WHAT DOES ISRAEL MEAN TO YOU?
Dear colleague,

When the team at Ask Big Questions sat down to think about the Birthright experience, we used our two criteria for Big Questions: 1) A Big Question is a question that is important to everyone; and 2) A Big Question is a question everyone can answer.

Israel in particular can be a challenging topic to talk about. For many of us, it marks an intersection between Big Questions and Hard Questions—those questions that are important to everyone, but that not everyone can answer. Israel is a thick, rich, and challenging subject to talk about. But as we worked on it, we found that the overarching question at the heart of the Birthright experience is a Big Question for Jews: What does Israel mean to you? We also found that this question led to several subquestions:

- Where do you feel at home? This frames a conversation about our relationship with the land of Israel (Eretz Yisrael).
- For whom are we responsible? This leads to a conversation about our relationship with the people of Israel (Am Yisrael).
- When do you feel powerful? This informs a conversation about our relationship with the State of Israel (Medinat Yisrael).

This booklet contains guides for all three of these conversations, as well as a conversation to use during Birthright orientation, and a follow-up conversation to be used after you’ve returned to campus. The main texts for many of the conversations have been translated to Hebrew as well, so that mifgash participants can fully engage in the conversations.

You are welcome to use them as is, or to modify them in your own way. We do recommend, however, that every participant have a guide in hand.

For more information on facilitating reflective conversation, please visit askbigquestions.org.

Special thanks to Josh Feigelson, Sheila Katz, Esther Abramowitz, Raina Goldberg, Danielle Hanley, and the other Hillel staff members who contributed to creating these guides.
1. WELCOME

Getting Started
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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.

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.
2. ASK AND SHARE

Introductions
We haven’t introduced ourselves yet. So let’s find out who we are. Please introduce yourself by telling us your name, any other important info, and a place you have journeyed to.

Note for Facilitators: These should be brief introductions—name, year in school, major, hometown, and a short answer to the question. You might want to introduce yourself first to model how it’s done.

Where have you journeyed?
We often think of a journey as a trip—physically going somewhere. It could be a vacation away from home. It could be the trip back home. It could be a long journey to another continent, or a short journey to the store to buy milk. Physically speaking, journeys can take many forms.

But we can also have journeys of the mind or heart, journeys where we don’t physically go anywhere, but are nonetheless transported someplace else. These journeys might be the kind you travel in your education, or in a relationship, or during a serious medical situation.

The Jewish people begins with a journey: “Lech-lecha, Get out from your land, from your birthplace, from your father’s house, to the land that I will show you.” These are God’s first words to the Biblical patriarch Abraham (Genesis 12:1). The ancient Israelites journeyed from Egypt to the land of Israel. And Jews have been a people of journeying throughout the centuries all over the world.

We are about to embark on our own powerful journey. So let’s take some time to introduce ourselves by sharing some stories about our own journeys.

Please take a few moments to look at the journey images below and see if one of them resonates with you. Make some notes to yourself about why it spoke to you. After we’ve had a few minutes, we’ll take some time to share our journey stories.
Which of these images speaks to you? Why? Use the space below to make some notes to yourself.

Note for Facilitators: This is the heart of the conversation. Give people several minutes to re-read the essay and prepare their thoughts. Then invite people to divide into pairs or triads and share their responses. Give them a good amount of time for this: 15 to 30 minutes or 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.

3. DO
Our conversation today has likely been a different kind of conversation than the ones we often have. We centered our conversation on a question that all of us can answer, but none of us can answer completely. Our responses to Big Questions
are always evolving. They are tied up with stories. And in telling our stories and listening to the stories of the others in our circle, we have gained a richer understanding of one another and ourselves. Just as important, we have created a space in which a conversation community could take root.

As we conclude our conversation today, here are three final questions to consider:

• What do you hope will happen to you personally during our journey together?
• What do you hope will happen to this group during the journey?
• What is one thing you can do to make those things happen?

Use the space below to write your answers:

These are the kinds of conversations we’ll be having during our journey in Israel. Thank you for helping to hold our conversation today.

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Home could be a physical place, like the home we grew up in. It could be defined by relationships we have—as in, “I feel at home with the people I love.” It could mean experiences, as in “I feel at home when I’m playing football,” or “I feel at home when I’m reading my favorite author.” Home is many things.

The American poet Robert Frost is known to have defined home as “the place where, when you have to go there, they have to take you in.” Or as another poet, Maya Angelou put it, “The ache for home lives in all of us, the safe place where we can go as we are and not be questioned.” Home is a place where we can be ourselves, according to these poets.

