



## **Youth Education Handbook**

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# Welcome

On behalf of the teaching staff and the Youth Education Committee, welcome to Sunday School at Kol Hadash Humanistic Congregation! We're looking forward to another exciting and rewarding year of learning together.

Classes from Kindergarten through 10<sup>th</sup> grade meet each Sunday from September to May, 9:30–11:30 at Deerfield High School, 1959 Waukegan Road. Children in the year before Kindergarten (PreK) are invited to join the K/1<sup>st</sup> class once a month to learn about Jewish holidays and participate in all-school celebrations. We also offer a Parent/Tot program for children 0-3.

The entire school comes together each week at 11:10 for music and other cultural programs. Parents are encouraged to attend.

To prepare for a Bar or Bat Mitzvah, students complete a two-year program in Hebrew and Jewish studies, followed by private tutoring in their Torah portion and commentary or other project. A summary of our B'nai Mitzvah program is in the handbook; for more details, see our separate booklet, *Kol Hadash B'nai Mitzvah Guide*.

In 2005 we started a new program for teens, the Kol Hadash Youth Group. The group is open to any student in 8<sup>th</sup>-12<sup>th</sup> grades. Our advisor is Kol Hadash member Courtney Fleisher. The youth group meets monthly throughout the school year and decides its own programming. They run the children's activity table at Sukkot, plan and run our Purim Carnival, and also raise funds to attend the Society for Humanistic Judaism's annual Teen Conclave.

This handbook was created to answer your questions about youth education at Kol Hadash. Please keep it for reference throughout the year. If you have questions or concerns at any time during the year, please call or email me. On Sunday mornings, you can reach me at my cell phone number.

Shalom!

Dawn Friedman  
Office 847-347-3003, C 847-997-8931,  
education@KolHadash.com

Dear Parents:

I am thrilled to welcome you to a new year with Kol Hadash. I call myself a Sunday School "lifer"—attended from kindergarten all the way through high school, taught when I was in college, and now as a rabbi I get to go for the rest of my career! We are partners in a very important project—the education of your children to be self-confident, ethical, Jewishly knowledgeable and committed, and active participants in our congregation. This year, I will be visiting your children in their classrooms, singing with them in music, working with them on their Shabbat services, and seeing YOU in adult education and Sunday School programs. If you ever have any kvetches (complaints) or kvells (outpourings of pride), please let me know—I'm glad to talk.

Once again, welcome and welcome back!

Rabbi Adam Chalom  
(847) 602-4500                      rabbichalom@KolHadash.com

# Humanistic Judaism

Kol Hadash is part of the worldwide movement of Secular Humanistic Judaism; we are affiliated with the Society for Humanistic Judaism ([www.shj.org](http://www.shj.org)), the national organization of our movement.

- We celebrate being Jewish through our human-focused philosophy of life.
- We believe that human beings possess the intelligence and wisdom to determine the purpose and course of their lives
- We honor Jewish tradition and heritage through cultural and educational exploration, and we celebrate holidays and life-cycle events together.
- We seek positive Jewish connections relevant to our everyday lives.

Kol Hadash empowers its members to make independent choices, to live lives of integrity, and to create positive change in the world. We believe that individual responsibility shapes lives of significance and dignity. We encourage our children to value their Jewish identity and to feel confident in their ability to think for themselves.

## Goals for Youth Education at Kol Hadash

At our founding in 2001, the Youth Education Committee and Sunday School staff developed the following goals for education at Kol Hadash. The guiding principles are reviewed annually and are foremost in our minds as we prepare for the coming school year:

- To develop critical thinkers and life-long active learners
- To foster an understanding of the many philosophical choices a student has and the development of a clear, critical rationale for one's individual choices
- To develop cultural literacy in Jewish heritage
- To provide information and skills that allows students to feel comfortable with their Jewish identity
- To provide an atmosphere that boosts self-confidence
- To foster a sense of community

## **Class Shabbat Services**

Each class from Kindergarten through 8<sup>th</sup> grade will create and lead a Shabbat service during the school year. Class Shabbat services involve students in congregational life outside Sunday School and allow them to share their knowledge and ideas with the congregation. Rabbi Chalom will visit classes to help them create their services.

