

CORE Groups at Central Synagogue

Why CORE groups?

Central Synagogue's CORE group strategy reflects our mission: to connect our members more deeply to one another, to our community, to Jewish tradition, and to God.

What a CORE group is:

CORE groups are intentional, lay-led communities, whose members come together on a regular basis with the understanding that Jewish tradition and deep personal relationships add meaning to our lives.

Some groups choose to focus on in-depth discussion and text study, allowing them to think deeply about "big questions" that affect all of us, but which we do not often make time to reflect upon or discuss.

Others may choose to take on Jewish practice (such as Shabbat observance) as a way to explore the power of Judaism to change their lives.

CORE groups may be longstanding or time-limited, but whatever their duration, they are defined by their members' commitment to engage in a process of transformational learning, reflection and relationship-building.

Participating in a CORE group encourages us to:

C – Connect more deeply to each other and to our community.

O – Open our hearts and minds to new ideas, experiences and stories.

R – Relate the wisdom, tradition and values of Judaism to our everyday lives.

E – Examine who we are, who we want to be, and how we want to live.

What a CORE group is not:

A CORE group is not a class. Many of us love learning and lectures, and text study will often be a part of our time together. In a CORE group, however, we use traditional texts to create a shared context for the personal Torah each of us will contribute, drawing on our own experience. A CORE group leader is not there to teach, but rather to facilitate a meaningful conversation based on the full participation of all group members. Likewise, while the clergy and professional staff of the synagogue will offer support and provide suggested content for your conversations, this is an opportunity to learn from one another, not the "professionals."

A CORE group is not a social club or dinner party. Don't get us wrong – our groups ARE centered on relationships, and we hope you will make many new meaningful connections. But the focus of your time together is not purely social.

A CORE group is not group therapy. People in your core group will offer their personal stories, and you should be prepared to listen, be present, and offer support as they do. But this is not a time to give advice, troubleshoot, or "save."

C – *Connect* more deeply to each other and to our community.

The more you invest in relationships outside of group time the richer your group time will become. Community doesn't just form; you must create it.

- Begin each session by “checking in,” and hearing about what is going on in each other's lives
- Share illnesses and losses; Support each other during hard times
- Share *simchahs* (joys) and celebrate them with each other
- Volunteer together at least once a year
- Have a Shabbat meal at least once a year
- Come to services as a group at least once a year
- Have a one-to-one coffee date with 3 people in your group

O – *Open* our hearts and minds to new ideas, experiences and stories.

Being in community goes hand in hand with encountering people who are not “like us.” Groups are enriched by diversity of opinion, background, and personality. Part of being in a group is learning to bring close those who are different and those with whom we may disagree.

- We grow as people when we are exposed to ideas that challenge our own – try not to shy away from disagreements
- Disagreement is good (we are in a Jewish setting after all!). But, we should remember we want to debate issues not people. It can be good to check in during a disagreement and make sure the issue is still the focus and not the people in the disagreement.
- If you find yourself jumping to respond to a comment ask yourself if someone hasn't shared yet and invite them to share
- If you vehemently disagree with something said, take a few seconds before responding and never cut off someone mid-sentence.
- If a conversation has been heated try to find the other person after the session and check in with each other and reiterate expressions of care and support.

R – *Relate* the wisdom, tradition and values of Judaism to our everyday lives.

While this is not an adult education class it is our hope that our tradition is brought to bear in the conversation and that through engaging with Judaism we see that it can be a lens through which we can view the world.

- Use texts as a springboard for personal story telling
- Avoid staying in an intellectual place. The texts apply to life. If you are talking about the hypothetical and theoretical there is a deeper level missing from the conversation.
- Spend the time between sessions looking for connections between your day to day life and the big ideas or texts you studied in the previous session. Bring those observations to the group.

E – *Examine* who we are, who we want to be, and how we want to live.

This is last but not at all least. Our hope is that your time in your group will lead to an examination of who we are and who we want to be. The time in your group should be transformational. It won't happen overnight, but it will only happen if you are open to it and if you invest in it.



CORE Groups: Best Practices for Group Leaders

Thank you for volunteering to lead a CORE group at Central Synagogue.

We know that there are many demands on your time and energy, and are honored that you will be dedicating your time to fostering an environment in which your fellow members can build connections with one another and explore how Jewish tradition relates to their lives.

This guide will offer some “best practices” for leading a CORE group.



If you have questions or concerns that are not answered here, do not worry. We are here to support you.

Rabbi Nicole Auerbach, our Rabbi for Small Groups, is happy to answer your questions, offer resources, help you to troubleshoot issues that may arise in your group, or simply to act as a sounding board as you begin this process. You can reach her by email at auerbachn@censyn.org, or by phone at 212-838-5122 ext. 4042.

What does it mean to be a CORE Groups leader?

