

HOW DO WE INCLUDE?

DISABILITY INCLUSION CONVERSATION GUIDES

ASK **BIG**
QUESTIONS

Hillel
International

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THE ONGOING WORK OF INCLUSION

Dear friends and colleagues,

“You shall not insult the deaf, or place a stumbling block before the blind.” So we are instructed by the Torah in the book of Leviticus. This reminds us that the imperative to ensure that our communities are inclusive of all, regardless of ability, has deep roots in our tradition.

Stumbling blocks, of course, can look like a lot of things, from stairs without ramps, lectures without ASL interpretation, and intolerance for those who need to move around during sermons to patronizing assumptions about what a person with a disability can and can't actually do. It's upon all of us, individually and together, to make sure that all of our Jewish spaces are open and welcoming—not just free of stumbling blocks, but welcoming and valuing the unique contributions of each person created b'tzelem elohim, in the Divine image.

Hillel is proud to partner with the Ruderman Family Foundation on this series of conversation guides aimed at deepening our awareness, sensitivity, and action around disability inclusion. These guides are built using our award-winning Ask Big Questions methodology. The Big Questions animating these conversations can help all of our communities, on campus and beyond, become even more welcoming and caring. When we ask ourselves, and one another, How are we seen? What advantages do you have? Who is in your community? How do we connect?, we engage in the ongoing work of empathy, understanding, and transformation.

As Rabbi Michael Safra puts it, “We can do more than accommodate. We can strive to be truly open, to be willing to be changed, to truly include others, with everything that inclusion entails. Unlike accommodation, which becomes unnecessary once certain changes are made, the process of building inclusive community never ends. There is always more we can do.”

The verse in Leviticus ends with a reminder: “You shall revere your God: I am the Holy One.” When we create spaces that truly cherish the offerings of each and every member of our community, we serve the Divine. We hope that these conversations are of service to this holy work.

B'vracha, in blessing,

Sheila Katz

Vice President for Social Entrepreneurship

HOW ARE WE SEEN?

CONVERSATION GUIDE FOR FACILITATORS

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ASK & SHARE

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Note for Facilitators: Give people a moment to organize their thoughts before you start asking for volunteers. It may be helpful to model this introduction for participants, so consider introducing yourself first. Be sure everyone states their name. You don't need to go in order around a circle. Allow people to introduce themselves when the spirit moves them.

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Many times a day, we look at other people, and make split-second, often unconscious, decisions about how we regard them. Is that person walking down the street a potential friend? A threat? A romantic prospect? Someone with whom we have little in common, or much? And others make those same judgments about us—fair, or unfair, valid, or invalid. Sometimes we're really seen for who we are, and sometimes we're mis-viewed, mis-understood, categorized in ways that don't reflect what our who we are, in whole or in part.

The Jewish tradition has a lot of blessings meant to reflect the act of seeing—we say a blessing when we see a rainbow or the ocean, but also when seeing certain kinds of people—for example, an old friend, a non-Jewish king, or a great scholar. There is one blessing, however, that some disability rights activists take issue with, as it's meant to be said when seeing someone who is visibly disabled. Here, Lauren Tuchman, a rabbinical student who happens to be blind, discusses her discomfort with the blessing and offers a new way of thinking about it. You can find the full essay from which this piece is excerpted online at <https://ravsak.org/disability-and-god-talk>.

Every human being is created in the image of God. Every human being has a spark of the divine within. When people are taught to honor and lift up the divine spark within their fellow human beings, the all-too-common impulse to “make other” or to exoticize those who are different from us begins to give way. As human beings, we tend to categorize, make quick judgments, and place people in boxes as a means of creating order out of the chaotic and constantly changing world around us. This pattern, though apparent across many markers of personal and social identity, is particularly acute and noticeable when it comes to individuals with disabilities. Whether out of a fear we do not know how to articulate or out of a fear of saying or doing the wrong thing, we tend to place those with disabilities in a category separate from the norm. If disability is addressed at all, particularly in a religious context, it tends to be used as a vehicle for the continued othering of the individual, even when it appears that it is being used to build bridges.

An example of this in Jewish tradition is the [blessing] that one is supposed to make upon seeing a “strange” individual: meshaneh habriyot. Blessed are You, God, ruler of the universe, who diversifies or makes different the creatures. On its face, this appears to be a beautifully inclusive [blessing], one that we might want to teach our children from the earliest age as a means of honoring the diversity that is humanity. However, for many individuals with disabilities and other visible differences that fall outside of social norms, including myself, this [blessing], instead of building bridges and honoring the beauty within our non-normative bodies, instead places us firmly within the category of “other.” When we thank God for diversifying God’s creatures, the inverse of that is that we are thanking God for making us normative in body, normative in appearance.

...One exercise that I have seen used successfully when thinking more deeply about meshaneh habriyot is to have people think for several moments about a time when they observed someone noticeably different and a time when they were observed for being noticeably different. Reflecting upon the feelings that arose during either of these encounters is instructive for beginning to shift one’s understanding of the [blessing]. It is also useful to use these reflective moments as a catalyst for thinking more broadly about the ways society would be transformed if we took the notion that we are all created in the image of God seriously. ...

