

# WHY BOTHER?

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 to our conversation. Please share one thing for which you make a little bit of extra effort. You can use the space below to make some notes to yourself.

## 3. LEARN

Sometimes it can be difficult to motivate ourselves to take action. We all have a lot of competing pulls for our energy and focus: relationships, school or work, other obligations, hobbies, amusing diversions, and a host of other commitments and limitations. It can be difficult to prioritize taking action on other things, even if those are things we believe will improve our society or our world.

And it's not always clear that, even if we do bother to do those things, they will make a meaningful, positive impact. Unfortunately, the issues that often feel most pressing to us seem large and overwhelming. It can be very easy to wonder if our own hard work and efforts can have any meaningful impact at all.

So then what? Where does that leave us? When do you decide that it might not even be worth the bother—for you personally, or for the larger picture? When do you decide that it is worth it for you to bother? How do you make those decisions? What informs them?

Food journalist Michael Pollan wrote an essay called, “Why Bother?” for *The New York Times Magazine* in 2008. Please read the excerpt below out loud, as a group. You can find the whole piece online here: [bit.ly/1mZivjX](http://bit.ly/1mZivjX)

Why bother? That really is the big question facing us as individuals hoping to do something about climate change, and it’s not an easy one to answer. For me the most upsetting moment in “An Inconvenient Truth” came long after Al Gore scared the hell out of me, constructing a convincing case that the survival of life on earth as we know it is threatened by climate change. No, the really dark moment came during the closing credits, when we are asked to . . . change our light bulbs. The immense disproportion between the magnitude of the problem Gore had described and the puniness of what he was asking us to do about it was enough to sink your heart.

There are so many stories we can tell ourselves to justify doing nothing, but perhaps the most insidious is that, whatever we do manage to do, it will be too little too late. Climate change is upon us, and it has arrived well ahead of schedule. For us to wait for legislation or technology to solve the problem of how we’re living our lives suggests we’re not really serious about changing—something our politicians cannot fail to notice. They will not move until we do.

If you do bother, you will set an example for other people. If enough other people bother, each one influencing yet another in a chain reaction of behavioral change, markets for all manner of green products and alternative technologies will prosper and expand. (Just look at the market for hybrid cars.) Consciousness will be raised, perhaps even changed: new moral imperatives and new taboos might take root in the culture. Driving an S.U.V. or eating a 24-ounce steak or illuminating your McMansion like an airport runway at night might come to be regarded as outrages to human conscience. Not having things might become cooler than having them. And those who did change the way they live would acquire the moral standing to demand changes in behavior from others—from other people, other corporations, even other countries.

All of this could, theoretically, happen. What I’m describing is a process of viral social change, and change of this kind, which is nonlinear, is never something anyone can plan or predict or count on. Sometimes you have to act as if acting will make a difference, even when you can’t prove that it will. That was precisely what happened in Communist Czechoslovakia and Poland, when a handful of individuals like Vaclav Havel and Adam Michnik resolved that they would simply conduct their lives “as if” they lived in a free society. That improbable bet created a tiny space of liberty that, in time, expanded to take in, and then help take down, the whole of the Eastern bloc.

So what would be a comparable bet that the individual might make in the case of the environmental crisis? Find one thing to do in your life that doesn't involve spending or voting, that may or may not virally rock the world but is real and particular (as well as symbolic) and that, come what may, will offer its own rewards. Maybe you decide to give up meat, an act that would reduce your carbon footprint by as much as a quarter. Or you could try this: determine to observe the Sabbath. For one day a week, abstain completely from economic activity: no shopping, no driving, no electronics.

But the act I want to talk about is growing some—even just a little—of your own food. Measured against the Problem We Face, planting a garden sounds pretty benign, I know, but in fact it's one of the most powerful things an individual can do—to reduce your carbon footprint, sure, but more important, to reduce your sense of dependence and dividedness. You can grow the proverbial free lunch—CO<sub>2</sub>-free and dollar-free. You will [also] probably notice that you're getting a pretty good workout there in your garden, burning calories without having to get into the car to drive to the gym. Also, by engaging both body and mind, time spent in the garden is time (and energy) subtracted from electronic forms of entertainment. You begin to see that growing even a little of your own food is one of those solutions that actually beget other solutions.

But there are sweeter reasons to plant that garden, to bother. At least in this one corner of your yard and life, you will have begun to heal the split between what you think and what you do, to commingle your identities as consumer and producer and citizen. The single greatest lesson the garden teaches is that our relationship to the planet need not be zero-sum, and that as long as the sun still shines and people still can plan and plant, think and do, we can, if we bother to try, find ways to provide for ourselves without diminishing the world.

As we reflect on these texts, here are a few questions to consider:

### Interpretive Questions

- What reasons does Pollan give for feeling it might not be worth the bother to make changes to help the environment?
- What arguments does he make in favor of bothering?
- What does he mean when he says that “solutions... beget other solutions?” Do you agree with him?
- Why does he introduce the notion of observing the Sabbath, keeping Shabbat, as a possible way to help the environment?
- What does making an effort look like, in Pollan's opinion? Does it demand a total lifestyle change?

## Reflective Questions

- When was a time that you decided not to bother taking action about something? Why didn't you?
- When was a time that you decided to do something? What was different about this time?
- Does your Jewish identity or understanding of the Jewish tradition impact your sense of when and how to bother?
- What factors do you need in place to feel that it's worthwhile to take an action?
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## 4. PERSPECTIVES FROM JEWISH TRADITION

How do these questions look through a Jewish lens? Here are some texts—classical midrash, as well as modern and contemporary takes—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.