But perhaps we don’t want to be ourselves, or at least the selves we are at the place we call home. “Say there’s a white kid who lives in a nice home,” the rapper Eminem said in a 2000 interview. “He goes to an all-white school, and is pretty much having everything handed to him on a platter. For him to pick up a rap tape is incredible to me, because what that’s saying is that he’s living a fantasy life of rebellion.” Sometimes we feel a need to leave home in order to discern where and what our home really is.

Israel is all about home. Some people feel at home in Israel because it is the place they grew up, the place their family is, the place they own property and pay taxes, raise their children and bury their dead. Yet others describe coming to Israel as “returning to a home I never knew I had.” They have been yearning for a homecoming, and they find it when they come to Israel—even though they don’t speak a word of Hebrew, even though they just set foot in the land.

Our journey in Israel leads us to reflect on home for two reasons: first, because it’s a journey, and journeys take place against the backdrop of home. Just the fact of this group being together on a journey causes us to think about home.

Second, even more than a journey to any other place, Israel is the homeland of Jewish people. It is the place our ancestors lived, were exiled from, and returned to. Through the Law of Return, which grants all Jews automatic rights to citizenship in Israel, the modern state of Israel is a potential home for Jews around the world.

So we’re going to reflect on home in this conversation. Below are several images of or about home. Take some time to look at them. Which images resonate with you? Which ones make you uncomfortable? Why? Use the space below the pictures to write some notes to yourself.
Take a few moments to turn to your neighbor and share your reflections. After a while we’ll have a chance to reconvene and share some of our insights in the larger group.

3. DO

Home is a paradoxical idea: it is both secure and vulnerable, real and imagined, at the same time. For some, home is a place of security. For others it is a place where we can make ourselves vulnerable—by inviting guests, by going to sleep. Home can be a physical location, and it can be a state of mind. We can be at home in a house, but we can also be at home in a language or an activity. Probably for many of us, it is all of these things.

For those of us who live outside of the state of Israel, Israel is not exactly our home. And yet we have a relationship with it. It can be difficult to find the words to express this. Elie Wiesel, the Nobel Peace Prize laureate and survivor of Auschwitz, put it this way:

How can it be explained that a Jew like myself, attached to the destiny of Israel with all the fiber of his being, has chosen to write, teach, work, found a family, and to live far away in a social and cultural environment that is far too generalized for that of our ancestors? Israelis put this question to me, as they do other Jews in the Diaspora... Is there a satisfactory response? If there is, I don’t know it... For the moment, this is all I can say: as a Jew, I need Israel. More precisely: I can live as a Jew outside Israel but not without Israel.

As we conclude this conversation, here a few final questions to consider:

- What are you taking with you?
- What lingers for you?
- What is one thing you want to change in your life based on this conversation?

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When we say the word “responsible,” what comes to mind? A person? A relative? A character? Use the space below to help you think about it, and we’ll share a few responses.

The dictionary defines “responsible” as “having control or authority,” or “being accountable for one’s actions and decisions.” To be responsible for someone in this sense seems to mean using our power in good faith: not abusing it, and not failing to use it when called upon to do so, as in the Biblical verse, “Do not stand idly by while your neighbor’s blood is shed” (Leviticus 19:16).

A legal dictionary broadens the definition of ‘responsible’ to include, “trustworthiness, integrity.” In this sense, to be responsible is to be faithful—to our relationships with others, and to our own history and calling, as in the verse: “Do not oppress the stranger; you know the life of a stranger, for you were strangers in the land of Egypt” (Exodus 23:9).

Do these definitions resonate with you?

A Story

Below is a story written by Herbert Friedman, an American Reform rabbi who died in 2008. Friedman grew up during the Great Depression. His family was poor. One night, his mother attended a meeting of her synagogue sisterhood, where a representative of the U.S. National Refugee Service made an urgent plea for Jewish families to “take into their homes German-Jewish children whose parents were willing to let them emigrate to the United States, not knowing if they would ever see those children again.” Here is the rest of the story:

Of the more than 100 women assembled, all mothers, no more than a dozen raised their hand. My mother stood and announced that she would take three children. God has been good to her, she said, giving her three healthy sons; this was her opportunity to repay. She added without embarrassment that her family was living in a small apartment, with only two bedrooms, because their house had been foreclosed by the bank during the Depression. Hence, she could take only boys, who could sleep mixed in with her sons.

