



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.

בְּרוּךְ אַתָּה יי, חוֹיֵן הַדָּעַת

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.

In anticipation of the celebration of Thanksgiving, this month we explore finding satisfaction with what we have and the inclination we have to desire more rather than feel grateful. (Some of you may remember that Rabbi Sheila Peltz Weinberg, one of the contributors, was our guest for Selichot a few years ago.) Here's a link if you'd like to learn more about this topic forward.com/shma-now/yetzer-hara

Also, we look forward to hearing Diana Butler Bass discuss her new book, *Grateful*, on Monday, Nov. 19 at 7:30PM at First United Methodist Church, 1928 Ross Ave.

NiSh'ma



Raysh Weiss and Jonah Rank: Convincing people to want what they don't need was the marketing strategy of the advertising pioneer and genius Edward Bernays. Drawing on the group psychology theories of his uncle Sigmund Freud, his work built a strategy using

the power of suggestion — that desire and perceived need can be *created* in the human psyche. When we speak of the “evil inclination” in Hebrew, we use the term “*yetzer ha'ra*.” How fitting that the Hebrew word for inclination, *yetzer*, shares a “root” (*yud*, *tzadey*, *resh*) with the word “*yotzer*,” Creator, or something made by the One who created the universe.

The question arises: How are we to understand the “*ra*,” the “bad,” in the phrase “*yetzer ha'ra*”? Exactly how *bad* is that bad? Is it merely undesired but acceptable (such as the materialistic urge to attain the kind of unnecessary commodity Bernays might try to peddle) or does the term denote pure evil and destructiveness? Or, is the Jewish understanding of this concept something altogether different?

Rabbi Moshe Chaim Ephraim of Sadilkov, a Hasidic commentator known by the name of his major work, *Degel Machane Ephraim*, shares a helpful teaching on the purpose of the *yetzer ha'ra*. He draws a likeness between the boards of the *mishkan* (the desert tabernacle) and humans: both are grounded in the earth yet reach above, and both are material but contain spiritual potential in their functions and purpose. Just as the most earthly and common materials were used to create a holy abode for the divine presence, so, too, are humans summoned to use their base nature — the nature that pushes toward the material (as opposed to the spiritual) — to create holiness out of the mundane. Jews are called upon to temper their drive toward materialism and physicality, the *yetzer ha'ra*, by using its counterpart, the *yetzer hatov*, the good inclination. We are called upon to direct those urges toward the creation of goodness and holiness — toward *tikkun*, radical transformative repair. As the early sage Ben Zoma taught, “Who is valiant? One who masters his *yetzer*.”

Rabbi **Raysh Weiss** serves Shaar Shalom Congregation in Halifax, Nova Scotia. A graduate of the Jewish Theological Seminary and the University of Minnesota's doctoral program in comparative literature, Weiss was a Wexner Graduate Fellow and a Bronfman Youth Fellow. She lives in Halifax with her spouse, Rabbi **Jonah Rank**, and their child. Rank serves as *maskil* (teacher of tradition) at Shaar Shalom. Rank was ordained at JTS and was recognized in 2015 as one of the Jewish musicians *The Forward* selected for *The Soundtrack of Our Spirit*.



Robert J. Saferstein: Every now and then, I drift off into fond, childhood memories. Then I remember Shabbos mornings, and all traces of gladness vanish as quickly as they arrived.

My objections to attending services went beyond the stiff, wooden chairs and sad, Ashkenazic dirges. If the synagogue experience was supposed to be a vehicle for spiritual and communal connection, *this* clearly wasn't working. There had to be a better way, and I was going to find it.

I've spent my life questioning the “fixed” nature of things to discover how they can be made better. We all want and need more; this is to be human. To be Jewish is to try to awaken the divine in everything.

The *yetzer/yotzer* relationship is the link between inclination and creation, intention and action. This is where innovation and revolution are born. Neither “good” nor “bad,” the *yetzer/yotzer* simply is: pure consciousness and the oneness of all things. It is the catalyst forward.

As a social entrepreneur, I'm always seeking to augment experience through form, style, and substance. It is our responsibility to elevate the mundane to the sacred and never settle for what is. We must reach higher, dig deeper, and go further so that we can step into what can be.

Condemning capitalism is a tired trope. While I may not need everything I want — a \$6.50 fair-trade, mocha-frappe latte — if something provides value by making me feel good, should it really matter whether the desire is manufactured by a marketing firm or born from within?

Ben Zoma isn't wrong — I'm quite grateful for what I have — but if we never yearn for more, we will never grow as a people or strive to better the world. And there is nothing rich or valiant about that.

Robert J. Saferstein uses media, design, and technology to craft digital and analog products and experiences that drive new points of engagement and social good. The recipient of two Natan Grants for his Shabbat series, Friday Night Lights, he is the founder of Eighteen:22 — a global network of Jewish LGBTQ+ and ally change-makers — which launched in 2015 in Salzburg, Austria as a Schusterman Connection Point. A member of the *Sh'ma Now* advisory board, he served as the market development director during *Sh'ma*'s strategic transformation into *Sh'ma Now*.



Sheila Peltz Weinberg: The wisdom of these simple lines speaks to how we balance the relationship between aspiration and acceptance, effort and relaxation, compassion and mindfulness.

The first phrase affirms our aspirations: growth in character, wholesome connecting, and life-affirming qualities. We also engage in an active process of cultivating the qualities that soften our unwholesome inclinations (*yetzar ha'ra*) such as greed, hatred, and other forms of selfishness and reactivity. It takes strength to practice lovingkindness, generosity, and compassion. It takes courage to be responsive rather than reactive.

In the second phrase, rejoicing in one's lot is the practice of gratitude — being accepting of what we have received. This is akin to mindfulness. We see what is true in our lives without pushing it away or clamoring for something else. We are curious and open, soft and receptive. This stance is more conducive to happiness. We have what we need. We are rich. This acknowledgement frees us from certain tensions, conflicts, and an excess of ambition — major causes of unhappiness. Even in the case of tragedy and loss, the willingness to open ourselves up to our grief with compassion and acceptance eventually allows wisdom and healing to emerge.

Both aspiration and acceptance depend on seeing clearly as we claim our freedom and our power. They are the foundation of training the mind and heart. I do find in our often judgmental, self-help culture that I personally need more support to settle into gratitude and acceptance than I do to wrestle with my inclinations. Maybe the heroic effort is to be kinder toward this frail and flawed human being.

Rabbi **Sheila Peltz Weinberg**, formerly a longtime congregational rabbi, was one of the founding teachers of the Institute for Jewish Spirituality. She now serves as a spiritual director to Jewish clergy and as a teacher of mindfulness in a Jewish context. She is the author of *Surprisingly Happy: An Atypical Religious Memoir* (2010) and *God Loves the Stranger* (forthcoming).

“Ben Zoma said: ‘Who is valiant?
One who masters his yetzer (inclination) ...
Who is rich? One who rejoices
in what he has.’”

Pirkei Avot 4:1

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?