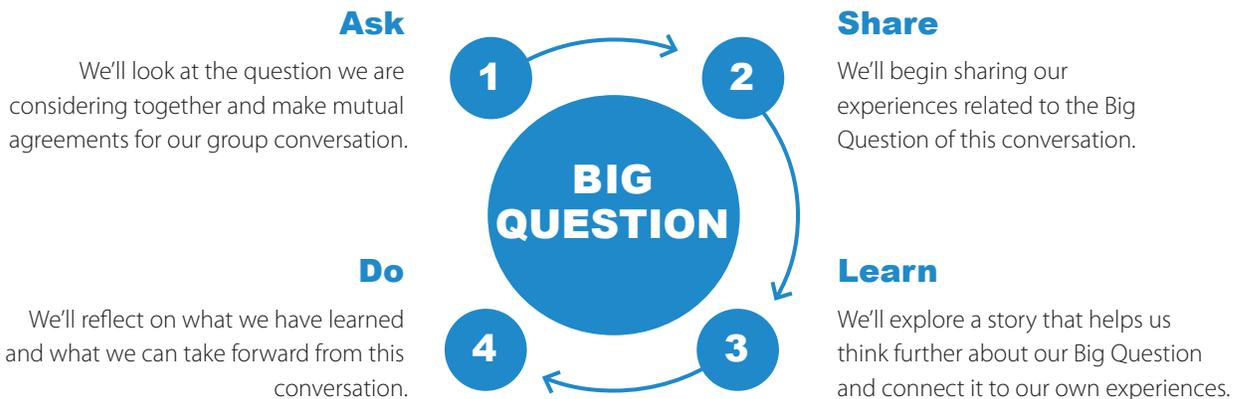


WHAT DO WE CHOOSE TO IGNORE?



WHAT KIND OF CONVERSATION IS THIS?

A Big Question conversation is one that helps us connect by discussing questions that matter to everyone, and everyone can answer. The questions we will talk about don't require expertise to answer. For our time together, we will share stories and explore questions instead of making arguments and debating issues. We'll focus on listening and reflecting together to understand and learn, instead of to convince or persuade others.



CONVERSATION FLOW:

Our conversation today will follow these stages, and should last between 60 and 90 minutes. We'll use this written guide as a centering point, to help us have a shared discussion that stays focused and allows everyone to participate. Some parts of the conversation will include reading aloud by members of the group and at times we might break into pairs or small groups.

*Conversation Leaders can find suggestions and support in our "Resources for Conversation Leaders" guide, available online.

ASK

Before we ask each other to share our stories, we need to agree to some parameters to guide us. To create a more trustworthy space where we feel able to contribute openly, we will begin by asking each of us to agree that we have mutual responsibilities to each other and the group. We'll spend around 10 minutes in this section.

We will read our Agreement of Mutual Responsibility together, with volunteers taking turns reading items out loud. As we read, you can use the space provided before the items to mark them using the symbols shown below. You can put more than one symbol by an item if more than one applies.



Put a question mark by any items for which you need clarification



Put a check mark by items which feel easy or natural to you



Put an arrow pointing to items which will be challenging for you, where you will need to pay special attention



Put a star by items which are most important for you to receive from others in order to participate fully

After we read the Agreement items together, we'll review any that need clarification. Then, as we go through the conversation:

- be aware of those items you marked as challenging for yourself, and try to adjust when you find yourself not following an agreement;
- if you feel others are not observing agreements, especially those that you starred as most important to you, you can ask the conversation leader or the group as a whole to review an item and discuss what can help the group make adjustments;
- notice whether your assumptions about what would come easily or naturally to you were accurate, and whether in the future you might need to be more mindful about your tendencies in those areas than you anticipated.

