
ADVISOR GUIDE



A BRIEF GUIDE TO HELP CONFRONT THE ISSUES
CONFRONTING MODERN RELIGIOUS LIFE

INTRODUCTION: THE PURPOSE OF THIS ADVISOR GUIDE

This advisor guide is, as its name suggests, merely a guide. It does not provide the decisive answer to questions and it is not a script explaining what you must say, rather it provides a context in which to approach questions posed to you by NCSY teens.

Since the tone, object, and context of people's questions change, so will this guide. We hope to continue to add, edit and revise as necessary.

If you have any question, additions or comments you would like to share please contact:

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THE FORMAT OF THE ADVISOR GUIDE

DEFINING THE MAIN CHALLENGE

Each subject begins with a section entitled “Defining the Main Challenge.” This section will present what the main challenges are regarding a particular issue. What makes it controversial and why is it so grating to the modern teenager.

FRAMING THE ISSUE

The goal of the second section, entitled “Framing the Issue,” is not to convince a certain approach but to foster a healthy and well informed discussion. New perspectives on approaching the issue at hand will be presented in this section.

Special care will be taken so that the context in which to approach the issues is presented with a focus on brevity and clarity.

FOR FURTHER THOUGHT

The approaches and perspectives presented in the guide do not begin to even scratch the surface of the issues at hand. For those interesting in investigated a particular topic more in-depth we have also provided a selected bibliography of additional books, articles, and sources, that discuss the topic.

CHOSEN PEOPLE

DEFINING THE MAIN CHALLENGE

- The main issue with the concept of a “chosen people” is that such a concept is antithetical to the contemporary notion of equality. If we are all created equal then how can one be chosen?
- Additionally, the question is closely related to the essential issue of why be Jewish. What is the purpose and point of chosenness? Sometimes the real question is what is the purpose of Jewish identity. What is our charge? What is our mission?

FRAMING THE ISSUE

- Chosenness can be a function of exclusivity or responsibility. Sometimes something is chosen to the exclusion of everything else, other times what is chosen is merely a responsibility that whomever was chosen may or may not accept. In Shemos 4:22 we are described as God’s firstborn. All nations are children of God, but we are described as the firstborn child. In a family, the firstborn child is not necessarily recipient of more love, rather his role differs insofar as the firstborn is expected to establish direction and inspire morale within the family. Ultimately chosenness is an opportunity of responsibility we are given the choice to accept.
- There does exist an irrationality to chosenness. The Torah does not expressly explain why God chose our forefather Abraham. Though we have some intriguing stories about his childhood, they were not written explicitly in the Torah. This may be an indication to the idea that although chosenness is a responsibility, there is an element of irrationality and mystery to our chosenness. Our relationship with God does not necessarily hinge one quality or goal. And perhaps, collectively, the concept of our chosenness transcends reason.
- The Talmud (Pesachim 87b) and many commentators emphasize that non-Jews not only have a portion in the world to come (Rambam Hil. Teshuva 5:3, Hil. Melachim 8:11) but have important ideas related to spirituality and life. Judaism does not claim to be the exclusive bearer of truth in the world (Megillah 16a, Orach Chaim Shemos 18:21).

FOR FURTHER THOUGHT

- Rabbi Jonathan Sacks has two books which relate to this issue:
 - The Dignity of Difference: How to Avoid the Clash of Civilizations
 - This book discusses how Judaism views spirituality in other religions
 - A Letter in the Scroll
 - Rabbi Sacks discusses the meaning and relevance of Jewish identity in the modern day.

EXISTENCE OF GOD

DEFINING THE MAIN ISSUE

- We do not explicitly see or hear God, so how can we be sure of His existence?
- This is a DIFFERENT issue than how can God exist if there is so much evil in the world.

