



RACIAL *and* ETHNIC DIVERSITY *in the* JEWISH COMMUNITY



This guide was created in partnership with Be'chol Lashon, an organization that grows and strengthens the Jewish people through racial, ethnic, and cultural inclusiveness. It advocates for the diversity that has characterized the Jewish people throughout history, and that is increasing through contemporary forces including intermarriage, conversion and adoption.

APPETIZER: GETTING TO KNOW EACH OTHER

FRAMING

The U.S. is in the midst of a significant demographic shift. Over the next few decades, people of color will come to comprise a majority of the country's population, a transition that's already happened among the nation's youngest residents, who are disproportionately multicultural. Jews are part of American life and are affected by social trends. For a community that has largely relied on insularity, ritual, and bloodline, the free-form development of Jewish identity today can be unnerving. Fears of a loss of Jewish identity fuel an often-disparaging view of the new frontiers of Jewish life. Instead of seeing this as a threat, we could benefit by celebrating the tapestry of Jewish history and embracing the contemporary choices of American Jews as a celebration of Jewish identity.

GUIDING THOUGHTS

Many have complex stories that may not be obvious or visible. We can't make assumptions about someone just because of the way they look. It is vital to build rapport and trust in order to engage in deeper conversations. Building relationships builds shared purpose—an investment in who we are together. Everybody's story matters. We are going to do a few exercises to help us understand opportunities for engagement and change. Now, more than ever, we need to practice two skills: telling our stories and listening to the stories of others. By listening respectfully, we may discover connections or points of conflict. Sharing and reconciliation begin with listening. Here are some ground rules to facilitate a listening-based conversation:

- **Avoid commenting on and critiquing each other's comments**
- **Make room for everyone to speak**
- **Let silence sit, allowing participants to gather their thoughts**

INSTRUCTIONS

Let's get to know a little more about each other. This activity focuses on the themes of listening and being heard. In pairs, discuss one or more of the prompts below (for 2 minutes or more, depending on timeframe, and then switch):

- 1. Tell a story about your first name or last name or both.**
- 2. Where were your grandparents born?**
- 3. What is something you value that your parents or family gave you?**

Optional: Repeat your partner's story back to him or her and discuss how sharing and hearing your story repeated made you feel.

ENTREE: JEWS ARE MORE DIVERSE THAN MANY ASSUME

FRAMING

Jews are more diverse than many assume—20% of America's 6 million Jews or 1,200,000 are African American, Latino/Hispanic, Asian, Sephardic, Mizrahi and mixed race and growing. However, multicultural Jews often experience a sense of isolation in an American Jewish community largely characterized by historic immigration from Eastern Europe. But, the perception of Jews as white, both in and outside the American Jewish community, is a relatively new phenomenon and a reflection of the assimilation Jews so avidly sought. Yet today this has left many Jews grappling with what it means to be labeled "white" including the privileges that it brings as well as the reality that the true ethnic and racial diversity of the Jewish community is often underrepresented. The American Jewish community is estranged from its own rich history of Jewish diversity. As a result, it has become steeped in America's racialism, whitewashing Judaism's most valuable asset: its diversity under a singular Jewish umbrella. Diverse Jewish voices and points of view are not reflected in most Jewish spaces.

INSTRUCTIONS

Read the first person excerpts below by Jews from a variety of ethnic, racial and cultural backgrounds from the Be'chol Lashon [Jewish& blog](#) on MyJewishLearning.com. The pieces are quite different one from the other and every source has its own point of view and story to tell regarding history, identity, family, religious practice, etc. As you read the excerpts, consider the questions below, and once finished, discuss a few with your chevruta partner.

GUIDING QUESTIONS

Consider the following questions with your chevruta partner:

1. What does this add to your understanding of the diversity of the Jewish community?
2. What difference does it make to listen to one voice vs. listening to many? Other than being voices of diversity, are there commonalities among these voices? Why or why not?
3. What did you hear from these voices that affirmed your understanding of what it means to be Jewish? What did you hear from these voices that challenged your own understanding of what it means to be Jewish?

Optional: If time allows, after each chevruta has finished their own conversation, each pair can report out briefly to the whole group.

A NOTE ABOUT CHEVRUTA

Chevruta literally means "friendship" or "companionship." It is the traditional rabbinic approach to Talmudic study in which a pair of students analyze, discuss, and debate a shared text. Unlike a teacher-student relationship, partnered learning puts each student in the position of analyzing the text, organizing their thoughts into logical arguments, explaining their reasoning to their partner, hearing out their partner's reasoning, and sharpening each other's ideas, often arriving at new insights into the meaning of the text. Spend some time wondering out loud together before referring to the guiding questions. Allow space for each partner have the opportunity to share a response.



