

# Why Bother?

ASK **BIG**  
QUESTIONS

A CONVERSATION GUIDE  
FOR PARTICIPANTS

**Hillel**  
International

## 1. 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.

## 2. Ask and Share

Let's take a moment to introduce ourselves. Please share your name and one thing for which you make a little bit of extra effort. You can use the space below to make some notes to yourself.

## 3. Learn

Sometimes it can be difficult to motivate ourselves to take action. First of all, we all have a lot of competing pulls for our energy and focus: relationships, school or work, other obligations, hobbies, amusing diversions, and a host of other commitments and limitations. It can be difficult to prioritize taking action on other things, even if those are things we believe will improve our society or our world.

And it's not always clear that, even if we do bother to do those things, they will make a meaningful, positive impact. Unfortunately, the issues that often seem most pressing to us are large, frequently overwhelming. It can be very easy to wonder if our own hard work and efforts can have any meaningful impact at all.

The Jewish tradition, certainly, is insistent that we are obligated to engage with the world around us. In one collection of Fifth Century Rabbinic teachings (Midrash Tanhuma, Mishpatim 2), it's written, "If a person of learning participates in public affairs and serves as judge or arbiter, he gives stability to the land... But if he sits in his home and says to himself, 'What have the affairs of society to do with me?... Why should I trouble myself with the people's voices of protest? Let my soul dwell in peace!'—if he does this, he overthrows the world."

So then what? Where does that leave us? When do you decide that it might not even be worth the bother—for you personally, or for the larger picture? When do you decide that it is worth it for you to bother? How do you make those decisions? What informs them?

Food journalist Michael Pollan wrote an essay called, "Why Bother?" for *The New York Times Magazine* in 2008. Please read the excerpt below out loud, as a group. You can find the whole piece online here: [bit.ly/1mZivjX](http://bit.ly/1mZivjX)

Why bother? That really is the big question facing us as individuals hoping to do something about climate change, and it's not an easy one to answer. For me the most upsetting moment in "An Inconvenient Truth" came long after Al Gore scared the hell out of me, constructing a convincing case that the survival of life on earth as we know it is threatened by climate change. No, the really dark moment came during the closing credits, when we are asked to . . . change our light bulbs. The immense disproportion between the magnitude of the problem Gore had described and the puniness of what he was asking us to do about it was enough to sink your heart.

There are so many stories we can tell ourselves to justify doing nothing, but perhaps the most insidious is that, whatever we do manage to do, it will be too little too late. Climate change is upon us, and it has arrived well ahead of schedule. For us to

wait for legislation or technology to solve the problem of how we're living our lives suggests we're not really serious about changing—something our politicians cannot fail to notice. They will not move until we do.

If you do bother, you will set an example for other people. If enough other people bother, each one influencing yet another in a chain reaction of behavioral change, markets for all manner of green products and alternative technologies will prosper and expand. (Just look at the market for hybrid cars.) Consciousness will be raised, perhaps even changed: new moral imperatives and new taboos might take root in the culture. Driving an S.U.V. or eating a 24-ounce steak or illuminating your McMansion like an airport runway at night might come to be regarded as outrages to human conscience. Not having things might become cooler than having them. And those who did change the way they live would acquire the moral standing to demand changes in behavior from others—from other people, other corporations, even other countries.

All of this could, theoretically, happen. What I'm describing is a process of viral social change, and change of this kind, which is nonlinear, is never something anyone can plan or predict or count on. Sometimes you have to act as if acting will make a difference, even when you can't prove that it will. That was precisely what happened in Communist Czechoslovakia and Poland, when a handful of individuals like Vaclav Havel and Adam Michnik resolved that they would simply conduct their lives "as if" they lived in a free society. That improbable bet created a tiny space of liberty that, in time, expanded to take in, and then help take down, the whole of the Eastern bloc.

So what would be a comparable bet that the individual might make in the case of the environmental crisis? Find one thing to do in your life that doesn't involve spending or voting, that may or may not virally rock the world but is real and particular (as well as symbolic) and that, come what may, will offer its own rewards. Maybe you decide to give up meat, an act that would reduce your carbon footprint by as much as a quarter. Or you could try this: determine to observe the Sabbath. For one day a week, abstain completely from economic activity: no shopping, no driving, no electronics.

