



*Gemilut Chasadim*  
A Jewish Journey Group  
on the Path of Social Justice

Leader's Guide



## Acknowledgments

*Gemilut Chasadim: A Jewish Journey Group on the Path of Social Justice* was created and written by Rabbi Joel Soffin. Special thanks to Phylis Sapherstein and Jeremy Soffin for their assistance.

*Appendix: Facilitator Resources for Leading Jewish Journey Groups* was created by Rabbis Nancy Flam and Amy Eilberg as part of the Synagogue 2000 Sacred Community curriculum.

Design: Margery Cantor, Oakland, California.

Rabbi Yoel Kahn, Ph.D., Director of Curriculum, Synagogue 2000.

This publication was made possible by the Nathan Cummings Foundation. Synagogue 2000 gratefully acknowledges our generous funders, including our original partners: the Nathan Cummings Foundation, the Righteous Persons Foundation, and the Whizin Foundation.

This Leader's Guide and of the participants' handouts for *Gemilut Chasadim: A Jewish Journey Group on the Path of Social Justice* are available from the Synagogue 2000 office and may be available on the Synagogue 2000 website: [www.synagogue2000.org](http://www.synagogue2000.org).



Synagogue2000

The contents of this publication are the property of Synagogue 2000 and are copyrighted. Any reproduction, in whole or in part, for commercial purposes is prohibited.

For additional information, please contact us at (212) 824-2250 or visit our website at [www.synagogue2000.org](http://www.synagogue2000.org).

©2003 Synagogue 2000.

# *Gemilut Chasadim*

## A Jewish Journey Group on the Path of Social Justice

### Leader's Guide

INTRODUCTION    **X**

SESSION ONE    **X**

SESSION TWO    **X**

SESSION THREE    **XX**

SESSION FOUR    **XX**

SESSION FIVE    **XX**

APPENDIX    **XX**





## Introduction

This five-session Jewish Journey Group is the first stage of an encounter with Jewish values and teachings that can lead to acts of social justice. Participants will explore the roots of social action in Jewish texts and then discuss the practical application of these historic Jewish teachings. Members of the group will include those who have participated in such activities but are unfamiliar with the Jewish roots and texts that support them, as well as those without such prior involvement. The learning and the activities are designed to help the participants hear God's call and respond to it with a deepened desire to improve the world.



The overall theme is Hillel's teaching in *Pirkei Avot* 1:14:

אִם אֵין אֲנִי לִי, מִי לִי.  
וְכִשְׁאֲנִי לְעַצְמִי, מָה אֲנִי.  
וְאִם לֹא עֲבָשִׁיו, אֵימָתִי:

"If I am not for myself, who will be for me? Yet, if I am for myself alone, what am I? And if not now, when?"

Many have struggled to find a way to balance these often conflicting claims upon us. Does charity begin at home? Does it end there? Are we free to walk away or to postpone our involvement in social justice issues until a more convenient time?

Each session lasts two and a half hours. The first one includes the creation of personal genograms to identify and acknowledge those who have inspired us to be concerned about social justice. Then the group discusses the importance of caring for ourselves and fellow Jews. From there, the focus is on the challenge and vision of the prophets and the group's ability to make its own hard choices as a *tzedakah* collective. Session four focuses on Jewish insights into the process of helping and the specific approaches of three national Jewish agencies. The final session includes a comparison of the agencies' approaches and a decision about how to move forward in partnership with one of them.

Additional Jewish Journey Groups will be available to those interested in pursuing the projects offered by the national agencies and in engaging in acts of advocacy designed to improve the systems that govern our lives.

Each session will follow the pattern of a Jewish Journey Group: opening ritual, check-in, Jewish text study, modern application, stepping back in reflection and a closing ritual. Please refer to the Appendix for more details about how the sessions are structured.

Welcome to the world of Jewish social action and social justice, *gemilut chasadim*.



## Session One

### OPENING RITUAL (5 MINUTES)

For many people, participation in this group will be their first experience with a Jewish Journey Group. They may be concerned about being in a group of this kind or opening up to strangers. Welcome everyone and reassure them that there will be time for questions, concerns and expression of feelings, but that the group will begin each session with a song or a prayer. Beginning with Session 2, introduce the song *Im Ein Ani Li Mi Li*, which forms the basis for the structure of this Jewish Journey Group. The words are on Handout 1.



For this session, sing or listen to a tape of *Al Sh'loshah D'varim* (Handout 1). Note that the three pillars on which the world stands and through which our lives acquire meaning—as noted in the song—will be strengthened through this journey group as we study, pray and then take action together.

Other ideas can be found in the Appendix.

### CHECK-IN (20 MINUTES)

Frame the check-in by asking one or more open-ended questions. Since this is the first gathering of the group, ask the participants to speak about their families and where they live, and to share a special talent or ability that they have. The Appendix section on check-in may be helpful. Each participant should speak for no more than 2 or 3 minutes.

### GROUP BRIT (COVENANT) (15 MINUTES)

Briefly introduce the concept of the Jewish Journey Group and the way in which this and subsequent meetings will be structured.

Explain that if the group is to succeed and its members are to trust one another, there must be agreement about the ground rules and the key values of the experience. A Jewish spiritual agreement is called a *brit* (covenant). Guidelines for the *brit* can be found in the Appendix. The facilitator should introduce the suggested *brit* and clarify any questions group members have. After modifications or clarifications have been made, the group should formally agree to be bound by its tenets.

In order to keep this from running on, it will be most helpful if the facilitator brings a proposed *brit* to the meeting (rather than having everyone present suggest the contents, discuss wording, etc.). This first session is already a little longer than the rest due to the opening discussions.

**TEXT STUDY: MITZVAH SPECIALTIES (35 MINUTES)**

The goal of this part of the session is to encourage participants to see themselves as capable of becoming *mitzvah* specialists, people who are very passionate about one form of *gemilut chasadim*. Acts of *tzedakah*, which are seen traditionally as involving money, will be distinguished from those of *gemilut chasadim*, which can be performed by giving of one's money or of oneself. Some in the group may have developed such interests already; others may be new to this type of activity. The enthusiasm of the newcomers will be enhanced by the experiences of the more seasoned activists, and they will inspire each other. Each has much to contribute.