All Shabbat services are held on Friday evenings at the Heller Nature Center, 2821 Ridge Road, Highland Park. Shabbat services for Grade K–5 will begin at 7:15 pm; services for grades 6–8 will be at 8:00. Each service is followed by an oneg Shabbat hosted by the class families. The K-3<sup>rd</sup> and 4<sup>th</sup>/5<sup>th</sup> grade services are family services; the 6<sup>th</sup> and 7<sup>th</sup>/8<sup>th</sup> grade services are intended for adults and older students (6<sup>th</sup> grade and up).

Families are expected to help at the Shabbat service and oneg for their student's class; more information will come later in the year.

See the school calendar for class Shabbat services this year.

## **Confirmation**

Confirmation marks the graduation from Sunday School for 10<sup>th</sup> graders as the congregation welcomes them into the adult community. The Confirmation service is created by the 9<sup>th</sup>/10<sup>th</sup> grade class under the direction of teacher David Hirsch and Rabbi Chalom. Each confirmant gives a presentation; 9<sup>th</sup> graders prepare a shorter speech. The Confirmation service is held on a Friday evening in May at the Heller Nature Center.

In order to be confirmed, students must be enrolled in Kol Hadash's Sunday School by 7<sup>th</sup> grade. New students in grades 9 or 10 may attend the class at the discretion of the teacher and the Youth Education Director.

# What You Need to Know

## **Registration**

Membership in the congregation is required in order to register a child in the Sunday School. Kol Hadash offers discounted membership dues to prospective families for the first year.

Registration is conducted during the summer for the following school year. Registration and tuition should be received prior to the first day of class. Sunday School tuition covers only a portion of Sunday School expenses, which the congregation heavily subsidizes from membership dues.

In the event a child withdraws from the Sunday School before the second week of classes, a full refund may be made upon the request of the parent or guardian. Refunds at any other time are subject to the approval of the Youth Education committee.

Parents should provide complete information regarding the physical, intellectual, and/or emotional issues relating to their child(ren). All information given to the Sunday School regarding any student shall be kept in the strictest confidence and used only to further the education of the student.

## **Attendance**

With just 29 weeks of Sunday School classes, each Sunday is important. Classwork is experiential, and making up work is difficult. Building a sense of community depends upon regular attendance. Please help your child(ren) maintain regular school attendance.

If a child has excessive absences during Sunday School or Hebrew School, additional work will be required.

If you know your child will be absent, please notify both the Youth Education Director and the child's teacher in advance. On Sunday mornings, you can reach Dawn Friedman by cell phone at 847-997-8931.

## **Arrival Time**

School begins at 9:30 am sharp. Students are expected to be in their classrooms by this time. All of our classrooms are on Q-Hall; please use the rear (east) entrance of Deerfield High School. Younger students should be accompanied to their classrooms by a parent. Please encourage your children to be prompt, responsible, and respectful by helping them arrive on time.

## **Books and Supplies**

All classroom materials will be provided by Kol Hadash. If students take home materials, please remind them to bring them back the following week.

## **Snack**

Kol Hadash provides plain bagels for all students each Sunday. Many thanks to Upper Crust Bagels in Deerfield for providing bagels at a substantial discount.

Students who do not want a bagel may bring their own snack to school; it must be nut-free and not messy (i.e. not crumbly). We ask that students bring only healthy snacks to school. All students should bring a water bottle (no juice or soda) to school each week.

A note about birthdays: Please do not send special birthday treats (cupcakes, donuts, etc.) to Sunday School. Sending special treats undermines our efforts to encourage healthy eating, may affect students with allergies, and also disrupts class.

## **Discipline**

Students are expected to conduct themselves in a polite, considerate and respectful manner. This courtesy extends to the teaching staff, other students and the physical property of the building.

Students who violate the policy of respect will be dealt with first by the classroom teacher, and failing a successful resolution, by the Youth Education Director. Consultation with the parent or guardian of the child will be pursued as needed.

**Dress**

Students should wear comfortable clothes appropriate for a school setting. They should dress for the weather. Deerfield High School is not air-conditioned and even in winter, some classrooms can be rather warm.

**Special Needs**

It is the intent and desire of the Sunday School to educate every child enrolled in the school in accordance with his/her intellectual and emotional abilities. No child of a member shall be denied a religious education, including training in Hebrew and a Bar/Bat Mitzvah, based on a physical, emotional or learning disability.

