



## Guide for Your Group

### WELCOME

Ask each person to introduce themselves and to share with the group a part of their day or week they would like to bring with them as they begin this conversation, and/or a part of their day or week they would like to leave behind.

As we gather in our Sh'ma group, may we honor the values of our Jewish tradition. May we bring compassion, insight, and wisdom to our learning and conversation. May we recognize the Divine Image in one another, and let that awareness be reflected in our words and actions.

ברוך אתה יי, חונן הדעת

Baruch atah Adonai chonein ha'daat.

Blessed are You, Adonai,  
who grants us wisdom and awareness.

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

- **Accountability:** I'll show up to our agreed upon times. I'll let the guide(s) know the (good) reason I will be absent. I will also be punctual and respect everyone's time.
- **Presence:** When we're together, I'll be present and mindful. I will listen and share. Life (and our mobile devices) offers many distractions, but I will stay present and engaged.
- **Double Confidentiality:** I'll maintain complete confidentiality. What I hear and say stays here. It means that even when I see group members in another context, like at Temple or in the neighborhood, I will not initiate a conversation on what has been shared.
- **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.
- **Respect:** I will remember that all of us are here for a common purpose and I will respect and acknowledge everyone in my group.
- **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.
- **Listening:** I understand that some of us are talkers, while some of us are quieter. I'll be aware not to dominate discussions and to balance how much I'm talking with how much I'm listening.
- **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.
- **Ownership:** This is our Sh'ma Group. 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.

### ABOUT OUR LEARNING MATERIALS—NISH'MA

On the following page you will find three takes on a passage of *Mishnah* that teaches we are all descended from the same person, the original Adam. This page is constructed like the Talmud—the central text in the center and various commentary surrounding it. We have chosen this learning material (NiSh'ma) because it explores relevant topics, and because we hope it will generate meaningful dialogue where the different perspectives within your Sh'ma group can be heard and appreciated. NiSh'ma is a project of The Forward magazine. If you have any feedback or questions about NiSh'ma, please let us know at [AHorn@tedallas.org](mailto:AHorn@tedallas.org).

In this month of October, we read about the original Adam in the pages of Bereshit, of Genesis. If all people emerge from the same source, then what responsibility do we have to our neighbors, our brothers and sisters? This is a fundamental question we ask as Reform Jews. Continue to explore this question at our 6:15PM Shabbat service on October 19. Together with congregations across the country we will honor the work of the Hebrew Immigrant Aid Society (HIAS) for their National Refugee Shabbat.

# NiSh'ma



**Lev Meirowitz Nelson:** This text reminds us that our generations stretch all the way back to the first human, Adam. And it teaches us that my ancestor was no better than your ancestor. A basic commonality underlies all humanity and demands equal rights in a way that is fundamentally at odds with racism, classism, and xenophobia.

Contextually, the text reminds us that our greatest moral achievements come from places of tragedy. We find these verses in the midst of the Mishnah's discussion of capital punishment: A severe crime has been committed, leaving lives devastated and a community torn asunder. Out of this grief — the Mishnah does not share America's blasé approach to execution — comes a series of grand statements about the immense worth and unique value of every human life.

Similarly (though on a much bigger scale), the United Nations' 1948 Universal Declaration of Human Rights was born out of the Holocaust and developed along with a new global consensus that the age of sovereignty — in which a state could do *whatever* it wished within its own borders — must give way to a new era, acknowledging a higher moral authority. Now, when governments commit atrocities, we at least have language for holding them accountable. This "naming" is our birthright. Adam gave names to all the animals (Gen. 2:19-20) so he could know what they were. We, the children of Adam, *b'nei Adam*, give names to everything, including our crimes, so we can deal with them.

---

Rabbi **Lev Meirowitz Nelson** is director of education at T'ruah: The Rabbinic Call for Human Rights. Ordained by the Rabbinical School of Hebrew College, he was honored in 2017 by the Covenant Foundation as an outstanding emerging educator with the Pomegranate Prize.



**Koach Baruch Frazier:** I recently purchased a DNA kit after reviewing my father's DNA results last December. I was so excited to find out where on the continent of Africa I originated and what other nations my family might be connected to. Knowing one's ancestry is powerful and provides the opportunity to explore one's heritage and the legacies of previous generations.