FRAMING THE ISSUE

- There are many paths to belief. Historically, Jews (and non-Jews) have found God in a variety of places. Though God has been found in a variety of places, it is important to note there is no one definitive proof for God's existence. Each area has responses, which in turn have other responses and so on. Ultimately, no one can prove God without a doubt and no one has disproved God without a doubt. As a religious people, we must treasure our leap of faith.
- Though there is not nearly enough time to Some of the ways in which people have discovered God include:
 - **Nature:** The order found in nature suggests there was a Divine Designer (Teleological Argument).
 - **Morals:** Universal morality suggests there is an objective Divine standard within us. (Argument from Morality associated with Immanuel Kant).
 - **Reason:** Man's ability to reason suggests his origin is from something that is not physical (Argument from reason as presented by C.S. Lewis).
 - **Consciousness:** The existence of conciseness from physical matter is best explained by theism (Argument from consciousness, see writings of David Chalmers)
 - **God does not have to be proved:** The same way believing in the conciseness of people outside of yourself is a properly basic belief that does not need the support of a proof, so might believing in God be an acceptably rational belief although not formally proven.
 - This approach, while a bit more complex than those previously mentioned is quite popular among contemporary theologians, most notably Alvin Plantinga of the University of Notre Dame. This general approach that God's existence does not require proof is known as Reformed Epistemology.

FOR FURTHER THOUGHT

- Permission to Believe: Four Rational Approaches to God's Existence by Lawrence Keleman
 - Gil Student, on his blog "Torah Musings," (TorahMusings.com) has several fantastic posts, entitled "Permission to Believe in God," which further discuss this work
- "The Source of Faith is Faith Itself," Leaves of Faith: The World of Jewish Learning, by Rabbi Aharon Lichtenstein

SEXUALITY

DEFINING THE MAIN ISSUE

- At first glance to many teens it seems Judaism avoids the issue to sexuality, either (seemingly) because it is not holy or discouraged. When sexuality is perhaps the most frequently discussed topic in the world, why is Judaism seemingly so prude about it?

FRAMING THE ISSUE

- It should be made clear that sex is a very serious and real part of Judaism. It is a mitzvah (--- --) for married couples to have sex. Judaism believes that spirituality and sexuality are not mutually exclusive. The question Judaism poses, however, is should sex have a context? Namely, should sex be a option in any relationship, so long as it is voluntary or should sex require some level of commitment? Judaism, recognizing the awesome power of sexuality and the physical expression of a couple's love, emphasizes the importance of intimacy and exclusivity for true sexuality. Without the context of exclusivity, namely marriage in the case of Judaism, sexuality can become the primary source of love in a relationship, rather than merely an essential expression of that love.
- Sex can also objectify rather than empower. Sex can become an obsession that de-humanizes, rather than serving as a tool of connection. As Marilyn Monroe lamented, "A sex symbol becomes a thing. I hate being a thing."
- The laws of niddah have been cited by many as a factor in enhancing a couples sexual life rather than hindering it. In fact, Judaism placed a great emphasis on the power of sexuality, the only concern is that it is directed properly.

FOR FURTHER THOUGHT

- A Hedge of Roses by Rabbi Norman Lamm
- Girls Gone Mild: Young Women Reclaim Self-Respect and Find It's Not Bad to Be Good by Wendy Shalit
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HOMOSEXUALITY

DEFINING THE MAIN ISSUE

- This is perhaps one of the most difficult dilemmas for the contemporary teen and traditional Judaism. How can the Torah forbid homosexuality? Most teens assume that this is not a lifestyle choice (an assumption you would do well not to challenge), so how can it be forbidden? Regarding sexuality, at the very least there is an outlet in the context of marriage, but how can we say that some people are not allowed to express their love?