OUR AGREEMENT OF MUTUAL RESPONSIBILITY

? need clarification

✓ feels easy or natural

➔ will be challenging

* need from others in order to participate fully

WE AGREE TO:

- _____ **1. Share the Air:** We will strive to share this time, space, and learning process equitably, so that all can participate and share in the benefit. We will not expect other individuals or groups to bear the responsibility of educating us.
- _____ **2. Uphold Confidentiality:** We will not share others' stories or identities outside this conversation, although we may share what we have learned from this experience.
- _____ **3. Maintain Respect:** We will treat others with respect. We will not shame, blame, demean, or attack others.
- _____ **4. Allow for Silence:** We won't rush to fill silences, recognizing that we may need time to gather our thoughts or find our courage to speak.
- _____ **5. Listen to Understand:** We will acknowledge the limits of our own knowledge and open ourselves to what we can learn from the experiences and circumstances of others. We will listen to understand and to learn, not to debate.
- _____ **6. Speak Only for Ourselves:** We will each speak from our own experience, not for others, not for entire groups. We will not expect others to speak for entire groups.
- _____ **7. Consider the Bigger Picture:** We will strive to recognize how our own and others' experiences and perspectives are influenced by heritage, cultural environments, social groups, our diverse identities, and social systems.
- _____ **8. Explore Disagreement:** We will strive to be open and curious about our disagreements, and to engage with disagreement even when it feels uncomfortable.
- _____ **9. Lean in to Discomfort:** We will be willing to grapple with challenging ideas and feelings, and examine our own reactions.
- _____ **10. Practice Generosity:** We will recognize that we are all people in process and are more than we express in any one moment. We will give ourselves and each other permission to not know. We will respect each other's right to be fully human, including experiencing strong emotions, not knowing, and making mistakes.

Please sign here as a symbol of your commitment to upholding our Agreement.

SHARE

We want to enter into conversation by introducing ourselves and inviting everyone to reflect on our own experience, connecting our Big Question to our individual lives. We'll have up to 20 minutes for this activity.

Think about this question:

- When was a time you chose to notice something you might have otherwise ignored?

WHAT COMES TO MIND?

Take a moment to organize your thoughts; you can use this space to make some notes to yourself. Then we'll each introduce ourselves and share a brief answer.

LEARN

This is the heart of our conversation; we'll spend up to 30 minutes in this portion. We are going to read a text together, to help us think about our Big Question from a shared reference point.

SETTING THE CONTEXT:

By late 1942, newspapers throughout the United States had reported that Nazi Germany had already killed two million European Jews as part of its mass murder campaign. Many found it difficult to believe the information. A January 1943 poll showed that only 48% believed it was true (US Holocaust Memorial Museum's Holocaust Encyclopedia).

In Germany and the rest of Europe many people were close to the events of the Shoah (Holocaust), even if they weren't actively perpetrators or victims or rescuers. They were passive, even indifferent, as they ignored the persecution of individuals in their communities or neighboring communities for years.

Of course, not all ignoring leads to the death of a population. Every single day, we choose to ignore or not ignore countless details around us as we go through our routines. Life would be impossible without this filtering. If we noticed everything, we'd go crazy. Yet, how do we filter without becoming indifferent?

Sometimes we actively ignore what's happening in the world, whether oceans away or on our street corner—perhaps because we feel overwhelmed by it, because we don't feel that we can have an impact, because we have “empathy fatigue” and have become desensitized to others' suffering, or for some other reason. And those choices also have implications—for us, and for the world we live in.

The question is, what do we choose to ignore? And by extension, what do we choose to notice?

Following is an interview with Walter Stier, the official responsible for the “special trains” that transported millions of Jews and others to concentration and death camps such as Auschwitz and Treblinka. Please read the interview aloud together. You can watch a longer excerpt of the interview, from the 1985 documentary Shoah, here: <http://bit.ly/1jKN9UG>

What’s the difference between a special and a regular train?

A regular train may be used by anyone who purchases a ticket. . . . A special train has to be ordered. The train is specially put together and people pay group fares. . . .

But why were there more special trains during the war than before or after?

I see what you’re getting at. You’re referring to the so-called resettlement trains. . . . Those trains were ordered by the Ministry of Transport of the Reich [the German government].

But mostly, at that time, who was being “resettled”?

No. We didn’t know that. Only when we were fleeing from Warsaw ourselves, did we learn that they could have been Jews, or criminals, or similar people.

Special trains for criminals?

No, that was just an expression. You couldn’t talk about that. Unless you were tired of life, it was best not to mention that.

But you knew that the trains to Treblinka or Auschwitz were—

Of course we knew. I was the last district; without me these trains couldn’t reach their destination.

Did you know that Treblinka meant extermination?

Of course not!

You didn’t know?

Good God, no! How could we know? I never went to Treblinka. I stayed in Krakow, in Warsaw, glued to my desk.