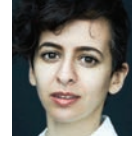
To be sure, though, using a classification such as the historic "one-drop rule," which aimed to define racial purity, white supremacy culture has used ancestry to perpetuate systems of discrimination and oppression. This rule asserted, if you have at least one ancestor from Africa, you are considered black, no matter your skin tone or heritage.

Fortunately, our sages left us with a blueprint that leads us toward a more inclusive understanding of our ancestry. We are indeed descendants of one common ancestor, Adam — the first human. And, as Rabbi Lev Meirowitz Nelson points out, our common ancestral rootedness demands equality.

And yet, in order for this equality to exist, we have to find ways to affirm this common humanity in each other. We must resist the legacy of white supremacy: a culture of hatred, isolation, and utter disregard for one another. We can resist by reminding ourselves of our shared ancestry, a fact that scientists confirm through our mitochondrial (maternal) DNA, offering a legacy of liberation rooted in real and meaningful connection, compassion, and dignity.

---

**Koach Baruch Frazier** holds a doctorate in audiology from Central Michigan University. He is a musician, healer, and writer who spends his days helping people reconnect with the world around them through better hearing and by providing love and support through revolutionary listening.



**Leah Vincent:** My father, an ultra-Orthodox rabbi, taught me dignity, loyalty, and a love of stories. But, as a parent, he had his limitations. When he couldn't accept my independent life, I adopted new fathers to guide me, drawn from my college education in psychology and the music that gave me comfort in a lonely secular world: Carl Jung advised me on the psyche, Leonard Cohen on the Jewish soul. Their calls for passion and emotional openness wove into my father's lessons to make a richer paternal heritage.

A personal "mythology" like this — a simple, stirring imaginative narrative — can be strong enough to shape a life. On the societal scale, it can shape a culture.

When reality feels bleak, mythology can be a mental scaffold, allowing us to envision and then embody a story line we might not yet know how to live. As Rabbi Meirowitz Nelson points out, the myth of a common father, Adam, was used amid tragedy to envision a new norm in which every life had inalienable value.

Reverend Martin Luther King Jr. once transformed our nation with this kind of epic storytelling. He imagined a time when the *sons of former slaves and the sons of former slave owners will be able to sit down together at the table of brotherhood*. In this perilous moment, I hope we will combat stories of hate and fear by building grand new tales of hope, justice, and a universal family.

---

**Leah Vincent** is the author of *Cut Me Loose: Sin and Salvation After My Ultra-Orthodox Girlhood* and the co-author of *Legends of the Talmud*. She holds a masters degree in Public Policy from Harvard University and has been named to the *Forward* 50 and the *Jewish Week's* 36 Under 36.



"The Walk to School" by Camille Fox

## Summary

Three commentators explicate a line from the *Mishnah* about creation: **“Furthermore, [Adam was created alone] for the sake of peace among people, that one might not say to another, ‘my father was greater than yours.’**” (Mishnah Sanhedrin 4:5)

**Rabbi Lev Meirowitz Nelson** writes that this text “reminds us that our generations stretch all the way back to the first human, Adam. And it teaches us that my ancestor was no better than your ancestor. A basic commonality underlies all humanity and demands equal rights in a way that is fundamentally at odds with racism, classism, and xenophobia.”

**Leah Vincent** left her ultra-Orthodox family to find new guides to explore her life. She writes about developing a personal mythology and imaginative narrative that is “strong enough to shape a life.”

**Koach Baruch Frazier** agrees with Lev that we are “descendants of one common ancestor, Adam — the first human. And... our common ancestral rootedness demands equality.” If we are descended from the same “Adam,” as the Mishnah asserts, what are the implications for our intersecting lives with other Americans? What is its impact on the notion of Jewish peoplehood? What are some other teachings — such as the sensibility that we are all created in the image of God, *b’tzelem Elohim* — that play into and also complicate the notion of shared ancestry?

## Reflective Questions

1. What was your initial understanding of the central text? What did you understand differently after reading/discussing the commentaries?
2. Which passage in the commentaries resonated with you—and why? Which passage was most challenging to you, and why?
3. What experiences have you encountered that illustrate OR amplify OR contradict something taught on the page?