

# WHAT DOES THE WORLD NEED FROM YOU?

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 & SHARE

Welcome, and thank you for joining this conversation. Please take a moment to think about the words “give” and “need.” What is a moment in your own life that comes to mind when you hear these words? Use the space below to write some notes to yourself or to draw or picture (or just think). When you’re ready, please share your thoughts.

## 3. LEARN

We are here in response to the question, What does the world need from you? Discerning our answer to this question is a key piece of developing our sense of purpose. American writer Frederick Buechner observed, “The place God calls you to is where your deep gladness and the world's deep hunger meet,” (*Wishful Thinking*, 1973). When we find the world’s deep hunger, we can answer it with what fuels our own passion. And when those two meet, we experience a sense of alignment, the deep gladness Buechner talks about.

But maybe the world doesn’t need us to identify needs. Maybe, in the words of Oprah Winfrey, the world just needs us to be our best selves. This way of looking at things is epitomized in a quote attributed to Australian Aboriginal activist Lila Watson. “If you have come to help me, you are wasting your time. But if you have come because your liberation is bound up with mine, then let us walk together.” In this view, it is more important to understand how our own needs are bound up with the needs of other people than to see ourselves as saviors providing for the others’ needs.

These are two different ways of approaching our question, What does the world need from you? They animate the work of poet Marge Piercy and Rabbi Shmuly Yanklowitz. Let’s read these two pieces together and take some time to unpack them.

**To Be of Use**  
by Marge Piercy

The people I love the best  
jump into work head first  
without dallying in the shallows  
and swim off with sure strokes almost out of sight.  
They seem to become natives of that element,  
the black sleek heads of seals  
bouncing like half submerged balls.

I love people who harness themselves, an ox to a  
heavy cart,  
who pull like water buffalo, with massive patience,  
who strain in the mud and the muck to move things  
forward,  
who do what has to be done, again and again.

I want to be with people who submerge  
in the task, who go into the fields to harvest  
and work in a row and pass the bags along,  
who stand in the line and haul in their places,  
who are not parlor generals and field deserters  
but move in a common rhythm  
when the food must come in or the fire be put out.

The work of the world is common as mud.  
Botched, it smears the hands, crumbles to dust.  
But the thing worth doing well done  
has a shape that satisfies, clean and evident.  
Greek amphoras for wine or oil,  
Hopi vases that held corn, are put in museums  
but you know they were made to be used.  
The pitcher cries for water to carry  
and a person for work that is real.

"To be of use" by Marge Piercy © 1973, 1982.

From *Circles on the Water*, Alfred A. Knopf, Inc. and  
Middlemarsh, Inc., 1982.

**From "Power, Passion and Partnership"**  
by Rabbi Shmuly Yanklowitz

We should emphasize methods of social action that effect the most change, while also promoting multiple approaches, in order to make use of the diverse talents and careers found within the Jewish community. Some people choose to serve as great philanthropists, some as community organizers and lobbyists, while others are social workers, or clergy activists. We must encourage all of these options to build our power base of partnership while adhering to the famous Jewish education principle of "chanoch la-na'ar al pi darko," (Proverbs 22:6: "Educate the child in his way.") educating based on the path of the particular student. After identifying our core values and concerns, we must learn to actualize our spheres of influence and skills in the most effective way possible. If we are well-connected to power, to wealth, or armed with a particular kind of knowledge, these factors should be taken into account.

"Power, Passion and Partnership," by Shmuly Yanklowitz, from *Jewish Choices, Jewish Voices: Social Justice*, Edited by Elliot N. Dorff and Danya Ruttenberg. The Jewish Publication Society, 2010.

### Questions on “To Be of Use”

- What does the narrator mean in the last lines when she says, “The pitcher cries for water to carry / and a person for work that is real?”
- What is “real” work?

### Questions on “Power, Passion, and Partnership”

- What does Yanklowitz mean when he invokes the notion of educating the “child in his way”?
- How does he understand what social action is and how it’s achieved?

### Questions for reflecting on both pieces together:

- Do you identify with one of the pieces more than the other?
- Have you ever clearly known what the world, or part of the world, needed from you?
- What do you want to give the world?

Use the space below to write some notes to yourself. Then we’ll have some time to share our responses with each other.