But the act I want to talk about is growing some—even just a little—of your own food. Measured against the Problem We Face, planting a garden sounds pretty benign, I know, but in fact it's one of the most powerful things an individual can do—to reduce your carbon footprint, sure, but more important, to reduce your sense of dependence and dividedness. You can grow the proverbial free lunch—CO<sub>2</sub>-free and dollar-free. You will [also] probably notice that you're getting a pretty good workout there in your garden, burning calories without having to get into the car to drive to the gym. Also, by engaging both body and mind, time spent in the garden is time (and energy) subtracted from electronic forms of entertainment. You begin to see that growing even a little of your own food is one of those solutions that actually beget other solutions.

But there are sweeter reasons to plant that garden, to bother. At least in this one corner of your yard and life, you will have begun to heal the split between what you think and what you do, to commingle your identities as consumer and producer and citizen. The single greatest lesson the garden teaches is that our relationship to the planet need not be zero-sum, and that as long as the sun still shines and people still can plan and plant, think and do, we can, if we bother to try, find ways to provide for ourselves without diminishing the world.

As you reflect on this essay, here are a few questions to consider:

### **Interpretive Questions**

- What reasons does Pollan give for feeling it might not be worth the bother to make changes to help the environment?
- What arguments does he make in favor of bothering?

- What does he mean when he says that “solutions... beget other solutions?” Do you agree with him?
- Why does he introduce the notion of observing the Sabbath, keeping Shabbat, as a possible way to help the environment?
- What does making an effort look like, in Pollan’s opinion? Does it demand a total lifestyle change?

### Reflective Questions

- When was a time that you decided not to bother taking action about something? Why didn’t you?
- When was a time that you decided to do something? What was different about this time?
- Does your Jewish identity or understanding of the Jewish tradition impact your sense of when and how to bother?
- What factors do you need in place to feel that it’s worthwhile to take an action?

Use the space below to write some notes to yourself.

## 4. Do

It can be difficult to make the effort to take action, even on something we believe in. But perhaps we don’t need to take responsibility for the whole big picture so much as taking each small step that we can, one step after another. Pirkei Avot, an ancient collection of Jewish wisdom, cites a saying of the First Century sage Rabbi Tarfon. “You are not required to complete the work,” he used to say. “But neither are you free to quit it.” If we each persist in doing some part of the work, perhaps, together, we can bring completion—or at least some healing—to the world and the people in it.

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?

Use the space below to note your response to these questions.

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**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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## 2. Ask and Share

Let's take a moment to introduce ourselves. Please share your name and one thing for which you make a little bit of extra effort. 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.

## 3. Learn

Sometimes it can be difficult to motivate ourselves to take action. First of all, we all have a lot of competing pulls for our energy and focus: relationships, school or work, other obligations, hobbies, amusing diversions, and a host of other commitments and limitations. It can be difficult to prioritize taking action on other things, even if those are things we believe will improve our society or our world.

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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, if you would like, you can 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.

## 4. Do

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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.

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# AIR-IT: A Guide to Facilitating Conversation

## A: Ask Big Questions

Big Question	Hard Question
<b>Anyone can answer it.</b> Example: "For whom are we responsible?"	<b>Experts will answer it best.</b> Example: "What is the best economic policy for the United States?"
<b>Focuses on wisdom and experience.</b> Example: "What's the best advice you've ever received?"	<b>Focuses on intelligence and skill.</b> Example: "Are human beings naturally good or evil?"
<b>Uses plain language.</b>	<b>Uses technical language.</b>
<b>Directed at a subject (me, you, us).</b> Example: "What could we sacrifice to change the world?"	<b>Directed at an object (it).</b> Example: "Is it better to cut spending or raise taxes to balance the federal budget?"
<b>Opens up space and invites people in as participants.</b>	<b>Closes space and leads people to feel like spectators.</b>
<b>Leads to sharing personal stories.</b>	<b>Leads to debates about truth claims.</b>
<b>Emphasizes a both/and approach.</b>	<b>Emphasizes an either/or approach.</b>

## 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?