



Kol Hadash

HUMANISTIC  CONGREGATION

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 2nd Grade through 10th grade meet each Sunday from September to May, 9:30–11:30 at Deerfield High School, 1959 Waukegan Road. See school calendar on the Kol Hadash website (www.kolhadash.com) for dates. Students in PreKindergarten (in the year before Kindergarten) through 1st Grade are invited to join us once a month before holidays and special programs. We also offer holiday storytimes for families with infants and toddlers at local bookstores; older children are welcome at those as well.

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 B Mitzvah (gender neutral term for what is commonly known as 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 Mitzvah program is in this handbook; for more details, see our separate booklet, *Kol Hadash B Mitzvah Guide*, available on our website.

The Kol Hadash Youth Group is open to any student in 8th – 12th grades. 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 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.

Shalom!

Dawn Friedman
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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 *kvels* (outpourings of pride), please let me know—I'm glad to talk.

Once again, welcome and welcome back!

Rabbi Adam Chalom
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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), 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.

Vision and Mission

Vision for Youth Education at Kol Hadash

To provide a comprehensive Jewish education for students as individuals, as members of Kol Hadash, as part of the Humanistic Jewish movement, as part of the general Jewish community, and in the larger society.

Mission Statement

1. Develop self-confident, critical thinkers and life-long, active learners
2. Explore philosophical and ethical choices through the perspective of Humanistic Judaism to promote a life of integrity
3. Develop Jewish historical and cultural literacy and an understanding of Judaism as an evolving civilization
4. Support a positive Jewish identity and connections to Kol Hadash, the Humanistic Jewish community, the larger Jewish world, and the community of humankind

Class Shabbat Services

Each class from 2nd through 8th grade will create and lead a Shabbat service during the school year. Class Shabbat services engage students in congregational life beyond Sunday School and allow them to share their knowledge and ideas with the congregation.

Shabbat services for 2nd – 8th grade families are held on Friday evenings at 7:30 pm, at the North Shore Unitarian Church, 2100 Half Day Road, Deerfield. Each service is followed by an *Oneg Shabbat* (reception) hosted by the class families. The 2nd/3rd and 4th/5th grade services are all-ages family services; the 6th and 7th/8th grade services are intended for adults and older students (6th 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 10th graders as the congregation welcomes them into the adult community. The Confirmation service is created by the 9th/10th grade class under the direction of teacher David Hirsch and Rabbi Chalom. Each confirmant gives a presentation; 9th graders prepare a shorter speech. The Confirmation service is held on a Friday evening in May.

In order to be confirmed, students should be enrolled in Kol Hadash's Sunday School by 7th grade. New high school students 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. There are several dues options—we never want finances to be a barrier to membership or school enrollment. Contact the Membership Chair, membership@KolHadash.com for details.

Registration is open year-round, but ideally families register students during the summer for the upcoming 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 their child(ren)'s physical, intellectual, and/or emotional issues. 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 classes only on Sundays from September to May, each Sunday is important. Classwork is experiential, and making up work is difficult. Building a sense of community depends upon regular attendance. Your child's voice contributes to the educational experience of every student in the class. 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. Teachers plan their activities based on enrollment so absences are helpful to know about in advance, even if that is Sunday morning. 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 at Deerfield High School; please use the rear (east) entrance. Younger students should be accompanied to their classrooms by a parent. Teachers are in their classrooms by 9:15; it is very helpful for students to arrive a few minutes early so they can socialize before classes begin and get settled by 9:30. 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.

Snacks

Kol Hadash provides light snacks for all students each Sunday. Many thanks to Upper Crust Bagels in Deerfield for providing bagels at a substantial discount. Snacks rotate between plain mini bagels, apple slices, and baby carrots.

Due to our food allergy restrictions, snacks from home may NOT be brought to Sunday 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 harm students with allergies, and also disrupts class.

Food Allergies

Due to severe, life-threatening allergies among our students, the following foods or foods containing these items may NOT be brought to any Kol Hadash event (Sunday School, lunches, adult education, and holiday or special programs): peanuts, tree nuts of any kind (including almonds), and sesame seeds.

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.

Violations of this policy will be addressed 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, including potentially messy art projects. They should dress for the weather. Temperatures in classrooms can be unpredictable, and some classrooms can be rather warm even in winter.

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 B Mitzvah (gender neutral term for what is commonly called a Bar or Bat Mitzvah), based on a physical, emotional or learning disability.

In order to meet the educational needs of a child, the 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. This information should be provided and updated each and every school year via the registration form or via email. 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 born by the parent or guardian of the child.

Sunday School Curriculum

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

PreKindergarten/Kindergarten/1st Grade

Students join us once a month before holiday celebrations and other special events to learn basic principles of Humanistic Judaism and explore Jewish culture and how we celebrate holidays. The curriculum includes stories, discussion, games and crafts.

