



# Giving Circle Facilitation Tool

Leading a giving circle is an exciting undertaking. Before your first meeting, you recruit members, coordinate the meeting, set the agenda, and make sure the space is comfortable and welcoming. And then, on the day of the meeting, you get to facilitate! For many, facilitation can be daunting, but fear not; this resource is here to help you become comfortable facilitating your giving circle meetings by providing you with fun icebreakers, structures to anchor your conversations, and strategies for closing the meeting.

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### 1 Icebreakers

These are short introductory activities or games that create comfort in the group, often by evoking laughter and introspective thinking at the same time.

### 2 Conversation Structures

Sometimes it is useful to provide a structure to a conversation. Whether you want to get different people contributing, to allow people to connect one on one, or to frame the conversation in the metaphor of a story, it is important for a facilitator to have a few structures to mix up the format of the gathering.

### 3 In Closing

The end of an experience makes the biggest impression. A circle gathering that ends in a rush will leave people feeling rushed and stressed even if the rest of the conversation was meaningful. Having a moment at the end to do a structured reflection, even if just for five minutes, will increase the likelihood of people feeling positive about their experience. Here, we provide you with several closing activities for the end of your circle gatherings. You can turn any of these activities into a ritual by repeating them each time you gather, or you can use different closings depending on your meeting goals.

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## Using this Tool

Review each section of this resource, read through the activity descriptions, select the ones that appeal the most, and jot down the themes and questions on which you might want to focus. Think about who your group members are (if you already know them) and how they might react to some of the prompts/themes/questions. Once you have read through the activity and taken your own facilitation notes, determine which version of the activity you are going to use and which of the themes you will focus on.

# 1. Icebreakers

## A) Blind Counting

Have the group sit in a circle with their eyes closed. They must count as high as they can as a group with everyone saying at least one number. If any two people call out the same number or call out a number at the same time they must start back at zero. The group is not allowed to establish a pattern. The game is about listening. If the guide thinks the group has created a pattern s/he can send the group back to zero.

A variation of this activity is to have the group practice counting while facing each other in the circle and then again with their backs to each other. You will likely see that the group will do a lot worse when they are facing away from each other. Talk about how important it is to keep communication open by not turning our backs on each other.



**For a reflective Jewish conversation, read:**

“And God said: ‘Go forth, and stand upon the mount before the Lord.’ And, behold, the Lord passed by, and a great and strong wind rent the mountains, and broke in pieces the rocks before the Lord; but the Lord was not in the wind; and after the wind an earthquake; but the Lord was not in the earthquake; and after the earthquake a fire; but the Lord was not in the fire; and after the fire, a still small voice.” —Kings I 19:11 - 12

Reflect on the divine revelation to Elijah. It was not in the pyrotechnics, but rather in the silence. Ask: What does it mean to be truly open to listening to a group?

Revisiting this activity with your group later in your giving circle process can be highly effective. As your circle progresses, the group will get closer and learn how to better communicate. This activity can be evidence of that.

## B) Most Important... and Why

Arrange the group in a circle. Provide each person with a pencil and two slips of paper. Instruct participants to write the cause that is most important to them on one piece of paper. On the other paper, instruct them to write why. Have them pass the first paper to the left and the second to the right. Go around and read the two papers you now have. This activity will be humorous but will also reveal new insights that might otherwise have gone unnoticed.

## C) Question Game

In Jewish life we prioritize questions over answers. Sometimes, at end of the story, a good question opens up hour of conversation. Have one person start by turning to the person on their left and ask any question. That person cannot pause, hesitate, answer, or repeat. They need to turn to the person on their left and ask a question. Continue around the circle like this. When someone breaks the rhythm or can't think of a question, they are “out.”

## D) Authentic Self

Hand out a piece of paper to each participant. Prompt everyone to depict how they see themselves on one side. You can invite participants to draw, create lists, or free write. After a few minutes, prompt participants to depict how they think others see them on the other side of the paper. Participants can reflect on the exercise as a full group or in pairs.



**For a reflective Jewish conversation, read:**

In Hebrew, there are two words that can be used to ask the question why: *lama* and *madua*. *Lama* asks: what is the immediate purpose? *Madua* asks: what could be the deeper existential cause?

**Ask:** When we sit in our circle, which “why” are we responding to?

Other reflection questions you might ask: What did you notice? What surprised you about the way this activity played out?



**For a reflective Jewish conversation, read:**

After Adam and his wife ate the forbidden fruit we read, “And the Lord God called to man, and God said to him, “Where are you?”” (Genesis 3:9) This is the first question God asks a human being.

After Cain killed his brother Abel the Lord said to Cain, “Where is Abel your brother?” And he (Cain) said, “I do not know. Am I my brother’s keeper?” (Genesis 4:9) Notably in Cain’s response is the first question that a human being asks God.

**Ask:** What is the role of questions and answers in society? What do these Jewish texts say about the way we think about questions?

**Ask:** What kinds of questions do we ask in this giving circle? What kinds of questions do we not ask in this giving circle? What is asked of us, because we are part of a giving circle?

You can also offer your group this challenge: Practice asking three good questions a day.



**For a reflective Jewish conversation, read:**

Above all else, guard your heart, for everything you do flows from it. — Proverbs 4:23

With a partner, discuss some differences between the two sides of yourself.

## 2. Conversation Structures

### A) Jewish Stories

Stories can serve as metaphors for topics or themes that you want your circle to discuss. They allow us to access an emotional response and imaginative parts of our brain, and bring to light insights that may not be accessible in straightforward conversation.

