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. Please tell us about a time you connected deeply with someone else despite very different worldviews. You can use the space below to make some notes to yourself.

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## 3. Learn

There’s something of a paradox inherent in our attempts to connect with—to deeply see—one another. Walt Whitman in his “Song of Myself,” articulated this in a way, saying on the one hand, “For every atom belonging to me as good belongs to you,” and, on the other, “(I am large, I contain multitudes.)” Even if we want, desperately, to give over all of ourselves to another, how can we if we are so large, so vast, encompassing so much? That is, in which ways is it possible to connect with others, and in which... not?

From one perspective, it’s impossible to ever really know someone else. No matter how profoundly we can connect, we’ll never have full access to his or her memories, assumptions, experiences, or ways of thinking. Add in our attempts to come together with someone of a different culture, ethnicity, sexual orientation, religion, class status, gender, ability level, or any one of a myriad of other things, and there are even more layers of perspective and assumption to untangle.

But from another point of view, of course, we can know one another, and we can use the power of language and shared experience to understand who the other in front of us really is, and to find the places of illumination in our shared humanity. When we work to understand one another, we forge the tools to create caring communities and build a world of kindness and love.
TEXT OPTION #1

This is one of two possible options for the central LEARN texts for this session. We recommend that you choose one of the two options and go deeply into the questions and issues that it raises, rather than trying to address both in one conversation. There will be additional opportunities for reflection in the PERSPECTIVES FROM JEWISH TRADITION section.

Here are two pieces that muse on the dichotomy of our specific experiences and our shared humanity. The first is a poem by the 13th century Persian Muslim poet, mystic and theologian Jalāl ad-Dīn Muhammad Rūmī, (often known, simply, as Rumi), and the other a quote from Zalman Schachter-Shalomi, a contemporary rabbi, author and teacher. The Schachter-Shalomi quote is excerpted from an interview with Beliefnet in 2005. The full interview can be found here: http://bit.ly/1b5OkPx. The Rumi poem was translated by Coleman Bark, and appears in The Essential Rumi, first published in 1995.

Only Breath
Jalāl ad-Dīn Muhammad Rūmī

Not Christian or Jew or Muslim, not Hindu, Buddhist, sufi, or zen. Not any religion or cultural system. I am not from the East or the West, not out of the ocean or up from the ground, not natural or ethereal, not composed of elements at all. I do not exist, am not an entity in this world or the next, did not descend from Adam or Eve or any origin story. My place is placeless, a trace of the traceless. Neither body or soul. I belong to the beloved, have seen the two worlds as one and that one call to and know, first, last, outer, inner, only that breath breathing human being.

Excerpt from “Soul Man” interview
Zalman Schachter-Shalomi

Each religion is like a vital organ. If you’re integral to the planet, it is really important to be the best Jews that you can be. If we are a healthy, vital organ of the planet, then the rest of the world will be able to heal, too. Since I’ve had ecumenical dialogue with Hindus, Buddhists, Confucionists, Taoists, Christians of all sorts, Muslims, it was getting very clear that with so many of the people I had a kinship, such that I didn’t even have to apologize. I didn’t have to be ashamed to say that I love God. And once people are in that situation that they too feel that they have that kind of kinship, then a lot of things happen in what I call spiritual intimacy.
**Interpretive questions**
- What does Rumi mean when he says, “My place is placeless... I belong to the beloved.”?
- Do you think Rumi literally means that he does not consider himself Muslim or “from the East or the West”?
- How is Rumi situating the specifics of his context in a greater picture?
- How does Reb Zalman understand the role of specific religions in the bigger picture?
- How does Reb Zalman understand his purpose as a Jew?
- How does Reb Zalman regard interfaith connections?

**Reflective questions**
- In what ways do you feel specifically rooted in your geographic, cultural, and/or religious context?
- In what ways do you feel part of the universal human story?
- How does, and doesn’t, your specific context impact what happens when you connect with others who are different from you?
- How do we connect with those who are different from us?
- How don’t we? Are there limitations? If so, what are they?
This is one of two possible options for the central LEARN texts for this session. We recommend that you choose one of the two options and go deeply into the questions and issues that it raises, rather than trying to address both in one conversation. There will be additional opportunities for reflection in the PERSPECTIVES FROM JEWISH TRADITION section.

