

Exploring Ultimate Questions
A Confirmation Curriculum

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Table of Contents

Rationale.....	3
Enduring Understandings, Essential Questions, Assessments.....	5
Curriculum Notes.....	6
First Lesson.....	9
First Lesson Materials.....	12
Second Lesson.....	13
Second Lesson Materials.....	15
Final Lesson.....	22
Four Additional Lesson Outlines.....	25

Religion is an answer to ultimate questions. The moment we become oblivious to ultimate questions, religion becomes irrelevant, and its crises sets in. The primary task of religious thinking is to rediscover the questions to which religion is an answer, to develop a degree of sensitivity to the ultimate questions which its ideas and acts are trying to answer. [emphasis in the original]¹

In many of his writings, Abraham Joshua Heschel is clear that he feels religion has lost its way. It would not surprise us to hear many people describe religion in such harsh terms. But to hear Abraham Joshua Heschel, perhaps the most important Jewish thinker of the twentieth century, describe religion as irrelevant is certainly a criticism that forces us to examine what is happening in religion today.

In his opinion, religion's crisis is that it no longer fulfills its function of exploring the "ultimate questions" that people ask every day. Religion has a purpose, which is to provide answers, or at least attempts at answers, to eternal questions. How can people find meaning and purpose in religion if it no longer fulfills its function? I believe that it cannot.

The bible scholar Moshe Greenberg agrees with Heschel. Alex Sinclair, when writing about Greenberg, writes:

Greenberg's understanding of religion sees it as a response to the innate spiritual needs of human beings. For humans are by their nature seekers of meaning, creatures who are impelled to find meaning for their existence in this world. Just as we must find food, water, and shelter, so too it is part of the human condition to search for existential meaning.²

This curriculum is designed to address ultimate questions.

But what are ultimate questions? Ultimate questions are unknowables that have been pondered for all of human existence. They are the fundamental questions that keep people coming back to religion. They are questions of:

The purpose of life; the struggle with death; the relationship between the visible and the invisible, the invisible and the meaningful, the individual and his community, his community and other communities; relationships within the family, between man and woman, parents and children; the relationship to the

¹ Heschel, Abraham Joshua. "Religion in a Free Society." *The Insecurity of Freedom; Essays on Human Existence*. New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 1966. 4. Print.

² Sinclair, Alex. "A Conservative Jewish Educational Approach to Postzionism." *Conservative Judaism* (2006): 47. Print.

trades and professions – how does one support oneself?; the relationship to success and failure, to hope and despair.³

These topics are certainly too large to cover in their entirety. Heschel would suggest that these fundamental topics of life should be the over-arching curriculum for an entire program, if not for all of Jewish education. Really these are the essential questions for all of Jewish life. Here I am starting small, with just a one-semester course, so that educators can begin to explore these topics without overhauling their entire program.

The topic of ultimate questions lends itself naturally to a confirmation curriculum in a supplementary school setting. Many confirmation programs, often in tenth grade, already focus on challenging the students to think deeply about religion or God. In some ways this curriculum is just a different way to look at those issues. But these are the questions that all people, and in this case, tenth grade students are asking. Framing the curriculum around these questions puts the student at the center of the learning and allows them to dictate the content of the discussions.

Through a deep exploration of ultimate questions, the students will connect with their Judaism and find it to be personally relevant. If Heschel is correct – that religion’s “primary task” is to help people find answers to these questions – then this curriculum is a first step at reinvigorating religion. It is my hope that this is a first step at helping religion out of the crisis in which it has put itself.

³ Fox, Seymour, Marom, Daniel, Scheffler, Israel. *Visions of Jewish Education*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003. 137. Print.

Enduring Understanding <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • “Religion is an answer to ultimate questions.” • Human beings continue to seek out answers to ultimate questions. 	Essential Questions <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • What are the ultimate questions that I am asking? • How can Judaism help me to find answers for the ultimate questions that I am asking?
Know-Do-Believe-Belong <p><i>Know:</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Students can identify certain ultimate questions and the connection those ultimate questions have to their lives. <p><i>Do:</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Students will present their thoughts about an ultimate question during the confirmation service through a chosen medium (eg mini sermon, song, music, art). • Students will have the opportunity to help lead an adult education course about personal theology. <p><i>Believe:</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Students will believe that Judaism is both relevant and meaningful to their lives and the questions that they ask. <p><i>Belong:</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Students will connect to each other through their collective inquiry into the ultimate questions. • Students will find their relationship with Judaism through the understanding that it can offer incite about life’s ultimate questions. 	

