

Doing Jewish at Home

Family Discussion and Journal- Keeping Guide

Dear Friends,

We are all stuck at home, but that doesn't mean we can't have some good discussions with each other. Use this as a guide for your at-home learning. This is meant to help you talk to each other about what being Jewish means to you.

You might want to keep a journal. Use one that's a little nicer than a notebook, and one with no lines. Ask your parents and siblings to participate. Use gel markers or colored pens if you want. Write your thoughts, feelings, and ideas – use Jewish texts or picture. Feel free to draw and get creative. Other family members can respond to what you've written. Use the family discussion guide below to help.

Below you will find a list of topics for family conversations. You can write these up and include them in your journal. If it doesn't work to talk as a family, call a relative or friend.

Good luck, and let me know what you create!

Rabbi Laurie

Topic #1

The renowned anthropologist Barbara Myerhoff once wrote, "Everyone has a story. These stories, told to oneself and others, can transform the world." Why do you think she believed that?

Interview one or two older Jews about their lives in general, or about their bar/bat mitzvah in particular. You can take notes in your journal. Here are some sample questions, but feel free to add your own. Remember, many women did not have the option of having a bat mitzvah. You might want to interview an older woman about what it was like to not be able to have a bat mitzvah and find out if she had one at a later point in her life.

1. Where did you grow up? Could you describe what life was like as a child? As a teenager?
2. Did you want to have a bar/bat mitzvah? Why/Why not?
3. If you did have one, what year was it? What else was happening in the world at that time?
4. What was the bar/bat mitzvah like? How was it different from bnei mitzvah celebrations today?
5. What's your strongest memory about your bar/bat mitzvah?

Discussion after the interview:

- What did you learn that surprised you?
- How, if at all, did the interview change the way you are thinking about your own bar/bat mitzvah?

Topic #2

Take a Jewish text from the list provided at the end of these pages and use it to discuss something you have been thinking about. Do you agree with the text? Does the text give you any guidance that would be useful?

These texts are short. How would you expand them to fill in what's not written there? Can you express your ideas by writing about them or drawing them in your journal?

Topic #3

Have a discussion about giving tzedakah. Tzedakah is more than charity. Its root is *tzedek*, which means justice. Giving tzedakah is about making the world a more just place. Here are some texts and questions for you to discuss:

A person dies with one half of her or his desires fulfilled. No matter how much a person accumulates, his or her desire for wealth constantly increases. As wealth is acquired, one's tastes, social circle, and perspectives change. Peer pressure to own as much as one's new friends have also sets in. Thus, regardless of the amount of wealth one has, a person will always desire to double it. Wealth, by itself, cannot bring happiness. (Kohelet Rabbah)

Who is rich? One who is satisfied with his or her life. (Pirkei Avot 4:1)

Do you agree with these texts? If so, in what ways do you find them texts compelling? If you don't agree with them, why not? What would you write instead?

Here are some additional texts:

The blessing of tzedakah is greater for the person who gives than for the person who receives. (Vayikra Rabbah 34:10)

Even a poor person who receives tzedakah should still give tzedakah. (Talmud)

Do you agree with these texts? What are the messages they are trying to teach us?

Topic #4

Read and discuss this Hasidic story together. Reb Zusya was a famous, beloved rabbi from the 18th century:

Reb Zusya of Hanipol was weeping on his deathbed. His students were very surprised and concerned by his grief. They asked him, "You have been such a pious man, what could possibly sadden or frighten you as you prepare to be reunited with God?"

Reb Zusya explained that he was afraid of the question that God would ask him when his life was over. "I am not afraid that God will judge me for not being more like Moses, for I can respond that I did not have his leadership abilities. I am not afraid that God will judge me for not being more like Solomon, for I can respond that I did not have his wisdom.

But if God demands of me, 'Why were you not more like Reb Zusya?' – then, how shall I respond?"

What do you think the message of this story is? Do you ever act like someone other than yourself? What advice would Reb Zusya give you?

Topic #5

When we chant the prayer, the Amidah, we focus on our ancestors, those people who came before us. We can also focus on our own relatives who made us into the people we are today. Talk together about your grandparents and great-grandparents. Are they still alive? If not, what do you remember about them (if anything)? Parents can share a few stories that they remember from their childhoods.

It's good to know where we came from. Keep in mind that family is much more than who we are related to biologically. Family are the people who raised us, the people who love us, the people who guide us on our paths.

Which family members have you not seen or spoken to in awhile? Give one a call and reach out to them.

Topic #6

Here is a list of eight Jewish principles that speak to how we treat ourselves and others. Think about each one. What does it mean to you? Do you think any principles are missing from this list?

Emet. Truthfulness – Tell the truth, even when it's difficult.

Rachmanut. Compassion – Be kind in your treatment of others.

Ometz Lev. Courage – Have the courage to stand up for yourself and others.

B'tzelem Elohim. We are made in God's image – Treat yourself and have others treat you as the unique and valuable person that you are.

Lo Levayesh. Don't embarrass – Refrain from all behavior that could humiliate another person.

Shmirat Haguf. Care for your body – Your body is a gift from God and should be treated with respect by you and others.

Tzedek. Righteousness – Always try to figure out what's right, and do it.

