

# WHAT ARE YOU THANKFUL FOR?

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, 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. Think of a time when you said a genuine thank-you to someone else. It could be as small as saying thank you for a cup of coffee, or something much more profound. Take a moment to bring a story to mind, and then we'll each share what we thought of. 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

Thankfulness is a paradoxical thing: as simple as saying “thanks,” and as complicated as our relationships and our lives.

Some people experience thankfulness as a debt. Thankfulness can come to feel like a burden, something that obligates us to others. And if gratitude is a debt, it can cause us to feel weighed down. Thankfulness is more than a connection—it signifies a deep bond, to someone or something.

For that reason, thankfulness can also be experienced as a rush, a thrill, something that evokes deep emotions that are hard to put into words. The 20th Century Jewish thinker Abraham Joshua Heschel put it this way: “We are struck with an awareness of the immense preciousness of being; a preciousness which is not an object of analysis but a cause of wonder; it is inexplicable, nameless, and cannot be specified or put in one of our categories.” A general sense of thankfulness for life is directed at God and leads to a more open, generous sensibility towards other people.

The Jewish tradition has many blessings aimed at keeping us aware of what we should be thankful for. There are blessings to be recited both before and after eating, when seeing a rainbow, when seeing an important head of state, when smelling beautiful flowers and when hearing good news. There’s even a specific blessing, the Shehechyanu, that thanks God for keeping us alive long enough to reach this particular moment, to experience whatever wonderful thing is happening—seeing a friend for the first time in a while, getting new clothes, eating a specific fruit for the first time that year, or almost anything else that merits thankfulness.

In other words, Judaism has blessings both for when we’re feeling thankful, and for when we forget to feel thankful—the blessing itself can remind us to say thank you for the many wonderful, sometimes small, things in our lives.

You may be familiar with the essay series ‘This I Believe,’ a project that engages youth and adults from all walks of life in writing, sharing, and discussing brief essays about the core values that guide their daily lives. ‘This I Believe’ was originally a radio series in the 1950s, and has been re-created online and on National Public Radio since 2004.

Below is an essay by a woman named Robin Baudier. Robin lived in her family’s FEMA (Federal Emergency Management Agency) trailer for 10 months in 2006. Before Hurricane Katrina devastated the Gulf Coast, she worked on script development for an independent film producer in Los Angeles. Robin now has her own apartment but continues to help rebuild her parents’ house.

We’ll take a moment read the essay together (you can also listen to it at <http://thisibelieve.org/essay/26077/>). After that, please take some time to re-read the essay and reflect on it.

I believe in strange blessings. I have never been in such good shape. I have never spent so much time outside. I caught the last three sunsets in a row and unless I am mistaken, I will catch the one tonight. I have never felt so close to my family. I have never felt so sure that I was doing everything right.

I live in a FEMA trailer with my parents. I moved home from L.A. February before last, quitting the job it had taken me almost a year of miserable internships to get, to make sure first-hand that my family was okay. Now I work on my Dad's house on the weekends and at his dental laboratory during the week. Shutting the curtain on the bunk bed area doesn't always cut it for privacy, so I spend a lot of time outside exercising the dog and just trying to get away from people. I take her out on the levee and run to get rid of all my frustration with not being able to have a job that will allow me to afford rent. I run to get out, when I have been stuck inside, reading to escape from life, not even able to sit up straight in my tiny bunk. I run to feel like I am doing something when I am overwhelmed by all the things I can't do anything about.

The reason I caught the sunset yesterday is that we have been waiting for two weeks for FEMA to come fix a leak in our plumbing. I was so frustrated with running out in a towel to turn the water off, then mopping up the floor with the rotating assortment of towels that we have hung outside the trailer that I decided to put on my bathing suit and shampoo under the hose. But God, that was a beautiful sunset last night.

I know it might sound strange that I am indirectly describing Hurricane Katrina as a blessing, since it took my family's home and recovering from it has taken over our lives. But I love my awful life so much right now, that I find it hilarious when I am unable to convince anyone else of it.

I make less than the people working at Popeye's. I repeatedly have to suffer the indignity of telling people that I live with my parents. But I have finally gotten rid of back pain that the doctors always told me was from stress. I occasionally have weekends when I realize that I am building a house with my Dad, which I used to dream about when I was six and watching Bob Vila with him. And I am back where I belong, no longer kidding myself that there is anywhere else I want to be.

I believe in strange blessings, because taking away my house brought me home.

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

### Interpretive Questions

- What are the blessings that Baudier experiences in the wake of the loss of her parents' home?
- What does she mean when she says, "I love my awful life so much right now?"
- How is she able to find gratitude in the midst of tragedy and dislocation?

### Reflective Questions

- Have you ever been able to find gratitude in the middle of a difficult time?
- What's challenging about feeling thankful?
- What enables you to experience gratitude?
- Does the Jewish tradition help you to feel or express gratitude? If so, in what way?

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 Midrash (Leviticus Rabbah 9:7) suggests that, in the World to Come, “all sacrifices will be annulled, but the Thanksgiving Sacrifice will not be annulled. All prayers will be annulled, but prayers of thanksgiving will not be annulled.” Our ability to express gratitude and thankfulness for what we have is, perhaps, one of the most eternal aspects of our humanity. It enables us to engage our lives with joy and humility, and to, perhaps, understand even more clearly than ever before what might be possible.

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 action you might take, or practice you might try, before we meet next time, based on what you’re taking from this conversation?
- What’s one obstacle to taking that action? How can you overcome it? Who might you need help from in order to do so?
- What could we do together as a community based on what we talked about today?

**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
<b>Anyone can answer it.</b> Example: "For whom are we responsible?"	<b>Experts will answer it best.</b> Example: "What's 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?

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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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# WHAT ARE YOU THANKFUL FOR?

## CONVERSATION GUIDE FOR PARTICIPANTS

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### **Interpretive Questions**

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