

HOW DO WE GROW?

A 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 around 45-60 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.

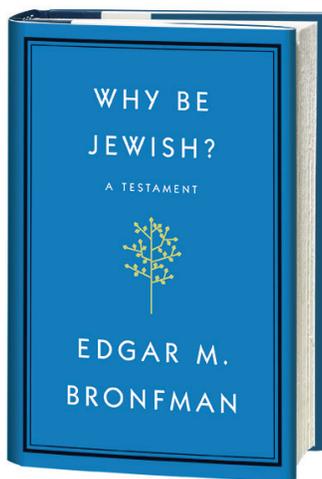
About Ask Big Questions:

Ask Big Questions is a project devoted to helping people understand themselves and each other, and strengthening our communities in the process. It's called Ask Big Questions because the questions we'll be talking through as a group are ones we believe matter to everyone and everyone can answer. They might be challenging questions, but they're not "hard;" they're not questions that require expertise to answer. They're questions we all have stories about, questions all of us share. We believe that asking and talking about Big Questions as a group helps us learn to genuinely hear one another. It helps us grow our ability to trust each other. It builds community.

Ask Big Questions was developed, launched, and scaled by Hillel International.

About This Conversation Guide and Edgar M. Bronfman:

This conversation guide is one of four created through a partnership between Hillel International and The Samuel Bronfman Foundation to honor the life and legacy of Edgar M. Bronfman (1929-2013), and his last book, *Why Be Jewish*. Edgar achieved an enormous amount in his life, in business, philanthropy, and communal leadership. He was deeply involved in Hillel International, serving as chairman of its Board of Governors, and inspiring other philanthropists to join him in supporting Hillel. But what Edgar valued most of all were his frequent trips to campuses and his encounters with young Jews. His Jewish journey was guided and enriched by his discussions and engagement with Hillel students and professionals over the years. He had an abiding faith in the future, and in college students as shapers of that future.



In the pages of *Why Be Jewish*, Edgar proposes an approach to reconciling his love of Jewish learning and traditions with his inclination toward doubt and disbelief in God. As Rabbi Angela Warnick Buchdahl writes in her introduction, Edgar's book "offers a compelling invitation for younger generations, and Jews of all ages, to take another look at Judaism, irrespective of the religious aspects of the tradition." It is in this spirit, and with this hope, that we have created these conversation guides.

A limited number of free or discounted copies of *Why Be Jewish* are available for Ask Big Questions participants. Please contact whybejewish@thesbf.org.

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

Welcome to our conversation Do you know someone who has made a big mistake and grown from it? Take a moment to sit with the question, and then we'll share our names and 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

Personal change is really hard work. Many of us have made new year's resolutions—this year I'll be a better friend; this year I'll call the people I care about more often; this year I'll consume less, volunteer more, and just, you know, do better. But as we all know, it's easier to change our principles than our habits. To say we're going to do better is one thing, to actually do it is another.

But it's not only the sticking with it that makes personal change so hard. It's hard to take an honest look in the mirror and allow ourselves to see what needs to change. It's only natural to want to blame other people for the things that aren't right in our lives. And other people may well bear some of the responsibility. But taking ownership of our mistakes, seeing our own faults, and opening ourselves up to be able to work on them and repair them—that requires some real courage.

In the following passage, Edgar M. Bronfman reflects on the Jewish ethic of reflection and self-improvement, the hard work of seeing ourselves honestly and holding ourselves to higher standards.

Engaging in the hard work of identifying and admitting where we have erred is a real challenge. For years my leadership positions in both the business world and in Jewish political circles have made me face criticism, warranted and unwarranted, and I have committed offenses, both intentional and unintentional, and had them committed against me. Such inconsistencies are the nature of relationships, both personal and professional, and we all navigate them as best we can. But Judaism requires us to do more than navigate. It requires us to consistently take stock and to repair ourselves when our moral tank is running on empty. This responsibility is evident in the Hebrew word for prayer—tefilah—which means to judge oneself. In Judaism, self-improvement can be thought of as a kind of prayer.

My own practice of tikkun middot [improving one's character] involves an action I've dubbed the mirror test. At least once a week, I gaze at my reflection and decide whether or not I'm happy with the man looking back. If not, why not? Have I hurt someone or made a mistake? Where have I failed myself or others? What positive attributes do I need to strengthen? What negative traits do I need to address? Where am I out of balance? Of course, real change requires more than looking in a mirror and asking oneself questions. But this kind of self-examination is a start. In sum, Judaism is not concerned with saving souls for heaven, but with saving lives on earth. (*Why Be Jewish*, p. 51)

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."

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.

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

What's happening in the text?

- How does Edgar define "tikkun middot?"
- How does he define tefilah?
- Try to paraphrase the text. What did Edgar say?

What's the author's intent?

- What does Edgar mean when he writes, "Such inconsistencies are the nature of relationships, both personal and professional, and we all navigate them as best we can?"
- What does he mean when he writes, "self-improvement can be thought of as a kind of prayer?"
- Why does he conclude the second paragraph by writing, "Judaism is not concerned with saving souls for heaven, but with saving lives on earth?"

How does it resonate with us?

- Have you ever engaged in the kind of reflection and introspection Edgar writes about in this passage? What happened?
- Do you think of this kind of work as a Jewish activity? Does Judaism help you do it better?

Use the space below to write some notes to yourself.

DO

The opportunity to change, to improve, is an incredible gift. It's not in every area of life that we have the chance for a do-over. But, as the Jewish tradition teaches, the power of renewal and forgiveness opens the door to transformations in ourselves and our relationships.

Yet the inner work of change doesn't take place only on an individual level. As the twentieth-century thinker Margaret Mead said: "Never doubt the power of a small group of committed citizens to change the world. Indeed, it is the only thing that ever has." Individuals can make a degree of change. But in order to make the change stick, we need other people. We need friends and family who will keep us honest and remind us of who we have resolved to be. We need community.

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

- What did you learn today?
- 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.

Thank you for being part of this conversation.



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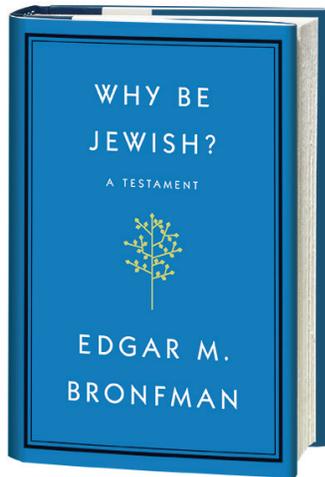
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