

## Conversation Guide for Participants

### 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.*

בְּרוּךְ אַתָּה יי אֱלֹהֵינוּ מֶלֶךְ  
הָעוֹלָם אֲשֶׁר קִדְּשָׁנוּ בְּמִצְוֹתָיו  
וְצִוָּנוּ לְעִסוֹק בְּצָרְכֵי צְבוּר:

Praised are You, Adonai our God, Ruler of the universe, who sanctifies us through mitzvot and has commanded us to engage with the needs of the community.

Now, let's review the *derech erez* – the shared understanding of how we will interact – that animates our time together. “*Derech erez*” (דֶּרֶךְ אֶרֶץ) is a Hebrew phrase that literally means “way of the land.” In common speech, it means courtesy, respect, or good manners. By having a shared understanding of how we will interact, we create a safe space for meaningful conversation and deep listening.

Our *derech erez* describes how we apply [Temple Beth Am's values](#) in the setting of our Elul Group conversations:

**Inclusion:** We honor differences, and do not make assumptions. We listen to each other and make room for every voice. We are kind to ourselves and one another.

**Inspiration:** The month of Elul is a time for *cheshbon hanefesh* – an accounting of the soul. As we engage in these conversations, we make ourselves vulnerable and open to new ways of seeing ourselves and others.

**Purpose:** What we do matters in the world. As we explore Jewish values through the lens of these conversations, we also explore how we can better align our actions with those values.

**Engagement:** We are fully present, eliminating distractions so that we can focus on the conversation and each other.

**Curiosity:** We are open to trying new things and going outside of our comfort zone. We agree to disagree and address any conflict directly and with kindness. We ask and respect questions.

**Responsibility:** We engage in these conversations to strengthen our connection to one another and our Temple Beth Am community. We will not share others' stories outside this conversation, although we may share what we have learned from this experience.

## ASK AND SHARE

Thank you for joining our conversation. Today we're going to be talking about connection. Sometimes connecting with other people is easy; other times, not so much. Please think about a time you connected deeply with someone – not a member of your family – and what sparked that connection.

Take a moment to bring a story to mind, and then we'll each share what we thought of.

## LEARN

It's been said that there's no such thing as a Jew in isolation. The practice of Judaism requires a community of (at least) ten people at key moments of both celebration and mourning. Trace the meaning of dozens of Hebrew words – e.g., to speak, to teach, to call, to load, to obligate, to be beautiful – back to their essential roots and they all mean “to join.”

Why is connection with others so central to our tradition?

Rabbi Ed Feinstein teaches: “What is the opposite of holiness? In Hebrew, the opposite of *kadosh* [holiness] is *hol*. Translated as ‘profane’ or ‘ordinary,’ *hol* literally means ‘sand.’ Sand has no cohesion, no connection, no bonds. When you are in relationship, you share a bond with an Other.”<sup>1</sup>

Elul is a time for us to examine our connections with other people – and with the Divine, in whatever way we each understand that concept. During Elul, we look for the aspects of our relationships that require healing. Through *t'shuvah* – the process of repair and return that is central to the High Holy Days – we deepen those connections.

### Interpretive Questions

- For Rabbi Feinstein, what is the link between connection and holiness?
- What do you think is the significance of the capital “O” in “Other” in this quote?

### Reflective Questions

- What role does connection play for you in experiencing holiness, however you may understand it?
- What are the signs that your connection with someone else is in need of repair?
- How does your experience of holiness change when your relationships are in need of healing?

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<sup>1</sup> *Relational Judaism* (2013) by Dr. Ron Wolfson, p.47

## PERSPECTIVES FROM JEWISH TRADITION

There's a saying from the Talmud, in Pirkei Avot 1:6, that may be familiar to you:

יְהוֹשֻׁעַ בֶּן פְּרִיְחָיָה אוֹמֵר, עֲשֵׂה לְךָ רֵב, וְקַנְיָה לְךָ חֵבֵר, וְהָגוּי דָן אֶת כָּל  
הָאָדָם לְכַף זְכוּת:

Joshua ben Perahiah used to say: make for yourself a teacher, and acquire for yourself a friend, and judge everyone with the scale weighted in their favor.

[Another way to translate the last phrase is “be in the habit of judging the entirety of the person with the benefit of the doubt.”]

The relationship between teacher and student is a recurring theme in Pirkei Avot; later on, we read that we are obligated to treat with honor a person from whom we learn “even one letter” and to call that person “beloved friend.” It makes sense that the Talmud – an intergenerational conversation among the Sages and their students that continued for hundreds of years – would use the metaphor of teachers and students to describe the way we should treat *everyone* with whom we are in relationship.

### Interpretive Questions

- Does giving others the benefit of the doubt foster connection? If so, why?
- Does connection make it easier to give someone the benefit of the doubt? If so, why?
- What does it mean to judge the “entirety of the person”? How does this enhance our connection to others?

### Reflective Questions

- Does this passage give you any insights about making *t'shuvah*?

# How Do We Connect?



## DO

In Genesis 2:18, we read: “*Adonai* said, ‘It is not good for [a person] to be alone.’” As humans, we crave connection – with other humans and with something more transcendent – even if those relationships don’t always run as smoothly as we might like. They require regular maintenance, and Elul serves as our annual reminder, just in case we’ve neglected that work the rest of the year.

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.