FRAMING THE ISSUE

- The first thing that needs to be said is a true sense of empathy for people struggling with this issue. It is important not to sound judgmental or pedantic.
- The Torah does not have a prohibited category called gay. The feelings are not prohibited. Only the action, namely anal sex, is mentioned in the Torah. The Torah does not categorize people who have homosexual feelings as being “outsiders.”
- Ultimately, it may be instructive to be honest and say you do not know why God draws His lines where He does. While Judaism certainly has a major emphasis on family we do not know if that is why homosexuality is prohibited. We don’t always know why God draws the lines where he does, but in the system of the Torah this is clearly a line that is drawn.
- The Torah has a clear obsession with empathy for people who do not fit into traditional familial structure. Discrimination, therefore, is totally outside of the framework of the Torah especially for those people facing major spiritual challenges.

FOR FURTHER THOUGHT

- R’ Ahron Feldman wrote a powerful letter of encouragement to a homosexual baal teshuva. The letter can be found here:
 - <http://www.guardyoureyes.com/resources/ssa/item/a-letter-by-reb-ahron-feldman-to-a-gay-baal-teshuva>
- R’ Chaim Rappaport wrote an extremely comprehensive book on the matter entitled Judaism and Homosexuality: An Authentic Orthodox View.
- ATID compiled a bibliography of Orthodox responses to the issue of homosexuality and Judaism. The bibliography is available for download here:
 - www.atid.org/resources/ATIDbiblio1.doc

WOMEN'S ROLE IN JUDAISM

DEFINING THE MAIN ISSUE

- The Torah seems to be misogynistic, namely there are many religious obligations that women do not perform (teffilin, tallis) and for all major religious ceremonies, the mechitzah seems to segregate men and women.

FRAMING THE ISSUE

- It is important to note, that it makes most sense for a woman to discuss this issue with teens rather than a man. It is hard for a man to truly appreciate the frustration some women may feel with Judaism and a woman's perspective will normally appear more understanding.
- The Torah has the highest regard for women. The Torah does, however, respect the very different gender roles which men and women have. Though the Torah fully supports complete gender legal equality, the Torah nevertheless fosters unique religious roles between men and women. Specifically, in religious life, which is very much connected to our emotional and identity constructs, it is important to be mindful of the differences between men and women. Equality does not necessarily require everyone having the same roles, rather it is just a commitment that everyone has the same opportunity to foster a relationship with God.

FOR FURTHER THOUGHT

- The most comprehensive work analyzing the halakhic and sociological implications of the feminist movement within Orthodoxy is by Rabbis Aryeh and Dov Frimer entitled, "Women's Prayer Services-Theory and Practice."
 - The article is available here:
<http://www.daat.ac.il/daat/english/tfila/frimmer1.htm>
 - This is just one of many articles they have published on the topic. All of their work on this matter is worth reading by anyone who is interested in getting a full grasp on the issue.
- See Slate magazine article, "The End of Jewish Men," (June 2011) which discusses the concern that liberal Judaism is becoming too female.
 - http://www.slate.com/articles/double_x/doublex/2011/06/the_end_of_jewish_men.html
- Many of the most sophisticated approaches can be found on Gil Student's website Torahmusings.com In particular see his series discussing different rabbinic approaches to the issue of women's prayer groups.
- You may also want to see *Women in the Talmud: An anthology of the Talmud's stories about women, from Seder Zeraim and Moed, as explained by the classic commentators by Rabbi Dr. Aaron Glatt.*

THE DIVINITY OF THE WRITTEN TORAH

DEFINING THE MAIN ISSUE

- This question can be posed in a number of ways.
 - Based on the multiple accounts of the certain stories in the Torah, these questions usually relate to the biblical criticism movement as they posit that the Torah was not written singularly by God but rather had multiple authors.
 - Also, one may ask what makes the revelation of Torah unique? What is unique about the revelation of the Torah as opposed to other religious documents.
 - There are elements of the Torah that seem very “ungodly” such as the existence of slavery, sacrifices etc.
 - This last issue should be dealt with as a separate question.