Curriculum Notes

Co-Construction

One of the more unique features of this curriculum is the opportunity for student input into the topics that will be discussed. In order for the students to properly engage in the ultimate question the question needs to be their own. By 10th grade you should find that many of the ultimate questions that the students ponder are the same ultimate questions that have been pondered for all of human history. To that end, this curriculum attempts to predict which questions the students will generate and has lessons for those ultimate questions. However, these lessons are not a mandatory part of the curriculum and should only be used if they relate to the questions that the students generate.

The only set lessons in the curriculum are the first two lessons and the final lesson. The first lesson is an introduction to the idea of ultimate questions and has the students generating ultimate questions that will become the topics for the remainder of the lessons. The final lesson is a wrap-up lesson that is needed to engage the students in the value of asking ultimate questions. The set lesson that might seem out of place is the second lesson, which explores the nature of God. The students might generate this question on their own but even if they do not the topic should be engaged. Many of the future lessons in the curriculum will naturally return to the topic of God and exploring this ultimate question will be important for future discussions.

Atheists

It is very likely that any 10th grade class will have at least one atheist. While any teacher should be sensitive to student beliefs in any curriculum particular attention should be paid to any atheists in the group during this curriculum. This curriculum assumes the existence of God. As this is a Jewish curriculum it is important that it upholds central Jewish beliefs such as a belief in God. However that does not mean the atheist does not have a place in the classroom. Just as atheists have a place in our community so too does the atheist have a place in this curriculum. Often atheists will have well thought out beliefs and will add a unique perspective to the discussion. Every effort should be made to help them feel part of the community.

Building Community

The topics that are discussed in this curriculum are heavy and can be sensitive. It is possible that this group of students has been learning together for a long time but it should not be taken for granted that they are close and comfortable. Particular attention should be paid to building a safe community where the students feel comfortable sharing serious thoughts about deep subjects.

This is particularly important when the students are generating ultimate questions. While a question might not seem “ultimate” to the teacher that does not mean that it isn’t of primary importance to the asking student or students in the room. Often questions that might seem less than ultimate are in fact ultimate questions framed in a way that the student can understand. For example, a question about going to college may also be a question about finding one’s place in the world. These more practical questions should be accepted and possibly reframed but never rejected.

Synthetic-Conventional Learners

James Fowler, when discussing his stages of faith development, says that this group needs: ...mirrors – mirrors to keep tabs on this week's growth, to become accustomed to the new angularity of a face and to the new curves or reach of a body. But in a new way the young person also looks for mirrors of another sort. He or she needs the eyes and ears of a few trusted others in which to see the image of *personality* emerging and to get a hearing for the new feelings, insights, anxieties and commitments that are forming and seeking expression.⁴

Building a community amongst the class is an important part of this curriculum as it gives the students the mirrors that they need to reflect on their beliefs. However, this curriculum's content can also act as a needed mirror for this group. It allows them the opportunity to reflect upon, explain and perhaps defend their spiritual viewpoints often by looking at the viewpoints of others. Although they do not interact with the various authors of the differing points of view they are still in dialogue with them.

Fowler calls the stage of faith development in which most students will be during this curriculum Synthetic-Conventional. The students are taking the faith conventions of their many interactions and attempting to synthesize them. If this curriculum is misunderstood it could be taken in a direction that is impossible for students in this stage. These students are not ready to create their own beliefs *ex-nihilo*. However, they are ready to look at many differing points of view and make them into a whole that works for them.

Because of the stage in which these students are in they are going to be looking for decisive answers. They are going to push the teacher to simply tell them what the answer is to the ultimate question being discussed. It is going to take a gifted teacher to resist the temptation to provide the students with any authoritative answer and rather give them the opportunity to synthesize their own answer from the points of view with which they are presented.

