



Godwrestling

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Institute for Informal Jewish Education

Brandeis University
Community Hebrew High Schools Curriculum Development Initiative
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Godwrestling

NUMBER OF SESSIONS/ COURSE: 15 sessions
LENGTH OF EACH SESSION: 75 minutes

Course Description:

Teens wrestle with questions concerning God. Whether it is the image of God that they have been taught, or believed since they were children, or a new god-image they are beginning to develop as they learn more about the world around them, their religion and their own personal beliefs.

In many arenas, God is a buzzword. When I talk about God, my image may be very different from yours. As a multi-faith Chaplain and a Jewish educator, I am constantly faced with the challenge of defining something (or someone) that defies definition. I find this a frustrating and oftentimes nearly impossible endeavor. Imagine what a teen must feel.

The teen years are punctuated by changing bodies, hormonal ups and downs and the desire of young men and women to break-away and become independent from their parents or guardians. These physiological and emotional stages are, in our Jewish teens, accompanied by often daunting and seemingly taboo theological questions and concerns.

This Godwrestling course gives students the space to ask and explore these questions and concerns. This course challenges their beliefs while maintaining respect for the traditional beliefs of our Jewish ancestors. This class is trans-denominational; it appeals to a broad range of Jews. The focus is not on defining God, but rather, defining each person's image of their god. This God could be the God of the Torah or, as one ninth grade student of mine said, "A nameless entity, like air, moving in and out of and around and through everything."

Teachers can use their own sources to reflect the class and denomination or group of students that they teach.

This is not a class where the students are taught *to*, but rather a class where the students teach *with* the instructor and each other. We can all learn from each other and our life experience will only be enriched by the ability to nurture open minds and open hearts.

No prior Hebrew skills are necessary for this course. All texts will be provided in English.

SYLLABUS

LESSONS	MATERIALS	QUESTIONS OF MEANING OR UNDERSTANDING	ASSIGNMENT DUE FOR THIS SESSION
LESSON 1	1. <i>What do Jews Believe?</i> by Tracy R. Rich, Judaism 101. (Appendix 1A, page 67)	What do Jews believe about God? Is there one Jewish belief or many? What do we, as individuals, believe about God?	None.
LESSON 2	1. <i>God, Grant Me the Ability to be Alone</i> , Prayer of Rabbi Nachman of Bratzlav (Appendix 2, page 69)	Can we, as a group or people, define God?	Think about defining God and whether or not it is possible.
LESSON 3	1. The Thirteen Principles (Appendix 3A, page 70) 2. Explanation of Thirteen Principles (Appendix 3B, page 71-72) 3. Maimonides in a Nutshell (Appendix 3C, page 73-74)	Do the Thirteen Principles, as defined by Maimonides, hold true for modern day Jews?	Read Rabbi Nachman's Prayer and find time to be alone with your thoughts.
LESSON 4	1. <i>How to Write Acrostic Poems</i> by Bruce Lansky (Appendix 4A, page 75) 2. <i>L'cha Dodi</i> by Rabbi Shlomo Halevi Alkabetz 3. <i>Yedid Nefesh</i> by Rabbi Eliezer Askari 4. <i>Piyyut</i> as defined by answers.com (Appendix 4B, page 76-77)	Is it possible to describe in words that which seems to defy description?	None.
LESSON 5	1. Quotes from <i>God Makes the Rivers to Flow</i> by Eknath Easwaran (Appendix 5, page 78-82)	Can you draw or create a visual picture of God even if no one really knows what God looks like?	Read <i>Piyyut</i> text. Bring a few examples of words or concepts that seem to defy description in your everyday lives.

LESSON 6	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Sodom and Amarah (Appendix 6A, page 83) 2. Key Elements of a Trial (Appendix 6B, page 84-86) 3. Elie Wiesel in a Nutshell (Appendix 6C, page 87) 4. Introduction to the Trial of God by Robert McAfree Brown (Appendix 6D, page 88) 	Does a human being have the right to hold God accountable morally?	None.
LESSON 7	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. <i>The Trial of God, The Trial of Us</i> by Matthew Fox (Appendix 7b, page 92) 2. <i>The Trial of God</i> by Elie Wiesel: <ol style="list-style-type: none"> a. Characters (p. 1) b. The Scene (p. 2) c. Act I (pp. 3-56) 	What is the relationship between God and humankind?	Bring a copy of <i>The Trial of God</i> by Elie Wiesel.
LESSON 8	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Mendel Quotes (Appendix 8, page 93) 2. <i>The Trial of God</i>, Act II (pp. 59-100) 	Was God on vacation?	If necessary, finish Act I of <i>The Trial of God</i> by Elie Wiesel.
LESSON 9	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Pedro Quote from <i>The Town Beyond the Wall</i> (Appendix 9, page 94) 2. <i>The Trial of God</i>, Act III (pp. 131-161) 	<p>Can anyone truly define God?</p> <p>Does God need a defender?</p>	If necessary, finish Act II of <i>The Trial of God</i> by Elie Wiesel.
LESSON 10	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Selection from <i>When Bad Things Happen to Good People</i> (Appendix 10A, page 95) 2. Job in a Nutshell (Appendix 10B, page 96) 3. Iyov's <i>Book of Job</i> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> a. Chapter 1 b. Chapter 2 	Why do bad things happen to good people?	None.