SARAH AROESTE

"The times in my life when I have most often struggled to retain that feeling of being grounded, I have turned to music. It is not coincidence that the first song I ever wrote is about a young girl trying to find her way home. The song "Chika Morena" is about the iconic Sephardic girl who has been kicked out from her homeland and has been searching the world over to return home. Along the way, she longs to be guided by her ancestors to return to the comfort of her roots. Working in Ladino (Judeo-Spanish), a language and discipline that is, sadly, disappearing, I have extra inspiration to grapple with my feelings of connectedness."



LIOR BEN-HUR

"As an Israeli musician living in San Francisco, I don't observe Shabbat the way my grandparents did. I drive to temple, play instruments and sing songs, and when the service is over, I might even go out for a drink in a bar. While "L'cha Dodi" is the common title, Iraqi Jews like my ancestors use the title 'Boee Kala' for this Piyut or Jewish liturgical poem by the well-known 16th century poet, Rabbi Shlomo HaLevi Alkabetz. I sing it as a way to not only welcome Shabbat, but to connect to my family, identity, and sense of self."



ADAM EILATH

"As a Jew with North African roots, I have always felt that my culture's rich traditions set me apart from my peers. On Pesach, I have felt grateful that rice and hummus found their way into every meal, in addition to hitting one another with leeks or green onions and rotating a plate of matza around someone's head singing "Ha Lachma Anya." When I moved to Israel after college, I intentionally sought out as much information as I could about my Mizrahi heritage. Yet, even in Israel, many North African Jews prefer the customs that are consistent across the country, rather than those they brought with them from their communities."



HELEN KIM

"As a second generation Korean American, I grew up with parents who wanted to assimilate. I wrote *JewAsian* with my husband Noah because we were curious about couples like us where one partner is Jewish in a cultural and/or religious sense and another partner who is racially Asian and of a different ethnic or cultural background. Based on what we studied, we were surprised by how vibrant Jewish life in these households is. How to do Jewish is clearer than how to do Asian. Parents in multicultural families should be open to exploring and talking about Asian identity, investigating the meaning and history."



SANDRA LAWSON

"I am a rabbi-in-training at the Reconstructionist Rabbinical College because I want to effect real change and bring more attention to racial and ethnic diversity in the Jewish community. I made a conscious decision to unite all of my identities—black, Jewish and queer—and use my identities as a bridge builder. Judaism is wonderful, and I'm always thinking about how to connect with Jews where they already are. You know the Jews who are not coming to synagogue or the JCC but are still proud of being Jews. I thought Snapchat would be a good place to reach them."



RABBI JUAN MEJIA

"I am blessed to be the spiritual leader of Chavurat Nahariyah, an exciting group of young families in the Caribbean city of Barranquilla in my native Colombia. They have opted, out of deep love for the God of Israel, Torah and the Jewish people, to convert to Judaism. As many converts often do, they tried to imitate what they perceived to be "authentic" Judaism: whether gastronomically, religiously, or liturgically. Given their Latino cultural surroundings, they favored Sephardic tunes, mixed with some Ashkenazi, that have become ubiquitous in US and Israeli Judaism. Yet, something was missing. Imitation can give you the building blocks, but true ownership requires that you infuse your new identity with a sense of who you are. This meant, neither Sephardic nor Ashkenazi, but Caribbean."



AVISHAI MEKONEN

"When my first my child was born, I realized I needed to come to terms with the trauma of my own childhood. When I was 10 years old, my family escaped Ethiopia and made the treacherous journey to Sudan. I made my documentary, 400 Miles to Freedom, to process the kidnapping I endured there. Miraculously, I was rescued by a Mossad agent the day before Operation Moses airlifted us to safety in Israel. Telling my story and connecting with other Jews of color along the way, allowed me to heal and to be the father I want to be. My motivation as a filmmaker revolves around the power of personal stories to enlighten and to heal."



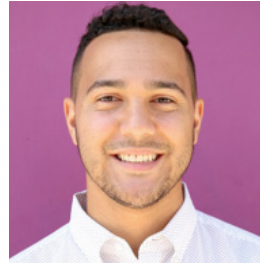
LINDSEY NEWMAN

"My Jewish identity is central to my sense of self. It has always been a part of who I am and how I see myself in relation to the world. Even though I cannot imagine me being me without being Jewish, oftentimes others may not see me as I see myself. They might see my caramel colored skin, dark brown corkscrew curls, and not think "Jewish." At this moment in time, there is an opportunity for us all to explore who we truly are, and incorporate all aspects of ourselves, regardless of what others see. As a mixed race, transracially adopted, Black Jewish woman, I cannot separate my identities. Each one informs the other. I find it awesome—truly inducing awe and reverence—that Judaism can expand to hold all of my identities, adding strength and depth to my understanding of myself."



