

# HOW ARE WE SEEN?

## 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.

**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. Please share your name and one thing you think a stranger on the street might presume about you based on how you appear. 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

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?

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 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.

# AIR-IT: A GUIDE TO FACILITATING CONVERSATION

## A: ASK BIG QUESTIONS.

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

## 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?



This conversation is powered by Ask Big Questions®, which was developed, launched, and scaled by Hillel International, and is a registered trademark of Hillel International. It is part of a series of conversations supported by the Ruderman Family Foundation, which believes that inclusion and understanding of all people is essential to a fair and flourishing community.



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