Mother came home with the affidavit forms, placed them under my father’s nose at the kitchen table, and told him of her commitment. Signing the forms, as far as she was concerned, was only a formality. He saw it differently, because of the legal obligations his signature would impose... He could not envision for an instant how they could handle the additional expense of food, clothing, school, etc., for three more persons.

My mother answered him quietly, but with great passion. Even though we were poor, how could we refuse to save Jewish lives if we were given the chance to do so? She was ashamed of the other sisterhood members. All of them should have volunteered, and she would not hesitate to tell them so at the next meeting. “If we have enough food for five of us,” she asked, “why can’t we simply make it enough for eight?” If I must wash shirts for six boys instead of three, what’s the difference?”...
The parental argument raged all night—the only time I remember my parents raising their voices in anger and disagreement. She won. In the morning, my father signed the affidavits, and she proudly took them back to the synagogue.

As I mulled over the matter, I decided that my mother’s fight with my father symbolized the whole problem, and the only conclusion was therefore to act according to moral Jewish values, without permitting rationalization, delay, or any other diluting factor. “When history knocks, you answer.”

~ Quoted in Noam Zion and Barbara Specter, A Different Light (2000), pp. 79-80

Below are some questions to consider as we unpack this story. Take some time to read the story again and consider the questions. Then we’ll divide into smaller groups to talk about our responses.

- How do the characters in this story understand who they are responsible for?
- How do they act on their sense of responsibility?
- Are there people they feel more responsible for than others? How do they prioritize?
- If you were in the same situation, would you do the same?
- How do you decide for whom you are responsible?
3. DO

The Talmud offers us a memorable line: *kol Yisrael areivim zeh bazeh*, All Israel are bound up with, responsible for, one another. The sense of solidarity among Jews, across time and space, is one of the most remarkable elements of Jewish life. Being in Israel, meeting Jews from around the world, comparing our situations in life, where some of us are in the Israeli army and others are in college—these experiences all prompt us to ask, again and again, who are we responsible for? And how do we act out that responsibility?

As we close this conversation, please take a few moments to reflect on these questions. Those who would like to will have an opportunity to share their responses.

- How has this encounter challenged your answer to the question, For whom are we responsible?
- What is one thing you want to do better to act on your sense of responsibility?

Thank you for contributing to our conversation today.
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2. ASK AND SHARE

Let’s begin by looking at some images. Below are a bunch of pictures. Each one can prompt you to think about power:

- What does the picture tell you power means?
- Which ones speak to you?
- Which ones challenge you?

Take a few moments to look at them, and then we’ll share our responses. You can use the space below the pictures to write some notes to yourself.
Reflecting on Power

The question of power is related to the question of home. For many people, home is a place we feel powerful: in command of our surroundings, fluent in the language, full of knowledge about the people and things in the world. Powerlessness comes when we leave home and expose ourselves to the unknown and unfamiliar, when we surrender control.

Yet we can think of power in the reverse as well: control is an illusion. Real power only comes when we stop deluding ourselves with the idea that we have any power to begin with. It’s like when Obi-Wan Kenobi tells Darth Vader, “If you strike me down, I will become more powerful than you can possibly imagine.” In this sense, surrender is the first step to power. This is the idea of Shabbat: there is power both in our labor and in our rest.

Below is an essay by the contemporary Israeli writer A.B. Yehoshua. A descendent of Greek Jews, Yehoshua has been an outspoken thinker throughout his career, particularly challenging Jews who live outside of Israel. We’ll read his essay together, and then reflect on it in small groups.

The Jewish Diaspora has existed ever since the Babylonian exile, about 2,500 years ago, and it will continue to exist for thousands more years. I have no doubt that in the future when outposts will be established in outer space, there will be Jews among them who will pray “Next year in Jerusalem” while electronically orienting their space synagogue toward Jerusalem on the globe of the earth. The Jew has a wonderful virtual ability to express his identity with consciousness alone. The lone Iraqi Jew in Baghdad after the American conquest or the two Jews sitting in Afghanistan are no more or less Jewish in their foundational identity than the chief rabbi of Israel or the president of the Jewish community in America. The Diaspora is the most solid fact in Jewish history; we know its cost, and we are aware of its accomplishments and failures in terms of Jewish continuity...

