

# Yom HaAtzmaut: How should we talk about Israel?

ASK **BIG**  
QUESTIONS

A CONVERSATION GUIDE  
FOR PARTICIPANTS

**Hillel**  
International

## 1. 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.

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## 2. Ask and Share

Welcome to our conversation. Let's take a moment to introduce ourselves. Please tell us your name and where you call home. And please share *one* word that comes to mind when someone says, "Israel."

You can use the space below to make some notes to yourself.

## 3. Learn

Israel is a lot of things to a lot of different people. It's an important place to people of a number of different ethnic, cultural and religious backgrounds, both historically and today.

And it's a place that means a lot of different things to Jews. Today, half the Jews in the world call Israel their home. Some of us have never been to Israel but feel connected to it, while others have never been and feel distant from it. Some have been many times and feel personally at home there. Some of us feel pride when we see Israelis in the Olympics, or when an Israeli wins a Nobel Prize. Some of us don't. Some of us listen to Israeli music, watch Israeli films, or have learned to speak Hebrew. Some of us sanctify our individual or collective connections to Israel each day in our prayers.

Whether we were born there, have spent time there, or have only imagined what it's like there, some of us feel uncomfortable with, ambivalent about, or angry with the Israeli government for its position on a particular issue, or several issues. And some of us feel proud of Israel as a democratic Jewish state.

For a lot of us, many of these things are mixed together.

There are a lot of layers to our attitudes, opinions, views, relationships—not just when it comes to Israel, but when it comes to anything in life. Where does our relationship with Israel come from? What informs it? How can we talk about our own relationship to Israel together with others, who may have strong ideas and opinions at odds with ours? What can a respectful conversation about a complex subject look like, and how can we think, grow, and dream together?

Israel is too complex a subject for one conversation. There are many conversations to have. And many of us find that, today in particular, we need a way in to those conversations. So here's a start. Below is a poem called

"Tourists," by the great Israeli poet Yehuda Amichai (1924-2000). Some of us may know this poem. For others it may be your first encounter. Regardless, let's approach it with fresh eyes and in the spirit of this conversation.

Let's read the poem aloud as a group or in pairs. Then we'll use the discussion questions below to help us open up the conversation.

### Tourists

Yehuda Amichai

Visits of condolence is all we get from them.

They squat at the Holocaust Memorial,

They put on grave faces at the Wailing Wall

And they laugh behind heavy curtains

In their hotels.

They have their pictures taken

Together with our famous dead

At Rachel's Tomb and Herzl's Tomb

And on Ammunition Hill.

They weep over our sweet boys

And lust after our tough girls

And hang up their underwear

To dry quickly

In cool, blue bathrooms.

Once I sat on the steps by agate at David's Tower,

I placed my two heavy baskets at my side. A group of tourists

was standing around their guide and I became their target marker. "You

that man with the baskets? Just right of his head there's an arch

from the Roman period. Just right of his head." "But he's moving, he's moving!"

I said to myself: redemption will come only if their guide tells them,

"You see that arch from the Roman period? It's not important: but next to it,

left and down a bit, there sits a man who's bought fruit and vegetables for his family."

תיירים / יהודה עמיחי

בקורי אבלים הם עורכים אצלנו,

יושבים ביד ושם, מרצינים ליד הכותל המערבי

וצוחקים מאחורי וילונות כבדים בחדרי מלון,

מצטלמים עם מתים חשובים בקבר רחל

ובקבר הרצל ובגבעת התחמושת,

בוכים על יפי גבורת נערינו

וחושקים בקשיחות נערוותינו

ותולים את תחתונייהם

ליבוש מהיר

באמבטיה כחולה וצוננת.

פעם ישבתי על מדרגות ליד שער במצודת דוד, את שני הסלים

הכבדים שמתי לידי. עמדה שם קבוצת תיירים סביב המדרוך

ושימשתי להם נקודת ציון. "אתם רואים את האיש הזה עם

הסלים? קצת ימינה מראשו נמצאת קשת מן התקופה הרומית.

