

Dear Rabbi,

My young child wants to know if the stories in the Hebrew Bible are true. Another adult (a Christian friend) said something the other day that has started a longer discussion within our family. (see next page)

So far, I've told him that we don't know which biblical stories are completely true and which ones aren't, but we still believe in them, and we tell them over and over because they matter to us.

I said that they help us to understand who we are as a people, and they are part of our holidays and our traditions.

But it feels like this is a cop-out. My kid wants to know what's true and what's false, and I don't really have the language for answering this question. Do you?

- *Baffled by the Bible*

Dear Baffled,

This is a thorny issue. You're absolutely right: your child wants to know about what's true and what's false.

First, try to remember that he is in a particular developmental stage right now, which is almost certainly part of the reason why he is looking for solid answers about these topics. It's normal for kids to spend their preschool to early elementary years trying to get a better handle on the difference between truth and lies, as well as the bigger nuances there.

But there's also more going on here, because this is an interfaith discussion.

When we try to talk with non-Jewish friends or family members about ideas like the authority of written scripture, we often find ourselves "speaking different languages," because our cultural and religious backgrounds tend to lead us to make different assumptions. It's possible that your friend's background means that they believe that the divine authority of the biblical text is supposed to be absolute or unquestionable, whereas Jewish tradition understands that human interpretation and argument are necessary for bringing the text to life and making it relevant. In a few cases, the rabbinic tradition even radically reinterprets a written text, making it say something quite different from what we read on the surface. For some people who highly revere the written text, and are concerned about human reinterpretation and its motives, this sort of behavior might appear irreverent or sinful.

To religious Jews, however, study and interpretation are understood as pious acts of love and devotion, both to God and to the Torah. Through the chain of Torah study and transmission, we join together across generations to study sacred texts with those who came before us. (see next page)

We must not hold ourselves back from that task or become mere consumers. Listening to God is important, and listening for God is also important. God's voice doesn't speak only through sacred texts, but also through the human conscience, our interpersonal relationships, and unexpected moments in our lives. If we believe that all things ultimately derive from God's activity in our world, then anything can become a divine message helping us better relate to scripture, to God, and to our own inner spiritual dimension.

As a final note: You may also want to consider the purpose that reading the Bible serves for your friend. It sounds like they have placed an emphasis on truth, faith, and belief, with the Bible as a source for these things.

But a traditional Jewish response to sacred texts like the Torah and the rest of the Hebrew Bible is concerned above all with acts. These include internal acts of professing faith and putting trust in God, but we emphasize external acts: ritual behaviors, cultural practices, and ethical and moral conduct.

I like to say (to the grown-ups!) that Judaism does not provide us with answers so much as responses. We should not look to God to tell us the whole, unvarnished truth, so that we will know all the answers; rather, if we attune our hearts and our senses, God offers us a message we need at a particular moment, so that we will respond appropriately and with wisdom. In this way, when we find contradictions or inconsistencies within our texts, we need not ignore them, but we need not let them detract from the wisdom of the message either.

So, how should you respond?

This can be a good opportunity for you to talk about faith and scripture, both with your child and with your friend. It may not be possible to have both conversations at the same time, and certainly not at the same level. But your primary duty is to your child, to help him understand how to grow in faith and how to understand the soul-deep responsibility that Jews have to engage honestly and relentlessly with words of Torah.

So I suggest you begin by asking him to hone his question. Perhaps he's saying: "Look, either the Hebrew Bible is the truth, or it's a lie; which one?" If that's the case, you can tell him with confidence that it's not a lie. It may be a complicated kind of Truth (note the capital "T"), and it may be true in a different way than your friend may think, but you don't have to feel dishonest telling your child this. As he gets older, try to help him understand both that

sacred literature is indeed sacred and that we get to work together with one another to figure out what it should mean.

- *Rabbi Noah S. Ferro*