

WHAT ADVANTAGES DO YOU HAVE?

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.

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WELCOME

Before we begin, we need to agree on a few things:

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- 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

Let's take a moment to introduce ourselves. Please share your name and one way that you feel fortunate in your life. 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

People have different kinds of advantages in society. An able-bodied person will have a much easier time navigating many public transit systems (not all of which are outfitted with elevators or ramps at every stop) than someone in a wheelchair. A student who is able to attend college without working several part-time jobs will have more time and energy to focus on studies and other interests, and might even be able to afford to take a prestigious, door-opening unpaid internship. Some transgender people fear animosity and even violence every time they're forced to choose a gendered public bathroom—an experience most cisgender people do not have. (“Cisgender” refers to someone whose gender identity conforms to his or her biological sex.) A person of color is more likely than a white person to be singled out for “additional screening” in the airport security line or followed around by suspicious security in a store.

When we understand the ways in which we have advantages, we are better able to situate ourselves in our larger social context. And when we do that, we may be better able to hear the stories of those who are different from us, and to be clear about the ways in which our society operates. This also helps us to make decisions about what, if anything, we want to do with the advantages we have. As the author and scholar bell hooks writes, “Privilege is not in and of itself bad; what matters is what we do with privilege.... We have to share our resources and take direction about how to use our privilege in ways that empower those who lack it.”

Christine Miserandino, who has Lupus, is disabled in some ways that are considered invisible—not apparent at first glance. She was in a diner one day with a friend, who asked her to describe the ways in which Lupus has impacted her life. She came up with a “spoon theory” that beautifully articulates the struggles that some people with chronic illnesses or invisible disabilities face. Please read the excerpt below. The full text can be found at butyoudontlooksick.com.

As I went to take some of my medicine with a snack as I usually did, she watched me with an awkward kind of stare, instead of continuing the conversation. She then asked me out of the blue what it felt like to have Lupus and be sick. She came to doctors with me, she saw me walk with a cane, and throw up in the bathroom. She had seen me cry in pain, what else was there to know?

I quickly grabbed every spoon on the table; hell I grabbed spoons off of the other tables. I looked at her in the eyes and said "Here you go, you have Lupus." I explained that the difference in being sick and being healthy is having to make choices or to consciously think about things when the rest of the world doesn't have to.

I asked her to count her spoons. She asked why, and I explained that when you are healthy you expect to have a never-ending supply of "spoons". But when you have to now plan your day, you need to know exactly how many "spoons" you are starting with. She counted out 12 spoons.

I asked her to list off the tasks of her day, including the most simple. As she rattled off daily chores, or just fun things to do, I explained how each one would cost her a spoon. When she jumped right into getting ready for work as her first task of the morning, I cut her off and took away a spoon. "No! You don't just get up. You have to crack open your eyes, and then realize you are late. You didn't sleep well the night before. You have to crawl out of bed, and then you have to make yourself something to eat before you can do anything else, because if you don't, you can't take your medicine, and if you don't take your medicine you might as well give up all your spoons for today and tomorrow too." I quickly took away a spoon and she realized she hasn't even gotten dressed yet. Showering cost her spoon, just for washing her hair and shaving her legs. Getting dressed was worth another spoon. I stopped her and broke down every task to show her how every little detail needs to be thought about. You cannot simply just throw clothes on when you are sick. I explained that I have to see what clothes I can physically put on, if my hands hurt that day buttons are out of the question.

I think she was starting to understand when she theoretically didn't even get to work, and she was left with 6 spoons. I then explained to her that she needed to choose the rest of her day wisely, since when your "spoons" are gone, they are gone. Sometimes you can borrow against tomorrow's "spoons", but just think how hard tomorrow will be with less "spoons". I also needed to explain that a person who is sick always lives with the looming thought that tomorrow may be the day that a cold comes, or an infection, or any number of things that could be very dangerous. So you do not want to run low on "spoons", because you never know when you truly will need them.

We went through the rest of the day, and she slowly learned that skipping lunch would cost her a spoon, as well as standing on a train, or even typing at her computer too long. She was forced to make choices and think about things differently. Hypothetically, she had to choose not to run errands, so that she could eat dinner that night.

When we got to the end of her pretend day, she said she was hungry. I summarized that she had to eat dinner but she only had one spoon left. If she cooked, she wouldn't have enough energy to clean the pots. If she went out for dinner, she might be too tired to drive home safely.

After we were emotional and talked about this for a little while longer, I sensed she was sad. Maybe she finally understood. Maybe she realized that she never could truly and honestly say she understands. But at least now she might not complain so much when I can't go out for dinner some nights, or when I never seem to make it to her house and she always has to drive to mine. I gave her a hug when we walked out of the diner. I had the one spoon in my hand and I said, "Don't worry. I see this as a blessing. I have been forced to think about everything I do. Do you know how many spoons people waste everyday? I don't have room for wasted time, or wasted "spoons," and I chose to spend this time with you."

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

Interpretive Questions

- Summarize the “spoon theory.” What are spoons to Miserandino?
- How is her experience of a normal day different from that of her friend’s?
- What seems to have surprised Miserandino’s friend about the exercise?
- What kinds of expectations do you think those who don’t understand Miserandino’s illness have of her?
- What kinds of privilege does Miserandino have? What kind(s) doesn’t she have?

Reflective Questions

- What kinds of systems do you think could or should be put in place to make Miserandino’s experience easier?
- Does it matter whether or not you know if someone has a certain kind of privilege?
- Think back to what you said you felt fortunate to have in your life. How would your life be different if you didn’t have that thing in your life?
- Do you feel like the Jewish community is better, worse, or about the same as other places in addressing issues of disability and privilege? In addressing other kinds of privilege?
- Does having privilege come with certain obligations? Why or why not?

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 Torah (Exodus 22:21) commands us, “You shall not wrong a stranger or oppress him, for you were strangers in the land of Egypt.” The implication is clear—our own communal experience of oppression can, and should, impact how we relate to others when we, ourselves, are in a position of power. Or, as Terry Smith, a high school social studies teacher and activist once said, “If we inherit injustice, we should never feel guilty. We are not responsible for that past. However, if we choose to do nothing about it going forward, then we have plenty to feel guilty about.” We are all lucky to have certain advantages in our lives. We should absolutely be grateful for the fortune that we have, and being aware of it gives us the opportunity to decide what that good fortune enables us to do.

As we conclude the conversation, here are a few final questions to consider.

- What’s one insight that you’ve gained from this conversation?
- What is one thing you want to change based on this conversation?
- How does this conversation impact your thinking around the value of inclusion in your Jewish community?
- What’s one obstacle to you making that change, and how can you overcome it? Who might you need help from in order to make this change?

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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Hillel International is the largest Jewish student organization in the world, building connections with emerging adults at more than 550 colleges and universities, and inspiring them to direct their own path. During their formative college years, students are challenged to explore, experience, and create vibrant Jewish lives.

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