The good news is that being a great CORE Groups leader does *not* require you to be an expert. You are not expected to be a teacher, and do not need any specialized Jewish knowledge.

Instead, as a leader, we ask that you:



Offer hospitality. Create a welcoming environment for your group to meet. This can be at your own home, the home of another member, a member’s office, or anywhere else where you can have a private, uninterrupted conversation. You are welcome, but not required, to arrange for participants to bring refreshments to share.



Prepare. For each session, you will have a Facilitator’s Guide with a suggested outline for the session, as well as a Participant’s Guide or Text Study, which will lay out key texts and offer suggested discussion questions. It is important that you review these materials beforehand, so that you can make any necessary adjustments to the outline, come up with questions that will suit your group, etc.



Bring supplies. For each session, be sure to make copies of the Participant Guide, and to bring any other materials (pens, index cards etc., listed in the Facilitator Guide) that might be needed for the session.



Facilitate discussion. The goal is to encourage lively, meaningful discussion, in which everyone’s voice is heard. See below for tips on how to do so.



Experience has shown us that there are 8 key things you can do to optimize the success of your group:



1 Make sure your group members understand the purpose of the group.

At your first meeting, we recommend going over the one-page document entitled “CORE Groups at Central Synagogue” with your group.

As one of our veteran leaders writes, the purpose of CORE Groups is “to create community within our synagogue and our city. The discussions lead to a sharing of values, dreams, fears and goals to live a better Jewish life. The groups help to make Central and the city a smaller and more familiar place.”

Let everyone know that if this sort of experience—in which participants actively share their stories and experiences with one another—is not what they had in mind, they are welcome to opt out with no judgement.



2 Review the “ground rules” for group discussion early—and often.

Attached is a “Brit,” or covenant, which should govern your conversations. Review it at your first meeting, and make sure everyone is on board. Some of our most successful groups review the brit at the beginning of every session. This reminds everyone what is expected.



3 Schedule all of your sessions in advance.

Calendars fill quickly. The key to ensuring regular attendance is to set your calendar well in advance. It is usually easiest to pick one day and time that recurs on a regular basis (i.e. first Tuesday of the month at 7PM).



4 Send out reminders and any prep materials a few days before each session.

It is always a good idea to send a reminder. And if there are any materials your participants need to view ahead of time, make sure to send them with enough notice that they can prepare.



5 Make room for all voices to be heard, but not too much.

Inevitably, some participants will be more talkative than others. Encourage everyone to be mindful of how much they are speaking, and how much they are listening.

Don't be afraid to say things like, “Maybe we can start with someone who hasn't spoken yet.” If this becomes a big issue, experiment with going around the circle, or offering everyone a set amount of time to speak.

If someone is really dominating conversation, you may wish to meet with them privately. Offer your appreciation for all of their contributions, and note that you are worried that others are not participating as much. Ask if they can try to jump in later to offer others the “first word.”

If someone is reluctant to participate, you can meet with them privately, and let them know that you would value their participation. You can also find out if there is anything about the group dynamic that is dissuading them from speaking.



Ask questions that everyone can answer.

Questions that foster meaningful conversation tend to be those that (a) are applicable and meaningful to everyone and (b) do not require any specialized knowledge to answer. Asking for stories is a particularly good way to invite people to share.



Acknowledge difficult moments and awkward silences.

There will be times when you ask a question and hear crickets. Or when there is a disagreement that gets more heated than you would like. Often, the easiest and best way to break the tension is to directly acknowledge it. For example, you might say:

“I notice we’ve been silent for a while. Are you just thinking, or is there something else going on?”
[Before doing this, you might try waiting longer than you are comfortable. Silence always feels longer than it is].

“Wow. I feel like the temperature just went up in the room. How are people feeling?”

“I noticed when Abraham said _____, we got quiet. What’s happening?”



Reach out to other leaders for support.

Remember, you are not alone. As a CORE Groups leader, you are part of a thoughtful, supportive community of leaders, many of whom have been leading groups for a year or more. If you are not sure how best to handle a dynamic in your group, or need help brainstorming how to best use materials to foster conversation, your fellow leaders are a great resource. There will be periodic get-togethers during the year, and you will receive a contact list with all of our CORE Groups leaders’ names so that you can reach out to them directly. Not sure whom to contact, or need a little extra help? Rabbi Nicole Auerbach is always happy to meet with you, and to provide assistance with content, facilitation techniques, or any other issues you might face.

Do you know someone who you think would make a great CORE Groups leader?

We believe that our CORE Groups have the potential to change the way our members relate to one another, to Central, and to Jewish tradition. But in order to offer this opportunity more broadly, we need more members who are willing to lead groups. Simply put, the more leaders we have, the more groups we can run. We offer training, one-on-one support, and user-friendly materials to all of our leaders. If you know someone who would be a great leader, please let Rabbi Auerbach know.