

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.

This month we will celebrate the holiday of Purim affirming the courage of Queen Esther and learning, again, about the religious intolerance of Haman (a descendant of Amalek) and how it endures across generations. (Hopefully you were able to hear Dr. Elana Stein-Hain when she spoke in December and you'll be inspired by her wisdom in this month's materials). Here's a link if you'd like to learn more about this topic <https://forward.com/shma-now/reminders/?attribution=articles-article-listing-7-headline>

Join us to celebrate Purim on March 20 and 24, 2019.
See details at www.tedallas.org/purim.

NiSh'ma



Elana Stein Hain: Jewish tradition associates both retribution and mercy with memory. Memories of past actions and relationships, and of our covenant, can motivate reprisal or compassion: “Remember what Amalek did to you...that you shall blot out its memory from the earth.” (Deuteronomy 25:17-19) Likewise, “God remembered Noah and all the beasts and all the cattle that were with him in the ark, and God caused a wind to blow across the earth, and the waters subsided.” (Genesis 8:1)

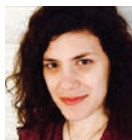
This rabbinic aphorism details the corruption of the relationships among memory, vengeance, and mercy. In context, it references King Saul’s regressive choices: He saved an Amalekite leader (and his nation’s livestock), but he massacred Jewish priests who had (unknowingly) provided food for his enemy. Saul chose to “forget” the cruelty of Amalek and his requirement to avenge it*; in the same way, he also chose to forget his commitment to his compassionate co-religionists.

Saul privileged the advantages of the present over his obligation to the past. The Amalekite king and his wealth offered Saul power and access, while (even accidentally) disloyal priests threatened to subvert his power. This was not an instance of mercy, but one of ambition cloaked in values language.

This ancient illustration touches on perennial human questions: How often do we forsake past commitments in favor of practical gains in the present? How quickly do yesterday’s memories fade when they compromise the opportunities of today? What reminders can orient us toward these questions in more thoughtful ways?

Dr. **Elana Stein Hain** is the director of leadership education at the Shalom Hartman Institute of North America. She earned her doctorate in religion from Columbia University with a dissertation on the topic of legal loopholes in rabbinic literature. She is a board member of the online resource Sefaria: A Living Library of Jewish Texts, sefaria.org.

*Note: The ethical implications of the commandment to destroy Amalek are not uncomplicated, but they are beyond the scope of this brief commentary.



Gila Lyons: I’m thinking about the photo that circulated after the protests in Charlottesville, Virginia. In it, white supremacists wearing Ku Klux Klan hoods, waving Confederate flags, and thrusting their arms out in the Nazi salute are being protected by a black police officer from the protesters who are rallying against them. By protecting the white supremacists’ right of assembly and free speech, the black officer was showing compassion to the cruel. But white supremacists hurling hateful epithets at the black man who was protecting them was an act of cruelty to the compassionate.

When I first saw the photo, I wished that the officer would step aside to allow the angry crowd to break through the crime scene tape and pummel the Klansmen. But I know that the path to change is through compassion — fostering communication, nurturing understanding, and building bridges — not through violence or hate.

While I might be tempted to wish for cruelty toward those I see acting cruelly to others, the fact remains: Violence has never changed any political situation for the better. Perhaps the questions we should be asking are these: How can we feel compassionate toward those who act with cruelty? How can we use compassion, rather than cruelty, to effect change?

I hope that we, as Jews, can evolve beyond a binary way of thinking — of believing that we are either compassionate or cruel, good or evil — and come to an understanding that we, individually and collectively, often flip-flop between being the oppressor and being the victim, between acting with compassion and acting with cruelty.

Gila Lyons writes about the intersection of feminism, mental health, and social justice. Her essays, reviews, and journalism, which can be found at gilalyons.com, have appeared in the *Forward*, the *Huffington Post*, *Cosmopolitan*, *Tablet*, and other publications.



Herzl Hefter: I prefer to read King Saul as a tragic figure rather than as a cynical politician employing moralistic arguments to further a selfish agenda. Saul is not evil; his fatal flaw is that he lacks self-awareness, and this makes him relevant to us.

The Torah bids us to remember many things — among them, the Sabbath, the Exodus, the commandments, and the transformative moment of standing at Sinai. Memory is the impression that has been imprinted upon our consciousness by past experience. By interpreting these impressions, we invest them with meaning. Hence, Jewish tradition is an interpretive tradition. We continually re-encounter our ancient texts, simultaneously breathing new meaning into them while drawing guidance from them.

Both the biblical narrative and the rabbinic aphorism indicate that Saul felt compassion toward the Amalekite king. But how does Saul interpret this felt compassion? We have a right to expect that Saul would exercise self-analysis and introspection. Is Saul’s compassion appropriate? Or do self-interest and cowardice cloud his judgment and condition his emotional response? Saul’s failure at self-scrutiny is his Achilles heel.

At times, we are all King Saul. I would rephrase Elana Stein Hain’s last question. How can we know that we are interpreting ourselves and the circumstances around us honestly?

The truth is, that we cannot know, but we can try. The first step is self-scrutiny. Next, is to surround ourselves with external reminders, such as a mezuzah and *tzitzit*, as the Torah prescribes. Third, is to collaborate with others we trust and respect who will help keep us honest. Finally, as the biblical narrative of King Saul demonstrates, what is true for the individual is also true of governmental authority. Therefore, on the level of governance, we need to contraposition institutions that keep power in check.

Rabbi **Herzl Hefter** is the founder and dean of the Jerusalem-based Har-el Beit Midrash (har-el.org), a center for advanced rabbinic studies for men and women that was established in memory of Belda Kaufman Lindenbaum, z”l, an Orthodox feminist activist. Hefter studied with Rabbi Yosef Dov Soloveitchik, z”l, and received *smikhah* from Rabbi Aharon Lichtenstein, z”l, an authority on halakhah.

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?