In order to meet the educational needs of a child, a parent or guardian should provide complete information regarding a child's physical, intellectual, and/or emotional issues. In particular, the Youth Education Director should be informed if a child has an Individual Education Plan (IEP) or 504 Plan at school. Any such information provided to the teacher and/or the Youth Education Director will be held in the strictest confidence and used only for the purpose of furthering a child's education at Kol Hadash.

Any additional instruction or tutoring required by a child, including the hiring of an aide, shall be provided, if requested by the parent or guardian or deemed necessary by Kol Hadash staff, and the expense for such shall be borne by the parent or guardian of the child.

# Sunday School Curriculum

Classes with combined grades use a rotating curriculum, alternating years.

## **Kindergarten/1<sup>st</sup> Grade - Teacher: Karen Whiteman**

### **A: My Humanistic Judaism**

Students learn basic principles of Humanistic Judaism in an age-appropriate way and create their own booklet on Humanistic Judaism; they will discuss and create artwork and assemble the booklet throughout the year. Throughout the year, they will also learn about Jewish holidays and Shabbat from a Humanistic Jewish perspective. The curriculum includes stories, discussion, games, and craft projects.

### **B: The Jewish Year: Holidays, Literature, and Shabbat**

Students continue to study Jewish holidays (Rosh Hashanah, Yom Kippur, Sukkot, Simchat Torah, Hanukkah, Tu B'Shevat, Purim, Passover, Yom Ha'atzmaut) and Shabbat using a variety of media. They will also learn about various types of Jewish literature, including the Bible and folk tales.

## **2<sup>nd</sup>/3<sup>rd</sup> Grades - Teacher: Michelle Fishman**

### **A: The Jewish Calendar and The Bible**

Students learn about the origins of the Jewish calendar and study major Jewish holidays. The Bible is introduced from the perspective of the Jewish family tree, teaching the stories of Genesis and Exodus sequentially. Origin myths from different cultures are also discussed as a means to put the Bible in historical and world context.

### **B: The Jewish Calendar and Life Cycle Events**

In addition to continued study of the Jewish calendar and holidays, students are introduced to the major Jewish life cycle events. Students will explore how the creative use of symbols makes celebrations more meaningful. Jewish holidays and life cycle celebrations have evolved over time to respond to and be more relevant to new circumstances; students will learn how Humanistic Jews, as well as Jews throughout history and around the world, have acknowledged the key events in our lives: birth, coming of age (Bar/Bat Mitzvah), marriage, and death.

## **4<sup>th</sup>/5<sup>th</sup> Grades - Teacher: Mark Friedman**

### **A: Heroes and Choices**

Every hero must make choices— many difficult, some seemingly impossible. These choices, and a person's actions that follow, make a hero. In this curriculum we will explore many heroes— from American history, Jewish history, the Bible, comic books and other pop culture sources, and from common everyday life. We will decide who are our heroes. What makes a Jewish hero? What makes a superhero? Students will gain an understanding of heroes' common values. Heroes don't have to be perfect either— that makes them human. The underlying theme of the curriculum is this: A hero's values can be identical to our own, and we don't even have to consider ourselves to be heroes!

### **B: Coming to America**

This class begins the study of Jewish history. Students begin the year studying shtetl life in eastern Europe during the late 19<sup>th</sup> century and their own family histories. Students follow the immigrant experience through the voyage to America, processing at Ellis Island, and Jewish communities in the United States. A highlight of the year is the Family Heirloom Project, in which students select heirlooms from their own families and research their histories.

## **6<sup>th</sup> Grade - Teacher: Louise Neidorf**

### **Great Jewish Communities Throughout History**

The main focus of the class is the study of significant Jewish communities throughout history, from the rabbinic period to the Middle Ages. Students will consider the continuous tensions inherent in assimilation as a factor in Judaism's survival as they study Jewish communities in ancient Jerusalem and Babylonia; Alexandria during the Rabbinic period; Cordova during the Golden Age of Spain; Renaissance Venice; Rashi and the Jewish community of Troyes, France; and Rosheim, Germany, and Prague, Bohemia (now Czech Republic) during the Middle Ages. Each student receives a *Tanakh* (the Hebrew Bible, in English) and learns to identify and maneuver through the books of the Bible; the class reads and discusses several Bible selections.

