



STRANGER/SISTER

HATE CAN'T STOP A SISTERHOOD.

a documentary film by Kirsten Kelly & Katie Taber

Classroom Discussion Guide

strangersister.com

Classroom Discussion Guide created by

The Pluralism
Project

HARVARD
UNIVERSITY

The Pluralism Project's online guide is an invitation to engage with the documentary film **STRANGER/SISTER** through the discussion of key themes. Participants are encouraged to consider these themes and questions—open-ended by design—while viewing the film. As viewers learn about the groundbreaking efforts of the [Sisterhood of Salaam Shalom](#), they are also invited to **reflect on their own responses to hate, the role of interfaith activism, women's leadership, and the challenges of relationship-building across lines of difference.**

Themes include:

- Ritual & Space
- Gender
- Political/Personal
- Courage & Empathy
- Activism
- The Sisterhood
- Israel/Palestine
- Interfaith in Practice



Facilitators are encouraged to consider other key resources in the larger guide, such as the trauma-informed guidelines and the [Southern Poverty Law Center's](#) fact sheets, which may also inform and enhance online discussions. To learn more about other interfaith efforts in the U.S., including a profile of the Sisterhood of Salaam Shalom, or to learn more about religious diversity in America, please visit pluralism.org.

This discussion guide—which includes tips for use in the classroom and educational community screenings and discussions—was developed by students and staff at the Pluralism Project at Harvard University. We hope you find it a useful framework for your learning and teaching.

Option One: Online classroom, watching the film in advance

Before Class

Prior to the class discussion of *STRANGER/SISTER*, ask your students to review the discussion guide, view the film, and respond to one of the thematic prompts. At least two days before the class meets, provide the dedicated link and password for the short film *STRANGER/SISTER* and the link to the discussion guide, specifically the Discussion Themes section (pages 8-11). Ask students to review the guide in advance so they can consider some of the key themes and questions while watching the film.

Your message to students might include a brief introduction to the film, such as the LOGLINE: “*STRANGER/SISTER* is the story of two ordinary women, one Muslim and one Jewish, who dare to believe they can join hands to stop the wave of hate.”



Or the SHORT SYNOPSIS: “*STRANGER/SISTER* is a documentary short film about the Sisterhood of Salaam Shalom. Founded by a Jewish woman, Sheryl Olitzky, and a Muslim woman, Atiya Aftab, the Sisterhood is an effort to build respect and relationships between these two communities. Together, women work to limit acts of anti-Muslim and Jewish sentiment, stand up to hate, and engage in social justice work. The film follows various chapters across the U.S., offering a unique glimpse of grassroots interfaith efforts in America.”

Students should be asked to access *STRANGER/SISTER* well in advance of the class meeting in case they encounter any difficulty streaming the film. Advise them to set aside at least one hour for this assignment: 40 minutes to watch the film and at least 20 minutes to note their responses to one of the thematic prompts. (Depending on the size and scope of the class, you may also choose to assign students to a specific prompt.)

Ask students to email you their response to their selected theme/questions the day before class so that you may set up breakout groups in advance; you may need to combine some of the themes to balance the size of the breakout groups (3-5 per group is ideal). Take note if there are significant themes not chosen by students that could be explored in the large group discussion.

Preparation for the class session

- Have the online discussion guide available (on screen or a printed copy)
- Cue up the film in case you want to screen share a clip from the film during class
- Form breakout groups based on themes selected
- Note possible topics for large group discussion

Online Class Meeting

Warm Up (5-10 minutes)

As students enter the online classroom, invite them to mute their mic and turn on their camera. Ask them to use chat to comment on the film, responding to a prompt such as: “What scene from this film was most memorable for you?” or “Did anything surprise you about this film?” Take note of the range of responses, and narrate any patterns emerging for the group. (Note that these comments warm up the initial discussion and may also be useful for “warm calling” in the large group discussion later.)

Share the agenda for the class discussion verbally and in the chat. For example:

10 minutes: Breakout groups by theme

20 minutes: Report out by theme

15 minutes: Large group discussion

5 minutes: Wrap up

Before sending students into small groups, ask them to discuss their responses to the questions and to select one student to report out. Let them know what time they’ll be re-joining the large group. As a final step, share the link to the discussion guide so they may refer to it in their discussion.

Breakout (10-15 minutes)

Set a timer to reconvene the breakout groups at the designated time. While the breakout groups meet, you may choose to drop in to the discussions; some instructors prefer to provide a basic template in Google docs to monitor progress and guide the report-out.



Report Out & Discussion (15-20 minutes)

Explain to the students that you will call on groups by theme — alphabetically, starting with “A) Ritual & Space”— and invite the selected reporter to unmute to summarize the discussion. During their presentation, ask the class to put any questions in the chat. After each report out, ask group members to raise their hands and unmute if they have anything to add. If there are relevant comments or questions in the chat, cover those before continuing to the next theme. Continue with each theme alphabetically, helping the students to make connections between the presentations.

