

WHERE DO WE FEEL AT HOME?

A 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 around 45-60 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.

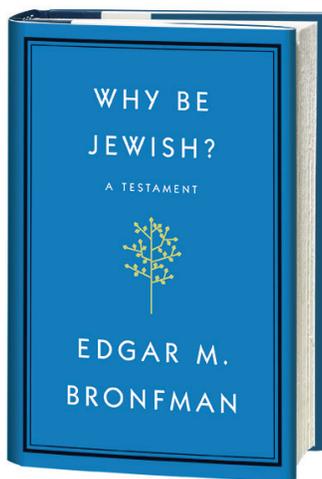
About Ask Big Questions:

Ask Big Questions is a project devoted to helping people understand themselves and each other, and strengthening our communities in the process. It's called Ask Big Questions because the questions we'll be talking through as a group are ones we believe matter to everyone and everyone can answer. They might be challenging questions, but they're not "hard;" they're not questions that require expertise to answer. They're questions we all have stories about, questions all of us share. We believe that asking and talking about Big Questions as a group helps us learn to genuinely hear one another. It helps us grow our ability to trust each other. It builds community.

Ask Big Questions was developed, launched, and scaled by Hillel International.

About This Conversation Guide and Edgar M. Bronfman:

This conversation guide is one of four created through a partnership between Hillel International and The Samuel Bronfman Foundation to honor the life and legacy of Edgar M. Bronfman (1929-2013), and his last book, *Why Be Jewish*. Edgar achieved an enormous amount in his life, in business, philanthropy, and communal leadership. He was deeply involved in Hillel International, serving as chairman of its Board of Governors, and inspiring other philanthropists to join him in supporting Hillel. But what Edgar valued most of all were his frequent trips to campuses and his encounters with young Jews. His Jewish journey was guided and enriched by his discussions and engagement with Hillel students and professionals over the years. He had an abiding faith in the future, and in college students as shapers of that future.



In the pages of *Why Be Jewish*, Edgar proposes an approach to reconciling his love of Jewish learning and traditions with his inclination toward doubt and disbelief in God. As Rabbi Angela Warnick Buchdahl writes in her introduction, Edgar's book "offers a compelling invitation for younger generations, and Jews of all ages, to take another look at Judaism, irrespective of the religious aspects of the tradition." It is in this spirit, and with this hope, that we have created these conversation guides.

A limited number of free or discounted copies of *Why Be Jewish* are available for Ask Big Questions participants. Please contact whybejewish@thesbf.org.

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

When you hear the word home, what's the first image that comes to mind? Take a moment to sit with the question, and then we'll share our names and what we thought of.

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

Of all the big questions of life, Where is home? may be one of the biggest. Home can be a physical place, like the home we grew up in. It can be defined by relationships we have—as in, "I feel at home with the people I love." It can denote experiences, as in "I feel at home when I'm playing football," or "I feel at home when I'm reading my favorite author." Home is many things.

The American poet Robert Frost is known to have defined home as "the place where, when you have to go there, they have to take you in." Or as another poet, Maya Angelou put it, "The ache for home lives in all of us, the safe place where we can go as we are and not be questioned." Home is a place where we can be ourselves, according to these poets.

But perhaps we don't want to be ourselves, or at least the selves we are at the place we call home. "Say there's a white kid who lives in a nice home," the rapper Eminem said in a 2000 interview. "He goes to an all-white school, and is pretty much having everything handed to him on a platter. For him to pick up a rap tape is incredible to me, because what that's saying is that he's living a fantasy life of rebellion." Sometimes we feel a need to leave home in order to discern where and what our home really is.

In the following passage, Edgar M. Bronfman reflects on the centrality of home in Jewish life.

While initiatives and programs are much needed, love of Judaism begins with family, at home. After the destruction of the Second Temple in 70 CE, our sages determined that the home would become the new Temple, calling it a mikdash ma'at, or little sanctuary. As one midrash explains, "When the Temple stood, the altar offered atonement for Israel. Now, one's table offers atonement" (Brachot 55a). The Jewish home—or any home—should be more than a shelter: It should act as the center of meaning, beauty, and connection to forces larger than ourselves.

In Jewish tradition, it is in the home that many of life's significant milestones, from the birth of a child to death and mourning, take place. As pointed out by Rabbi Andy Bachman, a well-known communal leader and dear friend, Judaism has rituals for all those aspects of life—birth, transition, marriage, death—in which people cry out for meaning. He believes, and I think I agree, that these life-sanctifying rituals, along with Shabbat, are one of the main reasons that Judaism has stayed alive for nearly four thousand years. The marking of these ancient customs brings joy and comfort into our present lives and joins us to our past. (*Why Be Jewish*, p.81)

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

What's happening in the text?

- Are there any terms that aren't clear to you? If so, ask for clarification.
- Try to paraphrase the text. What did Edgar say?

What's the author's intent?

- What does Edgar mean when he writes, "The Jewish home—or any home—should be more than a shelter: It should act as the center of meaning, beauty, and connection to forces larger than ourselves?"
- What does he mean when he writes, "These life-sanctifying rituals, along with Shabbat, are one of the main reasons that Judaism has stayed alive for nearly four thousand years?"

How does it resonate with us?

- Are there times you have felt your home was a mikdash me'at, a little sanctuary?
- What rituals—Jewish or otherwise—have you found were significant in your own life?
- What comes up for you as read Edgar's comments on Jewish life-cycle rituals?

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."

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

As our conversation demonstrates, home is a powerful idea. In many ways it is fundamental to who we are. Home is an idea filled with paradoxes. For some, home is a place of security. For others it is a place where we can make ourselves vulnerable—by inviting guests, by going to sleep. Home can be a physical location, and it can be a state of mind. We can be at home in a house, but we can also be at home in a language or an activity. Probably for many of us, it is all of these things.

As we close this conversation today, please consider a few more questions:

- What did you learn today?
- What is one change that you want to make based on this conversation?
- What's one obstacle that might get in the way of you making that change? How can you overcome that obstacle? Who can help you get there?

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.

Thank you for being part of this conversation.



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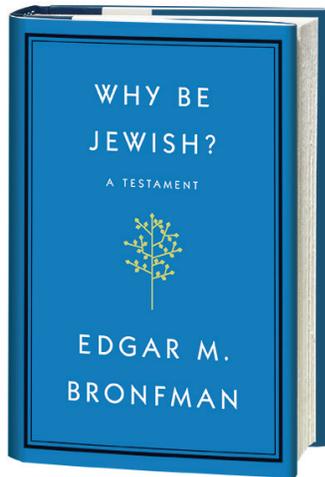
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