Confirmation Project

This curriculum is designed to be for confirmation students who typically participate in varying degrees in a Shavuot/Confirmation service towards the end of the school year. Often students will write a short sermon about a topic that was studied during the year and deliver that sermon during the service. This curriculum, and specifically one of the evidences for understanding, is intended to fit into that model. The students will demonstrate knowledge of the material by creating something that can be presented during the confirmation service.

However time and guidance must be allotted for the creation of such a project. That is not written into this curriculum, but should be taken into account based on each congregation's unique program. This might mean that the students meet twice a week and dedicate once to the creation of a project and once to course material. This might mean that the students work on

⁴ Fowler, James W. "Stage 3. Synthetic-Conventional Faith." *Stages of Faith*. New York: HarperCollins, 1981. 151. Print.

their projects and review them with a professional outside of class time. This will need to be determined by the confirmation team based on staffing and timing availabilities.

Written Reflection

Each session ends with a written reflection. The students are asked to reflect on the topic of the day either by responding to a given prompt or a personal prompt. There is no length requirement; students should be free to write as little or as much as is needed for them to express their thoughts. All entries will be written in a provided composition pad and the teacher will read all entries unless the student specifically designates that an entry not be read. To request that an entry not be read a student should simply fold the page(s) in half.

Often times the words “diary” or “journal” can have a particular stigma that is associated with them. This can limit the students in their thinking or, at worst, turn them off to the practice in general. Being aware of this the teacher might prefer to use the words “written reflection” instead.

First Lesson – What Are Ultimate Questions?

Goal The goal of the first lesson is to give the students a chance to learn who the other members of the class are as well as give them an introduction to the concept of Ultimate Questions. By the end of the lesson the students will feel more comfortable with the other members of the class and will understand what an Ultimate Question is.	
Core Concepts <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • It is part of human nature to contemplate ultimate questions. • Religion has traditionally been a way to explore and perhaps answer ultimate questions. 	Essential Questions <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • What is the meaning and purpose of religion? • What are my ultimate questions? • Is it useful or necessary to think about ultimate questions?
Timetable 00:00 – 00:10 Welcome 00:15 – 00:30 What is the Purpose of Religion? 00:30 – 00:50 Ultimate Questions 00:50 – 00:60 Wrap-up & Written Reflection	Materials <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Whiteboard and markers • Projector & computer • <u>Dogma</u> DVD or internet connection • Picture file on computer • Pens (1/student) • Composition Pads (1/student)

Procedure

00:00 – 00:15 Welcome to Confirmation

As the students arrive the teacher should engage in an informal check-in. The teacher should go around and say hello to students, find out how their week is going or went, ask about school or their family, etc. After most students have arrived the teacher should begin by welcoming everyone to the class and to their confirmation year. Assuming that everyone is familiar with each other everyone should go around and say their name and how they are different after break. The teacher should be included in this.

Just like the students are coming to this year differently so too is the year inherently different- “How is this year in Hebrew school different from previous years?” This is an entryway to talk about confirmation. Perhaps the students have the opportunity to learn from the rabbi or learn in a special space. The content of the curriculum is different and they have the opportunity to shape how the curriculum progresses. Later in the lesson they will be determining the topics of the future lessons. Confirmation is about choosing to accept the role Judaism will play in their lives and also their ability to shape and influence Judaism.⁵

Discussion Questions

- How is this year different?
- What is confirmation?

⁵ Useful resources as to the history and meaning of confirmation can be found on the internet. A good place to get started is: <http://judaism.about.com/od/barandbatmitzvah/f/confirmation.htm>

- Is it important?
- Are you able to influence and shape Judaism?

00:15 – 00:30 What is the Purpose of Religion?

As the students begin to understand the purpose of confirmation they should begin wondering about religion in general. Raise the point and then tell them introduce two competing viewpoints of religion in order to get them thinking. First play the movie clip from Dogma where Matt Damon, playing an angel, is talking to a nun about religion.⁶ Afterwards introduce the Abraham Joshua Heschel quote below and project the image below as expressing Heschel's beliefs.

Religion is an answer to ultimate questions. The moment we become oblivious to ultimate questions, religion becomes irrelevant, and its crisis sets in. The primary task of religious thinking is to rediscover the questions to which religion is an answer, to develop a degree of sensitivity to the ultimate questions which its ideas and acts are trying to answer.