The rabbis cited in Handout 3 saw themselves as being particularly devoted to the fulfillment of one *mitzvah*. While observing all the others, they approached one with great *kavannah*, with deep commitment and heartfelt devotion. They hoped that this extra passion would be worthy of reward.

Begin by explaining the nature of study in the traditional Jewish *chevruta* style (see Appendix) and then have the participants pair off to discuss Handout 3. Ask them to record their answers to the last question on the sheet so they can be shared with the whole group later.

Before the text study begins, introduce and teach the blessing for the study of Torah on Handout 2. (5 minutes)

Allow 15 minutes for *chevruta* study. Then bring everyone back together. Invite the participants to share the social action *mitzvot* for which they would like to be especially rewarded. It is okay for these to be *mitzvot* that group members have not performed *as yet* with much passion. Write the various responses on butcher paper and then post them around the room.

Turning to Handout 4, have different participants read the passages defining *tzedakah* and *gemilut chasadim*. Ask others to explain these concepts in their own words. Then read the passage from the Talmud that distinguishes between them and pose this question: Why does the Mishnah include *gemilut chasadim* but not *tzedakah* among those things without limit?

Now turn to the sheets that are posted on the wall and ask the group to categorize each of their *mitzvot* as either *tzedakah* or *gemilut chasadim*. If there is a lot of overlap among their *mitzvot*, add some of these to the list: aiding a Jew to celebrate Passover, helping someone find a job, freeing captive Jews, adopting African HIV-positive orphans.

Conclude by explaining that both *tzedakah* and *gemilut chasadim* fit within the broader context of *tikkun olam*, helping to mend the world and to enhance the Godliness of each human being.

### GENOGRAMS (45 MINUTES)

Explain that it is helpful to take some time to discover why we perform acts of *gemilut chasadim*. One technique through which we can understand our motivation is the creation of personal genograms. They are similar to family trees but contain different information.

Participants should place on their genograms the names of people who influenced them to care in this way. Participants should include the people whose words or deeds inspired them and who led them to this Jewish Journey Group. They may be relatives (living or deceased), friends, teachers or acquaintances. They may be people encountered through books or the media, real or fictional.

In the genogram, include their names and something about them: their work, their connection to us and the type of inspiration that participants received from them. It is sufficient to make brief notes that can be expanded in later discussion.

Spend 15 minutes doing this, so each participant can create as complete a genogram as possible.

Ask one participant to read the quote from Danny Siegel on Handout 5. Then have those who are willing share something about one or more of the people who “called” them to perform acts of *gemilut chasadim*. (30 minutes)

Ask the participants who they think will include them in a genogram.

In concluding, ask participants to find a way to thank or acknowledge the role that these people have played in their lives.

### REFLECTION (10 MINUTES)

It is important now to take a step back and ask: What was it like to be on this Jewish journey together for the past few hours? Ask for ideas, concerns or reflections. What was surprising, inspiring or informative? Are there any closing comments participants would like to make?

Adapted from Stephanie Fingerroth and Miryam Kabakov, “Genograms,” *International Jewish College Corps Handbook, American Jewish World Service Delegation Guide*, p.72 [AJWS, 45 W. 36th St, New York, NY 10018; [www.ajws.org](http://www.ajws.org).]

**CLOSING RITUAL OR PRAYER (5 MINUTES)**

Encourage everyone to be very quiet and still. Explain that this may help us to hear God's voice calling to us. That voice may speak to us directly or through the words of those on our genograms. Listening quietly may be the first step in responding to their call to us. Ask that there be a few moments of silence, with everyone gathered in a circle. Conclude by singing *Al Sh'loshah D'varim* or a *niggun*.

This will end the formal part of the session. Participants should be invited to linger over coffee and cake as long as they choose to continue the conversation with each other.

Ask the group to read Peter Pitzele's Dilemma (Handout 6) before the next session.

Close the session by reading the following story (not to be discussed):

The story is told that shortly before he died, Reb Zusya gathered his students together. They could see that he was anxious about something and soon he revealed it to them.

“When I die and come before God, God will not ask me, why I was not another Moses. But God will ask me why I was not Reb Zusya, why I was not true to the best within myself, why I did not fulfill the purpose for which I was created.

When God asks me that question, how will I answer?”

## Session Two



### OPENING PRAYER, RITUAL OR SONG (5 MINUTES)

Focus on the Hillel text: *Im Ein Ani Li Mi Li* (Handout 1). This is a good time for the group to learn to sing it or to listen to it being sung. It will be discussed in this session and will serve as the overarching theme for the rest of the sessions.

### CHECK-IN (20 MINUTES)

Frame the check-in by asking one or more open-ended questions. For this session, ask: “Is there one expenditure you have made which has given you great personal pleasure?” Of course, personal sharing is always welcome (“How have you been?”). See the Appendix for more suggestions.

### TEXT STUDY: WHOSE LIFE TAKES PRECEDENCE? (50 MINUTES)

Explain that the goal of this text study and this session is to consider when one’s own needs and interests might take precedence over those of others. The focus here will be on the first part of Hillel’s quote (*Pirkei Avot* 1:14): “If I am not for myself, who will be for me?”

Invite the group to join in the blessing for the study of Torah (Handout 2). Then share this passage from the Babylonian Talmud (Bava Metzia 62a):

“Two people were walking on a journey (in a desert), and one of them had a flask of water in his hand. If both of them were to drink, they would both die. If only one drinks, he could reach a settlement.”

What should they do?

Without discussing this, divide the participants into two groups. Explain that two rabbis, ben Petora and Akiva, disagreed in their responses to this question. Each group will defend the position of one of the rabbis.

The first group will argue for ben Petora’s interpretation, that they should share the water. The second group will argue for Akiva’s interpretation that the one with the water should drink it all himself.

Distribute Handout 7A: “Ben Petora” to the first group and Handout 7B: “Rabbi Akiva” to the second. Note that there are some texts on the handouts that may be helpful in arguing for each position.

Allow the two groups to discuss the case and to write up their arguments. Each group should try to anticipate what the other group will be presenting and include persuasive responses. A volunteer from each group should be chosen to present the group’s findings. (20 minutes)

Ask the group representatives to present their arguments and then have an open discussion. Take a vote in which everyone can vote without regard to their original group’s position. (25 minutes)

Continue by sharing the conclusion of the Talmudic passage:

“Ben Petora argued: It is better that both of them should drink and die, than that one should witness the death of the other.

