The author draws upon the writings from Jamie Faith Woods' students to explore spiritual themes that emerge and to relate them to recent literature on children's spiritual development.

Recent research into the spirituality of children tells us that children often do not have the language for the experiences they feel. These religious experiences of intimacy and immediacy are deeply felt and have long term significance but are mainly non-verbal. They remain individualistic experiences often considered very private since they come from a place of vulnerability in the child. Once expressed, their descriptions may be deeply particular featuring clouds and dreams, giants and scenes of nature.

Children find these images so powerful that they can be said to be their own individual "signature." These formative images become the basis upon which their theologies are built. It is often the case therefore that we as Jewish educators have to listen for these experiences by earning their trust and confidence and offering opportunities to reflect intentionally on their religious encounters. One way of enabling children to reflect on their own experiences is to write about what they think, feel, sense and experience about God.

Reading children's writings about God requires a sensitivity to the ways in which children express their "relational consciousness," defined by Rebecca Nye in her research on the spiritual life of children as a heightened awareness to the connections and relationships around and beyond the self. Often attributed to a religious feeling or presence, it can express itself in relationships with loved ones, the natural world, or images of transcendence, and it is frequently found in familiar and everyday contexts resulting in expressions of awe or wonder, reverence or surprise and greater openness and clarity.

God is with me when I am Outside
With my bare feet touching the newly soaked grass
I see the clear blue Sky dotted with little white puffs
Running freely almost flying
Dancing with nature as the wind sways in unison
I AM FREE

Here a ten-year-old child associates a sensing of God with Outside (capital O). She is attentive to the experience of being in the natural world, and her feelings are heightened and opened to the wonder and beauty of grass and sky. The freedom of wind and cloud connects her to feelings of unbounded perception, wanting even to fly. She makes a connection between God and her own experience of freedom of movement and openness to the heightened
comforting, he gets a reminder of how the world came to be in stillness and harmony and how it should be in its ideal and natural state. It gives him a moral message of what should be as well as what is.

Night time is of course a common theme, but it can be frightening rather than comforting; and God might be considered in a different role.

I feel God’s presence when I am about to fall asleep. It seems that He shuts my eyes and starts projecting my dreams. I sometime have really weird dreams. When I was really little, I dreamt that a huge orange blob was chasing my mom. I was chasing the blob on our balcony with no railings. I think that those dreams are supposed to make me appreciate what I have. When the dream is over, I dream that God is front of me telling me that the movie is over and that I should wake up.

Here it is God’s presence that brings on fears and anxieties about familiar things, home and family, and the child is unsettled and fearful of what can happen to overturn the essential anchors in her life. Her own dream interpretation is that this is a warning to appreciate the things she has and that God is a prefigurement to the experience of growing up. Children who reflect on the loss of a childhood think and feel it running over them with nothing to stop the progress of time.

James Fowler would call these the issues of faith, ultimate questions of significance, power and meaning, and here the child is grappling in her own way with her own images and language to interpret how life is changing for her. It can be at this time that the questions of faith become divorced in the child’s mind from the questions of religion. Unless the religious educator has a means to offer the child religious language, narrative and symbolic images that resonate with his or her own individual spiritual signature, the explicit religiosity of the tradition will be divorced from the implicit personal questions of religious experience.

We have long thought that this disconnection with classic depictions of God and belief takes place in late childhood, but children’s writings tell us that their formative experiences take place in early childhood, and only in late childhood are they expressed and interpreted.

When I was three, I dreamt that I was playing hide go seek with my mom. I was hiding in my dinosaur tepee thing. When the flaps opened, I thought it was my mom but it was really a knight with a big axe. When I woke up, it was as if God brought me back to reality.

Everything here is very real for the three year old child: play, toys, knights and axes. However, the ten-year-old interprets God as the one to distinguish between the fantasy and reality. God takes away the possibility of another way of knowing something, a dream-like state. The God he has been taught now wants the child to focus on more “real” images: God as king, father or judge. “Knight with an axe” as a mother figure retains its own symbolic meaning to that three-year-old. Jerome Berryman would ask us to wonder with the child about his own innate images and allow those wonderings to become his own theological language and perspective.

When we start to listen for children’s own theological language and expression, we find that we have so much to learn from them. The richness of their imagination and the natural way they connect to God’s presence or experience can powerfully move us in reflecting on our own childlike images, and in wondering about the possibility of religious encounter in a whole new way.

This piece of writing from another ten-year-old says much about the place and context of encouraging the search for and reflection on religious experience in all of us. The sad reality is that no one in this child’s family or religious school probably knew about this until he wrote it down.