Give the students a couple minutes to think silently or write down their thoughts. Then ask the students to turn to a partner and discuss the movie clip, Heschel quote and image. After they have had a couple minutes to discuss bring the class back together to share with the group.

Discussion Questions

- How do these different viewpoints compare?
- Do you agree or disagree with any of them and why?
- What do you think is the purpose of religion?

⁶ The movie clip can be found towards the beginning of the movie when actors Matt Damon and Ben Affleck are in an airport or here: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7hfFyGtbXwM>

00:30 – 00:50 Ultimate Questions

Explain that this course is strongly influenced by Heschel's thought that religion needs to answer ultimate questions. Explore the concept of ultimate questions and then generate a list of the students' ultimate questions. Write the responses on the board.

Discussion Questions

- What are ultimate questions?
- What is the definition for an ultimate question?
- Do you think that religion's purpose is to answer ultimate questions?
- Do you think that other people ask the same ultimate questions as you do?
- How does the "official" class list of ultimate questions relate to your ultimate questions?

00:50 – 00:60 Wrap-up & Written Reflection

Wrap-up the class by reviewing the main points of what was covered, thoughts to ponder and the topic of the next session then introduce the concept of written reflection. The prompt for the day is: "Which ultimate question generated today that isn't yours interests you the most and which is the most difficult?"

What is Religion?

by Abraham Joshua Heschel

Religion is an answer to ultimate questions. The moment we become oblivious to ultimate questions, religion becomes irrelevant, and its crisis sets in. The primary task of religious thinking is to rediscover the questions to which religion is an answer, to develop a degree of sensitivity to the ultimate questions which its ideas and acts are trying to answer.

Religious thinking is an intellectual endeavor out of the depths of reason. It is a source of cognitive insight into the ultimate issues of human existence. Religion is more than a mood or a feeling.⁷

It [religion] is an answer to the ultimate problems of the individual and of society.⁸

⁷ Heschel, Abraham Joshua. "Religion in a Free Society." *The Insecurity of Freedom; Essays on Human Existence*. New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 1966. 4. Print.

⁸ Heschel, Abraham Joshua. "Jewish Education." *The Insecurity of Freedom; Essays on Human Existence*. New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 1966. 233. Print.

Second Lesson – What is the Nature of God?

Goal The goal of this lesson is for the students to begin to understand how they feel about God or the concept of God. This lesson will most likely be reflected upon throughout the duration of the curriculum. By the end of the lesson the students will be able to begin articulating their feelings about God.	
Core Concepts <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Our understanding of God and the role that God plays in our lives is completely intertwined with all ultimate questions. • Our understanding of God and the role that God plays in our lives is something that is constantly in flux throughout our lifespan. 	Essential Questions <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Does God exist? • What is the nature of God?
Timetable 00:00 – 00:05 Set Induction 00:05 – 00:20 Introducing the Topic of God 00:20 – 00:50 God Imagery in Our Text 00:50 – 01:00 Written Reflection	Materials <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Intake form • Pens • Computer/projector • Images of God statements • Text handouts • Artwork handouts • Student composition pads

Procedure

00:00 – 00:05 Set Induction: Belief and Practice Intake

The students will fill out an intake form about their personal beliefs and practices. This intake will not be discussed and should be sealed in an envelope with the student's name when it is completed. While it will not be discussed it will help them think about God and how they relate to God in order to help generate discussion later in the lesson. There are no right answers on this form. It will be redistributed to the students at the end of the curriculum.

00:05 – 00:20 Introducing the Topic of God

The topic for this lesson is God. Before beginning assure all students that regardless of whether they believe in God or not their opinions are still important and valued in this setting. Project the images of God statements and ask them to react to what they see.

Discussion Questions

- Which statement stands out to you and why?
- Which statement most resonates with your belief in God and why?
- Which statement least resonates with your belief in God and why?
- How do you feel about God statements?

00:20 – 00:50 God Imagery in Our Text

Working in groups of 3 or 4 the students will look at a piece of sacred text that portrays an image of God and discuss.

Discussion Questions

- What type of God is being portrayed here?
- What are some of the personality traits of this God?
- Does this image/portrayal of God match your image/portrayal? How?

After they have had time to discuss give them a copy of the piece of artwork that corresponds to the text they just read and discussed.

