

FOR WHOM ARE WE RESPONSIBLE?

ASK **BIG**
QUESTIONS

CENTRAL CONVERSATIONS
PARTICIPANT GUIDE

1. WELCOME

Before we begin, let's review the *brit*—the covenant—that animates our time together:

- *Accountability*: I'll show up for eight meetings over the next eight months. Or I'll let the host know the (good) reason I will be absent. I will also be punctual and respect everyone's time. Which means that meetings will start and end on time, no matter how good the schmoozing.
- *Presence*: When we're together, I'll be present and mindful. I will listen and share. Life (and our mobile devices) offer many distractions, but I will stay present and engaged.
- *Double Confidentiality*: I'll maintain complete confidentiality. What I hear and say stays here. That means that even when I see group member in another context, like at Central or in the neighborhood, I won't bring up what has been shared in our group unless you open the conversation.
- *Vulnerability*: I'll stretch myself to be as open and honest as I can with my perspectives and experiences to create a safe environment that might encourage others to take risks, too.
- *Respect*: I will remember that all of us are here for a common purpose and I will respect and acknowledge everyone in my group.
- *No Fixing, Advising, Saving or Setting Straight*: I will give each person the gift of true attention without trying to "solve their problem." No advice unless it's asked.

- *Listening:* I understand that some of us are talkers and some of us are quieter, so I'll be aware to not dominate discussions or always leave the weight of it to others.
- *Curiosity:* Judaism is a religion of exploration; of questions more than answers. I will get the most out of my group by being open to our discussions and the people around me.
- *Ownership:* This is our group. This is our community to create. While we have guidelines and suggestions, it is ours to shape and form. We will get out of it what we put into it.

2. ASK AND SHARE

Welcome, and thank you for joining this conversation. Please think about this question: When you hear the word 'responsibility,' is there a person or story that comes to mind? Take a moment, and share when you're ready. You can use the space below to write some notes to yourself.

3. LEARN

In a 1959 commencement address at Morehouse College, Martin Luther King, Jr. articulated a broad vision of universal responsibility: "An individual has not started living," he said, "until he can rise above the narrow confines of his individualistic concerns to the broader concerns of all humanity." For King, as for many of us, the ideal is to feel responsible for all human beings, regardless of their background. But consider this quote from 20th century author Anais Nin: "How wrong is it for a woman to expect the man to build the world she wants, rather than to create it herself?" For Nin, as for many feminists, first and foremost our responsibility begins with ourselves.

"If am not for myself, who will be for me? When I am for myself, what am I? If not now, when?" Hillel the Elder, the first-century rabbinic sage, was famous for asking these questions. At the heart of them is our question: For whom are we responsible? Can we

expect anyone else to be responsible for us? If we are only responsible for ourselves, what does that make us?

In the poem below, the main character deals with all these questions. We'll read it together, and then have a chance to discuss it.

Okay

By Lowell Jaeger

There's a man in the road, waving.
We're driving home from Hot Springs,
my wife and I, and our three kids.
He's holding something bundled
in his arms. Don't stop, my wife
telegraphs to me with a sideways glance.
I'm okay with that.

It's a dog! the kids shout, He's
carrying a dog! So, okay, I stop,
roll down the window.

Please help, the man says, tears
leaking down his stubbled chin.
The dog is bleeding. He's rolled up
in an old rug, eyes open, miserable.
I just run over my dog, the man
blubbers, He's drunk. And stinks.

Okay, I'm thinking, I'm stuck
with this. The kids squeeze together;
the man and dog huff and groan,
sniffle and slide themselves into
our lives. My kids' faces in the rearview
are pinched, afraid to breathe –
wet dog, blood, booze, rotting socks.
The man whimpers, cradles his dog,
I'm f-ing sorry, man. So f-ing, f-ing
sorry. This is less than okay.
We spit gravel behind us and speed
back to Hot Springs to find a Vet.

It's a Sunday, my wife whispers, everything's

locked up. I'm thinking, Okay, what now?
At the one payphone on Main, I pull over

to let the man and dog out. You better call
someone, I say. My voice sounds afraid.
The man's eyes are shut, not asleep,
but almost. The dog's eyes are shut, too.
You better call someone, I say louder,
Okay? Okay?

The man stands at the payphone, his dog
bundled on the sidewalk. He just stands there.
My kids cry silently. My wife trusts me
to be the man she hopes I am. I don't
know what's okay and what's not. The man
is fumbling in his empty pockets for change.
I feel a lot like that.

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Reprinted in Taking Action, edited by Adam Davis (Great Books Foundation, 2012).

