

How Reconstructionist Students Conceptualize and Experience God

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Psychologist David Elkind stresses the importance of making the effort "...to see the world from the child's perspective." By studying children's beliefs and ideas, we might become better guides in their spiritual development.

Between 1995 and 1997, I surveyed 889 students in the greater Philadelphia area about their conceptions of God. The survey involved 382 third and fourth graders and 504 sixth and seventh graders. It was undertaken to give Jewish educators a picture of how students attending Jewish supplementary schools conceptualize and experience God. 97% of the survey students were from Conservative and Reform schools. (The remaining 3% came from Reconstructionist schools.)

In the winter of 2006, I approached the principals in the Reconstructionist Educators Council (affiliated with the Auerbach Central Agency for Jewish Education) about doing a follow-up study to compare present Reconstructionist students with the original study participants. The principals agreed and, with an offer for aid for computer analysis from the education department at JRF, five schools took part in the study that spring, involving 148 students.

In this report, I will provide the results of the 2006 survey and compare them to the survey completed ten years ago. Subjects in both surveys were given the same four part questionnaire (see Appendix).

I was not able to compare the current Reconstructionist students' responses with that of their counterparts in the original survey because there were too few Reconstructionist students in that survey to create a reliable sampling size. In this report, when you read the words "original sample" without any qualification, it is a reference to the entire sample.

The first section collects information about gender, grade, synagogue attendance, and communication about God with parents, peers, and teachers. The remaining sections use three different approaches to studying children's conceptualization and experience of God. The second section of the questionnaire contains fourteen statements about belief in God to which students were asked to report their agreement/disagreement. The third section is designed to be more open-ended and consists of three incomplete sentence stems to be completed by the respondents. The last section contains space for respondents to draw a picture that "tells about God."

For the most part, the reader will find that the responses to both surveys are similar, with a few interesting differences. Hopefully, these comparative results will provide important information for Reconstructionist principals and lay leaders who are interested in the education of our children.

I'll first share the data about the third and fourth graders and then the data for the sixth and seventh graders (where more differences occur).

Third and Fourth Grade Subjects

In the original survey, the 382 third and fourth grade students who participated came from eight congregational schools. The sample was closely matched in terms of grade, gender, and Conservative and Reform movement affiliation. (55% of the students were boys and 45% were girls. 52% were in fourth grade and 48% were in third grade. 56% of the students were from schools with a Conservative affiliation and 42% of the students were from schools with a Reform affiliation.) Only 2% had a Reconstructionist affiliation.

The recent survey involved 101 third and fourth graders from five suburban Philadelphia Reconstructionist schools. They too were closely matched in terms of grade and gender. (52% were fourth graders and 48% were third graders. 50% were boys and 50% were girls.)

Among the original sample, 28% of the students reported that they attended services frequently, 60% reported that they attended a little and 14% almost never. There was little difference by gender or by grade. Conservative-affiliated students reported that they attended services more often than Reform-affiliated students. (39% of Conservative-affiliated students were frequent attendees, compared to 10% of the Reform-affiliated students.)

In the present sample, 16% of the Reconstructionist students reported that they were frequent attendees, 51% reported that they attended a little and 33% almost never. Thus, Reconstructionist students fall between Conservative and Reform students in terms of reported frequent attendance. However, the percentage of those who report that they almost never attend services is higher than both Conservative and Reform students.

The original students reported varying frequencies of communication about God with parents, peers, and teachers. For example, 51% of the students reported that they almost never talked to their parents about God. They were even less likely to talk to their peers about God. (84% say they almost never talk to friends about God.) By contrast, 58% of the students reported that they talked to their teachers about God.

In the recent survey, the data for Reconstructionist students were fairly similar with regard to communication about God with parents and peers. 60% reported that they almost never talked to their parents about God. 91% almost never talk to their peers about God. However, a slightly higher percentage – 65% to 58%- report that they talked to their teachers about God.

