

WHO IS IN YOUR COMMUNITY?

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.

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WELCOME

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- 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. Take a moment and think of the word "community." What's the first thing that comes to mind? Use the space below to make some notes or draw a picture.

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

It seems community is all the rage these days. We talk about “real” and “virtual” communities. We hear frequently—especially on college campuses—about the need to create community. We elected a President—for two terms—who was a community organizer. Community is one of the buzzwords of our time.

But what makes a community? The dictionary reminds us that community is rooted in something we have in common: living in a common place, undergoing common experiences, sharing common language, values, or goals. Community implies communing—sharing life together. In a world increasingly defined by individualized, customized experiences—from the ads Facebook sends us based on our unique interests, to our ability to choose where we get our news or when and where we watch our favorite movies and shows—community is something we know we need, but also can seem hard to achieve.

The text below comes from a book by Lord Jonathan Sacks, former as Chief Rabbi of the United Kingdom. Rabbi Sacks is a prolific writer and public intellectual (and a regular contributor to the Ask Big Questions blog!). His writings often focus on the challenges of building a healthy social fabric in communities and societies undergoing enormous change. Though many of his thoughts focus on questions of how different faith communities can live together, his books and articles also speak more generally about how diverse groups of people can honor each other’s differences and live peacefully with one another.

In this passage, Rabbi Sacks reflects on the Biblical story of the Exodus from Egypt, and offers a theory as to how the ancient Israelites, newly freed from slavery, were formed into not just a mass of individuals, but a functioning community.

From *The Home We Build Together* (2008)

By Rabbi Lord Jonathan Sacks

Read the book of Exodus and you will see that the early chapters are all about the politics of freedom. They tell of slavery, oppression, the mission of Moses to Pharaoh, the ten plagues, liberation, the division of the Red Sea and the revelation at Mount Sinai. All of this is a sequential story about liberty. But the last part of Exodus—roughly a third of the book as a whole, is taken up with an apparently minor and irrelevant episode told and retold in exhaustive detail: the construction of the Tabernacle.

This was the first house of worship made by the Israelites. It was a modest affair, made of poles, beams, skins and drapes that could be taken apart, carried on their journeys, and re-assembled at their next encampment. It had, or so it seems, no lasting significance. Once the Israelites had entered the land, the Tabernacle was left in Shilo for several centuries until King David established Jerusalem as the capital of the newly united kingdom, and his son Solomon built the Temple. So why is the story of the Tabernacle told at such length?

The Hebrew Bible is a political as well as a spiritual text, and it tells a political story. Despite the miracles, the essential narrative is remarkably human. The Israelites are portrayed as a querulous, almost ungovernable group. Moses, their deliverer, comes to them with the news that they are about to go free. His first intervention, however, only makes things worse, and the people complain. Eventually the people leave, but Pharaoh and his

army pursue them. They are trapped between the approaching Egyptian chariots and the Red Sea, and again they complain. Moses performs a miracle. The sea divides. The Israelites cross through on dry land. They sing a song of deliverance. But three days later, they are complaining again, this time about the lack of water.

Some six weeks later, at Mount Sinai, they receive the great revelation. God speaks directly to the people. They make a covenant with him. Moses reascends the mountain to receive the tablets on which the covenant provisions are engraved. While he is away, the Israelites commit their greatest sin. They make a golden calf and dance before it, saying, 'These are your gods, Israel, who brought you up out of Egypt.' The episode of the golden calf is told in Exodus 32-34, in the middle of the account of the making of the Tabernacle, so clearly there is some connection between them.

Putting all this together we arrive at the boldest of all Exodus' political statements. A nation—at least, the kind of nation the Israelites were called on to become—is created through the act of creation itself. Not all the miracles of Exodus combined, not the plagues, the division of the sea, manna from heaven or water from a rock, not even the revelation at Sinai itself, turned the Israelites into a nation. In commanding Moses to get the people to make the Tabernacle, God was in effect saying: To turn a group of individuals into a covenantal nation, they must build something together...

A people is made by making. A nation is built by building. What they built was a 'home' for the Divine presence. The Tabernacle, placed at the center of the camp with the tribes arrayed around it, symbolized the public square, the common good, the voice that had summoned them to collective freedom. It was a visible emblem of community. Within the Tabernacle was the ark, within the ark were the tablets of stone, and on the tablets of stone were written the details of the covenant. It was the home of their constitution of liberty. Here, then, is the source of the title of this book. Society is the home, the Tabernacle, we build together.

It was built out of difference and diversity. That too is the point of the narrative. Each of the Israelites brought his or her own distinctive contribution. Some brought gold, others silver, others bronze. Some gave jewels, others animal skins, and others drapes. Some gave of their skills and time. The point is not what they gave but that each was valued equally... The Tabernacle was built out of the differential contributions of the various groups and tribes. It represented orchestrated diversity, or in social terms, integration without assimilation. That is the dignity of difference. Because we are not the same, we each have something unique to contribute, something only we can give.

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.

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

Interpretive Questions

- What does Sacks mean when he writes that a nation or community “is created through the act of creation itself?”
- What does he mean when he says that “society is the home we build together?”
- How would you paraphrase Sacks’s phrase “orchestrated diversity?” What does he mean?

Reflective Questions

- Does Sacks’s description of community-building resonate with you? Have you ever had an experience like the one he describes?
- Have you ever felt part of a community? Left out of a community? What were those experiences like?
- What does it take to become a member of a community?
- Do you have to personally like, or feel connected to, everyone in your community?
- How do you know who is in your community?

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.

DO

The Talmud (Ta'anit 11a) teaches, "One who accepts affliction with the community will live to see the consolation of the community." That is, when we throw our lot with others, and allow what happens within our community to impact us, we reap the reward of connection and caring during the times when we might need it most.

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?

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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?

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