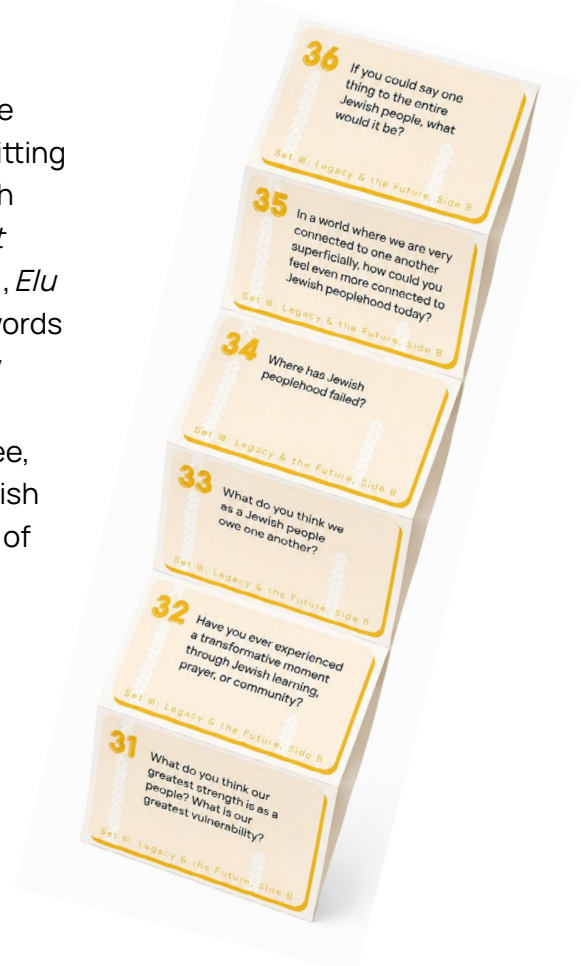


36 Questions that Lead to Peoplehood: A Practice for Increasing Empathy and Connection in a Fractured Jewish World

OVERVIEW

This pedagogy for Jewish Peoplehood begins at the edges, where Jewish difference is most pronounced and least comfortable. It invites learners to engage with those they perceive as “other” through a series of questions that highlight true differences in background, practice, and identity, and at the same time seek to build empathy and connection through recognition and mutual respect. By adopting a posture of curiosity, participants can move from positions of defensiveness to openness, and even be surprised by shared experiences and areas of agreement. The 36 questions act as a scaffold, enabling participants to transition from basic biographical sharing to more profound topics involving beliefs, experiences, and aspirations – fostering an environment for acknowledgment without requiring consensus.

This practice emerges from a deep concern for the present fragmentation of the Jewish people and a fierce hope that the majority of Jewish people believe Peoplehood is a value worth maintaining and transmitting to the next generation. Rabbinic tradition is filled with examples of constructive disagreement – *Makhloket l'shem shamayim* (arguments for the sake of heaven), *Elu v'elu divrei Elohim hayyim* (these and these are the words of the living God), and *Shivim panim laTorah* (seventy faces of Torah). These sources remind us that the challenge of living in Jewish community is not to agree, but to remain in dialogue. Without romanticizing Jewish unity, this practice insists on dignity and recognition of the other.



A VISION OF JEWISH PEOPLEHOOD

Any exercise in Jewish Peoplehood pedagogy that holds out hope for our collective future must honestly acknowledge our long history of internal rupture — biblical tribal division, civil strife, and even political assassination. Contemporary research sharpens the picture further. According to the 2020 Pew Survey of Jewish Americans, while 85% of American Jews feel a sense of belonging to the Jewish people, only 9% of Orthodox Jews say they have a lot in common with Reform Jews — and the same is true in reverse. More recently, M²'s 2025 Hope Study found that internal communal division was the top professional challenge identified by 950 North American Jewish professionals, with respondents describing themselves as “caught between competing factions” and “watching our community tear itself apart.” In a moment when Jewish Peoplehood is strained by mistrust, distance, and competing claims to authenticity, this practice helps to cultivate the skills that make relationships across difference possible.

Kintsugi, the Japanese art of golden repair, serves as a spiritual and cultural metaphor for my worldview. According to this philosophy, damage does not destroy a fragile object's value. Fractures, filled with gold, are something to celebrate, not hide. Applied to Jewish Peoplehood, kintsugi demands that we invest in each other not despite our differences but through them. From this worldview emerges a search for Jewish sources to support a pedagogy rooted in difference, conversation, and mutual dignity — one that understands curiosity as the golden material that can join the fractured shards of our community together.