LESSON 11	<p>1. Selection from <i>Arguing with God</i> (Appendix 11A, page 100)</p> <p>2. Iyov's <i>Book of Job</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> a. Chapter 6 b. Chapter 7 c. Chapter 9 d. Chapter 10 e. Chapter 17 f. Chapter 19 g. Chapter 21 h. Chapter 27 <p>(Appendix 11B, page 101-108)</p>	<p>Do we, as humans, have a right to argue with God?</p> <p>Do we, as Jews, have a right to argue with God?</p>	None.
LESSON 12	<p>1. Genesis 32:22-33 (Appendix 12A, page 120)</p> <p>2. Iyov's <i>Book of Job</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> a. Chapter 38 b. Chapter 39 c. Chapter 40 d. Chapter 42 <p>(Appendix 12B, page 121-124)</p>	<p>Can humans ever "truly" know God or God's will?</p> <p>Can God ever truly "know" us?</p>	None.
LESSON 13	<p>1. The Trial Parts and Witness List (Appendix 13A, page 125-129)</p> <p>2. Trial Quotes (Appendix 13B, page 130-132)</p>	<p>Is God a victim?</p> <p>Is God a perpetrator?</p> <p>Can God be both? Or neither?</p>	None.
LESSON 14	<i>See above.</i>	<i>See above.</i>	Bring quotes, ideas, information about their character, or any other items that the students think they need for the trial.
LESSON 15	<p>1. The Trial Parts and Witness List</p> <p>2. Trial Quotes</p>	<i>See above.</i>	None.

Session 1, Godwrestling

I. Teacher's Preparation

LESSON QUESTIONS OF MEANING:

- What do Jews believe about God?
- Is there one Jewish belief or many?
- What do we, as individuals, believe about God?

SELECTION OF TEXTS:

1. *What do Jews Believe?* Tracy R. Rich, Judaism 101. See Appendix 1A, page 67 for excerpt.

OBJECTIVES/ INTENDED OUTCOMES:

1. What will the students *do*?

- The students will **answer** the Godwrestling Questionnaire questions and **share** answers if they choose.
- The students will **read** the text and **state** whether the text points are true for them in their belief/practice.

Teacher's Guide

I. Teacher's Preparation

LESSON QUESTIONS OF MEANING:

Often students come to us with a variety of beliefs and it is difficult, as educators, to 'teach' to all of them.

This class enables the teacher to learn about the beliefs and faith traditions of the students as the course begins and throughout the development of the course.

This also introduces the idea that this course will focus on individual images of God and will honor those images as well as the images taught or conveyed in religious institutions, religious instruction, and Torah.

SELECTION OF TEXTS:

I selected this text because it is easy to read and understand. Also, it is a good starting point for lively discussion.

Each student will probably find at least one point that rings true for them and one that is the exact opposite of their belief or practice.

OBJECTIVES/ INTENDED OUTCOMES:

By being clear about what I want them to do during and at the end of class, as well as what I expect them to understand, I can decide what I need to assess and devise methods of assessment.

This class values and respects the opinions and beliefs of each individual. *All judgment must be suspended and confidentiality is imperative.*

The students will be able to recognize the importance of respecting others' opinions and maintaining confidentiality and will leave the lesson with a better understanding of their own personal image of God.

It is important that all images of God be respected as well as the way that the students write about God, including God with a gender, God with a capital G, god with a small g, G-d, or any way that the students wish to express their image.

ASSESSMENT/ MEASUREMENT OF INTENDED OUTCOMES:

I have chosen to collect the Godwrestling Questionnaire so that I can hand them out during the last class session and ask the students if their images of God or answers to the questions have changed or remained the same.

2. The students *will be able to*:

- **State the points** in the text that best represent their belief/practice.
- **State** whether they believe that in Judaism actions are more important than beliefs, and why/why not.

3. The students *will understand*:

- Each individual has their own image of God.
- All images and opinions of God are valid and respected in this class.
- Opinions and descriptions of God vary within Judaism.

ASSESSMENT/ MEASUREMENT OF INTENDED OUTCOMES:

1. Pay close attention and take notes during the discussion of the questionnaire answers.
2. Evaluate the quality of the answers the students develop as a class.