My overarching goal is to instill within all children that we are more alike than we are different, that children with disabilities are peers, not other, not to be feared or pitied, but human beings, created in the divine image. When we begin to truly examine the notion that we are created in the divine image, radical possibilities for reimagining what our world could look like begin to emerge. Though it might be uncomfortable to use a critical lens upon many of our [blessings], I think it highly instructive for understanding the messages we send and the ways in which we might alter those assumptions.

As we reflect on this text, here are a few questions to consider:

Interpretive Questions

- Why might “Blessed are You, God, ruler of the universe, who diversifies or makes different the creatures” traditionally be said upon seeing someone who is visibly disabled?
- What is Tuchman's objection to this blessing?
- How does Tuchman's exercise (“Think about a time when...”) impact people's thinking about this blessing?
- How does Tuchman think regarding people as created in the divine image invites “radical possibilities for reimagining what our world could look like”?

Reflective Questions

- When was a time that you observed someone noticeably different from you?
- When was a time that you were observed for being noticeably different?
- How does being seen as “other” impact you? Does it impact the way you see yourself?
- When was a time that you were able to really see the fullness and humanity of a person who is different from you in some way? What happened?
- When was a time that you allowed yourself to be really seen? What needed to be present in order for you to feel comfortable doing so?
- How can we create communities in which we are better able to see one another?

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- When each person is done, thank them for their comment.
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For other ideas on facilitation, please refer to the AIR-IT guide at the end of this document. When you sense that the group has finished sharing its responses to these questions, invite people to share any further insights or reflections from the conversation, before moving to the conclusion.

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The philosopher Martin Buber (1878-1965) distinguished between two kinds of relationships: I-It, and I-Thou. In I-It relationships, the other person is seen in a flat, one-dimensional way, often as someone who can be useful to you, to hinder you, or as more of an object than a whole person. In an I-Thou relationship, the other person is regarded as a whole person, full of complexities, hopes, dreams, and selfhood. When we strive to really see one another, and to let others really see us, we create spaces for caring, compassion, connection and empathy.

As we conclude the conversation, here are a few final questions to consider.

- What’s one insight that you’ve gained from this conversation?
- How does this conversation impact your thinking around the value of inclusion in your Jewish community?
- What is one thing you want to change based on this conversation?
- What’s one obstacle to you making that change, and how can you overcome it? Who might you need help from in order to make this change?

Note for Facilitators: Give people a minute to reflect on the question. Then ask anyone who wants to share to do so. When you sense that the group has finished sharing its response to this question, invite people to share any further insights or reflections from the conversation, before moving to the conclusion.



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UNDERSTAND OTHERS. UNDERSTAND YOURSELF.

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From one perspective, it's impossible to ever really know someone else. No matter how profoundly we can connect, we'll never have full access to another person's memories, assumptions, experiences, or ways of thinking. Add in our attempts to come together with someone of a different culture, ethnicity, sexual orientation, religion, class status, gender, ability level, or any one of a myriad of other things, and there are even more layers of perspective and assumption to untangle.

But from another point of view, we can know one another. We can use the power of language and shared experience to understand who the other in front of us really is. We can find the places of illumination in our shared humanity. When we work to understand one another, we forge the tools to create caring communities and build a world of kindness and love.

The trio of stories below are from the Talmud, the 3,000-page collection of Jewish law and lore dating from the first several centuries of the common era in the ancient near east. These stories are about how humans connect—and when, and why, we don't.

A note: These stories appear in the context of illness and healing, not disability per se. For some in the disability community, the language of "healing" is fraught; as disability rights activist Eli Clare writes, focusing on healing "ignores the reality that many of us aren't looking for cures but for civil rights." We offer these stories, nonetheless, as a powerful lens for thinking about hearing, understanding and connection. Please read them out loud.

Rabbi Hiyya bar Abba fell ill and Rabbi Yochanan went in to visit him. He said to him: "Are your sufferings welcome to you?" (That is, are you enjoying being sick?) He replied: "Neither they nor their reward." (That is, I don't want to be sick, and I'd even pass on any future spiritual reward that I might possibly get for being sick, if I could get better.) He said to him: "Give me your hand." He gave him his hand and he raised him.

Rabbi Yochanan once fell ill and Rabbi Hanina went in to visit him. He said to him: "Are your sufferings welcome to you?" He replied: "Neither they nor their reward." He said to him: "Give me your hand." He gave him his hand and he raised him. Why couldn't Rabbi Yochanan raise himself? They replied: The prisoner cannot free himself from jail.

Rabbi Eleazar fell ill and Rabbi Yochanan went in to visit him... Thereupon he noticed that Rabbi Eleazar was weeping, and he said to him: "Why do you weep? Is it because you did not study enough Torah? Surely we have learned: The one who [studies] much and the one who [studies] little receive the same transcendent reward, as long as their heart was directed towards heaven [when they studied]. Is it because you did not have a lot of material comfort? Not everybody has the privilege to enjoy two tables (that is, a rich life). Is it perhaps because of [the lack of] children? This is the bone of my tenth son [who has died!]" (That is, we all have hardship!) He replied to him: "I am weeping on account of this beauty that is going to pass into dust." He said to him: "For this you certainly have a reason to weep!" And they wept together. Eventually he said to him: "Are your sufferings welcome to you?" He replied: "Neither they nor their reward." He said to him: "Give me your hand." And he gave him his hand and he raised him.

