

WHEN ARE YOU SATISFIED?

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 our conversation. Please tell us about one time that you felt truly satisfied. You can use the space below to make some notes to yourself.

3. LEARN

The dictionary definition of satisfaction is “fulfillment of one's wishes, expectations, or needs, or the pleasure derived from this.” So it’s difficult to talk about what it is that makes us satisfied without spending some time on the question of our wishes and desires. Although people have always had wishes, desires, longings, our experience of desire is also connected to the culture in which we live. As writer Caroline Knapp notes, "Some twelve billion display ads, three million radio commercials, and 200,000 TV commercials flood the nation on a daily basis—most of us see and hear about 3,000 of them a day, all of them lapping at appetite, promising satisfaction, pulling and tugging and yipping at desire...."

We live in a world that’s constantly manufacturing new desires, new ways that we might feel unfulfilled. We see exciting new technology that we realize could make our lives so much cooler. A myriad of beauty products scream from the shelves that they will make hair just a little glossier, skin just a little smoother. We walk past the bakery and the brownies call to us, seductively, taking over our attention and awareness for a time. Sex is referenced so pervasively in our media—in music, advertising, and elsewhere—that we barely see it anymore, at least on the conscious level. The unconscious level is something else entirely.

So with all of these desires and longings being offered to us, how do we find satisfaction? What does having enough feel like? How do we know when we’re there? How can we feel more satisfied, more of the time?

Author Geneen Roth has written a number of books on desire and satisfaction—particularly related to food, money and spirituality. This essay, “The Naked Truth,” appears on her website, at <http://geneenroth.com/the-naked-truth.php> Please read this essay aloud, as a group.

Back in the last century, I weighed almost twice as much as I do now—and I desperately wanted to be thin. So desperately that if a genie had appeared (and I'm not exactly proud of this fact) and offered me one wish, it would have been to wake up thin the next day. World peace could wait. Since I was convinced that being fat was the cause of my suffering, I was also convinced that if I was thin, my problems would disappear, and happiness would be mine.

When I lost weight, my focus changed and I became a serial monogamist in the "If only I had" department. The belief that my suffering would end when I got thin was transferred to "when my book got published" which (after publication) was then transferred to "when I fell in love" which (after marriage) was transferred to "when I live in the right house." (There were, of course, a few articles of clothing thrown in the mix of I-will-be-happy-when: I get the perfect black boots, the sassy-but-not-too revealing dress, the earrings that were big but not gaudy).

What I didn't realize was that I had become so entranced with the belief that happiness was in the future that I walked through my life as if I was jet-lagged and living in an airport shopping mall with the same stores, smells, sights as all the other airports I'd visited. Within a few days of arriving at the place or situation I thought was going to fix everything, the landscape of my mind felt exactly the same as it did before. Same thoughts. Same discontent. Even though I'd waited so long to get from "here" to "there," I always ended up in the same place—"here."

The possibility of stopping the search, or that there was nothing to fix and nowhere to go didn't occur to me. (Okay, maybe it did occur to me once or twice during my thirty years of mediation practice, but the truth was that sweetness and quiet and stillness weren't as compelling as angst, drama and the chatter of discontent). I mean, seriously: "now" just wasn't sexy or appealing. It didn't hold promises of splashy parades with cymbals and drums and opera singers thrashing about. The naked now, the one without frills, the one that was always here, just wasn't as interesting as what could be. What should be. What I wanted to be. I was enthralled, as the Buddhist teacher Choygam Trungpa described it, with the process of "putting make-up on space."

Finally, and this is going to sound a bit more linear than it actually was or is, love pierced the trance. I realized I wanted something more than I wanted to keep walking through the airports of my mind. I wanted to be here. For the purpling of sunsets and the clanking of dishes. For the soft way my husband's hand feels in mine. I wanted to breathe when I breathed and eat when I ate. I wanted to live in and through my body, not my mind. And, not only did I realize I wanted that, I knew without a doubt that I already was that. Am that.

It's not a done deal over here, however. The pull of my thoughts is still strong, but the love for this moment is stronger. The pull of drama still compels me, but the love for showing up where I am is bigger. Nothing can compete with the love of this life blazing in and through me, which, along with the depth of night-sky stillness, also includes outrageous laughter, salted chocolate and occasional swoops of sadness.

