How do we welcome?
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THE HOLINESS OF A GREETING

Dear friends and colleagues,

The Torah tells the story of Abraham sitting in his tent on a stiflingly hot day. When he sees three men nearby, he runs to greet them and goes to great lengths to make sure that they feel welcome and cared for. He doesn’t know who they are or what their stories are, but it doesn’t matter—regardless of their background or status, they’re warmly invited in.

This spirit of hospitality and inclusion is at the heart of the Jewish tradition. We, as a community, and a people, should always strive to keep our tent open, to proactively endeavor to make each and every person who crosses our threshold feel comfortable and at home.

Hillel is proud to partner with the Genesis Prize Foundation on this series of conversation guides aimed at expanding our thinking about what inclusion is, and can be. These guides are inspired by Genesis Prize recipient Michael Douglas’ call for inclusion of Jews from interfaith families, and we hope they open up discussion on a range of topics around inclusion. These guides are built using our award-winning Ask Big Questions methodology; the Big Questions animating these conversations can help all of our communities, on campus and beyond, become even more welcoming and caring. When we ask ourselves, and one another, What do we assume? When do you conform? What does your family teach? we learn how to best hear and understand one another, and to grow in empathy and connection.

The Talmud teaches that Rav Yehudah taught in the name of Rav, “Receiving one another is greater than greeting the Divine Presence.” When we run to include everyone in our tent, as Abraham does, we engage in work that is, perhaps, the holiest of all.

Warmly,

Sheila Katz
Vice President for Social Entrepreneurship
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Welcome

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• We will assume good faith in one another.
• We will open ourselves to listen and learn from one another.
• We won’t rush to fill the silence.

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Ask and Share

Welcome to our conversation. When you hear the word “family,” what feelings come up? Take a moment to sit with the question, and then we’ll share our names and what we thought of.
Learn

A strict definition of family runs something like this: “a group of people related to one another by blood or marriage.” It can be expanded to include “a person or people related to one and so to be treated with a special loyalty or intimacy.” But what does “related” mean? Is it only blood or marriage or civil union? Or can we be related in other ways, and therefore part of a family?

However we define family, however, we learn powerful lessons from the people with whom we live in intimate connection. As the medieval sage Maimonides puts it, “From one’s youth, one becomes accustomed to acting in accordance with the accepted behavior of one’s family and locale.” Is that a good thing? A bad thing? A neutral thing? What are the lessons that get passed down unconsciously, and what do we learn from, and teach, those closest to us as we all grow and change?

The actor Michael Douglas powerfully addressed some of these questions when accepting The Genesis Prize, which honors those who have attained excellence in their chosen fields and inspire others through their engagement and dedication to the Jewish community and/or the State of Israel. Please read the transcript of his speech below.

My journey to this stage was a long time in the making, but along the way there have been a number of key moments…and people…in my life that pointed me in the right direction, and that led to me being able to say these four words with great pride: I am a Jew.

There are those who insist that to say those words one’s mother has to be Jewish. And make no mistake, my being Jewish is as deep and as definitive as my genes…just not from my mom. Our great tradition came to me instead from my father Issur Danielovitch—known to the world as Kirk Douglas—and the values he instilled in me at a very young age.

…My Dad got bar mitzvahed a second time in the year 2000. I have to admit it was a little strange seeing an 83 year old bar mitzvah boy. At the service he talked movingly about tikkun olam: about his desire to repair and make better the world we live in. There was no contradiction between his Jewishness and his universalism, none at all. They supported each other. And it struck me at the time that the concept he embraced on the bima [the pulpit]—the idea of tikkun olam—was something that had always been an indelible part of our family.

Kirk reconnected with his Jewish roots after a horrible airplane accident when he turned 70. I also connected with my roots at age 70. So like father like son…except in my case it could be said “like son, like father.” And that is because of my son Dylan.

