

WHAT ARE YOU THANKFUL FOR?

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

Take a moment and think of one thing for which you are grateful, but for which you have not expressed your gratitude. To whom do you owe a “thank you”? Once we’re all ready, we will each take a minute or two to share our answer with the group.

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

LEARN

On the next page is an essay from the program, “This I Believe,” by a woman named Robin Baudier. Robin lived in her family’s FEMA (Federal Emergency Management Agency) trailer for 10 months in 2006. Before Hurricane Katrina devastated the Gulf Coast, she worked on script development for an independent film producer in Los Angeles. Robin now has her own apartment but continues to help rebuild her parents’ house. We’ll take a moment read the essay together. You can also listen to it online at <http://thisibelieve.org/essay/26077>.

I believe in strange blessings. I have never been in such good shape. I have never spent so much time outside. I caught the last three sunsets in a row and unless I am mistaken, I will catch the one tonight. I have never felt so close to my family. I have never felt so sure that I was doing everything right.

I live in a FEMA trailer with my parents. I moved home from L.A. February before last, quitting the job it had taken me almost a year of miserable internships to get, to make sure first-hand that my family was okay. Now I work on my Dad's house on the weekends and at his dental laboratory during the week. Shutting the curtain on the bunk bed area doesn't always cut it for privacy, so I spend a lot of time outside exercising the dog and just trying to get away from people. I take her out on the levee and run to get rid of all my frustration with not being able to have a job that will allow me to afford rent. I run to get out, when I have been stuck inside, reading to escape from life, not even able to sit up straight in my tiny bunk. I run to feel like I am doing something when I am overwhelmed by all the things I can't do anything about.

The reason I caught the sunset yesterday is that we have been waiting for two weeks for FEMA to come fix a leak in our plumbing. I was so frustrated with running out in a towel to turn the water off, then mopping up the floor with the rotating assortment of towels that we have hung outside the trailer that I decided to put on my bathing suit and shampoo under the hose. But God, that was a beautiful sunset last night.

I know it might sound strange that I am indirectly describing Hurricane Katrina as a blessing, since it took my family's home and recovering from it has taken over our lives. But I love my awful life so much right now, that I find it hilarious when I am unable to convince anyone else of it.

I make less than the people working at Popeye's. I repeatedly have to suffer the indignity of telling people that I live with my parents. But I have finally gotten rid of back pain that the doctors always told me was from stress. I occasionally have weekends when I realize that I am building a house with my Dad, which I used to dream about when I was six and watching Bob Vila with him. And I am back where I belong, no longer kidding myself that there is anywhere else I want to be.

I believe in strange blessings, because taking away my house brought me home.

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

Interpretive Questions

- What are the blessings that Baudier experiences in the wake of the loss of her parents' home?
- What does she mean when she says, "I love my awful life so much right now?"
- How is she able to find gratitude in the midst of tragedy and dislocation?

Reflective Questions

- Have you ever been able to find gratitude in the middle of a difficult time?
- What's challenging about feeling thankful?
- What enables you to experience gratitude?

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

PERSPECTIVES FROM JEWISH TRADITION

Consider these two texts concerning gratitude, one ancient and one modern:

Ben Zoma used to say: 'A good guest says, "How much my host toiled for me! He put so much meat in front of me, so much wine, so much bread – all his exertion was just for me!" A bad guest says, "What did my host toil for me? I ate just one roll, just one piece of meat, I drank just one cup – all his exertion was for his own household!"

-- Babylonian Talmud, B'rachot 58a

The first words out of the mouth of a traditional Jew upon waking are: "I am grateful," Modeh Ani. It is not merely a prayer. It is a personal statement of being. It is a reflection on abundance before we have even engaged the world. We are grateful merely for the fact of our existence. "I give thanks to You, living and everlasting King, for You have restored my soul with mercy. Great is your faithfulness." My soul has been restored. I can live another day.

Yet as we travel through the rest of the day and face the prosaic cares it spews forth, we understand that rather than set the tone for the day, Modeh Ani can feel like a momentary aberration. A day full of gratitude seems increasingly unlikely. We said thank you once and first but may hear and say it less as the hours pass.

– Erica Brown, *Return: Daily Inspiration for the Days of Awe*

- Has more of your time this past month been spent like Ben Zoma's "good guest"? Or his "bad guest?"
- Have good things happened in your life this year that have gone unacknowledged or uncelebrated?
- Why is it that we express our gratitude less as the day goes on?
- Do these texts suggest that we are wrong to complain? Must we always be grateful?
- What practice might help you express gratitude on a more regular basis?

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?

Thank you for being part of this conversation.

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Portions of this guide were originally developed by Rabbi Nicole Auerbach for Central Synagogue.



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