## **7<sup>th</sup>/8<sup>th</sup> Grades**

**Teacher: Leora Hatchwell**

### **A: Insider/Outsider: Jewish Identity 1750–Today**

This class focuses on Jewish history from the Enlightenment through the aftermath of the Holocaust. Throughout the year, students will discuss how political and social decisions affect quality of life, the importance of community, the ethical and unethical uses of power, personal responsibility, and the importance of tolerance, understanding, and acceptance. The year begins with studying the Enlightenment and the global and domestic conditions that led to the rise of Nazism. Students will explore the evolutionary process of state policies that resulted in the Holocaust as well as the various forms of resistance, intervention, and rescue that occurred. At the end of the year, students will discuss the impact of the Holocaust on society and assess issues of conscience and moral responsibility. A field trip to the Illinois Holocaust Museum, is planned for the Spring.

### **B: American Jewish History and Israel**

The themes of this year are identity, community, and overcoming obstacles to create nations, recognizing the importance of human efforts and power. The fall semester covers the history of Jews in America from the early pre-colonial period to modern times. Jews have influenced America, and America has transformed Jews and Judaism. Jewish life in America has been a balance between change and tradition. The second semester focuses on the land of Israel, the evolution of Zionism, and the establishment of the state of Israel, including discussions of Israel today. Students will expand their Jewish literacy as they study key events, figures, and geography in the history of Jews in America and of Israel.

## **9<sup>th</sup>/10<sup>th</sup> Grades/Confirmation Class - Teacher: David Hirsch**

### **Comparative Judaism and Comparative Religion**

Over a two-year period, students explore how various religions attempt to answer the big questions of life, while they explore and develop their own personal philosophies and codes of ethics. A critical element of the class are field trips throughout the year to various religious institutions. Both 9<sup>th</sup> and 10<sup>th</sup> graders

participate in the spring Confirmation service, with graduating students preparing more in-depth presentations.

### **Rabbinic Instruction**

Classroom instruction will be supplemented with regular visits by Rabbi Chalom. Rabbi Chalom works with classes to prepare their Shabbat services and also leads educational units with each class. Rabbi Chalom also leads Adult Education on Sunday mornings and at other times throughout the year.

Rabbi Chalom teaches the second year of the B'nai Mitzvah program, for seventh graders. For more information, see the *Kol Hadash B'nai Mitzvah Guide*.

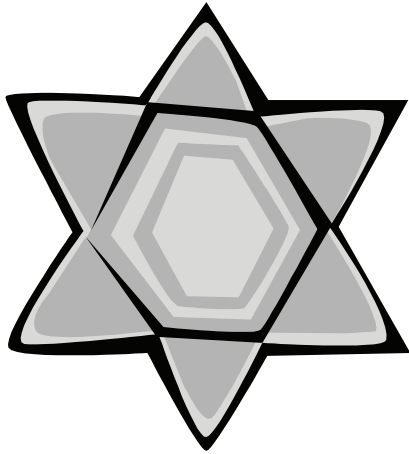
### **Hebrew**

The Hebrew Alef-bet and basic vocabulary are introduced in Sunday School to give students a basic familiarity with Hebrew language. Formal Hebrew study for B'nai Mitzvah preparation begins in 6<sup>th</sup> grade. For 6<sup>th</sup> grade Hebrew School, Kol Hadash uses a unique Hebrew program in which students learn to read Hebrew phonetically via a series of fun, self-paced Hebrew workbooks. Basic Hebrew vocabulary is introduced as well to round out the program.

Hebrew study continues in the 7<sup>th</sup> grade B'nai Mitzvah class with Rabbi Chalom. Students practice reading and understanding each other's B'nai Mitzvah Hebrew readings, in order to become very familiar with both the pronunciation and the meaning of the readings. Students also master simple Hebrew conversations, grammar, and vocabulary, as well as songs sung in Israel and at Kol Hadash. This class balances the need for B'nai Mitzvah Hebrew reading skills with understanding Hebrew as a modern, living language.

