

WHAT HAVE YOU LEARNED SO FAR?

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 our conversation. Please tell us about an important teacher in your life. You can use the space below to make some notes to yourself.

3. LEARN

What is learning? Often times we talk about learning in terms of skills: we study so that we can pass a test, so that we can earn a degree, so that we can get a job, so that we can make money and buy the things we need and want. Political leaders frequently invoke this idea of learning as a means to economic competitiveness. Learning means mastering knowledge, remembering facts and rules. It means putting stuff into our heads, like the Far Side cartoon to the right.



But there are other traditions about learning. “The capacity of knowledge is present in everyone’s soul,” Plato writes in the Republic. “That’s what Education should be, the art of turning the soul.” For Plato, as for many philosophers, theologians, and great teachers, learning is not something we do simply for our ability to translate what we’ve learned into dollars and cents. Learning is something we do innately, because we are human beings. Learning leads us deeper into life. Learning is its own reward.

Learning can take place with our minds. But our minds are part of our bodies, and our bodies learn along with our minds. What have we learned, not only with our brains, with with our hands and hearts? In this sense, learning involves discipline—the way an athlete or a musician learns to play, or how all of us learn to do all the things we do with our bodies, from eating, walking and speaking, to making love, caring for children, and aging. Learning happens in the dimensions of mind, body, and soul.

The poet Julia Kasdorf shares some of what she has learned so far in life in her poem, “What I Learned From My Mother.” Please read it together below.

What I Learned From My Mother

By Julia Kasdorf

I learned from my mother how to love
the living, to have plenty of vases on hand
in case you have to rush to the hospital
with peonies cut from the lawn, black ants
still stuck to the buds. I learned to save jars
large enough to hold fruit salad for a whole
grieving household, to cube home-canned pears
and peaches, to slice through maroon grape skins
and flick out the sexual seeds with a knife point.
I learned to attend viewings even if I didn't know
the deceased, to press the moist hands
of the living, to look in their eyes and offer
sympathy, as though I understood loss even then.
I learned that whatever we say means nothing,
what anyone will remember is that we came.
I learned to believe I had the power to ease
awful pains materially like an angel.
Like a doctor, I learned to create
from another's suffering my own usefulness, and once
you know how to do this, you can never refuse.
To every house you enter, you must offer
healing: a chocolate cake you baked yourself,
the blessing of your voice, your chaste touch.

From *Sleeping Preacher*, University of Pittsburgh Press, 1992. Copyright © 1992 by Julia Kasdorf.

Interpretive Questions:

- What are the lessons that Kasdorf articulates having learned from her mother?
- Is there a deeper wisdom underneath some of the more concrete lessons she mentions? If so, what? What does she mean when she writes, "I learned to create/from another's suffering my own usefulness, and once/you know how to do this, you can never refuse"?
- How did Kasdorf learn these lessons? What was the means of teaching? Did her mother intend to teach all the lessons that she learned?

Reflective Questions:

- What people or events have been your greatest teachers? What did that teaching look like?
- How do you know when you've really learned something?
- What have been some of the most important lessons you've learned so far? How did you learn them?
- What do you hope to learn in the future?

4. PERSPECTIVES FROM JEWISH TRADITION

How do these questions look through a Jewish lens? Here are a few texts—one from the Babylonian Talmud (redacted in the 5th century C.E.), one by Rabbi Joseph B. Soloveitchik (1903-1993) and one from our traditional liturgy—that might offer some insights. 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.

אלו דברים שאדם עושה אותם ואוכל פירותיהן בעולם הזה והקרן קיימת לו לעולם הבא, ואלו הן: כיבוד אב ואם וגמילות חסדים והבאת שלום שבין אדם לחברו ותלמוד תורה כנגד כולם

These are the precepts whose fruits a person enjoys in this world but whose principal remains intact for them in the world to come. They are: honor due to father and mother, acts of kindness, early attendance at the house of study morning and evening, hospitality to guests, visiting the sick, providing for a bride, escorting the dead, absorption in prayer, bringing peace between human beings – and the study of Torah is equivalent to them all.

--Babylonian Talmud, Shabbat 127a

- What does it mean that a person may enjoy the fruits of certain acts in this world, but retains their principal in the world to come?
- Why do you think these are the precepts noted to have special merit?
- How do these precepts compare to the lessons that Julia Kasdorf learned from her mother?
- Why does the Talmud suggest that the study of Torah is equivalent to them all?

I start shiur (class). I don't know what the conclusion will be. Whenever I start the shiur, the door opens, another old man walks in and sits down. He is the grandfather of the Rav [that is to say, of Rabbi Soloveitchik himself], his name is Rav Hayyim Brisker, without whom you cannot learn nowadays. The door opens quietly again and another old man walks in. He is older than Rav Hayyim. He lived in the 17th century.... More visitors show up, some from 11th, 12th, 13th centuries, some from antiquity: Rabbi Akiva, Rashi, Rabbenu Tam, the Ra'avad, the Rashba, more and more come in. What do I do? I introduce them to my pupils and the dialogue commences. The Rambam says something and the Ra'avad disagrees: sometimes it's very nasty; the Ra'avad uses very sharp language. A [student] jumps up to defend the Rambam against the Ra'avad and the [student] is fresh. You know how young [students] are. He uses improper language so I correct him... I try to analyze what the young [student] meant... another [student] intervenes... we call upon Rabbenu Tam to express his opinion and suddenly a symposium of generations comes into existence. Generations, young boys—22 or 23—and my generation, the generation of Rav Hayyim Brisker... of Rabbenu Tam, Rav Hai Ga'on, Rabbi Akiva, and Rabbi Elazar, and Rabbi Tzvi Pittinsky... We all speak one language... We all chat. We all laugh. We all enjoy the company. We all pursue one goal.... This unity of generations, this march of centuries, this conversation of generations this dialogue between antiquity and present will finally bring the redemption of the Jew.

--Rabbi Joseph B. Soloveitchik, "The First Jewish Grandfather."

- How does Rabbi Soloveitchik describe Jewish learning?
- How is this different from—or similar to—other kinds of learning in your life?
- Does this description resonate with your own experience of studying Judaism?

This is an excerpt from Ahava Rabba, which is part of the traditional morning liturgy. It's recited just before the Sh'ma.

הַמְּרַחֵם, רַחֵם עָלֵינוּ, וְתֵן בְּלִבֵּנוּ לְהַבִּין וּלְהַשְׁפִּיל, לְשִׂמוּעַ, לְלִמּוּד וּלְלַמֵּד, לְשִׁמְרַת וּלְעֲשׂוֹת וּלְקַיֵּם אֶת כָּל דְּבָרֵי תִּלְמוּד תּוֹרָתְךָ בְּאַהֲבָה.

... O Merciful One, have mercy upon us, instill in our hearts the ability to understand and discern, to heed, learn, and teach, and to observe, perform and fulfill all the words of Your Torah with love.

- What kind of language is used to describe the process of “instilling in our hearts”? Why are there so many different verbs used?
- Does this description of learning resonate with your own experience of learning? Of learning certain kinds of things but not others?

Use the space below to write some notes to yourself.

5. DO

The question we asked in this conversation was, What have you learned so far? Those last two words, so far, remind us that learning is never done. It continues all the time. The traditional Jewish concept of heaven even extends learning beyond this life, as the ultimate reward in the afterlife is to study Torah with God. We never finish learning, and thus this conversation is never really over. We can return to it year after year, whether we're formally in school or not. As Yogi Berra said, “Life is a learning experience, only if you learn.”

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.

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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