

# HOW DO WE DISAGREE?

## 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 inclusion and diversity. 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 think of one person in your life with whom you currently, or in the past, have seriously disagreed. Take a moment, and then we will all share our names, who we thought of, and maybe say a word or two about why we thought of that person.

**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

There are a lot of hot-button issues in our world today, a lot of things about which people disagree vociferously, and sometimes viciously. Rhetoric in the media, online, and in person around topics like abortion, immigration, the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, and gun control can devolve quickly into inflammatory statements and personal attacks that leave all parties feeling angry and frustrated.

In conflict, issues of truth and justice may feel as though they are—or may really be—on the line, and we often feel not only intellectually, but also emotionally invested in the outcome of a debate. But if we can find a way to disagree well, it might just open up new possibilities and clear the way for unexpected outcomes.

Below are two texts from different parts of the Talmud, the major corpus of Rabbinic law and culture in the Jewish tradition, edited around 500 C.E. (the first text) and 200 C.E. (the second text), respectively. They tell the story of the academies of Hillel and Shammai, two different schools and ideological camps that thrived in the first century of the Common Era. Though they disagreed, at times profoundly, about how Jewish law should be decided, they managed those disagreements in fruitful ways, as we'll see below. Please read the texts aloud together.

Rabbi Abba said in the name of Shmuel: For three years the academy of Shammai and the academy of Hillel argued. One group asserted, "The law follows our views," and the other asserted, "The law follows our views." A Heavenly voice came down and announced, "They are both the words of the living God, but the law follows the academy of Hillel." Since both were the words of the living God, what entitled the academy of Hillel to have the law agree with them? Because they were kind and modest, they studied their own rulings and those of the academy of Shammai, and not only that, they mentioned the rulings of the academy of Shammai before their own. (Talmud Eirubin 13b)

Even though the academy of Shammai declares one thing kosher while the academy of Hillel declares the same thing not kosher, even though one forbids while the other permits, the academy of Shammai did not refrain from marrying the women of the academy of Hillel, nor did the academy of Hillel refrain from marrying the women of the academy of Shammai. Even though one side declares things to be pure while the other side declares the same thing to be impure, nonetheless they did not refrain from preparing things requiring a state of purity by using things from the other side. (Mishnah Yevamot 1:4)

As we reflect on these texts, here are a few questions to consider:

## Interpretive Questions

- Why does the Heavenly voice declare that the academy of Hillel's rulings were more in line with Jewish law?
- How do the disagreements between the academies impact their relationships?
- What's the significance of their "not refraining from preparing things requiring a state of purity by using things from the other side?"

## Reflective Questions

- When was a time when you acted like the academy of Hillel in a disagreement?
- When was a time that you didn't? Why didn't you?
- Are there times when the "academy of Hillel" model isn't appropriate in a disagreement? What are different tactics that people use to disagree, and when should they be used?
- Do you think people who disagree with you feel welcome in your community? Why or why not?
- How should people create community with those with whom they disagree?

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

Navigating our conflicts with one another in a way that is constructive and respectful can be difficult, especially given how much is often at stake. But, on the other hand, there's too much at stake for us not to do so. As Marian Wright Edelman, president and founder of the Children's Defense Fund, once said, "We are not going to deal with the violence in our communities, our homes, and our nation until we learn to deal with the basic ethic of how we resolve our disputes and to place an emphasis on peace in the way we relate to one another."

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

- What did you learn today?
- How does this conversation impact your thinking around the value of welcoming 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.

# 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?

Thank you for being part of this conversation. Please share this conversation guide with others in your community. And join our conversation online at [AskBigQuestions.org](http://AskBigQuestions.org).

Our partner for this guide is 9 Adar: the Jewish Day of Constructive Conflict. The 9 Adar project seeks to strengthen the Jewish culture of constructive conflict and healthy disagreement. In our ancient texts, this is called machloket l'shem shemayim (disagreements for the sake of Heaven). It means arguing the issues while respecting and maintaining good relationships with the other side, making sure that your personal motivation is to come to the best solution and not just to win, admitting when you are wrong, and acknowledging that both sides might be right. Approximately 2,000 years ago on the 9th of Adar, two major ideological schools of thought, Beit Hillel and Beit Shammai, allowed their disagreements to degrade into terrible conflict. Today, we are using the day to promote the original culture of healthy and constructive conflict. For more background on constructive conflict in Judaism, check out this video by G-dcast: <http://bit.ly/15fHDgQ>



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9Adar is a program of the Pardes Center for Judaism and Conflict Resolution at the Pardes Institute of Jewish Studies



**Hillel** Ask Big Questions is an initiative of Hillel: The Foundation for Jewish Campus Life in partnership with the Einhorn Family Charitable Trust. Visit [AskBigQuestions.org](http://AskBigQuestions.org) to answer questions, learn from others, and join the movement.

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