

Divrei Hokhmah for 5774

CONVERSATION STARTERS

Introduction: The **Mishpachah: Modern Jewish Family Project** focuses our attention on the diversity of the families that make up our communities. Who are they? What do they look like? How welcoming and inclusive are we no matter the family structure?

The first step in promoting pluralism is to understand the importance of our communication, whether in direct conversation, when speaking about each other, or when we write or email, etc.

Many of these Conversation Starters are from the personal experiences of diverse families in our communities and are found in the August material, “Beginning the Conversation.” Others were taken from everyday sources such as synagogue bulletins and conversations.

Over the next year, as we become more attuned to the effects of language, we will reinforce the wisdom of Proverbs: *mavet ve-chayyim beyad lashon* (death and life are in the power of the tongue). In other words, language counts!

Thanks to the members of the PAC for creating these discussion questions.



You can see all of the Conversation Starters here, or else click on a Conversation number to download it as a separate document. Select a Conversation Starter to read before a meeting or event and then open it up for discussion. You will be amazed at the response.

The Conversation Starters

Conversation 1

Lesbian families, unlike ‘straight’ families, still have to be accepted.

Discussion questions

- Why are we *still* calling them “lesbian” families?
- Do we usually use the term “heterosexual” family?
- What does it mean to be “accepted” and why is it important?
- Is there an implied judgment in the process of acceptance?
- Why do children accept differences easier than adults?

Conversation 2

Most people ask without malice but fail to consider the judgment couched in their question that a family without a woman is not really a family at all.

Discussion questions

- What and who define a family?
- What makes a family a family?
- What comes to mind when you hear, “A family without a woman is not really a family”?
- What do you think is most important when raising children? (1) biology (2) love (3) attachment (4) commitment
- Do you think that two men can provide a loving environment?

Conversation 3

I would constantly explain that I could not attend evening committee meetings or adult-only programs because I did not have a spouse who could stay at home. When it was suggested that I find a babysitter, I would be in the awkward position of explaining that as a single-income family, babysitters were a treat reserved for special occasions...

Discussion questions

- What kinds of problems, and sets of assumptions, does this single parent confront?
- What other issues might arise in this situation?
- In what ways can our community better support single-parent families?

Conversation 4

Unfortunately, too many people judge converts more critically, and there are numerous occasions where people have judged him either for not knowing something or, conversely, are surprised at his level of knowledge.

Discussion questions

- Are converts held to a different standard?
- What are those standards?
- Are we more judgmental about converts to Judaism than those who are born to it?
- What do converts give up when becoming Jews? How can we make things easier for them?

Conversation 5

People would often ask me if things were getting better [following the death of her husband]... We get better when we recover from an illness, but we do not recover after losing a partner who never comes back, as our health hopefully does.

Discussion questions

- What strikes you about this speaker's response about getting better?
- When speaking to someone who has just undergone a loss, or change in status, what might be a helpful comment? Why?
- What comments might not be helpful? Why?
- How can friends and family include recently singled people in family or social activities?

Conversation 6

My friend Eleanor is a convert OR my friend Eleanor is a Jew-by-choice

Discussion questions

- What is the intent of pointing out that someone converted to Judaism?
- What does tradition say about the treatment of converts? (Answer: we should not remind a convert that once she/he was not a Jew because we were once strangers in Egypt)
- Why do we continue to identify converts?
- How might we respond to someone who uses this label?
- How can we help those who convert to Judaism not feel like outsiders?

Conversation 7

When is she going to get married and settle down?

Discussion questions

- What is the implied relationship between getting married and settling down?
- What message is being conveyed through this formulation?
- What is implied about the states of marriage and of settling down?
- Is there another way to ask about someone's marital status?

Conversation 8

...their Ethiopian grandchild...

Discussion questions

- What comes to mind, immediately, when you hear this statement?
- What is the intent of characterizing the grandchild by nationality or ethnicity?
- Does this characterization help or hinder inclusion?
- Do people introduce their grandchildren as their “biological” grandchildren?

Conversation 9

...Mommy and Me program/classes/clubs...

Discussion questions

- What could be troubling about this formulation?
- How would a child who attends a Mommy and Me feel if not there with his/her mommy?
- What could be more inclusive titles for these kinds of programs?

Conversation 10

Dessert Night Out: *Bring your spouse, significant other or come alone and share your evening with other people in their 30's, 40's and early 50's. Bring your favorite dessert to share or a bottle of wine...*

Discussion questions

- What strikes you about this announcement?
- What do you think about “*or come alone ...*”? Can you think of a different way to say this?
- In Genesis 18:1-5, our patriarch, Abraham, the ultimate host, runs to greet his three visitors, inviting them to rest under the tree, bathe their feet, drink, eat, to refresh themselves. How can we as individuals and as communities exemplify Abraham’s hospitality in our programming and publicity?

Conversation 11

In the synagogue where I grew up, I was used to my rabbi and other congregants seeking out any newcomers and welcoming them, but I think that does not happen in synagogues any more.

Discussion questions

- To whom is the speaker referring when she says *newcomers*?
- What happens if you substitute the word *families* for *newcomers*? What is the effect of that substitution?
- What if you substitute *individuals*? What does that say about the synagogue in which she grew up? What does that say about “other” synagogues?
- What is the primary problem for the speaker? What might be other issues for her?
- How does this statement relate to the Mishpachah project?