



CIVIC ENGAGEMENT

EVERY CONGREGATION COUNTS
EVERY VOTE COUNTS



JEWISH TEXTS ON CIVIC ENGAGEMENT

We believe that our democracy is strongest when everyone has the opportunity to participate. As we work together to fulfill the sacred mandate of *tikkun olam*, world repair, non-partisan civic engagement in service of our enduring values is an essential way that we stay active in our communities.

The Reform Jewish Movement's nonpartisan Civic Engagement campaign seeks to mobilize the entire Reform Jewish community—be it through a congregation, a NFTY region, a camp community, a Sisterhood, or campus activism. We know our Movement is strongest when we act together. Use this Civic Engagement Jewish text resource to help your community plan its strategy for meaningful, Jewish, nonpartisan civic engagement in 2018.

Use the following texts, commentaries, and discussion questions to help root your Reform Jewish community's civic engagement efforts in Jewish values and teachings. You might consider incorporating them into a sermon, a *d'var Torah* discussion with a board or social justice committee, an introduction to an event such as a candidate forum, a study session prior to a voter registration drive or phone bank, an educational program on civic engagement, or a congregational bulletin or newsletter.

Thank you to the following leaders for creating this resource:

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רב ורבי חנינא ורבי יוחנן ורב חביבא מתנו בכוליה דסדר מועד כל כי האי זוגא חלופי רבי יוחנן ומעייל רבי יוחנן כל מי שאפשר למחות לאנשי ביתו ולא מיחה נתפס על אנשי ביתו באנשי עירו נתפס על אנשי עירו בכל העולם כולו נתפס על כל העולם כולו
– *Talmud Shabbat 54b*

Rav, R Hanina, R Yochanan and R Haviva taught: “Whoever can stop his household [from doing something wrong] but does not, is punished for [the wrongdoing of] his household; if he can prevent his fellow citizens, he is punished for the sins of his fellow citizens; if the whole world, he is punished for the sins of the whole world.”

- Why do you think the rabbis in this text went so far as to say that someone who can stop others from doing wrong, but does not, is punished?
- Does that seem fair? Why or why not?
- What are the implications in this text with regards to voting and civic engagement?

“In full accordance with the spirit of the Mosaic legislation, which strives to regulate the relations between rich and poor, we deem it our duty to participate in the great task of modern times, to solve, on the basis of justice and righteousness, the problems presented by the contrasts and evils of the present organization of society.”

– *Pittsburgh Platform, 1885, a point added at the last minute by Rabbi Emil Hirsch*

The Pittsburgh Platform was the first statement of principles for Reform Judaism. It helped to articulate what our nascent movement believed and how Reform Jews should act in the world.

- What is the significance of including this language in the Platform? What does it say about how the early Reform Movement saw itself?
- What is the significance of this statement for us today, over 125 years later?
- How does this impact why and how you vote?

“My [political and social] activism is driven by a set of religious commitments and I think that Jewish theology believes in ‘radical responsibility.’ This is a time to wrestle with what that directive requires of us. A text that I’ve been thinking about a lot is one where Ibn Ezra states that one who oppresses and one who witnesses oppression and says nothing have the very same status. According to the Torah, there is no such thing as an innocent bystander. The Torah tells us, in Deuteronomy 10:18-19, that God loves gerim—immigrants, refugees, those who fled from their native land and came to live with you. God loves the ger, and you, too, must love the ger. So it follows then, that if you want to love a God and serve a God who is on the side of the vulnerable, then it is also your responsibility to stand up on the side of the vulnerable. You cannot be preoccupied with the God of justice and remain indifferent to questions of justice. Good people can disagree with what justice requires of us, but there isn’t room for disagreement about our responsibility to engage.”

– *Rabbi Shai Held*



- Why do you feel a responsibility to engage in our democratic process?
- How are you standing on the side of the vulnerable?

“Many individual Jews play prominent roles in public life, as community organizers, public policy experts, legislators, and government officials.... At the same time, many Jewish organizations are deeply engaged in policy debates at local, state, national, and international levels.

What is missing in much of this work is a real public discussion about how Jewish law and tradition might address contemporary policy questions. Those on either side of an issue often quote texts to support their points, but they do so in a way that does not invite debate or discussion. Instead, when Jews engage in the public discourse as Jews, we should bring Jewish law and principles into the conversation in such a way as to enrich, rather than shut down, the discourse.

If we succeed in facilitating this rich conversation, we will create a new kind of Jewish politics in America. Rather than trade sound bites, we will continue the Talmudic tradition of dialogue, in which various questioners and commentators engage in an often-messy conversation that eventually leads to a fuller understanding of the situation at hand.... We will witness the emergence of a Judaism that views ritual observance, study, and engagement in the world as an integrated whole, rather than as separate and distinct practices. The Jewish community’s deepened involvement in public life will change the face of religious politics in America, as other communities will recognize the Jewish community as an important and authentic religious voice in the public square of America.”

