



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.

Thresholds can be physical and spiritual places, they are portals for transitions in our lives. In this first month of the secular year we consider the sacred thresholds of the past and the present. Here's a link if you'd like to learn more about this topic <https://forward.com/shma-now/thresholds/?attribution=articles-article-listing-8-headline>

NiSh'ma



Steven Sager: In order to provide witnesses for the investiture of the priests, God commanded Moses, “Assemble all of the community in the doorway of the Tent of Meeting.” (Leviticus 8:3) Such crowding of the threshold was certainly impossible.



Gray Myrseth: In his commentary on Leviticus Rabbah, Rabbi Steven Sager speaks of “liminal, transitional moments” where we can be present with “holiness-in-the-making” and encounter a spaciousness that bends the ordinary laws of physics.

The *ba'al ha-midrash* (story master) insists that the word “all” opens things up wondrously — not to a measurable fact, but to the spacious truth of metaphor. Thresholds of consciousness, emotion, pain, and awareness offer vistas wider than their framing moments. At such thresholds, “the little contains the much”: Events deepen into experiences; moments become momentous.

On the “*limen*” (Latin for “threshold”), we experience liminal, transitional moments; perception crosses a threshold and a deepening awareness creates in us an expanded vision.

The *ba'al ha-midrash* positioned all of us — those present and those yet to be — on a threshold of religious imagination, inviting coherence, consciousness, and continuity, and allowing us to be present to holiness-in-the-making that is beyond us and within us.

The *ba'al ha-midrash* extended this teaching to include Jerusalem herself. Like the threshold of the sacred tent, Jerusalem became “the little that contains the much” — always wide enough to contain those who seek her. May it be so, quickly, and in our day.

Rabbi **Steven Sager** is the founder and director of *Sicha — Continuing the Conversation*, an organization that offers special support and resources to rabbis who guide and direct end-of-life issues. Sager is rabbi emeritus of Beth El Synagogue in Durham, N.C. and a senior rabbinic fellow of the Shalom Hartman Institute in Jerusalem.



Sara Luria: The poet John O'Donohue teaches that a threshold, from the Old English word “*threscan*,” is the place where one separates the wheat from the chaff. Threshing is an embodied experience of separating. Right after Moses assembles the entire community at the Tent of Meeting, he washes Aaron and his sons in preparation for their sacred roles. The mikveh ritual, an immersion in living waters, is an embodied Jewish transition ceremony that facilitates spiritual threshing. Those who immerse themselves

allow what is not useful anymore to dissolve in the water, and thus they emerge lighter and more prepared for what is to come.

In the mikveh — and at the threshold to the Tent of Meeting — we are standing in a place in between what we were and what we will become. This is what Rabbi Steven Sager teaches, echoing Leviticus Rabbah, “the little contains the much.” Perhaps, each of us is the little that contains the much. Our small bodies hold vast experiences — losses, hopes, fears, love, pain, and joy. Leviticus Rabbah teaches us that all of Israel — 600,000 people — assembled to participate in transformation. Each of us is one of the 600,000. Each of us is alone as we stand in the mikveh or at a threshold.

Rabbi **Sara Luria's** experiences as a community organizer, birth doula, and hospital chaplain inspire her work as the founder and executive director of *ImmerseNYC*, a pluralistic, feminist, grassroots-energized community mikveh project. Her new project, *Beloved*, is a home-based experiment in Jewish living that integrates community, ritual, food, and art.

וְאֵת-כָּל-הָעֵדָה הִקְהִיל אֶל פֶּתַח אֹהֶל
מוֹעֵד (ויקרא ח:ג) אָמַר רַבִּי אֶלְעָזָר:
כָּל יִשְׂרָאֵל שְׂשִׁים רְבּוּא וְאֵת אוֹמְרִי:
"אֶל פֶּתַח אֹהֶל מוֹעֵד!?" אֵלֶּא זֶה אֶחָד מִן
הַמְּקוֹמוֹת שֶׁהַחֲזִיק מוֹעֵט אֶת הַמְּרַבֵּה.

“All of Israel numbered 600,000, yet you say, ‘Assemble all of the community in the doorway of the Tent of Meeting.’ (Leviticus 8:3) Impossible, except that this is one of the places where the little contains the much.”

Leviticus Rabbah 10:9

When I think of the *limen* and the threshold, I imagine everyone standing at the edge of our communities, wondering what kind of welcome they will receive as they approach. I think of Jews of color, queer and transgender Jews, Jews with disabilities, and Jews by choice. I think of people with one Jewish parent, people who are unsure for a wide range of reasons whether they will find the right fit in any Jewish community or whether they will stand at the edges forever.

As we consider the thresholds of our homes and sanctuaries, it is my hope that we can remember that the first Tent of Meeting created by our desert ancestors was wide enough to hold every person who approached its doorway. That tent was wide enough to hold the spirit of the Holy One, who defines boundaries and binaries, and who welcomes human beings who do the same. May our own present-day Jewish spaces be as welcoming to the fullness of the Jewish people in all our queer and liminal splendor, as the Tent of Meeting was so long ago. What we find beyond the threshold will be infinitely more fabulous when we do.

Rabbi **Gray Myrseth**, who currently serves as school director at the Kehilla Community Synagogue in Piedmont, Calif., was ordained in 2017 by the Rabbinical School of Hebrew College in Newton Centre, Mass.



“Threshold” by Ruth Weisberg



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?