2nd/3rd Grades – Teachers: Irene Chase and Robin Kacyn

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 mythical family tree, teaching the stories of Genesis and Exodus sequentially. Origin myths from different cultures, as well as scientific and archaeological approaches to the origins of life and the Jewish people, 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 learn how Humanistic Jews, as well as Jews throughout history and around the world, acknowledge the key events in our lives -- birth, coming of age (B Mitzvah, gender-neutral term for Bar or Bat Mitzvah), marriage, and death -- and explore how Jewish holidays and life cycle celebrations have evolved over time to respond to and be more relevant to new circumstances. Students also learn how the creative use of symbols makes celebrations more meaningful.

4th/5th 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 students explore many heroes—from American history, Jewish history, the Bible, comic books and other pop culture sources, and from common everyday life. The class decides who are their heroes. What makes a Jewish hero? What makes a superhero? Does a hero have to be perfect? Students gain an understanding of heroes' common values.

A simultaneous strand in this curriculum takes students through a comparative study of Judaism. Students learn more about Humanistic Judaism and how it is both similar to and different from other branches by studying Jewish holidays and other religious and cultural traditions.

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 19th 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.

6th Grade – Teacher: Stacey Max

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 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 Prague, Bohemia (now Czech Republic) during the Middle Ages. Students learn to identify and maneuver through the books of the *Tanakh* (the Hebrew Bible) in English. Throughout the year, Jewish holidays are discussed using originating texts in the Bible and their historical context in different eras.

7th/8th Grades – Teacher: Leora Hatchwell

A: Ethical Jewish Consciousness and Morality: Dilemmas Relating to the Holocaust

This class focuses on Jewish history from the Enlightenment (circa 1750) through the aftermath of the Holocaust. Throughout the year, students 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 class begins the year studying the Enlightenment and the emancipation of Jews and continues with 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 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. One 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.

9th/10th 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 develop their own personal philosophies and codes of ethics. Field trips to various religious institutions are a critical element of the class. Both 9th and 10th graders participate in the spring Confirmation service, with graduating students preparing more in-depth presentations.

Rabbinic Instruction

Regular visits by Rabbi Chalom supplement classroom instruction. Rabbi Chalom teaches educational units related to the class curricula and works with classes to prepare their Shabbat services. The rabbi also leads Adult Education on Sunday mornings and at other times throughout the year.

Rabbi Chalom teaches the second year of the B Mitzvah (gender neutral term for Bar or Bat Mitzvah) program, for seventh graders. For more information, see the *Kol Hadash B 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 Mitzvah (gender neutral term for Bar or Bat Mitzvah) begins in 6th grade, as part of the 6th grade Sunday School class.

Hebrew study continues in the 7th grade B Mitzvah Class. Students practice reading and understanding each other's B 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 Mitzvah Hebrew reading skills with understanding Hebrew as a modern, living language. The class meets for one hour after Sunday School.

Youth Group

The Kol Hadash Youth Group is open to students in grades 8-12. Youth Group meets monthly on Sundays, 11:10-12:45, 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 coordinates craft activities at the Sukkot celebration and organizes and runs our school Purim carnival. They also hold fundraisers and attend the Society for Humanistic Judaism's annual Teen Conclave.

B Mitzvah Program

To celebrate a B Mitzvah (gender neutral term for Bar or Bat Mitzvah) at Kol Hadash, a child is expected to:

- Regularly attend Sunday School beginning in third grade (Students enrolling later than 3rd grade may still participate; families should contact the Youth Education Director to discuss a timetable.)
- Complete 6th Grade Hebrew and 7th Grade B Mitzvah Classes, 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 documented activity)

The Mitzvah student is also expected to complete a community service project that demonstrates a willingness to think of others and serve the community.

It is expected that B Mitzvah students and their parents will usher and help with a simple oneg at two B Mitzvah ceremonies during the year of or prior to their own B Mitzvah service.

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

See the Kol Hadash B Mitzvah Guide on our website, www.kolhadash.com, 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 from the University of Michigan in Hebrew and Jewish Cultural Studies, Rabbinic ordination from the International Institute for Secular Humanistic Judaism, and a PhD from 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 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 is a Northwestern University graduate and an alumna of the Florence Melton School of Adult Jewish Learning, a two-year core curriculum developed by Hebrew University. A former professional dancer, she is a certified Pilates instructor teaching in Glenview and Barrington. Dawn and her husband Mark (see below) live in Deerfield; their daughter celebrated her Bat Mitzvah at Kol Hadash, was confirmed, and was a classroom aide.

Laura Burk (Music) has been leading Sunday school music and accompanying on guitar since 2012. Laura has been a member of Kol Hadash since 2004 and has sung in the choir since 2007. She also leads music for the class Shabbat services and occasionally sings and plays guitar for Bar and Bat Mitzvah services. She holds a Bachelor of Music Composition Degree and an MBA from Roosevelt University. She and her husband Ken have a daughter who attends Sunday School. Laura works in marketing analytics and is an avid cyclist.

Irene Chase (2nd/3rd Grades) joined our staff in 2011 after several years as a substitute teacher in our school. Irene has been a member of Kol Hadash since 2002 and has served on the Youth Education Committee (one year as co-chair) and the Steering Committee. She was raised as a secular Jew and graduated from the North Shore School of Jewish Studies Sunday School.

