Note for Facilitators: This document is designed to be the centering point for a group conversation. You should plan for the conversation to last between 60 and 90 minutes, depending on group size. Most parts are meant to be read by members of the group, so you should plan to ask participants to take turns reading sections. Alternatively, you can choose the first reader of a section, and then that reader chooses the next reader. Additional guidelines and suggestions for planning and leading a successful conversation can be found at the end of this guide.
WELCOME

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

- In order for our conversation to be as rich as it can be, we need everyone to feel safe to really share and really listen.
- Therefore, we agree not to share others’ comments outside of this space.
- Our aim is to create a space where we can understand others and understand ourselves, not to give advice or to argue ideas of objective truth. With that in mind, in this conversation we will agree to speak in the first-person, about our own truth.
- 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.

ASK & SHARE

Welcome to our conversation. Let’s take a moment to introduce ourselves. Please tell us your name and where you call home. And please also tell us one way you’re conforming or not conforming right now: it could be in how you’re dressed, how you talk, what you eat, or something else.

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.
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.

Below are some images that might help us think about conformity. Take a look at them. There are larger versions of each of these images in the Appendix.

Who is conforming in each of these images? Who is not conforming? Take some time to think about these images a little more. Then turn to your neighbor and share your thoughts.
LEARN

The holiday of Purim commemorates the story of Esther, the Jewish woman who married the ancient Persian King Ahashverosh and saved her people from Haman's genocidal plot. For many, Purim is remembered best as a children's holiday, marked by dressing up in costume. There's something fun and exciting about wearing a mask, being someone else. For kids, Purim can feel like a Jewish version of Halloween—even though it's really a closer cousin of Mardi Gras, similar to the Roman and later European topsy-turvy “carnival”, where opposites and reversals are emphasized. People can masquerade as others from a different background, public drunkenness is encouraged, the Jews hang their oppressors on the gallows meant for themselves, and a woman saves the day.

Because, of course, the story of Purim is far from child's play. The Book of Esther opens with a scene featuring King Ahashverosh at a raucous, drunken feast, demanding that his wife, Vashti, come out and “display to the people her beauty.” (1:11). Vashti refuses—whether because she's stubborn, or perhaps, given that some Jewish commentaries suggest that she was asked to come out naked, she was concerned for her integrity and perhaps safety.

Vashti is deposed for her refusal, and Esther becomes queen. However, upon taking the throne, “Esther did not tell of her people or her ancestry,” on the instruction of her uncle Mordechai (2:10). Esther, as she took on the royal robes, hid an essential part of who she was. This becomes the focal point of the story, as Haman, the king's closest advisor, seeks to annihilate the Jews—because Mordechai refuses to prostrate himself to Haman. (Traditional commentaries claim that Mordechai refused on the grounds that he only bows before God.) Haman makes a plan and gets the king's approval, and the date for the disaster is set.

When Esther hears what Haman has planned, she, like Jews all over the kingdom, is frightened. Yet when Mordechai asks her to intervene, to beg the king to stop the plan, she replies that, since she hasn't been summoned by the king, she would have to risk her life to speak up—in ancient Persia, you can't just go in front of the king any time you please, even if you're the queen. But Mordechai tells Esther: “Do not think you will find refuge in the king's palace and avoid the fate of all other Jews. For if you keep silent at this moment, salvation will come from somewhere else, and you and your ancestors will perish. And who knows—perhaps it was for a moment just like this that you became queen” (4:13-14). Mordechai's words move Esther, and she tells him to gather all the Jews of the capital and fast for three days along with her. “And I will go before the king—against the law—and if I perish, I perish” (4:16).

Esther winds up making a dinner for her husband, King Ahashverosh, and Haman, at which she pleads her case: “I and my people have been sold—to be destroyed, murdered, wiped out.” Who would do such a thing? the king asks. Haman, replies Esther. The king orders Haman hanged (on the gallows on which he had planned to hang Mordechai), and the Jews defend themselves against their would-be attackers. By speaking up and revealing herself, Esther saves her people.

The story of Esther raises some basic questions for us, many of which have become critical questions for Jews living in non-Jewish host societies.
As we reflect on this text, here are a few questions to consider:

**Interpretive Questions**

- When do the various characters in the story—Ahashverosh, Vashti, Esther, Mordechai, and Haman—conform? When do they not conform?
- What motivates their decisions to conform or to not conform?
- In what situations, if any, is conformity a good thing in this story? In which situations, if any, is problematic?
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- When do Jews in America today conform with the larger society? When do we not conform?
- What motivates us to conform or not conform to the larger society?
- When do you, personally conform? When do you not conform? Why?
- How do you decide whether to conform, and what to conform to?

Use the space below to write some notes to yourself.

Please 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.

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**Note for Facilitators:** This is the heart of the conversation. Give people several minutes to 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—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.
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.

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?

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**Note for Facilitators:** 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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Are the people in this photo conforming to the expected norms of teenagers? Of prom?

