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 when you chose to notice something you might otherwise have ignored—whether or not you responded in an active way in the moment.

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

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3. LEARN

The decision to ignore or notice happens many times a day: we ignore (or don’t ignore) emails, Facebook messages, tweets, phone calls, letters, even someone we know across the street. We choose whether to read the news, and what kind of news to read. We choose whether to pay attention to the natural world around us, to a distracting noise, to a friend’s irritating quirks. Life would be impossible without this filtering. If we noticed everything, we’d go crazy. And if we notice nothing, it’s meaningless.

Sometimes we actively ignore what’s happening in the world, whether oceans away or on our street corner—whether it’s because we feel overwhelmed by it, because we have “empathy fatigue,” because we don’t feel that we can have an impact, or for some other reason. Sometimes we choose to ignore behavior around us that we know is wrong or in which someone is getting hurt because we’re afraid to intervene or afraid to be unpopular, or because we assume that someone else will step in. These choices also have implications—for us, for those around us, and for the world we live in.
TEXT OPTION #1

These two texts serve as one of two possible options for the central LEARN text 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.

What do we choose to ignore? And by extension, what do we choose to notice? These are the questions informing the two selections below. The first is an essay from the This I Believe series on National Public Radio. (You can listen to the essay read by the author here: http://thisibelieve.org/essay/24636/). The second is a poem by American poet Mary Oliver. We’ll read them aloud, and then reflect on them together.

A Busybody’s Guide to Improving the World
Brigid Daull Brockway

I believe in sticking my nose into other people’s business.

When I was a teenager, a man I knew killed his son and himself. On the TV news the neighbors were shocked that something like this would happen here, and they had no idea the family was in such trouble.

It was a lie. We all knew what that man did to his kids. We told ourselves it was none of our business, and now we were lying because we were complicit in a child’s death. We’d seen the bruises on the children and did nothing. We’d seen the way he talked to them and said nothing. And so when the TV cameras came along, we told them we saw nothing.

I helped kill that kid, like everyone else, in the name of minding my own business.

Martin Luther King said in his Letter from Birmingham Jail, “Injustice anywhere is a threat to justice everywhere.” I’m no Martin Luther King but his call to action is as relevant now as it was then, and I know that the only way I can atone for that child’s death is to butt in, even when it’s unpopular, even when I’m not in the mood to fill out a police report or get screamed down by an abusive parent in the grocery store.

I’ve done those things, but I used to do them a lot more when I lived in the rough neighborhoods where I grew up, and when I worked at tough jobs. There was a wrong to be righted or a person to help around every corner. But then, I got a regular job. Now I live in the suburbs and work in a cubicle, and there are no great moral decisions under my nose.

The other day, I finally got around to reading the stack of bulk mail from charities that has been piling on the kitchen table. I was confronted with countless organizations wanting me to help children who are victims of war, neglect and abuse around the world — all of it seemed so overwhelming. And it made me want to do nothing more than just sit on the couch and watch reality TV.
But Dr. King’s words keep ringing back to me. As much as I may dislike my role as busybody, I think I’m really not nosy enough. I’m worried about saving the kids up the block, but what about kids around the world whose lives are in danger because I’m not sticking my nose in their business?

I know it’s time to get off the couch and start butting in more. It begins with writing this essay, and with holding myself accountable to my ideals. I believe it’s time I started sticking my nose, not just in the business of my neighbors but in the business of the world. I’m not eager to be chastised for my nosiness, but I know a little boy who died because no one likes a busybody. I believe I’ve got no right to make others suffer for my lack of conviction.

