

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.

What Will Your Legacy Be?



ASK AND SHARE

Thank you for joining our conversation. Today we'll be talking about "legacy." Please take a moment to think about what comes to mind when you hear that word.

When we're all ready, we'll each share what we thought of.

LEARN

Merriam Webster defines "legacy" as:

- 1: a gift by will especially of money or other personal property
- 2: something transmitted by or received from an ancestor or predecessor or from the past

Legacies aren't crafted after the fact. They're built, day by day, as we make choices about where to invest our time, our energy, our talents and our attention. Those choices determine the kind of person we will have been, the impact we will have had, the way we will have touched people and the way we will be remembered by them.

Bill Watterson, the creator of the comic strip Calvin and Hobbes, gave a graduation speech at his alma mater, Kenyon College, in 1990, that included the following:

Creating a life that reflects your values and satisfies your soul is a rare achievement. In a culture that relentlessly promotes avarice and excess as the good life, a person happy doing his own work is usually considered an eccentric, if not a subversive. Ambition is only understood if it's to rise to the top of some imaginary ladder of success. Someone who takes an undemanding job because it affords him the time to pursue other interests and activities is considered a flake. A person who abandons a career in order to stay home and raise children is considered not to be living up to his potential – as if a job title and salary are the sole measure of human worth.

You'll be told in a hundred ways, some subtle and some not, to keep climbing, and never be satisfied with where you are, who you are, and what you're doing. There are a million ways to sell yourself out, and I guarantee you'll hear about them.

To invent your own life's meaning is not easy, but it's still allowed, and I think you'll be happier for the trouble.

What Will Your Legacy Be?



Interpretive Questions

- What does Watterson think are the risks and benefits of the various paths he describes?
- What do you think he means by “invent[ing] your life’s meaning”?

Reflective Questions

- In what ways have you made choices that help you invent your life’s purpose?
- What kinds of choices do you think you need to make to create a life that “reflects your values and satisfies your soul”?
- How do you come to determine what has meaning in your life? Are there people or experiences or values or traditions that are particularly important for you?
- What do you want your legacy in life to be?

PERSPECTIVES FROM JEWISH TRADITION

At the High Holy Days – especially on Yom Kippur – we are confronted with our mortality¹. Reminded that our days are numbered, we have to make every day count, so that the legacy we leave will be one we are proud of. This is a time to take stock of whether we are actually living by the values we espouse, and to recalibrate if necessary.

In the Talmud, Tractate Shabbat 31a, the Sage known simply as Rava recounts the questions each person is asked when departing this world and arriving at the World to Come:

אָמַר רַבָּא : בְּשָׁעָה שֶׁמִּכְנִיסִין אָדָם לְדִין , אֹמְרִים לוֹ : נִשְׂאָתָּ וְנִתְּתָּ
בְּאִמּוּנָה? קִבַּעְתָּ עֵתִים לַתּוֹרָה? עִסְקִיתָ בְּפִרְיָהּ וּרְבִיָּהּ? צָפִיתָ לִישׁוּעָה?
פְּלִפְלִיתָ בְּחֻכְמָה? הִבְנִיתָ דָּבָר מִתּוֹךְ דָּבָר?

Rava said: After departing from this world, when a person is brought to judgment for the life he lived in this world, they say to him: Did you conduct business faithfully? Did you designate times for Torah study? Did you engage in procreation? Did you await salvation? Did you search for wisdom or learn to form a conclusion by analogy?

Interpretive Questions

- What does this text suggest are the main priorities that should inform a person's life choices?
- How do these priorities differ from, or build upon, Watterson's notion of legacy?

Reflective Questions

- Do you think these questions reflect a specifically Jewish idea of how to evaluate a life?
- If you were to update this list to reflect 21st Century Jewish values, (how) would it change?
- If you were compiling your own list of questions, what would be on it? How would – or does – that list affect your life choices?

¹ "A Dress Rehearsal for our Deaths," <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/09/17/opinion/yom-kippur-death-rehearsal-morality.html>

What Will Your Legacy Be?



DO

In the Jewish tradition, there is a beautiful custom of writing an ethical will. Parents write letters to children summing up what they have learned in life, what values are important to them, and what they hope to have instilled in the family. For many people, these sentiments are just as valuable as material family heirlooms. In writing an ethical will, one confronts oneself – forcing a reflection on time spent living.

The book [*So That Your Values Live On*](#) collects more than 100 contemporary ethical wills, including one by William Joseph Adelson, a Jewish pediatrician and allergist from Sudbury, Massachusetts. Adelson left this advice for his children: “More than material possessions, I hope I will have left each of you an optimistic spirit, a fervor and enthusiasm for life, a sensitivity to nature and esthetics, a closeness and regard for one another, a sense of responsibility and concern for others, and a sense of worth-whileness about yourselves.”

(If you would like to write your own ethical will, the book *The Forever Letter: Writing What We Believe for Those We Love* by Elana Zaiman² provides samples and writing tips.)

When you reflect upon your own life, and upon the legacy you hope to leave towards the end of your life, what do you envision? And how can you live into tomorrow’s legacy today?

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, 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.

² <https://www.indiebound.org/book/9780738752884>