Below are percentage frequencies for the original respondents for each of the fourteen survey statements:

	<u>Yes</u>	<u>No</u>	<u>Not Sure</u>
1. You can talk to God.	52%	13%	36%
2. God answers our prayers.	55	10	34
3. God does not know what will happen to us.	21	47	33
4. God gets lonely.	13	47	39
5. God gets angry at us.	67	10	22
6. God is perfect.	20	49	30
7. God is a He ... not a She.	25	20	54
8. God can't do everything.	43	27	30
9. God is everywhere.	82	7	11
10. God punishes bad people.	69	10	20
11. God really exists.	67	6	26
12. God knows what we think.	42	18	39
13. God is not kind sometimes.	46	20	34
14. God creates things every day.	32	17	42

Below are the percentage frequencies of the present Reconstructionist sample (some respondents gave no responses to some questions):

	<u>Yes</u>	<u>No</u>	<u>Not Sure</u>
1. You can talk to God.	51%	7%	42%
2. God answers our prayers.	44	8	48
3. God does not know what will happen to us.	16	39	45

4. God gets lonely.	17	43	40
5. God gets angry at us.	58	14	28
6. God is perfect.	9	60	31
7. God is a He ... not a She.	22	21	52
8. God can't do everything.	37	28	33
9. God is everywhere.	79	4	16
10. God punishes bad people.	50	14	35
11. God really exists.	65	8	25
12. God knows what we think.	36	15	46
13. God is not kind sometimes.	34	14	49
14. God creates things every day.	52	19	27

Overall, the results suggest that both groups of students hold a rather firm belief in God but do discriminate among different ways to conceptualize and experience God. In many instances, there is uncertainty.

The most pervasive belief of these third and fourth grade students is that God is everywhere. 82% of the original participants agreed with this statement, while 79% of Reconstructionist students agreed with the statement. Other pervasive beliefs were that God punishes bad people (69% for the original respondents and 50% for the present Reconstructionist participants) and that God really exists (67% for the original respondents and 65% for the present Reconstructionist students).

In both groups, more students than not believed that: You can talk to God, God answers our prayers; God knows what will happen to us; God does not get lonely; God gets angry at us; God is not perfect; God can't do everything; God knows what we think; God is not kind sometimes; and God creates things every day.

Roughly one third of all the responses in both surveys to these statements was "unsure." The most uncertainty was reflected about whether God was masculine or feminine. 54% of the original participants and 52% of the present Reconstructionist students said they were unsure about God's gender.

In summary, the majority of these students expressed a belief in a God who is powerful, omniscient and parental. But there are some doubts about the absolute nature of God's power and God's gender. Overall, there is a remarkable similarity in the responses between the Reconstructionist students in the recent study and those in the original one. We may note that the God the third and fourth grade Reconstructionist students experience is slightly more positive. They conceptualize God as a little kinder and less punitive. Also, Reconstructionist third and fourth graders are more likely to experience God as creating things every day.

Below is a summary to responses to each of the three sentence stems.

1. I feel close to God when...

The most frequent ending for the original participants (40%) given to this sentence stem is "praying at synagogue." For the present Reconstructionist students, this ending appeared 39% of the time.

14% of the original students commented that they felt close to God at a time when they had deep emotions (e.g. when they were happy, sad, troubled or lonely or when someone was born or died). For Reconstructionist students, this response also occurred 14% of the time. 9% of the original students specifically stated that they felt close to God when God helps or answers their prayers or wishes for material objects (e.g. guitar or bike) or assists them with achievements (e.g. tests or homework). 1% of Reconstructionist students gave this response. 6% of the original students felt God's presence when they did something they perceive as good compared to 5% of the Reconstructionist students. Another 7% felt close to God when they go to sleep. 10% of Reconstructionist students gave this response. These combined responses, representing 22% of the responses for the original students and 16% for the present Reconstructionist students, indicate that these children rely on God for strength, comfort and protection as well as, occasionally for "favors," though for the present Reconstructionist students, the last item was not as relevant.