When building a conversation around a story, follow these steps:

1. Choose a story from the [Jewish Stories Resource](#) (or choose a story of your own).
2. Ask your giving circle a framing question (we've included some in the Jewish Stories Resource). Depending on the size of the group and the amount of time you have, the framing question can be shared around the circle, discussed in pairs, written as a personal reflection or read aloud to put people in a new state of mind.
3. Read the story out loud. You can read the whole story or you can pass the story around the circle (if you pass it around the circle make sure people are comfortable reading to the group). You can have copies for everyone to follow along or you can ask them to simply listen.
4. Once you've read the story, open it up for conversation.
  - To start, give each person a chance to share their impressions so everyone's voice is heard before you get too deep into the discussion.
  - Basic starting questions could be: What does this story bring up for you? What does this story make you think of?
  - Once everyone has shared, use discussion questions (we've included some in the Jewish Stories Resource) to keep the conversation going.
  - You may want to connect themes from the story to topics your circle has already discussed. Don't force a connection, simply keep the conversation open and allow participants to draw their own connections and conclusions.

### B) Simple Circle

Have the group sit in a circle. Decide on a meaningful object that can be used as a "talking piece." Agree that only the person with the talking piece will speak while everyone else will be present and listening. Present a question to the group. Pass the talking piece around the circle in one direction allowing each person a chance to speak. This process ensures that each person gets an opportunity to speak. It is a good structure to use when you notice a few voices starting to dominate the conversation; this modality limits people's ability to take over the conversation.

### C) Concentric Circles

Have half of the group sit in a circle facing out. This is called the inside circle. Have the other half of the group form an outside circle by sitting opposite someone from the inside circle. Have the facilitator ask a conversation prompt (i.e. talk about an ancestor whose story inspires you toward giving; talk about the most meaningful gift you've received; which of your core values drives your giving choices?; ). Have the participants who are facing each other share stories or discuss the prompt. After four minutes, the facilitator calls "switch." Everyone in the outside circle moves one space to the left. Another prompt is read and the new partners discuss it. Continue for as long as time allows or until the outside circle completes their rotation.



**For a reflective Jewish conversation, read:**

"The Face is a source from which all meaning appears." — Emmanuel Levinas, French Jewish Philosopher 1906 - 1995

Discuss what it is like to look into each other's eyes. What meaning do you gain by coming together to engage in these conversations face-to-face?

### D) Open Fishbowl / Samoan Circle

The Samoan Circle or Open Fishbowl is a leaderless meeting intended to help the group negotiate controversial issues or allow a group to discuss a challenging topic in a structured yet natural setting. While there is no 'leader,' a facilitator should welcome participants and explain the seating arrangements, rules, timelines, and the process. The entire group sits in a circle with four to six chairs forming a smaller, inner circle. During the conversation, only people in the inner circle may speak. In this process, there will be an opportunity for anyone to join or leave the inner circle throughout the conversation. At the beginning, the inner circle should be filled with people representing all the different viewpoints while leaving one chair open. As the conversation progresses people may enter into the conversation by occupying the empty chair. People in the inner circle may leave their chair and rejoin the observers.

This process works best with controversial issues. It can help avoid severe polarization. And it allows a large number of people to be involved in the conversation without it getting out of hand.



**For a reflective Jewish conversation, read:**

"If you know someone who says the Throne of God is empty, and lives with that, then you should cling to that person as a good, strong friend. But be careful: almost everyone who says that has already placed something or someone else on that Throne, usually themselves." — Rabbi Adin Steinsaltz

In this activity we leave a chair empty to invite unheard voices into the conversation. What else can we do to ensure that we are continuing to leave room for the things we are not hearing?

## 3. In Closing

At the end of your giving circle meeting, it is important to come together with a ritualized closing that allows for personal and group reflection. This reflection can be individual, in pairs/small groups, or with the whole group. Prompts for this reflection should also look to the future — what will this moment lead to?

### Here are a few closing rituals you can use:

- A)** In pairs, each partner takes three minutes to talk about whatever is on his/her mind. The other partner should only listen and not say anything. After three minutes, the facilitator calls time and the partners switch roles.
- B)** Have everyone gather in a circle, hold hands, close their eyes and take three collective breaths.
- C)** Have the group gather together and go around in the circle, each participant sharing one thing that they either learned, appreciated or will remember/take with them from their time together.
- D)** Share one of the texts listed on the right. Go around the circle and have everyone respond.
- E)** Go around the circle and ask: "What next step in this process am I looking forward to?"



### For a reflective Jewish conversation, read:

"It is always important to know when something has reached its end. Closing circles, shutting doors, finishing chapters, it doesn't matter what we call it; what matters is to leave in the past those moments in life that are over."  
- Paulo Coelho, Brazilian lyricist and novelist

"The most important thing is this: to sacrifice what you are now for what you can become tomorrow." - Shannon L. Adler

"Rabbi Levi said: It can be compared to two ocean-going ships, one leaving the harbor and the other entering. While everybody was rejoicing over the one that was setting out on her voyage, few seemed to hail with pleasure the one arriving. Seeing which, a wise man there reflected: 'I see here a paradox; for surely, people should not rejoice at the ship leaving the harbor, since they know not what conditions it may meet, what seas it may encounter, and what wind it may have to face. Whereas, everybody ought to rejoice at the ship that has returned to the harbor, for it has safely set forth on the ocean and safely returned.'" —Exodus Rabbah 48:1