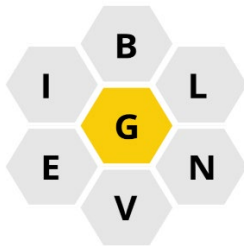


## "What's God?"—and Other Questions Kids Ask

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Do you see the honeycomb pictograph of the New York Times Spelling Bee as a random assortment of letters or the **beginning** of patterns?<sup>1</sup> People react differently to the building blocks that comprise their world. These reactions shape their worldview and sense of **being**. The elementary school students whom my colleagues and I teach develop their spiritual signatures by observing their world and finding their place in it. We encourage them to notice, look closely, and consider how the elements relate to one another. Their curiosity often serves as the **engine** of their discovery.

This week's double Torah reading specifies 42 locations where the Israelites camped between leaving Egypt and entering Canaan. While the list could be seen as *pro forma*, a beloved teacher of mine—Dr. Eliezer Slomovic—always insisted that God is not a blabbermouth; everything in Torah is imbued with meaning, even a list of 42 place names. Toward the end of Douglas Adams' *The Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy*, a supercomputer famously reveals the Ultimate Answer to Life, The Universe, and Everything to be the number 42. The numerical parallel to the 42 Israelite encampments provides a serendipitous opening to consider

<sup>1</sup> The New York Times Spelling Bee is a puzzle in which players try to make words from a set of seven unique letters while using the center letter at least once.

how the seemingly mundane might be the gateway to a wider awareness of something greater than ourselves.

My students often ask questions like "What's God?" as they add to their verbal and experiential lexicon. An awareness of something greater is one of many definitions of spirituality, and concrete tools like Harvard's Project Zero "See Think Wonder" strategy help develop it. "See Think Wonder" works beyond the classroom for which it was designed; it encourages us to observe our surroundings, reflect on what we've seen, and allow our minds to delve into realms of possibility. Its designation as a "thinking routine" is appropriate when contemplating the Israelite journey with its repetition of wilderness sojourns and an unchanging diet. The years between Egypt and Canaan were not just for a generation to die out, but for a generation to gradually instill a practice, honing an outlook on the whetstone of seeming sameness.

By adopting this mindset, everyday experiences become triggers for discovery. There is nothing **negligible**. We notice details we might have otherwise missed, consider multiple interpretations, and generate questions that fuel our desire to learn more. This practice nurtures a habit of mindful engagement with the world, where each moment becomes a potential source of wonder.

The repetitive pattern of halting and traveling described in Numbers 33 is more than just a historical record: it serves as a metaphor. It mirrors the rhythms of our own lives—periods of rest and stability interspersed with times of movement and change. This cadence invites us to consider how we approach these transitions. Do we simply move from one stage to another without much thought? Or do we approach each with intentionality? If we see the divine presence in the everyday details of our lives and come to

each new moment with the goal of adding to our perception and perspective, we might recognize that we are being led on an ongoing process of becoming.

Wondering in the wilderness is different from wandering there. Wondering bespeaks interest and reflection, fascination and awe; wandering implies aimlessness. Consider whether the ground on which Moses stood was holy because he'd wandered to where the bush grew, or whether his expression of wonder and curiosity transformed the nature of the place where he stood.

We are **given** the opportunity to embrace **living** in the present. This can ignite momentum towards **believing**.

The words in bold might embolden us to put more of the pieces of our journey into play, serving to both anchor and propel us. They may root us by providing focus and meaning to our experiences and advance us by inspiring us to continue moving, growing, and seeking.

To come full circle, what do the NYT Spelling Bee and the detailing of the 42 encampments of the Israelites in the desert have in common? Each prompts us to recall that life unfolds in stages and that we often find connections when we sit with something for a bit. The "Shuffle" feature that rearranges the letters reminds us that in life we benefit from seeing from different perspectives. And lastly, while some days you're a Genius and some days are just a Good Start, every day brings yet another chance.

Addressing the child's question, "What's God?," our parashah suggests that God is not confined to one place or experience, but encountered throughout our journey. The Torah shows that life, like the Israelites' journey, isn't linear. It's a mix of progress and retreat, clarity and confusion. We all face uncertainty and spiritual dryness, but these wilderness experiences shape who we're becoming. In both physical and spiritual wildernesses, we gain unique insights into our spirit and divine connection. Moments of awe often reveal what truly matters.

The reality for both children and adults is that being open to discovery affords opportunities to see our world and make

meaning of it. Adults might rephrase the "What's God" question as "Is there more than what I see?" and our double parashah nudges us to look to our *path* for answers, rather than our destination. Meandering obliviously, conversely, may stunt our growth. If we feel called to truly notice the stops and starts of our path, though, our wonder will give way to lives of purpose and significance.

Two generations overlapped in that wilderness, both led by cloud and fire; one was the aimless wanderer that had crossed the Sea of Reeds on dry ground while the second was the purposeful wonderer that would cross the Jordan on dry ground. We're presented with two ways of journeying in the wilderness of our lives. Which generation do you want to be?