## Youth Group

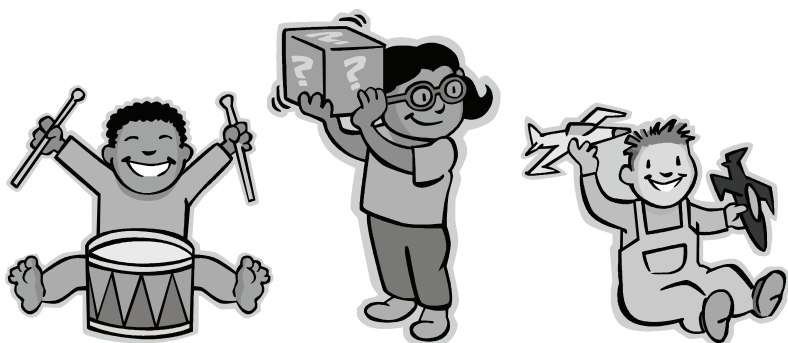
The Kol Hadash Youth Group is open to students in grades 8-12. The group is led by Kol Hadash member Courtney Fleisher. Youth Group meets monthly on Sundays, 11:10-1:00, including lunch. Programming is decided by the group. Some meetings are purely social while others are planning meetings for future events. Traditionally, the youth group organizes and runs our school Purim carnival. They also hold fundraisers throughout the year to attend the Society for Humanistic Judaism's annual Teen Conclave.



## Parent/Tot Program

Our parent/tot program is a monthly session for children ages 0-3 and their parents or caregivers. Classes meet on Sunday mornings at Deerfield High School and include a mix of storytelling, art projects, snack, playtime, and music. Parents and children in the program join the Sunday School students for music at the end of their class. Families are also invited to attend school holiday celebrations.

The Parent/Tot program is also open to non-members.



## B'nai Mitzvah Program

To celebrate a Bar or Bat Mitzvah at Kol Hadash, a child is expected to:

- Regularly attend Sunday School beginning in third grade
- Complete two-year B'nai Mitzvah Hebrew class, in addition to Sunday School
- Meet periodically with Rabbi Chalom in the year leading up to the Mitzvah celebration
- Study and prepare to read a Torah portion or other Hebrew selection and deliver a commentary or complete an in-depth, relevant project (research, artistic expression, or activity)

The Bar/Bat Mitzvah student is also expected to complete a mitzvah (service) project that demonstrates a willingness to think of others.

It is expected that each Bar/Bat Mitzvah child and his/her parents will usher and help with a simple oneg at two B'nai Mitzvah ceremonies during the year of or prior to his/her own Bar/Bat Mitzvah.

Because a Bar/Bat Mitzvah ceremony also welcomes a student into the Kol Hadash community, all congregants are invited to attend the service.

See the Kol Hadash *B'nai Mitzvah Guide* for more information.

## Staff Biographies

**Rabbi Adam Chalom** was raised as a Humanistic Jew at the Birmingham Temple in suburban Detroit, Michigan, the founding congregation of Humanistic Judaism. He earned a B.A. from Yale University in Judaic Studies, a Master's Degree at the University of Michigan in Hebrew and Jewish Cultural Studies, Rabbinic ordination from the International Institute for Secular Humanistic Judaism, and his PhD at the University of Michigan in Near Eastern Studies.

Rabbi Chalom joined Kol Hadash Humanistic Congregation in July 2004. Before then, he served for three years as co-Rabbi of the Birmingham Temple. Rabbi Chalom is also the Dean for North America for the International Institute for Secular Humanistic Judaism. He has written adult and youth education curricula, taught leadership and rabbinic training seminars, and presented workshops and keynote addresses at several national conferences. For Rabbi Chalom, Humanistic Judaism is not only a professional pursuit but also a personal passion that he shares with his wife, A.J., who also grew up as a Humanistic Jew at the Birmingham Temple—they were even in the same youth group. They live in Highland Park with their two children.

**Dawn Friedman (Youth Education Director)** has been the school director since Kol Hadash's founding in 2001. Dawn has been a member of several Humanistic Jewish congregations and taught Sunday School at the Congregation for Humanistic Judaism of Fairfield County, Connecticut, where she was also an assistant to the Education Director. Dawn and her husband Mark (see below) live in Deerfield with their daughter, who celebrated her Bat Mitzvah at Kol Hadash in 2008.

**Karen Whiteman (K/1<sup>st</sup>, Music)**, part of a three-generation family at Kol Hadash, has been affiliated with Humanistic Judaism since she was in second grade. Karen began her teaching career as the teacher's aide for a fifth grade Sunday School class; after graduating from college, she taught fifth grade Sunday School and later kindergarten, first grade, and music.

Since the founding of Kol Hadash in 2001, Karen has been the Kindergarten/1<sup>st</sup> grade teacher and youth music director. Karen also sings in the Kol Hadash choir. Her son was confirmed in 2003; her daughter was confirmed in 2006 .