II. The Lesson Plan

A. RECALL/SPONGE ACTIVITY (5 min)

1. Sit the students in a circle.
2. Ask each of them, one at a time, to tell the entire class three “facts” about themselves. Two “facts” that the students are to share with the class should be true, but one should be a lie.
3. The rest of the class must then guess which “fact” is the lie.
4. Allow enough time for each of the students to get a chance to share their “facts.”

B. SET INDUCTION (20 min)

1. The students will receive a piece of paper with five questions/statements to answer/finish in writing as individuals. *See Appendix 1B, page 68 for the “Godwrestling Questionnaire.”* The questions/statements will include:
 - a. I describe God as...
 - b. The way I understand God now is...
 - c. The way I experience God now is...
 - d. In Godwrestling, I would like to learn...
 - e. Judaism often claims that actions are more important than beliefs. How do you feel about this?
 - f. In three words, describe what it is like being Jewish.
2. The students will be given the opportunity to share their answers if they so choose.
3. The teacher will collect the questionnaires.

II. The Lesson Plan

A. RECALL/ SPONGE ACTIVITY

Since this is the first lesson, the time spent on a recall/sponge activity is better spent on an “icebreaker” or introduction to the class.

This is a fun “icebreaker” that enables the students to learn more about each other.

B. SET INDUCTION

These first fifteen minutes spent answering the “Godwrestling Questionnaire” serve as the introduction to this course.

This questionnaire asks the students to look deep within themselves and search for answers to difficult questions.

These questionnaires will be collected and handed out during the last class session so students can compare their answers from the beginning of the course to the end of the course, thus framing the learning experience.

Be sure to explain each question and offer your own personal story. The students will relate better to the questionnaire if the teacher participates. They are also more apt to share their thoughts and beliefs if the teacher has set an example.

If you want to ask these questions differently, try to rephrase the questions in a way that stays true to the lesson questions of meaning.

C. TEXT STUDY

What do Jews Believe? By Tracy R. Rich offers the students a sense of what Judaism “is” or, at least, how it is sometimes represented.

I have chosen to give the students this text on one page so it is easy for them to pick out the points that resonate with them and those that conflict with their beliefs or practice.

D. CLOSURE

This is not an easy course. This course asks the students to answer questions on a level that they may have never encountered before.

This course is not about frontal teaching. We, as teachers, do not tell the students what to think. Instead, we listen to their thoughts and validate their way of thinking.

This closure reminds the students what we have learned and also helps them to realize that I admire their effort.

C. TEXT STUDY (45 min)

1. Hand out *What do Jews Believe?* By Tracy R. Rich, Judaism 101.
2. Read the first few bullet points aloud. Then ask for volunteers to continue reading.
3. After each bullet point, ask for the following input:
 - a. Does this resonate with you?
 - b. Does this point ring true for your belief/practice?
 - c. Does this point describe your Judaism?

D. CLOSURE (5 min)

1. Summarize what we have done today. Compliment their work where appropriate.
2. Next week we will map out God. Ask the students to think about defining God over the week, and whether it is possible to do so.

What Do Jews Believe?

source: *Judaism 101* by Tracy R. Rich

- Judaism has no dogma, no formal set of beliefs that one must hold to be a Jew.
- In Judaism, actions are more important than beliefs, although there is certainly a place for belief within Judaism.
- The closest that anyone has ever come to creating a widely-accepted list of Jewish beliefs is Rambam's Thirteen Principles of Faith.
- As basic as these principles are, the necessity of believing each one of these has been disputed at one time or another, and the liberal movements of Judaism dispute many of these principles.
- Unlike many other religions, Judaism does not focus much on abstract, cosmological concepts. Although Jews have certainly considered the nature of G-d, man, the universe, life and the afterlife at great length, there is no mandated, official, definitive belief on these subjects, outside of the very general concepts discussed above.
- There is substantial room for personal opinions on all of these matters.
- Judaism focuses on relationships: the relationship between G-d and mankind, between G-d and the Jewish nation, between the Jewish nation and the land of Israel, and between human beings.
- Our scripture tell the story of the development of these relationships, from the time of creation, through the creation of the relationship between G-d and Abraham, to the creation of the relationship between G-d and the Jewish people, and forward.
- The scriptures also specify the mutual obligations created by these relationships, although various movements of Judaism disagree about the nature of these obligations.
- Some say they are absolute, unchanging laws from G-d (Orthodox); some say they are laws from G-d that change and evolve over time (Conservative); some say that they are guidelines that you can choose whether or not to follow (Reform, Reconstructionist).

Godwrestling Questionnaire

Name _____

Date _____

1. I describe God as...

2. The way I understand God now is...

3. The way I experience God now is...

4. In Godwrestling, I would like to learn...

5. Judaism often claims that actions are more important than beliefs. How do you feel about this?

6. In three words, describe what it is like being Jewish.
