

Conversation Guide

WELCOME

We begin, as Jewish gatherings do, with a blessing for our time together:

Baruch atah Adonai Eloheinu melech
haolam asher kidshanu b'mitzvotav
v'tzivanu la'asok b'tzorchei tzibur.

ברוך אתה יי אלהינו מלך
העולם אשר קדשנו במצותיו
וצונו לעסוק בצרכי צבור:

We praise you, Holy One of Blessing, who sanctifies us through mitzvot and has commanded us to engage with the needs of the community.

This group is intended to create a brave space for meaningful conversation and deep listening where each of us is able to speak honestly from our own experience. In order to do that, we need a shared understanding of how we will interact respectfully. So let's discuss our *b'rit* – the commitment we each make to the group and to each other.

The sample *b'rit* on the following page is a baseline. We'll take some time now to walk through the *b'rit*, and you are welcome to suggest any additions or clarifications that would more fully help you feel a sense of openness with the group. In the remaining meetings, we will briefly review the *b'rit* for our group to remind ourselves of our shared commitments.

Elul Group Sample B'rit

- We acknowledge that there are many demands on our time and we affirm the gift of each participant's commitment to creating this space together. Because of the sacredness of this time together, we agree that our commitment to this group takes priority over other activities for the month ahead. If we are unable to attend a scheduled meeting, *e.g.*, because of illness or a family emergency, we will let the group leader know as soon as possible. We will be fully present for group meetings, eliminating outside distractions and focusing our attention on the activities and conversation within the group.
- We welcome the diversity of voices and perspectives and strive to learn from our differences. We agree to treat each other with kindness and to respect each other's experiences and identities, even in moments of disagreement.
- We are aware of how much we are participating. If some of us generally speak a lot, we consider making space for others to speak. If some of us generally participate less, we consider taking space and sharing with the group.
- We listen to understand, rather than listening with the intent of forming a response.
- We honor confidentiality. What's said here, stays here. What's learned here, leaves here.
- To enhance our getting to know each other in a respectful and caring way, we will wear nametags with our preferred name and pronouns at in-person meetings. When meeting on Zoom, we will each make sure our name and pronouns on the screen reflect the way in which we want to be addressed.

How Do You Recharge?



ASK AND SHARE

As humans, we recharge in many different ways for many different reasons. A good night's sleep can help recharge after a long day. Reading a good book or engaging in a favorite hobby can make us feel mentally refreshed, and intense physical activity releases endorphins that can recharge both body and mind. Please think of one thing that helps you refill your sense of joy, restfulness, and energy when you feel depleted or run-down. What helps you feel recharged? Take a moment to think about this question, and then we'll share our responses.

How Do You Recharge?



LEARN

None of us enters directly into the High Holy Days ready to make *t'shuva* – to ask for forgiveness. We need time to prepare ourselves and reflect. The Jewish tradition has had a designated time for rest and reflection since, well, the very beginning: *Shabbat*. Since Yom Kippur is also referred to as *Shabbat Shabbaton* – the Sabbath of Sabbaths – let's start our Elul journey by seeing what Shabbat can teach us about how to stop the busy-ness in our minds and to start preparing for the High Holy Days.

In the Torah, the story of the creation of the world ends with a day of rest – a set-apart time. Later descriptions of *Shabbat*, the Sabbath day, make it clear that everyone in the community is meant to rest – not only those with privilege, but workers, the stranger passing through, and even the animals! Judaism considers rest an important activity; elsewhere, the Torah talks about the act of *shavat v'yinafash*, resting and restoring oneself. *Nefesh* means “soul” in Hebrew, so this kind of resting is a sort of a re-souling, a recharging of one's soul or spirit.