Every time I find myself wandering away, I bring myself back to what I love: to this very moment, these exact sensations, this coolness on the surface of my right arm, the sound of a single bird cheeping, the low thrum of the heater. I take, as Eckhart says, one conscious breath and return to where the feast is: here. And when I do—when thoughts drop away and the one I refer to as "I" disappears—what remains is contentment itself. And it is enough.

Interpretive Questions:

- What does Roth mean when she says that she became “a serial monogamist in the ‘If only I had’ department”?
- What appealed to her about thinking about future events? What was the problem with it?
- What did she change? How? Did she find satisfaction?

Reflective Questions:

- Do you relate to Roth's description of the "airports of [her] mind" and living in the "if only"? If you do, how does it feel for you?
- Does her way of finding satisfaction—by appreciating the present moment—work for you? Why or why not? Are there certain aspects of your life in which it's easier to come by than others?
- Are there times when it's a good thing to not be satisfied? When can dissatisfaction with what currently is be beneficial?
- What's the difference between satisfaction and complacency or resignation?
- When are you satisfied? And what can you do to create more satisfaction in your life?

4. PERSPECTIVES FROM JEWISH TRADITION

How do these questions look through a Jewish lens? Here are a few traditional texts—one from the Mishnah (redacted in the 2nd century C.E.), one from the Babylonian Talmud (redacted in the 5th century C.E.), and one from the Biblical Book of Proverbs—that might offer some other possibilities for thinking about satisfaction, and the lack thereof. 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.

איזה הוא עשיר השמח בחלקו

Who is rich? The one who is happy with their lot.

--Mishnah Pirke Avot, 4:1

- Do you experience this to be true?
- How easy or difficult is it to obtain the "riches" suggested in this text?
- How does this text relate to Geneen Roth's understanding of satisfaction?

אמר ליה שמואל לרב יהודה: שיננא, חטוף ואכול חטוף ואישתי, דעלמא דאזלינן מיניה כהלולא דמי

Samuel said to R. Judah: Keen scholar, snatch and eat, snatch and drink. The world, which we all must leave, lasts no longer than a wedding feast.

--Babylonian Talmud, Eruvin 54a

- What does this text seem to be saying about satisfaction?
- Does this text offer a different idea about satisfaction than the previous text? If so, how?
- Is there a way to resolve these two ideas about what satisfaction is, and how it is obtained?

יש מפזר, ונוסף עוד; וחסך מישך, אך-למחסור. נפש-ברכה תדשן; ומרנה, גם-הוא יורא. מנע בר, יקבהו לאום; וברכה, לראש משביר. שחר טוב, יבקש רצון; ודרש רעה תבואנו. בוטח בעשרו, הוא יפול; וקעלה, צדיקים יפרכו.

Those who scatter [their grain] will increase, and those who withhold tend only to want. The beneficent soul will be made rich, and the one who satisfies [others] abundantly will be satisfied. The one who withholds grain--the people will curse him but blessing will be on the head of the one who distributes it. The one who earnestly seeks good pursues favor, but the one that seeks evil--it will come for him. The one that trusts in riches will fall, but the righteous will flourish like foliage.
--Proverbs 11:23-28

- How does one become satisfied in this text? How does one become not satisfied?
- Does this understanding of satisfaction resonate with your own experience?
- How does this text fit into the conversation so far?
- How does Judaism understand what satisfaction is? How do you understand what satisfaction is?
- When are you satisfied?

Use the space below to write some notes to yourself.

5. DO

There are some very good reasons why people do not feel satisfied—because they lack important basic needs such as food, shelter, or human connection; because they see the work necessary to create a better world; because they’re in the process of creating something new; because one of their relationships isn’t meeting their needs; or one of many other reasons. But even if there are real reasons for longing in our lives, perhaps there are things in which we can find satisfaction—and maybe even delight—in our lives as well. The Book of Ecclesiastes exhorts us to “go, eat your bread in gladness, and drink your wine in joy; for your action was long ago approved by God...Enjoy happiness with a woman that you love all the fleeting days of life that have been granted to you under the sun—all your fleeting days....Whatever it is in your power to do, do with all your might.”

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?

Feel free to use the space below to write some notes to yourself.

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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