Although Catherine and I do not keep a religious household, three years ago Dylan developed, through his friends, a deep connection to Judaism. He would go to their houses for weekends and watch his friend’s families celebrate Shabbat; he would go with them to Hebrew School and watch as they learned and grew spiritually and intellectually. And after a few months of being part of this important part of his friends’ lives, Dylan came home one day and said he wanted a bar mitzvah. And when he started going to Hebrew school and studying for his bar mitzvah, it connected me with the religion of my father. Dylan brought the spirit and teachings of Judaism into our household and it touched Catherine and me, it moved us…. it made me think and it made me strong—and for that, Dylan, I will be eternally grateful.
This award means so much to me for so many reasons. For when an organization as important and respected as the Genesis Prize Foundation decides to choose as their 2015 laureate someone who in the eyes of some is “not really Jewish,” it sends a message to the world.

…And that is just one reason you’re giving me this honor is so significant for me. It tells the world that in a time when so many of our people are assimilating, when so many are marrying outside our faith, that there is room for all in the warmth and the safety of Abraham’s tent for inclusiveness and tolerance are Jewish values too.

Abraham and Sarah were not exclusionary, they welcomed strangers to their tent. According to a midrash, Abraham’s tent was open on all four sides so that he could welcome people from all directions. Abraham is our tradition’s hero of hospitality.

I strongly believe that Judaism should reflect that spirit of welcome in the tradition that began with Abraham’s tent. And this tent, this Jewish home, is one from which I will continue to try to live by the Jewish values handed down to me from my dad and now handed up to me by my son. Three generations of Douglases, from Kirk at home, to Catherine and my kids Dylan and Carys here tonight who are committed to keep working to repair the world.

Interpretive Questions

• What kinds of lessons did Douglas learn implicitly from his parents?
• What did he learn more explicitly about Judaism from his father?
• What did he learn from his son?
• What did Dylan learn from his friends?
• What kinds of lessons does Douglas try to pass along to his own children?

Reflective Questions

• What are the explicit messages that your family has passed on about Judaism or Jewishness?
• What are the implicit messages that you’ve learned from your family about Judaism, or Jewishness?
• What other kinds of messages has your family passed along to you?
• Are all lessons from family positive? If not, how do you sort out what messages are positive and which ones are negative? How do you deal with the less positive ones?
• What messages or lessons do you want to pass along to your own family—however you might define “family”?

Do

The medieval Jewish commentator and poet Ibn Ezra once said, “A person who has a family is likened to a branch attached to its source.” We don’t have to take every one of our family lessons to heart, but some of the best ones can nourish us like rain feeds a tree. When we’re embedded in a network of love and caring, connected to those to whom we’re bound by blood and those who we choose as family, we are able to grow taller and stronger as a result. And some of what our family teaches us can help us to do that, to give us strength to reach our leaves towards the sun.

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• What did you learn today?
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What does your family teach?

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Note for Facilitators: Give people a moment to organize their thoughts before you start asking for volunteers. It may be helpful to model this introduction for participants, so consider introducing yourself first. Be sure everyone states their name. You don’t need to go in order around a circle. Allow people to introduce themselves when the spirit moves them.

Learn

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Interpretive Questions

• What kinds of lessons did Douglas learn implicitly from his parents?
• What did he learn more explicitly about Judaism from his father?
• What did he learn from his son?
• What did Dylan learn from his friends?
• What kinds of lessons does Douglas try to pass along to his own children?

Reflective Questions

• What are the explicit messages that your family has passed on about Judaism or Jewishness?
• What are the implicit messages that you’ve learned from your family about Judaism, or Jewishness?
• What other kinds of messages has your family passed along to you?
• Are all lessons from family positive? If not, how do you sort out what messages are positive and which ones are negative? How do you deal with the less positive ones?
• What messages or lessons do you want to pass along to your own family—however you might define “family”?
Note for Facilitators: This is the heart of the conversation. Give people several minutes to prepare their thoughts. Then, if you would like, you can invite people to divide into pairs or triads and share their responses. Give them a good amount of time for this—10-20 minutes. It may be longer, depending on how much momentum they develop. Then reconvene in the large group and ask people to share from their small-group conversations.

A few tips on facilitation:
• The large-group debrief should take another 20-30 minutes.
• Begin by asking for a volunteer to share an insight from their conversation. You might begin by asking, “What came up?”
• When each person is done, thank them for their comment.
• Don’t feel a need to rush or to fill silences.
• If someone begins to monopolize the time, you might say, “I want to be sure that everyone has a chance to speak, so let’s try to make room for another person.”