You were a . . .

I was strictly a bureaucrat! . . .But as to what happened, I didn’t. . .

What was Treblinka for you? Treblinka or Auschwitz?

Yes, for us, Treblinka, Belzec, and all that were concentration camps.

A destination.

Yes, that’s all. For example, a train coming from Essen, or Cologne, or elsewhere, room had to be made for them there. With the war, and the Allies advancing everywhere, those people had to be concentrated in camps.

When exactly did you find out?

Well, when the word got around, when it was whispered. It was never said outright. Good God, no! They’d have hauled you off at once! We heard things. . .

QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION:

We won't necessarily discuss every question here, but we will discuss at least 1 or 2 from each section. As we discuss, you can use the space below to make some notes to yourself.

Clarifying: What's happening in the text?

- Is there anything in the text that isn't clear to you?

Interpreting: How do people in the story feel and respond?

With these questions, we want to stay as close as possible to the actual content/action of the story, examining what is there and what we think it means.

- What does it seem that Stier understood regarding the Holocaust during the war years, and what does it seem that he understood regarding the role that the trains played in it?
- What did he choose to ignore in the 1940's? Why?
- What did he choose to pay attention to? Why?
- As an older man looking back in this interview, what does he choose to ignore, and what does he choose to pay attention to?

Reflecting: How does this story resonate with us?

- Have you ever chosen to ignore something of which you were at least partly aware?
- Why do you choose to ignore what you choose to ignore? How much of a choice does it feel like it is for you?
- When have you chosen not to ignore something? What happened? Did it change your thinking?
- How do we stop ignoring things that might be helpful for us to see?

WHAT COMES TO MIND?

DO

To conclude our time together, we'll think and talk about some of the things that really struck us during the course of our conversation and what we can take forward from this experience.**

**Check out the Conversation Leader Resource Guide for variations of this part of the conversation and ideas on how to make it even more interactive.



WHAT DID WE LEARN?

First take a moment to reflect and respond briefly, in a phrase or sentence, to at least one of these questions:

- What insights did you have about our Big Question?
- What insights did you have about yourself, your own values, or how you view the world?
- What insights did you have about others -- whether other participants, someone whose story we discussed in the Learn section, or people in general?

You can use the space to make some notes to yourself. After you've had a moment, we'll share some of our thoughts.

| WHAT COMES TO MIND?

WHAT WILL WE DO?

Now take a moment to reflect and respond to the questions below and choose one response you would like to share with the group. We'll finish with a final round of sharing.

1. Think again about our Agreement of Mutual Responsibility. What are some things you noticed in this conversation that you and others did – or didn't do – that created the space for a meaningful, respectful conversation? What is one thing you want to work on maintaining in other conversations you have?
2. We all know maintaining commitments can be hard. In anticipation of the times when maintaining your goal is a struggle, what is a strategy that you can use to help yourself in those moments?

WHAT COMES TO MIND?

CLOSING

Thank you for participating in this conversation. Educator John Westerhoff has said that "We are at our best when we make our lives and our search for meaning available as a resource for another's learning."

SHARE YOUR FEEDBACK:

We'd like to hear about your conversation experience!

Take our brief survey at <https://www.surveymonkey.com/r/HillelABQConvo>.

SHARE YOUR STORY:

Join the Ask Big Questions community online – connect with us and share your conversation story.

Tag @AskBigQs (Twitter) and @AskBigQuestions (Facebook and Instagram)



ABOUT ASK BIG QUESTIONS

Ask Big Questions is a project that seeks to deepen understanding and strengthen community through reflective conversations about questions that matter to everyone. No matter our background or perspective, we need opportunities to see and hear each other more deeply – not as labels but as human beings. Conversations that help us connect are essential building blocks for strong and inclusive communities. Big Question conversations support and strengthen civic habits of listening, civility, and engaging diverse perspectives, which are important steps toward better problem solving. Ask Big Questions is an initiative of Hillel International.



ABOUT HILLEL

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.

JOIN THE BIG QUESTIONS COMMUNITY!

Join our movement to build connection, trust, and community through better conversation! A good conversation changes us, and as those effects ripple outward, it can change the world. Visit askbigquestions.org to find more Big Question conversation guides and resources to help you use our guides for better civic dialogue.

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