

Faith Journeys

Background

I have been teaching a class on Jewish philosophy at Frisch for a number of years. The topics we address include free will, divine providence, chosenness, morality, dogma, identity and other such weighty issues; however, I had always been hesitant to teach a unit on faith. I'm not sure where my hesitation stemmed from. Maybe it was because I was nervous to introduce questions of faith to students if they were not struggling with them; maybe I was nervous that the answers I had at my disposal would fall short or if my students didn't relate to these answers, I could end up causing more harm than good. Maybe I thought that these issues were better addressed privately instead of in a group setting. Either way, I responded to these fears by avoiding the issue. While all of the topics we covered touched on issues of faith, I didn't address it head on. For many years I failed to introduce my students to perhaps the most important topic in Jewish philosophy, and one that might be most important for their "real" lives and their Jewish identity post high school.

Last year I had the privilege to teach an exceptional group of Seniors. The learning we did together challenged me and brought our group closer together as we delved into Jewish thought. Towards the end of the year, I asked my students to email me any questions that they felt were not addressed over the course of our class. The questions I received were thoughtful and reflected a high level of insight, and many of them revolved around issues of faith. I began to wonder if I had made a mistake in not formally addressing this topic.

I decided to do some research. One of my main influences in adolescent education has always been the psychologist Erik Erikson, whose structure of human psychosocial development has had a profound impact on me since I was introduced to it about ten years ago. Erikson sees life as a series of conflicts that the individual is forced to attempt to resolve. Each stage of life is thereby defined by the crisis through which a person must navigate. The crisis of adolescence is called identity vs. role confusion. In it, a child must attempt to recognize what makes him or her unique, how he is or she is an autonomous being, and define what he or she believes. In his book Identity: Youth in Crisis, Erikson writes, "if the earliest stage bequeathed to the identity crisis an important need to trust in oneself and others then clearly the adolescent looks most fervently for men and ideas to have *faith in* which also means men and ideas in whose service it would seem worthwhile to prove oneself trustworthy" (128-129).

Other psychologists, in examining Erikson's work discuss the role that spirituality and religion play in the resolution of identity crisis. Janet Gebat and Gary Leak write that specifically spiritual beliefs can be the basis of an adolescent's worldview (Gebat and Leak, Identity and Spirituality: Conceptual and Empirical Progress). Jeffrey Jensen Arnett adds that that it is important, however, for these spiritual beliefs to be ones that the individual has come to by virtue of his/her own exploration and reflection, and it is crucial for emerging adults to reexamine belief systems that they have been taught by their schools and families (Arnett, Emerging Adulthood A Theory of Development From the Late Teens Through the Twenties).

Class Goals

With this research in mind, as well as my growing unease about not directly addressing perhaps the most fundamental question of Jewish philosophy, I set out to prepare a unit on faith. While preparing, I was mindful of all the reasons I had been reluctant to teach this topic, and searched for a way to present the issue of faith in an inclusive way, that did not put pressure on me to be the oracle with all the answers, nor would force students to fit into a perfectly proscribed box. Erikson in mind, I wanted to afford my students with a space to explore faith and encourage them to create a spiritual identity. It is towards this aim that I named the unit "Faith Journeys" to signify that exploration of faith is not a topic that one should stop thinking about after a particular class, and not one that will have one answer that will be uniform for each person. Rather, faith is a topic that will continue to be explored and examined throughout a person's life. I wanted this unit to break down the classroom walls and to be an integral part of the student's emerging identity.

Class Structure:

- A. Articles and Responses**
- B. Research**
- C. Interview**
- D. Paper**

A. Articles and Responses

- We began our class with Rabbi Norman Lamm's article *Faith and Doubt*, in which Rabbi Lamm presents faith as having different parts - each playing off each other. Through this structure Rabbi Lamm communicates that not all faith must be the same, and therefore not all doubt will be uniform as well. Rabbi Lamm identifies three forms of faith - Cognitive (Intellectual), Affective (emotional) and functional (performance). My students were taken with the structure and had never before thought of faith as having different forms. They began to think of their own faith and trying to identify what forms of faith they had, what forms of faith they thought were important. The energy in the class was honest exploration and respect for everyone's opinions
- After reading and discussing *Faith and Doubt* I assigned articles that highlighted each for of faith in isolation. Since most people are used to beginning a discussion about faith with "proofs of God," I specifically stayed away from this type of discourse. Instead we began with an article which isolated affective faith. Reading "A Prayer for the Days of Awe," by Elie Wiesel was a moving experience for my students. They were not used to hearing someone speak so emotionally about his faith without having resolved intellectual issues about how God runs the world.
- To highlight functional faith, we read "Social Orthodoxy," by Jay Lefkowitz. Lefkowitz describes a community who does not believe in God but keeps mitzvot out of a sense of

history and peoplehood. This provocative view of segments of the Modern Orthodox community provoked spirited discussion in class, especially in light of a blog post on Times of Israel by Eitan Gross

(<http://blogs.timesofisrael.com/modern-orthodoxy-from-a-teenagers-perspective/>)

critiquing the Modern Orthodox community for not having enough faith in God and for picking and choosing between mitzvot. We wondered as a class whether the mitzvah performance the Lefkowitz describes actually falls into the functional faith category, or would Rabbi Lamm necessitate some degree of cognitive or affective faith to be involved in one's mitzvah observance.