(Babylonian Talmud, Tractate Brachot, 5b)

As we reflect on this text, here are a few questions to consider:

Interpretive Questions

- What does it mean when the stories say, “Give me your hand, and he gave him his hand, and he raised him”?
- Why can’t Rabbi Yochanan heal himself?
- What is Rabbi Yochanan doing that’s not working in the last story? What assumptions does he make about Rabbi Eleazar?
- Why is Rabbi Eleazar crying?
- What is Rabbi Yochanan’s response when he finally understands why?
- What happens when they weep together?

Reflective Questions

- Have you ever made the same mistake that Rabbi Yochanan did in the third story? What happened?
- Have you ever been able to really listen to someone else’s experience with empathy? To weep, or celebrate together with them? What happened?
- When was a time when someone made the time to understand you? What made it possible? What were some impediments?
- Is it easier or more difficult to connect deeply with people whose experiences are very different from your own?
- How could we create Jewish communities in which people are able to connect deeply with one another? In which people feel connected to the community as a whole?

Use the space below to write some notes to yourself.

Note for Facilitators: This is the heart of the conversation. Give people several minutes to prepare their thoughts. Then invite people to divide into pairs or triads and share their responses. Give them a good amount of time for this—10-20 minutes. It may be longer, depending on how much momentum they develop. Then reconvene in the large group and ask people to share from their small-group conversations.

A few tips on facilitation:

- The large-group debrief should take another 20-30 minutes.
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DO

It’s not easy to see, to really see another person. And it’s important to enter into the attempt with humility about the possibilities and limitations of really understanding another person’s feelings and perspective. But engaging in the sometimes difficult work of connecting with someone else—even, maybe especially, someone different from ourselves in significant ways—can be transformational. It can change how understand the world, and it can expand our capacity for creating community.

As we close this conversation today, please consider a few more questions:

- What did you learn today?
- How did this conversation impact your thinking around connection and inclusion in your Jewish community?
- What is one change that you want to make based on this conversation?
- What’s one obstacle that might get in the way of you making that change? How can you overcome that obstacle? Who can help you get there?

Note for Facilitators: Give people a minute to reflect on the question. Then ask anyone who wants to share to do so. When you sense that the group has finished sharing its response to this question, invite people to share any further insights or reflections from the conversation, before moving to the conclusion.



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A note: These stories appear in the context of illness and healing, not disability per se. For some in the disability community, the language of "healing" is fraught; as disability rights activist Eli Clare writes, focusing on healing "ignores the reality that many of us aren't looking for cures but for civil rights." We offer these stories, nonetheless, as a powerful lens for thinking about hearing, understanding and connection. Please read them out loud.

Rabbi Hiyya bar Abba fell ill and Rabbi Yochanan went in to visit him. He said to him: "Are your sufferings welcome to you?" (That is, are you enjoying being sick?) He replied: "Neither they nor their reward." (That is, I don't want to be sick, and I'd even pass on any future spiritual reward that I might possibly get for being sick, if I could get better.) He said to him: "Give me your hand." He gave him his hand and he raised him.

Rabbi Yochanan once fell ill and Rabbi Hanina went in to visit him. He said to him: "Are your sufferings welcome to you?" He replied: "Neither they nor their reward." He said to him: "Give me your hand." He gave him his hand and he raised him. Why couldn't Rabbi Yochanan raise himself? They replied: The prisoner cannot free himself from jail.

Rabbi Eleazar fell ill and Rabbi Yochanan went in to visit him... Thereupon he noticed that Rabbi Eleazar was weeping, and he said to him: "Why do you weep? Is it because you did not study enough Torah? Surely we have learned: The one who [studies] much and the one who [studies] little receive the same transcendent reward, as long as their heart was directed towards heaven [when they studied]. Is it because you did not have a lot of material comfort? Not everybody has the privilege to enjoy two tables (that is, a rich life). Is it perhaps because of [the lack of] children? This is the bone of my tenth son [who has died!]" (That is, we all have hardship!) He replied to him: "I am weeping on account of this beauty that is going to pass into dust." He said to him: "For this you certainly have a reason to weep!" And they wept together. Eventually he said to him: "Are your sufferings welcome to you?" He replied: "Neither they nor their reward." He said to him: "Give me your hand." And he gave him his hand and he raised him.

(Babylonian Talmud, Tractate Brachot, 5b)

As we reflect on this text, here are a few questions to consider:

Interpretive Questions

- What does it mean when the stories say, “Give me your hand, and he gave him his hand, and he raised him”?
- Why can't Rabbi Yochanan heal himself?
- What is Rabbi Yochanan doing that's not working in the last story? What assumptions does he make about Rabbi Eleazar?
- Why is Rabbi Eleazar crying?
- What is Rabbi Yochanan's response when he finally understands why?
- What happens when they weep together?

Reflective Questions

- Have you ever made the same mistake that Rabbi Yochanan did in the third story? What happened?
- Have you ever been able to really listen to someone else's experience with empathy? To weep, or celebrate together with them? What happened?
- When was a time when someone made the time to understand you? What made it possible? What were some impediments?
- Is it easier or more difficult to connect deeply with people whose experiences are very different from your own?
- How could we create Jewish communities in which people are able to connect deeply with one another? In which people feel connected to the community as a whole?

