

TISHA B'AV: HOW DO WE MOURN?

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.

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, what is said in this conversation stays in this conversation, and may not be repeated outside it.
- 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. Let's take a moment to introduce ourselves. Please tell us your name. Please also tell us about a time when you had to mourn something—whether a friendship or relationship that ended, a dream you let go of, a loved one who died or something else. 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

Tisha B'Av, the ninth day of the Jewish month of Av, marks the destruction of the First and Second Temples in 586 BCE and 70 CE, and the subsequent exile of the Jewish people. It is a day of fasting and mourning, and has become a time to remember other great calamities that have befallen the Jewish people, such as episodes of forced martyrdom, the destruction of medieval Jewish communities during the Crusades, and the Holocaust.

The Book of Lamentations, which is read on Tisha B'Av, recounts the devastation wrought with the destruction of Jerusalem by Babylonia in 586 BCE, personifying the city as a mourning woman. It opens, "Alas! Lonely sits the city that once was full of people!... She weeps bitterly in the night, with tears on her cheeks... she has no one to comfort her." Over the course of the five chapters, the tone of the poem—and the voice of the mourner—moves from horrified to despairing to angry to depressed to yearning for redemption.

Mourning is not a simple or straightforward thing. It's a complex, multilayered process that encompasses a range of emotional states. In 1969, the psychiatrist Elizabeth Kübler-Ross hypothesized that there are five stages of grief: denial, anger, bargaining, depression, and acceptance. These stages, she posited, were not necessarily linear, clear categories so much as touchstones for the types of experiences those dying, and those mourning, experience. It has since been suggested that people don't necessarily experience these stages in order, and that grief is a process that that is constantly shifting. Whether or not Kübler-Ross was correct, her stage theory has nonetheless become an indelible part of our cultural conversation around grief and mourning.

We all mourn. Some of us have mourned for loved ones who have died. Some of us mourn for great hopes that we have had to surrender, for health we do not possess, for opportunities we have passed up or missed, for romantic relationships or friendships that have ended, for a dream that doesn't resemble the reality. Sometimes we also mourn as a community, when someone in our midst—on campus, for example—dies, when a beloved public figure passes, or in the wake of a major national tragedy. And as we mourn, it's important to think through just how we mourn.

Following is the poem, "The Five Stages of Grief," by the contemporary Jewish poet Linda Pastan. Please read it aloud together as a group.

The Five Stages of Grief

Linda Pastan

The night I lost you
someone pointed me towards
the Five Stages of Grief.
Go that way, they said,
it's easy, like learning to climb
stairs after amputation.
And so I climbed.
Denial was first.
I sat down at breakfast
carefully setting the table
for two. I passed you the toast—
you sat there. I passed
you the paper—you hid
behind it. in defective neon.
Hope was a signpost pointing
straight in the air.
Hope was my uncle's middle name,
he died of it.
After a year I am still climbing,
though my feet slip
on your stone face.
The treeline
has long since disappeared;
green is a color
I have forgotten.
But now I see what I am climbing
towards: Acceptance
Anger seemed more familiar.
I burned the toast, snatched
the paper and read the headlines myself.

But they mentioned your departure
and so I moved on to
Bargaining. What could I exchange
for you? The silence
after storms? My typing fingers?
Before I could decide, Depression
came puffing up, a poor relation
its suitcase tied together
with string. In the suitcase
were bandages for the eyes
and bottles of sleep. I slid
all the way down the stairs
feeling nothing.
And all the time Hope
flashed on and of a special headline:
Acceptance.
Its name is in lights.
I struggle on,
waving and shouting.
Below, my whole life spreads its surf,
all the landscape I've ever known
of dreamed of. Below
a fish jumps: the pulse
in your neck.
Acceptance. I finally
reach it.
But something is wrong.
Grief is a circular staircase.
I have lost you.

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

Interpretive Questions:

- What are the different kinds of feelings that Pastan experiences as she mourns?
- Where does hope fit into her mourning process?
- How does she regard the idea of acceptance at the end of the poem?
- What does she mean when she says, "Grief is a circular staircase"?

Reflective Questions:

- Has your experience of grief or mourning been similar to Pastan's? In what ways? In what ways not?
- How do you understand hope and acceptance in mourning?
- Is mourning different when the loss is communal as opposed to an individual, personal loss? If so, in what ways?
- How does our culture talk about and experience mourning? How should it talk about and experience mourning?

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

Author Vicki Harrison once wrote, “Grief is like the ocean; it comes in waves ebbing and flowing. Sometimes the water is calm, and sometimes it is overwhelming. All we can do is learn to swim.” The process of learning to swim—of finding a way to move through and around the many layers of mourning—is a complex one, and can be different for everyone.

The Book of Lamentations ends on a note of hopeful yearning: “Restore us to yourself, O God, that we may be restored; renew our days as of old.” Of course, after mourning, we are never perfectly restored to the “days of old;” things have changed, and part of moving forward means living into what happens now, whatever that looks like. However, grief has the power to transform us, so perhaps once we find a way to swim through our own mourning, we can find a way to engage the world with a renewed sense of perspective, insight, purpose, and selfunderstanding.

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

- Has this conversation helped you come to any new insights about how you mourn?
- What is one thing you want to do differently in your life based on this conversation?
- What could we do together based on what we’ve talked about today?

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.

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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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 to answer questions, learn from others, and join the movement.

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And so I climbed.
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I sat down at breakfast
carefully setting the table
for two. I passed you the toast—
you sat there. I passed
you the paper—you hid
behind it. in defective neon.
Hope was a signpost pointing
straight in the air.
Hope was my uncle's middle name,
he died of it.
After a year I am still climbing,
though my feet slip
on your stone face.
The treeline
has long since disappeared;
green is a color
I have forgotten.
But now I see what I am climbing
towards: Acceptance
Anger seemed more familiar.
I burned the toast, snatched
the paper and read the headlines myself.

But they mentioned your departure
and so I moved on to
Bargaining. What could I exchange
for you? The silence
after storms? My typing fingers?
Before I could decide, Depression
came puffing up, a poor relation
its suitcase tied together
with string. In the suitcase
were bandages for the eyes
and bottles of sleep. I slid
all the way down the stairs
feeling nothing.
And all the time Hope
flashed on and of a special headline:
Acceptance.
Its name is in lights.
I struggle on,
waving and shouting.
Below, my whole life spreads its surf,
all the landscape I've ever known
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a fish jumps: the pulse
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