Interpretive Questions

- What's going on in the poem? Can you summarize the action?
- How does the driver understand to whom and for what he is responsible?
- Are there people he feels more responsible for than others? How does he prioritize?

Reflective Questions

- If you were in the same situation, would you do the same?
- What would get you to stop on the side of the road? What would keep you from stopping?
- How do you decide for whom you are responsible?

You can use the space below to make some notes to yourself.

4. PERSPECTIVES FROM JEWISH TRADITION

How do these questions about responsibility look through a Jewish lens? Here are two excerpts from the Babylonian Talmud (redacted in the 5th century CE), as well as one from the Torah and one from the contemporary Rabbi Jonathan Sacks, former Chief Rabbi of England, that may offer some other possibilities for thinking about responsibility. Please read them aloud together. You need not discuss all of the texts; feel free to choose those that speak to you. These texts are merely tools for reflecting on your own stories and experiences. Please use them in a way that organically continues or deepens the conversation you have been having so far.

דתני רב יוסף (שמות כ"ב) אם כסף תלוה את עמי את העני עמך, עמי ונכרי - עמי קודם, עני ועשיר - עני קודם, ענייך ועניי עירך - ענייך קודמין, עניי עירך ועניי עיר אחרת - עניי עירך קודמין.

Rav Yosef taught: "If you lend money to any of my people that are poor with you" (Exodus 20:2). [This teaches, if the choice for helping lies between] a Jew and a non-Jew, a Jew has preference; the poor or the rich, the poor takes precedence; your poor [i.e. your relatives] and the [general] poor of your town, your poor come first; the poor of your city and the poor of another town, the poor of your town have prior rights.
— Babylonian Talmud, Bava Metzia 71a

ת"ר: מפרנסים עניי נכרים עם עניי ישראל, ומבקרין חולי נכרים עם חולי ישראל, וקוברין מתי נכרים עם מתי ישראל, מפני דרכי שלום.

Our Rabbis taught: We sustain the non-Jewish poor with the Jewish poor, visit the non-Jewish sick with the Jewish sick, and bury the non-Jewish dead with the Jewish dead, for the sake of peace.
--Babylonian Talmud, Gittin 61a

- Do you agree with the priorities that Rav Yosef has outlined? Why or why not?
- What do you think "for the sake of peace" in the second reading, meant at the time it was written? How might you understand it now?
- How do these texts intersect with the tension that the narrator in the poem felt?
- It's possible to see a tension between the first text's suggestion that we care for Jews first and the second text's instruction to care for both Jews and non-Jews. Do you feel this tension in your own life? Which of these approaches more closely represents your own priorities in giving or serving?

David Hume noted that our sense of empathy diminishes as we move outward from the members of our family to our neighbors, our society and the world. Traditionally, our sense of involvement with the fate of others has been in inverse proportion to the distance separating us and them. What has changed is that television and the Internet have effectively abolished distance. They have brought images of suffering in far-off lands into our immediate experience. Our sense of compassion for the victims of poverty, war and famine runs ahead of our capacity to act. Our moral sense is simultaneously activated and frustrated. We feel that something should be done, but what, how, and by whom?

--Rabbi Jonathan Sacks, *The Dignity of Difference* (2002).

- How do you personally decide whom to help? Do you prioritize those in greater need, or those in your local community?
- Do you have particular places to which you feel a sense of ownership or obligation? What are they?
- Do you think the globalization that Rabbi Sacks refers to affects our obligations as articulated in the Talmudic texts above? Are we still primarily obligated to those of our own cities, or does greater knowledge of events far away change our sense of obligation?

Use the space below to reflect.

5. DO

The Talmud in Tractate Shevuot (39a) tells us, “*Kol Yisrael arevim zeh bazeh.*” That is, “All of Israel are responsible for one another.” At the same time, the 20th century theologian Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel was once quoted as saying, “In a democratic society, some are guilty, all are responsible.” How we understand for whom we are

responsible is not simple, and intersects with our sense of obligation as Jews, as Americans, and as human beings.

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 action you might take, or practice you might try, before we meet next time, based on what you're taking from this conversation?
- What's one obstacle to taking that action? How can you overcome it? Who might you need help from in order to do so?
- What could we do together as a community based on what we talked about today?

Use the space below to note your response to these questions, and then we'll do a final round of sharing.

Thank you for being part of this conversation.



Central Synagogue works tirelessly toward a world in which Judaism is central to the lives of Jews everywhere and is a profound and positive force for humanity. We are relentless in our pursuit of that goal — constantly evolving and always seeking new ways to be “more excellent.” We reach far beyond the walls of our synagogue to learn, worship, serve, and continually redefine what it means to be Jewish today.



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