

Authentic Inquiry Questions for the study of Judaism: A Lived Tradition approach

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Who am I? Originally an academic Economist (Ph.D. Harvard 1997).

Focus: contracts, organisations, incentive structures, law and economics.

2004: entered full time Jewish community work, and ran a successful cheder (Jewish religion school) in Reading for many years.

2015: shifted focus to RE -- organising and designing Jewish learning experiences at non-Jewish schools. SACRE syllabus writing. Coordinator of AJREP.uk

Work partner and husband: Rabbi Zvi Solomons. Based in Reading.

Many inquiries. Many syllabi. Many key questions. Many lesson plans.

Some good. Some OK. Some very unhelpful. **How can this be improved?**

The Problem

- Very few RE Judaism specialists
- Most RE Judaism materials created by non-specialists, who are also not Jewish.
- Result: Content often fails to reflect what Jews believe that others need to know to understand us.
- Result: Content is often driven by external priorities.
- Judaism taught as a belief system rather than as a living civilisation.

***Jewish children should recognise their lived religion
in what is taught.***

Common KS1 and KS2 Judaism Questions

Current

- Who is God to Jews?
- Is Shabbat important to Jewish children?
- Does visiting the synagogue help Jewish children feel closer to God?
- What is the best way for a Jew to lead a good life?
- How do Jewish beliefs, teachings and stories impact on daily life?
- How does celebrating Shavuot help Jewish children feel closer to God?
- Are Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur important to Jewish children?
- What is the best way for a Jew to show commitment to God?

- How are sacred teachings and Stories interpreted by Jews today?
- Why do Jewish people go to the Synagogue?
- How and why is Shabbat important to some Jewish people in Britain?
- What do different Jewish people believe about God?

Older but still popular

- How special is the relationship Jews have with God?
- How important is it for Jewish people to do what God asks them to do?
- Does celebrating Chanukah make Jewish children feel close to God?
- What happens in a Synagogue?

Common Judaism Questions (closed questions corrected in italics)

Current

- Who is God to Jews?
- *How is Shabbat important to Jewish children?*
- *How does visiting the synagogue help Jewish children feel closer to God?*
- What is the best way for a Jew to lead a good life?
- How do Jewish beliefs, teachings and stories impact on daily life?
- How does celebrating Shavuot help Jewish children feel closer to God?
- *How are Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur important to Jewish children?*
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- *How does celebrating Chanukah make Jewish children feel close to God?*
- What happens in a Synagogue?

Problem 1: Diversity as a tick box exercise

- “What do **different** Jewish people believe about God?” (KS1)
 - Assumes that Jews treat God as a truth claim (“believe about”).
 - Neglects diversity of Jewish practice.
- “How and why is Shabbat important to **some Jewish people** in Britain?” (KS1)
 - Would you ask: “How and why is Easter important to some Christian people in Britain?”
 - Teach how Shabbat is important in Judaism -- for all varieties of religious Jews
 - Acknowledge that approaches to Shabbat differ (legalistic versus experiential).
 - Acknowledge that not all Jews are religious so not all Jews keep Shabbat.

Does this question help children understand what it means to be Jewish?

Are you privileging external priorities over an understanding of Judaism?

1.2 Including Non-religious Jews

- Judaism is both an ethnicity and a religion.
One can be Jewish without practicing Judaism. In fact, some Jews actively reject Judaism.
- **How do you acknowledge this diversity?**
- DO avoid using phrases such as “[all] Jews believe ...” or “[all] Jews do ...” or even “[all] Orthodox Jews believe ...” DO avoid stereotyping Jews or groups of Jews.
- But **for core aspects of Judaism**, also avoid: “some Jews believe...” or “some Jews do ...”.
Avoid framings that atomise us.
- Rather: **Different Jews connect differently to such and such core aspect of Judaism.**
- Best: “Such and such belief or value or concept or practice is important in Judaism”.
- Not all Jews are religious or hold all core Jewish beliefs or embrace all core Jewish values and practices, but the beliefs and values and practices are still Jewish ones.

**Saying that something is important in Judaism
does not negate the experiences of Jews who are not religious.**

1.3 How *should* you teach diversity in Judaism?

- Teach the diverse ways in which Jews express what we have in common.
- In Judaism, **disagreeing and debating is an integral part of Jewish practice.**
- Community is built primarily on **common practices** and identity, not on theological agreement.
- Diversity in Judaism does not fit cleanly into externally constructed categories.
- To be inclusive of non-religious Jews:
Teach about **Judaism as an ethnicity**, with a history and a geographical origin.
Acknowledge that Judaism is a living civilisation, not just a belief system or worldview.
- Continually ask: Is the goal of this lesson to enhance understanding of Jews and Judaism or am I using Judaism to pursue external priorities (instead)? If the latter, then STOP.

How does the tradition of disagreeing and debating help build community and a common identity for Jews?

