

If You Were God

The following is an excerpt from "If You Were God" by R' Aryeh Kaplan.

We often question God's ways. But given the chance, how would we do things differently?



The Problem:

You are given an island where several tribes live.

By nature and culture, these tribes are exploitative and belligerent. This results in much suffering on the island, caused by war poverty and prejudice.

They have been living this way for centuries without any sign of improvement.

Your Assignment:

To try to improve this society.

To teach its members to live together in harmony and reduce suffering to a minimum or eliminate it entirely.

To create a healthy society.

Your Resources:

You have all the resources that a highly advanced technology can offer.

You have the entire island under surveillance and can see what is happening in any place at any time.

You have such devices as cloud-seeding equipment and can plant underground explosives. Within reason, you can control weather, flooding, volcanoes and earthquakes, and produce any "natural" phenomenon on cue.

You also have devices that can be used to implant ideas through subliminal suggestion. You can implant ideas to entire populations or to certain select leaders.

However, you must take into account the severe limitations of subliminal suggestion. If you try to implant any ideas that go against the basic nature of the populace, they will be totally rejected and your efforts will be in vain.

One alternative would be to implant ideas that somehow would make use of the acknowledged bad nature of these people.

Your Restrictions:

Under no circumstances are the natives of this island to be aware of your presence.

This supersedes all other considerations.

The cultural shock caused by your revealing yourself would disrupt the entire fabric of the island culture. It would cause much suffering and more than offset any good that you could possibly accomplish.

The natives would be reduced to a state of almost vegetable-like dependence from which they would be unlikely to recover. If they did recover, they might rebel so violently as to eliminate any positive values they might have originally had.

Therefore, the restrictions that you not reveal yourself must be followed without exception under any circumstances.

But aside from this restriction, you have a free hand to proceed as humanely or as ruthlessly as you see fit.

In short, you have the opportunity to play God.

What would you do?



The God Project

Essential Question to be addressed in this activity:

Why did Hashem create the Jewish People? The approach we're suggesting, that the Jews are meant to act as Hashem's representatives in the world for the rest of the Nations, modeling the way they're meant to live as part of the overall framework of Creation, will likely lead to discussing why Hashem created the world in the first place. Based on Rav SR Hirsch's 19 Letters (and, apparently, R' Aryeh Kaplan, but without the Kabala).

Goals:

Primary Goal: Improve the Society

Secondary Goal: Have these improvements passed on to subsequent generations

Primary Goal: Improve the Society

Question #1: What Needs to Change?

(A) Justice- Prevent the Leviathan Effect (I may have made up the term, but it's a good one, based on Thomas Hobbes' Leviathan)-most powerful member has total control, and will presumably abuse it for own benefit (combated by Social Contract). Unless the Leader somehow has the values we're looking to instill?

(B) Compassion- Take care of the weaker members of the community
Both altruistic and self-serving: The strongest will eventually become weak and be replaced, so its in their own interests to take care of those in the positions they themselves will eventually fill

(C) Respect- The existence of other tribes means that, unless you seek to integrate them into one tribe somehow (and they will not appreciate/accept that effort except through impressive amounts of subterfuge), they need to learn to accept each other and their differences, or the wars will never end.

Question #2: What Gets in the Way?

Distractions

Short-term: Pleasure: whatever makes me happy is the current center of life, with everything else taking a backseat

Long-term: Self-Service: Even if not yielding pleasure, putting my individual self before all other concerns means I reject anything I don't think will benefit me either directly or indirectly

As long as this is the focus of their lives, there will presumably be no progress...

Secondary Goal: Pass It On

If the improvement comes as a result of powerful central leadership as opposed to society-wide acceptance of the above ideals, when the leader disappears, so do the improvements. How do we make the improvements stick?

Question: What Are Our Options?

Possible Methods:

(1) Install a Leader with the necessary value system

Issue: How do you get him accepted by the tribe if he's so different/an outsider? Even if you can get him accepted, what stops the rest of the tribe from ganging up on him and deposing him so they can go back to their more enjoyable lifestyle? Even if he holds through his term, what happens when he dies?

(2) Change the Values of the Entire Tribe

Issue: How do you change an entire population?

(a) Direct Revelation - Against the rules, for good reason-they'd become mindless drones incapable of making their own choices, meaning it would be the same as creating a nation of robots-not what we're looking for. If they aren't totally mindblown, they rebel-compare to the super powerful leader who takes over from outside with a different value system.

(b) Infiltration-Bringing in new people to model the necessary values, demonstrating how positive they are. Beware of assimilation-how is it prevented, what keeps the communities separate until they're ready to mix?

Ultimately, this is the role Rav SR Hirsch presents for the Jewish people: Hashem created a world intending for Man to choose to take his part in the overall scheme of creation, but Man was distracted by pleasure and self-service. The Jewish people are meant to clearly demonstrate Hashem's place in the world, and the positives associated with choosing to fill that role. Mitzvos serve many roles, some of which include instilling us with the values we're looking to teach, and keeping us distinct from the corrupt societies we're looking to influence so that we don't get sucked into their mistakes.

God vs. God

(The fun part)

The following are some “impossible tasks” you can challenge the teens to do between the discussion questions. Since each group is meant to be acting as “God” - guiding their societies towards the ultimate goal - they should also be able to accomplish the impossible, or at least the very difficult!

- 1) **The Zen Counting Game** - No one can say anything except for a number - if two people say the same number at the same time, restart. Everyone must say at least one number! Aim for at least double the number of people in the group.
- 2) **Traffic Jam** - http://www.teampedia.net/wiki/index.php?title=Traffic_Jam
- 3) **Helium Stick** - Everyone uses 1 finger under a thin, light rod, starting a little above chest height, and tries to bring it to the ground. Be strict on every finger staying in contact with the rod-if people aren't working in sync, the rod will rise instead of sink!
- 4) **Saltine Challenge** (Bring Saltines...) - Eat 6 Saltines in a minute

Summary of Points for Discussion

(This page can be passed out to each group to help facilitate discussion for each section)

What Gets in the Way? (Choose 3)

1. Hedonism-Focus on Pleasure
2. Not Enough Resources to Go Around
3. Different Styles of Dress or Food
4. Attachment To Illogical Violence and Bloodlust
5. Focus on Self Instead of the Community/Ideals
6. Lack of Sufficiently Developed Technology
7. Other: _____

What Needs to Change? (Choose 4)

1. Justice-Everyone gets what they deserve for doing something 'wrong'
2. Compassion-Looking out for the less powerful/fortunate in the society
3. Respect-Interact with others recognizing the value they potentially bring to the group
4. Survival of the Fittest-Strongest survive and run the society
5. Victory is Everything-Winning, no matter what, trumps all other considerations
6. Socialism-Complete, total equality of possessions and stations
7. Serenity-Accepting everything that happens, good and bad, with grace
8. Patriotism-Identifying the self as a part of the nation/community
9. Joy/Happiness-Do whatever will make you happy
10. Self-Realization-Do what you feel will help you understand yourself
11. Holiness-Living life with an aim towards a relationship with a Higher Power
12. Moderation-Promoting self-control as a sign of one's humanity
13. Other...

How Will the Changes Take Place? (Choose 1)

1. Mind Control (Illegal...)
2. Infiltration by a new Society, already acting with the new Values
3. Install a new Leader
4. Wipe out everyone except for a Single Survivor, and Start Over Hoping For the Best
5. Mysterious Message in a Bottle
6. Other...