ISAIAH ROTHSTEIN

"I was born and raised in Monsey, NY in a Chabad Lubavitch community with an African-American and Dutch mother who so deeply felt connected to the Jewish mission that she converted nearly 35 years ago. Today, I am devoting my time to the service of all people and all Jews as a rabbi. As a Jew of color, and at times being subject to much speculation as to the source of my Jewish roots, I wonder how has it come to this? Nearly every page of the Torah closely underlines the power of identifying with the other (Ethics of our Fathers 2:4). My struggle is to embrace the Jewish values I hold to be true, and turn them towards a stance of identifying with others."



AARON SAMUELS

"Seventy years prior, the world watched as my mother's ancestors were shuffled into train cars and transported to their deaths. My father's great-grandmother was born a slave and died a free woman. My truth is that for as much of history as I know, people have been inventing ways to enslave, manipulate, and exterminate my family. I exist because of a series of improbable survivals and I believe that I am compelled to tell my story. It is so ridiculous and so specific that it reads as an untruth, a history so unfathomable it must be a lie. I think that is what it means to be Jewish; I think that is what it means to be black—to know the truth so well, even when the rest of the world denies its existence."



LACEY SCHWARTZ

"I come from a long line of New York Jews. At 18, I found out my biological father was not the man who had raised me but a black man with whom my mother had an affair. My personal documentary *Little White Lie* traces my experience of pulling back the curtain on matters of race and family secrets, and of learning to live with a dual identity. It raises the questions of what factors—race, religion, family—make us who we are, and what happens when we are forced to redefine ourselves. I feel strongly that we cannot expect society to talk openly and productively about difficult topics, until individuals and families, which are the building blocks of society, are able to do so."



ISAAMA STOLL

"I wanted to be a rabbi since I was 6 years old. I was sure it was my destiny, I felt like it was what God had called me to do. I am not the first person of color to be ordained in my field, however, I am the only student of color at Hebrew Union College. I can relate to the isolation other women must have felt on their rabbinic journeys. Their journeys, like mine were complicated by the lack of role models that looked like them. They also faced the fear of not looking like the "traditional Judaism" congregants want the image of their rabbis to reflect. Most significantly, they also met with the lack of institutional understanding and support for the unique challenges that come from being different."

DESSERT: SH'MA / LISTENING

FRAMING

The Sh'ma is the central Jewish prayer. Unlike other prayers, the Sh'ma begins not with God or gratitude but the directive to listen. Taking inspiration from the Sh'ma, we can work towards engaging people outside our comfort zones, learning to listen so that others may feel heard. Begin by reading the following aloud:

Sh'ma Yisrael שְׁמַע יִשְׂרָאֵל

Sh'ma Yis'ra'eil Adonai Eloheinu Adonai echad.

Hear, Israel, Adonai (the Lord) is our God, Adonai (the Lord) is One.

From the moment we are born, we learn about ourselves, our environment, and the world. Families, friends, peers, teachers, books, and others influence our views on what is right and what is wrong. These early learnings are deeply rooted within us and shape our perceptions about how we view things and how we respond to them. What we learn and experience gives us a subjective point of view known as bias. Depending on our bias, we often make assumptions about what someone else thinks and feels. Listening is a foundational Jewish value and it is also an essential starting place to hear different points of view, allowing us to understand and change ourselves and the world.

INSTRUCTIONS

Read the following two pieces. The first reading is an excerpt from Dr. Martin Luther King's "The Other America," and the second reading is an excerpt from Marcella White Campbell's blog "A Letter to My Black and Jewish Daughter in Light of the Election." Give yourself time to think the pieces through, then proceed to the discussion questions below.

READING ONE: MARTIN LUTHER KING

This is an excerpt referring to the 1967 Watts Uprising and other unrest surrounding disenfranchised African Americans at the height of the Civil Rights Movement:

"...it is as necessary for me to be as vigorous in condemning the conditions which cause persons to feel that they must engage in riotous activities as it is for me to condemn riots. I think America must see that riots do not develop out of thin air. Certain conditions continue to exist in our society which must be condemned as vigorously as we condemn riots. But in the final analysis, a riot is the language of the unheard. And what is it that America has failed to hear? It has failed to hear that the plight of the Negro poor has worsened over the last few years. It has failed to hear that the promises of freedom and justice have not been met. And it has failed to hear that large segments of white society are more concerned about tranquility and the status quo than about justice, equality, and humanity. And so in a real sense our nation's summers of riots are caused by our nation's winters of delay. —Martin Luther King, Jr., The Other America 1967

Without calling for or justifying violence, Dr. King seeks to understand why disenfranchised people might riot. By understanding the root causes of rioting, he hopes to bring about changes that would make it unnecessary. By listening to people who are taking actions he doesn't agree with, Dr. King practices and models empathy that can lead to peace and change.

