

How did Hashem create the world?

When children ask about God

GENERAL POINTS

- Kids don't always know whether it's acceptable to ask something that is bothering them. Often the question is concealing something else.
- It takes a lot of courage to ask a question. Reward them for coming forward and essentially admitting that they don't understand.
- Try to think of replying in terms of a response rather than an answer; answers could sound like they are final, shutting out any further discussion.
- Ensure that you don't give the answer that merely satisfies you. Each question and each questioner may need a different approach, especially when the question is coming from a child.
- Try not to say things that are too definitive such as "Judaism says that turning lights on during Shabbat is forbidden." Their family may not keep Shabbat. Rather approach the point by saying, Judaism teaches that we don't turn lights on or off on Shabbat.
- It is helpful to explain that there may be a number of legitimate responses to their question. Some work for some people and others for other people. There are no one-size-fits-all answers which will satisfy every curious mind.
- Stories help to take abstract ideas and make them real. Abstract ideas are hard to grapple with. For example, 'kindness' is difficult to explain in words. Instead take an example of a person who exemplifies this abstract idea, such as Abraham and tell a story about him. This is probably one of the reasons that the Torah contains so many stories.
- Be descriptive where possible. Clear language provides for answers that children can incorporate into their understanding of the world. Be mindful that often adults use abstract language without even meaning to.
- Many children and adults find it hard to relate to intellectual ideas. Rather than being cerebral, be emotional. For kids it's often easier to talk about how they feel, rather than what they think.
- You don't need all the answers. Children value authenticity and will know if your answer is contrived or fake. It is much better to admit that you don't know and suggest asking the rabbi together than fumble through an answer.
- Emphasise that everyone must continue to learn and we learn best when we ask questions about what we don't yet know. The greatest scholars are referred to as *Talmidei Chachomim* – students of sages; even though they know a lot, they still consider themselves as students. So never be afraid to ask!

SPECIFIC POINTERS

1. Where is Hashem?

For adults: When this question was asked to the Kotzker Rebbe, he famously answered 'Wherever we let Him in'. This cryptic answer in fact demonstrates that while God is everywhere, He is hidden in this world. We have the power to reveal Him by connecting with him through his Mitzvot. The word Mitzvah literally means connection (not commandment and certainly NOT good deed). When we 'connect' with God, we have the power to bring Him into even the darkest parts of the world.

For children: Think about a time when you shared a toy with someone else, or said sorry to someone, or listened to your mummy or daddy or teacher. Whenever we do something that Hashem wants us to do, especially when we don't really want to do it, He loves it so much that He wants to be there with us because it makes Him so happy to see us do something good.

2. How did Hashem create the world?

For Adults: God created the world through speech. Our speech is a paradigm for creation as it is the contact point between our thoughts which are non-physical and the physical world. Speech takes those thoughts and brings them into the physical world. Similarly, God's speech takes His 'thoughts and desires' and makes them physical.

For Children: God is like a mummy or a daddy. He is in charge of everyone so everyone has to listen to Him. That means that if He says something like 'let there be light' it must happen, just like when a teacher or parent says something, we have to listen and do it straight away!

3. Why do I need to pray? Surely God knows what I need? Will God always give me what I want?

For Adults: God knows what we need better than we do, but we still have to pray. The reason is that prayer helps us to acknowledge the source of our blessings is Him. Left on our own we would struggle to succeed. However, God does not always give us what we want as there is a difference between what we want and what we need.

For Children: God wants us to pray because it reminds us that He is the source of all our blessings. It also reminds us to be grateful for what we have. God always answers our prayers, but sometimes the answer is no. He won't give us something that we don't need or would be harmful to us, and He won't give us something we could have worked for ourselves.

4. Why do bad things happen?

For Adults: We cannot fathom the workings of the world. We do not know why God would allow something bad to happen. Lord Sacks put it beautifully in his book 'The Great Partnership'.

From 'The Great Partnership' Chapter 12 – The Problem of Evil (pp. 233 – 238)

How can God allow unjust suffering in the world? How can he allow his creatures to use, abuse, manipulate, dominate, injure and kill one another? How can he allow an earthquake, a flood, a drought, a famine to cause thousands, even millions, of deaths? How can he allow one innocent child to die? No question so lacerates the heart of faith as does this. How, if God is good, is there so much evil in the world?

After the tsunami in the Indian Ocean in 2004 that killed 230,000 people and left more than a million homeless, I went to visit one young woman who had been in Thailand at the time and only narrowly escaped. She was in a state of extreme anguish. This was her story. She was in her hotel room when the wave struck. She was able to swim through the window, but then she found the surface of the water blocked with debris. She could only raise an arm above the surface and wave for help.

