

SIMCHAT TORAH: WHAT STORY DO WE TELL?

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:

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- 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

Think, for a moment, about a few pivotal moments in your life—times when something important in your life, or in who you are, changed or began to change. Do those pivotal moments have anything in common? How much of the change was a result of outside forces beyond your control? How much of the change was result of your own initiative and choice?

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

The holiday of Simchat Torah—literally, “Rejoicing with the Torah”—marks the end of one annual cycle of Torah readings and beginning the whole book again from the start. This book, this story, begins with the creation of the universe—the story of the world as a whole, and the creation of humankind—and then moves into the story of one specific family, that of Abraham and Sarah, Isaac and Rebecca, Jacob, Leah, Rachel and their children. Then, as the book of Genesis moves into the book of Exodus, it becomes the story of the Jewish people as a whole, of their departure from Egypt, receiving of the Torah at Sinai and attempts to get to the Promised Land. In the very last story, read at the beginning of Simchat Torah, Moses, at the end of his life, blesses the Israelites in their journey forward.

The trajectory of the Torah invites us to think about stories both universal and particular, and how we choose to locate ourselves within them.

Rabbi Jonathan Sacks, soon to be the former Chief Rabbi of the United Kingdom, wrote about this in his book, *A Letter in the Scroll*. Please read the following excerpt:

Several centuries of Western thought, beginning in the Enlightenment, have left us with the idea that when we choose to live, we are on our own. Nothing in the past binds us. We are whoever and whatever we choose to be... One way of dramatizing the contrast [between this idea and Judaism] is to imagine we are in a vast library. In every direction we look there are bookcases. Each has shelves stretching from floor to ceiling and each shelf is full of books. We are surrounded by the recorded thoughts of many people, some great, some less so, and we can reach out and take any book we wish. All we have to do is choose. We begin to read, and for a while we are immersed in the world, real or imaginary, of the writer. It may intrigue us enough to lead us to look for another book by the same writer, or perhaps on the same subject. Alternatively, we can break off and try a different subject, a different approach; there is no limit...

Now imagine that while browsing in the library, you come across one book unlike the rest, which catches your eye because on its spine is written the name of your family. Intrigued, you open it and see many pages written by different hands in many languages. You start reading it, and gradually you begin to understand what it is. It is the story each generation of your ancestors has told for the sake of the next, so that everyone born into this family can learn where they came from, what happened to them, what they lived for and why. As you turn the pages, you reach the last which carries no entry but a heading. It bears your name...

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

Interpretive Questions

- What is Sacks' metaphor attempting to describe?
- How does he describe the difference between the "Western" way of thinking and the Jewish approach? Do you think this is fair?
- How does Sacks think that we tell our stories as Western people? As Jews? Does he think one person can tell both versions of the story, or that we have to choose?

Reflective Questions

- Do you feel that you have access to the books bearing your family's name? The books telling the story of the whole Jewish people? Of all people?
- What does the page bearing your name say?
- How do you relate to the Torah and the stories within them? Do you feel a personal connection to them? If so, what kind?

Take some time to think about these questions. When we're all ready, each of us will turn to our neighbor and share our thoughts. 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

Elie Wiesel wrote, "People become the stories they hear and the stories they tell." We have a lot of power over what stories we choose to tell about our lives, and how we choose to frame them and connect them to others. Those stories, as Wiesel notes, can have a tremendous impact on who we are and who we become.

As we close our conversation today, please reflect on one or two ways that this conversation has changed the way that you think about your own story, and the way that you choose to tell the story of your life, your family, the Jewish people or humanity as a whole. Take a few moments to reflect, and then we'll share our answers.

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?

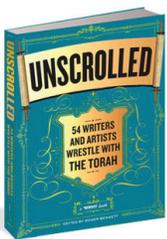
Who and How?

- 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.



If you enjoyed this conversation, we encourage you to check out REBOOT's UNSCROLLED project at www.unscrolled.org. UNSCROLLED is a reinterpretation, a reimagining, a creative celebration: 54 leading Jewish writers, artists, photographers, and screenwriters, and more grapple with the first five books of the Bible, giving new meaning to the 54 Torah portions. UNSCROLLED is a gathering of engaging, diverse voices that will speak to anyone interested in Jewish culture and identity. In stories, poems, memoirs, plays, infographics—plus a Web search, a graphic novel, and a psychiatric transcript—it offers a fresh take on the Torah, its value, and its place in our lives.



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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UNDERSTAND OTHERS. UNDERSTAND YOURSELF.

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CONVERSATION GUIDE FOR PARTICIPANTS

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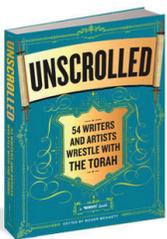
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