

WHAT DO WE CHOOSE TO IGNORE?

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, 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.

ASK & SHARE

Welcome to our conversation. Let's take a moment to introduce ourselves. Please tell us your name and where you call home. Please also tell us about a time when you chose to notice something you might otherwise have ignored—whether or not you responded in an active way in the moment. 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

In 1987, a group of gay activists, frustrated by the lack of communal response to the AIDS crisis, created a poster with a black background, a pink triangle, and the words, in white, “SILENCE = DEATH.” It was a warning, a cry for help, and a call to action. It may have been more comfortable for many, particularly for those outside the gay community, but also for those within it, to try not to notice the catastrophe unfolding. Certainly, very few people wanted to feel as though this set of problems—people dying from a mysterious, frightening, contagious disease—was their responsibility, and some perhaps wanted to distance themselves from the issue because of homophobia. And the poster’s creators knew that it would take strong words to get people to stop ignoring the devastation that was happening in their midst. Their choice of icon—the pink triangle—was the very symbol that the Nazis used to mark the prisoners sent to concentration camps for the crime of homosexuality. The message and the analogy was clear: Ignoring can be a form of complicity with unspeakable consequences.



Of course, not all ignoring leads to the death of a population. Every single day, we ignore (or don't ignore) emails, Facebook messages, tweets, phone calls, letters, even someone we know across the street. We choose whether to read the news, and what kind of news to read. We choose whether to pay attention to the natural world around us, to a distracting noise, to a friend's irritating quirks. Life would be impossible without this filtering. If we noticed everything, we'd go crazy. On the other hand, if we notice nothing, it's meaningless.

Sometimes we actively ignore what's happening in the world, whether oceans away or on our street corner—whether it's 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.

So 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...

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

Interpretive Questions

- 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?

Reflective Questions

- 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?

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 choice to ignore or to see is one we make dozens, even hundreds of times, every day. It can be about seeing someone's faults with a generous eye, or not focusing on certain demands on our time in order to have a moment of quiet. But it can also involve not paying attention to our own needs, or someone else's needs. It can be about complicity in a problematic situation or system. At the very least, we have the responsibility to be thoughtful in our choices about what we ignore—and what we decide it's time to stop ignoring.

Hopefully our conversation today has helped us all to reflect on our practice of noticing and ignoring, and to understand ourselves and each other a little better.

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?
- 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?

Thank you for being part of this conversation. Please share this conversation guide with others in your community. And join our conversation online at AskBigQuestions.org.



Our partner for this guide is Facing History and Ourselves. Facing History believes that the lifeblood of democracy is the ability of every rising generation to be active, responsible decision-makers. And we believe that inspired teachers and innovative methods are the key. We work with educators around the world throughout their careers to improve their effectiveness in the classroom, as well as their students' academic performance, historical understanding and civic learning. Learn more at facinghistory.org.



Ask Big Questions is an initiative of Hillel: The Foundation for Jewish Campus Life in partnership with the Einhorn Family Charitable Trust. Visit AskBigQuestions.org to answer questions, learn from others, and join the movement.

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