



**Social Justice in the Jewish Tradition**  
**Adapted from the Union for Reform Judaism's "Torah at the Center"**  
**Volume 3, No.1**  
**60 minutes**

**Audience: 4<sup>th</sup>-12<sup>th</sup> grade**

**Goals:**

- Explore the Jewish concept of "Tzedek"
- Contemplate the connection between justice and the Civil Rights Movement
- Educate about the Jewish community's role in the Civil Rights Movement
- Inspire further engagement with issues of social justice

**Timeline:**

0:00-0:15	Introduction to the Jewish Concept of Justice
0:15-0:40	Justice Exploration Activities
0:40-0:50	Jews and the Civil Rights Movement
0:50-1:00	Current Issues of Justice

**Materials:**

- Pens, paper
- White board or butcher paper
- A computer that can play music
- One copy of the *Tanakh*—Hebrew, with English translation— per 5 students (intermediate grades)

**Background**

The Jewish commitment to social justice in general and to the struggle for civil rights in particular is not a modern phenomenon. To understand our historic and continued passion for the work of justice, it is critical to comprehend the concept of justice, or *tzedek*, in Jewish tradition. *Tzedek, Tzedek Tirdof; Justice, justice shall you pursue.* The Jewish concept of justice stresses equality, the idea that every human life has equal value. In Jewish life the attainment of justice is critical to the attainment of holiness. This idea was the basis for the significant Jewish involvement in the struggle for black civil rights in America.

In Judaism, however, justice is not simple. It is a large concept, encompassing a variety of ethics and ideals. Even when *tzedek* can be defined, it is pursued through many different activities and behaviors, and involves actions as well as intentions. The Civil Rights Movement was no exception.

**0:00-0:15 Introduction to the Jewish Concept of Justice**

Distribute or post the quotations in Attachment I for the students to read.

Discuss the implications of each statement.

- What does each statement suggest about the nature of humankind? What is our potential? What are our weaknesses? Do you agree or disagree with the way humans are characterized?

- Taken together, what kind and quality of world do these statements imagine?
- Ask the students to think of examples from their own experience, and especially from Jewish and human history, that contradict these statements.
- Have a conversation about the various factors that inhibit these statements from describing a reality. Be as thorough as possible in elaborating on the impediments, so that students understand that the attainment of these ideals is a complicated task.
- Explain that these selections represent the Jewish concept of *b'tzelem Elohim* ("in the image of God")—that each of us has been created in God's image and therefore is deserving of respect and dignity.

Explain that today's conversation, in celebration of Martin Luther King Jr. Memorial Day, will be devoted to exploring the Civil Rights Movement in the United States, and especially the Jewish involvement with and commitment to the cause of civil rights.

### **0:15-0:40 Justice Exploration Activities**

#### *A. Lower Grades*

Distribute copies of Deuteronomy 16:20 in Hebrew and in English (see Attachment II). Read through the text in both languages. Ask the students to think of other words that mean the same thing as the word *pursue*. Explain to the students that Judaism has a very specific way in which we pursue (run, chase, find, track down) justice.

Distribute copies of the lyrics to the song "Justice, Justice" by Doug Cotler (see Attachment III). Play the song for the students (available to stream [here](#) and available to download [here](#)); then, reviewing the lines of text, have the students develop a definition of the word *tzedek*.

In particular, discuss the meaning of the following lines:

- "We know what it's like to be without a home. We know what it's like to wander years alone." (Who is the "we"? When were "we" without a home? From where do we get our experience of wandering? What is the loneliness that the song refers to?)
- "In the beggar's eye, sparks of heaven shine. In the captive's cry, the voice of the Divine." (How did the sparks of heaven get into the beggar's eye? How can the captive's cry also be the voice of God?)
- What does the song suggest is the ultimate outcome of pursuing justice? How does justice lead to peace?

Discuss ways in which the students do and can pursue justice in their own lives. As a class, define the word *tzedek*. Post the definition on the board.