Jewish identity in Israel, which we call Israeli identity [distinct from Israeli citizenship, which is shared by Arab citizens who also live in the shared homeland, though their national identity is Palestinian]—this Jewish-Israeli identity has to contend with all the elements of life via the binding and sovereign framework of a territorially defined state. Thus its reach into life is immeasurably fuller and broader and more meaningful than the Jewishness of an American Jew, whose important and meaningful life decisions are made within the framework of his American nationality or citizenship. His Jewishness is voluntary and deliberate, and he may calibrate its pitch in accordance with his needs.

We in Israel live in a binding and inescapable relationship with one another, just as all members of a sovereign nation live together, for better or worse, in a binding relationship. We are governed by Jews. We pay taxes to Jews, are judged in Jewish courts, are called up to serve in the Jewish army, and compelled by Jews to defend settlements we didn’t want or, alternatively, are forcibly expelled from settlements by Jews. Our economy is determined by Jews. Our social conditions are determined by Jews. And all the political, economic, cultural, and social decisions craft and shape our identity, which, although it contains some primary elements, is always in a dynamic process of changes and corrections. While this entails pain and frustration, there is also the pleasure of the freedom of being in your own home.

Homeland and national language and a binding framework are fundamental components of any person’s national identity. Thus, I cannot point to a single Israeli who is assimilated, just as there is no Frenchman in France who is an assimilated Frenchman—even if he has never heard of Molière and has never been to the Louvre, and prefers soccer matches and horse races. I am sure, for example, that some of the British pilots who risked their lives in
defense of London during World War II knew the names of the Manchester United players better than Shakespeare’s plays, and yet no one would dare call them assimilated Britons...

For me, Jewish values are not located in a fancy spice box that is only opened to release its pleasing fragrance on Shabbat and holidays, but in the daily reality of dozens of problems through which Jewish values are shaped and defined, for better or worse. A religious Israeli Jew also deals with a depth and breadth of life issues incomparably larger and more substantial than those with which his religious counterpart in New York or Antwerp must contend.

Am I denouncing their incomplete identity? I am not denouncing nor praising. It’s just a fact that requires no legitimating from me, just as my identity requires no legitimating from them. But since we see ourselves as belonging to one people, and our identities are interconnected and flow into one another, their relationship must be well clarified.

As long as it is clear to all of us that Israeli Jewish identity deals, for better or worse, with the full spectrum of the reality and that Diaspora Jewry deals only with parts of it, then at least the difference between whole and part is acknowledged. But the moment that Jews insist that involvement in the study and interpretation of texts, or in the organized activity of Jewish institutions, are equal to the totality of the social and political and economic reality that we in Israel are contending with— not only does the moral significance of the historic Jewish grappling with a total reality lose its validity, there is also the easy and convenient option of a constant flow from the whole to the partial.


Questions to consider:
• How does it make you feel to see Jews wearing military uniforms and carrying weapons?
• Do you think Jews outside of Israel have power?
• Are you powerful as a Jew?
UNDERSTAND OTHERS. UNDERSTAND YOURSELF.

10/5/2006: 10:32 AM

IRHEL

This is a page from a document discussing understanding others and oneself. There are several mathematical expressions and symbols interspersed throughout the text. Some of these might include variables, functions, integrals, or other mathematical notation. The text appears to be a continuation of a previous discussion, possibly from a series or a book, given the references to previous pages and sections. The document seems to be a mix of text and mathematical content, suggesting it might be an academic or educational piece.
III. CONCLUSION

In the context of Jews and Israel, When do you feel powerful? is one of the inescapable questions. As Diaspora Jews, we may experience a sense of power at being in Israel, but a simultaneous sense of powerlessness because Hebrew is a foreign language to us, or because we don’t serve in the IDF. As Israelis, we may feel powerful because of our military service, but we may feel powerless when we think about how much of our existence lies outside of our control.

Wherever we live, the State of Israel—what some Jewish thinkers termed the Jewish people’s re-entry into history—challenges us to deal with the question of what it means to have power. And since the military victory of 1967 in particular, it has forced us to ask not only what it means to be powerful, but what it means to have power over another people.

As we close our conversation today, here is one final question to consider. Use the space below to reflect on it, and then we’ll share our answers:

• What is one thing you can do exercise your power as a Jew more responsibly?

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What are you connected with?