This was accepted until Rabbi Akiva came and taught: ‘that your brother may live with you’ (Leviticus 25:36) means that your life takes precedence of that of your fellow.”

Ask for the group’s reaction to this decision in favor of Akiva’s point of view. What do we learn from this discussion about one life taking precedence over another? How does it make you feel? (5 minutes)

“IF I AM NOT FOR MYSELF, WHO WILL BE FOR ME?” (15 MINUTES)

Turn now to Hillel’s teaching, which will serve as the basis for the rest of the sessions. It is found on Handout 8: If I Am Not For Myself, Who Will Be For Me?

Divide the participants into *chevruta* partners—different from the last session if possible—and distribute the handout. Ask them to read it to themselves, and to think about their answers to the questions. Then they should share their responses with their *chevruta* partners.

Then bring everyone back together and ask them to share their one sentence rephrasing of Hillel's teaching (Question # 5 on Handout 8).

**"FIRST, TAKE CARE OF YOUR OWN" (10 MINUTES)**

Continue with part of an essay by Dennis Prager in his publication *Ultimate Issues* (Handout 9). Ask one participant to read the excerpts to the group.

The position that Prager takes moves us in a controversial direction. We must care for our own, but does that prevent us from also thinking of others? So much money, time and effort are devoted to secular causes and institutions when Jewish needs go under-funded. Perhaps we need to focus more on our own.

Ask the group if they agree with Prager and let the discussion go on for a few minutes. Make sure that his conclusion is also part of the conversation so that comments are made about whether those who don't help their own are unlikely to help others.

The discussion may be stopped in midstream since the issue of how we should focus our efforts will be raised in future sessions. Further conversation can continue during the coffee and cake time.

**REFLECTION: PETER PITZELE'S DILEMMA (15 MINUTES)**

Remind the group of the incident that Pitzele described in the homework reading (Handout 6). Imagine that he came before the group for help in resolving his lingering feelings of discomfort. In light of everything they have discussed, what would they suggest that he do in a similar situation? If that voice were to call out to him again, should he keep listening to it? If he did, would he be "for himself?"

Ask participants the following questions: Are you for yourself? How did this session affect you? What was it like to be here with the group?

**CLOSING RITUAL OR PRAYER (5 MINUTES)**

Start by singing *Im Ein Ani Li Mi Li*. Conclude by softly reading the story told by Rabbi Hanoach (below).

There was once a man who was very stupid. When he got up in the morning, it was so hard for him to find his clothes that at night he almost hesitated to go to bed for thinking of the trouble he would have on waking. One evening he finally made a great effort, took paper and pencil and as he undressed, noted down exactly where he put everything he had on. The next morning, very well pleased with himself, he took the slip of paper in his hand and read: “cap” – there it was, he set it on his head; “pants” – there they lay, he got into them; and so it went until he was fully dressed.

Martin Buber, *Tales of the Hasidim: The Later Masters*. New York: Schocken Books, 1948, p. 314.

“That’s all very well, but now where am I myself?” he asked in great consternation. “Where in the world am I?” He looked and looked, but it was a vain search; he could not find himself. “And that is how it is with us,” said the rabbi.

Ask the participants to read Handout 10: The Prophets for next session.

## Session 3



### OPENING PRAYER OR RITUAL (5 MINUTES)

Begin by singing or listening to *Im Ein Ani Li Mi Li* (Handout 1). Then ask each participant to recite Hillel's teaching in turn, in Hebrew or in English, transforming it into a focus of meditation.

### CHECK-IN (20 MINUTES)

Begin with this question: Can you remember a specific time when you, or someone you know, performed an act of *tzedakah* or *gemilut chasadim* to help a total stranger?

As always, brief personal sharing is welcome and encouraged.

Conclude, after personal sharing, by distributing Handout 11 and reading "In Praise of Mitzvah Heroes" by Danny Siegel.

### TEXT STUDY: TO BE A PROPHET (35 MINUTES)

The goal of this text study is to re-create part of the social justice agenda that was of concern to the prophets Amos, Isaiah and Jeremiah.

Start by leading the group in the blessing for the study of Torah (Handout 2).

Next, divide the group into thirds. Give each group a different version of Handout 12: "To Be a Prophet", focusing on either Amos, Isaiah or Jeremiah.

Ask them to read the "About the Prophet" section first and then the passages cited on the back. The same four questions have been posed for each group, which should be answered individually first and then discussed.

Make sure that someone in each group serves as the recorder, noting the answers to Question 4, which will be shared later.

After 25 minutes, bring everyone back together. Ask them to share their sense of what their prophet's three-point agenda would be today. Write their responses on butcher paper to be posted on the wall. Are their agenda items similar or different? If there are differences, did they arise from the different perspectives of the prophets or from alternative applications of the prophets' broad concerns to modern life? Limit discussion to ten minutes.

### THE TZEDAKAH COLLECTIVE CHALLENGE (60 MINUTES)

Explain that the group is now going to act as if it were a newly formed *Tzedakah* Collective. A *Tzedakah* Collective is a group of people who each contribute to the collective's treasury, in this case imagine that there is \$150 to distribute. The challenge is to allocate the money donated by creating a priority listing based on Jewish sources.

The prophets' agenda for a just society and their vision of which areas need special attention are on butcher paper on the wall. Post two other sheets between them with the priority listings from Handouts 13A and 13B.

Choose one participant to play the role of Collective Chairperson for this meeting and another to be the recorder. The task of the Collective is to write a set of *tzedakah* priority guidelines, keeping in mind the types of people and needs that they are likely to encounter in their *tzedakah* work. They should refer to the passages posted on the wall, but can include any of their own ideas as well. The recorder should write the guidelines on butcher paper as they are decided. (20 minutes)

(Some sample guidelines include: Our first priority will be . . . If there is a need closer to home and one further away . . . If a woman and a man are both in need . . .)

Once the guidelines have been completed, explain that three *tzedakah* opportunities will be presented in turn by individual members of the Collective. Ask three participants to make the presentations that are detailed in Handout #14: Three Appeals To a *Tzedakah* Collective. After each one has been presented and discussed briefly, the Collective will prioritize them and decide what, if any, allocations should be made.