– Rabbi Jill Jacobs

- What role do you think religion should play in the public sphere? How could Jews bring Jewish law into public policy discussions?
- What role do you think religious people should play in public life? Should they speak from their religious values? If so, how?
- Rabbi Jacobs lays out three essential principles: the dignity of human life; an attempt to rectify major disparities in power; and the mutual responsibilities between the individual and the community. How might these three principles inform the discussion of other public policy issues?

– Questions from the Jewish Lights’ “There Shall Be no Needy” [discussion guide](#)

“There is no inconsistency between loyalty to America and loyalty to Jewry. The Jewish spirit, the product of our religion and experiences, is essentially modern and essentially American. Not since the destruction of the Temple have the Jews in spirit and in ideals been so fully in harmony with the noblest aspirations of the country in which they lived.”

– Louis Brandeis, April 25, 1915



Louis Brandeis was the first Jewish Justice on the Supreme Court. He faced many questions about “dual loyalties” because of his Jewish identity. His nomination was also opposed because he was a militant crusader for social justice. In this speech to the Conference of Eastern Council of Reform Rabbis, he answers critics who said that he could not be loyal to America because he was Jewish.

- In what ways do you think the Jewish spirit is “essentially modern and essentially American?”
- Do you think there are ways in which Jewish values are not in harmony with the ideals and reality of American life today? If so, what are they and what should be done about this disharmony?

האיש אחד יחטא תני רבי שמעון בר יוחאי משל לבני אדם שהיו יושבין בספינה נטל אחד מהן מקדח והתחיל קוגח תחתיו אמרו לו חבריו מה אתה יושב ועושה אמר להם מה אכפת לכם לא תחתי אני קודח אמרו לו שהמים ואף אמנם שגיתי אתי עולין ומציפין עלינו את הספינה כך אמר איוב כי יסיף על חטאתו פשע ביביו ישפוק תלין משוגתי אמרו לו חבריו אתה מספיק בינינו את עומתך
– *Vayikra Rabbah 4:6*

Rabbi Shimon bar Yochai taught a parable: Men were on a ship. One of them took a drill and started drilling underneath him. The others said to him: What are you sitting and doing?! He replied: What do you care. Is this not underneath my area that I am drilling?! They said to him: But the water will rise and flood us all on this ship. This is as Job said (Job 19:4): "If indeed I have erred, my error remains with me." But his friends said to him (Job 34:37): "He adds transgression to his sin; he extends it among us." [The men on the ship said]: You extend your sins among us.

- In this parable, why do you think the man does not notice that what he is doing affects others on the ship?
- In what ways do you see this attitude playing out in American society today?

כופין אותו לבנות בית שער ודלת לחצר רבן שמעון בן גמליאל אומר לא כל החצרות ראויות לבית שער. כופין אותו לבנות לעיר חומה ודלתים ובריח. רבן שמעון בן גמליאל אומר לא כל העירות ראויות לחומה. כמה יהא בעיר ויהא כאנשי העיר שנים עשר חדש. קנה בה בית דירה הרי הוא כאנשי העיר מיד.
Mishnah Bava Batra 1:5

We force a person to build a gatehouse and a door for the courtyard. Rabban Shimon ben Gamliel says: Not all courtyards are suitable for gatehouses. We force a person to build for a city a wall, doors, and a deadbolt. Rabban Shimon ben Gamliel says: Not all cities are suitable for a wall. How long must a person live in a city to be counted among the people of that city? Twelve months. If a person bought a house, he is immediately considered to be a person of that city.



- Why does buying property make someone a person of the city?
- Why do you think the community required a person live in their residence for a year before being considered "a person of that city"? Do you think this is a good policy? Why or why not?
- In what ways are residents of a city responsible for its maintenance in the text and today?

ולכל מילי מי בעינן י"ב חגש והתניא שלשים יום לתמייו שלשה חדשים לקופה ששה לכוסות תשעה לקבורה שנים עשר לפסי העיר אמר ר"א סי אמר ר"יוחנן כי תנן נמי מתניתין שנים עשר חדש לפסי העיר תנן.

Talmud Bava Batra 8a

The Gemara asks: And do we require that one live in a city for twelve months for all matters? But isn't it taught in a *baraita*: If one lives in city for thirty days, he must contribute to the charity platter from which food is distributed to the poor. If he lives there for three months, he must contribute to the charity box. If he lives there for six months, he must contribute to the clothing fund. If he lives there for nine months, he must contribute to the burial fund. If he lives there for twelve months, he must contribute to the columns of the city [*lepassei ha'ir*], i.e., for the construction of a security fence. Rabbi Asi said that Rabbi Yohanan said: When we learned twelve months in the mishna, we learned that with regard to contributing to the columns of the city, money used for protecting and strengthening the city, but not for other matters.

- What do all the things that one must contribute to have in common? Why do you think that is?
- In what way do these contributions help to "strengthen the city?"
- Today, how what contributions do we make to help strengthen our cities?
- How is civic engagement, a way to strengthen our cities?