

Understanding Tish'a B'Av through Empathy and Allyship

Goals: To gain a deeper understanding of Tish'a B'Av through exercises built around empathy and allyship.

Ages: 12-16

Time: 40-45 minutes

Introduction (5 min)

Facilitator: Read to the group

The early rabbis tell a story about the events leading up to the destruction of the Second Temple on Tish'a B'Av. They say that the collective tragedy that took place on that day had its roots in an individual act of cruelty, and the unwillingness of bystanders to step in. This is the story of Kamtza and bar Kamtza:

Our tradition teaches that there was once someone preparing a large party, who sent an invitation to a friend, Kamtza.

Accidentally, the invitation went to a person with a very similar name - bar Kamtza...who the person did not like.

When the wrong person showed up to the party the host was very surprised and angry! This person with the mistaken identity was very embarrassed and asked kindly if he could stay so that he did not have to feel like a fool in front of everyone. The host did not listen and threw him out!

After getting thrown out of the party this person was very angry and hurt, at the host and all of the party goers. They thought to themselves, "all of the Rabbis were there, and not one of them spoke up for me." Furious, they went to the Roman authorities and told them that the Jews were rebelling against them, setting the stage for the destruction.

This particular story is meant to make us think about several things: the destructiveness of hatred and unkindness, the power of speaking up against bullies, and the ways in which individual acts of allyship can have a profound effect on the world. These are the messages that we can take with us as we observe this day of mourning.

Think, Pair, Share - Building Empathy (15 min)

Facilitator: Create groups of 2 or 3 depending on how many participants there are and send them to breakout rooms. In their pairs, have them think about a time when they felt like an 'other.' When did someone's assumptions about them create a barrier for them to belong? Allow for participants to be in their pairs for 10 minutes, reminding them at the 5-minute mark to switch partners if they haven't yet already. It might be helpful to broadcast the questions and paste them into the chat for easy reference. After 10 minutes, have them come back and ask for a few folks to share reflections and observations.

- 1) What did that feel like?
- 2) How did you know you were an 'other'?
- 3) What could have been done differently to make you feel more included?
- 4) What does it feel like to feel included?
- 5) How can you include others

Allyship and Interrupting Harm (15 min)

Facilitator: Ask the group if they know what an ally is. Make sure the group understands that an ally is someone who is outside a social group but who supports and advocates for that group. For example, a straight person can be an ally to LGBTQ people, white people can be allies to people of color, non-Jews can be allies to Jews, etc.

“Being an ally is active. It is a lot more than just calling yourself an ally. Part of being an ally means interrupting harm when you see it happening. We are going to look at some examples of scenarios where you could interrupt harm.”

Pick 3-4 of the below scenarios to talk through. Be mindful that some of these scenarios may be more appropriate for older audiences. Be mindful of who is in your group while choosing which role plays to do.

Have two (or more) people volunteer to share how they could respond to each scenario. You can prompt the group to provide different ways of intervening by asking, “what other ways could you intervene?” Some possible interventions are included for discussion. Please note this is not an exhaustive list of all possibilities.

Roleplay Scenarios:

You hear someone at your lunch table say, “no homo.” How do you respond?

- Possible interventions: asking the person what they mean by no homo, saying “we don't need to say no homo after expressing appreciation/admiration for someone,” saying “saying ‘no homo’ is homophobic,” talking to the person 1:1 later

Your friend says, “Jamie just told me she’s bisexual and likes guys AND girls. I don’t get it! Why can’t she just pick one??”

- Possible interventions: “we don’t need to fully understand everyone’s experience, but I don’t like hearing you judge someone like that.” “What do you mean about picking one? Do you pick who you are attracted to?” Advocating for more LGBTQ education in schools so people are more educated about LGBTQ identities.

A friend comes to you after using the girls’ bathroom. She starts talking about a trans girl who was also using the bathroom. She says, “oh my god! That freak Sam was in there using the girls’ bathroom. I can’t believe he gets to use the girls’ bathroom. It seems wrong!”

- Possible interventions: “everyone gets to use the bathroom that’s most comfortable for them.” “Trans girls are girls!” “Why does it bother you that she uses the girls bathroom? She’s a girl.”

You’re hanging with a new friend at your house. He is gay and is dating a guy. Your mom asks him, “You’re so handsome, you must have a girlfriend, right?”

- Possible interventions: check in with your friend later, y’all to your mom 1:1, say “mom, you shouldn’t assume everyone’s straight!”, with your friend’s permission, say “not everyone is straight mom. He has a boyfriend!”

You’re working on a group project, and someone in your group uses they/them pronouns. Another team member uses “he” when talking about them. What do you do?

- Possible Interventions: repeat what was just said using the right pronouns, check in with the person who was misgendered afterward, talk to the person who misspoke afterward.

You hear a group of people talking about your friend. They’re saying things like, “She plays soccer AND runs track... she’s so mannish.” “Have you seen her leg hair?!” “Of course she has to date women because a guy would never date her!”

- Possible interventions: “wow that is super homophobic!” “Everyone has a right to express themselves however they want.” “That way of talking about her is unacceptable.” Talk to an adult about what’s happening so they can intervene.

You’re scrolling through Instagram and see that someone commented with a homophobic slur on a peer’s photo.

- possible interventions: check in directly with the person who was targeted to ask how you can support them. Involve an adult. Talk directly to the person who left the comment.

Reminders:

- There is more than one way to be an active bystander.
- You might not be the best person to respond. Think about your own safety, relationship to the people involved, and if it might be better coming from someone else.
- Checking in with the person harmed is also a form of allyship
- Distraction is also a form of intervention
- If appropriate, coming from a place of curiosity can prevent people from getting defensive. For example, asking questions rather than reprimanding can help. I.E. instead of saying “That’s homophobic and terrible,” you could ask, “What do you mean by ‘no homo?’” Asking someone to explain what they mean helps by making them aware of what they just said.

Wrap-up (5 min)

Facilitator: Reflect back on the two activities you just completed.

Debrief questions:

- How did the exercises relate the story we heard at the beginning?
- Have you ever had someone stick up for you? How did it feel?
- It’s easier to practice interrupting harm than to actually intervene. What can make it hard to stand up for others?
- What’s one lesson you’re taking away from today?