For other ideas on facilitation, please refer to the AIR-IT guide at the end of this document. When you sense that the group has finished sharing its responses to these questions, invite people to share any further insights or reflections from the conversation, before moving to the conclusion.

Do

The medieval Jewish commentator and poet Ibn Ezra once said, “A person who has a family is likened to a branch attached to its source.” We don’t have to take every one of our family lessons to heart, but some of the best ones can nourish us like rain feeds a tree. When we’re embedded in a network of love and caring, connected to those to whom we’re bound by blood and those who we choose as family, we are able to grow taller and stronger as a result. And some of what our family teaches us can help us to do that, to give us strength to reach our leaves towards the sun.

As we close this conversation today, please consider a few more questions:

• What did you learn today?
• What is one change that you want to make based on this conversation?
• What’s one obstacle that might get in the way of you making that change? How can you overcome that obstacle? Who can help you get there?

Give people a minute to reflect on the question. Then ask anyone who wants to share to do so. When you sense that the group has finished sharing its response to this question, invite people to share any further insights or reflections from the conversation, before moving to the conclusion.
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What do we assume?

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Ask and Share

Welcome to our conversation. What is one thing that people assume about you? Take a moment to sit with the question, and then we’ll share our names and what we thought of.
Learn

We all make a lot of assumptions every day. We make choices all the time about whether to assume the best or the worst in people, about what situations seem safe, about how the world works based on the information that we have. Sometimes our assumptions turn out to be founded—and sometimes, they don’t.

Of course, our culture is rife with troubling assumptions about people based on their dress, skin color, gender presentation, sexuality, religion, perceived health or ability, and many other things—and those assumptions can have consequences ranging from the frustrating to the fatal.

Even the greatest heroes in the Jewish tradition struggle with assumptions. Moses, for example, assumed that he wouldn’t be successful when God instructed him to liberate the Israelites from Egypt—he assumed that the Israelites wouldn’t listen to him, wouldn’t take him seriously, and that he wouldn’t be able to communicate effectively to Pharaoh with a speech impediment. It took no less than the character of God to disabuse him of these false beliefs—beliefs that, if not shattered, could have left the Israelites trapped in slavery and hijacked the watershed moment in the creation of the Jewish people.

In this piece, below, writer Susan Goldberg discusses some of the assumptions about Jewishness and relationships that she found challenged when she became a mother. This originally appeared on the blog of InterfaithFamily.com. You can find the original version of the post here: http://bit.ly/1Z4sGsB. Please read this essay together.

But will the children be Jewish? “Of course they will,” I thought. So, I’m sure, did many of my girlfriends who were raised in the Conservative Jewish tradition. For us, the so-called “matrilineal principle” held sway: we had been taught that if a child has a Jewish mother, then that child is automatically Jewish, no matter what the father’s religious background. For many of us who entered into interfaith relationships, this relatively arbitrary rule was a small comfort: no one could deny that our kids would be Jewish.

But what if a child has two mothers? And what if those mothers have used a sperm donor — perhaps Jewish, perhaps not — to conceive their children? All of a sudden questions of identity, heredity, biology, and religion — not to mention concepts like “chosen family” and queer politics — become that much more complicated.

As a Jewish woman, married to a (mostly lapsed) Catholic woman, with a non-Jewish sperm donor, these questions loomed large as my partner and I pondered the possibility of having kids. I’m not religious, but I realized that I was fairly emotionally invested in the idea that my kids would be Jewish. Partly for those reasons, I was relieved when we decided that I would be the one to get pregnant. The matrilineal principle would kick in, the kids would be Jewish, and everything would be just fine.

But the more I thought about it, that position didn’t sit well with the very nature of the family I was about to create. It seemed downright hypocritical to accept, no questions asked, that our kids’ religion was a biological fact, while at the same time creating a family where at least one parent was not biologically related to the children.

