

PRECIOUS IMAGES, PROVOCATIVE CONVERSATIONS

A Handbook for Film Groups¹

Film groups are the newest model in the vibrant tradition of discussion groups. For centuries people have been getting together regularly to explore and argue about ideas. Salons have proliferated across the United States in the past few years. Book groups have become so popular that they are now being courted by publishers.

Film groups are a great way to use the varied resources of the **Jewish Heritage Video Collection (JHVC)**. They complement perfectly the two other main uses of the collection -- courses and home viewing. The JHVC allows the full potential of film groups to be realized because it:

- ❑ provides ready access to exceptional movies, documentaries, and television programs (many of which were previously unavailable for home viewing);
- ❑ is very user-friendly, with coherent categories, helpful cross-referencing, a catalog, and other useful written materials; and
- ❑ is large and diverse enough to include ample material for a wide variety of interests and preferences.

Film groups provide a wonderful opportunity to discuss and debate the films. Perhaps most importantly, film groups offer the chance to meet new people, create a stimulating community, and develop lasting friendships. Because they are open-ended, successful groups can continue meeting for years.

A Personal Note: During the twenty-five years that I have participated in book and film groups, my enthusiasm has remained undiminished. How can I convey what these groups have given me --

¹This guide is intended for informal groups that meet in homes. For other uses of Jewish Heritage Video Collection tapes, see the *JHVC Manual for Program Administrators* and the *JHVC Guide to Public Performance*.

from intellectual stimulation and great new friends to cultural adventures and a sense of belonging to meaningful communities of interest? The simplest way to explain it is that these groups have made my life and those of other members happier and richer. This is why the first group I was a member of is still going strong after twenty-five years, and the group I am now a member of -- on the other side of the country -- is flourishing during its twentieth year.

I can't guarantee that every group will succeed. Even with the best efforts and intentions, group dynamics can be unpredictable and sometimes unsatisfactory. But I believe that once you have experienced the exciting things a film group has to offer, you won't be satisfied until you have found or created a group that meets your needs.

STARTING A FILM GROUP

This manual is designed for people who would like to start a film group using the unique resources of the JHVC. It describes the essential steps for forming and nurturing a group during its initial phase. Other approaches can work, but if you follow these steps you will have the best chance of succeeding. At a certain point each group develops its own identity, and adjustments can be made to serve the particular needs of its members.

Two things are needed to begin organizing a film group: access to the JHVC and a person interested in starting a group. If only one element exists, the other must be found. The administrator of the local JHVC can recruit people to organize film groups, or individuals interested in forming groups may be able to either convince a local institution such as a community center, synagogue, library, or college to acquire the Collection, or persuade a local philanthropist to donate it.

The Collection

Every film in the JHVC addresses vital issues of Jewish history, identity, and culture. All the titles are classified into seven general categories, and many are featured in courses for which extensive curricular material has been developed. There are countless other combinations of films that will catalyze enlightening discussions and fiery debates. For suggested series for film group viewing, see pp. 16-44.

For descriptions of course curricula, which offer rich background material on topics and films, see pp. 48-50.

The Organizer

The individual who decides to create a film group needs an initial vision, and enough energy and enthusiasm to interest a core of people in participating. The organizer is pivotal during the formation and first stage of the group. He or she may have to do almost everything that needs to be done initially (in later stages tasks will be shared more equally), but the organizer also has the opportunity to determine the character and style of the group.

RECRUITING MEMBERS

The organizer's most important task is recruiting members, since the group's dynamic will be a key factor in its success or failure. There are two basic approaches: open enrollment (anyone can sign up) and selective recruitment (only those asked can join). I recommend starting with selective recruitment, which can later be supplemented with open enrollment if necessary.

Selective recruitment increases the chances of creating a group that is diverse and has a congenial group dynamic. If people don't find each other's company stimulating and enjoyable, the group is bound to fail.