**Questions to reflect on: What does Israel mean to you now?**

The fundamental question of our Birthright experience was “What does Israel mean to you?” We probably found that Israel means many things, and it means different things to different people. For some, Israel is an idea—a Jewish homeland, a “light unto nations,” a Zionist dream of renewal. For others, Israel is the people—the Israelis who were on our bus, the people we encountered on our journey, the other students we met and bonded with. For others, Israel is the land—Jerusalem, Tel Aviv, the desert, the Galil; the landmarks like the Kotel or Yad Vashem, or a spot that isn’t in the guidebooks but made a deep impression on us.

Now we’re back in America. And the question is still “What does Israel mean to you?” But we’re not in Israel anymore. We don’t hear Hebrew on the street, we don’t have the sights and sounds and smells in front of us. We may have Israelis around us, but it’s different.

So the question is: What does Israel mean to you now?
Images
Below are three images that might lead us to think about our connections after our Birthright trip. Take a few moments to look at them, and see what comes to mind. Use the space below to write some notes to yourself.

Questions for Reflection
What moments from our trip do you find yourself thinking about? Why do you think about them?
Do you want to return to anywhere in Israel in particular? If so, where and why? If not, why not?
If you were to return to Israel for an extended stay, what would excite you most about the prospect? What would make you most nervous?
How have you changed as a result of the trip?
Lost in Jerusalem
By Matt Gross

As a traveler, I am not a particularly choosy person. I will go pretty much anywhere, anytime. Wander on horseback into the mountains of Kyrgyzstan? Why not? Spend the night in a sketchy Burmese border town? Sure! Eat my way through Bridgeport, Conn.? Loved it. Once, I even spent four consecutive Sunday nights in Geneva — in midwinter — an ordeal to which no rational adventurer would willingly submit.

In fact, of all the world’s roughly 200 nations, there was only one — besides Afghanistan and Iraq [which my wife has deemed too dangerous] — that I had absolutely zero interest in ever visiting: Israel.

This surprised friends and mildly annoyed my parents, who had visited quite happily. As a Jew, especially one who travels constantly, I was expected at least to have the Jewish state on my radar, if not to be planning a pilgrimage in the very near future. Tel Aviv, they’d say, has wonderful food!

But to me, a deeply secular Jew, Israel has always felt less like a country than a politically iffy burden. For decades I’d tried to put as much distance between myself and Judaism as possible, and the idea that I was supposed to feel some connection to my ostensible homeland seemed ridiculous. Give me Montenegro, Chiapas, Iran even. But Israel was like Christmas: something I’d never do.

Then, last fall, my friend Theodore Ross — author of the forthcoming book “Am I a Jew?” — suggested I see Jerusalem. And suddenly feeling life calling my bluff, I booked a flight. I’d spend six December days in the holiest place on the planet and, surrounded by the Old City’s 500-year-old stone walls and legions of Christians, Jews and Muslims, I would be the lone unbeliever, walking a tightrope between belonging and individualism, observing not necessarily my faith but the faithful.

The Old City itself, however, turned out to be, at least in terms of geography and architecture, exactly the kind of place where I feel comfortable. Within those 40-foot-high walls was the dense warren I’d expected, laid out with seemingly no sense of order — or perhaps an order I couldn’t yet perceive. Either way, it was a visceral pleasure to master its paths, to dart down the covered, crowded market streets, past the char-grilled lamb-kebab shop [name? “Kebab Shop,” said its chef] and then up the easily missed stairs off Habad Street to the empty roofs above the market itself, where the noise of commerce barely filtered through. I loved the feeling of worn stones slipping under my sneakers, and the astringent smell of herbs as I passed Palestinian women selling bundles of sage near Damascus Gate.

The boundary between the modern and the medieval was shaky here. Cybercafes were ensconced in cavelike nooks; market stalls sold plush rams, lions and donkeys [actually Donkey, from “Shrek”]; Israeli soldiers lurked with their machine guns inside ancient fortified gates. And just as fluid — to me, if not to residents — were the lines between neighborhoods. I’d turn a corner and suddenly find myself in the new construction of the Jewish Quarter, where informational plaques spelled out the history of rebuilt synagogues. Another corner, and I’d wind up in the too-quiet Armenian Quarter, whose closed-off courtyards allegedly held networks of secret streets I’d never penetrate.

My own secret hideout became the Austrian Hospice, a huge, mid-19th-century guesthouse visited by everyone from Franz Joseph I to the musician Nick Cave and whose unassuming ground-floor walls you’d pass right by unless you knew it was there. My room, up on the second floor, was a comfortably large space with black-and-white checkerboard floors, simple wood furniture and highly functional Wi-Fi. From its windows I’d gaze out at church towers to the west and — almost close enough to touch — the golden Dome of the Rock, reflecting the raw sun at midday and the moon at midnight. Every time I turned my key in
the hospice door and ascended from the street, I marveled at my luck. The place had been recommended by a German doctor, Christoph Geissler, whom I’d met in the shared taxi from Tel Aviv airport. [When I asked his specialty, he’d told me, grinning, ”I am anesthetized!”]