#### *B. Intermediate Grades*

Write the Hebrew root of the word *tzedek* on the board. Ask the students to translate. Explain that this exercise will be an attempt to begin to define the Hebrew word *tzedek* and to understand the concept of justice in Jewish tradition. Divide the class into three groups. Give each group of students a copy of the *Tanakh* and instruct them to look up one of the following biblical passages: **Proverbs 31:8-9;** **Isaiah 1:17;** and **Deuteronomy 1:17.**

Ask each group to read the assigned passage in both Hebrew and in English, making sure to identify the Hebrew word *tzedek*. Based on the use of the word *tzedek* in this passage, ask each group to develop a definition. (Notice that the contexts for the word *tzedek* are purposefully varied so that the students will share a variety of definitions. The idea is for them to understand that these multiple meanings are incorporated within the larger concept of *tzedek*.)

Each student should give an example from their own experience of this type of justice. In addition, have the groups discuss examples of this definition of justice from their own lives, and from Jewish history. Gather the groups to share their definitions and specific examples. Discuss any differences in the three definitions.

Explain to the students that the Jewish idea of justice incorporates many other ethical and moral attributes, and so the pursuit of justice involves many different kinds of activities.

### C. Upper Grades

Write Deuteronomy 16:20 on the board in Hebrew and in its English translation (see Attachment IV). Explain to the students that the Torah was written with a great deal of care. Each word was given much consideration before it was included. Therefore, in reading the Torah, when one encounters the repetition of a word ("*tzedek, tzedek*"), the text is telling us to pay attention. Something significant is being said.

Torah commentators have differed over the exact meaning of the repetition of the word *tzedek*. Distribute a sheet listing the various interpretations of the phrase "*tzedek, tzedek, tirdof*" (see Attachment IV). Divide the students into small groups to review the different explanations. First, have the students discuss how each interpretation offers an explanation for the doubling of the word *tzedek*. Next, ask the students to think of a specific example from Jewish or regional history that supports each interpretation.

As a class, share the examples and debate the meaning of the quoted statement. The point of this activity is for students to understand that there is a compelling Jewish idea of "justice" but that the concept is broad enough to encompass many ethical values.

### **0:40-0:50 Jews and the Civil Rights Movement**

However we define it, all sources agree that justice is a core value for the Jewish community. Show students the [picture of Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., Rabbi Maurice Eisendrath, and Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel](#), marching together in Montgomery, Alabama. Explain that this picture is emblematic of the relationship between the Jewish and Black communities during the Civil Rights Movement.

Discuss the following questions:

- Who do you recognize in this picture?
- What symbols are particularly prominent?
- What do you know about the participation of Jews in the Civil Rights Movement?
- Why do you think the Jewish community was particularly active in the Civil Rights Movement?
- How does the Jewish community's commitment to civil rights related to what we have discussed about the Jewish conception of justice?

This photograph was taken in 1965 in Montgomery, Alabama at the conclusion of the famous march for voting rights from Selma to Montgomery. Rabbi Maurice Eisendrath, a tremendous figure in American Reform Judaism, who served as the President of the Union of American Hebrew Congregations (now the Union for Reform Judaism) from 1943 until 1972, and who was very much of a spiritual partner to Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King in the struggle against racism, can be seen carrying the Torah in this photo. He provided an invocation at a rally that occurred at the conclusion of the March. Next to him is Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel, one of this century's great religious figures and a close colleague of Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. When referring to this March, Rabbi Heschel declared, "When I marched in Selma, it felt like my legs were praying."

During the Civil Rights Movement, Jewish activists represented a disproportionate number of whites involved in the struggle. American Jews played a significant role in the founding and funding of some of the most important civil rights organizations, including the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP), the Leadership Conference on Civil Rights, and the Student Nonviolent Coordination Committee (SNCC). Jews made up half of the young people who participated in the Mississippi Freedom Summer in 1964. And, Dr. King spoke at the Union for Reform Judaism's Biennial convention in 1963.

Jewish political leverage contributed to passage of landmark civil rights laws, nationally and locally. The Civil Rights Act of 1964 and the Voting Rights Act of 1965 were both drafted in the conference room of the Union for Reform Judaism's Religious Action Center building in Washington, D.C., under the aegis of the Leadership Conference on Civil Rights (which for decades was housed in the Center). The Jewish community continued to be an avid supporter of dozens of the most far-reaching civil rights laws in the nation's history, addressing persistent discrimination in voting, housing, and employment, against not only women and racial minorities, but the disabled as well.