The organizer may start by recruiting a few friends, who in turn ask some of their friends. It is also possible to piggy-back on an existing grouping -- participants in a course (especially one connected to the JHVC); members of a book club; people working together on a JCC committee; or a set of neighbors or family members. This core grouping can then be supplemented so members have the opportunity to meet new people with divergent points of view.

If open enrollment is used for recruitment, there are a variety of ways to spread the word. Notices can be placed in newsletters or other mailings, or posted; and announcements can be made at general meetings and in JHVC courses. It is possible to screen applicants, especially if many more apply than there is room for (although the best solution in this case may be to form two groups).

The thought, care, and energy devoted to recruitment may determine the fundamental character of the group. For better or worse, this character is unlikely to change in the short run, even with a certain amount of group turnover.

“A Good Participant”

The organizer should start recruitment with a sense of the personal qualities that are most desirable for a discussion group. According to Rachel Jacobsohn’s *The Reading Group Handbook*, members should be: “interested, willing, enthusiastic”; “inquisitive and flexible”; intelligent; and have a sense of humor. Most importantly, a member should be “a good listener” and “a good participant.” A good participant is able to express his or her ideas clearly and to interact with others so that one person’s thoughts trigger another’s. Great discussions aren’t about being right or winning arguments, but about exploring a work together.

A Lively Mix

The organizer should also start with a conception of the ideal mix of people in the group. The key to the success of many discussion groups is intellectual and cultural diversity. The greater the variety of occupations, educational backgrounds, life experiences, and world views, the better. Being exposed to different perspectives and assumptions is stimulating and enlightening. Intellectual homogeneity and conventional-wisdom consensus should be avoided.

It is certainly possible to form groups that are all women (as many book groups are), all seniors, or all singles and achieve intellectual diversity, but attention should be paid to recruiting members with a variety of backgrounds, attitudes, and experiences. If the group is limited to women, I would recommend finding members from different generations. If the group is limited to seniors, I would recommend including men and women.

Optimum Size

The size of the group is important. Groups that are too large don’t provide sufficient opportunities for every member to speak, and lack the intimacy and bonding of smaller groups. Groups that are too small usually lack the diversity and energy of larger ones.

Groups should ideally have 10-16 committed members, with an average turnout of 7-11 for each meeting. Since there are often dropouts and no-shows when a group is starting, it is best to begin with a list of 15-20 names.

CHOOSING A FACILITATOR

The other essential component of a successful group is a good facilitator (or facilitators). The role of the facilitator is to moderate the

discussions. “The facilitator,” comments *The Salon-Keeper’s Companion*, “initiates the conversation, modulates its tone, guides its direction and focus, remains aware of the time, draws out the meek, and gently but firmly quiets the boor, while witnessing and participating in the process.” A good facilitator will ensure that discussions are focused and lively, rather than diffuse and deadly, and that everyone participates, rather than letting a few people dominate each session. Good facilitation can help groups flourish rather than self-destruct.

The facilitator can be:

- a member (possibly the organizer) who has the skills and time to play this role regularly;
- members who rotate in this role; or
- a professional facilitator hired by the group.

Each model has advantages and disadvantages. Rotating the role among all the members gives everyone the opportunity and responsibility to facilitate. This is equitable, enabling the group to tap the particular passions and areas of expertise of each member. But it also means that some meetings will be better facilitated than others.

Designating someone with the talent, commitment, and possibly the experience to regularly facilitate has many advantages. It ensures consistency and, ideally, quality, and is likely to result in more satisfying discussions. But finding a member or an outside professional with both the ability and willingness to be the regular facilitator is not easy.

The organizer of the group should initially try to find a member willing and able to serve as the facilitator. It is particularly important that the first few discussions are well-moderated so that participants will want to make a commitment to the group. Even if a member isn’t eager to serve as the facilitator permanently, he or she may be willing to handle the first few sessions.

After several satisfying sessions, the group can decide whether it wants to rotate the role among its members, find a paid professional facilitator, or persuade the acting facilitator to continue. While some book groups rely on professional facilitators, the majority of successful groups rotate the role among their members. When recruiting members, the organizer should bear in mind the fact that each person may be periodically facilitating.