The Collective should discuss each in turn for 10 minutes. (30 minutes) Then, leave 10 minutes for prioritizing the requests within the established guidelines and voting on the allocation(s).

### REFLECTION (10 MINUTES)

It is important to pause so participants can share their feelings about the Jewish Journey Group or reflect on how things are going. Encourage participants to spend a few minutes discussing their reactions with the group.

**CLOSING RITUAL OR PRAYER (5 MINUTES)**

Read “Your Soul: Half Full or Half Empty?” (below), and then ask participants to pour beverages for each other.

**“YOUR SOUL: HALF FULL OR HALF EMPTY?”**

At a recent college graduation, the rabbi giving the benediction told this story about Bill Cosby. He was the first person in his family to attend college. After the first day, his grandmother asked him what he had learned. He described to her the discussion they had in philosophy class about whether the glass was half full or half empty.

“Oh, that’s easy,” she said. “If he’s drinking, it’s half empty. If he’s pouring, it’s half full.” This she knew without a high school diploma.

The rabbi went on to say: If you’re drinking and concentrating only on your own thirst, your own needs, then you’re half empty and alone. If you’re pouring for someone else and thinking of their needs, then you’re filling up your soul.



## Session 4

### OPENING PRAYER OR RITUAL (5 MINUTES)

Begin by singing or listening to *Im Ein Ani Li Mi Li* (Handout 1).



Continue by reading the following poem by Danny Siegel:

“Even a Poor Man”

Even a poor man must give *Tzedakah*.  
He knows what it is like.  
He knows the people,  
where it is best to give,  
and how much.

Better than we know.  
He is our Rebbi –  
we should follow him on his rounds.

Daniel Siegel, *And God Braided Eve's Hair*. New York: Department of Youth Activities, United Synagogue of America, 1976, p.114.

### CHECK-IN (20 MINUTES)

Begin by asking the group this question: Have you ever known a poor or homeless person?

Brief personal sharing is welcome and encouraged. Conclude check-in by distributing and reading Handout 15: “The Shoe Lady,” another inspirational personal social action story.

### TEXT STUDY: A HIERARCHY OF HELPING (30 MINUTES)

The goal of this text study and discussion is to sensitize the participants to the needs and feelings of those they may choose to help. What is learned here will be helpful regardless of which project(s) the group ultimately chooses.

Divide the participants into groups of 2 or 3. Referring to Handout 16: “Al-Nakawa’s Nine Gradations,” ask each small group to put the nine choices in descending order of preferable responses to people in need, with number 1 being the greatest response. Explain that Maimonides’ listing in descending order is on the back of the sheet. They can refer to it but need not accept his approach (15 minutes).

Bring everyone together so they can share their ordering of Al-Nakawa's choices. Then read his actual order. (6, 2, 4, 8, 1, 3, 9, 5, 7) and discuss briefly. (5 minutes)

Conclude this section by asking the group to consider this question:

Habitat for Humanity teaches the value of "sweat equity." The future owners of Habitat homes must work on the building of the homes themselves. This means that their identity will be known. If it were a Jewish Habitat build, should sweat equity be required? (10 minutes)

#### OUR PARTNERS IN GEMILUT CHASADIM (60 MINUTES)

The goal of this session is to begin to expose the group to the different kinds of social action projects they may choose to pursue. (A full discussion will take place in Session 5.) Explain that several agencies have joined with us in our efforts to perform acts of *gemilut chasadim*: American Jewish World Service (AJWS), Jewish Fund for Justice (JFJ) and Coalition on the Environment and Jewish Life (COEJL).

In this part of the session, the participants will view/listen to presentations that these agencies have prepared. Each one will last for approximately 15 minutes and will be divided into three parts:

- Mission of the agency ;
- A specific issue it is dealing with;
- Ideas for projects that might be helpful in addressing that issue.

For the concluding 15 minutes, lead a discussion of the different issues and approaches that the agencies have presented. A list of questions should be developed that can be emailed to the agency representatives. Reference should be made to the guidelines developed in Session 3 and to the conclusions reached in the preceding discussion. Participants are encouraged to go to the agency web sites for more information before the next session.

Ask each participant to choose one agency to examine more closely before the next session. They should be ready to share what they have learned.

In addition, some may focus on the possibility of becoming a *tzedakah* collective (Handout #17) and others may research projects of their own choosing.

Conclude with this saying from *Pirkei Avot* (2:21):

שֶׁאֵל הָעֵנִי מִמֶּנֶּה וְאֵין בְּיָדְךָ כָּלוּם לִיתֵן לוֹ פִּיִּסְהוּ בְּדַבְרִים,  
וְאָסוּר לְגַעַר בְּעֵנֵי אֹ לְהַגְבִּיחַ קוֹלוֹ עָלָיו בְּצַעֲקָה.

“Rabbi Tarfon used to teach: You are not required to complete the work, but neither are you at liberty to abstain from it.”

#### REFLECTION (10 MINUTES)

Since the Jewish Journey Group is nearing its conclusion, pause at this point so participants can share their feelings. Remind them that they will have a full discussion of where to go from here at the next session.

#### CLOSING RITUAL OR PRAYER (5 MINUTES)

Listen to or sing *Lo Alecha* (Handout 1). Then close the session with the following quote from Maimonides:

לֹא הַמְדִּירֵשׁ הוּא הָעֵקֶר, אֶלָּא הַמְעַשָּׂה.

“If a poor person requests help and you have nothing in your possession to give him, placate him with kind words; it is forbidden to be angry or to shout at her, for her heart is broken and crushed.” (Maimonides, *Mishneh Torah*, Gifts to the Poor, 10:5).



## Session 5



### OPENING PRAYER OR RITUAL (5 MINUTES)

Begin the session with the group singing or listening to *Lo Alecha* (Handout 1).

Read the following prayer, which is based on the same themes:

There are times when the world's problems seem so many.  
There are days with no moments for all the to-dos.

There are ways of silencing, blocking out the calls.  
There are paths that lead us away from others, from ourselves.

There are others who will surely do the right thing;  
There must be people better at this than we.

But this is our moment, our time, our place.  
We hear the call and must respond: Hineini, send me.