When confronted by an opportunity, or a trying situation, all sorts of reasons can arise that steer us away from active engagement. Imagine coming to the end of your life and realizing how much you missed because you leaned away from life instead of gently and wisely leaning into the challenges and possibilities. Willingness means being ready to engage, contribute, and even risk. When the children of Israel came to the Red Sea, it only split for them once Nachshon ben Aminadav walked into the water up to his chin.  
--Alan Morinis *Every Day, Holy Day*

- What reasons does Morinis give for bothering, even when it's challenging?
- How does he use the example of Nachshon ben Aminadav to make his case?
- When, for you, has engaging a challenge felt like walking into water up to your chin?
- What happened when you did so? Was it what you had expected?

According to the midrash in Bereshit Rabbah (36:1), the [people that God destroyed in the Flood] see God as blind, indifferent, callous to the world. What follows is that human beings feel themselves free to be likewise blind, indifferent, and callous:

“When He is silent, who will condemn? If He hides His face, who will see Him, be it nation or man?” [Job 34:29]. R. Meir said, “This is what the generation of the Flood said: He is silent toward His world; He hides His face from His world, like a judge who has a curtain drawn over his face, so that he does not know what is happening outside. ‘The clouds screen Him so He cannot see’” [Job 22:14].

God’s silence, the curtain of cloud that screens man from His view—this is a philosophical understanding that justifies human cruelty. If God either ignores what is happening just beyond His line of sight, as it were, or if He is *shotef bakol*—indiscriminately destroys whole generations—then human society is freed from the yoke of justice and responsibility. Or, at least, until the terrors of such freedom become so palpable that a backlash sets in.

--Aviva Zornberg, *Genesis: The Beginning of Desire*

- How does the understanding of God described in this midrash generate a sense of indifference?
- What’s the significance of the fact that those who feel free to be blind are the “generation of the Flood”? Does the midrash implicitly paint their actions as justified, morally neutral, or problematic?
- Have you ever experienced God in the way that the Flood generation did?
- If so, how did that impact your actions—or your feelings about your actions?

We live one small moment at a time. One breath, one glance, one thought at a time. And yet, doesn’t life feel like a freight train, a long deafening, fast blur? Is it trite to say that you are the conductor and the engine and the track? You own this train and its cargo, its route. This is your life to imagine. Do not neglect the details. Do not turn away from the quiet voices within; they speak of love, of destiny, of goodness. Do not silence the thoughts that tell you to slow down; they want to capture your attention and show you something grand. Do not ignore the heart that desires to rejoice; listen to the voices of the children at play, they delight. Learn to be delighted. Listen to the early-morning hum of your home, the quiet sounds before others awake. Notice that what you see all around is beauty, no matter where you are, No matter what your state—right before your eyes beauty awaits. Because yours is the breath, the glance, the one simple precious thought.

--Rabbi Karyn Kedar *Omer: the Counting*

- How is Kedar conceptualizing what it means to bother?
- How is this different from, or similar to, Pollan’s or Morinis’ ideas?
- When, for you, is bothering about turning towards “the quiet voices within”?
- When is it about noticing the beauty around you?

- How do these kinds of acts of attention impact your sense of bothering in regards to other aspects of your life?

מלכה של תורה במשפט שהוא עושה מעמיד את הארץ, ואיש תרומות יהרסנה אם משים אדם עצמו כתרומה הזו שמושלכת בזויות הבית ואומר מה לי בטורח הצבור מה לי בדיניהם מה לי לשמוע קולם שלום עליך נפשי הרי זה מחריב את העולם

If a person of learning participates in public affairs and serves as judge or arbiter, he gives stability to the land... But if he sits in his home and says to himself, "What have the affairs of society to do with me?... Why should I trouble myself with the people's voices of protest? Let my soul dwell in peace!"—if he does this, he overthrows the world.

-- Midrash Tanhuma, Mishpatim 2

- How does this text portray the effects of bothering?
- How is it similar to, or different from, Pollan's understanding?
- What are the criteria for being obligated to engage, here?
- When have you asked yourself, "What have the affairs of society to do with me?"
- Do you feel that you're obligated to participate in public affairs? In what way?

Just to be is a blessing. Just to live is holy. And yet being alive is no answer to the problems of living. To be or not to be is not the question. The vital question is: how to be and how not to be? The tendency to forget this vital question is the tragic disease of contemporary man, a disease that may prove fatal, that may end in disaster.

--Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel, "No Religion is an Island."

- What does Heschel seem to think the reason for bothering (or not bothering) is?
- What does he think is at stake? How is this similar to or different from the understanding of Midrash Tanhuma?
- Do you see the "tendency to forget this vital question" manifest in contemporary society? How?
- In what ways does the question of "how to be and how not to be" motivate you?

Use the space below to write some notes to yourself.

## 5. DO

It can be difficult to make the effort to take action, even on something we believe in. But perhaps we don't need to take responsibility for the whole big picture so much as taking each small step that we can, one step after another. If we each persist in doing some part of the work, perhaps, together, we can bring completion—or at least some healing—to the world and the people in it.

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 thing you want to change in your life based on this conversation?
- What's one obstacle to you making that change, and how can you overcome it? Who might you need help from in order to make this change?
- 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. Please join our conversation online at [AskBigQuestions.org](http://AskBigQuestions.org).



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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