In a lot of ways, Lady Gaga does not conform to the expected behaviors of a pop singer—but in a lot of ways, she does.
Are all of these people dressed identically? Are there subtle ways in which we conform or don’t?

How can conformity build community?

How much do broader cultural notions of “fun” inform our own?
Women and men wearing tefillin (phylacteries) and tallitot (prayer shawls)—Jewish ritual garb—near the Western Wall in Jerusalem. Is the choice to don religious garb conforming or not conforming (or neither?) Does your answer change in the broader context of American culture? Does it change if a woman wears ritual gear traditionally associated with men?

Early punks. How do we think of conformity in our own subcultures, vs. in the broader culture in which those subcultures are located?
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SOURCES FOR FURTHER DISCUSSION

Since the celebration of Purim is often connected to drinking, and since drinking on campus can be connected to conformity, we have brought some traditional sources that address the topic of Purim and alcohol.

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The same days on which the Jews enjoyed relief from their foes and the same month which had transformed for them from one of grief and mourning to one of festive and joy. They were to observe them as days of feasting and merrymaking, and as an occasion for sending gifts to one another and presents to the poor. The Jews accordingly assumed as an obligation that which they had begun to practice and which Mordechai prescribed for them.

- How does this text contextualize drinking?
- What other practices are connected to the celebration of Purim?

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Rava said: a person must get drunk (lit. “spiced”) on Purim until he cannot distinguish between ‘cursed be Haman’ and ‘blessed be Mordechai’. Rabbah and Rabbi Zeira made a Purim feast together. They got drunk. Rabbah stood up and slaughtered Rabbi Zeira. The next morning, Rabbah prayed and brought him back to life. The following year, Rabbah said to him: ‘Come, let us celebrate the Purim feast together!’ Rabbi Zeira replied: ‘Listen, miracles don’t happen every day!’

- Why does Rabbi Zeirah decline Rabbah’s second invitation?
- What does this text seem to say about alcohol consumption?
- How does this text connect Rava’s statement with the story of Rabbah and Rabbi Zeira?

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What is the nature of our obligation for this [Purim] feast? A person should eat meat and prepare as attractive a feast as possible. One should drink wine until intoxicated and fall asleep in drunkenness.

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When a wise person drinks wine, it should only be to soften the food in his stomach. And anyone who gets drunk - it is sinful, disgraceful, and lessons wisdom. And if he is inebriated in front of others [non-sages] this disgraces God’s name...

- What do you make of Maimonides’ two different takes on intoxication?
- Does context matter when it comes to alcohol? In what way?
- Why does Maimonides suggest in the second text that alcohol “lessens wisdom”? Why does he think it “disgraces God’s name”?
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- How does this text understand the idea of drinking on Purim?
- How is this understanding different from or similar to previous texts' understanding?
- Does this understanding reflect with your own thinking about drinking? How or how not?

Shulhan Arukh, Orach Hayyim 695:2 (16th c.; Rabbi Joseph Caro, Israel, with commentary from Rabbi Moses Isserles, Poland)

Rabbi Karo: One is obligated to drink on Purim until one does not know the difference between “cursed is Haman” and “blessed is Mordechai”.

Rabbi Isserles: And there are those who say that one need not get too inebriated, rather, drink a little more than usual and sleep, for during sleep one is unable to make the distinction. And whether one drinks heavily or drinks a small amount— intention toward heaven is required.

- How do Karo and Isserles differ in their interpretations of the Talmud?
- How are they similar to, or different from, Maimonides and the Sefer Kol Bo?

General questions:

- Of all of these approaches to drinking, which most closely reflects the culture on your campus?
- Of all these approaches, which most closely reflects your own thinking?
- When do you conform in regards to drinking, and when don't you?
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’s 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?
• 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?
Thank you for being part of this conversation. Please share this conversation guide with others in your community. And join our conversation online at AskBigQuestions.org.

We are pleased to partner with Jewish Women International on this guide. JWI is the leading Jewish organization empowering women and girls - through economic literacy; community training; healthy relationship education; and leadership development. Our innovative programs, advocacy and philanthropic initiatives protect the fundamental rights of all girls and women to live in safe homes, thrive in healthy relationships, and realize the full potential of their personal strength. Learn more at jwi.org.

Ask Big Questions is an initiative of Hillel: The Foundation for Jewish Campus Life in partnership with the Einhorn Family Charitable Trust. Visit AskBigQuestions.org to answer questions, learn from others, and join the movement.

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WELCOME

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- Of all these approaches, which most closely reflects your own thinking?
- When do you conform in regards to drinking, and when don’t you?
Thank you for being part of this conversation. Please share this conversation guide with others in your community. And join our conversation online at AskBigQuestions.org.

We are pleased to partner with Jewish Women International on this guide. JWI is the leading Jewish organization empowering women and girls—through economic literacy; community training; healthy relationship education; and leadership development. Our innovative programs, advocacy and philanthropic initiatives protect the fundamental rights of all girls and women to live in safe homes, thrive in healthy relationships, and realize the full potential of their personal strength. Learn more at jwi.org.

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