Help us, O God, to listen and to act.  
Help us to know the heart of the stranger so we can find our own.

Amen.

### CHECK-IN (20 MINUTES)

Begin by asking the group: Was there ever a time when you missed the opportunity to help someone else?

Brief personal sharing is also welcome and encouraged.

Conclude by reading Handout 17: "Angels From Heaven". This continues the series of social action vignettes designed to inspire the group to embrace a *gemilut chasadim* approach.

**TEXT STUDY: WHEN WILL ELIJAH COME? (30 MINUTES)**

The purpose of this text study is to stress the urgency in helping as quickly as possible. It also emphasizes the power that *gemilut chasadim* work has to bring the Messianic Era closer to becoming a reality.

Have the participants study the passage on Handout 19: “Nahum and the Starving Man” with *hevruta* partners. Ask them to keep in mind the incidents that were shared during check-in as they discuss the *Talmudic* story and to refer to the questions that follow it. Begin with the blessing for the study of *Torah*. (Handout 2) (15 minutes)

Bring the group back together as a whole and distribute Handout 20: “When Will Elijah Come?” Ask for three volunteers to read the parts of Rabbi Joshua, Elijah and the Messiah. The participants should then write brief answers to the three questions. Have everyone share responses, focusing primarily on Question 3: Why didn’t the Messiah come?

Be sure that the following response is included in the discussion: The Messiah didn’t come because Rabbi Joshua didn’t take his place with the lepers. Conclude by saying: Each time someone takes the Messiah’s place with a person in need, that person brings the beginning of the Messianic Era that much closer to reality. (15 minutes)

**IF NOT NOW, WHEN? WHERE DO WE GO FROM HERE? (45 MINUTES)**

The goal of this part of the session is to evaluate the project choices that were discussed at the last session and to consider selecting one of them to complete.

The responses from the three agency representatives should be shared as well as any new insights that the participants may have. It is important to discuss each project in detail to be sure that every aspect has been addressed. As the conversation continues, ask the participants to fill in Handout 21. They should list the positives as well as the unique challenges of each of the possible projects. Then have them share their individual lists to make a composite list that will be written on butcher paper and posted.

Conclude this section by asking the participants which of the possible projects they find to be most appealing and feasible. Explain that each agency has agreed to provide continuing support and help should its project be pursued. There will be additional help should the group choose to become a *Tzedakah* Collective or to take on another project.

Participants may choose to continue the Jewish Journey Group experience with a second series of sessions that will focus more directly on the issues surrounding the project selected. The curriculum for that Jewish Journey Group has been prepared in partnership with each of the agencies.

### REFLECTION (15 MINUTES)

It is important to be sure that everyone is comfortable with the direction that the group is considering. Allow time for feedback and responses not only to the choices that have been discussed but also to the process of the journey group itself.

Focus on the need to be involved in some form of action. If it is not by joining the next Jewish Journey Group, then it could be through one of the congregation's existing social action efforts or with one of the agencies directly. You may open or close this section with the rabbinic teaching:

אָדָם נוֹתֵן פְּרוּטָה לְעֵנִי - זוֹכָה וּמְקַבֵּל פְּנֵי שְׂכִינָה,  
שֶׁנֶּאֱמַר: אָנִי בְּצַדֵּק אֶחֱזָה פְּנֵיךָ אֲשֶׁבֵעָה בְּהַקִּיץ תִּמְוֹנֶתְךָ.  
רַבִּי אֶלְעָזָר יְהִיב פְּרוּטָה לְעֵנִי וְהִדִּיר מִצְלִי,  
אָמַר, דִּכְתִּיב: אָנִי בְּצַדֵּק אֶחֱזָה פְּנֵיךָ

Shimon, the son of Rabban Gamliel, said: "Study is not the most important thing, but deed."

*Mishnah, Pirkei Avot 1:17*

**CLOSING RITUAL OR PRAYER (5 MINUTES)**

If any of the songs have become group favorites, they should be sung here as everyone stands in a circle. Then conclude with this reading:

If a person gives but a penny to a beggar, that person is deemed worthy to receive the Divine Presence, as it is written (Psalm17:15): “I shall behold Your face in *tzedakah*.” Rabbi Eleazar used to give a coin to a poor man and straightaway say a prayer, because, he said: it is written “I, in *tzedakah*, shall behold Your face.”

Babylonian Talmud,  
*Baba Batra* 10a

May there be moments on our *gemilut chasadim* journey when we, too, are blessed with the Divine Presence in our midst.

## Appendix: Resources for Planning and Leading Jewish Journey Group Sessions

The Structure of Jewish Journey Group Sessions  
 Planning and Logistics  
 Group Norms and Group Dynamics  
 Group Covenants  
 Opening Jewish Journey Group Sessions  
 Facilitating Check-In  
 Closing Jewish Journey Group Sessions  
 Further resources from Synagogue 2000



### THE STRUCTURE OF JEWISH JOURNEY GROUP SESSIONS

Jewish Journey Group sessions seek to be a microcosm of a lived spiritual community.

Every session should include these elements: Opening ritual, prayer or song; check-in; Jewish study; thematic material or group activity; closing ritual or prayer. Sharing a snack or a meal together may precede or follow the formal session.

In Jewish Journey Group sessions, everyone should be attentive to the feelings of the other participants and to the dynamics of the group. A high value is placed on respectful speaking, listening, collaborating, and reaching closure when appropriate.

**An opening ritual, prayer or song** should open every session, marking the gathering as a Jewish spiritual occasion and formally announcing its beginning. Different facilitators will have different styles of opening the group. One might begin with a niggun (wordless melody) that is accessible to all, another with a kavannah (a suggestion for focusing attention). Depending upon the group, “Jewish moments” can also be interwoven into the course of each meeting: a d’var torah or other form of Jewish study after check-in; prayers before and after food and study; and a spontaneous prayer or niggun for the closing ritual.

**Check-in** might take from a few minutes to more than half an hour. Check-in is a critically important aspect of Jewish Journey Groups; it is not something to be hurried through. Check-in gives participants the opportunity to express and share their thoughts and feelings, excitements and frustrations, highs and lows. Try to resist rushing through check-in to get to the “real content” of the meeting – the sharing that takes place is an important aspect of the “real content.”