FRAMING THE ISSUE

- The Kuzari has a famous presentation on the uniqueness of the Torah’s revelation, namely, in contrast to all other major religious documents, the Torah’s narrative describes that the Torah was given before a mass audience. Such a claim is much more difficult to fabricate as it related to our people’s collective memory, rather than the claim of an individual prophet.
- Biblical criticism, a product of the 17th century rationalist movement, questioned the divine authorship of the Torah. Most teens do not have a strong understanding of these issues, but those who do should be spoken to seriously. These are not issues that should be summarily dismissed. Just in terms of basic definitions there are two types of biblical criticism:
 - Lower criticism: This effort seeks to find scribal errors and mistakes that may have crept into the text.
 - Higher criticism: The search for the original source behind a biblical text.

FOR FURTHER THOUGHT

- Permission to Receive by Rabbi Lawrence Keleman is a very easy to ready presentation on some of the ideas that may bolster one’s acceptance of the Torah’s divinity.
- A great article which contains a history of the issues of biblical criticism and some of their counterarguments was written by Rabbi Nathan Lopez Cardoza, entitled, “On Bible Criticism and Its Counterarguments.”
 - The article can be found here:
http://www.aishdas.org/toratemet/en_cardozo.html

JEWISH DENOMINATIONS: REFORM, CONSERVATIVE, ORTHODOX

DEFINING THE MAIN ISSUE

- Teens are very often curious regarding the origins of the denominations. Was it always so divisive? What are they arguing about?

FRAMING THE ISSUE

- The best way to approach this issue is discuss the various developments within Judaism from a historical perspective. Rather than explaining who is “right,” it may be more instructive to discuss how this division evolved and what values each movement was trying to achieve.
- Historically, the formal denominations are an outgrowth of the 19th century German reforms (which eventually begat Reform Judaism) and the historical school of Breslau (which eventually created conservative Judaism in the USA).
- The main tension within the denominations is between the value of modernity and tradition. Each denomination agrees that both are components of Judaism, however the question is how should each value be emphasized.
- Pluralism, the tenent that we should all just work together is easier posited than actually realized. There are very real issues at hand in terms of the preservation of Judaism. While every Jew should be treated with respect and dignity, that does not necessarily mean that every interpretation is correct.

FOR FURTHER READING

- Jew vs. Jew: The Struggle for the Soul of American Jewry by Samuel G. Freedman is an excellent presentation of the struggles within contemporary American Judaism.
- Jewish Continuity in America: Creative Survival in a Free Society by Abraham J. Karp is an illuminating presentation of how the denominations crystallized in early America.
- One People, Two Worlds: A Reform Rabbi and an Orthodox Rabbi Explore the Issues That Divide Them by Amiel Hirsch and Yaakov Yosef Reinman
 - This book sometimes presents the Orthodox view as more “fundamental” than really necessary. Still, some of their discussion are extremely valuable.

MESSIANIC TIMES

DEFINING THE MAIN ISSUE

- Messianic times seems very mysterious to teens. What can be expected will change with the coming of messiah? Will I still have my ipad?
- A secondary issue includes why the anticipation of such a time is so fundamental to Jewish thought? Aren't things OK the way they are?

FRAMING THE ISSUE

- As presented by the Rambam (Hil. Teshuva ch. 9, based on Talmud Brachos 34b) the Messianic time will not be any different from the world as we know it today except that there will be peace in the world and recognition of Godliness in the world. You will still have your iPad.
- The anticipation of a Messiah is the realization that there are some problems in the world that are unsolvable, some challenges which we cannot surmount alone. It is the recognition of the collective vulnerability of humanity and our need for a Divine messenger to bring spiritual order to our world.

FOR FURTHER READING

- Aryeh Kaplan's work entitled The Real Messiah discussed the different conceptions Judaism and Christianity have of the Messianic Age.
- The classic work on Messianic Age and the World to Come is Shaar HaGemul by the Ramban.

SCIENCE AND TORAH

DEFINING THE MAIN ISSUE

- The Torah seems to place the creation of the world at over 5700 years old, while science seems to date it quite a bit older!
- There seem to be so many contradictions between the portrayal of the world in the story of Bereishis and through science.
- Doesn't evolution mean that there was no creator? Don't the laws of science imply that there is no God?