Few original study children (4%) expressed that nature brought them close to God. The number was slightly higher (10%) for the Reconstructionist students.

2. We know God is real because.....

For 30% of the original respondents and 23% of the present respondents, Creation points to God's existence. Although only 4% and 10% respectively "experience" God through nature, nature proves God is real for a large number of both groups of students. For 24% of the original students, the fact that God is in the Bible stories they learn indicated to them that God must be real. For Reconstructionist students,

the percentage is 16%. Thus, for many students in both studies, the Bible plays an important role in their spiritual development.

3. A question I have about God is....

The most frequently asked question by both groups of students (13% and 23%) concerns God's gender, or as more commonly put by the students, "Is God a boy or a girl"? This is followed by questions about God's appearance (11%) for the original students, but only 4% for the present Reconstructionist students. 11% and 15%, respectively, asked if God exists.

Both groups also asked a number of "how" questions or other concrete queries, reflecting their pragmatic nature at this age... How was God created? How does God spend the day? How can God be everywhere? How does it feel to be God? Does God watch over adults? Is it fun being God? Why did you make Israel so small? Why did you make humans? A few were curious if God was ever alive at one point and then became God.

When asked to draw a picture that tells about God, 42% of the original students drew a picture that conveyed God as a spiritual being. 32% drew a picture depicting God as a creative force and 17% drew God in relationship to humanity (often punishing the wicked, but occasionally assisting people.) 9% drew no picture, usually adding a note that you can not draw a picture of God.

17% of present Reconstructionist students drew pictures that conveyed God as a spiritual being. 40% drew a picture of God as a creative force and 21% drew God in relationship to humanity (e.g. helping the poor, the torah, the parting of the Red Sea, God punishing the wicked.) 19% drew no picture.

Sixth and Seventh and Grade Subjects

In the original study, there were 504 students surveyed from eleven congregational schools. In the present study, 47 Reconstructionist sixth and seventh graders are surveyed.

The original sample was closely matched in terms of grade and gender, though there were a larger number of Conservative students represented than Reform, and a very small number of Reconstructionist students. 54% of the students were boys and 49% were girls. 49% were in sixth grade and 51% were in seventh grade. Of the eleven supplementary schools participating in the second study, five were Conservative, five Reform and one Reconstructionist. 67% of the students were

from schools with a Conservative affiliation and 30% of the students were from schools with a Reform affiliation. 3% had a Reconstructionist affiliation.

The recent sample was somewhat matched in terms of grade and gender. 59% of the students were boys and 41% were girls. 57% were in sixth grade and 43% were in seventh grade. Five Reconstructionist schools were represented.

Among the original sample, 18% of the students reported that they attended services frequently, 66% reported that they attended a little and 16% almost never. [There was little difference by gender or by grade.] However, Conservative-affiliated students reported that they attended services more often than Reform-affiliated students. For example, 29% of Conservative-affiliated students were frequent attendees compared to 14% of the Reform-affiliated students.

9% of the present sixth and seventh grade Reconstructionist participants reported that they attended services frequently and 64% reported that they attended services a little. 28% reported that they almost never attended services. Overall, they reported attending services less frequently than the original respondents.

Students in the original survey reported varying frequency of communication about God with parents, peers, and teachers. 62% of the students reported that they almost never talked to their parents about God. [There was no difference by gender, grade or affiliation.] They were even less likely to talk to their peers about God. 85% said they almost never talk to friends about God. [There was little difference by gender, grade or affiliation.] However, 58% of the students reported that they talked to their teachers about God frequently

68% of the present Reconstructionist students reported that they almost never talked to their parents about God. They too are even less likely to talk to their peers, (79%) Only 34% reported that they talked to their teachers a lot about God – a significant drop from the third and fourth grade Reconstructionist sample and significantly lower than reported by the original survey respondents.