### JEWISH JOURNEY GROUP MEETING FORMAT

Opening ritual,  
prayer or song

Check-in

Jewish Study

Thematic material or  
work group activity

Reflection

Closing ritual or prayer

Food

**Jewish Study** should be combined with thematic material whenever possible. If the group is meeting primarily for purposes other than Jewish study or spiritual exploration, it is still important to provide an opportunity for Jewish learning. Among other things, such study can further ground the work that is being undertaken in a Jewish context.

**Thematic material or work group activity** will occupy most of the meeting time, and will vary depending upon the nature of the group.

**Reflection** is an opportunity for participants to address their responses to the theme of the session, the structure or dynamics of the group, or other issues of process or content. Towards the end of every meeting, the facilitator should allow time for group members to raise issues or concerns and to recognize feelings or “unfinished business” about the session or the group. Trigger questions can enable a deepening of the Jewish Journey group experience by giving group members permission to express any feelings they have about the group and inviting them to explore hidden thoughts and feelings. Ask open-ended questions, such as: “How did this session go for you?” “Was there anything that you would like to bring up that did not get addressed?” “Do you have any concerns or observations that you would like to talk about?” At regular intervals over the course of the Jewish Journey Group, the facilitator should include a block of time at the beginning or end of the session for an open discussion of the group process and the group’s progress.

**A closing ritual or prayer**, with a quick “go around” of last words, is an opportunity to hear how people are feeling and to create closure for that day’s session. Follow the personal sharing with a simple closing circle, song, poem, or short prayer to help create a transition out of group time.

**Food** is an important component that encourages the forming of social connections. Whether food is included at the beginning, middle or end of the session, consistency should be maintained throughout the duration of a group. The sharing of food can be infused with Jewish meaning by including the appropriate blessings before and after eating.

## JEWISH JOURNEY GROUP PLANNING AND LOGISTICS

Select the meeting location carefully. Groups might choose to meet in private homes, which can provide a friendlier, more intimate setting, or they might meet in a small, fairly private room in the synagogue. If the group meets in a private home, be sure that it is accessible to people with disabilities.

If possible, avoid rooms in high traffic areas or with large uncurtained windows. Many people will open up more comfortably in a more secluded space. The “work group” activity of a group may necessitate a completely different model for a Jewish Journey Group’s location; the goal is to be aware of the environment and how it can be made to feel more intimate and friendly. This is often accomplished with soft lighting and movable seating. It is ideal to have a regular meeting place, since routine helps to build community. If the location rotates or needs to change, be sure that all participants have a schedule and directions.

No one likes to arrive late because of confusion. Make sure, too, that there is a phone or e-mail list, so that if there are any last-minute changes or unavoidable cancellations, everyone can be notified.

Arrange chairs in a circle, if possible, so that everyone can see each other’s faces. This enables each person to be able to respond to everyone else, and facilitates discussion.

Consider planning refreshments so that a different person brings them each week. If you are planning to have an entire meal at each group session, consider how to organize the meal—for example, potluck, or charging a fee for the cost of catered meals. If group members participate in providing refreshments, let them know whether there are *kashrut* (kosher) guidelines for the home or synagogue so that both the host and the food providers will be comfortable.

Child care may also be an important consideration; child care needs should be addressed in the planning and scheduling of the group.

It is important to understand the culture of the individual synagogue when developing Journey groups.

---

## GROUP NORMS AND GROUP DYNAMICS

**Create a friendly, warm, safe and responsive environment.** We suggest that you, as the facilitator, welcome people as if they were coming to your home. The facilitator is the person who creates and contains the space in which participants move and explore. Through body language, eye contact, voice tone and attentive listening, you model the way in which everyone is expected to treat each other, creating an environment where people can grow and participate fully in all of the group's activities.

Although you are the facilitator, acting in a leadership role, you are also a member of the group, and should participate fully in all group activities along with the other members. Recognize, however, that people may privilege your voice above others, and be sensitive to how often you speak. When asked: "What made your Jewish Journey Group work?" people often give the name of the person who made them feel welcome and at ease.

You need nourishment in your facilitator role as you take on this significant work. In order to support the synagogue programs, you need to remember to take care of your own needs of body, mind and spirit.

---

**Be mindful of helping the group achieve its goals.** You as the facilitator have particular responsibilities to help the group go where it wants to go, to the extent that it needs such help. You will need to orient the group at the beginning of each session. You will organize the agenda, gently usher the group through each session's transitions (from opening, to check-in, to a discussion of the theme, to closing), keep track of time, lead or delegate responsibility for leading sections of each session, and gently facilitate interaction by asking questions and/or offering reflections. Additionally, it is your responsibility to make sure that, from the first meeting, the group understands what a Jewish Journey Group is and is not.

## GROUP COVENANTS

**Establish a group *brit* (covenant) at the first session.** One of the group's first tasks is to establish a *brit* or covenant. Initially, you might offer a few specific items and ask for additional suggestions from the members.

**Confidentiality.** The group should agree to certain boundaries of confidentiality. These often include a statement that "What you hear here stays here." That is, everyone is free to talk outside the group about their own thoughts and feelings, but other people's thoughts, stories and feelings—anything they share in the group—should remain confidential.

**Disclosure During Group Meetings.** A Jewish Journey Group is meant to be a place safe enough to contain deep sharing, and a place where it is also safe not to share. Members decide what is safe to disclose, what they would rather keep private, and when they would rather sit quietly and listen. When sharing feelings or opinions, participants should employ “I” statements, such as “I was upset when. . .” Since members are likely to bring very different backgrounds and beliefs to the group, all should be cognizant that this is a place to respect differences.

**Awareness of Others.** Members are expected to cultivate a “disciplined spontaneity” in which they recognize other people’s needs while also recognizing their own. In particular, group members should be aware of how much others have spoken or kept silent, so that no one monopolizes the group time or agenda.

**Personal and Spiritual Growth,** One purpose of the group is personal and spiritual growth through exploration of particular topics, via study, discussion and reading. It is important to be clear about the specific goals of the group, so that participants will be less likely to develop unrealistic expectations. A Jewish Journey Group is not a therapeutic group for solving personal problems, although problems may come up and be addressed along the way.

