

# FOR WHOM ARE WE RESPONSIBLE?

**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

Welcome, and thank you for joining this conversation. Please think about this question: When you hear the word ‘responsibility,’ is there a person or story that comes to mind? Take a moment, and share when you’re ready. You can use the space below to write some notes to yourself.

## LEARN

“If am not for myself, who will be for me? When I am for myself, what am I? If not now, when?” Hillel the Elder, the first-century rabbinic sage, was famous for asking these questions. At the heart of them is our question: For whom are we responsible? Can we expect anyone else to be responsible for us? If we are only responsible for ourselves, what does that make us?

In the poem on the next page, the main character deals with all these questions. We’ll read it together, and then have a chance to discuss it.

Okay  
By Lowell Jaeger

There's a man in the road, waving.  
We're driving home from Hot Springs,  
my wife and I, and our three kids.

He's holding something bundled  
in his arms. Don't stop, my wife  
telegraphs to me with a sideways glance.  
I'm okay with that.

It's a dog! the kids shout, He's  
carrying a dog! So, okay, I stop,  
roll down the window.

Please help, the man says, tears  
leaking down his stubbled chin.  
The dog is bleeding. He's rolled up  
in an old rug, eyes open, miserable.  
I just run over my dog, the man  
blubbers, He's drunk. And stinks.

Okay, I'm thinking, I'm stuck  
with this. The kids squeeze together;  
the man and dog huff and groan,  
sniffle and slide themselves into  
our lives. My kids' faces in the rearview

are pinched, afraid to breathe –  
wet dog, blood, booze, rotting socks.  
The man whimpers, cradles his dog,  
I'm f-ing sorry, man. So f-ing, f-ing  
sorry. This is less than okay.  
We spit gravel behind us and speed  
back to Hot Springs to find a Vet.

It's a Sunday, my wife whispers, everything's  
locked up. I'm thinking, Okay, what now?  
At the one payphone on Main, I pull over  
to let the man and dog out. You better call  
someone, I say. My voice sounds afraid.  
The man's eyes are shut, not asleep,  
but almost. The dog's eyes are shut, too.  
You better call someone, I say louder,  
Okay? Okay?

The man stands at the payphone, his dog  
bundled on the sidewalk. He just stands there.  
My kids cry silently. My wife trusts me  
to be the man she hopes I am. I don't  
know what's okay and what's not. The man  
is fumbling in his empty pockets for change.  
I feel a lot like that.

*Copyright © 2011 by Lowell Jaeger.*

*Reprinted in Taking Action, edited by Adam Davis (Great Books Foundation, 2012).*

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

### **Interpretive Questions**

- What's going on in the poem? Can you summarize the action?
- How does the driver understand to whom and for what he is responsible?
- Are there people he feels more responsible for than others? How does he prioritize?

### **Reflective Questions**

- If you were in the same situation, would you do the same?
- What would get you to stop on the side of the road? What would keep you from stopping?
- How do you decide for whom you are responsible?

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

# PERSPECTIVES FROM JEWISH TRADITION

Consider the following two texts from Jewish tradition:

Rav Yosef taught: “If you lend money to any of my people that are poor with you” (Exodus 20:2). [This teaches, if the choice for helping lies between] a Jew and a non-Jew, a Jew has preference; the poor or the rich, the poor takes precedence; your poor [i.e. your relatives] and the [general] poor of your town, your poor come first; the poor of your city and the poor of another town, the poor of your town have prior rights.

— Babylonian Talmud, Bava Metzia 71a

Our Rabbis taught: We sustain the non-Jewish poor with the Jewish poor, visit the non-Jewish sick with the Jewish sick, and bury the non-Jewish dead with the Jewish dead, for the sake of peace.

--Babylonian Talmud, Gittin 61a

- Do you agree with the priorities that Rav Yosef has outlined? Why or why not?
- What do you think “for the sake of peace” in the second reading, meant at the time it was written? How might you understand it now?
- How do these texts intersect with the tension that the narrator in the poem felt?
- It’s possible to see a tension between the first text’s suggestion that we care for Jews first and the second text’s instruction to care for both Jews and non-Jews. Do you feel this tension in your own life? Which of these approaches more closely represents your own priorities in giving or serving?

Now take a look at this modern approach, by Rabbi Jonathan Sacks:

David Hume noted that our sense of empathy diminishes as we move outward from the members of our family to our neighbors, our society and the world. Traditionally, our sense of involvement with the fate of others has been in inverse proportion to the distance separating us and them. What has changed is that television and the Internet have effectively abolished distance. They have brought images of suffering in far-off lands into our immediate experience. Our sense of compassion for the victims of poverty, war and famine runs ahead of our capacity to act. Our moral sense is simultaneously activated and frustrated. We feel that something should be done, but what, how, and by whom?

--Rabbi Jonathan Sacks, *The Dignity of Difference* (2002).

- How do you personally decide whom to help? Do you prioritize those in greater need, or those in your local community?
- Do you have particular places to which you feel a sense of ownership or obligation? What are they?
- Do you think the globalization that Rabbi Sacks refers to affects our obligations as articulated in the Talmudic texts above? Are we still primarily obligated to those of our own cities, or does greater knowledge of events far away change our sense of obligation?

Use the space below to reflect.

# 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?

Use the space below to note your response to these questions, and then we'll do a final round of sharing.

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

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





The Union for Reform Judaism leads the largest and most diverse Jewish movement in North America. We strengthen communities that connect people to Jewish life. Visit <https://urj.org/> for more information.



Ask Big Questions was developed, launched, and scaled by Hillel International: The Foundation for Jewish Campus Life. Ask Big Questions is a national initiative to help people deepen understanding, strengthen community, and build trust through reflective conversation. Visit [AskBigQuestions.org](https://AskBigQuestions.org) to learn more.

©2017 Hillel International. All rights reserved.

Ask Big Questions® is a registered trademark of Hillel International.