Our culture has shifted towards increased technological connection and, often with it, an expectation that people will respond to any kind of work request even late at night and early in the morning, seven days a week. In addition to that gradual shift, the sudden transformation that accompanied the COVID-19 pandemic removed for many of us the boundaries that had distinguished the different parts of our lives – because work either moved home or disappeared, along with childcare, school, and numerous other activities. The trauma of more than a year in lockdown and adjusting to this new sense of normal have left many of us without a chance to rest or recharge – to stop *doing* so much and to just *be*.

Interpretive Questions

- What needs are served by having a designated time for rest and reflection?
- Are those needs personal, communal, or both?

Reflective Questions

- Do you experience the kind of rest and “re-souling” we talk about on Shabbat differently from other restful activities? How?
- If you were asked to come up with a list of ten things to do (or not do) on Shabbat to rest and recharge, what would be on it?

PERSPECTIVES FROM JEWISH TRADITION

Let's go deeper into the Jewish tradition to help us make the leap from the weekly rest we enjoy on Shabbat to the annual reflection we engage in around the High Holy Days.

There is a passage in the Talmud, Tractate Shabbat 12a¹, in which the students of Shammai and Hillel² disagree over whether it is permitted to perform certain activities on Shabbat. The students of Shammai – who generally follow a narrower interpretation of what is allowed under Jewish law – list a number of activities that may not be performed on *Shabbat*, including making matches or betrothals, comforting mourners, or visiting the sick. The students of Hillel – usually more lenient in their interpretation – argue that each of these activities include an aspect of performing a *mitzva*³ and should therefore be allowed on *Shabbat*.

The text then goes on to discuss how to greet a sick person one is visiting on *Shabbat*. Unlike the rest of the week, one may not “cry out and ask for compassion [for the sick person].” Instead, upon entering one says, “*Shabbat* is capable of compassion.” In the early 19th Century, Reb Nachman of Breslov⁴ explained the passage this way: a person who lacks “holy knowledge” (*da'at*) cannot be compassionate. *Shabbat* itself endows us with *da'at* and therefore with compassion⁵.

¹ <https://www.sefaria.org/Shabbat.12a.12?lang=bi&with=all&lang2=en>

² Shammai and Hillel were scholars who lived in the first century BCE. They frequently diverged in their interpretation of Jewish law. Rather than this being a negative, their disagreements were referred to as “disagreements for the sake of heaven.”

³ A *mitzva* (plural: *mitzvot*) is an obligation or positive commandment. It is also commonly used in the sense of “a good deed.”

⁴ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Nachman_of_Breslov

⁵ https://www.sefaria.org/Likutei_Moharan.119?lang=bi

How Do You Recharge?



Interpretive Questions

- Beit Shammai and Beit Hillel appear to be focusing on different aspects of activities that may or may not be allowed on *Shabbat*. How would you describe the principles they each rely on?
- What is the connection between “holy knowledge” (*da’at*) and compassion?

Reflective Questions

- Does performing a *mitzva* or showing compassion help you to recharge? Can you give an example?
- If Yom Kippur is a *Shabbat Shabbaton* – a Sabbath of Sabbaths – surely it too is capable of compassion. During Elul, a time for taking stock of where we may have missed the mark, how can you extend that compassion not only to others but also to yourself?

How Do You Recharge?



DO

Reflection – an activity that is often both solitary and sedentary – is nonetheless hard work. Like teenagers who seemingly grow inches taller while they sleep, these “down times” for reflection are actually some of our most productive. Without taking the time to rest and recharge, we may not have the energy to go deep, to think hard about things rather than react, to see the bigger picture. Having *Shabbat* every week gives us a model for the annual rest, reflection, and renewal of the High Holy Days.

As we conclude the conversation, here are a few final questions to consider.

- What’s one insight that you’ve gained from this conversation?
- What is one action you might take, or practice you might try, before we meet next time, based on what you’re taking from this conversation?
- What’s one obstacle to taking that action? How can you overcome it? Who might you need help from in order to do so?
- What could we do together as a community based on what we talked about today?

Please take a moment to think about these questions, and if you’d like, to share them with the group.

Thank you for being part of this conversation.