A local Thai man saw her waving, swam over to her and brought her to safety. Without this she would have died. Hours later, when the water had receded, she saw among the wreckage the dead body of the man who had rescued her. 'How', she asked me, 'could God have allowed him to die? He saved my life. Of all people, he should have earned the right to live.'

This question, or something like it, causes more people to lose faith than any other. There is none deeper. To fail to take it seriously is to fail to be serious at all. It is the question of questions, and it calls for nothing less than total honesty.

To give it its most famous philosophical expression: either God cannot prevent evil, or he can but chooses not to. If he cannot, then he is not all-powerful. If he can but chooses not to, then he is not all-good. How does a good God permit evil to deface and defile his creation?

No sooner have we asked the question than we realise something strange about the Bible. The later response of theologians, long after the biblical canon was closed, is familiar to us. We cannot fathom the workings of providence. If we could understand God, we would be God. Who are we to know what is for the best *sub specie aeternitatis*, from the perspective of eternity? What we cannot understand we must accept.

It is this view that we do not find in the Bible. Instead we find Moses saying to God, 'Why have you done evil to this people? Why did you send me?' (Exodus 5:22). Here is Jeremiah, challenging God:

You are always righteous, O Lord, when I bring a case before you. Yet I would speak with you about your justice: Why does the way of the wicked prosper? Why do all the faithless live at ease? (Jeremiah 12:1)

And here is Habakkuk: How long, O Lord, must I call for help, but you do not listen? Or cry out to you, 'Violence!' but you do not save? Why do you make me look at injustice? Why do you tolerate wrong? Destruction and violence are before me: there is strife, and conflict abounds. Therefore the law is paralysed, and justice never prevails. The wicked hem in the righteous, so that justice is perverted. (Habakkuk 1:2-4)

Far from attempting to minimise the problem, the Bible maximises it, seemingly at every opportunity. The people who challenge divine justice are not heretics, sceptics, deniers of the faith. They are the supreme heroes of the faith: Moses and the prophets, the people who carry God's word to the world. This cries out for explanation.

So does the book of Job. The book sets up the following scenario. Satan -not in Judaism an evil force, simply the prosecuting attorney - challenges God on the faith he had in creating humanity. Show me one person who is truly righteous, he says. Job, God answers. Job is righteous, Satan replies, because you never tested him. He has all he wants: a happy marriage, children, wealth. It is easy for him to believe. He has no reason not to believe. But take away his good fortune and you will see that he no longer believes.

In swift, successive blows, Job loses everything. His wealth. His children. His wife loses faith. 'Curse God and die,' she says. Job replies, in words Jews have used ever since, 'God has given. God has taken away. May the name of God be blessed.' There is a momentous acceptance in those words, and logically the book should have ended there.

But it does not. Satan challenges God again and persuades him to send Job one more affliction. It is a relatively minor one, but this time Job breaks and curses the day he was born. From then to almost the end of the book, for more than thirty chapters, Job challenges God to show him how and why he deserves his fate.

His three companions - later they are joined by a fourth, younger and surer of himself - give Job the conventional answers. God is just. Therefore if Job has suffered, he must have sinned. He is being punished for some wrong he did.

Yet we the readers know something Job's comforters do not. Job has not sinned. That was how the story was introduced in the first place. Job is the only person in the entire Hebrew Bible to be called sinless. There is therefore a massive irony throughout. Job's comforters, who defend God's justice, are in fact slandering Job, accusing him of a wrong he did not commit.

As the book rises to a crescendo, God, who has been absent throughout, finally reveals himself to Job. Now, we expect, we will hear the answer to the question of questions. Instead, for a full four chapters, God simply asks questions of his own - unanswerable questions. 'Where were you when I laid the earth's foundation? Have you journeyed to the springs of the sea or walked in the recesses of the deep? Have the gates of death been shown to you?' And so on.

Job is silenced. Then, in an astonishing reversal, God tells Job that he, who challenged God's justice, is right and his comforters, who defended God, are wrong. Job is then blessed with a restoration of his wealth and with more children.

For Children: We don't understand everything that God does. But even the bad things that happen to us can help us grow as people. The following is one of my favourite stories and may indeed help children who are experiencing a range of struggles and difficulties:

Once a little boy was playing outdoors and found a fascinating caterpillar. He carefully picked it up and took it home to show his mother. He asked his mother if he could keep it, and she said he could if he would take good care of it.

The little boy got a large jar from his mother and put plants to eat, and a stick to climb on, in the jar. Every day he watched the caterpillar and brought it new plants to eat.