Eight years and two children later, I have never been more convinced that parenting has almost nothing to do with biology and everything to do with the grueling, daily (and middle-of-the-nightly) grind of responsibility and duty — and even occasional joy — that comes from raising small people.
Over the same time span, I’ve also come to understand the same thing about what it means to be Jewish. For my family at least, Judaism isn’t and can’t be a simple matter of biology. Instead, like parenting, it’s a matter of the commitments and the choices we make in our everyday lives. In the same way that our children are our children through the daily routines and rhythms of our family life, they are Jewish — at least to us — by the cyclical routine and ritual of Judaism. Which is why I go to the trouble of baking challah and lighting Shabbat candles with them every week. Which is why we haul them to our tiny synagogue’s Hebrew school early on Sunday mornings. Which is why we make the trip by airplane each Passover to participate in raucous seders with grandparents and cousins and friends.

At the same time, understanding my religion the way I understand my parenting has allowed for more flexibility in the way that I practice Judaism. If a tradition or a rule — like, say, the matrilineal principle — doesn’t work, if it’s outdated, sexist, homophobic, or otherwise rests on values that don’t jibe with my own, I’m much more comfortable with the idea of jettisoning it to make way for something new…. My family’s Judaism, like my family itself, is a work in progress. As the heads of a two-mama (plus cherished donor dad) family, my partner and I can’t rely on assumptions around gender roles when it comes to parenting. And as an interfaith family, we can’t rely on unquestioned assumptions about Judaism when it comes to our religious practices. More and more, I realize just how much my Judaism has not only been affected, but also enriched, by my queerness: being forced to create new paths in one area of my life has yielded unexpected blessings in many others.

Interpretive Questions

• What assumptions does Goldberg originally hold about what Judaism, or Jewishness, is?
• What assumptions does Goldberg originally hold about parenting?
• How do her assumptions get challenged? Why?
• In what ways does her thinking change through the process of raising children?

Reflective Questions

• Do you relate to the narrator? If so, in what way?
• What assumptions do you make about your own family? Your Judaism and/or your Jewishness?
• Are assumptions always problematic? If not, when can they be useful?
• When have you made assumptions that then became challenged? What happened? Did that impact your experience in the future?
• How do others’ assumptions about you impact your experiences? How do they impact how you regard yourself?

Do

The Nobel Prize-winning French author André Gide once wrote, “The most important things to say are those which often I did not think necessary for me to say—because they were too obvious.” Sometimes, indeed, the things that seem most obvious to us are, actually, the ones most important to spell out—to ourselves, or to others. When we become aware of and thoughtful about the assumptions that we make, we open the possibility to see the world in a different way—and, potentially, to transform the ways in which we engage with our lives and the lives of those around us.

As we close this conversation today, please consider a few more questions:

• What did you learn today?
• What is one change that you want to make based on this conversation?
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But the more I thought about it, that position didn’t sit well with the very nature of the family I was about to create. It seemed downright hypocritical to accept, no questions asked, that our kids’ religion was a biological fact, while at the same time creating a family where at least one parent was not biologically related to the children.

Eight years and two children later, I have never been more convinced that parenting has almost nothing to do with biology and everything to do with the grueling, daily (and middle-of-the-nightly) grind of responsibility and duty — and even occasional joy — that comes from raising small people.

Over the same time span, I’ve also come to understand the same thing about what it means to be Jewish. For my family at least, Judaism isn’t and can’t be a simple matter of biology. Instead, like parenting, it’s a matter of the commitments and the choices we make in our everyday lives. In the same way that our children are our children through the daily routines and rhythms of our family life, they are Jewish — at least to us — by the cyclical routine and ritual of Judaism. Which is why I go to the trouble of baking challah and lighting Shabbat candles with them every week. Which is why we haul them to our tiny synagogue’s Hebrew school early on Sunday mornings. Which is why we make the trip by airplane each Passover to participate in raucous seders with grandparents and cousins and friends.

At the same time, understanding my religion the way I understand my parenting has allowed for more flexibility in the way that I practice Judaism. If a tradition or a rule — like, say, the matrilineal principle — doesn’t work, if it’s outdated, sexist, homophobic, or otherwise rests on values that don’t jibe with my own, I’m much more comfortable with the idea of jettisoning it to make way for something new…. My family’s Judaism, like my family itself, is a work in progress. As the heads of a two-mama (plus cherished donor dad) family, my partner and I can’t rely on assumptions around gender roles when it comes to parenting. And as an interfaith family, we can’t rely on unquestioned assumptions about Judaism when it comes to our religious practices. More and more, I realize just how much my Judaism has not only been affected, but also enriched, by my queerness: being forced to create new paths in one area of my life has yielded unexpected blessings in many others.