Use the space below to write some notes to yourself.

DO

It's not easy to see, to really see another person. And it's important to enter into the attempt with humility about the possibilities and limitations of really understanding another person's feelings and perspective. But engaging in the sometimes difficult work of connecting with someone else—even, maybe especially, someone different from ourselves in significant ways—can be transformational. It can change how we understand the world, and it can expand our capacity for creating community.

As we close this conversation today, please consider a few more questions:

- What did you learn today?
- How did this conversation impact your thinking around connection and inclusion in your Jewish community?
- What is one change that you want to make based on this conversation?
- What's one obstacle that might get in the way of you making that change? How can you overcome that obstacle? Who can help you get there?



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WHAT ADVANTAGES DO YOU HAVE?

CONVERSATION GUIDE FOR FACILITATORS

ASK **BIG**
QUESTIONS

Hillel
International

Note for Facilitators: This document is designed to be the centering point for a group conversation. You should plan for the conversation to last between 60 and 90 minutes, depending on group size. Most parts are meant to be read by members of the group, so you should plan to ask participants to take turns reading sections. Alternatively, you can choose the first reader of a section, and then that reader chooses the next reader. Additional guidelines and suggestions for planning and leading a successful conversation can be found at the end of this guide.

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- We will assume good faith in one another.
- We will open ourselves to listen and learn from one another.
- We won't rush to fill the silence.

Can we all agree to these things? If you feel, for whatever reason, that you cannot agree to these things, then please take this opportunity to exit. By staying in the circle, we all signify our intention to abide by these commitments.

ASK & SHARE

Let's take a moment to introduce ourselves. Please share your name and one way that you feel fortunate in your life. You can use the space below to make some notes to yourself.

Note for Facilitators: Give people a moment to organize their thoughts before you start asking for volunteers. It may be helpful to model this introduction for participants, so consider introducing yourself first. Be sure everyone states their name. You don't need to go in order around a circle. Allow people to introduce themselves when the spirit moves them.

LEARN

People have different kinds of advantages in society. An able-bodied person will have a much easier time navigating many public transit systems (not all of which are outfitted with elevators or ramps at every stop) than someone in a wheelchair. A student who is able to attend college without working several part-time jobs will have more time and energy to focus on studies and other interests, and might even be able to afford to take a prestigious, door-opening unpaid internship. Some transgender people fear animosity and even violence every time they're forced to choose a gendered public bathroom—an experience most cisgender people do not have. ("Cisgender" refers to someone whose gender identity conforms to his or her biological sex.) A person of color is more likely than a white person to be singled out for "additional screening" in the airport security line or followed around by suspicious security in a store.

When we understand the ways in which we have advantages, we are better able to situate ourselves in our larger social context. And when we do that, we may be better able to hear the stories of those who are different from us, and to be clear about the ways in which our society operates. This also helps us to make decisions about what, if anything, we want to do with the advantages we have. As the author and scholar bell hooks writes, "Privilege is not in and of itself bad; what matters is what we do with privilege.... We have to share our resources and take direction about how to use our privilege in ways that empower those who lack it."

Christine Miserandino, who has Lupus, is disabled in some ways that are considered invisible—not apparent at first glance. She was in a diner one day with a friend, who asked her to describe the ways in which Lupus has impacted her life. She came up with a "spoon theory" that beautifully articulates the struggles that some people with chronic illnesses or invisible disabilities face. Please read the excerpt below. The full text can be found at butyoudontlooksick.com.

As I went to take some of my medicine with a snack as I usually did, she watched me with an awkward kind of stare, instead of continuing the conversation. She then asked me out of the blue what it felt like to have Lupus and be sick. She came to doctors with me, she saw me walk with a cane, and throw up in the bathroom. She had seen me cry in pain, what else was there to know?

I quickly grabbed every spoon on the table; hell I grabbed spoons off of the other tables. I looked at her in the eyes and said "Here you go, you have Lupus." I explained that the difference in being sick and being healthy is having to make choices or to consciously think about things when the rest of the world doesn't have to.

I asked her to count her spoons. She asked why, and I explained that when you are healthy you expect to have a never-ending supply of "spoons". But when you have to now plan your day, you need to know exactly how many "spoons" you are starting with. She counted out 12 spoons.

I asked her to list off the tasks of her day, including the most simple. As she rattled off daily chores, or just fun things to do, I explained how each one would cost her a spoon. When she jumped right into getting ready for work as her first task of the morning, I cut her off and took away a spoon. "No! You don't just get up. You have to crack open your eyes, and then realize you are late. You didn't sleep well the night before. You have to crawl out of bed, and then you have to make yourself something to eat before you can do anything else, because if you don't, you can't take your medicine, and if you don't take your medicine you might as well give up all your spoons for today and tomorrow too." I quickly took away a spoon and she realized she hasn't even gotten dressed yet. Showering cost her spoon, just for washing her hair and shaving her legs. Getting dressed was worth another spoon. I stopped her and broke down every task to show her how every little detail needs to be thought about. You cannot simply just throw clothes on when you are sick. I explained that I have to see what clothes I can physically put on, if my hands hurt that day buttons are out of the question.