**Attendance and Logistics.** The *brit* should include logistical issues including when and where the group will meet, how long each session will be, the expected duration of the group, and responsibilities for set up, clean up, or sharing food. Participants should come on time to all sessions, and if they cannot attend a particular session, they should make every effort to call the facilitator beforehand, passing on any messages they would like to have communicated to the group on their behalf. If a member decides to drop out of the group, he or she should let everyone know in person, if possible, as a way of acknowledging the importance of the group to everyone in it.

**Vision of the Group.** A Jewish Journey Group cannot be all things to all people. Meetings will go better if there is a consensus about what the group’s goals and ground rules are. There are several ways for the facilitator to elicit input from the group regarding their vision of the group’s goals and values. Any of the following exercises can help bring individual members’ hopes and expectations to the surface, and help the group create community together.

- Hand out 3”x5” cards at the first session and ask everyone to write their ideas about values that should govern group time together (e.g., confidentiality, respect for differences, recognizing the *tselem Elohim*, or image of God, in every member, acceptance and caring even in the midst of disagreement, love of Judaism, respect for spiritual needs, etc.). These lists can then be shared.
- Ask everyone to write down a vision for the group’s time together, completing the sentence, “We envision this group as a place where . . .” Again, these statements can be read and discussed together.
- Complete the sentence, “One thing I want this group to do/to be is...”



#### **RESOURCES ON GROUP COVENANTS AND SMALL GROUPS IN THE CONGREGATION**

Two useful resources about Group Covenants—and small groups in general—are *Connecting to God: Nurturing Spirituality through Small Groups*, by Corinne Ware, pp. 22-26, and *Small Groups in the Church: A Handbook for Creating Community*, by Thomas G. Kirkpatrick, pp. 125-6 (both books are published by the Alban Institute: (800) 486-1318, [www.alban.org](http://www.alban.org)). While targeted to church groups, the material is easily translatable to the synagogue context.

## OPENING JEWISH JOURNEY GROUP SESSIONS

As the group gathers, it is important to allow members time to arrive, not only physically but also spiritually. Spending a few minutes at the beginning of the session to let people slow down, settle in and become more fully aware of themselves sets an important tone for the entire meeting.

Every group leader has his or her own style and strengths. Some of the suggestions below may not work for particular leaders or groups. We suggest that you experiment with these openings, daring to stretch yourself and your group slightly beyond what may be entirely comfortable or familiar. In addition, please feel free to come up with your own ideas to achieve the goal of helping people begin their time together mindfully.

**Sing a *niggun* (a wordless tune).** You might want to preface your singing with a *kavannah* (a way to focus). For instance, you might ask people to let the *niggun* wash over them and wash away anything they need to let go of in order to be present to this group experience. You might ask them to use the *niggun* as a way of inviting God's presence to be with them more fully. You might ask them to use the *niggun* as a way to center themselves more fully in their bodies. Sing the *niggun* over and over until it no longer feels like you are singing the *niggun*, but rather that the *niggun* is singing you.

**Lead the group in a relaxation exercise.** Instruct everyone to get comfortable in their seats, with their backs supported and their feet flat on the ground. Ask them to take several slow, deep breaths, feeling their breathing begin not in their upper chests, but deep within the diaphragm. Encourage them to sigh or make their exhalations audible if they would like. Then direct their attention to different parts of their bodies—starting from the toes and feet and moving upward to the ankles, lower legs, knees, thighs, pelvic area, bellies, lower backs, chests, shoulders, elbows, lower arms, hands, fingers, necks, heads and faces—suggesting that they relax that part of their body on the exhalation.

**Play a spiritually nourishing piece of Jewish music.** Bring a CD or cassette player, and play a piece of music that will help the group center and focus. You might choose a piece of music that is thematically relevant to the group, or a selection from *Nefesh: Songs for the Soul* (Synagogue 2000) or by a contemporary Jewish musician.

**Sit in silence.** Instruct the group to sit in silence for several minutes. Prepare them by asking them to get comfortable in their chairs, and to do some slow and gentle breathing. Tell them that the point of this brief meditation is to help them slow down, quiet themselves, and become settled. They should simply pay attention to their breathing and note whatever physical sensations, thoughts and emotions come up for them. They do not need to chase away or judge any sensation, thought or emotion. Whenever they note something that arises for them, they should simply return their attention to their breathing.

**Invite the group to journal.** Pass out paper and pens. Explain that you would like them to spend some time writing about how they are in the present moment. Ask them to write as continuously as they can. If they get stuck, they can begin a sentence with the words, “I feel. . .” They might be more comfortable in their writing if you remind them that the writing will not be shared.

**Sing a spiritually meaningful song.** If you are going to sing a song with words, provide the words to the group. It is best to sing a simple song, one that is meditative in tone and that you can repeat a few times. For instance, you might want to sing *Pitchu li*, *Achat sha’alti*, or other songs from the book, *Refuah Shlemah: Songs of Jewish Healing*, published by Synagogue 2000.

**Meditate on a particular word or phrase.** Suggest that participants meditate on a particular Jewish word or phrase. Offer a number of suggestions, and write them clearly in English, Hebrew and transliteration for all to see. Some possibilities include the *Shema*, *B’yado afkid ruchi* (“Into God’s care I entrust my soul”), *Adonai karov l’chol korav* (“The ETERNAL is near to all who call”), *Shiviti Adonai lenegdi tamid* (“I keep the ETERNAL before me always”). Before they begin this practice, ask participants to get comfortable in their seats and to take a few slow and deep breaths. Instruct them to match the sounds of these words with their breathing, some on the inhalations, some on the exhalations.

**Read a psalm.** Select a psalm, provide copies of the text for everyone, read it slowly, and allow the group to sit in silence for a few moments afterwards. You may want to close the reading by leading the group in a version of *Halleluyah* or the last line of the last psalm (Psalm 150), *Kol hane-shama tehalel Yah, Halleluyah* (Every soul shall praise God, Halleluyah).

**Read an inspiring passage of Jewish thought.** Choose a poem or selection from one of the great Jewish writers whose thoughts and eloquence may provide uplift and inspiration.