קצת ימינה מראשו". "אבל הוא זו, הוא זו!" אמרתי בלבי:

הגאולה תבוא רק אם יגידו להם: אתם רואים שם את הקשת

מן התקופה הרומית? לא חשוב: אבל לידה, קצת שמאלה

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### Interpretive Questions

- Who are the tourists in this poem? What is their relationship to Israel?
- What does the narrator think of that relationship?
- Why is the Roman arch significant to these tourists? Why is the man significant to the narrator?
- What does the narrator mean when s/he refers to "redemption" near the end of the poem?
- How would you summarize Amichai's message to tourists, and to Israelis?
- What would Amichai make of Israel's current political situation in regards to the idea of redemption?

### Reflective Questions

- When (related to Israel, or not) have you felt like the tourists in this poem? Like Amichai?
- Who in this poem do you most identify with, and why?
- Have you ever experienced difficulty in talking about Israel with others? What was happening in that conversation to make it difficult?
- How would Amichai say that we should talk about Israel?
- What does redemption mean to you?

Feel free to use the space below to write some notes to yourself.

## 4. Do

Elie Wiesel, the Nobel Peace Prize laureate and survivor of Auschwitz, comments on his choice to live in the Diaspora: “How can it be explained that a Jew like myself, attached to the destiny of Israel with all the fiber of his being, has chosen to write, teach, work, found a family, and to live far away in a social and cultural environment that is far too generalized for that of our ancestors? Israelis put this question to me, as they do other Jews in the Diaspora... Is there a satisfactory response? If there is, I don’t know it...” He experiences Israel as a sort of a home, but at the same time, chooses not to live there. For him, it’s a paradoxical feeling. For those who feel much more like tourists when they visit Israel, a different set of ambivalences may be in play. Regardless of how you talk about, and experience, Israel, though, hopefully we can all bring redemption together, in some way.

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?

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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.

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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.

## 3. Learn

Israel is a lot of things to a lot of different people. It's an important place to people of a number of different ethnic, cultural and religious backgrounds, both historically and today.

And it's a place that means a lot of different things to Jews. Today, half the Jews in the world call Israel their home. Some of us have never been to Israel but feel connected to it, while others have never been and feel distant from it. Some have been many times and feel personally at home there. Some of us feel pride when we see Israelis in the Olympics, or when an Israeli wins a Nobel Prize. Some of us don't. Some of us listen to Israeli music, watch Israeli films, or have learned to speak Hebrew. Some of us sanctify our individual or collective connections to Israel each day in our prayers.

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Note for Facilitators: Israel can be a hot-button topic of conversation in some communities and on some campuses. One role of the facilitator in this conversation, as in all of our conversations, is to help people remember to speak from their own viewpoints, and to tell stories and speak from their own truth rather than to argue about objective data points. If the conversation veers into debate terrain, it may be useful to remind participants of this. It may be helpful to begin the discussion of the Amichai text by inviting participants to break into pairs and to read the excerpt out loud to one another, and to begin to discuss the Interpretive Questions and the Reflective Questions in dyads, before coming together to discuss the text and the larger questions around dreaming together as a group. (If you'd like, you can share that paired hevruta learning is how Jewish texts are traditionally studied.)

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Note for Facilitators: This is the heart of the conversation. Give people several minutes to prepare their thoughts. Then, if you would like, you can 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.

## 4. Do

Elie Wiesel, the Nobel Peace Prize laureate and survivor of Auschwitz, comments on his choice to live in the Diaspora: “How can it be explained that a Jew like myself, attached to the destiny of Israel with all the fiber of his being, has chosen to write, teach, work, found a family, and to live far away in a social and cultural environment that is far too generalized for that of our ancestors? Israelis put this question to me, as they do other Jews in the Diaspora... Is there a satisfactory response? If there is, I don’t know it...” He experiences Israel as a sort of a home, but at the same time, chooses not to live there. For him, it’s a paradoxical feeling. For those who feel much more like tourists when they visit Israel, a different set of ambivalences may be in play. Regardless of how you talk about, and experience, Israel, though, hopefully we can all bring redemption together, in some way.

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Feel free to use the space below to write some notes to yourself.

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.

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# 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 is 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?