Discussion Questions

- Does the artwork match the image that you had in your head? How?
- Do you think the artist accurately portrayed what the text was trying to say?
- Is there a difference between capturing the image of the text and capturing the nature of God the text was trying to convey?
- Does this artist capture one or both? Explain.

Bring all the groups back together to share what they have been learning in their small group.

Discussion Questions

- How do these texts and this artwork shape our thoughts on God?
- How do they align or misalign with your feelings about God?

00:50 – 01:00 Written Reflection

The prompt for today is: “Of the images that we have explored today, which is the closest to what you believe?”



Isaiah 6 – Tiffany Studios

Discussion Questions

- Does the artwork match the image that you had in your head? How?
- Do you think the artist accurately portrayed what the text was trying to say?
- Is there a difference between capturing the image of the text and capturing the nature of God the text was trying to convey?
- Does this artist capture one or both? Explain.



Ezekiel 1 – William Blake

Discussion Questions

- Does the artwork match the image that you had in your head? How?
- Do you think the artist accurately portrayed what the text was trying to say?
- Is there a difference between capturing the image of the text and capturing the nature of God the text was trying to convey?
- Does this artist capture one or both? Explain.



Ezekiel 1 – Raphael

Discussion Questions

- Does the artwork match the image that you had in your head? How?
- Do you think the artist accurately portrayed what the text was trying to say?
- Is there a difference between capturing the image of the text and capturing the nature of God the text was trying to convey?
- Does this artist capture one or both? Explain.



Exodus 3 – Sebastien Bourdon

Discussion Questions

- Does the artwork match the image that you had in your head? How?
- Do you think the artist accurately portrayed what the text was trying to say?
- Is there a difference between capturing the image of the text and capturing the nature of God the text was trying to convey?
- Does this artist capture one or both? Explain.



Psalm 139 – Irv Davis

Discussion Questions

- Does the artwork match the image that you had in your head? How?
- Do you think the artist accurately portrayed what the text was trying to say?
- Is there a difference between capturing the image of the text and capturing the nature of God the text was trying to convey?
- Does this artist capture one or both? Explain.



Genesis 18 - Gerbrandt Jansz van den Eeckhout

Discussion Questions

- Does the artwork match the image that you had in your head? How?
- Do you think the artist accurately portrayed what the text was trying to say?
- Is there a difference between capturing the image of the text and capturing the nature of God the text was trying to convey?
- Does this artist capture one or both? Explain.



Genesis 32 – Chagall, Marc

Discussion Questions

- Does the artwork match the image that you had in your head? How?
- Do you think the artist accurately portrayed what the text was trying to say?
- Is there a difference between capturing the image of the text and capturing the nature of God the text was trying to convey?
- Does this artist capture one or both? Explain.



HANDOUT 1.1: BELIEF AND PRACTICE INTAKE

Please mark D = disagree with the statement, A = agree with the statement, or U = unsure about the statement.

Belief

- | | |
|---|----------------------|
| 1. Human beings can experience God personally. | D_____ A_____ U_____ |
| 2. God controls what happens in the world. | D_____ A_____ U_____ |
| 3. God is all-knowing. | D_____ A_____ U_____ |
| 4. God cares about human beings. | D_____ A_____ U_____ |
| 5. God can be pleased or displeased by our behavior. | D_____ A_____ U_____ |
| 6. Fulfilling mitzvot matters. | D_____ A_____ U_____ |
| 7. God created the world. | D_____ A_____ U_____ |
| 8. There is no God. | D_____ A_____ U_____ |
| 9. Prayer can change the outcome of events. | D_____ A_____ U_____ |
| 10. Prayer enhances my relationship with God. | D_____ A_____ U_____ |
| 11. Performing rituals and celebrating/observing holy days
bring me closer to God. | D_____ A_____ U_____ |
| 12. The Torah is inspired by God. | D_____ A_____ U_____ |
| 13. God has the power to change the human condition. | D_____ A_____ U_____ |