Karen holds a B.S. in Education and Special Education and an M.A. in Special Education emphasizing early childhood. She has taught special education students from 2<sup>nd</sup> grade through 8<sup>th</sup> grade throughout the Chicago area and ran a very successful home day care center for children three months to eight years old for fifteen years. Karen is currently teaching middle school students with learning disabilities in Waukegan. A Deerfield resident, Karen is married to Rick Whiteman.

**Michelle Fishman (2<sup>nd</sup>/3<sup>rd</sup> Grades)** has been teaching Sunday School at Kol Hadash since its founding and is very excited about the growth in our congregation and the many new students in our Sunday School program. Michelle was raised as a Humanistic Jew and feels that allows her to teach children about our religion with passion, excitement and a true understanding of what it means to be a Humanistic Jew. She enjoys sharing her Jewish life experiences with her students and teaching them about the important story that we the Jewish people have to tell and the legacy we will leave to future generations. Michelle works at Interline Creative Group, a business-to-business advertising agency, and lives in Wheeling with her husband Steve and their two daughters.

**Mark Friedman (4<sup>th</sup>/5<sup>th</sup> Grades)** is a second-generation Humanistic Jew who completed a Humanistic Kindergarten-thru-Confirmation Sunday School education in his childhood. In the past, he has taught both Sunday School and adult education at various Humanistic congregations. In 2003 he joined the Kol Hadash Sunday School staff and created a new 4th-5th grade curriculum focusing on 19th-20th century Jewish immigration to America; in 2006 he created a new curriculum for that class, Heroes and Choices. In professional life, Mark has worked in the children's educational publishing industry for more than 15 years .Mark has been chair and vice-chair of the Kol Hadash

Steering Committee, a member of the Finance Committee, and editor of the Shofar newsletter. Mark and his wife Dawn, Youth Education Director, live in Deerfield with their daughter.

**Louise Neidorf (6<sup>th</sup>)** has been teaching a Humanistic Jewish curriculum for the past 25 years. At Kol Hadash, Louise has taught curricula she created for 4<sup>th</sup>/5<sup>th</sup>, 6<sup>th</sup>, and 7<sup>th</sup>/8<sup>th</sup> grades. She also created and taught a comparative religion curriculum for 8th grade students at Congregation Solel in Highland Park. For ten years, Louise was a docent at the Terra Museum of American Art in Chicago. She completed the two-year Florence Melton Adult Mini-School, a program of Hebrew University in Jerusalem, including a study seminar in Israel. Louise lives in Evanston, and she is currently head of the Interlibrary Loan department at the Wilmette Public Library.

**Leora Hatchwell (7<sup>th</sup>/8<sup>th</sup>)** was born in Israel, grew up in Los Angeles, and returned to Israel to pursue a Bachelors degree in nutrition at Hebrew University. She also has a Masters degree in Food Science from the University of Illinois. Leora worked as a flavor scientist for 28 years. For the past several years she has designed and made jewelry and painted silk ritual items, such as chuppahs. She is fascinated by Sephardic Jewish history. Leora has taught Sunday School at Kol Hadash since its founding in 2001. She has chaired the Kol Hadash Steering Committee and its By-Laws Committee. Leora and her husband Tom McCune live in Buffalo Grove; their daughter was confirmed in 2004.

**David Hirsch (9<sup>th</sup>/10<sup>th</sup>, Confirmation)** is a product of a Humanistic Sunday School; his Confirmation Class teacher was Rabbi Daniel Friedman, one of the founders of Humanistic Judaism and Rabbi Emeritus of Kol Hadash. David and his wife Glynis have two children. In addition to teaching Sunday School, David sings in the choir and has served as chair of the Steering Committee. David has been teaching in the English Department of Deerfield High School for more than twenty years. You have probably seen David shuttling his kids around—he's the one with the *Star Trek* minivan!

**Noah Pinko (Hebrew)** was born in Israel. He grew up on Kibbutz Hanita near the Lebanese border and served as a paratrooper in the Israel Defense Forces. A Naperville resident, Noah and his wife Kathy have two children. They all go to Sunday School together. Noah is a driving instructor for teens.