The Old City did present one problem: I couldn’t get out of it. Not that I couldn’t find the way, but I kept getting distracted, and happily so. I’d come to this place to wander its winding streets without benefit of map or guidebook to let me know what was where, and every discovery of a world-famous landmark stopped me in my tracks. The Church of the Holy Sepulcher? Holy cow, it was right here, mere steps from the Kebab Shop, a vast, stern emblem of Christianity, with none of that Renaissance sentimentality that turns me off churches in Western Europe. A tumult of visitors swarmed through — Poles and Spaniards and Greeks and Ukrainians. They rubbed their scarves on the Stone of Unction where Jesus’ body was said to have been prepared for burial, and they lighted candles next to the sepulcher itself before immediately snuffing them out. Why? Tradition, they explained without elaborating.

Nearby lay the Lutheran Church of the Redeemer, now my favorite church in the world. Built at the very end of the 19th century, it is impossibly elegant and spare, all pale gray stone arches, with almost no ornamentation aside from small, jagged, brightly colored stained-glass windows. Several times I returned to the church just to ogle its curves, and once to attend Sunday-morning services — in unfamiliar Arabic.

“All the languages are in God’s light,” said Rafiq, the old man who greeted me. Translation: Even if I didn’t understand the words, the meaning would filter through.

I don’t know what kind of exotic experience I expected, but when the prayers began, I was indeed transported — to the last place I’d attended Lutheran services: Decorah, Iowa. Apart from the linguistic differences, these two churches a world apart were strikingly similar: down-to-earth, ambling, devoid of theatrics. In Jerusalem the occasional flubs of the organ player, the reedy voice of the hymn-singing woman behind me and the squabbles of children in the pews were oddly comforting.

As often as I got sidetracked by things to see, I was also waylaid by human beings. Sometimes I’d just watch them, fascinated. The woman crying as she sang and prayed in Mandarin along the Via Dolorosa. The somber men carrying polished wooden crosses. The Orthodox Jews swaying at the Western Wall. The blond woman, a white scarf wrapped around her neck, who simply stopped on the street and turned her face to the sun, her eyes closed, her expression enraptured.

Some believers tried to explain themselves to me. Near the Austrian Hospice, two Muslims in long robes instructed me to ask God, not Jesus, for forgiveness.

”Beware of intermediaries!” they said.

Over in the Jewish Quarter, in the square surrounding the gorgeous domed Hurva Synagogue, I encountered Rabbi David Stern, a Californian transplant who wanted me to put on tefillin, the leather straps that some observant Jews wind around their arms during prayers. I’d done it once before, in Lithuania, and while it wasn’t for me, I told the rabbi I could be persuaded to try again.

”Do you believe in God?” he asked. “O.K., do you believe in a higher power? Because most people do.” Sorry, I said. Anyway, he explained, the tefillin creates a spiritual connection between mind and heart when you pray, and to do so in the land of my ancestors would be especially sacred. Still unpersuaded, I declined. We shook hands and I walked away, a little disappointed.

I could navigate the Old City half-drunk (more on this later), but it was becoming clear that I couldn’t find my way into the believers’ world.
Sometimes, I felt condemned to interact only with the lowest rungs of the tourism industry, the salesmen, touts, hucksters and guides — people like Joseph, a round man with bad teeth who approached me one day in the Jewish Quarter and offered, in the needling way of unlicensed tour guides everywhere, to show me the Ramban Synagogue, which I had, I said truthfully, just come from. Thinking me rude, he stormed off. I chased after him and explained, as politely as possible, that I hadn't meant to blow him off. Joseph grumbled forgiveness, and we parted.

But a day or two later, I bumped into him again. We greeted each other with a great show of friendliness, chatted about nothing for a few minutes and then went our separate ways. When it happened the next day, too, he told me that in Jerusalem, when you encounter each other three times you buy the other person an ice cream, or he buys one for you. I was up for it — was I starting to like the guy? — but then he abruptly wandered off to look for clients.

Nebbishy, noodgy Joseph functioned as a human alarm clock, a reminder that I really needed to get out of the Old City and meet people who were neither tour guides nor fervent believers.