Interpretive Questions

• What assumptions does Goldberg originally hold about what Judaism, or Jewishness, is?
• What assumptions does Goldberg originally hold about parenting?
• How do her assumptions get challenged? Why?
• In what ways does her thinking change through the process of raising children?

Reflective Questions

• Do you relate to the narrator? If so, in what way?
• What assumptions do you make about your own family? Your Judaism and/or your Jewishness?
• Are assumptions always problematic? If not, when can they be useful?
• When have you made assumptions that then became challenged? What happened? Did that impact your experience in the future?
• How do others’ assumptions about you impact your experiences? How do they impact how you regard yourself?

Note for Facilitators: This is the heart of the conversation. Give people several minutes to prepare their thoughts. Then, if you would like, you can invite people to divide into pairs or triads and share their responses. Give them a good amount of time for this—10-20 minutes. It may be longer, depending on how much momentum they develop. Then reconvene in the large group and ask people to share from their small-group conversations.

A few tips on facilitation:
• The large-group debrief should take another 20-30 minutes.
• Begin by asking for a volunteer to share an insight from their conversation. You might begin by asking, “What came up?”
• When each person is done, thank them for their comment.
• Don’t feel a need to rush or to fill silences.
• If someone begins to monopolize the time, you might say, “I want to be sure that everyone has a chance to speak, so let’s try to make room for another person.”

For other ideas on facilitation, please refer to the AIR-IT guide at the end of this document. When you sense that the group has finished sharing its responses to these questions, invite people to share any further insights or reflections from the conversation, before moving to the conclusion.

Do

The Nobel Prize-winning French author André Gide once wrote, “The most important things to say are those which often I did not think necessary for me to say—because they were too obvious.” Sometimes, indeed, the things that seem most obvious to us are, actually, the ones most important to spell out—to ourselves, or to others. When we become aware of and thoughtful about the assumptions that we make, we open the possibility to see the world in a different way—and, potentially, to transform the ways in which we engage with our lives and the lives of those around us.

As we close this conversation today, please consider a few more questions:
• What did you learn today?
• What is one change that you want to make based on this conversation?
• What’s one obstacle that might get in the way of you making that change? How can you overcome that obstacle? Who can help you get there?

Thank you for being part of this conversation.

Give people a minute to reflect on the question. Then ask anyone who wants to share to do so. When you sense that the group has finished sharing its response to this question, invite people to share any further insights or reflections from the conversation, before moving to the conclusion.
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Note: This guide is part of Hillel’s initiative to promote deeper conversations about inclusion on campus. We hope that it prompts some powerful thoughts and reflections about how we can be more open and welcoming as individuals and as a community.

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Before we begin, we need to agree on a few things:

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• We will assume good faith in one another.
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Can we all agree to these things? If you feel, for whatever reason, that you cannot agree to these things, then please take this opportunity to exit. By staying in the circle, we all signify our intention to abide by these commitments.
Ask and Share

Take a moment to look at the pictures below, and to consider:
Who is conforming in each of these images? Who is not conforming? What do each of these images tell you about conformity? Please turn to the person next to you and discuss.

After you've had a moment with the images, we'll go around and share our names and one way in which we're conforming right now.

Learn

What does it mean to conform? One dictionary definition suggests that it is “to act in accordance or harmony; comply; (usually followed by) to conform to rules.” To conform is to behave according to the needs and expectations of the people or culture we find ourselves in. In some ways, it can be a positive thing—sometimes aligning ourselves with the needs of those around us can help us to be of service, to build trust, to create connections and bonds (after all, the word comes from the Latin *conformare*, from *con-* ‘together’ + *formare* ‘to form’). But it also means to comply; when conforming means complying, it’s not just about behaving in a polite way. It’s about surrendering a certain part of ourselves, an element of our will or autonomy.

The Book of Esther tells the story of Esther, a Jewish woman who married the ancient Persian King Ahashverosh and lives with him in his palace in the city of Shushan. She is installed as his queen after his first wife, Vashti, refuses his orders. Esther’s cousin, Mordechai, learns that Haman, one of the king’s viziers, has set in motion a genocidal plot to destroy the Jewish people. Esther intervenes with her husband, revealing her own Jewishness and ultimately saving her people.