## Youth Education Committee

The Youth Education Committee at Kol Hadash functions as both a school board and PTO for the KHHC Sunday School. The committee creates school policy, reviews the school curriculum, reviews and revises the Youth Education Handbook and B'nai Mitzvah Guide, oversees school activities, reviews procedures, and supports all school-related programs. The committee holds regular meetings once a month during Sunday School throughout the school year.

The YEC reviews and approves the yearly Sunday School budget and calendar, as prepared by the Education Director. Once approved by the committee, the budget is presented to the Finance and Steering Committees.

The YEC is responsible for coordinating all school-related events, including the August back-to-school picnic, Sukkot, the school Hanukkah party, Tu B'Shevat Seder, Purim (in connection with the Kol Hadash Youth Group), School Passover Seder and year-end school party.

The YEC also coordinates and supports non-school congregational activities and social events as long as they involve children within our school and their families. This includes ushering and hosting the oneg for the Rosh Hashanah Family Service, all class Shabbat services, Family Shabbat services, family education programs (including field trips), and family social events.

Committee meetings are open to all members of the congregation. YEC members must join the committee by the first regular YEC meeting and commit to serving for one year. For more information, contact the Youth Education Director at [education@KolHadash.com](mailto:education@KolHadash.com).

# Dealing with the “God” Question

## By Rabbi Adam Chalom

*Developed for International Institute for Secular Humanistic Judaism seminar “Jewish Education and Curriculum Planning” and published in Humanistic Judaism, Summer-Fall 2004*

One of the challenges in Humanistic Jewish education is how to answer students’ questions concerning the concept, figure, and importance of “God.” If they have been raised their whole lives as committed Humanistic Jews, they will still have their own questions as well as questions asked of them by other children (some friendly questions, others not). And if the students and their parents are new to our school or community, they probably have even more questions in this area. These are challenging issues for *adults* to address—to translate our philosophy to a child’s language and conceptual ability is that much more difficult.

This short list of 6 FAQ’s (Frequently Asked Questions) by students on the “God” question is intended to help teachers with students, and parents with children as well. Two concise answers are offered to each question—one aimed at children under 7, the other at children between 8 and 12. Clearly, just as the questions may be asked in several different formats, the answers should be adjusted for specific questions and family situations. And “heaven forbid” these answers be repeated verbatim—the more they are expressed in your own words, the more convincing they will be.

The best advice I can offer is to be honest (one of our basic principles), to be affirming of even the most challenging questions (after all, everyone has the right to make up their own mind), and to be as clear as possible. I have avoided condescending answers like “weak people need it” or “we’ve evolved past that primitive stage,” and in general created answers that address the question in a clear and respectful way. Every member of Humanistic Judaism, even the youngest, has the right to understand our shared values and beliefs.

1) “Do you/we/I believe in God?”

CHILDREN UNDER 7

I like to say, “I believe in you.” I can see you, touch you, hear you, and care for you. I don’t know if the idea of “God” is just an idea in your mind, or something real. Remember that it’s OK to say “I don’t know” if you really don’t know something. But I DO know that if I help you, you’re happy; if you help me, I’m happy. Let’s look at what we KNOW, and see if that’s enough for us.

CHILDREN 8-12

We don’t know if there’s a God or not. So we prefer to focus on what we DO know—we know that being good to other people is good for them and good for us, and we know that we can learn about the world from our experience and other people. We don’t know if a God answers prayers, so WE have to work to make the world better so that we KNOW it’s getting better. Some people believe there’s a God, and some people believe there’s no God. We choose to focus on what we can do in the meantime!

2) “Should I pray? What if other kids ask me what I pray for?”

CHILDREN UNDER 7

“Praying” is another way of saying “I hope” that something happens—I hope that my mommy comes home soon, I hope that everyone gets along. Sometimes, though, hope isn’t enough—if I just “hope” that I get what I want, I can’t be sure it will happen. Sometimes we need to work to make what we “hope” happens turn into what really happens. You can tell them, “I hope and work for good things for my family.”

CHILDREN 8-12

“Praying” is like wishing or hoping for something—the difference is that prayer usually asks someone or something else, like “God,” to make it happen. But just like wishing and hoping, prayer can’t make sure that we get the good thing we’re looking for. Thinking something in your brain doesn’t change the real world. On the other hand, when we WORK to make our hopes into reality, we KNOW that we’re making it happen, and we get the credit for doing it. If other kids ask you about praying, you can tell them, “I hope AND I work for good things in the world.”

