

***learning guide- skyman
from the album s*ngs ab-ut g?d***

introduction

When I was a kid, g?d was a big dude in the sky with a beard. A friendly guy, but still a guy. This guy kept track of the morality of the world, punishing the bad and rewarding the good. I thought this was Judaism's idea of g?d- at least it seemed that way from the Torah stories and prayers I learned. Plus, my teachers never gave me another alternative, so this was it. As I grew up, and specifically after my own father passed away, I stopped being able to believe in this version of g?d. I was embarrassed by my own previous beliefs, feeling a little foolish. But as an educator, I know now that it is totally understandable for a child to see g?d as the "dude in the sky." (For more on that, watch [this video](#).) It can be a comforting image, but one that raises a lot of questions, especially as they get older. This song voices those questions which seem child-like, but could be expressing concerns about the state of the world at any age. If g?d is so powerful, why are people hungry or sick? Does anyone hear our prayers? These questions arise out of the discrepancy between the g?d ideas we learn and the world in which we live. I hope this song allows you to ask these questions, to look around the world and think, "why is it like this?" To call out to the Divine, even if you don't really know what the Divine even is, but are clear in what it's not. But while it's frustrating to have Skyman be such a pronounced image in my mind, knowing it's only an image can open it up to new possibilities. Now, when I experience awe, grace, or gratitude out in the world, I know that this is g?d, even if no hand gives me a high five from the heavens.

suggestions for study

This song could be a great introduction for talking about g?d ideas with middle schoolers and up.

Watch [this video](#) and discuss- Where do you think these children got their ideas about g?d?
What were your ideas about g?d when you were a child? (or if you are working with teenagers or younger, what are your ideas about g?d now?)
Where did you learn these ideas?

[Listen](#) to the song and follow along to the [lyrics](#), or watch the [music video](#).

Discuss- What questions and statements about g?d are raised here?

Have you ever had those questions? Which ones?

What about g?d do these questions assume? (for example- “healing the sick and feeding the hungry/ you could do all of this and do more” assumes that g?d has the power to do those things.)

What are your questions about g?d? What do those questions assume about g?d?

If part of a larger unit, have students write their questions in a physical or online journal to reference later.

To go deeper, explore the “holy nick/name” and “bonus texts” together.

holy nick/name: אֲדֹנָי Adonai & יהוה YHWH

What are some Hebrew names you’ve heard used for g?d before?

We can think of all of these like nicknames for g?d. Loving, intimate names, or names based on action , or names based on values. But what is g?d’s “proper name” in Hebrew?

That name is spelled *yud*, *hey*, *vav*, and *hey*. If you saw this name written out, you might pronounce it *Adonai*, which means “my Lord.” (technically, “my Lords.”)

What are some associations you have with the word “Lord”? Maybe male, powerful, ancient.. But *yud*, *hey*, *vav*, and *hey* does not spell *Adonai*. We use *Adonai* here as a nickname.

Why do you think we don’t say *yud hey vav hey* out loud?

We actually can’t. The vowels were lost long ago, and it’s impossible to say the name without vowels. Try to pronounce a *yud* or a *vav*, and feel the pressure in your throat. Say a *hey* without a vowel- it’s breathing out.¹

We can also feel it in a different way. Take a look at these letters, vertically this time.



We can map them on to our bodies and see how it feels.

Stand up if you can. Feel your feet on the ground, bend your knees. Feel supported by the earth. Now roll your shoulders back and stand tall, feeling where the top of your head meets the air around it.

Now, using your imagination, picture that your head is a beautiful *yud*, the top reaching up and the bottom reaching down.

Imagine that your torso and arms are a *hey*. Does that change how you stand?

Imagine your spine is a *vav*, straight and tall. Feel yourself straighten up.

And imagine your legs are the last *hey*, rooting you in the earth.

Imagine that your body is the name. *Yud*, *hey*, *vav*, *hey*...

How would the world be different if we treated every person like a name of g?d?

¹ Kavanah by Cantor Ellen Dreskin

So, we can't pronounce *yud hey vav hey*, but we can feel it, and we can embody it. That's a lot like how we experience *yud hey vav hey* in the world. We have moments of connection, of holiness. We feel part of something greater than ourselves. We feel hope, we imagine what the world could be. And it's difficult to put into words, but we can feel it, and we can try to be it. And we try to put it into words anyway.

But just like any Hebrew word, *yud hey vav hey* has a root. The root is, "is!" You can see it in the Hebrew verb form *להיות*, "to be." And in the past, present, and future tense: *היה*, 'was', *הוה*, 'is', *יהיה*, 'will be'. See how the same letters are contained in this name. The closest translation of YHVH we have is "being" or "is-ness." And that's very different from Lord.

How might it be different to relate to g?d as "is-ness" vs "Lord?" Try "blessed are You, Lord" and then "blessed are You, Is-ness" and see how it feels.

bonus text

"Among some kind of liberal rabbis and liberal Jewish thinkers, they begin often with a wildly non-empathic presentation of what traditional theism is. You hear this a lot... someone will get up and say "well my g?d is not a big old grandpa in the sky," and then they're off to the races with some radically alternative conception of g?d. That's fine except I would like to say no Jewish thinker has ever held anything like remotely a grandfather in the sky, and since we're actually committed to empathy as a value, can we do some work in imagining more sympathetically what a traditional conception of g?d looks like? Just as one might ask for the opposite." Rabbi Shai Held, from [this video](#)

What are your initial impressions of this quote?

What kind of empathy do you think Rabbi Held is talking about? How could we have this empathy?