One day the caterpillar climbed up the stick and started acting strangely. The boy worriedly called his mother who came and understood that the caterpillar was creating a cocoon. The mother explained to the boy how the caterpillar was going to go through a metamorphosis and become a butterfly.

The little boy was thrilled to hear about the changes his caterpillar would go through. He watched every day, waiting for the butterfly to emerge. One day it happened, a small hole appeared in the cocoon and the butterfly started to struggle to come out.

At first the boy was excited, but soon he became concerned. The butterfly was struggling so hard to get out! It looked like it couldn't break free! It looked desperate! It looked like it was making no progress!

The boy was so concerned he decided to help. He ran to get scissors, and then walked back (because he had learned not to run with scissors...). He snipped the cocoon to make the hole bigger and the butterfly quickly emerged!

As the butterfly came out the boy was surprised. It had a swollen body and small, shriveled wings. He continued to watch the butterfly expecting that, at any moment, the wings would dry out, enlarge and expand to support the swollen body. He knew that in time the body would shrink and the butterfly's wings would expand. But neither happened!

The butterfly spent the rest of its life crawling around with a swollen body and shriveled wings. It never was able to fly...

As the boy tried to figure out what had gone wrong his mother took him to talk to a scientist from a local college. He learned that the butterfly was SUPPOSED to struggle. In fact, the butterfly's struggle to push its way through the tiny opening of the cocoon pushes the fluid out of its body and into its wings. Without the struggle, the butterfly would never, ever fly. The boy's good intentions hurt the butterfly.

As you go through school, and life, keep in mind that struggling against things that appear bad is an important part of any growth experience. In fact, it is the struggle that causes you to develop your ability to fly!

5. Why did Hashem create the world?

For Adults: The fact is God is perfect and had no need to create the world. Therefore we believe He did so out of love, so that we could experience and benefit from his creation.

For Children: God created the world because He is kind and loving. He wanted us to experience all of the wonderful things in His creation, especially our family and friends.

6. Why are so many of the Mitzvot so hard to understand?

For Adults: Since we have finite minds, we cannot understand the world completely. God does not make up laws for His sake. God obligates us to do a range of things or refrain from other things to benefit us – not Him. He doesn't need us or our mitzvot.

The mitzvot He has given us can be split into three categories: (a) Commandments that we could have thought of ourselves such as not murdering or stealing. These are logical and understandable. (b) Commandments that we would not have thought of ourselves but appear to have a rational purpose for them, such as Shabbat. The laws of Shabbat help us to focus on the important things in life such as our family and friends and not be slaves to our work. (c) Then there are commandments that are not easily understood. This does not mean that there is no reason for them, but just that we cannot fathom what that reason is. For example, the laws of kashrut restrict what we can eat. It cannot be to do with health benefits as many non-Jews partake of non-kosher food all the time and are fit and healthy.

Imagine a small child playing with a dangerous object like a glass or a knife. They cannot understand the dangers that the glass might break exposing sharp edges or that the knife might cut them. Explaining the dangers to a young child is pointless as they are simply too young to understand. Even older children might think that the glass won't break or say that they will be careful; they do not understand the concept of risk. Therefore, a parent or teacher has to set out rules that the child may not understand and therefore feel are unduly strict or unfair. Yet they are there for the child's benefit.

For Children: Imagine if you were looking after a younger child, perhaps your little brother or sister. What would you do if you saw them doing something dangerous like playing with matches, a plug socket or a knife? Would you stop to explain to them why it is dangerous or would you move them out of the way of the danger? So too, God encourages us to stay away from things that are dangerous to us spiritually, even though we cannot understand why.

7. Why doesn't the Torah mention the dinosaurs? Were there dinosaurs on the Ark?

For Adults: The implication of the question may be much more complex though. Given that ancient man did not know about dinosaurs, the fact that the Torah doesn't mention them implies that it was written by man and not by God. Surely God wouldn't have left out something so important. Yet the Torah doesn't mention lots of things that did exist. That doesn't mean we don't believe in them. The Torah is not a book of Natural History nor is it going to invest effort speaking about things that are not relevant. In terms of Noah, since we believe that the story happened only around 5,000 years ago it is obvious that dinosaurs were not on the ark.

Yet this opens up a can of biblical worms. How could a flood have covered the earth only 5,000 years ago? If it did, how did all of the animals dumped somewhere in Turkey after the flood get across to places like America and Australia? There are some approaches who explain that the flood only occurred over part of the world, even though the Torah implies it covered the whole world.

For Children: The Torah is not a book of Natural History. Nevertheless, what it says is important and is true. Exactly what we are supposed to understand from the text is subject to discussion in the commentaries which is why it is so important to learn them.

