

WHAT ARE YOU THANKFUL FOR?

ASK **BIG**
QUESTIONS

CENTRAL CONVERSATIONS
GUIDE FOR PARTICIPANTS

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 of a time when you said a genuine thank-you to someone else. It could be as small as saying thank you for a cup of coffee, or something much more profound. Take a moment to bring a story to mind, and then we'll each share what we thought of. You can use the space below to make some notes to yourself.

3. LEARN

Thankfulness is a paradoxical thing: as simple as saying “thanks,” and as complicated as our relationships and our lives.

Some people experience thankfulness as a debt. The 17th-century French thinker Jean-Jacques Rousseau wrote, “Gratitude is a duty which ought to be paid, but which none have a right to expect.” Thankfulness can come to feel like a burden, something that obligates us to others. That’s why cowboys in old westerns would say, “Much obliged, Ma’am”—they were obligated out of a sense of gratitude. And if gratitude is a debt, it can cause us to feel weighed down. Rousseau’s contemporary, Denis Diderot, said, “Gratitude is a burden, and every burden is made to be shaken off.” Thankfulness is more than a connection—it signifies a deep bond, to someone or something.

For that reason, thankfulness can also be experienced as a rush, a thrill, something that evokes deep emotions that are hard to put into words. The great English poet John Milton saw thankfulness along these lines: “Gratitude bestows reverence,” he wrote, “allowing us to encounter everyday epiphanies, those transcendent moments of awe that change forever how we experience life and the world.” In the Twentieth century,

the Jewish thinker Abraham Joshua Heschel put it this way: “We are struck with an awareness of the immense preciousness of being; a preciousness which is not an object of analysis but a cause of wonder; it is inexplicable, nameless, and cannot be specified or put in one of our categories.” For both Milton and Heschel, a general sense of thankfulness for life is directed at God and leads to a more open, generous sensibility towards other people.

Below is an essay from the program, “This I Believe,” by a woman named Robin Baudier. Robin lived in her family’s FEMA (Federal Emergency Management Agency) trailer for 10 months in 2006. Before Hurricane Katrina devastated the Gulf Coast, she worked on script development for an independent film producer in Los Angeles. Robin now has her own apartment but continues to help rebuild her parents’ house. We’ll take a moment read the essay together. You can also listen to it online at <http://thisibelieve.org/essay/26077>.

I believe in strange blessings. I have never been in such good shape. I have never spent so much time outside. I caught the last three sunsets in a row and unless I am mistaken, I will catch the one tonight. I have never felt so close to my family. I have never felt so sure that I was doing everything right.

I live in a FEMA trailer with my parents. I moved home from L.A. February before last, quitting the job it had taken me almost a year of miserable internships to get, to make sure first-hand that my family was okay. Now I work on my Dad’s house on the weekends and at his dental laboratory during the week. Shutting the curtain on the bunk bed area doesn’t always cut it for privacy, so I spend a lot of time outside exercising the dog and just trying to get away from people. I take her out on the levee and run to get rid of all my frustration with not being able to have a job that will allow me to afford rent. I run to get out, when I have been stuck inside, reading to escape from life, not even able to sit up straight in my tiny bunk. I run to feel like I am doing something when I am overwhelmed by all the things I can’t do anything about.

The reason I caught the sunset yesterday is that we have been waiting for two weeks for FEMA to come fix a leak in our plumbing. I was so frustrated with running out in a towel to turn the water off, then mopping up the floor with the rotating assortment of towels that we have hung outside the trailer that I decided to put on my bathing suit and shampoo under the hose. But God, that was a beautiful sunset last night.

I know it might sound strange that I am indirectly describing Hurricane Katrina as a blessing, since it took my family’s home and recovering from it has taken over our lives. But I love my awful life so much right now, that I find it hilarious when I am unable to convince anyone else of it.

I make less than the people working at Popeye’s. I repeatedly have to suffer the

indignity of telling people that I live with my parents. But I have finally gotten rid of back pain that the doctors always told me was from stress. I occasionally have weekends when I realize that I am building a house with my Dad, which I used to dream about when I was six and watching Bob Vila with him. And I am back where I belong, no longer kidding myself that there is anywhere else I want to be.