Below are percentage frequencies for each of the fourteen statements from the original survey of sixth and seventh graders.

	<u>Yes</u>	<u>No</u>	<u>Not Sure</u>
1. You can talk to God.	52%	13%	29%

2.	God answers our prayers.	43	12	44
3.	God does not know what will happen to us.	23	39	38
4.	God gets lonely.	11	45	43
5.	God gets angry at us.	58	15	26
6.	God is perfect.	14	54	31
7.	God is a He ... not a She.	8	27	54
8.	God can't do everything.	38	29	32
9.	God is everywhere.	73	11	16
10.	God punishes bad people.	45	22	31
11.	God really exists.	64	7	29
12.	God knows what we think.	37	22	40
13.	God is not kind sometimes.	41	22	37
14.	God creates things every day.	46	21	33

Here are the results from the current survey of sixth and seventh Reconstructionist students:

	<u>Yes</u>	<u>No</u>	<u>Not Sure</u>	
1.	You can talk to God.	30%	28%	40%
2.	God answers our prayers.	13	28	57

3.	God does not know what will happen to us.	21	28	51
4.	God gets lonely.	11	47	43
5.	God gets angry at us.	49	15	34
6.	God is perfect.	19	53	28
7.	God is a He ... not a She.	13	38	47
8.	God can't do everything.	36	32	32
9.	God is everywhere.	68	21	11
10.	God punishes bad people.	21	38	40
11.	God really exists.	49	17	34
12.	God knows what we think.	21	38	40
13.	God is not kind sometimes.	36	17	47
14.	God creates things every day.	38	19	43

Overall, the results suggest that the sixth and seventh grade students in both studies still hold a rather firm belief in God but, with maturity, do discriminate among different ways to conceptualize and experience God. The most pervasive beliefs of these students are that God is everywhere and that God really exists. (Note that a greater number of Reconstructionist students question God's existence more than their Conservative and Reform counterparts.) Other beliefs brought a greater variety of viewpoints. Moreover, compared to the surveys of third and fourth grade students, some dramatic affiliation differences occur. Conservative and Reform students were far more likely than Reconstructionist students to believe that you can talk to God, God answers your prayers, God gets angry, and God punishes bad people. It seems that God is perceived as less personal, imminent, and punitive to Reconstructionist sixth and seventh graders than students from the other two movements.

It is also important to note that older students in both studies frequently responded “not sure” to the statements. This tendency was especially pronounced in Reconstructionist students. They were more frequently “not sure” than their Conservative and Reform counterparts for almost every item.

Below is a summary to responses to each of the three sentence stems among Conservative and Reform sixth and seventh graders and a comparison to the recent Reconstructionist respondents.

1. I feel close to God when...

The most frequent ending for the original participants (48%) given to this sentence stem is "praying at synagogue." 13% of the students commented that they felt close to God at a time when they had deep emotions (e.g. when they were happy, sad, troubled or lonely or when someone was born or died). 11% specifically stated that they felt close to God when God helps or answers their prayers or wishes for material objects or assists them with achievements 7% feel close to God when they go to sleep. Another 4% feel God's presence when they do something that they perceive as good. These combined responses, representing 22% of the responses, indicate that these children rely on God for strength, comfort and protection, as well as "favors." 4% feel close to God when they are at Hebrew School. Another (4%) expressed that nature brought them close to God. 8% of the children reported that they never feel close to God.

The present Reconstructionist students had rather similar responses. Their most frequent ending (32%) given to this sentence stem was “praying at synagogue.” 13% of the Reconstructionist students commented that they felt close to God at a time when they had deep emotions. 10% specifically stated that they felt close to God when God helps or answers their prayers or wishes for material objects or assists them with achievements. 9% feel close to God at bedtime. Another 9% feel God’s presence when they do something that they perceive as good. These combined responses, [representing 28% of the sample] indicate that these students also rely on God for strength, comfort, protection, as well as “favors.” Besides a few idiosyncratic replies, 9% replied “never” and 10% did not respond to this item.