I think she was starting to understand when she theoretically didn't even get to work, and she was left with 6 spoons. I then explained to her that she needed to choose the rest of her day wisely, since when your "spoons" are gone, they are gone. Sometimes you can borrow against tomorrow's "spoons", but just think how hard tomorrow will be with less "spoons". I also needed to explain that a person who is sick always lives with the looming thought that tomorrow may be the day that a cold comes, or an infection, or any number of things that could be very dangerous. So you do not want to run low on "spoons", because you never know when you truly will need them.

We went through the rest of the day, and she slowly learned that skipping lunch would cost her a spoon, as well as standing on a train, or even typing at her computer too long. She was forced to make choices and think about things differently. Hypothetically, she had to choose not to run errands, so that she could eat dinner that night.

When we got to the end of her pretend day, she said she was hungry. I summarized that she had to eat dinner but she only had one spoon left. If she cooked, she wouldn't have enough energy to clean the pots. If she went out for dinner, she might be too tired to drive home safely.

After we were emotional and talked about this for a little while longer, I sensed she was sad. Maybe she finally understood. Maybe she realized that she never could truly and honestly say she understands. But at least now she might not complain so much when I can't go out for dinner some nights, or when I never seem to make it to her house and she always has to drive to mine. I gave her a hug when we walked out of the diner. I had the one spoon in my hand and I said, "Don't worry. I see this as a blessing. I have been forced to think about everything I do. Do you know how many spoons people waste everyday? I don't have room for wasted time, or wasted "spoons," and I chose to spend this time with you."

As we reflect on this text, here are a few questions to consider:

Interpretive Questions

- Summarize the “spoon theory.” What are spoons to Miserandino?
- How is her experience of a normal day different from that of her friend’s?
- What seems to have surprised Miserandino’s friend about the exercise?
- What kinds of expectations do you think those who don’t understand Miserandino’s illness have of her?
- What kinds of privilege does Miserandino have? What kind(s) doesn’t she have?

Reflective Questions

- What kinds of systems do you think could or should be put in place to make Miserandino’s experience easier?
- Does it matter whether or not you know if someone has a certain kind of privilege?
- Think back to what you said you felt fortunate to have in your life. How would your life be different if you didn’t have that thing in your life?
- Do you feel like the Jewish community is better, worse, or about the same as other places in addressing issues of disability and privilege? In addressing other kinds of privilege?
- Does having privilege come with certain obligations? Why or why not?

Use the space below to write some notes to yourself.

Note for Facilitators: This is the heart of the conversation. Give people several minutes to prepare their thoughts. Then invite people to divide into pairs or triads and share their responses. Give them a good amount of time for this—10-20 minutes. It may be longer, depending on how much momentum they develop. Then reconvene in the large group and ask people to share from their small-group conversations.

A few tips on facilitation:

- The large-group debrief should take another 20-30 minutes.
- Begin by asking for a volunteer to share an insight from their conversation. You might begin by asking, “What came up?”
- When each person is done, thank them for their comment.
- Don’t feel a need to rush or to fill silences.
- If someone begins to monopolize the time, you might say, “I want to be sure that everyone has a chance to speak, so let’s try to make room for another person.”

For other ideas on facilitation, please refer to the AIR-IT guide at the end of this document. When you sense that the group has finished sharing its responses to these questions, invite people to share any further insights or reflections from the conversation, before moving to the conclusion.

DO

The Torah (Exodus 22:21) commands us, “You shall not wrong a stranger or oppress him, for you were strangers in the land of Egypt.” The implication is clear—our own communal experience of oppression can, and should, impact how we relate to others when we, ourselves, are in a position of power. Or, as Terry Smith, a high school social studies teacher and activist once said, “If we inherit injustice, we should never feel guilty. We are not responsible for that past. However, if we choose to do nothing about it going forward, then we have plenty to feel guilty about.” We are all lucky to have certain advantages in our lives. We should absolutely be grateful for the fortune that we have, and being aware of it gives us the opportunity to decide what that good fortune enables us to do.

As we conclude the conversation, here are a few final questions to consider.

- What’s one insight that you’ve gained from this conversation?
- What is one thing you want to change based on this conversation?
- How does this conversation impact your thinking around the value of inclusion in your Jewish community?
- What’s one obstacle to you making that change, and how can you overcome it? Who might you need help from in order to make this change?

Feel free to use the space below to write some notes to yourself.

Note for Facilitators: Give people a minute to reflect on the question. Then ask anyone who wants to share to do so. When you sense that the group has finished sharing its response to this question, invite people to share any further insights or reflections from the conversation, before moving to the conclusion.



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WHAT ADVANTAGES DO YOU HAVE?

CONVERSATION GUIDE FOR PARTICIPANTS

ASK **BIG**
QUESTIONS

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WHO IS IN YOUR COMMUNITY?

CONVERSATION GUIDE FOR FACILITATORS

ASK **BIG**
QUESTIONS

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International

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ASK & SHARE

Let's take a moment to introduce ourselves. Think about the word "community." What's the first thing that comes to mind? We'll take a moment and then go around and share what we thought of.

Note for Facilitators: Give people a moment to organize their thoughts before you start asking for volunteers. It may be helpful to model this introduction for participants, so consider introducing yourself first. Be sure everyone states their name. You don't need to go in order around a circle. Allow people to introduce themselves when the spirit moves them.

