1. WELCOME
Before we begin, let’s review the brit—the covenant—that animates our time together:

- **Accountability:** I’ll show up for eight meetings over the next eight months. Or I’ll let the host know the (good) reason I will be absent. I will also be punctual and respect everyone’s time. Which means that meetings will start and end on time, no matter how good the schmoozing.
- **Presence:** When we’re together, I’ll be present and mindful. I will listen and share. Life (and our mobile devices) offer many distractions, but I will stay present and engaged.
- **Double Confidentiality:** I’ll maintain complete confidentiality. What I hear and say stays here. That means that even when I see group member in another context, like at Central or in the neighborhood, I won’t bring up what has been shared in our group unless you open the conversation.
- **Vulnerability:** I’ll stretch myself to be as open and honest as I can with my perspectives and experiences to create a safe environment that might encourage others to takes risks, too.
- **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 each person 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 and some of us are quieter, so I’ll be aware to not dominate discussions or always leave the weight of it to others.

• **Curiosity:** Judaism is a religion of exploration; of 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 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.

### 2. ASK AND SHARE

Welcome to our conversation. Let’s take a moment to introduce ourselves. When you hear the word “home,” what’s the first thing that comes to mind?

You can use the space below to write some notes to yourself.

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### 3. LEARN

Of all the big questions of life, Where is home? is one of the biggest. Home could be a physical place, like the home we grew up in. It could be defined by relationships we have—as in, “I feel at home with the people I love.” It could denote experiences, as in “I feel at home when I’m playing football,” or “I feel at home when I’m reading my favorite author.” Home is many things.

The American poet Robert Frost is known to have defined home as “the place where, when you have to go there, they have to take you in.” Or as another poet, Maya Angelou put it, “The ache for home lives in all of us, the safe place where we can go as we are and not be questioned.” Home is a place where we can be ourselves, according to these poets.

But perhaps we don’t want to be ourselves, or at least the selves we are at the place we call home. “Say there’s a white kid who lives in a nice home,” the rapper Eminem said in a 2000 interview. “He goes to an all-white school, and is pretty much having everything handed to him on a platter. For him to pick up a rap tape is incredible to me, because what that’s saying is that he’s living a
fantasy life of rebellion.” Sometimes we feel a need to leave home in order to discern where and what our home really is.

On the next page, there are several images of or about home. Take some time to look at them. There are larger versions of each of these images in the Appendix at the end of this conversation guide.
Interpretive Questions:
- What’s going on in each of these photos?
- In what ways does each image evoke the concept of “home” for you?
- In what ways does each image challenge the concept of “home” for you?
- In what ways does each image expand the concept of “home” for you?

Reflective Questions:
- Which of these images resonates most strongly with you? Why?
- Which of these images makes you most uncomfortable? Why?
- When was a time when you were surprised to feel at home?
- When was a time when you expected to feel at home, and didn’t?
- How do you know when you’re home?

4. PERSPECTIVES FROM JEWISH TRADITION

How do these questions about home look through the lens of the Jewish tradition? The Book of Ruth, The Book of Psalms, and the contemporary writer Anita Diamant offer some possibilities. You need not discuss all of the texts; feel free to choose those that speak to you. These texts are merely tools for reflecting on your own stories and experiences. Please use them in a way that organically continues or deepens the conversation you have been having so far.

In the Book of Ruth, Naomi, a Jew, becomes widowed and her sons die. She prepares to return to her homeland of Yehudah from Moab, where she had been living, and her daughter-in-law, Ruth, a Moabite, makes the following speech to her, asking to join her on this journey. Ruth is sometimes considered the first convert to Judaism.

Do not urge me to leave you or to turn back from you. Where you go I will go, and where you lodge I will lodge. Your people will be my people and your God my God. Where you die I will die, and there I will be buried. May the Eternal deal with me, be it ever so severely, if even death separates you and me.
--Book of Ruth 1:16-17.