Dibuk L'chaverim. Stick by your friends – True friendship involves both loyalty and honesty.

Topic #7

Take a Jewish text from the list provided at the end of these pages and use it to discuss a political issue that you care about. (Examples: immigration, racism, climate change, poverty,...) How does the text shape how you think about the issue? Why is it worthwhile to bring Jewish texts into the conversation?

Ask a parent to describe an important issue to them when they were your age. How are the issues different? Similar?

Make a collage with images you find on the topic and pair the images with one or more Jewish texts. If Facebook is your thing, post it and see what the image says to other people. Or, just ask a few people to share with you what it means to them.

Topic #8

What's most important to you about being Jewish? Being part of a Jewish community? Participating in Jewish prayer? Living Jewish values? Speaking Hebrew? Studying Jewish topics like Jewish ethics or Jewish history?

It used to be that we didn't need to ask these questions. Children grew up in homes where the expectation was that they would take part in Jewish rituals on a daily basis. In our world we have to make conscious choices about how to be Jewish. What does that look like for you? Where do you find the most meaning in Judaism? What kinds of Jewish practices do you plan to do in the next five or ten years?

Jewish Texts

1. "The world rests upon three things: Torah (learning), avodah (prayer), and gemilut hasadim (acts of loving kindness). (Pirkei Avot 1:2)
2. Joshua ben Perachia would say: Appoint for yourself a teacher, and acquire for yourself a friend, and give each person the benefit of the doubt. (Pirkei Avot 1:6)
3. [Hillel] would say: If I am not for myself, who will be for me? And if I am only for myself, what am I? And if not now, when? (Pirkei Avot 1:14)
4. Hillel said: Do not separate yourself from the community. (Pirkei Avot 2:4)
5. Hillel said: ...Do not judge your fellow until you have put yourself in his place. (Pirkei Avot 2:4)
6. Your friend's dignity should be as precious to you as your own. (Pirkei Avot 2:10)
7. Rabbi Tarfon used to say: It is not up to you to finish the task, but you are not free to desist from it. (Pirkei Avot 2:16)
8. Rabbi Eliezer ben Azariah would say: If there is no Torah, there is no common decency. If there is no common decency, there is no Torah. If there is no wisdom, there is no fear of God. If there is no fear of God, there is no wisdom. If there is no knowledge, there is no understanding. If there is no understanding, there is no knowledge. If there is no flour, there is no Torah. If there is no Torah, there is no flour. (Pirkei Avot 3:17)
9. Ben Zoma taught: Who is worthy of respect? The one who treats other human beings with respect. (Pirkei Avot 4:1)
10. Do not seek revenge or bear a grudge against anyone among your people, but love your neighbor as yourself. I am the Lord. (Leviticus 19:18)
11. You shall not oppress a stranger, since you yourselves know the feelings of a stranger, for you also were strangers in the land of Egypt. (Exodus 23:9)
12. Learn to do good. Devote yourselves to justice; aid the wronged. Uphold the rights of the orphan; defend the cause of the widow. (Isaiah 1:17)
13. Who is mighty? One who makes an enemy into a friend. (Avot de Rabi Natan 23)
14. Why is gossip like a three-pronged tongue? Because it kills three people: the person who says it, the person who listens to it, and the person about whom it is said. (Babylonian Talmud, Arakhin, page 15b)

15. What is hateful to you, do not do to your neighbor. This is the whole Torah; all the rest is commentary. Now go and study. (Babylonian Talmud, Shabbat 31a)
16. When God created the first human beings, God led them around all the trees of the Garden of Eden and said: "Look at My works! See how beautiful they are—how excellent! For your sake I created them all. See to it that you do not spoil and destroy My world; for if you do, there will be no one else to repair it." (Midrash Ecclesiastes Rabbah 7:13)
17. A man in a boat began to drill a hole under his seat. His fellow passengers protested. "What concern is it of yours?" he responded. "I am making a hole under my seat, not yours." They replied: "That is so, but when the water comes in- it will sink the whole boat and we will all drown." (Leviticus Rabbah 4:6)
18. If one causes another person's face to turn white in public, it is as if he has spilled blood. (Babylonian Talmud, Bava Metzia 58b)
19. Therefore, one human being was created...to teach you that one who destroys one life, it is as if he has destroyed an entire world, for he destroys all future generations that would have come from that one person. And he who saves the life of one person, it is as if he had saved an entire world. (Babylonian Talmud, Sanhedrin, 37a)
20. If, however, there is a needy person among you, one of your kinsmen in any of your settlements in the land that the Lord your God is giving you, do not harden your heart and shut your hand against your needy kinsman. Rather, you must open your hand and lend him sufficient for whatever he needs. (Deuteronomy 15:7-8)
21. And they shall beat their swords into plowshares, and their spears into pruning hooks; nation shall not lift up sword against nation, neither shall they learn war any more. (Isaiah 2:4)
22. When you reap the harvest of your land, you shall not fully reap the corner of your field, nor shall you gather the gleanings of your harvest. And you shall not glean your vineyard, nor shall you collect the [fallen] individual grapes of your vineyard; you shall leave them for the poor and the stranger. I am the Lord, your God. (Leviticus 19:9-10)