8. What makes people different to animals?

For Adults: Human beings are not merely 'naked apes'. We have a *neshamah* – a spark of Godliness invested in us. This manifests as an ability to override the animalistic urges and drives such as the urge to eat and procreate. This helps us to become more refined; we are not slaves to our impulses but can control them.

For Children: While Judaism believes that animals should be treated properly, humans are different because God gave us the ability to mature and grow in our character and nature. We can work on things like our anger, patience or cravings and perfect ourselves. Animals don't have that opportunity.

9. What does Hashem look like?

For Adults: We cannot imagine what God looks like. He has no body or even form. We can only imagine what He is like.

For Children: God doesn't look like anyone or anything. But we can try to appreciate what it must be like to be with Him. Imagine your favourite relative or friend. It might be your mummy or daddy, grandma or grandpa. Think about why you love them so much and try to imagine just how much they love you. Now imagine going to your favourite place or doing your favourite thing with someone you love and feel so close to. We would feel so special and fortunate to be there with that person. This is a little bit what it must feel like to be with God.

10. Where is heaven?

For Adults: Heaven isn't a place as such but a state of being intimately connected with God.

For Children: Imagine the happiest event in your life – a birthday party, a family holiday or celebrating a simcha. Now take all of the happiest memories you have and multiply them together. Now take all of the happiest memories that everyone has ever had and add them in as well! That must feel so amazing. Imagine having that feeling all of the time – that is just a glimpse of what heaven is like.

11. Do Jews believe in Hell?

For Adults: God is not waiting to punish us for things we did wrong. The penalties listed in the Torah for breaking God's commandments are more consequences. This is what is meant by 'punishments' being described as *middah k'neged middah*, measure for measure. Discipline is designed to help us grow to be better people – it comes from the same word as disciple. After a person dies they have a *din v'chesbon* – a judgement and accounting for all of their actions.

For Children: We don't believe in Hell as a place that people are punished for their sins as in some religions. We do however believe that sin affects a person's soul in a similar way that bad there are bad things that can harm our bodies. Imagine what would happen if we ate too many sugary or fatty foods all the time - our bodies would suffer. To get our bodies back into shape we would have to exercise and eat more healthy things. Exercise is good for us but it's hard work. So too, sin hurts a person's soul. After a person dies their soul has be cleansed again from the bad influences – this might not be nice, but just like exercise it's actually good for us in the long term. Far better though to keep our souls (and bodies) in good shape to begin with!

12. If I break a commandment, nothing happens. Surely this means that God doesn't really care what I do?

For Adults: As in the previous answer, God is not waiting to jump on us and punish us for things we did wrong. Rather, He wants to give us the space to recognise that what we did was wrong and do *teshuvah* – (*lit.* return but understood to mean repentance). This is why there is no immediate cause and effect if we sin, or indeed if we do a mitzvah.

For Children: God wants us to realise our mistakes and give us the opportunity to learn from them and promise not to do them again. That's why he doesn't punish us straight away.

13. Why can't we see Hashem?

For Adults: Hashem doesn't have a body. But we can sense Him in other ways. We can see the effect He has on our lives and the lives of others.

For Children: Do you believe in something like love? Can we see love? No! But we know it exists because we see the effect of having a loving parent or grandparent. So too we know that God exists without having to see Him directly. We just have to be grateful for all of the things we have.

14. If Hashem is everywhere, is everything Hashem?

For Adults: Hashem is everywhere but that does not mean He is everything. Pantheism is the belief that the universe or nature as the totality of everything, is identical with divinity, or that everything composes an all-encompassing, immanent God. This is not a Jewish idea. A table is not Hashem.

Yet without Hashem the table wouldn't exist. This idea is known as Panentheism (from the Ancient Greek meaning "all-in-God"). It posits that God interpenetrates every part of the universe and extends above time and space beyond it. Unlike pantheism, which holds that the divine and the universe are identical, panentheism maintains a distinction between the divine and non-divine and the significance of both.

For Children: Hashem is everywhere, but that does not mean that everything is Hashem. Hashem is everywhere in the sense that He can be everywhere we allow Him to be.

15. If Hashem is everywhere, why do we have to go to Shul?

For Adults: The truth is we don't have to go to shul to connect with God. On the contrary, Judaism is much more of a home-centred religion than a shul centred one. Yet Shul is useful as a place for us to gather and pray together. While individual prayer is good, communal prayer is better as we take joint responsibility for making the world better.

For Children: Shul is a place that helps us to focus on praying to God because it brings us all together. While we don't *have* to go to shul to pray or do certain mitzvot, it is much better to have a place where we can all go together.