Wild Geese
Mary Oliver

You do not have to be good.
You do not have to walk on your knees
for a hundred miles through the desert, repenting.
You only have to let the soft animal of your body love what it loves.
Tell me about despair, yours, and I will tell you mine.
Meanwhile the world goes on.
Meanwhile the sun and the clear pebbles of the rain
are moving across the landscapes,
over the prairies and the deep trees,
the mountains and the rivers.
Meanwhile the wild geese, high in the clean blue air,
are heading home again.
Whoever you are, no matter how lonely,
the world offers itself to your imagination,
calls to you like the wild geese, harsh and exciting-
over and over announcing your place
in the family of things.
Interpretive Questions

• What does Brockway mean when says that she “helped kill that kid?”
• What does Brockway mean when she says that she used to be more involved in righting injustice, but that “now I live in the suburbs and work in a cubicle, and there are no great moral decisions under my nose?”
• Why is it significant for Mary Oliver that the natural world goes on while we live our lives?
• What does she mean when she writes that “the world offers itself to your imagination?”

Reflective Questions

• Have you ever acted like Brockway? Have you ever “stuck your nose into other people’s business?” What happened?
• How do we stop ignoring things that might be helpful for us to see? What about things that might be good for us to see in personal ways?
• Are there times that it’s good or useful to ignore something? If so, how do we determine what those things are?
In 2013, there was a fiery public discussion about whether it was appropriate for comedians to make jokes about sexual assault—and, if so, what kind. In the middle of this conversation, actor and comedian Patton Oswalt wrote an essay in which he shared about something he had chosen to ignore—and the moment when he decided to start noticing. It’s titled “A Closed Letter to Myself About Thievery, Heckling and Rape Jokes.” The full essay can be accessed here: http://pattonoswalt.com/index.cfm?page=spew&id=167

A special note about this text, as it addresses a sensitive topic: Please do not assume that there are no survivors of sexual violence in the room. 1 in 4 women and 1 in 7 men are survivors of sexual violence of some kind. As you speak, please keep in mind the likelihood that someone in this room experiences these issues as very personal indeed. Please read this excerpt out loud as a group:

The comedians I’ve known who joke about rape – and genocide, racism, serial killers, drug addiction and everything else in the Dark Subjects Suitcase – tend to be, internally and in action, anti-violence, anti-bigotry, and decidedly anti-rape. It’s their way – at least, it’s definitely my way – of dealing with the fact that all of this [horrible stuff] exists in the world. It’s one of the ways I try to reduce the power and horror those subjects hold for me. And… I was secure in thinking my point of view was right. That “rape culture” was an illusion.... I’ve never wanted to rape anyone. No one I know has ever expressed a desire to rape anyone. My viewpoint must be right. Right?

See if any of these sound familiar:
There’s no “evidence” of a “rape culture” in this country. I’ve never wanted to rape anyone, so why am I being lumped in as the enemy? If these bloggers and feminists make “rape jokes” taboo, or “rape” as a subject off-limits no matter what the approach, then it’ll just lead to more censorship.

They sure sound familiar to me because I, at various points, was saying them. Either out loud, or to myself, or to other comedian and non-comedian friends when we would argue about this. I had my viewpoint, and it was based on solid experience, and it...was...wrong.

Let’s go backwards through those [faulty] conclusions, shall we? First off: no one is trying to make rape, as a subject, off-limits. No one is talking about censorship. In this past week of re-reading the blogs, going through the comment threads, and re-scrolling the Twitter arguments, I haven’t once found a single statement, feminist or otherwise,
saying that rape shouldn’t be joked under any circumstance, regardless of context. Not one example of this.

In fact, every viewpoint I’ve read on this, especially from feminists, is simply asking to kick upward, to think twice about who is the target of the punchline, and make sure it isn’t the victim.

Why, after all of my years of striving to write original material (and, at times, becoming annoyingly self-righteous about it) and struggling find new viewpoints or untried approaches to any subject, did I suddenly balk and protest when an articulate, intelligent and, at times, angry contingent of people were asking me to apply the same principles to the subject of rape? Any edgy or taboo subject can become just as hackneyed as an acceptable or non-controversial one if the exact same approach is made every time. But I wasn’t willing to hear that.