The first time I experienced God was when I was at a sukkah party. Every year our next door neighbors have a sukkah party. It is like a maze outside of a castle. There is even a little pond filled with fish. It is an amazing backyard. One year when I was little I was playing in the backyard with my sister. We were playing hide and go seek. I don’t know why, but at that particular moment for about 15 minutes, I felt God’s presence. It was amazing. I felt...
To Learn More

David Hay and Rebecca Nye, *The Spirit of the Child*.
James W. Fowler, *Stages of Faith*.
Michael Rosenak, *Commandments and Concerns*.
Jerome Berryman, *Godly Play*.

like my mind and my heart were somewhere else. My brain was going crazy, like it is doing now as I remember that moment. Now that we have moved a little further away, we still go to their sukkah party and I always make it a point to walk in the backyard.

His imagination and wonder is heightened in the context of the place at a time when his community gathers to celebrate the fragility of God’s presence as in the sukkah. Hide and Seek becomes the metaphor for seeking and finding God’s presence in the garden. For this child, his mind and heart go somewhere else in what seems to him a very long time; his senses are overwhelmed, including his power of reason and thought. It is truly an I-Cola moment which cannot be experienced again but can be recollected each time in its time and place. This may be the most significant religious experience this child will have throughout his whole lifetime, and the clearest recollection of it is the holiness of a backyard sukkah!

Though religious experience is powerful for young children, children too use their reasoning and mind to “think” the possibility of a God.

Once in Humash class, Eliana raised the subject of God. She wanted to know what our opinions on God were. One girl questioned God’s inability to solve all the problems in the world... When Humash class ended, Eliana took us to recess. I sat down in a chair and continued to think about God. My friends asked me if I’d like to play with them but I said “no thank you.” I thought and thought and thought some more. When recess was over and I got in line, I was still thinking about God. I was even thinking about God at home after I had done my homework. At the dinner table, I said, “Mom Dad I have been thinking about something.” I asked them, “Is God the most powerful being in the Universe? If not, what or who is?” My parents were stunned by my questions and said indeed those are powerful questions.

In his written paragraph he emphasises how much he needed to think God through at school, with his friends, at home encompassing his whole world. The thought wouldn’t go away and he needed to deliberate long and hard on his question. Finally like the greatest philosophers, he realises that the problem is one of theodicy; God’s power in the world. His question is actually the culmination of a process and his parents wisely reflect on the power of the question.

This serious thinking of course can take a child in another direction, a direction in which many adults finally end up.

God
I don’t believe in God
When I don’t believe in God its Because
Bad things happen to me
I have two allergies and temper issues
And to think someone would curse me
With my problems
That would be just mean
If there is a God
To me
God is an illusion
Others believe in God
And they can if they want to
I’m an atheist
And I don’t believe in God
But
Thinking of all the good things that happen to me
Maybe someone blesses me with these things
If there is a God
Many, if not most, children will express their unbelief in God by the age of 10 or 11, but for some it is an ambivalence and for others it is a yearning that it could be otherwise. The deeper the thought about why there couldn’t possibly be a God can have the effect of moving a child through a faith transition to a point where he or she shapes a belief on her own answers to her own questions about God. This child reflects so much of our tradition, from the blessing and curses of Deuteronomy to the suffering in Job. For her the questions will remain more powerful than any answer, and our guiding role is to continue to get her to ask the challenging questions.

We learn from children’s writings about God that they commonly have religious experiences associated with the presence of God. These experiences are everyday and routine, but hold a particular signature image for each child. They are often non-verbal in that the child has no capacity or ability to explore them at the time, but they become recollected and significant just a few years later in late childhood. They form the questions of faith in young children, offering purpose and meaning to issues of trust, protection, family, growing up, fear, suffering and death. They are strongly felt and sometimes thoughtfully explored. By and large the passages about religious experience do not use explicit religious language, symbol or metaphor. They are not particularly concerned with what God is like, but rather how close or faraway God can become in their daily lives.

For us as religious educators, it is extremely hard to elicit these experiences. They become endangered as we seek to provide the answers to questions of faith before we have listened for and understood the children’s own questions of meaning. Perhaps the best we can do is to tell our sacred stories, sing our liturgy and sit back in silence as we ask, “What are you wondering about? I’d like to wonder with you.”

Writing about the question “What is God to me?” opens up new language for children with opportunities for connecting their innate perceptions with the religious language of symbol and metaphor of their tradition. Children writing about their experiences and thoughts about God have a key to unlocking this nonverbal language and enabling them to find their own spiritual signature, as in one fifth grader’s moment of clarity: “God is a mystery and that’s what I think He is.”