2. We know God is real because.....

For 29% of the original respondents, Creation points to God's existence. Although only 4% "experience" God through nature, nature proves God is real for a large sample of students. For 18% of the students, the fact that God is in the Bible stories they learn indicates to them that God must be real. Another 4% mention the Biblical miracles done for our ancestors as proof of God's existence. Thus for 22% of the students, the Bible plays an important role in their spiritual development. 15% of the students responded that they know God is real by virtue of their faith. They simply believe or feel it is so. Another 15% mention God's helping us. 16% did not respond.

For the most part, the responses of the present older Reconstructionist students were similar to the original sample of students. For 19% of the older Reconstructionist respondents, Creation points to God's existence. For 11% of the older students, the fact that God is in the Bible stories they learn indicated to them that God must be real. Another 10% mention the miracles done for our ancestors as proof of God's existence. Thus, for 21% of the older Reconstructionist students, the Bible plays an important role in their spiritual development. 20% responded by referring to a spiritual factor (eg faith, hope prayer, love) and one "young Kaplanian" referred to a "Divine Force in all creatures in the world." 39% were unsure.

Differences were the fact that they did not refer to God as answering prayers and far more students (42%) expressed their uncertainty about God's existence.

3. A question I have about God is....

The most frequently asked question among Conservative and Reform sixth and seventh graders concerns God's gender (12%). This is followed by questions about why God allows hardship or evil (10%). 9% of the students asked if God exists, and another 9% asked about God's appearance. 4% asked questions relating to the nature and extent of God's power control. 14% responded that they did not have questions. 89% asked more than one question.

For Reconstructionist students, the most frequent question they had was whether God exists (23%) 14% asked questions relating to the nature and extent of God's power and control The next most frequent question was about God's gender. (6%).

1% inquired if God ever transformed into a human or animal form. 16% responded that they did not have questions. One young “existentialist” pondered, “why are we here?” Another wondered if God influences people.

The drawings of the original respondents describe God as the creative force in the world and a spiritual essence. God is depicted as both mysterious and eternal. In terms of God's relationship with people, there are fewer pictures of God as the one who punishes than in those of the third and fourth graders and more of God as *enabler*. There are also more pictures that focus on God's attributes.

Since there are no percentages available for the respondents in the first survey, I can only do a comparison with the younger Reconstructionist students. 25% of the older Reconstructionist students' drawings describe God as the creative force in the world. 32% describe God as a spiritual essence. These percentages are somewhat lower than those of the younger students. Only 15% depicted God in relation to humans. This too is lower than the percentages of the younger students and matches their responses in the second part of the questionnaire where they conceptualize God as less relational than did the original students. These responses can not be compared because 40% of the students did not draw a picture. It is difficult to tell if they did not do this due to lack of interest or lack of time.

Discussion

A substantial percentage of children in these surveys affirm that God exists and is everywhere. Although many of the older respondents see God as getting angry and punishing bad people, the numbers are far less than their younger counterparts perhaps reflecting less dependence on authority figures.

Fewer sixth and seventh graders than third and fourth graders agree that God answers our prayers. However, more see God as creating every day, compared to the younger students. Their increased awareness of God's continual presence can be combined with their interest in social action. Their idealism can be linked to being "partners with God" in protecting the environment and repairing the world. This may be an advantageous time to introduce or reintroduce prayers about creation and blessings of the natural world. Prayer experiences outdoors can be very moving for this age group.

Although service attendance does not increase for this age group (even with Bar/Bat Mitzvah approaching), many older students feel close to God when they pray at synagogue. It would seem that encouraging more synagogue attendance

would be beneficial as well as teaching blessings that can be recited privately, such as at meal time or bed time.