- How is home articulated in this passage?
- What does it mean to leave your home to create a new home?
- Do you experience home as a person or people?
The Ashrei is a prayer that is traditionally recited three times a day. The first two lines are from Psalms 84 and 144; the rest of the prayer is from Psalm 145.

Ashrei yishuv ba’bayit, v’od melekh kol ha’asha’ir ha’isha, Ashrei ha’isha, Ashrei ha’isha, Ashrei ha’isha.

Happy are Those who Dwell in Your House. They forever Praise You. Happy the people who have it so; happy the people whose God is Adonai.  
--Psalms 84:5 and 144:15

- What does it mean to dwell in God’s house?
- Does God’s house feel like home to you? Why or why not?

The Jewish home has been called a mikdash me’at, a little sanctuary. It is an evocative image. From the moment you walk through the doorway of a sanctuary, you know you are entering a unique kind of space. A sanctuary does not look like other places. It is defined and ornamented by ritual objects, books and art. A sanctuary feels different from the workplace and the marketplace. In a sanctuary, the mundane criteria for success and failure fall away. What matters is not what you do but who you are.

A sanctuary is a place of safety and asylum. It is where the dispossessed go for shelter, where the hungry go for food, where the weary find rest. Sanctuaries are filled with voices, sometimes singing in unison, sometimes raised in disagreement. And sometimes a sanctuary is as still as a garden. Today, when so many families face the pressures of multiple roles, needs and schedules, making a home into a sanctuary seems more difficult than ever-and thus more important than ever. The tools for making a home into a mikdash me’at are the mitzvot... No sanctuary is perpetually filled with all the beauty and meaning it might contain. No home is ever fully or finally a sanctuary. But the ongoing process of making Jewish choices can help turn a home into a mikdash me’at, a little sanctuary, an island of peace, a safe harbor, a beautiful Jewish place.

~Anita Diamant, Contemporary journalist and author.

- What does Diamant consider to be the difference between a home and a sanctuary?
- In what ways are the places that are home for you also sanctuaries? In what ways are they not?
- What plays a role in transforming your home spaces into sanctuaries?

You can use this space to write some notes to yourself.
As our conversation demonstrates, home is a powerful idea. In many ways it is fundamental to who we are.

The Talmud recounts that the second-century Rabbis Akiva and Eliezer disagreed about how to understand the Biblical verse, “You shall dwell in booths (sukkot)... so that your descendants may know that the Lord made the people of Israel live in sukkot when he led them out of Egypt,” (Leviticus 23:42-43). Rabbi Akiva interpreted the sukkah referred to in the verse as a literal sukkah: a hut like the ones we build today. Rabbi Eliezer believed the sukkot in the verse were the “clouds of God’s glory”—and thus the sukkot we build are metaphors or symbols, not a literal re-enactment of the past. We could say that for Rabbi Akiva, the sukkah—home—is a physical structure; for Rabbi Eliezer, it is a state of mind.

Like the sukkah, home is an idea animated by paradoxes: it is both secure and vulnerable, real and metaphorical, at the same time. For some, home is a place of security. For others it is a place where we can make ourselves vulnerable—by inviting guests, by going to sleep. Home can be a physical location, and it can be a state of mind. We can be at home in a house, but we can also be at home in a language or while performing an activity. Probably for many of us, it is all of these things.

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?

Use the space below to note your response to these questions.
Thank you for being part of this conversation.

Central Synagogue works tirelessly toward a world in which Judaism is central to the lives of Jews everywhere and is a profound and positive force for humanity. We are relentless in our pursuit of that goal — constantly evolving and always seeking new ways to be “more excellent.” We reach far beyond the walls of our synagogue to learn, worship, serve, and continually redefine what it means to be Jewish today.

Ask Big Questions is an initiative of Hillel: The Foundation for Jewish Campus Life in partnership with the Einhorn Family Charitable Trust. Visit AskBigQuestions.org to answer questions, learn from others, and join the movement.

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APPENDIX: IMAGES IN LARGER SIZES