to

accept those struggles and let them go …slowly

4: Other feedback?

Student B:

I loved these discussions. I left not only having learned/clarified a feeling about

God, but also learning about my self. Didn't expect that!

Student C:

This has been a wonderful experience. I only wish that I knew how to pull it into

the rest of my life – instead of letting it fall away. Thanks you for doing this, good

luck!

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