Irene and her husband Jeremy live in Highland Park; her son celebrated his Bar Mitzvah at Kol Hadash, and her twin daughters celebrated the first B'not Mitzvah in Kol Hadash history. All three were confirmed at Kol Hadash and are now all in college at the same time!

Robin Kacyn (2nd/3rd Grades) was born in Cambridge, Massachusetts, and moved to the Chicagoland area when she was very young. She went to Deerfield High School, holds a degree in Theatre from Washington University in St. Louis, and studied Culinary Arts at Kendall College. She attended Congregation Beth Or (the first Humanistic congregation in the Chicago area) where she completed the entire education curriculum, so she's very excited that things have come full circle and she's returning to teach in our Sunday School! Robin has had several different careers—actor, event planner, caterer, daycare Instructor, and tutor (to name a few)—but has finally found her "forever" job as the Program Services Specialist at Aspiritech, a not-for-profit organization in Highland Park that employs adults on the autism spectrum to provide quality assurance testing for companies here and abroad. Robin and her husband Matt live in Chicago with their sweet rescue pup, Bowie.

Mark Friedman (4th/5th Grades) is a second-generation Humanistic Jew who completed a Humanistic Kindergarten-thru-Confirmation Sunday School education in his childhood; his father is Rabbi Emeritus Daniel Friedman. 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 the second new curriculum for that class, Heroes and Choices. In professional life, Mark has worked in the children's educational publishing industry for more than 25 years. Mark has been chair and vice-chair of the Kol Hadash Steering Committee, a member of the Finance Committee, chair of the Marketing Committee, and editor of the *Shofar* newsletter. Mark and his wife Dawn, Youth Education Director, live in Deerfield.

Stacey Max (6th Grade) joined our teaching staff in 2013 after several years as a substitute teacher at Kol Hadash. Stacey has been a member of Kol Hadash since 2006, has served on the Youth Education, Community Service, and Steering Committees (including two years as Secretary), and is the leader of the Kol Hadash Book Group. She was raised a Reform Jew and holds a degree in religious studies and theatre, as well as a masters degree in education. Stacey and her husband Ethan live in Vernon Hills with their two daughters. Their oldest daughter celebrated her Bat Mitzvah and was Confirmed at Kol Hadash; her youngest celebrated her Bat Mitzvah in 2016. Stacey has been teaching at Caruso Middle School in Deerfield for more than 16 years (science and STEM) and teaching middle school since 1996.

Leora Hatchwell (7th/8th Grades) 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 and a Masters in Jewish Professional Studies from the Spertus Institute for Jewish Learning and Leadership in Chicago. 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. She completed a course on Spanish Jews by Hebrew University where study took place in Spain and Israel. Leora also has a passion for teaching the ethical and moral issues relating to the Holocaust. Leora has taught Sunday School at Kol Hadash since its founding in 2001 and enjoys the burgeoning critical thinking skills of 7th and 8th graders. She has chaired the Kol Hadash Steering Committee and the By-Laws Committee and coordinated numerous special events. Leora and her husband Tom McCune live in Buffalo Grove; their daughter was confirmed in 2004.

David Hirsch (9th/10th, 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 who celebrated their Bar/Bat Mitzvahs and were confirmed at Kol Hadash, as well as working as classroom aides. In addition to teaching Sunday School, David sings in the choir and has served as chair of the Steering Committee and the Development Committee. David has been teaching in the English Department of Deerfield High School for more than thirty years.

Mara Heichman (Hebrew & B Mitzvah tutor) has been a B mitzvah tutor since 2000 for a variety of temples in the Chicagoland area. She was raised in a conservative congregation in Cincinnati and was the first female to have a Saturday morning Bat Mitzvah at that congregation to help create a more egalitarian community.

Mara is an Occupational Therapist in skilled nursing and a Certified Professional Life Coach who works with teens, young adults and families on increasing confidence, decreasing anxiety and improving relationships in families.

Mara has two children at Stevenson High School. Her daughter has followed in her mom's footsteps and tutors students at Temple Chai in Long Grove where their family has a membership.

Youth Education Committee

The Youth Education Committee (YEC) at Kol Hadash functions as both a school board and PTO for the Sunday School. The committee creates school policy, reviews the school curriculum, oversees school activities, reviews procedures, and supports all school-related programs. The committee holds regular meetings about every six weeks 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 coordinates all school-related events, including the August back-to-school picnic, fall Sukkot celebration, Hanukkah party, Tu B'Shevat Seder, Purim Carnival (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 that involve children and their families. This includes ushering and helping with the oneg for the Rosh Hashanah Family Service, class Shabbat services, family education programs (including field trips), and family social events.

All this work aside, the YEC is fun way to get involved in your child's Jewish education, learn more about what's going on at Sunday School, and get to know other parents! Committee meetings are open to all members of the congregation. Congregants must have attended a majority of the meetings to date in order to vote on school policies. For more information, contact the YEC Chair at YEC@KolHadash.com.

Dealing with the “God” Question By Rabbi Adam Chalom

Developed for the 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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