

WHAT WILL YOUR LEGACY BE?

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

Let's take a moment to introduce ourselves. Please share your name and what comes to mind when you hear the word, "legacy."

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

LEARN

A dictionary definition of legacy generally refers to something transmitted from an ancestor or predecessor—something that we have received from those who have come before us. But as we go about the business of crafting our lives today, we can ask ourselves what we want our own legacy to be—what do we want to bring forth into the future? What do we want to have left behind? What kind of impact do we want to have had? What kind of person do we want to have been? How do we want to have touched people? How do we want to be remembered?

“When we begin to think about legacy,” Linda Thal writes, “we notice that the story of our lives extends backward before we were born... just as it will continue forward beyond our lifetime. Our legacies include what we have inherited from the past and how that has influenced the shape of our lives. Accordingly, we need to look in both directions. We ask, what have we done with that inheritance, and in what ways does our life ripple outward from it, beyond ourselves.”

Consider the following poem, by Billy Collins:

Fall to Your Knees and Thank God for Your Eyesight

Was my mother's usual response
to my bouts of childhood whining.

I can't find my other sneaker
Fall to your knees and thank God for your eyesight
There's no one to play with this early.
Fall to your knees and thank God for your eyesight.
My bicycle only has three gears.
Fall to your knees and thank God for your eyesight . . .

Needless to say, I never fell for it,
though it did create pauses in my trickle of complaints
and maybe cleared some room in my room strewn with toys...
a little space to think about God and eyesight
but not for long, of course, the demands of childhood

being what they are. And the repeated words
sometimes made me think twice before whimpering about a bruise on my knee,
or foolishly I would say the line just when she did,
the two of us chanting Fall to your knees...
which is as far as I got before she appeared

in the doorway and pinned me to the floor with that look.
No surprise to know that nowadays
I say it every chance I get:
to everyone under this roof including the dog
and under my breath to people on the street –
this one grouching about the price of eggs or gasoline

that one furious that the bus is late,
especially when I realize those voice are mine –
me peevish in the bedroom, me bitching about the rain,
me and my broken shoelace, me in the sand trap,
me forgetting to fall to my knees to thank her
for giving me the eyes to see the world, to regard these words.

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

Interpretive Questions

- What was the author's reaction to the words "Fall to your knees and thank God for your eyesight" when he was a child?
- How did his relationship to these words change as he grew older?
- How does this poem relate to the idea of "legacy"?

Reflective Questions

- Do you find yourself speaking in the voices of those who shaped your upbringing? What words of theirs do you carry with you?
- If there were a catch-phrase that would embody the legacy you wish to leave behind, what would it be?

Use the space below to write some notes to yourself.

PERSPECTIVES FROM JEWISH TRADITION

Consider this text, from the Babylonian Talmud:

One day, [a man named Honi the Circle-Maker] was walking along the road when he saw a certain man planting a carob tree. Honi said to him: This tree, after how many years will it bear fruit? The man said to him: It will not produce fruit until seventy years have passed. Honi said to him: Is it obvious to you that you will live seventy years, that you expect to benefit from this tree? He said to him: That man himself found a world full of carob trees. Just as my ancestors planted for me, I too am planting for my descendants. Honi sat and ate bread. Sleep overcame him and he slept. A cliff formed around him, and he disappeared from sight and slept for seventy years. When he awoke, he saw a certain man gathering carobs from that tree. **oni** said to him: Are you the one who planted this tree? The man said to him: I am his son's son. Honi said to him: I can learn from this that I have slept for seventy years . . . Honi went home and said to the members of the household: Is the son of Honi the Circle-Maker alive? They said to him: His son is no longer with us, but his son's son is alive. He said to them: I am Honi the Circle-Maker. They did not believe him. He went to the study hall, where he heard the Sages say about one scholar: His [interpretations of Jewish law] are as enlightening and as clear as in the years of Honi the Circle-Maker, for when Honi the Circle-Maker would enter the study hall he would resolve for the Sages any difficulty they had. Honi said to them: I am he, but they did not believe him and did not pay him proper respect. Honi became very upset, prayed for mercy, and died.

Discussion Questions:

- What does Honi learn about his legacy?
- Does our legacy depend on whether or not we have children?
- It appears that 70 years after this death, Honi is still remembered as a great scholar. Why, then, does he become so upset? Is that legacy not enough?
- The text suggests that just as we inherited the world from those who came before, we must plan ahead for coming generations. What have you inherited that you would like to pass on?
- The text suggests that we may not live to see the fruits of our labors. What effect does this have on the actions we decide to take in our lifetime?

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 thing you want to change in your life before we meet next time?
- What's one obstacle to you making that change, and how can you overcome it? Who might you need help from in order to make this change?
- What could we do together as a community based on what we talked about today?

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

Thank you for being part of this conversation.

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



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