There are many layers of conformity and non-conformity in this story; let’s look together at a few passages from the original text. Please read them together.
The king made a feast unto all the people that were present in Shushan the castle, both great and small, seven days, in the court of the garden of the king’s palace…. And they gave them drink in vessels of gold—the vessels being diverse one from another—and royal wine in abundance, according to the bounty of the king. … Also Vashti the queen made a feast for the women in the royal house which belonged to king Ahasuerus. On the seventh day, when the heart of the king was merry with wine, he commanded Mehuman, Bizzetha, Harbona, Bigtha, and Abagtha, Zethar, and Carcas, the seven chamberlains that ministered in the presence of Ahasuerus the king, to bring Vashti the queen before the king with the royal crown, to show the peoples and the princes her beauty; for she was fair to look on. But the queen Vashti refused to come at the king’s commandment by the chamberlains; therefore the king was very furious, and his anger burned in him.  (Esther 1:5-12)

Then the king’s servants that ministered unto him said: Let there be sought for the king young maidens fair to look on; and let the king appoint officers in all the provinces of his kingdom, that they may gather together all the fair young maidens unto Shushan the castle, to the house of the women, unto the custody of Hegai the king’s chamberlain, keeper of the women; and let their ointments be given them; and let the maiden that pleases the king be queen instead of Vashti.' And the thing pleased the king; and he did so. There was a certain Jew in Shushan the castle, whose name was Mordecai … And he brought up Hadassah, that is, Esther, his uncle’s daughter; for she had neither father nor mother, and the maiden was of beautiful form and fair to look on; and when her father and mother were dead, Mordecai took her for his own daughter. So it came to pass, when the king’s commandment and his decree was published, and when many maidens were gathered together unto Shushan the castle, to the custody of Hegai, that Esther was taken into the king’s house, to the custody of Hegai, keeper of the women. And the maiden pleased him, and she obtained kindness of him… and he advanced her and her maidens to the best place in the house of the women. Esther had not made known her people nor her kindred; for Mordecai had charged her that she should not tell it.  (Esther 2:2-10)

This last excerpt takes place later in the story, when news of Haman’s genocidal plan came to light:

And in every province, whithersoever the king’s commandment and his decree [that the Jews would be destroyed] came, there was great mourning among the Jews, and fasting, and weeping, and wailing; and many lay in sackcloth and ashes. And Esther’s maidens and her chamberlains came and told it her; and the queen was exceedingly pained… And Hathach [one of the king’s chamberlains] went forth to Mordecai unto the broad place of the city, which was before the king’s gate. And
Mordecai told him of all that had happened unto him, and the exact sum of the money that Haman had promised to pay to the king’s treasuries for the Jews, to destroy them. Also he gave him the copy of the writing of the decree that was given out in Shushan to destroy them, to show it unto Esther, and to declare it unto her; and to charge her that she should go in unto the king, to make supplication unto him, and to make request before him, for her people. And Hathach came and told Esther the words of Mordecai. Then Esther spoke to Hathach, and gave him a message unto Mordecai: ‘All the king’s servants, and the people of the king’s provinces, do know, that whosoever, whether man or woman, shall come unto the king into the inner court, who is not called, there is one law for him, that he be put to death, except those to whom the king holds out the golden sceptre, that he may live; but I have not been called to come in unto the king these thirty days.’ And they told Mordecai what Esther said. Then Mordecai asked them to answer Esther: ‘Think not with yourself that you shall escape in the king’s house, more than all the Jews. For if you hold your peace at this time, then relief and deliverance will come to the Jews from another place, but you and your father’s house will perish; and who knows whether you have not become royalty for such a time as this?’ Then Esther asked them to answer Mordecai: ‘Go, gather together all the Jews that are present in Shushan, and fast for me, and neither eat nor drink three days, night or day; I also and my maidens will fast in like manner; and so will I go in unto the king, which is not according to the law; and if I perish, I perish.’ So Mordecai went his way, and did all that Esther had commanded him. (Esther 4:3-17)

Interpretive Questions:

- Paraphrase the various plot points in your own words.
- Why does Mordechai tell Esther not to reveal the fact that she’s Jewish?
- When do the various characters in the story—Ahashverosh, Vashti, Esther, and Mordechai—conform? When do they not conform?
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In many ways, we conform without being aware of it—how we dress, what media we consume, where and how we spend our time. So much operates on the unconscious level. But sometimes we conform in conscious ways as well. As the Jewish homiletic collection the Pesikta Rabati noted, “Wherever you find crowds, you find the discomfort of pressure.” How we respond to that pressure, what value we place on it, where we decide to push back on it—and where we don’t—are, in many ways, very personal issues. The most important thing, however, is to be aware of what choices we make, why we make them, and what the implications of those choices might be.
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This text may seem intimidating to some facilitators because of its Biblical origin. Rest assured: It’s just like any other text! None of the interpretive questions have one right answer; there are a lot of possibilities with each. Beginning by paraphrasing the three plot points in contemporary language will help open up the rest of the conversation.

A few tips on facilitation:
• The large-group debrief should take another 20-30 minutes.
• Begin by asking for a volunteer to share an insight from their conversation. You might begin by asking, “What came up?”
• When each person is done, thank them for their comment.
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AIR-IT: A Guide to Facilitating Conversation

A: Ask Big Questions

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Big Question</th>
<th>Hard Question</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Anyone can answer it.</td>
<td>Experts will answer it best.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Example: “For whom are we responsible?”</td>
<td>Example: “What is the best economic policy for the United States?”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Focuses on wisdom and experience.</td>
<td>Focuses on intelligence and skill.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Example: “What’s the best advice you’ve ever received?”</td>
<td>Example: “Are human beings naturally good or evil?”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Uses plain language.</td>
<td>Uses technical language.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Directed at a subject (me, you, us).</td>
<td>Directed at an object (it).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Example: “What could we sacrifice to change the world?”</td>
<td>Example: “Is it better to cut spending or raise taxes to balance the federal budget?”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Opens up space and invites people in as participants.</td>
<td>Closes space and leads people to feel like spectators.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Leads to sharing personal stories.</td>
<td>Leads to debates about truth claims.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Emphasizes a both/and approach.</td>
<td>Emphasizes an either/or approach.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

I: Invite Personal Stories.

Big questions lead to sharing personal stories. The facilitator acts to support this by:

- Creating the space (physical, intellectual, emotional, spiritual) of trust in which these stories can be shared and honored.
- Weaving: Summarize, reflect back, and keep the stories and observations tethered to the big question. This helps the group to maintain integrity and not feel that it is fragmenting or fraying.

R: Really Listen.

Ask Big Questions conversations are marked by real listening. The facilitator’s reflecting back and weaving is crucial to this. Participants should be able to answer questions like: “What did so-and-so say? What do you think they meant when they said it? What did it evoke in you?”

IT: Use Interpretive Things.

Ask Big Questions conversations often use a text, poem, artwork, song, natural object or other “interpretive thing” to help center the conversation and create a common point of access for all participants.
Questions to Ask When Preparing for a Discussion

Where?

- Does the place where you’re having the conversation create a space in which people can feel safe?
- Is it a closed space? Does it have a door you can close to ensure privacy and confidentiality when needed?
- What can you do to make the space visually appealing or lovely? Does it have windows to let in light? Do you want to play some music?
- Is it located near the center of campus?
- Are the building and bathroom accessible?
- Can everyone sit comfortably in a circle?

When?

- Are you scheduling the conversation at a time when everyone can be physically awake and present?
- Will people be hungry? Will you provide food or drink?
- Can everyone access the conversation?
- Is there an ASL interpreter available with advance notice?
- Will they be tired or sleepy after a meal?
- How long will the conversation be?
- How will you break up the time if necessary?

Who and How?

- How many people will participate? Will there be enough to sustain diverse conversation? Will there be too many to keep the conversation centered?
- How will you get the word out and then remind people?
- Do you need to make any special arrangements for people with disabilities?
- Greetings – Who will welcome people to the conversation and how will they do it?
- How will you have everyone introduce themselves? (Big Questions are great for introductions!)
- How will you close the conversation?
- How will you follow up with people?
- How will you capture their contact information?

What About You?

- What will you do to get yourself ready?