I believe in strange blessings, because taking away my house brought me home.

Interpretive Questions

- What are the blessings that Baudier experiences in the wake of the loss of her parents' home?
- What does she mean when she says, "I love my awful life so much right now?"
- How is she able to find gratitude in the midst of tragedy and dislocation?

Reflective Questions

- Have you ever been able to find gratitude in the middle of a difficult time?
- What's challenging about feeling thankful?
- What enables you to experience gratitude?

4. PERSPECTIVES FROM JEWISH TRADITION

How do these questions look through a Jewish lens? Here are several texts—a section from the Torah, a traditional blessing, and some contemporary musings—to consider. 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.

פי ה' אלהינו מביאך אל-ארץ טובה ארץ נחלי מים עינת ותהמת וצאים בפקעה ובהר: ארץ חטה ושערה נקפו ותאנה ורמון ארץ-זית שמן ודבש: ארץ אשר לא במספנת תאכל-פיה לקם לא-תחסר כל בה ארץ אשר אבניה ברזל ומהרביה תחצב נחשת: ואכלת ושבעת וברכת את-ה' אלהיך עליה-ארץ הטבה אשר נתורלה:

For, Adonai your God is bringing you to a good land—a land with rivers and deep springs flowing to the valleys and hills. It is a land filled with wheat, barley, grapes, figs, and pomegranates, a land of olive oil and honey— a land without scarcity. You will eat bread in it and lack nothing. It is a land where rocks are iron and you can dig copper from its mountains. When you have eaten and are satisfied, bless Adonai your God for the good land which God has given you.

~Deuteronomy 8:7-10

- What is the connection between the description of the Land of Israel and the blessing of thanks that we are commanded to give?
- What is the connection between satisfaction and gratitude in this text?
- The Talmud (in Brachot 35a) suggests that “everyone who enjoys something of this world without a blessing commits sacrilege.” Do you think that’s true? How does that idea relate to this text from Deuteronomy?

The Shehechyanu blessing is recited at the beginning of a holy day; at the first performance of certain annual mitzvot; when eating a fruit for the first time in the year; when seeing a friend for the first time in a month; when acquiring a new home or clothes; at the birth of a child; during a conversion; or when doing something that happens infrequently, or for the first time.

בְּרוּךְ אַתָּה יְהוָה אֱלֹהֵינוּ מֶלֶךְ הָעוֹלָם, שֶׁהִתְיַנְּנוּ וְקִיַּמְנוּ וְהִגִּיעְנוּ לְזֶמֶן הַזֶּה

Blessed are You, Adonai our God, who has granted us life, sustained us, and enabled us to reach this moment.

- What does the text of this blessing tell you about gratitude?
- What do the various ways in which this blessing is used tell you about the way Judaism understands thankfulness?
- How can this blessing—or blessings in general—enable you to think about being thankful?

The term “Jew” comes from the Hebrew word *Yehudah* meaning thanks, joy and gratitude. At the core of the Jewish way is a resilient joy that directs our attention toward the blessings we already have, those we need to work toward to realize, and the need to share those blessings in community.

--Rabbi Brad Artson, “Expanding Circles of Thanks,” in *The Huffington Post*

- Rabbi Artson links the word for “Jew” to its linguistic root, connected to the word for praise. Do you agree that this is “at the core of the Jewish way”?
- In what ways does this understanding of what it means to be a Jew connect with Baudier’s experiences after Hurricane Katrina?
- Does his understanding relate to your own understanding of thankfulness?
- What are you thankful for?

Use the space below to write some notes to yourself.

5. DO

The Midrash (Leviticus Rabbah 9:7) suggests that, in the World to Come, “all sacrifices will be annulled, but the Thanksgiving Sacrifice will not be annulled. All prayers will be annulled, but prayers of thanksgiving will not be annulled.” Our ability to express gratitude and thankfulness for what we have is, perhaps, one of the most eternal aspects of our humanity. It enables us to engage our lives with joy and humility, and to, perhaps, understand even more clearly than ever before what might be possible.

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?

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.



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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