3) “\_\_\_\_\_ said we can’t be Jewish if we don’t believe in God.”

CHILDREN UNDER 7

“Being Jewish” means that you are part of the Jewish family. Your mom is still your mom, and your grandpa is still your grandpa, even if you have different ideas. What are some of the things about us and things that we already do that are Jewish? (holidays, songs, names, congregation, foods) You see? Being Jewish is not what you think, but who you are and what you do. You can be happy to be a proud member of the Jewish family.

CHILDREN 8-12

Being Jewish is like being part of a family. Just like your family has family traditions, favorite family foods, and family jokes, or your school has a school mascot and school colors, the Jewish family has Jewish food, Jewish jokes, Jewish traditions—all of those together add up to what we call “culture.” You can be part of Jewish culture in a lot of ways—some of them use the idea of God, and some focus instead on the Jewish people and what they’ve made. Being Jewish is not what you think, but who you are and what you do.

4) “\_\_\_\_\_ said I’m not a good person if I don’t believe in God.”

CHILDREN UNDER 7

Being a good person is about doing good things. You can do good things because you believe that a God told you to, or you can do good things because you want to help other people. We do good things all the time (recall an example), and we didn’t have to talk about God to do a good thing. What you do makes you a good person, so if you do good things, you ARE a good person.

CHILDREN 8-12

What makes you a good person, what you think or what you do? I think that what you DO decides if you’re a good person or not. I know people who believe in God who are nice, and some who are mean. And I know people who don’t believe who are nice, and some who are mean. If you care about other people, and you work to help them, then you’re a good person.

5) “My grandparents/neighbors/kids at school told me that my

family is going to Hell because we don't believe in God/Jesus."

#### CHILDREN UNDER 7

Lots of people believe lots of different things. It's OK to believe something different from someone else— they believe one thing, and we believe something different. And you don't have to worry about what happens a long time from now—it's more important to pay attention to what we do today and tomorrow. You have a family that loves you and that takes care of you today. Be a good person today and tomorrow—that's plenty!

#### CHILDREN 8-12

Some people think that they are right all of the time. They are sure that they know exactly what happens after we die, and what we have to do now. We prefer to let everyone make up their own minds about what might happen or how to live their lives. What we DO know is that it's very important to be a good person and to live a good life in THIS life, because it's the only life we KNOW is real. Don't worry about what happens in the distant future—what can we do TODAY?

6) "Why do so many other people/Jews pray to/believe in God, and we don't?"

#### CHILDREN UNDER 7

Lots of people believe lots of different things. It's OK to believe something different from someone else— they believe one thing, and we believe something different. We know that we can help each other, and make each other happy, and that's enough for us. We can say, "I don't know," when we really don't know, and using what we DO know we can do a lot of good things. We believe in people, and that's enough for us.

#### CHILDREN 8-12

If we all thought the same thing, life would be really boring—we would have nothing to talk about! Just because a lot of people think something is right, that doesn't mean that it's true—most people thought that the world was flat for a long time, but today we've learned that it's round. Other people have the right to make up their own minds about the idea of a God, and we can decide for ourselves. For us, it makes more sense to look at what we can know about the world instead of what we can guess. And we can say, "I don't know," when we really don't know.

**Kol Hadash Humanistic Congregation is a welcoming Jewish home that honors Jewish tradition and empowers independent, human-focused choices.**

We celebrate being Jewish through our human-focused philosophy of life. We believe that human beings possess the intelligence and wisdom to determine the purpose and course of their lives

We honor Jewish tradition and heritage through cultural and educational exploration, and we celebrate holidays and life-cycle events together. We seek positive Jewish connections relevant to our everyday lives.

Kol Hadash empowers its members to make independent choices, to live lives of integrity, and to create positive change in the world. We believe in the fundamental importance of individual responsibility to shape lives of significance and dignity.

We encourage our children to value their Jewish identity and to feel confident in their ability to think for themselves.

- ☆ Kol Hadash provides a **Home** – a place you can belong and feel welcome.
- ☆ Kol Hadash creates **Connections** – relevant and meaningful relationships with other Jews, broader Jewish culture and our community.
- ☆ Kol Hadash stimulates **Ideas** – new ways of thinking about relevant Jewish and Humanist philosophy, ethics, literature, culture and history.

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