Since the peer group now plays a more significant role in their lives, efforts could be made to create "davening groups" just for sixth and seventh graders. This may include a social component (e.g. lunch, singing, group games) and an intellectual challenge, taking advantage of their emerging abilities in formal operational thinking.

Sixth and seventh graders are beginning to be critically reflective, as they develop their own ideas. They want to know "why" and to decide if the answers given are logically acceptable to them. It is a time for teachers (and parents) to share different approaches to defining and experiencing God and giving the students room to find their own path. They are now open to ideas and values, but like to reach conclusions by themselves. It would be counter-productive to force their agreement or to "put-down" their opinions.

It is also a time to introduce the concept that Bible stories may not be true in a literal sense but offer important truths. The values taught in Torah can be held as a consistent and insightful system for living. Mitzvot should be presented as more than "because it says so" but as challenges to leading a meaningful and idealistic life.

Midrash making and studying Jewish texts with themes that have relevance to their everyday lives (e.g. cheating, lost articles, sex, drugs, body piercing, relating to parents, friendship) are a good match for this age group. Learning about heroes and heroines that have made a difference through their courage and/or contributions to society has the potential to inspire. Selecting a hero or heroine and presenting a report (e.g. on the Friday night before the Bar/Bat Mitzvah) can be an impactful project.

Family education programs that focus on the topic of God would give students an opportunity to hear the views of other teens and adults as well. Sixth and seventh graders are more likely to share their thoughts in small groups rather than in front of a large audience. However, they should not be in a group with their own parents. In public, they may find this awkward, yet, they are usually comfortable with peers and non-parental adults. Being separated from parents allows them to demonstrate that they are no longer children. It also allows them to "try out" opinions, even theoretical ones, as they begin to search for a philosophy of life.

The research for both the younger and older groups of students reveals that Jewish supplementary students primarily discuss God with their teachers. They look to them for information and guidance. This may not be a subject with which teachers are comfortable or have formulated a clear position. It should be on the agenda of teacher training institutions and faculty in-service sessions. Although most Reconstructionist students are likely to disagree that God is “he,” it should be noted that in the open ended section of the survey, all but two respondents referred to God as a “He.”

It is my own view that it is helpful to let students know that finding God is a life-long search and that although belief is important, it is our actions that define who we are. We as educators and parents may not have all the answers but what we can share are our spiritual journeys. We can share both when we have felt close to God and when not. We can share our discoveries as well as the questions we still have. We can share how a belief in God can manifest itself in our daily lives.

To be models for our students, educators must be involved in both learning and reflection. Our students expect to discuss God at religious school. We must be prepared to engage them.

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Appendix

Your School _____

Your Grade _____

Are you a boy? or a girl?

Do you go to services at the synagogue

a lot? a little? almost never?

Do you and your parents talk about God

a lot? a little? almost never?

Do you and your friends talk about God

a lot? a little? almost never?

Do you and your religious school teachers talk about God

alot? a little? almost never?

What do you think?

1. You can talk to God.

Yes No Not Sure

2. God answers our prayers.

Yes No Not Sure

- | | | | | |
|-----|---|-----|----|----------|
| 3. | God does not know what will happen to us. | Yes | No | Not Sure |
| 4. | God gets lonely. | Yes | No | Not Sure |
| 5. | God gets angry at us. | Yes | No | Not Sure |
| 6. | God is perfect. | Yes | No | Not Sure |
| 7. | God is a He ... not a She. | Yes | No | Not Sure |
| 8. | God can't do everything. | Yes | No | Not Sure |
| 9. | God is everywhere. | Yes | No | Not Sure |
| 10. | God punishes bad people. | Yes | No | Not Sure |
| 11. | God really exists. | Yes | No | Not Sure |
| 12. | God knows what we think. | Yes | No | Not Sure |
| 13. | God is not kind sometimes. | Yes | No | Not Sure |

14. God creates things every day.

Yes No Not Sure

Finish these sentences.

I feel close to God when

We know God is real because

A question I have about God is

Draw a picture that tells about God.