**Use Jewish rituals and ritual objects creatively.** Washing each other's hands, sharing challah and pouring honey on each other's bread, passing around a spice box, sharing wine, or dipping greens in salt water at Pesach are all possibilities for using Jewish rituals and ritual objects to open the group.

**Use sacred space.** You might want to meet in the sanctuary, the chapel or an outdoor setting, and begin by focusing on the surroundings.

### FACILITATING CHECK-IN

**Check-in invites** people to let go of their daily concerns, reflect on what they personally bring to the gathering and to tell the group about what is important in their own lives.

Check-in might begin by having each person share something positive thing that has happened since the last meeting, a challenge being faced, or anything in a participant's life that is related to the theme of the group. One basic check-in question is: "What is going on in your life [today; this week; since our last meeting]?" People may tell about their day or week or something significant happening in their lives. The rest of the group listens respectfully and does not respond.

Check-in serves several goals:

- It helps create lines of connection and community between people.
- Not everything that goes on in the meeting is connected to the meeting. Informing the group about important issues affecting one's life can save telling of people individually and explain the mood or demeanor of the person.
- Through checking-in, each individual can become more conscious and responsible for their own behavior.

In Jewish Journey Groups, check-in may be used to focus group members attention to the themes of the group and how these themes may be present in participants' lives.

Check-in questions for the initial group meeting might include: What drew you here? What do you hope to get from coming to this group? What is your vision for this group? What has been happening in your life over the last week? Most Synagogue 2000 Jewish Journey Group guides include suggested check-ins for each session.

We suggest that you experiment with these openings, daring to stretch yourself and your group slightly beyond what may be entirely comfortable or familiar.

---

At the first session, review these guidelines for check-in:

- Each participants should take up to three minutes. The facilitator might ask one person to keep time or use an egg timer. Either go around in a circle or ask for volunteers. The facilitator should participate in check-in.
- There should be no “cross-talk” or interruption of the person speaking.
- It is okay to pass completely to speak for a shorter time than the full allotment.
- If a topical question is asked, it is okay to check-in about what is going on personally instead of answering the check-in question

If a topical question is asked, some people may choose to speak about something that is occurring or important in their personal lives, positive or negative. It can be very difficult for the next person to address the topical question when the prior person has just announced a personal loss or major medical diagnosis! You can help by allowing a brief silence, acknowledging the person’s check-in (for example, “Thank you for coming tonight,”) and then calling on the next person. After everyone has checked-in, the leader or another member of the group may offer a brief prayer or otherwise acknowledge the issues that have been raised during check-in:

I am grateful that all of you chose to come be here this evening. I hope that this gathering with people who care about you will be a source of comfort.

The members of our group are coming from widely different places, and there is a lot going on in our lives.

Summaries like these recognize the feelings and issues that group members have brought to the gathering without diverting attention from the purpose of the meeting. They also create a space for people to announce their personal news without drawing the group’s attention back to individuals.

### CLOSING JEWISH JOURNEY GROUP SESSIONS

Closing the group meeting with prayer provides an important time to pull together loose threads, offer recognition of people’s challenges and hopes, and root the group’s work in the context and language of sacred Jewish experience.

**Offer an extemporaneous prayer.** Based on what has happened in the group, offer a prayer that expresses to God the group’s concerns. You may want to express gratitude for particular blessings that the group has experienced (trust in each other, a sense of growth, insight, etc.) as well as a sense of the group’s yearnings (for clarity, strength, healing, etc.). This offers one more occasion for group members to know that they have been

heard, provides some closure on the experience, and puts all the group's work in explicit relationship to God.

**Offer a traditional prayer together.** You may want to sing or say a traditional prayer to close the group. Some examples include *Oseh Shalom*, *Mi Sheberakh*, the priestly blessing, or Psalm 150.

**Sing a contemporary prayer or song.** There are many wonderful contemporary Jewish songs based upon prayers that you may want to sing. Examples include Debbie Friedman's *Tefilat HaDerekh*, or *Kaddish Derabanan*, or selections from contemporary Jewish artists, such as Shlomo Carlebach, David Zeller, or selections from *Nefesh: Songs for the Soul* (CD available from Synagogue 2000). Choose songs or prayers that are appropriate to making closure and sending each person back into the world.

**Sing a niggun.** Singing a *niggun* at the end of a session allows people time to quietly reflect without having to pay attention to words or meaning. If you began the session with a *niggun*, singing the same *niggun* again at the end can impart a sense of closure and wholeness to the session.

**Ask the group to bless one another.** Ask participants to break into pairs and offer one another words of blessing, with one person offering words of blessing and prayer for his/her partner first, and each pair then switching roles. You can suggest that they tell their partners if there are particular concerns they would like to have mentioned in the blessing. Suggest that they touch each other's shoulders, hands or heads if that is comfortable. For those who do not want to make up their own blessing, provide them with the words of the priestly blessing.

**Hold hands silently in a circle.** Ask participants to hold hands silently, and to find a place of prayer within. Let them know that if they would like to break the silence by offering a prayer of their heart, they may do so. If anyone has spoken, maintain a few moments of silence before ending the group. After a few moments of silence, initiate a squeeze of the hands to go around the circle to end the session.

#### AFTER EVERY SESSION

**Take notes directly after each session.** So much can happen between meetings that it can be difficult for the group to return to where it left off. As facilitator, it will be your task to reorient the group and to remind them of anything left over from the previous session. Your notes will help you gather

your thoughts and reactions after the session, to remember things that might otherwise slip your mind, and to record insights that you might want to bring to the next meeting. These notes may also be helpful to you as you meet with other facilitators or advisors.

#### FURTHER RESOURCES FROM SYNAGOGUE 2000

Additional resources about leading Jewish Journey Groups, including suggestions on guiding group process and caring for the self as a group facilitator, can be found in the Jewish Journey Groups section of the Synagogue 2000 *Sacred Community* curriculum.



---

Closing meetings in a prayerful manner  
can help people move from the from the Jewish  
Journey Group experience back into their lives.

The materials in this section were originally created by Rabbis Nancy Flam and Amy Eilberg as part of the Synagogue 2000 *Sacred Community* curriculum. Additional resources about leading Jewish Journey Groups, including suggestions on guiding group process and caring for the self as a group facilitator, can be found in the Jewish Journey Groups unit of the Synagogue 2000 *Sacred Community* curriculum.