Practice

- | | |
|---|----------------------|
| 1. I pray. | D_____ A_____ U_____ |
| 2. I perform Shabbat, holiday, and/or daily rituals. | D_____ A_____ U_____ |
| 3. I study Torah and other Jewish texts. | D_____ A_____ U_____ |
| 4. I am engaged in <i>tikkun olam</i> . | D_____ A_____ U_____ |
| 5. As God's partner, I continue the work of Creation. | D_____ A_____ U_____ |
| 6. I communicate with God. | D_____ A_____ U_____ |
| 7. I have experienced God's presence. | D_____ A_____ U_____ |
| 8. I work on behalf of my fellow human beings. | D_____ A_____ U_____ |
| 9. My actions make no difference in the world. | D_____ A_____ U_____ |
| 10. I perform Jewish acts. | D_____ A_____ U_____ |
| 11. I am involved in the Jewish community. | D_____ A_____ U_____ |
| 12. I consider Jewish values in my decision making. | D_____ A_____ U_____ |
| 13. I wrestle with God. | D_____ A_____ U_____ |

Final Lesson – What is the Meaning of Life?

Goal The goal of this lesson is for the students to begin understanding what they feel is the meaning of life. As the quintessential ultimate question, “what is the meaning of life?” provides the students with a good closing to the course while also highlighting that the work of ultimate questions continues past this moment. Through the exploration of this question the students will understand that the act of contemplating ultimate questions can shape and direct their life.	
Core Concepts <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • It is part of human nature to contemplate ultimate questions. • Religion has traditionally been a way to explore and perhaps answer ultimate questions. • My life is improved and given meaning by actively thinking about ultimate questions. 	Essential Questions <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • What is the meaning of life? Why are we here? • How does thinking about ultimate questions shape my life? • How have I been changed by this course?
Timetable 00:00 – 00:15 Monty Python’s Meaning of Life 00:15 – 00:30 Googling “Meaning of Life” 00:30 – 00:45 Revisiting the Intake Form 00:45 – 01:00 Written Reflection	Materials <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Intake form • Students’ original intake forms • Pens • Computer/projector • Monty Python’s <u>The Meaning of Life</u>

Procedure

00:00 – 00:15 Monty Python’s Meaning of Life

Introduce the topic for today session and explain that at the quintessential ultimate question it will help us wrap up the course. Play a clip from Monty Python’s The Meaning of Life (00:28:32 - 00:33:00). This is an example of one opinion of the meaning of life. Unpack the movie clip and invite the students to offer alternative viewpoints.

00:15 – 00:30 Googling “Meaning of Life”

Remind the students of the image that we looked during the first lesson by projecting it for them.



Either on a central projected screen or on the students' personal devices (smartphone, iPad or laptop) ask them to do a Google image search for "what is the meaning of life." Discuss the images that appear on the screen and note the many repetitions of a man on high or a wise man giving answers or not being able to give answers. Eventually settle on and discuss the image below:



"I climb all this way, and you tell me *THAT'S* the meaning of life?!"

Discussion Questions

- Do you notice any similarities between many of these images and if so, why do you suppose that is?
- Is there anything that surprises you about any of the images?
- Does it surprise you how many cartoons have been drawn about this subject and why or why not?
- How do you explain that so many of the images have a man on high or a wise man being petitioned for answers? Does he usually have an answer?
- What is silly or ridiculous about asking a wise man for answers?
- Why do you think it is important that we search for these answers ourselves?
- Do you think that you have been changed by the process of exploring ultimate questions?

00:30 – 00:45 Revisiting the Intake Form

The students will retake the intake form that was first looked at in the second lesson. Return the students' original forms to them and ask them to compare the two.

Discussion Questions

- What are some of the similarities or differences between the two forms and how do you account for that?
- Does anything surprise you when comparing these two forms?
- Do you think that this course had an effect on your beliefs and if so, what was that effect?

00:45 – 01:00 Written Reflection

There are two prompts:

1. What is your meaning of life?
2. Do you find it worthwhile to explore ultimate questions and why?

Four Additional Lesson Outlines

What Happens When You Die?

Goal

The goal of this lesson is for the students to be exposed to different beliefs about the afterlife. By the end of the lesson the students will begin formulating their own idea of afterlife based on the examples that were given in class.

Core Concept

- Judaism has multiple beliefs about an afterlife.

Essential Question

- What happens when you die?