The transition from Old City to new was striking. Exiting through one of the 16th-century gates that still control access — touristy Jaffa Gate, busy Damascus Gate, historic Zion Gate, where Israeli soldiers entered in 1967 — I leapt forward into a distinctly modern world of crosswalks and traffic lights, 19th-century buildings and chunky apartment towers, green parks and municipal offices, falafel joints, cellphone stores and a brand-new light-rail system. Here secular society predominated, although many college types wore yarmulkes and otherwise fashion-forward girls were dressed in long skirts. Amid the frozen-yogurt parlors and focaccierias, under the bright sun, with Hebrew signage everywhere, Jerusalem could feel like a forgotten city in California populated entirely by Jews.

But as I wandered around I could sense that this image was, in many ways, a facade. I was not in California. The low beige buildings of Arab East Jerusalem covered the hills in the near distance, and on clear days I could see the sinuous, ominous wall separating Israel from the West Bank. Closer up, other differences became apparent. Sometimes only a block from Jaffa Street — one of the first neighborhoods built just outside the Old City in the 19th century, now a center of dining and night life — the streets suddenly turned Orthodox, with hardly an uncovered head in sight. One area, Mea Shearim, was festooned with signs warning visitors, in English and Hebrew, “Please do not pass through our neighborhood in immodest clothes.” My dark sweater, I was sure, was modest, but without a yarmulke, I felt like an interloper. What was I doing there anyway?

Nor were secular neighborhoods entirely angst-free. One Friday, I rode the light rail 20 minutes to Yad Vashem, the Holocaust museum, in the western hills of Jerusalem. I’d been to other Holocaust-related sites before — the Berlin memorial, the killing pits outside Vilnius — and had not been much affected. In the dark, twisty confines of this hellaciously detailed museum, however, I was utterly unnerved, terrified that I’d come across the identity card of a long-lost relative or the photo of someone I somehow recognized. When I finally emerged from the primary hall, it was a relief. There before me was a picture-perfect valley, a white-washed village clinging to the far slope. I stared at it a long time before I could move on. Mostly, though, my time in the new city, and especially around Jaffa Street, was devoted to one thing: eating well. (Partly because the Old City, always touristy, shut down after dark.) Some meals were simple, like falafel from Moshiko, bundled into a pita with approximately 20 or 30 other ingredients — cucumbers fresh and pickled, cabbage in its many guises, the whole cleaned and chopped contents of a backyard vegetable garden. Quite often, however, I was tempted toward more ambitious offerings. My very first night, following a tip from the manager of the boutique Harmony Hotel [just off Jaffa Street], I popped into Adom, a lively restaurant in the stone-arched basement of an 1895 building, and over a couple of glasses of Israeli cabernet, I had my mind blown by a platter of seared veal
sweetbreads with artichokes, cherry tomatoes and cauliflower cream. It hit every mark: lush and crusty, vegetal and tart, smooth and filling.

On the Sabbath, when most restaurants close, I found Adom’s cozy neighbor, Barood, still open — and packed except for a single seat remaining at the bar. I bellied up, ordered the excellent Palestinian “upside-down” chicken-and-rice dish, and quizzed the bartender — Shelly, who was playing great American-songbook jazz on the stereo — about local bars. I’d been to a couple already, Shoshana and the Lion’s Den, but felt out of place among their crowds of Israeli college students and skullcaps kids from Los Angeles and Baltimore. Does Jerusalem, I asked, have an underground?

“The underground is mainstream,” Shelly said, meaning that Jerusalem was so small that the funkier alternatives were instantly visible. Then she drew me a map to all the worthy bars, including Uganda, where the D.J.’s were spinning old Iggy Pop and ’80s New Wave, and Sira, whose dark, rough-stone interior and soundtrack of Radiohead and Devendra Banhart evoked memories of similar spots in Berlin, Budapest and my home, Brooklyn.

Sira instantly became my favorite nighttime destination. I could [and did] sit there for hours talking to the bartender, Yonaton, fresh from five years in the military and ready for university, and to Michael, a photographer, tech expert and alleged cousin to Abe Vigoda, and to Hannah, a Canadian immigrant with whom I discussed our complex feelings about Judaism over enough Goldstar lagers that I don’t recall precisely what those feelings were.

In the city I never thought I’d visit, I had found a place I didn’t want to leave.