And let’s go back even further. I’ve never wanted to rape anyone. Never had the impulse. So why was I feeling like I was being lumped in with those who were, or who took a cavalier attitude about rape, or even made rape jokes to begin with? Why did I feel some massive, undeserved sense of injustice about my place in this whole controversy?

The answer to that is in the first incorrect assumption. The one that says there’s no a “rape culture” in this country. How can there be? I’ve never wanted to rape anyone. Do you see the illogic in that leap? I didn’t at first. Missed it completely.

And just because I find rape disgusting, and have never had that impulse, doesn’t mean I can make a leap into the minds of women and dismiss how they feel day to day, moment to moment, in ways both blatant and subtle, from other men, and the way the media represents the world they live in, and from what they hear in songs, see in movies, and witness on stage in a comedy club.

There is a collective consciousness that can detect the presence (and approach) of something good or bad, in society or the world, before any hard “evidence” exists. It’s happening now with the concept of “rape culture.” Which, by the way, isn’t a concept. It’s a reality. I’m just not the one who’s going to bring it into focus. But I’ve read enough viewpoints, and spoken to enough of my female friends (comedians and non-comedians) to know it isn’t some vaporous hysteria, some false meme or convenient catch-phrase.

I’m a comedian. I value and love what I do. And I value and love the fact that this sort of furious debate is going on about the art form I’ve decided to spend my life pursuing. And I don’t want to be on the side of the debate that only argues from its own limited experience. I’m a man. I get to be wrong. And I get to change.
As we reflect on this text, here are a few questions to consider:

**Interpretive Questions**

- What had Oswalt chosen to ignore? What factors helped him to do so?
- What changed for him? What does that transformation look like?
- Do you agree with Oswalt that “people only bring their own perceptions and experiences to bear when reacting to something….And, since they’re speaking honestly from their experience, they truly think they’re correct…. Dismissive, even…”? Why or why not?

**Reflective Questions**

- Have you ever had a shift in perspective of the sort that Oswalt describes?
- In what ways have ignoring or noticing things impacted your life?
- How do we stop ignoring things that might be helpful for us to see?
- Are there times that it’s good or useful to ignore something? If so, how do we determine what those things are?
4. PERSPECTIVES FROM JEWISH TRADITION

How do these questions look through a Jewish lens? Here are several texts—Rabbinic and Hasidic, from a priest activist in the Second World War and a late 20th century Israeli poet—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.

At Sinai, when the Holy One gave the Torah to Israel, God manifested marvels upon marvels for Israel with God’s voice. How so? As the Holy One spoke, the voice reverberated throughout the world. At first Israel heard the voice coming to them from the south, so they ran to the south to meet the voice there. It shifted to the north, so they ran to the north. Then it shifted to the east, so they ran to the east; but from the east it shifted to the west, so they ran to the west. Next it shifted to heaven. But when they raised their eyes toward heaven, it seemed to rise out of the earth. Hence Israel asked one another, "But wisdom, where shall it be found?" (Job 28:12)

--Midrash Exodus Rabbah 5:9

• Why are the Israelites confused in this passage?
• How much of what’s happening is a result of their ignoring what they could be noticing?
• What do you think the answer to the question at the end of the passage might be?
• When are you like the Israelites in this midrash?

How long will you ignore the honor due to God and deal with the honor of humans?
--Babylonian Talmud, Kiddushin 32b

• When do you focus on giving or receiving honor from other people? When do you pay attention to who’s getting what kinds of honors?
• What does it mean to focus attention on the honor due to the divine?
• What do you ignore in your religious or spiritual life? Why?
The great wonder-working saint, Rabbi Meier Primishlaner, blessings on his name, once related the following story: When I was a young man I had an irresistible desire to see Elijah the Prophet, and so I pleaded with my father to show him to me. My father replied, “If you study the Torah with unceasing devotion you’ll become worthy of seeing him.” I, therefore, applied myself ardently to my studies, pored over the sacred books by night and by day for four weeks. Then I went to my father and told him, ”I’ve done what you asked me to do, but, I assure you, the Prophet Elijah has failed to reveal himself.” So my father replied, “Don’t you be so impatient! If you deserve it he’ll surely reveal himself to you.”