Wider Discussion (15-20 minutes)

Tell your students that you’d like to widen the discussion to include some of the themes/ questions not already covered. Invite them to suggest a theme they’d like to discuss, either by commenting in the chat or by raising their hand.



If no students weigh in,

you may select a theme to discuss or simply return to the opening comments in the chat about memorable scenes in order to “warm call” students. Before wrapping up, ask the students if any questions arose for them while watching the film, or during this discussion. You might suggest a question that came up for you, especially if it was clarified by the class discussion.

Wrap Up (5 minutes)

Explain to the students that, as part of the wrap up, you’d like each of them to comment in the chat about one “take-away” or lingering question from the film after the small and large group discussions. Read aloud one or two before wrapping up the session.

Follow-Up Assignment

You may wish to give students a follow-up assignment, such as:

- Write a one-page reflection paper on their selected theme—or a new one from the discussion.
- Draft a film review, written in the style of *The New Yorker*, which considers the narrative approach, style and aesthetics, gaze, key scenes and themes; suggest that each review must include at least two points of criticism and two points of praise about the form and content of the film.
- Write an article for the student newspaper about the Sisterhood, including some additional research: Is there a chapter close to where they live? What sorts of activities does this chapter do? What other news articles are there about local chapters, or about the national organization? Visit the national website and consider how this content is different from, or similar to, the content covered in the film.
- Provide a “hate update”: Make a list of the hate crimes and divisive contemporary events chronicled in the film: What updates would need to be added since the film was completed?
- Develop a strategic plan: Imagine yourself as a consultant to the Sisterhood and help them plan for the next ten years with a SWOT analysis: what are the organization’s Strengths, Weaknesses, Opportunities, and Threats?
- Write a scene analysis: Focus on one sequence, such as the film’s opening, and describe in detail what is happening and why it is significant. Are there things happening that you don’t understand? How can you find more information? What sources would you use? What questions are you left with? Consider the importance of both “religious literacy” (knowledge about faith traditions) and “interreligious literacy” (skills and capacities for interreligious engagement) and how each is evident in *STRANGER/SISTER*.

Option Two: Online Peer-to-Peer Discussion/ Interfaith Event, watching the film together

Before the Screening

Invite members of your interfaith group to watch and discuss **STRANGER/SISTER**. If it is a small group, consider if there are other groups or organizations you might invite. See the [Odyssey Impact website](#) for promotional materials, including the poster, and share on social media. Plan to provide the meeting link at least one week in advance, and send a reminder the day before. Wait to share the film link and private password during the event.

Event Kick-off (5 Minutes)

Introductions

Offer a welcome, with brief introductions (of self and organization). Depending on the size of the group, you might invite participants to post their name and location in the chat; for smaller groups, the host might call upon individuals and request they unmute to briefly introduce themselves.

If you'd like to offer a brief introduction to the film, you can use the logline: "**STRANGER/SISTER** is the story of two ordinary women, one Muslim and one Jewish, who dare to believe they can join hands to stop the wave of hate." Or: "**STRANGER/SISTER** is a documentary short film about the Sisterhood of Salaam Shalom. Founded by a Jewish woman, Sheryl Olitzky, and a Muslim woman, Atiya Aftab, the Sisterhood is an effort to build respect and relationships between these two communities. Together, women work to limit acts of anti-Muslim and Jewish sentiment, stand up to hate, and engage in social justice work. The film follows various chapters across the U.S., offering a unique glimpse of grassroots interfaith efforts in America."

Logistics

Next, put the link and password for the film in the chat, followed by a link to the discussion guide. Describe the process to participants: "**STRANGER/SISTER** is 40 minutes in length. In the chat, you'll find the link and password to watch this film on our own. You'll also find the discussion guide to help you think about key themes as you're watching. We'll reconvene as a group for discussion immediately after at (insert time to meet, 40 minutes later)."

You may invite participants to stay in the Zoom Meeting or Google Meet with their mic muted and camera off while they watch; alternatively, direct the group to leave the meeting and return after viewing, using the link for the original meeting. Add: “Are there any questions? If you have any issues, please contact the host.” The host should plan to be available during the screening.

Screening (40 minutes)

Discussion (40 minutes)

Reconvene

People may return at slightly different times: ask people to comment in the chat about the most memorable scenes or themes: “As people are returning, please post a brief comment about which scene or theme from the film is most memorable to you.” Hosts may want to get things started by posting a comment in the chat.

Breakout Groups

Randomly divide the group into smaller breakout rooms of up to 5 people, setting the timer for 15 minutes. Post the link to the discussion guide in the chat, and provide the schedule. “We’ll spend 15 minutes in the breakout rooms. Together, pick one or two themes you’d like to discuss. Please be prepared to report out when we reconvene at (insert time to meet, 15 minutes later).”