Problem 2: Neglect of Passover and the Exodus

- None of the commonly used key questions discusses Passover or the Exodus.
- Passover is retrofitted into a variety of questions, rather than standing on its own.

You *can* understand what it means to be Jewish without learning about Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur.

But **you cannot understand what it means to be Jewish without learning about Passover** and the Exodus.

The Exodus is *the* founding story of the Jewish People.

Abraham's story is important, but primarily because of the promise made to Abraham that was fulfilled in the Exodus (and subsequent events).

Three core stories that shape Jewish practice: **Creation. Revelation. Redemption.**

Absurd that resources frequently have key questions on Chanukah (a minor festival) but not on Passover.

Passover must be its own topic, not a subtopic of some other key question such as "How do Jewish beliefs, teachings and stories impact on daily life?" (KS2)

Problem 3: Narrow focus on God

Unhelpful

- *How does visiting the synagogue help Jewish children feel closer to God? (KS1)*
- *How does celebrating Shavuot help Jewish children feel closer to God? (KS2)*
- *How does celebrating Chanukah make Jewish children feel close to God? (KS1)*

Need reframing

- *What is the best way for a Jew to show commitment to God? (KS2)*
- *What do different Jewish people believe about God? (KS1)*
- *How important is it for Jewish people to do what God asks them to do? (KS2)*

Helpful (might also be improved)

- *Who is God to Jews? (KS1)*
- *What happens in a Synagogue? (KS1)*
- *How special is the relationship Jews have with God? (KS2)*

**The best way to talk about God in Judaism, is to start with lived religion.
There is no short cut.**

3.2 In Judaism, Faith is not about believing truth claims.

- Beliefs emerge out of practice. Faith consists of actions. Being reliable.
- Faith is **being faithful** – *Emunah*. **Faith is rooted in a relationship.**
- “The word religion... comes from the Latin *religare*, meaning ‘to bind’. That is what religions did and still do. They bind people to one another and to God.” – Rabbi Lord Jonathan Sacks
- Two most important commandments: Love God and Love your Neighbour. Actions, not emotions.

Love is a verb.

- Commandment to believe in God (in Decalogue).
Question: How can belief be commanded?
Answer: **You show you believe in God by how you live.**

3.3 Na'aseh Venish'mah (We will do, and we will understand)

Creation. Revelation. Redemption.

Revelation at Sinai (Receiving the Torah)

Decalogue. (What Christians call the “10 Commandments”)

Core text (Exodus 24:7): **All that God says, we will do and we will understand.**

Na'aseh v' Nishma. כל אֲשֶׁר־דִּבֶּר ה' נַעֲשֶׂה וְנִשְׁמָע

Covenant of Sinai: At Mount Sinai, Israel accepted the whole Torah.

Trust in God - We agreed to adhere to what we had not yet heard (including Oral Torah).

613 Mitzvot frame every part of our lives.

Doing comes first. *Then* you understand.

You learn by doing.

3.4 Faith in Practice

We teach children how to live (to do mitzvot).

→ They learn values and develop connection with Judaism, other Jews and God.

Belief and understanding emerge from practice.

Example: Saying please and thank you teaches children gratitude.

You can be religious and also doubt truth claims.

A religious Jew keeps the faith, by continuing to practice.

Performing mitzvot makes our lives holy and makes space for God in our lives.

Belief in God is not a truth claim. Belief in God is a relationship. *Emunah.*

Seek God while you can; Call out while [God] is near. (Isaiah 55:6)

Connection to God requires discipline and hard work. There is no short cut.

What does Good Practice Look Like?

- Core stories and how these stories are lived.
- **Narratives and practices shaped by law that teach and embody values.**
- Covenant at Sinai is more than the “10 commandments”
Na’aseh Venish’mah
- Basic Jewish history. Understand who Jews are.
(as an ethnicity, not just a religion) We have more in common than divides us.
- Thematic approaches that include topics like calendars, dietary rules etc. rather than focusing on philosophy / theology. (**Stop mischaracterising religions as worldviews.**)

God, Torah, Israel

Creation, Revelation, Redemption

Appendix: Common Mistakes in Teaching Judaism

- Focus on Abraham as the “founder of Judaism”.
- Excessive focus on “Ten Commandments”, instead of Revelation at Sinai
- Excessive focus on belief in God (rather than commitment to practice)
- Shabbat taught without mentioning the concept of holiness.
- Judaism framed as a worldview / belief system
- Using Judaism time to achieve external priorities.
Example: David and Goliath but not Jacob’s dream or name change
- Teaching Chanukah and Yom Kippur instead of Passover
- Failure to integrate diversity into teaching.
- Stereotyping particular groups of Jews:
Example: “Reform Jews don’t pray in Hebrew.”
Example: “Orthodox Jews interpret the Torah literally.”
- Neglect of Jewish identity and history / *Am Yisra’el* (Israel as a people)