## 4. PERSPECTIVES FROM JEWISH TRADITION

Both Marge Piercy and Shmuly Yanklowitz offer, in their way, a Jewish perspective on our question. Here are some other sources, however, that may offer still other ways of thinking about it. Below are a Hasidic story and a passage from the Babylonian Talmud (redacted in the 5<sup>th</sup> Century C.E.) that may deepen our understanding of what the world needs from each of us. You need not discuss both 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.

*The following is a Hasidic tale about Rabbi Meshulam Zusya of Annapol, in Poland (1718-1800). As the story goes, one day he did not arrive to the study house as usual, so his students went to his home to see what had happened.*

The students entered Rabbi Zusya's house. In the far corner of the room they saw the old rabbi lying huddled in bed, too ill to get up and greet them. "Rabbi Zusya!" his students cried. "What has happened? How can we help you?"

"There is nothing you can do," answered Zusya. "I'm dying and I am very frightened."

"Why are you afraid?" the youngest student asked. "Didn't you teach us that all living things die?"

"Of course, course, every living thing must die some day," said the Rabbi. The young student tried to comfort Rabbi Zusya saying, "Then why are you afraid? You have led such a good life. You have believed in God with a faith as strong as Abraham's. and you have followed the commandments as carefully as Moses."

"Thank you. But this is not why I am afraid," explained the rabbi. "For if God should ask me why I did not act like Abraham, I can say that I was not Abraham. And if God asks me why I did not act like Moses, I can also say that I was not Moses." Then the rabbi said, "But if God should ask me to account for the times when I did not act like Zusya, what shall I say then?"

- Why is Rabbi Zusya afraid?
- What does it mean to "act like Zusya"?
- What does Zusya think the world—or God—requires of him? Does he think of those as the same thing, or different things? Do you?

כי הוּוּ מִפְטָרֵי רַבָּנָן מִבֵּי רַבִּי אָמִי, וְאָמְרֵי לֵה מִבֵּי רַבִּי חֲנִינָא, אָמְרֵי לֵיהּ הֲכִי: עוֹלָמְךָ תִּרְאֶה בְּחַיִּיד, וְאַחֲרֵיתֶךָ לַחַיֵּי הָעוֹלָם הַבָּא, וְתִקְוֶתְךָ לְדוֹר דּוֹרִים. לְבַךְ יִהְיֶה תְבוּנָה, פִּיךָ יִדְבֵר חֲכָמוֹת וְלִשׁוֹנְךָ יִרְחִישׁ רַנְנוֹת, עַפְעַפִּיךָ יִשִּׁירוּ נֶגְדְךָ, עֵינֶיךָ יֵאִירוּ בְּמֵאוֹר תּוֹרָה וּפְנִיךָ יִזְהִירוּ כְּזוֹהַר הַרְקִיעַ, שְׂפָתֶיךָ יִבְיַעו דַּעַת וְכִלְיוֹתֶיךָ תִּעֲלֶזְנָה מִיִּשְׂרָאֵל, וּפְעָמֶיךָ יִרְצֻוּ לְשִׁמוּעַ דְּבָרֵי עֲתִיק יוֹמִין.

When the Rabbis left the study house of Rabbi Ami—though some say it was the study house of Rabbi Hanina—they said to him: May you live to see your world fulfilled. May your destiny be for the World to Come. May your hope be in the generations to come. May your heart meditate on understanding. May your mouth speak wisdom. May your tongue utter songs of praise. May your eyelids look straight before you. May your eyes be enlightened by the light of the Torah and may your face radiate like the brightness of the firmament. May your lips speak knowledge. May your insides rejoice in righteous acts. May your steps run to hear the words of the Ancient of Days.

~ Babylonian Talmud, 17a

- What values does this text articulate?
- What would it look like to live out the blessings offered here?
- What are the challenges to doing so?

- What kind of vision of meeting the world's needs does this text offer?

## 5. DO

The theologian Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel (1907-1972) was once asked what message he had for young people. He replied, "Let them remember that there is a meaning beyond absurdity. Let them be sure that every deed counts, that every word has power, and that we all can do our share to redeem the world in spite of all absurdities and all frustrations and all disappointments. And, above all, remember . . . to build a life as if it were a work of art." We hope that this conversation has helped you to better understand what the world needs of you—and ways your own life might be able to create meaning beyond absurdity in word, deed, and the very act of living itself.

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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