LEARN

We hear the word “community” a lot these days. We talk about “real” and “virtual” communities. We hear frequently—especially on college campuses—about the need to create community. We elected a President who was a community organizer.

But what makes a community? The dictionary reminds us that community is rooted in something we have in common: living in a common place, undergoing common experiences, sharing common language, values, or goals. Community implies communing—sharing life together. In a world increasingly defined by individualized, customized experiences—from the ads Facebook sends us based on our unique interests, to our ability to choose where we get our news or when and where we watch our favorite movies and shows—community is something we know we need, but also can seem hard to achieve.

The text below comes from *The Home We Build Together* by Lord Jonathan Sacks, former Chief Rabbi of the United Kingdom and a prolific writer and public intellectual. In this passage, Rabbi Sacks reflects on the Biblical story of the Exodus from Egypt, and offers a theory as to how the ancient Israelites, newly freed from slavery, were formed into not just a mass of individuals, but a functioning, inclusive community. Please read this passage together.

Read the book of Exodus and you will see that the early chapters are all about the politics of freedom. They tell of slavery, oppression, the mission of Moses to Pharaoh, the ten plagues, liberation, the division of the Red Sea and the revelation at Mount Sinai. All of this is a sequential story about liberty. But the last part of Exodus—roughly a third of the book as a whole, is taken up with an apparently minor and irrelevant episode told and retold in exhaustive detail: the construction of the Tabernacle.

This was the first house of worship made by the Israelites. It was a modest affair, made of poles, beams, skins and drapes that could be taken apart, carried on their journeys, and re-assembled at their next encampment. It had, or so it seems, no lasting significance. Once the Israelites had entered the land, the Tabernacle was left in Shilo for several centuries until King David established Jerusalem as the capital of the newly united kingdom, and his son Solomon built the Temple. So why is the story of the Tabernacle told at such length?

The Hebrew Bible is a political as well as a spiritual text, and it tells a political story. Despite the miracles, the essential narrative is remarkably human. The Israelites are portrayed as a querulous, almost ungovernable group. Moses, their deliverer, comes to them with the news that they are about to go free. His first intervention, however, only makes things worse, and the people complain. Eventually the people leave, but Pharaoh and his army pursue them. They are trapped between the approaching Egyptian chariots and the Red Sea, and again they complain. Moses performs a miracle. The sea divides. The Israelites cross through on dry land. They sing a song of deliverance. But three days later, they are complaining again, this time about the lack of water....

Putting all this together we arrive at the boldest of all Exodus' political statements. A nation—at least, the kind of nation the Israelites were called on to become—is created through the act of creation itself....To turn a group of individuals into a covenantal nation, they must build something together...

A people is made by making. A nation is built by building. What they built was a 'home' for the Divine presence. The Tabernacle, placed at the center of the camp with the tribes arrayed around it, symbolized the public square, the common good, the voice that had summoned them to collective freedom. It was a visible emblem of community.... Society is the home, the Tabernacle, we build together.

It was built out of difference and diversity. That too is the point of the narrative. Each of the Israelites brought his or her own distinctive contribution. Some brought gold, others silver, others bronze. Some gave jewels, others animal skins, and others drapes. Some gave of their skills and time. The point is not what they gave but that each was valued equally... The Tabernacle was built out of the differential contributions of the various groups and tribes. It represented orchestrated diversity, or in social terms, integration without assimilation. That is the dignity of difference. Because we are not the same, we each have something unique to contribute, something only we can give.

As we reflect on this text, here are a few questions to consider:

Interpretive Questions

- What does Sacks mean when he writes that a nation or community “is created through the act of creation itself?”
- What does he mean when he says that, “society is the home we build together?”
- How would you paraphrase Sacks’ phrase, “orchestrated diversity?” What does he mean?
- What does he mean by the phrase “the dignity of difference”?

Reflective Questions

- Does Sacks’ description of community-building resonate with you? Have you ever had an experience like the one he describes?
- Have you ever felt part of a community? Left out of a community? What were those experiences like?
- What do we need to do differently, or better, in order to create communities that more effectively honor the dignity of difference? That better reflect orchestrated diversity?
- What are the implications of Rabbi Sacks’ thinking when considering disability inclusion specifically?
- Is your community set up to receive everyone’s contribution? What are obstacles to that happening?

Use the space below to write some notes to yourself.

Note for Facilitators: This is the heart of the conversation. Give people several minutes to prepare their thoughts. Then invite people to divide into pairs or triads and share their responses. Give them a good amount of time for this—10-20 minutes. It may be longer, depending on how much momentum they develop. Then reconvene in the large group and ask people to share from their small-group conversations.

A few tips on facilitation:

- The large-group debrief should take another 20-30 minutes.
- Begin by asking for a volunteer to share an insight from their conversation. You might begin by asking, “What came up?”
- When each person is done, thank them for their comment.
- Don’t feel a need to rush or to fill silences.
- If someone begins to monopolize the time, you might say, “I want to be sure that everyone has a chance to speak, so let’s try to make room for another person.”

For other ideas on facilitation, please refer to the AIR-IT guide at the end of this document. When you sense that the group has finished sharing its responses to these questions, invite people to share any further insights or reflections from the conversation, before moving to the conclusion.

