

# WHO IS IN YOUR COMMUNITY?

**A GUIDED CONVERSATION**



# WELCOME

Before we begin, let's review the brit—the covenant—that animates our time together:

1. **Accountability:** I'll show up to our agreed-upon meetings. I'll let the host know the (good) reason I will be absent. I will also be punctual and respect everyone's time.
2. **Presence:** When we're together, I'll be present and mindful. I will listen and share. Life (and our mobile devices) offer many distractions, but I will stay present and engaged.
3. **Double Confidentiality:** What I hear and say stays here. If I see another group member in a different context, I will not bring up anything they said here unless they do first.
4. **Vulnerability:** I'll stretch myself to be as open and honest as possible with my perspectives and experiences in order to create a safe environment that might encourage others to take risks as well.
5. **Respect:** I will remember that all of us are here for a common purpose and I will respect and acknowledge everyone in my group.
6. **No Fixing, Advising, Saving or Setting Straight:** I will give each person the gift of true attention without trying to "solve their problem." No advice unless it's asked.
7. **Stepping Up & Stepping Back:** I understand that some of us are natural talkers while others are quieter. I'll pay attention to how much I am contributing, and will seek to balance how much I am talking with how much I'm listening.
8. **Curiosity:** Judaism is a religion of exploration; of big questions more than answers. I will get the most out of my group by being open to our discussions and the people around me.
9. **Ownership:** This is our community to create. While we have guidelines and suggestions, it is ours to shape and form. We will get out of it what we put into it.

# ASK & SHARE

When you hear the word “community,” what comes to mind? Once everyone has had a moment to think, you will be invited (but not required) to share your answer with the group.

You can use the space below to make some notes to yourself.

# LEARN

The text that follows comes from a book by Lord Jonathan Sacks, who until recently served as Chief Rabbi of the United Kingdom. Read it together, as a group.

The Home We Build Together (2008, excerpted)

By Jonathan Sacks

Read the book of Exodus and you will see that the early chapters are all about the politics of freedom. They tell of slavery, oppression, the mission of Moses to Pharaoh, the ten plagues, liberation, the division of the Red Sea and the revelation at Mount Sinai. All of this is a sequential story about liberty. But the last part of Exodus—roughly a third of the book as a whole, is taken up with an apparently minor and irrelevant episode told and retold in exhaustive detail: the construction of the Tabernacle.

This was the first house of worship made by the Israelites. It was a modest affair, made of poles, beams, skins and drapes that could be taken apart, carried on their journeys, and re-assembled at their next encampment. It had, or so it seems, no lasting significance. Once the Israelites had entered the land, the Tabernacle was left in Shilo for several centuries until King David established Jerusalem as the capital of the newly united kingdom, and his son Solomon built the Temple. So why is the story of the Tabernacle told at such length? ....

In focusing on the Tabernacle, the book of Exodus makes a bold political statement. A nation—at least, the kind of nation the Israelites were called on to become—is created through the act of creation itself. Not all the miracles of Exodus combined, not the plagues, the division of the sea, manna from heaven or water from a rock, not even the revelation at Sinai itself, turned the Israelites into a nation. In commanding Moses to get the people to make the Tabernacle, God was in effect saying: To turn a group of individuals into a covenantal nation, they must build something together....

A people is made by making. A nation is built by building. What they built was a ‘home’ for the Divine presence. The Tabernacle, placed at the center of the camp with the tribes arrayed around it, symbolized the public square, the common good, the voice that had summoned them to collective freedom. It was a visible emblem of community. Within the Tabernacle was the ark, within the ark were the tablets of stone, and on the tablets of stone were written the details of the covenant. It was the home of their constitution of liberty. Here, then, is the source of the title of this book. Society is the home, the Tabernacle, we build together.

It was built out of difference and diversity. That too is the point of the narrative. Each of the Israelites brought his or her own distinctive contribution. Some brought gold, others silver, others bronze. Some gave jewels, others animal skins, and others drapes. Some gave of their skills and time. The point is not what they gave but that each was valued equally... The Tabernacle was built out of the differential contributions of the various groups and tribes. It represented orchestrated diversity, or in social terms, integration without assimilation. That is the dignity of difference. Because we are not the same, we each have something unique to contribute, something only we can give.

As we reflect on this text, here are a few questions to consider:

### **Interpretive Questions**

- What does Sacks mean when he writes that a nation or community “is created through the act of creation itself?”
- What does he mean when he says that “society is the home we build together?”
- How would you paraphrase Sacks’s phrase “orchestrated diversity?” What does he mean?
- Who is a member, and who is left out, of the community Sacks describes?

### **Reflective Questions**

- Does Sacks’s description of community-building resonate with you? Have you ever had an experience like the one he describes?
- What does it take to become a member of a community, both according to Sacks and in your own experience?
- When you have felt a part of a community, what has helped create that feeling?
- When you have felt left out of a community, what contributed to that feeling?

You can use the space below to write some notes to yourself.

## PERSPECTIVES FROM JEWISH TRADITION

Consider this text from the Babylonian Talmud, which sets out the requirements for a Jewish community:

“A *talmid haham* (Torah scholar) is not allowed to live in a city that does not have these 10 things: a *beit din* (law court) that metes out punishments; a *tzedakah* fund that is collected by two people and distributed by three; a synagogue; a bath house; a bathroom; a doctor; a craftsperson; a blood-letter; (some versions add: a butcher); and a teacher of children.”

-- Babylonian Talmud, Sanhedrin 17b

### Discussion Questions:

- Why do you imagine the text specifies these requirements for a Torah scholar, and not for everyone?
- What are the priorities that underlie this list of required communal institutions? What kind of community does this text imagine?
- When you consider where you might live, do you have a list of minimum requirements? Is the presence of Jewish community a factor?
- Think of a community of which you have been a part. What were the essential factors that make that community “work”?
- Is a sense of community dependent on institutions? Interpersonal relations? Both?

You can use the space below to write some notes to yourself.

# DO

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

- What's one insight that you've gained from this conversation?
- What is one action you might take, or practice you might try, before we meet next time, based on what you're taking from this conversation?
- What's one obstacle to taking that action? How can you overcome it? Who might you need help from in order to do so?
- What could we do together as a community based on what we talked about today?

You can use the space below to write some notes to yourself.

**Thank you for being part of this conversation.**



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