FRAMING THE ISSUE

- The issue of Torah and Science is not a new issue, it is hundreds of years old and actually came to the forefront during the controversy surrounding Copernicus.
- The main perspective from which the Torah speaks is the perspective of man. The Talmud uses the phrase דבריה תורה בלשון בני אדם (Nedarim 3a). The Torah does not necessarily speak in the language of objective science, rather it addresses itself to man's perspective.
- Essentially there are 3 schools of thought in resolving this issue:
 1. The Torah is actually presenting scientific fact and we must take it on faith that the Torah is right when there is an apparent contradiction (i.e. the Torah says the earth is over 5700 years old and science is wrong).
 2. Explaining that on a deeper level that the Torah is explaining science, but it is in consonance with current scientific understanding (i.e. the Torah agrees that the earth is billions of years old, you just have to read it on a deeper level).
 3. The Torah and science relate to different field of inquiry, namely, the Torah is concerned with religious truth while science only relates to scientific truth.

FOR FURTHER THOUGHT

- The most comprehensive presentation on the different schools of thought in which to approach this issue is David Schatz's article "Is there Science in the Bible? An Assessment of Biblical Concordism." The article was published in Tradition 41:2 (2008)
- Gerald Schroeder is the most popular writer from school #2.
- This issue was source of a major controversy known as "The Slifkin Affair." There is no need to present the issues to a teen who is unaware this specific controversy, but many Rabbi Slifkin's blog has many valuable sources discussing the different sides in the debate.
 - His blog can be found here: <http://www.rationalistjudaism.com/>

GOOD PEOPLE & BAD THINGS

THE EXISTENCE OF EVIL IN THE WORLD

DEFINING THE MAIN ISSUE

- The existence of evil in the world seems to undermine the existence of a just and good God.
 - Its should be noted that there are two types of evil related to this question:
 - Natural evil such as earthquakes, hurricane, disease etc. This seemingly comes directly from God
 - Moral evil describes suffering that comes from the acts of man such as theft, war, murder, embarrassment.
 - Only the latter category allows for an explanation of evil as a product of man's free will.
- This question rests at the heart of religion, because if evil happens that means that mans efforts for good do not necessarily result in a good life.

FRAMING THE ISSUE

- This question will never have a completely satisfactory answer. Moshe Rabbeinu asked God this question and did not receive an answer (Talmud Brachos 7a).
- We do not always understand God ways. Sometimes things are only understood in retrospect, if at all. R. Tzadok (Resisei Layla ch. 52) explains the verse in which God says to Moshe, "You will see My back but cannot see my face," to mean that we cannot understand God's plan in the present (His face) but sometimes in retrospect it is more clear (His back).
- The Talmud in Pesachim 50a explains that in the world to come we will not only experience God as all good then, but we will be able to look back and finally understand his entire plan.
- Rabbi Soloveitchik (Halachik Man footnote #4, a must read!) explains that the purpose of Judaism is not to help us explain or avoid tragedy, but it empowers us how to react to tragedy.

FOR FURTHER THOUGHT

- Out of the Whirlwind by Rabbi Soloveitchik is a collection of his thoughts related to man's response to suffering and tragedy.
- Rabbi Morey Schwartz published a powerful and painful book called "Where's My Miracle," that takes a very hard look at some of the issues related to suffering in the world.

LINKS FOR GENERAL REFERENCE

NCSY'S EDUCATION WEBSITE

The **NCSY Education website** offers many educational resources for you to use, including articles, videos, text-based sessions, activities, infographics, printable guides, and Torah quotes. All materials are tagged according to concepts so you can easily find resources based on your topic of interest.

To access the NCSY Education website, visit

<http://education.ncsy.org>

or <https://staff.ncsy.org/education/>

ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

Also, make sure to check out the **Resources page** for more great external links and resources:

<https://staff.ncsy.org/education/resources/>