Timetable

00:00 – 00:25 Sum by David Eagleman

00:25 – 00:40 G'vurot

00:40 – 00:50 Drawing Activity

00:50 – 01:00 Written Reflection

Materials

- Copies of Sum⁹
- Copies of G'vurot
- Student composition pads
- Pens

Procedure

00:00 – 00:25 Sum by David Eagleman

After the teacher welcomes the students the students will be broken into chevrotot and given a different chapter (2-3 pages) from the book Sum by David Eagleman. Each of these chapters tells a story of a different afterlife that was created in the author's imagination. Each chevrotuta will read the story and discuss based on the discussion questions at the bottom of the story. The group will come back together and share not just the idea of the story but how well the afterlife depicted resonated with them. The teacher will keep notes on the board of any common themes of things that resonate well or do not resonate.

(An alternative would be for each group to act out their afterlife in order to engage kinesthetic learners.)

00:25 – 00:40 G'vurot

The class will have a text study of the G'vurot. Using the traditional version of the prayer the students will be exposed to the idea of Jewish resurrection and Olam Habah. The teacher will explain that Judaism puts an emphasis on life but still has beliefs about the afterlife. This activity will give them a Jewish perspective on afterlife.

00:40 – 00:50 Drawing Activity

The students will discuss in which type of afterlife they believe. After beginning the discussion the students will each draw a picture that depicts their personal afterlife. This can be a scene from that afterlife or a more abstract representation.

00:50 – 01:00 Written Reflection

The prompt for today is: "Paint a picture with words of what your afterlife looks like."

⁹ Eagleman, David. *Sum: Forty Tales from the Afterlives*. New York: Vintage, 2010. Print.

How Do You Determine Right and Wrong?

Goal The goal of this lesson is for the students to understand the relative nature of right and wrong. By the end of the lesson the students will appreciate that Judaism affects what they consider to be right and wrong and that other cultures and people may have a different understanding.	
Core Concepts <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Judaism has a set right and wrong that influences our world.• Many, if not all, of our distinctions between right and wrong are relative.	Essential Questions <ul style="list-style-type: none">• How do you determine right and wrong?• Are there any universal rights and wrongs?
Timetable 00:00 – 00:30 Settlements in the West Bank 00:30 – 00:50 <u>Sum</u> by David Eagleman 00:50 – 01:00 Written Reflection	Materials <ul style="list-style-type: none">• West Bank Resources• Internet• White board• Copies of “Egalitaire”¹⁰• Student composition pads• Pens

Procedure

00:00 – 00:30 Settlements in the West Bank

After the teacher welcomes the students they will explore the Israeli/Palestinian conflict through the issue of new housing being built in the West Bank. The teacher will introduce the topic and might give background information. The class should be broken up into two groups (perhaps four if it is a large group). Each group should be given information about Israeli building in the West Bank or they can do their own research on the Internet. However, each group should be given information from either the Israeli side or the Palestinian side. If the students are doing their own research then they should only use websites that the teacher tells the group to use (e.g. JPost, Al-Jazeera, etc). They should be doing research in order to understand the issue from the perspective of that group.

After each group has completed their research they will reconvene to discuss the situation. Each group will have the opportunity to present their findings and the teacher will write notes on the board. Afterwards the class will unpack what they have learned and compare the two sides. The conclusion is that each side has meaningful and valid points and it is difficult to say which side is right and which side is wrong; right and wrong are concepts that are relative to culture and experience. The class will generate other examples of things that might be morally relative.

(An alternative would be for the students to have a formal debate with each student taking a side and preparing arguments.)

¹⁰ Eagleman, David. "Egalitaire." *Sum: Forty Tales from the Afterlives*. New York: Vintage, 2010. 5-7. Print.

00:30 – 00:50 Sum by David Eagleman (“Egalitaire”)

Everyone will be given a copy of the story “Egalitaire” to read silently to him or herself. The story depicts a God who lets everyone into heaven because she notes that everyone has suffered and everyone deserves to be admitted. This story relates to the previous activity because it shows examples where there is more than one right and wrong. It adds a new element when it introduces God into the equation and makes the students think about an eternal morality. It addresses the essential question, “Are there any universal rights and wrongs?”

00:50 – 01:00 Written Reflection

The prompt for today is: “Do you believe that there are any universal rights or wrongs? If yes, what are they and if not then how do you determine right from wrong?”