One night, as I sat at my desk in my father’s House of Study, a poor man came in. He was dusty from the road and dressed in tatters, one patch laid on the other. Moreover, he had a very ugly face. On his bent back he carried a heavy pack. As he began to put his pack down I restrained him. “Don’t you do this!” I rebuked him angrily. “What do you take this holy place to be—a tavern?”

“I’m very tired!” the wayfarer pleaded. “Let me rest here awhile, then I’ll look for lodgings.”

“It’s no use,” I told him, “you can’t rest here! My father doesn’t like all kinds of tramps to come and settle themselves here with their dusty packs.”

So the stranger sighed, lifted his pack to his shoulders, and went away. No sooner had he gone, than my father came in. “Well, have you seen the Prophet Elijah?” he asked me.

“No, not yet,” I replied sadly.

“Was nobody here today?” he further asked.

“Yes,” I said. “A poor wayfarer carrying a heavy pack was here just before.”

“Did you say shalom aleichem to him?”

“That I didn’t.”

“Why didn’t you? Didn’t you know it was Elijah? Now I’m afraid it’s too late!”

Ever since, I’ve taken upon myself the sacred obligation to say shalom aleichem with a full heart to every person, no matter who she is, or how he looks, or what their station in life may be.

--Adapted from Sefer Gevuroth Israel, 1924

- What did the narrator choose to ignore?
- Why did he regret it?
- Do you think he regretted it for the right reasons?
• How much does your own self-interest play into what you choose to ignore or notice?

First they came for the Socialists, and I did not speak out—because I was not a Socialist.
Then they came for the Trade Unionists, and I did not speak out—because I was not a Trade Unionist. Then they came for the Jews, and I did not speak out—because I was not a Jew. Then they came for me—and there was no one left to speak for me.
--Martin Niemöller

• What does Niemoller suggest that he chose to ignore? Why?
• What are analogous situations today about which you could speak out, but choose not to? Why don’t you?
• What would cause you to move from ignoring to noticing—and noticing to action—in these situations?

Tourists
Yehuda Amichai

Visits of condolence is all we get from them. They squat at the Holocaust Memorial, They put on grave faces at the Wailing Wall And they laugh behind heavy curtains In their hotels. They have their pictures taken Together with our famous dead At Rachel’s Tomb and Herzl’s Tomb And on Ammunition Hill. They weep over our sweet boys And lust after our tough girls And hang up their underwear To dry quickly In cool, blue bathrooms.

Once I sat on the steps by agate at David’s Tower, I placed my two heavy baskets at my side. A group of tourists was standing around their guide and I became their target marker. “You see that man with the baskets? Just right of his head there’s an arch from the Roman period. Just right of his head.” “But he’s moving, he’s moving!” I said to myself: redemption will come only if their guide tells them, “You see that arch from the Roman period? It’s not important: but next to it, left and down a bit, there sits a man who’s bought fruit and vegetables for his family.”

• What do the tourists in this poem choose to notice?
5. DO

The choice to ignore or to see is one we make dozens, even hundreds of times, every day. It can be about seeing someone’s faults with a generous eye, or not focusing on certain demands on our time in order to have a moment of quiet. But it can also involve not paying attention to our own needs, or someone else’s needs. It can be about complicity in a problematic situation or system. We have the responsibility to, at the very least, be thoughtful in our choices about what we ignore—and what we decide it’s time to stop ignoring.

Hopefully our conversation today has helped us all to reflect on our practice of noticing and ignoring, and to understand ourselves and each other a little better.

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. Please share this conversation guide with others in your community. And 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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