

ROSH HODESH: HOW DO WE OWN OUR TRADITIONS?

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

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- 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 and where you call home.

Think, for a moment, about a cherished tradition in your life—it can be a family tradition, an American tradition, something from Judaism, or something else. In a sentence, how much of the tradition is, well, traditional (that is, "everybody" celebrates birthdays this way) and how much is your (or your family's) special twist or way of doing things?

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

Rosh Hodesh, the first day of the Jewish month, has a long and important history. Since Judaism functions on a lunar calendar, the months were originally designated by the sighting of the new moon through a process of witness testimony in the ancient courts. The first day of the month was known to be a special holiday for women; a midrash, a Jewish legend, says that they were given the monthly day of rest as a reward for declining to give their jewelry to Aaron for the Golden Calf. Of course, the association between women and monthly cycles is also hard to miss; it's possible that this was an additional part of the underlying thinking in these early sources.

In the 1960s, feminists decided to expand upon the association between Rosh Hodesh and women by forming groups (modeled, most likely, after the consciousness-raising groups that were proliferating at the time) of women that met on the new Jewish month. Each Rosh Hodesh, they celebrated the themes corresponding to the month or the holidays that might fall within it, or Jewish women's spirituality in a more general way. The groups themselves continue to flourish in a myriad of forms. Some are gatherings of women of all ages, while others are specifically designed for girls, tweens, or teens, running the gamut of styles and approaches. Different groups (or one group at different times) might engage in traditional text study, art projects, formal ritual, group discussion, and many other activities. These groups, in many cases, have become the wellspring for new Jewish spiritual expression—the blending of poetry, text study and interpretation, art, ritual and a contemporary feminist sensibility.

Rosh Hodesh epitomizes the ways in which we as contemporary Jews can use the tools of our heritage—in this case, a somewhat minor association between Rosh Hodesh and women—to create new traditions and new forms of Judaism.

Author Jay Michaelson has spent some time thinking about tradition and how we can connect with it. The full text of his piece from the Jewish Daily Forward, "Don't Call the Rabbi, Make Your Own Rituals," can be found here: <http://bit.ly/1allynX>

Please read the following excerpt aloud together.

I've been thinking about "empowered Judaism" seriously these last few months, as I've planned my own wedding, officiated at the funeral of a family member and created rituals and liturgies for the communities in which I live. At every turn, I've found it enriching and fulfilling to follow the DIY — Do It Yourself — ethos. I wrote my own ketubah [Jewish wedding contract], in language that I crafted based on the traditional form but adapted for a same-sex, egalitarian couple. I created a funeral service that ditched alienating (and, to my relatives, irrelevant) talk of judgment in favor of an appreciation of life's passages, while maintaining traditional biblical and liturgical language. And so on.

All this has felt great. I feel like a participant in the Jewish tradition rather than a consumer of it. I've found space within Jewish literature and culture for the life I live, rather than try to either shoehorn myself into a form that doesn't fit or ditch the form entirely.

This is so because DIY is a lifestyle, an ethos. It's a way of living as a competent human being, rather than a passive consumer of pre-fab goods usually produced by faceless corporations. I don't want to be a customer, a consumer or an audience member. I want to be a participant, a co-creator and a co-owner of the world I inhabit. This view is hardly unique to me, of course. It animates much of what is vital in today's urban and alternative cultures, from the Brooklyn food movement to indie music in the age of the iPod, Spotify, etc.

Yet when it comes to Jewish life, few of my contemporaries could have the same kinds of experiences I've had this summer. Why not? Usually, the complaint one hears against empowered Judaism is that to be empowered just takes too much work. To write a ketubah, for example, one must know Hebrew or Aramaic; one must know the legal construct of a Jewish marriage and egalitarian alternatives to it; one must have a command of liturgical language and symbolism and, I guess, one ought to have good penmanship, too. This, we are told, is a tall order. But I don't buy it. Yes, all the above takes effort, but so does brewing your own beer, making your own paper or recording your own music on Garage Band. Craft takes skill, which is a big part of why it's worthwhile to pursue. No — the difference isn't the amount of content one must master to be an empowered Jew. The difference is one of attitude.

Our mainstream institutions largely exist to cater to the lowest common denominator of disengaged Jews, and in so doing they immediately turn off anyone interested in more. Prayer services are dumbed down in the name of "inclusivity," and whenever a lifecycle event comes up, someone calls a rabbi. American Judaism has created a class of professional Jews, notably absent in Israel, who sing our prayers, learn our scripture and perform our rituals for us. It's infantilizing, and it's alien to the very notion of Jewish religious responsibility.

What if projects like Haggadot.com, Open Source Judaism and Empowered Judaism existed on a mass scale? What if navigating the treasure troves of resources at Ritual Well, MyJewishLearning.com and other websites was taught at Jewish camps and supplementary schools? What if our first instinct was not to call the rabbi, but to take ownership of our Jewish lives and create them for ourselves?

Sure, rabbis will always be important. But we should utilize them as we might turn to a copy editor or a graphic designer: for specialized advice. When it comes to ordinary desktop publishing, not only do we not need an expert, but calling one is disempowering and counterproductive. Every family can create and lead its own funerals, for example, and doing so will ultimately be more fulfilling for everyone. You don't need a rabbi to get married, have a bar mitzvah or even conduct a bris — though, admittedly, a mohel [person trained in ritual circumcision] is usually a good idea.

The resources are already out there. Websites like those I mentioned (and dozens more) already offer all the raw materials you need for lifecycle events, prayer services, book groups and everything from visiting the mikveh [ritual bath] after surgery to building your Sukkah in October. What's needed is not more information but more willingness, on the part of laypeople and clergy alike, to stop leaning on "professionals" and instead to DIY — Do It Yourself.

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

Interpretive Questions

- How does Michaelson describe his relationship to the Jewish tradition?
- How does he think lay Jews should engage their tradition? Do you think this is a good approach? A fair or reasonable one? A realistic one?
- How are feminist Rosh Hodesh groups similar to or different from Michaelson's approach?

Reflective Questions

- What kinds of traditions are most important to you? Many of us have several kinds of traditions—cultural, religious, familial, regional, and more.
- In what ways do you feel alienated from your traditions?
- When is it good to let traditions stay traditional, and when is it good to innovate?
- Do you feel that you are “empowered” in regards to your traditions? In what ways do you feel that you are, and in what ways do you feel that you aren't? When do you feel empowered to innovate?
- What would your ideal DIY tradition look like?

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 contemporary feminist rabbi Shefa Gold once wrote, “Every generation inherits [an] accumulation of text, music, commentary, law, custom, recipes, and secret wisdom. And it is the responsibility of each generation to fully receive, re-interpret, add to the treasure and pass it on in a form that is more relevant and more alive to our present-day challenges.” The question of what that means, however, is open. How do we receive, reinterpret, and add to our traditions? How do we live them, and what choices do we make about how to apply them in our lives today?

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

- What did you learn today?
- What is one thing you want to change 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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apply a gender lens and Jewish values to the challenges of their everyday lives. If you have participated in a Rosh Hodesh group, Moving Traditions would love to hear from you at www.roshhodesh.org.



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MOVING
TRADITIONS

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