The trio of anecdotes below are from the Talmud. They tell a powerful story about human connection, and how we connect—and when, and why, we don’t. Please read it out loud, as a group.

Rabbi Hiyya bar Abba fell ill and Rabbi Yochanan went in to visit him. He said to him: “Are your sufferings welcome to you?” [That is, are you enjoying being sick?] He replied: “Neither they nor their reward.” [That is, I don’t want to be sick, and I’d even pass on any future metaphysical reward that I might possibly get for being sick if I could get better.] He said to him: “Give me your hand.” He gave him his hand and he raised him.

Rabbi Yochanan once fell ill and Rabbi Hanina went in to visit him. He said to him: “Are your sufferings welcome to you?” He replied: “Neither they nor their reward.” He said to him: “Give me your hand.” He gave him his hand and he raised him. Why could not Rabbi Yochanan raise himself? They replied: The prisoner cannot free himself from jail.

Rabbi Eleazar fell ill and Rabbi Yochanan went in to visit him... Thereupon he noticed that Rabbi Eleazar was weeping, and he said to him: “Why do you weep? Is it because you did not study enough Torah? Surely we have learned: The one who [studies] much and the one who [studies] little receive the same transcendent reward, as long as their heart was directed towards heaven [when they studied]. Is it because you did not have a lot of material comfort? Not everybody has the privilege to enjoy two tables [that is, a rich life]. Is it perhaps because of [the lack of] children? This is the bone of my tenth son [who has died!]” [That is, we all have hardship!] He replied to him: “I am weeping on account of this beauty that is going to pass into dust.” He said to him: “For this reason you certainly have a reason to weep!” [And they wept together. Eventually he said to him: “Are your sufferings welcome to you?” He replied: “Neither they nor their reward.” He said to him: “Give me your hand.” And he gave him his hand and he raised him.

--Babylonian Talmud, Brachot 5b
**Interpretive Questions**

- What does it mean when the stories say, “Give me your hand,’ and he gave him his hand, and he raised him”?
- Why can’t Rabbi Yochenan heal himself?
- What is Rabbi Yochenan doing that’s not working in the last story? Why isn’t it effective at connecting?
- Why is Rabbi Eliezar crying?
- What is Rabbi Yochenan’s response when he finally understands why?
- What happens when they weep together?

**Reflective Questions**

- Have you ever made the same mistake that Rabbi Yochenan did in the third story? How did that go?
- Have you ever “raised” someone? Has someone ever raised you? What happened?
- How do we connect with others in deep understanding and empathy?
- How don’t we? Are there limitations? If so, what are they?

**4. MORE PERSPECTIVES FROM JEWISH TRADITION**

Let’s go deeper into the Jewish take on connection. Here are several texts—from the Mishnah, the Talmud, the 19th and 20th century—to consider. **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.

Joshua ben Perachiah said, “Make for yourself a teacher, acquire for yourself a friend, and give everyone the benefit of the doubt.”

--Mishnah Pirke Avot 1:6

- How do you “make for yourself” a teacher? Is that different from finding a teacher?
- How do you acquire for yourself a friend? What is the process of acquisition?
- How does giving others the benefit of the doubt foster connection?
We are taught that Rabbi Judah said: He who has never seen Alexandria in Egypt’s synagogue with the double colonnade has never seen the glory of Israel. It is said that it was like a huge basilica, one colonnade within another, and it some times held twice the number of people that had gone out of Egypt. In it, corresponding to the seventy-one elders of the Sanhedrin, there were seventy-one golden cathedras, each of them weighing not less than twenty-one talents of gold. In the middle of the synagogue was a wooden bimah, upon which the sexton of the synagogue stood with scarves in his hand. When the time came to answer, “Amen,” he waved the scarves and the congregation responded with “Amen.” Moreover, they were not seated haphazardly. Goldsmiths sat separately, silversmiths sat separately, blacksmiths separately, master weavers separately, and apprentice weavers separately, so that when a stranger or a poor man entered the synagogue, he was able to identify the members of his craft. He would then join them, and through them earn a livelihood for himself and the members of his family.

