



# Feeling Close to God

## Writing Activity



*To pray is to take notice of the wonder, to regain a sense of the mystery that animates all beings, the divine margin in all attainments. Prayer is our humble answer to the inconceivable surprise of living.*

*~ Abraham Joshua Heschel, Moral Grandeur and Spiritual Audacity*

### **Topic**

Enhancing positive feelings of God's presence and a close connection with the Divine.

### **Grade Level(s)**

3<sup>rd</sup> – 5<sup>th</sup> grade (may be adapted for younger or older children, as well as for teens and adults)

### **Goals for the Lesson/Activity**

#### **Students will:**

- Consider what helps or might help them feel close to God
- Engage interactively with the *Shema* to imbue it with personal meaning
- Understand the tenets of prescribed/liturgical prayer and personal prayer

### **Materials needed:**

- Paper
- Pencils, pens, or other writing implements
- Writing template, one per student
- Clipboards (optional)

### **Prepare in Advance**

Think about how you would like to create a contemplative environment in your classroom. You might choose to dim the lights, bring in rugs, etc.



# Feeling Close to God

## Writing Activity

### **Background for Teachers**

#### The Shema

The *Shema* (Deuteronomy 6:4-9, 11:13-21, Numbers 15:37-41) is considered by many Jews to be the most important Jewish prayer. Part of the beauty of the *Shema* is that it is both simple and complex and, as such, is a portal to connecting with the Divine that can be renewed and sustained over the course of a lifetime. Many Jews would agree that recitation of the first six words is central to Jewish practice. It is recited as part of the morning and evening prayer services and it is recited by many before bed.

*Shema yisrael, Adonai Eloheinu Adonai echad*, is often translated: Hear O' Israel, God is our God, God is one. And "Israel" may be translated as *one who struggles with God*. Some consider the *Shema* a proclamation of faith rather than a prayer per se.

#### Keva (קבע) and Kavana (כוונה)

*Keva* and *kavana* refer to two modes of or approaches to prayer. The first, *keva*, is related to the Hebrew word *kavua* which means fixed or permanent. This denotes what is written on the page, namely the prayers in the order they are found in the prayer book. *Kavana* is related to the word *kivun*, or intention. *Kavana* refers to the spirit that someone brings or the personal connection someone imbues into a prayer.

#### Hitbodedut (התבודדות)

The Hasidic master Rabbi Nachman of Breslov (1772-1810) is credited with popularizing *hitbodedut*, prayer composed by the person praying and meant to establish a close personal connection to God, sometimes uttered spontaneously while alone.

#### The Name of God

In some Jewish practices, the name of God, when written or printed on paper, cannot be destroyed or thrown away. If you do not know the custom in your school setting, please consult the education director or a member of the clergy.

### **Description of Activities**

This engaging activity, modeled on a "call and response" poem, helps learners to personalize the *Shema* in ways that enhance positive feelings of connection to God.

- Setting the Tone

Begin by establishing a calm, contemplative environment. This could include dimming the lights, having students clear their desks, sitting in a circle with backs facing in (to avoid distracting eye contact).

Explain to students that they (we) will be exploring feeling close to God and that the room has been arranged (per above) to aid this kind of spiritual activity and stillness. Ask students to recite the first line, or six words, of the *Shema* together.



# Feeling Close to God

## Writing Activity

Then ask students to take three deep breaths, closing their eyes if they are comfortable doing so.

- **Brainstorming, Drafting & Sharing**

Pass out paper and pencils or pens to students. If they are sitting on the floor, consider giving students clipboards or another hard surface, such as a book, for more comfortable writing.

Writing Warm-Up: Ask students to take a few minutes to think of times when they have felt God's presence or a close connection to the Divine. Ask students to write for 5-10 minutes, staying with the memories. Where were they? What were they doing? How did they feel? Explain that if memories do not immediately come to mind, that is okay, just sit quietly and see if anything comes up for them.

Sharing: Take a 5-10 minute break from writing and invite students to briefly share their experiences of feeling close to God. Explain that there are no right or wrong responses and, as such, you are composing a list without judgment. Write what students are saying on the board or a large piece of paper, editing for brevity and clarity.

Comment on similarities and differences (e.g., location, season, tone, activity, alone or in community). The goals of sharing are: (1) to help students feel connected to each other and their Jewish heritage through shared experience and (2) to appreciate the broad range of ways to connect to God, including some they might not have previously noticed or tried.

Continue Writing Warm-Up: After sharing as a group, to refocus, ask students to recite the *Shema* together, then continue to write for about 10 more minutes. Students should write as many details as they can think of in whatever format they like; this writing will be a starting point or idea pool for a call and response poem connected to the *Shema*. Hopefully, classroom sharing will have inspired some new ideas. See also Differentiation Options below.

- **Call and Response Poem**

Pass out to each student one of the three templates included at the end of this lesson plan. Have students look at their written draft as they decide what to write in response to each line of the *Shema*.

To enhance community building, write a class poem wherein each student contributes a line in response to a line from the *Shema*. Alternatively, choose a line from each student's poem to incorporate into a class poem and share the finished product you have composed with the students.



# Feeling Close to God

## Writing Activity

### Troubleshooting and Differentiation Options

- Student difficulty coming up with instances of feeling close to God: Ask these learners to consider when they would like to feel close to God. They may word their poetic language as “I’d like to feel close to God when...”
- Student difficulty understanding what “feeling God’s presence” or “feeling close to God” means: Turn the question back to the student by asking what it *might* mean to them or what they would *like* feeling connected to God to feel like. Though certainly God is unique, students can think about what it is like to feel connected to another person, an animal, nature, or even to an aspect of themselves. Encourage them to focus on bodily sensations when thinking about close connections (e.g., a warm heart, relaxed muscles). Sometimes embodied sensations can bypass thinking and language; ask students whether they can associate those sensations with a spiritual experience.
- Student difficulty with mechanics of writing or keyboarding Have student(s) dictate to you or another student to write for them.

Sample Poem based on middle school student responses:

### Feeling Close to God

#### *Shema Yisrael*

I ask God to help me with difficult decisions.

#### *Listen Israel, You who struggles with God*

Saying *Aleinu* at shul brings me closer to God.

#### *Adonai Eloheinu*

At Yom Kippur with so much praying and asking,  
I feel God looking at all of us and sucking in every word we utter.

#### *God is our God*

At sleep-away camp when I am homesick, I feel like God is with me.

#### *Adonai Echad*

When I am with God, I forget my worries and problems and live in the moment.

#### *God is one*

I picture myself talking to God and I feel protected, excited, happy, comfortable, safe, focused.



# Feeling Close to God

*Writing Activity*

*Shema Yisrael*

*Listen Israel, you who struggles with God*

*Adonai Eloheinu*

*God is our God*

*Adonai Echad*

*God is one*



## Feeling Close to God

*Writing Activity*

*Shema Yisrael – שְׁמַע יִשְׂרָאֵל*

*Listen Israel, you who struggles with God*

*Adonai Eloheinu – יְיָ אֱלֹהֵינוּ*

*God is our God*

*Adonai Echad – יְיָ אֶחָד*

*God is one*



# Feeling Close to God

*Writing Activity*

שְׁמַע יִשְׂרָאֵל

יְיָ אֱלֹהֵינוּ

יְיָ אֶחָד