As you move on to the next piece, view it through the framework of Dr. King's "unheard"/heard duality. Most importantly, be open to applying Dr. King's message not only to a very specific moment in American history, but to diverse contemporary groups and events.



READING TWO: MARCELLA WHITE CAMPBELL

Dear Maia,

From the time you were born, I tried to raise a small-but-mighty Black-and-Jewish feminist, a girl who was not just cute but fast, not just sweet but smart, not just pretty but strong. I peppered you with action words: run! climb! Out of all the verbs I was brainstorming, listen hadn't occurred to me. I wanted you to sing and speak. I wanted your voice to rise above everyone else's. I wanted you to roar.

I'm not sure I raised a roarer, but I did raise a singer. This past erev Yom Kippur, as the first stars winked into the sky, I closed my eyes along with the congregation. Slowly, as it always does, the first sound of the Shema whispered through the hall, rising into that beautiful opening note. Your voice beside me grew until your clear, strong soprano floated above all the others. Listen.

You came to me, now grown, the morning after the election, and cried. I wanted to do something to make you feel better. All I could do was to listen to you cry, and then go somewhere to cry myself. I've been so angry since then, angry for you and your brother, two children I brought into a world that I thought was going to be better than we found it but is either getting worse or miserably the same. You saw naked racism and antisemitism directed at people like you, and I told you America would not let it stand. When you felt frightened and unsafe, I let you believe that our values would win out over other values, that it was a struggle of good versus evil and, just like in all the stories you listened to us read, the heroine would prevail.

I'm not apologizing for my anger. You need to understand that it's okay for people, especially women, to be angry. But I've been thinking about what I can tell you to do—not that you asked for more action words—and I think what I can tell you to do is listen.

Millions of people believe Trump speaks for them and that, Tuesday night, their voices were finally heard. Millions of people went into the voting booth and voted to hurt millions and millions of Americans. They believe that they are good people. We need them to come out and explain how they squared their choice with the values we thought they had, and we also need someone ready to listen when they talk, because—as hard as this is for me to say—we need to keep this line of communication open. We can make sweeping change at the ballot box and on the Senate floor, but we can only make lasting change at the personal level. We can and should stay angry; we will fight for our rights and the rights of our fellow citizens. We will do everything we can, and one of the things we can do is to listen.

Maia, I didn't realize this until now, but listen is an action word. Listening is powerful, because listening is a choice, just like marching, and writing, and singing, and roaring. I am not ready to listen yet, but maybe you and I can learn together.



GUIDING QUESTIONS

Using the questions below, discuss with a chevruta partner or in groups of 3 or 4:

1. What does “listening” mean in these two pieces? Why is listening so important? When is listening passive? When is it active?
2. What do you think Martin Luther King meant by “a riot is the language of the unheard”? What do you think America had “failed to hear” in the context of the civil rights movement?
3. Can this quote be used to understand other outbursts of public anger by other groups in other contexts?
4. How could that quote be used to think about or understand 2016’s election—not only in terms of riots directly after the election, but also in terms of voters’ choices and conflicts leading up to Election Day? What issues did America “fail to hear” in those cases? What else could be described as the “language of the unheard”?
5. Could listening have changed the outcome? If so, how? If not, why not? Do you feel ready to listen to people you don’t agree with? If not, what would make you feel ready?
6. Can you describe a situation in your life where you didn’t or don’t feel listened to? What would have made you feel heard?

Optional: If time allows, after each chevruta has finished their conversation, the pair can share briefly with the whole group.

CONCLUDING ACTIVITY: A MODERN SH'MA

In the Sh’ma, we begin with listening and move on to identify the intended audience and the message that we hope they will hear. Using the prompts below, or your own inspiration, take a moment to write your own Sh’ma, a statement about listening, hearing and our obligations to each other.

Hear, Israel, Adonai (the Lord) is our God, Adonai (the Lord) is One.

MATERIALS

- Pens or pencils
- Index cards or paper

INSTRUCTIONS

Consider the following examples to help guide you in writing your own Sh’ma:

1. Hear, America, millions feel disconnected, and listening can bring unity.
2. Hear, Maia, even though you are disappointed, have the courage to fight for what you believe.
3. I have heard diverse voices tonight, and I will find opportunities to hear more points of view in the future.

Now, write your own:

Hear, _____, _____, _____.

Optional: If time allows, anyone who feels comfortable can read aloud to the group.