-- Babylonian Talmud, Tractate Sukkah 51b

- How do people connect in the large Alexandrian community?
- What advantages does this kind of system have? What impact does it have?
- What disadvantages does it have?
- How have you connected with others in the large community here?
- How might someone walking in the doors here for the first time find connection?

In the building of the Tabernacle, all Israel, were joined in their hearts; no one felt superior to his fellow. At first, each skilled individual did his own part of the construction, and it seemed to each one that his work was extraordinary. Afterwards, once they saw how their several contributions to the “service” of the Tabernacle were integrated – all the boards, the sockets, the curtains and the loops fit together as if one person had done it all. Then they realized how each one of them had depended upon the other. Then they understood how what all they had accomplished was not by virtue of their own skill alone but that the Holy One had guided the hands of everyone who had worked on the Tabernacle. They had only later merely joined in completing its master building plan – so that “it came to pass that the tabernacle was one” [Exodus 36:13]. Moreover, the one who had made the holy ark itself was unable to feel superior to the one who had only made the courtyard tent pegs.

--Rabbi Mordecai Yosef of Izbica, Itturay Torah

- In what ways are the Israelites working on their own?
- How do the Israelites understand their connection to one another? What kind of impact does it have?
• When have you understood your efforts to be part of a larger story?
• How does seeing the big picture of your contribution impact your relationship with others who are also part of that picture?

In the siddur which he issued, Rabbi Shneur Zalman of Liadi states: “Before prayer it is proper to say “I hereby am accepting upon myself the commandment of loving your neighbor as yourself.” The commandment to love one’s fellow Jews is the gateway to coming before God in prayers.” When a person encounters another person in total immediacy, he or she may also experience a glimpse of God.

--Martin Buber

• How does Rabbi Shneur Zalman understand the meaning of the commandment to love one’s neighbor?
• What does he think the impact of this commandment is when remembering it before prayer?
• Do you ever experience a glimpse of the divine when you connect deeply with others? If so, what does that look like?

Once the Gerer Rebbe decided to question one of his disciples: “How is Moshe Yaakov doing?” The disciple didn’t know. “What!” shouted the Rebbe, “You don’t know? You pray under the same roof, you study the same texts, you serve the same God, you sing the same songs, and yet you dare tell me that you don’t know whether Moshe Yaakov is in good health, whether he needs help, advice or comforting?”

–Eli Wiesel, Messengers of God

• Why would the Gerer Rebbe expect that his disciple would know how Moshe Yaakov was doing?
• Why didn’t the disciple know?
• Do you know if the people in your community are “in good health, whether they need help, advice or comforting”? If so, how do you know?
• If not, how would you find out?
• What are the obstacles to learning this about the people in your various communities? How can those obstacles be overcome?

Use the space below to write some notes to yourself if you’d like.
5. DO

It’s not easy to see, to really see another person. And it’s important to enter into the attempt with humility about the possibilities and limitations of really understanding someone else’s perspective. But engaging in the sometimes difficult work of connecting with someone else—even, or especially, someone different from ourselves in significant ways—can be transformational, not only for our understandings of the world and our capacity to create community and new ways of thinking. Rather, as the 20th Century Catholic monk Thomas Merton put it, “Souls are like athletes, that need opponents worthy of them, if they are to be tried and extended and pushed to the full use of their powers, and rewarded according to their capacity.” Our relationships with other human beings almost never offer ideal peace and serenity—but natural points of turbulence or friction offer us a chance to address our own assumptions, agendas, impatience and selfishness in a way we rarely do when left to our own devices. Learning how to connect with—or even love—one another is hardly easy. But it is through the imperfect attempt to do so that we become who we were meant to be all along, as individuals and together.

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 thing you want to change in your life based on this conversation?
• What’s one obstacle to you making that change, and how can you overcome it? Who might you need help from in order to make this change?
• 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. Join our conversation online at AskBigQuestions.org.
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.

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