

# HOW DO YOU CONNECT JEWISHLY?

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.

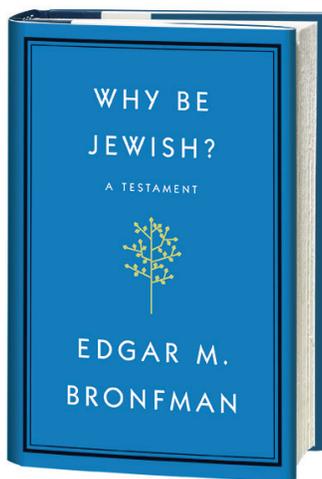
## About Ask Big Questions:

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](mailto: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. When have you/do you feel most connected with Jewishness? 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

If you ask three Jews about how they connect with Jewishness, you're likely to get many more than three ideas. Some might say through food. Others will say holidays and rituals. Some may say Torah study, or social justice, or living in or traveling to Israel.

In the following passage, Edgar M. Bronfman outlines a set of values and principles he believes provide the core things that enable Jews to connect with their Jewishness.

What principles can guide a Jewish practice that moves beyond belief? Without the idea of adherence to divine commandments as a starting point, the question of what a Jewish practice should entail can be overwhelming. As an individual, how does one choose what is important from the immense tradition that has been debated and expounded upon by countless scholars and sages? If our tradition is to find vitality among a new generation, individual Jews and seekers must have the courage to do just that.

To help those just beginning on this journey, I decided to create a list of the principles that have guided my own secular Jewish practice. With the goal of limiting the number of items on this list, I dug through Jewish history, art, and culture in search of a symbolic number, like the seven branches on the menorah or the Five Books of Moses. Finally, I fixed on the number twelve, to represent the twelve gems on the hoshen, or breastplate worn by the high priests of ancient Israel.

According to the account in Exodus, each of the twelve precious stones was engraved with one of the names of the twelve tribes of Israel. In today's fractured and fractious Jewish world, this symbol of unity held great appeal for me, with many tribes sharing one space. We are all one people, and my great hope is that a more civil discourse will replace the wars going on between Jewish denominations and communities. The image of the shield also appealed to me. Encouraging secular Jews to discover their traditions and create their own practice is a form of protection, helping keep more liberal strains of Judaism from withering away. Once I established the number of tenets I would include, I set to work. My only rule was that everything on my list must be extrapolated from Jewish text, history, or tradition. All the principles on the list are written in verb form, specifying, with the Jewish emphasis on deed over creed, that these are things to do, not things to believe:

- Revere godliness: the true, the good, and the beautiful.
- Ask questions.
- Commit to repairing the outer and inner world.
- Perform acts of loving-kindness.
- Assist society's weakest members.
- Champion social justice and environmental causes.
- Welcome the stranger.
- Engage with Jewish traditions, texts, philosophy, history, and art.
- Study and strive for excellence in the humanities and other secular fields.
- Promote family and community.
- Embrace key Jewish holidays and life-cycle events.
- Conduct business ethically.

*(Why Be Jewish, p.17)*

## What's happening in the text?

- Why did Edgar write this list?
- Why did he choose the number twelve?

## What's the author's intent?

- What does Edgar mean when he writes, "Without the idea of adherence to divine commandments as a starting point, the question of what a Jewish practice should entail can be overwhelming?"
- What does he mean when he writes, "We are all one people, and my great hope is that a more civil discourse will replace the wars going on between Jewish denominations and communities?"
- What do you notice about his list? Can you categorize the items in any way?

## How does it resonate with us?

- Which of the items on Edgar's list do you find easiest or hardest to do?
- Are any of these principles you find help you connect with Jewishness?
- Are there things you would change if you had to make your own list of twelve essential Jewish principles?

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."

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

What do we have in common as Jews? How can we create a common Jewish vocabulary in an age when we have so many ways of engaging in our Jewishness? That question is central to postmodern Jewish life the world-over, and it has been at the center of our discussion. And that question ultimately starts with an individual question for each of us, How do you connect Jewishly?

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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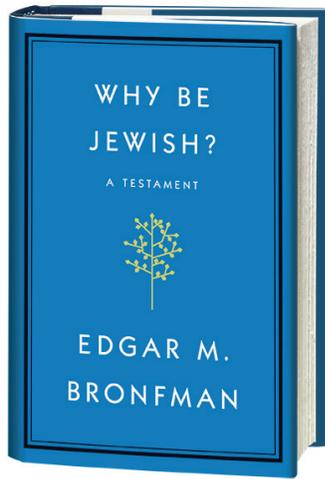
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