But leave I did, often well after 1 a.m., late enough that the Israeli guards in the Old City would interrogate and search me on my way back to the guesthouse. As an occasional experience, the security measures were fascinating, much more thorough and intelligent than the cursory T.S.A. sweeps I’m used to. I could also sense the tension they created, and again found myself amazed at what true believers will do, and submit to, in the name of their faith. All of this, alien to me, was their normal. But my life here — the daytime angst, the nighttime revelry — was normal, too. I hadn’t been alone in those bars.

My final morning in Jerusalem I woke uneasily, struggling to recover from another night of seared goose breast and good wine. I checked Facebook and noticed my friend Pauline had swung into Jerusalem from New York; we arranged to meet for lunch at Abu Taher, a market nook home to sublime, sweet hummus. Afterward, we wandered through the Old City, looking at this and that, before deciding to leave for the new city. And on our way out of the Jewish Quarter, who should we run into but — inevitably — Joseph.

He was ebullient. We greeted each other like old friends, then I introduced him to Pauline. As he shook her hand, he leaned in and said to her, “You’re a lucky woman!”

“Oh, I’m marri — ” she started to say.

“You’re a lucky woman!” he said again, then his voice dropped to a near-whisper. “This guy” — pointing at me — “is a mensch.”

For nearly a week I’d been struggling to feel what visitors to Jerusalem — Jews, Christians and Muslims — have felt for millennia, and I’d just about given up. It was an experience for other people, not for me. But, corny as it is, at Joseph’s words my heart melted. Here I was, being seen not as a Jew or as a non-Jew, an American or a tourist, but as a mensch: a good and honorable man.
And so we went our separate ways, Pauline to the new city’s market, me to the airport, Joseph to hunt for tourists — one of whom, I hoped, would be good enough to buy him an ice cream cone.

**Yehuda Amichai, ‘Tourists’**

Visits of condolence is all we get from them.  
They squat at the Holocaust Memorial,  
They put on grave faces at the Wailing Wall  
And they laugh behind heavy curtains  
In their hotels.  
They have their pictures taken  
Together with our famous dead  
At Rachel’s Tomb and Herzl’s Tomb  
And on Ammunition Hill.  
They weep over our sweet boys  
And lust after our tough girls  
And hang up their underwear  
To dry quickly  
In cool, blue bathrooms.

Once I sat on the steps by agate at David’s Tower,  
I placed my two heavy baskets at my side. A group of tourists  
was standing around their guide and I became their target marker. "You see  
that man with the baskets? Just right of his head there’s an arch  
from the Roman period. Just right of his head." "But he’s moving, he’s moving!”  
I said to myself: redemption will come only if their guide tells them,  
"You see that arch from the Roman period? It’s not important; but next to it,  
left and down a bit, there sits a man who’s bought fruit and vegetables for his family.”

**Questions About ‘Lost in Jerusalem’ & Yehuda Amichai’s ‘Tourists’**

Why did Matt Gross resist going to Israel?  
What did he find in Jerusalem?  
Is Matt Gross the kind of tourist Amichai is talking about in his poem?
3. DO

Israel isn’t something separate from the rest of Jewish identity. It doesn’t only matter when we’re in Israel, or when we’re thinking about Israel. The idea of Israel lives with us even when we’re not there. And for all of us, it inflects the way we think about what it means to be Jewish.

As we conclude the conversation, here are a few final questions to consider:

• What is one thing in your life you want to change as a result of your Birthright trip?
• What are the obstacles to making that change?
• What can you do to make the change stick? What help do you need to make it stick?
• What could we do together to improve our lives as a result of this trip?

Use the space below to note your response to these questions.

Thank you for being part of this conversation and for participating in the Ask Big Questions Birthright Israel experience. Join our conversation online at AskBigQuestions.org.
AIR-IT: A GUIDE TO FACILITATING CONVERSATION

A: Ask Big Questions.

Big Questions are different than Hard 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: &quot;When have you been a stranger?&quot;</td>
<td>Example: &quot;What is the history of racism on campus and what can be done to promote greater inclusion?&quot;</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Focuses on wisdom and experience.</td>
<td>Focuses on intelligence and skill.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Example: &quot;What’s the best advice you’ve ever received?&quot;</td>
<td>Example: &quot;Are human beings naturally good or evil?&quot;</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: &quot;What could we sacrifice to change the world?&quot;</td>
<td>Example: &quot;Is it better to cut spending or raise taxes to balance the federal budget?&quot;</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?
• 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?
• 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 special needs (i.e. physical 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?