As Rabbi Dr. Jonathan Sacks z”l writes, each of us “must learn to listen and be prepared to be surprised by others. We must make ourselves open to their stories, which may profoundly conflict with our own. We must even, at times, be ready to hear of their pain, humiliation, and resentment and discover that their image of us is anything but our image of ourselves.” And it is through conversation, not debate, that real change takes place: “In a debate one side wins, the other loses, but both are the same as they were before. In a conversation, neither side loses, and both are changed because they know what reality looks like from a different perspective.” Good conversations can lead to fundamental change — but in an age of increasing isolation and loneliness, many lack the tools to foster and shape them. Scaffolded questions can be a first step toward creating a shared sense of Jewish Peoplehood that honors both dignity and difference and leads to repair.

THE SCIENCE OF CONNECTION: CONCEPTUAL FOUNDATION

This educational practice is inspired by Professor Arthur Aron's 1997 study, "The Experimental Generation of Interpersonal Closeness," which used 36 questions to deepen connections between participants who did not know one another. By guiding pairs through questions designed to elicit vulnerability, authenticity, and shared reflection, Aron's experiment produced a surprising sense of closeness far beyond what emerges in unstructured interaction. His core finding forms the backbone of this pedagogy: relational depth can be built with purpose, and guided conversation has generative power. Connection is not only a matter of shared background or chemistry — it can be intentionally cultivated through a sequence of questions that invite openness and mutual regard.

Joe Keohane's book *The Power of Strangers* reinforces this insight in a broader social register. Keohane demonstrates that when we approach strangers with curiosity rather than fear, we gain fresh viewpoints that broaden our worldview without forcing us to surrender our beliefs. Conversations bridging differences establish shared space: space for acknowledging another's reality and space for our own to be recognized. These encounters help weave a social fabric built on empathy, trust, and shared humanity, reminding us that change and connection arise through the simple courage of talking — and listening — to someone we do not yet know. Taken together, Aron and Keohane affirm that in an age marked by loneliness, mistrust, and polarization, guided conversation remains one of the most powerful tools we have for repairing social fabric. It is from this evidence base, alongside Jewish commitments to dignity, dialogue, and relationship, that the practice at the heart of this pedagogy takes shape.

THE PEDAGOGY OF PEOPLEHOOD

36 Questions that Lead to Jewish Peoplehood is an interactive educational practice designed for adult learners. Pairs can be matched randomly or more thoughtfully by the facilitator to ensure diversity across religious, political, or ideological lines. The questions are divided into three sets of twelve, each requiring approximately 15–20 minutes. Set I (Setting and Story) opens with questions of personal Jewish experience, memory, and community. Set II (Tensions and Belonging) moves into territory that is more complex and contested — what binds Jews together, what troubles participants about Jewish life, and how individuals relate to the broader Jewish story. Set III (Legacy and the Future) asks participants to look forward together: what they hope for, what they believe the Jewish people owe one another, and what they would say to the entire Jewish people if they could. The practice closes with structured reflection prompts, inviting pairs and then the full group to consider what surprised them, what felt hard, and what the experience revealed about Jewish Peoplehood.

The practice has been tested in a range of settings. Members of the International Nahum Goldmann Fellowship Network and the M² Senior Educators Cohort worked through the questions in global pairs on Zoom; participants reported feeling closer to their partners

and noted that the questions surfaced greater complexity and nuance in definitions of Jewishness and Peoplehood than they had anticipated. A 90-minute version was piloted at the Netaim conference in Bucharest in September 2025, with international Jewish educators from across Europe and Israel; the session concluded with a group debrief that generated rich conversation about how Peoplehood is experienced differently across communities. Further testing is ongoing in Hillel settings and Jewish education programs in New York. Across all settings, the structured nature of the questions scaffolds dialogue in a way that makes vulnerability possible and meaningful connection likely.

CONCLUSION

This practice transforms what might otherwise be casual or superficial conversation into a deliberate practice of Peoplehood. By asking participants to slow down, reflect, and speak honestly about their own lives, it cultivates awareness of both difference and shared experience. Participants are invited to notice commonalities and surprising points of resonance, all while maintaining respect for the uniqueness of the other. Over time, this practice not only strengthens the relationships between individuals but also reinforces broader Jewish commitments to dignity, conversation, and the ongoing cultivation of communal life. In a fractured moment, it offers something both ancient and urgent: a structured invitation to fill the cracks with gold.



To access the full question sets, facilitation guide, and reflection tools, scan the QR code or [click here](#).



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