DO

The Talmud (Taanit 11a) teaches, “One who accepts affliction with the community will live to see the consolation of the community.” That is, when we throw our lot with others, and allow what happens within our community to impact us, we reap the reward of connection and caring during the times when we might need it most. And when we allow others into our communal space, we all reap the gifts of the Tabernacle together.

As we conclude the conversation, here are a few final questions to consider.

- What’s one insight that you’ve gained from this conversation?
- How does this conversation impact your thinking around the values of inclusion in your Jewish community?
- What is one thing you want to change based on this conversation?
- What’s one obstacle to you making that change, and how can you overcome it? Who might you need help from in order to make this change?

Note for Facilitators: Give people a minute to reflect on the question. Then ask anyone who wants to share to do so. When you sense that the group has finished sharing its response to this question, invite people to share any further insights or reflections from the conversation, before moving to the conclusion.



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WHO IS IN YOUR COMMUNITY?

CONVERSATION GUIDE FOR PARTICIPANTS

ASK **BIG**
QUESTIONS

Hillel
International

Note: This guide is part of Hillel's initiative to promote deeper conversations about disability inclusion. We hope that it prompts some powerful thoughts and reflections about how we can be more open and welcoming as individuals and as a community.

WELCOME

Before we begin, we need to agree on a few things:

- In order for our conversation to be as rich as it can be, we need everyone to feel safe to really share and really listen.
- Therefore, we agree not to share others' comments outside of this space.
- Our aim is to create a space where we can understand others and understand ourselves, not to give advice or to argue ideas of objective truth. With that in mind, in this conversation we will agree to speak in the first-person, about our own truth.
- We will assume good faith in one another.
- We will open ourselves to listen and learn from one another.
- We won't rush to fill the silence.

Can we all agree to these things? If you feel, for whatever reason, that you cannot agree to these things, then please take this opportunity to exit. By staying in the circle, we all signify our intention to abide by these commitments.

ASK & SHARE

Let's take a moment to introduce ourselves. Think about the word "community." What's the first thing that comes to mind? We'll take a moment and then go around and share what we thought of.

LEARN

We hear the word "community" a lot these days. We talk about "real" and "virtual" communities. We hear frequently—especially on college campuses—about the need to create community. We elected a President who was a community organizer.

But what makes a community? The dictionary reminds us that community is rooted in something we have in common: living in a common place, undergoing common experiences, sharing common language, values, or goals. Community implies communing—sharing life together. In a world increasingly defined by individualized, customized experiences—from the ads Facebook sends us based on our unique interests, to our ability to choose where we get our news or when and where we watch our favorite movies and shows—community is something we know we need, but also can seem hard to achieve.

The text below comes from *The Home We Build Together* by Lord Jonathan Sacks, former Chief Rabbi of the United Kingdom and a prolific writer and public intellectual. In this passage, Rabbi Sacks reflects on the Biblical story of the Exodus from Egypt, and offers a theory as to how the ancient Israelites, newly freed from slavery, were formed into not just a mass of individuals, but a functioning, inclusive community. Please read this passage together.

Read the book of Exodus and you will see that the early chapters are all about the politics of freedom. They tell of slavery, oppression, the mission of Moses to Pharaoh, the ten plagues, liberation, the division of the Red Sea and the revelation at Mount Sinai. All of this is a sequential story about liberty. But the last part of Exodus—roughly a third of the book as a whole, is taken up with an apparently minor and irrelevant episode told and retold in exhaustive detail: the construction of the Tabernacle.

This was the first house of worship made by the Israelites. It was a modest affair, made of poles, beams, skins and drapes that could be taken apart, carried on their journeys, and re-assembled at their next encampment. It had, or so it seems, no lasting significance. Once the Israelites had entered the land, the Tabernacle was left in Shilo for several centuries until King David established Jerusalem as the capital of the newly united kingdom, and his son Solomon built the Temple. So why is the story of the Tabernacle told at such length?

The Hebrew Bible is a political as well as a spiritual text, and it tells a political story. Despite the miracles, the essential narrative is remarkably human. The Israelites are portrayed as a querulous, almost ungovernable group. Moses, their deliverer, comes to them with the news that they are about to go free. His first intervention, however, only makes things worse, and the people complain. Eventually the people leave, but Pharaoh and his army pursue them. They are trapped between the approaching Egyptian chariots and the Red Sea, and again they complain. Moses performs a miracle. The sea divides. The Israelites cross through on dry land. They sing a song of deliverance. But three days later, they are complaining again, this time about the lack of water....

Putting all this together we arrive at the boldest of all Exodus' political statements. A nation—at least, the kind of nation the Israelites were called on to become—is created through the act of creation itself....To turn a group of individuals into a covenantal nation, they must build something together...

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As we reflect on this text, here are a few questions to consider:

Interpretive Questions

- What does Sacks mean when he writes that a nation or community “is created through the act of creation itself?”
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Reflective Questions

- Does Sacks’ description of community-building resonate with you? Have you ever had an experience like the one he describes?
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GLOSSARY OF DISABILITY-RELATED TERMS

Adapted from inclusioninthearts.org.

Accessibility: Barriers to accessibility can be physical, sensory, or cognitive. A barrier-free environment is one that can be accessed by people of all abilities, regardless of physical, sensory, or cognitive limitation.