- Lastly, we turned to the topic of cognitive faith, and read an excerpt from Rabbi Howard Jachter's recently published book Reasons to Believe. Jachter presents various "portals" to believe in God. We discussed each proof and whether the students related to it or not.
- After reading each article at home, students write short reader response essays that are graded for thoughtfulness and how much they reflect a close reading of the article.

→ **My reflection:** I am glad that I had the opportunity to speak to my students about their faith. Rabbi Lamm's article gave me the framework to be able to present faith not as a monolithic entity to which one must exactly conform, but as a free-flowing and divergent approach. I am regretful that I had not introduced this topic to my class last year and it was only after they pointed out to me that I had skipped it that I was able to push myself to prepare it. Nevertheless, without this hesitation, I think I would have started the unit with "cognitive faith" and first explored the proofs for God, which I am happy that I did not do. I think by doing it at the end, I allowed the students to see that these types of arguments exist but do not confine them to only thinking about faith in the cognitive sense.

B. Research

- After reading the articles in class, each student had to find their own somewhat academic article to which they can compare the sources. Many students chose "The Source of Faith is Faith Itself," by Rav Aharon Lichtenstein. Other students read excerpts from The Lonely Man of Faith by Rav Soloveitchik, "Religious Development in Adolescence: A Work in Progress" by Rabbi Jay Goldmintz, and Rabbi Haskel Lookstein's response to Jay Lefkowitz's article.

→ **My Reflection** - This was an integral part of the class, that presented somewhat of a missed opportunity. I could have had the students present their articles to the class, or at least write a short essay about them. This would have ensured that they read them carefully and would have also brought their voices into leading the class discussion. INstead I only had them reflect on these articles in their final paper. When teaching this unit again, I will do this part differently.

C. Interview

- Part of the faith journey is learning from and integrating others' thoughts and journeys. As part of their final paper, students needed to interview an adult about their faith. I specified an adult because I wanted them to speak to someone who may have had ups and downs, and has had time to think about their faith and internalize it. I added that if they wanted to additionally interview a peer, they could. We brainstormed good interview questions together, ones that might elicit a deep response. The students had to hand in their interview questions for an interim grade. Most students interviewed their parents. I had some beautiful feedback from students that they never realized how thought out their parents' faith was, and how they were able to connect to their parents about this issue. Even students who reported that they did not relate to their parents' faith were able to respect the path their parents had taken after talking it through with them.

→ **My reflection** - This was a vital part of the faith journey. The students wrote about their interviews and reactions to them in their final papers. In retrospect, I should have had them hand in the transcript of their interviews before their final papers. This would have allowed them to focus on integrating all of the information and reflecting on the interview, and not bound by transcribing the interview itself.

D. Paper

- At the end of the unit the students submitted a paper. The paper topic was as follows:
 - In this essay you will explore different areas thought about faith. You can write this paper in 1st person.
 - Section 1 - Reflect on the articles that we did in class. Which articles spoke to you and which didn't - why?
 - Section 2 - Read a new article and Summarize it. Is it a similar approach to the ones we did in class or different? Did it speak to you? What category of faith did this person explore?

- Section 3 - Interview someone and ask about their faith journey. Write about the interview. Did it impact your thought process or change your views in any way?
- Section 4 - Evaluate your own faith journey in light of the research that you have done. How would you categorize your own faith? How have you evolved? Has the research you have done (readings, class discussions and interview) shaped you in any way?

→ **My reflection:** While I think the process of writing this paper, bringing together the information and reflecting on each student's faith journey was valuable, I do think I could have done it better by breaking it into sections to be handed in at different times, as mentioned earlier. I am also a bit worried that there could have been students who felt uncomfortable being so open about their own journeys. One student did come to me and tell me that he felt uncomfortable, and I did give him an alternate assignment for the last part. He ended up doing the original assignment and telling me he was happy he did it. However, there could have been other students who didn't feel comfortable telling me that they did not want to be open about their own faith. I wonder if I should have given a different option instead of writing so personally. On the other hand, perhaps if I gave a different option, too many people would have taken it as an easy way out.

After the students handed in the papers, one student came to me privately and told me that she felt that while they had been open with me about their faith, I had not been open with them about mine. I thought this was a valid criticism and the following class, the class was invited to interview me about my faith. I felt comfortable talking to them because of the trust we had built up going through the issues together and because of the safe space we had created. I think that hearing a teacher speak openly about her own experiences allows the students to see again that faith is an issue that adults think about, and they will hopefully continue forming during the course of their adult lives.

Closing Remarks

While I am regretful that I was too hesitant for the past number of years to introduce this topic, I am very glad that I finally did. My hesitation over the past few years and my caution caused me to introduce this topic not as the answer to "why should we believe in God" but as a journey and a process. I am hopeful that through the learning they did in this class, my students began to form a spiritual identity, that will carry them past the classroom walls and into a healthy and positive emerging adulthood.