

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, such as 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 everybody 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.

The secular year is drawing to a close and the New Year is about to dawn. This turn in the calendar is an opportunity to reflect on the "secrets" we have uncovered and those that await our exploration in the months to come. (Not included on the handout but in the supplementary materials for the month is a beautiful piece written by Erica Brown who will also be teaching here at Temple this spring. Mark your calendar to come and hear her....) Here's a link if you'd like to learn more about this topic <https://forward.com/shma-now/elu-velu/?attribution=articles-article-listing-3-headline>

NiSh'ma



Daniel Brenner: I once heard a Hasidic story about a rabbi who developed the spiritual ability to channel other people's thoughts. One day, one of his students begged to learn the tricks to reading the minds of others. Reluctantly, the rabbi taught the young disciple. The next day, the rabbi overheard the disciple pointing people out to his fellows as they

passed by the shul: "See him, all he thinks about all day is holy books, a real *tzadik!* But see him, all he thinks about is men and women engaging in sex! A *shanda!*" The rabbi grabbed the arm of his young disciple and scolded him: "That's enough mind-reading." "Why?" his student asked, "I am learning so much, now that I can understand the secret thoughts of men!" "Well," the rabbi replied, "you just praised our town's bookbinder, who is a thief, and you just cursed the town's matchmaker, who is one of the holiest souls in our village!"

One of the functions of liturgy is to keep us humans humble. This blessing, *Chacham Razim*, which blesses the God of Secrets, keeps us humble by teaching: If we see a large group of people and if for some reason we hold the conceit that we can read the minds of those around us, and we actually think we know their secrets, stop! Though God is wise to secrets, we are not. Reb Haim of Volozhin envisions God's wisdom as an unbreakable encrypted databank of billions of individually led human secrets, ours included. The best we can ever do, I think, is to try to understand what is happening in our own independent intellects, try to see the world through different perspectives (*elu v'elu*), and hope that, on occasion, we will feel the rush of divine interconnectivity.

Rabbi **Daniel Brenner** is the chief of education and program for Moving Traditions. He was recently featured in *The New York Times* cultural arts section for his touring performance of Klezmer Aerobics (klezmeraerobics.com).



Tiferet Berenbaum: Attending a recent international conference of the Bnai Brith Youth Organization, I was awed at the sight of more than 3,000 young Jews sitting around tables laid out for Shabbat. For such a moment, our tradition gives us the blessing *Baruch Chacham Razim*, blessed is the One who is wise to secrets. I love working with teenagers who are simultaneously throwing off the cloak of childhood and engaging with the realities of adult living. They are both testy and open to new experiences and deep learning. Our next generation has access to greater scientific and technological advances than we had, and because of social media, video, and the vast knowledge base of the Internet, they will know a great deal more than us.

As Rabbi Daniel Brenner writes, one purpose of liturgy is to keep us humble. This particular blessing humbles us by helping us acknowledge that we cannot know God's secrets or the vast unknowns that our younger generations will eventually discover. Khalil Gibran poignantly writes about youth: "For their souls dwell in the house of tomorrow, which you cannot visit, not even in your dreams." Walking into that Shabbat-ready room, I saw the future; I saw solutions to problems we haven't yet imagined. I saw promise. Only the Holy Blessed One, the *Chacham Razim*, knows the truth within each of those teens. As adult guides, our job is to help them discover and manifest that truth in their lives.

Rabbi **Tiferet Berenbaum** is the spiritual leader and education director of Temple Har Zion in Mount Holly, N.J. She received ordination from the Rabbinical School of Hebrew College in 2013. She lives and loves with her husband, Joel, their 1-year-old daughter, and their beagle, Clint.



Hank Lazer: I am initially drawn to the phrase "God of Secrets," though I'll make my way there indirectly. As Rabbi Daniel Brenner's commentary notes, it is this wonderful blessing — *Chacham Razim* — that points us toward the God of Secrets and keeps us humble. Indeed, we cannot know one another from the outside. Each is an "other" to me, to be respected, cherished, and considered by me for the enigma that we also are to ourselves.

As a poet and not a scholar of Jewish texts, I approach this passage with what my Zen practice calls beginner's mind. I thought I understood halakhah to mean Jewish law, but my first etymological dig — for the God of Secrets is simultaneously present and occluded in language — suggests that halakhah at its root means "the path that one walks," and, in the case of this passage, the path to walk along is the road of language. God is a God of Secrets; otherwise, it would be easy to know God directly and with certainty. God is the keeper of secrets, and the best-kept secret is the very nature of God.

Blessed is the God of Secrets for that God allows us to love and to be on intimate terms with the unknowable.

Hank Lazer is the author of 27 books of poetry, most recently *Thinking in Jewish* (N20) (2017) and *Evidence of Being Here: Beginning in Havana* (N27) (2018). In 2015, he received the Harper Lee Award for lifetime achievement in literature.



"Homage 8144a" by Irene Mamiye

"One must not think slightly of the paradoxical ... for the paradox is the source of the thinker's passion, and the thinker without a paradox is like a lover without feeling: a paltry mediocrity."

— Søren Kierkegaard

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?