Assistive Technology (AT): AT means any item, piece of equipment, or product system, whether acquired commercially off-the-shelf, modified, or customized, that is used to increase, maintain, or improve the functional capabilities of a person with a disability. A generic term that includes assistive, adaptive, and rehabilitative devices and the process used in selecting, locating, and using them. Examples of assistive technology include: screen readers, screen magnifiers, TTY devices, powerchairs, and mobility scooters.

Disability: any restriction or lack (resulting from an impairment) of ability to perform an activity in the manner or within the range considered normal for a human being.

Impairment: any loss or abnormality of psychological, physiological or anatomical structure or function.

Cognitive disability: Can be the same as an intellectual disability but can also refer to an illness that may affect someone's capacity to reason or comprehend. Cognitive disabilities can range from milder forms, such as dyslexia and ADHD, to more profound disabilities, including brain injuries such as a stroke, and genetic diseases such as Down syndrome, mental retardation, and autism spectrum disorder.

Developmental disability: A diverse group of chronic conditions due to mental and/or physical impairments. People with developmental disabilities have difficulty performing skills that may include language, mobility, learning, and/or independent living. Developmental disabilities include, but are not limited to: cerebral palsy, autism spectrum disorders, intellectual disabilities, and ADHD.

Intellectual disability: Characterized as an individual's ability to reason and/or learn. People should not make generalizations about the needs of persons with intellectual disabilities. In some instances an intellectual disability will not be obvious from a person's appearance, nor will it be accompanied by a physical disability. Intellectual disabilities include, but are not limited to: Down syndrome, ADHD.

Learning Disability (LD): A neurological disorder that affects the brain's ability to receive, process, store and respond to information.

Mobility disability: A condition limiting physical ability; generally considered to include lack of or decreased movement due to disease, amputation, paralysis, injury, or developmental condition; or limitation of movement due to cardiovascular or other disease. Mobility disabilities include: cerebral palsy, spina bifida, or spinal cord injury. Preferred language is disabled as an adjective (as in "disabled person"), not a noun; as in "He is disabled," or "person with a disability."

People-First Language: Some people are strong advocates of "people first language," which refers to the individual first and disability second and prefer "a child with autism" over "autistic child." Others consider their autism, or blindness, or other disability descriptor as an important part of their identity (akin to how one might self-identify as a Jew or a lesbian) and reject the notion that there's anything negative or shameful about their disability.

AIR-IT: A GUIDE TO FACILITATING CONVERSATION

A: ASK BIG QUESTIONS.

BIG QUESTION	HARD QUESTION
Anyone can answer it. Example: "For whom are we responsible?"	Experts will answer it best. Example: "What's the best economic policy for the United States?"
Focuses on wisdom and experience. Example: "What's the best advice you've ever received?"	Focuses on intelligence and skill. Example: "Are human beings naturally good or evil?"
Uses plain language.	Uses technical language.
Directed at a subject (me, you, us). Example: "What could we sacrifice to change the world?"	Directed at an object (it). Example: "Is it better to cut spending or raise taxes to balance the federal budget?"
Opens up space and invites people in as participants.	Closes space and leads people to feel like spectators.
Leads to sharing personal stories.	Leads to debates about truth claims.
Emphasizes a both/and approach.	Emphasizes an either/or approach.

I: INVITE PERSONAL STORIES.

Big questions lead to sharing personal stories. The facilitator acts to support this by:

- Creating the space (physical, intellectual, emotional, spiritual) of trust in which these stories can be shared and honored.
- Weaving: Summarize, reflect back, and keep the stories and observations tethered to the big question. This helps the group to maintain integrity and not feel that it is fragmenting or fraying.

R: REALLY LISTEN.

Ask Big Questions conversations are marked by real listening. The facilitator's reflecting back and weaving is crucial to this.

Participants should be able to answer questions like: "What did so-and-so say? What do you think they meant when they said it?

What did it evoke in you?"

IT: USE INTERPRETIVE THINGS.

Ask Big Questions conversations often use a text, poem, artwork, song, natural object or other “interpretive thing” to help center the conversation and create a common point of access for all participants.

QUESTIONS TO ASK WHEN PREPARING FOR A DISCUSSION

Where?

- Does the place where you’re having the conversation create a space in which people can feel safe?
- Is it a closed space? Does it have a door you can close to ensure privacy and confidentiality when needed?
- What can you do to make the space visually appealing or lovely? Does it have windows to let in light? Do you want to play some music?
- Can everyone sit comfortably in a circle?

When?

- Are you scheduling the conversation at a time when everyone can be physically awake and present?
- Will people be hungry? Will you provide food or drink?
- Will they be tired or sleepy after a meal?
- How long will the conversation be?
- How will you break up the time if necessary?

Who and How?

- How many people will participate? Will there be enough to sustain diverse conversation? Will there be too many to keep the conversation centered?
- How will you get the word out and then remind people?
- Do you need to make any special arrangements for people with special needs (i.e. physical disabilities)?
- Greetings – Who will welcome people to the conversation and how will they do it?
- How will you have everyone introduce themselves? (Big Questions are great for introductions!)
- How will you close the conversation?
- How will you follow up with people?
- How will you capture their contact information?

What About You?

- What will you do to get yourself ready?



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