Large Group Discussion

After returning from the breakout rooms, ask each group to report out. In a larger group, you may ask for one person to report out for each group. Allow 10 minutes for this, then broaden the discussion. “Are there other themes or scenes that you would like to discuss?” Refer to the online discussion guide: what themes have not yet been discussed? (You may also refer to the chat, where participants included their initial reflections, and “warm call” any participants who mentioned a scene or theme not already discussed.)

Wrap-Up

In the final minutes, offer thanks to the participants, and invite them to visit the [Sisterhood’s website](#) as well as those of the [Pluralism Project](#), the [Southern Poverty Law Center](#), and [Odyssey Impact](#). You may wish to invite participants to offer a one-sentence “take-away” or lingering question from the film or make a brief concluding comment before signing off. Encourage participants to post about the film on social media to continue the discussion.

Discussion Themes

A) Ritual & Space



1. What role does prayer play in this film? What are some of the ritual practices depicted in the course of the film?

2. What are some of the questions that emerged for you about the ritual practices depicted in the film—particularly in the opening scenes? How would you describe what is happening—and why is it significant?

3. What are some of the physical spaces in which the Sisterhood does its work? Why do you think members meet in these kinds of spaces? How might these spaces shape our perceptions of these women and their activism?

B) Gender



1. Why does the Sisterhood focus on women? How does this inform and inflect members' efforts? Are there any advantages—or risks—to limiting participation to Jewish and Muslim women?

2. Sheryl Olitzky says, "Women are from Genesis, men are from Leviticus," explaining that women navigate the world through relationships, men through rules. How do you respond to that construct? Are there risks in making this generalization?

3. How does Olitzky's association of women with relationships rather than with politics function as a form of meaning-making and political change?

C) Political/Personal



1. Sisterhood members are confronted with the question "How can you trust them?", implying shared cultural assumptions about the "other." What might this suggest about overcoming divisions and differences?

2. Consider this quote from the film: "We don't share religious beliefs, and we don't have to share political views either." How do we engage with this statement given this organization's activism in the US? Is their activism political?

3. What does this film show about the practice of pluralism, especially as it relates to political and personal identity? Are there any points of view that are missing?

D) Courage & Empathy



1. In the film, how do you see courage operating in interfaith relationships? How do members of the Sisterhood engage and act with courage?

2. What is the role of empathy in the Sisterhood's mission? How does empathy contribute to the organization's ability to make social change? What are some examples of empathy in the film?

3. How are affective qualities like courage and empathy helpful when crossing lines of difference—or when confronting hate?

4. How might the Sisterhood—or other interfaith groups—bring courage and empathy to healing political divisions in the U.S.?

Discussion Themes

E) Activism



F) The Sisterhood



G) Israel/Palestine



H) Interfaith in Practice



1. Why would a delegation from the Sisterhood visit sites associated with the civil rights movement?
2. On the tour, Dr. Allen describes the civil rights movement as “a story of ordinary people who did extraordinary things.” How does this comment resonate for you?
3. Sheryl Olitzky describes “praying with our feet.” Atiya Aftab comments: “Pray as if everything depended on God. Act as if everything depended on you.” How can social justice efforts be expressive of religious commitments? What are some examples from this film—or from your experience?
4. The Sisterhood describes its mission as “about shared values, not politics.” In this film, does this seem possible—or even desirable?

1. What do you understand about the goals and origins of the Sisterhood? How would you assess the organization’s effectiveness? What is the significance of the film’s title?
2. What is the role of narratives in the Sisterhood’s work? How do narratives relate to action and social change?
3. What kinds of sharing does the film show, and what impact does sharing have? What is the role of ritual, prayer, and food in this film, and in interfaith community-building?
4. How do people of different generations interact with one another throughout the film? What is the role of food in this film—and in interfaith community-building?

1. What impact does the Israel/Palestine conflict have on the Sisterhood’s work in American interfaith communities?
2. In the film, Sisterhood leaders learn to speak with the media about Israel/Palestine before they discuss it with each other. Why do you think this is the case?
3. In approaching conversations about Israel/Palestine, the Sisterhood encourages members to ground their conversation in the personal. How does this approach work towards the Sisterhood’s goal of peacemaking through relationships? How effective is it?
4. What does the Sisterhood stand to gain or lose by discussing Israel/Palestine in the chapters or leadership?

1. Some of the teenage members of the Sisterhood teach children about religions. What are the merits—and deficits—of this approach?
2. An Austin leader describes her prior interfaith work as “incredibly superficial,” characterizing the conversations as, “Let’s eat hummus together.” How does the Sisterhood bring depth to interfaith efforts and what other strategies would you suggest?
3. This film includes some awkward and difficult moments. Do any stand out to you? What do you think these moments offer? Can you reflect on times of productive discomfort in your own experience of interfaith activity?
4. What questions are you left with at the end of this film?

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a part of the impact campaign!*



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This guide was developed by students and staff of the
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For additional information on the film visit www.strangersister.com
For screening information contact screenings@odyssey-impact.org



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