Why Is There Evil in the World?

Goal The goal of this lesson is for the students to contemplate God's role in evil. The students will spend time exploring ancient and modern disasters and try to make sense of the idea that God is part of those terrible events.	
Core Concept <ul style="list-style-type: none">• God has a role in evil.	Essential Question <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Why is there evil in the world?
Timetable 00:00 – 00:10 “A Prayer for the Days of Awe” 00:10 – 00:50 Noah and the Flood 00:50 – 01:00 Written Reflection	Materials <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Copies of “A Prayer for the Days of Awe”¹¹• Copies of the Genesis text• Student Composition Pads• Pens

Procedure

00:00 – 00:10 “A Prayer for the Days of Awe” by Elie Weisel

After the teacher welcomes the students they will receive a copy of “A Prayer for the Days of Awe” by Elie Weisel. This article, published in the New York Times, is Wiesel’s open invitation to make up with God over the atrocities of Auschwitz. It introduces the idea of being angry for God over what happened in the Holocaust, which implicates God as being involved. The article will get the students thinking about what God’s role was in the Holocaust and what God’s role is in other horrible things.

00:10 – 00:50 Noah and the Flood

The students will read and explore the story of Noah and the flood. There is an option to read the whole story but the necessary material is from Genesis 6:9-22. In this passage God clearly explains that he is responsible for the flood that will come and destroy the earth. The students have probably never thought very much about the fact that a lot of people died by God’s hand and what that means for Judaism. This will be connected to modern day floods (Haiti and Japan) and then to other natural disasters. The students will explore God’s role in “natural evil” and then they will explore God’s role in “man made evil.”

(Possible additions: (1) Have the students look at the prayer in the Amidah that asks God to destroy all the wicked and unpack God’s role if he follows through. (2) Have the students look at other flood stories from other cultures of that time period.)

00:50 – 01:00 Written Reflection

The prompt for today is: “Does God have a role in evil and if so, how do we justify praying to a God that can be involved in such terrible acts?”

¹¹ Wiesel, Elie. "A Prayer for the Days of Awe." *The New York Times* 2 Oct. 1997. *www.nytimes.com*. Web.

Ayeka? Where Are You?

Goal The goal of this lesson is for the students to contemplate their place in the world and how it is changing. By the end of the lesson the students will have an idea of where they fit in spiritually and how that relates to the big picture.	
Core Concept <ul style="list-style-type: none">• In order to move forward spiritually you need to know where you are.	Essential Questions <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Ayeka? Where Are You?• What is my place in the world?
Timetable 00:00 – 00:20 Text Study 00:20 – 00:50 College Stories 00:50 – 01:00 Written Reflection	Materials <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Copies of text study sheets• Copies of college stories¹²• Student composition pads• Pens

Procedure

00:00 – 00:20 Text Study

In chevrotot the students will review the story of Adam and Eve centering on Genesis 3:9. Each chevuta will take a moment to note any details that they did not realize before or any questions that they have. The group will come back together and discuss the story and focus in on God's question to Adam – Ayeka – in Genesis 3:9. The question, "Where are you?" seems an absurd one for God to ask since God obviously knows exactly where Adam and Eve are. It is clear that God is not asking for physical location but perhaps something more like spiritual location. The fact that this question is the first question in the Torah shows us the primacy of this question. A discussion about the phrase, "know before whom you stand" should also enter into the conversation.

00:20 – 00:50 College Stories

The students will each be given a story about someone that went to college and found it was not what he or she expected. The students can read these stories silently and then the group will come back together to discuss. The question of "Where are you?" resonates for 10th grade students in a way that explores their place in the world. They are beginning to think about college, which is a significant shift in status and role. The people in the college stories all had expectations about what their experience would be like but more importantly they all had expectations about who they were. That is an important first step into knowing what you want to get out of college and life, even if you discover that your expectations about yourself were not accurate.

00:50 – 01:00 Written Reflection

The prompt for today is: "Before whom do you stand? To whom are you responsible?"

¹² "Transition Tales: Stories About Leaving Home To Go To College." *Expert College Admission Essay and Personal Statement Editing, College Counseling*. Web. 22 Apr. 2011. <<http://www.college-admission-essay.com/collegetransitiontales.html>>.