It is unsurprising that Jews responded powerfully to the fight against racial segregation and discrimination in America. After all, no group in history has been so frequently the victim of racial hatred. As a result, few segments of the American community have invested themselves as deeply as the Jewish community in the struggle for civil rights. In a 1961 Resolution, the Reform Movement declared, "We pledge ourselves, as individual Americans and as inheritors of the dream of one brotherhood under one God, to be as zealous for the dignity and rights of our neighbors as we would have them be of ours." ([Achieving Equality Under the Law](#)). The Reform Jewish Movement has continued to follow this precept, getting involved in many more social justice issues throughout the years.

### **0:50-1:00      Current Issues of Social Justice**

Sing "Make Those Waters Part" by Doug Mishkin, *Shireinu* Song #106. (See Attachment V for lyrics). Or, stream the song [here](#). Discuss what this song conveys about the relationship between the Black and Jewish communities and the struggle for social justice.

In particular, discuss the following lines:

- "Once we were slaves in Egypt, our people and our land were apart" AND "Once we were slaves in America, we were given white men's names." (Why does the song draw a parallel between these two periods of history?)
- "Now we are slaves in our own time." (Who is the "we"? Who/what are we slaves to?)

- “Somewhere tonight lives a free man; Somewhere else freedom’s just a song of the heart.” (Where and for whom is freedom just a song of the heart?)
- “Make those waters part.” (In the context of the song, what does it mean to make waters part?)

Have a conversation with the students about where they see injustice in our world today. Make a list of the specific issues that they raise and follow up with a short discussion of how they can help to address these injustices.

Younger students might be asked to illustrate how each of these issues relates to the concept of *b'tzelem Elohim*. Older students might be asked to come up with an action plan for the attainment of social justice as it relates to these issues. The illustrations and the action plans should be posted in the classroom.

Explain to the students that the Religious Action Center is working in Washington, D.C. every day to make the Jewish value of justice a reality. But, the Center can't do the work alone. They need the support of Reform Jews all across the country, fighting for justice in their local communities and on the national level. Visit [www.rac.org](http://www.rac.org) for more information.

**Attachment I**  
**Texts about Justice**

*Have we not all one parent? Has not one God created us? (Malachi 2:10)*

*Why did God create only one person, Adam? All people are descended from a single human being, Adam, so that none can say, "My ancestor is worthier than yours." (Mishnah Sanhedrin 4:5)*

*God formed Adam from the dust of all the corners of the earth - yellow [clay] and white [sand], black [loam] and red [soil]. Therefore, the earth can declare to no race or color of humankind that it does not belong here, that this soil is not its home. (Yalkut Shimoni, 1:13)*

**Attachment II**  
**Deuteronomy 16:20**

צדק צדק תרדף

*Tzedek, Tzedek Tirdof*

Justice, Justice Shall You Pursue

**Attachment III**  
**Lyrics to "Justice, Justice"**

**Justice, Justice**

by Doug Cotler, Lanny Cotler, Steve Cotler and Jeff Marx  
©1997 Wail and Blubber Music (BMI)

Justice, justice, I will pursue you.  
I will never cease to do what's right.  
The more there's justice,  
The more there will be peace.

We know what it's like  
To be without a home.  
We know what it's like  
To wander years alone.

And I must break the chains that bind the slave  
And make oppression disappear.  
And I must help the stranger find a bed.  
And I must share my bread.

In the beggar's eye,  
Sparks of heaven shine.  
In the captive's cry,  
The voice of the divine.

Everyone must work;  
Move a single stone.  
Mountains cruel and cold  
Can't be crossed alone.

**Attachment IV**  
**Interpretations of Deuteronomy 16:20**

צדק צדק תרדף

*Tzedek, Tzedek Tirdof*

Justice, Justice Shall You Pursue

1. Justice is both a group and an individual responsibility (Levi Isaac).
2. There should be no rush to judgment but a careful examination of the evidence (Maimonides).
3. Compromise is essential to justice (Torah Temimah).
4. Do not be satisfied with observing an injustice; you must also do something about it (Rabbi Aha and Leviticus Rabbah).
5. Justice is the ultimate value in Jewish life and pillar of the world (Deuteronomy Rabbah).
6. Justice can only be pursued through just methods (Rabbi Nachman).
7. Justice demands the implementation of a judicial system (Rabbi Judah Ha-Nasi).

**Attachment V**  
**Lyrics to “Make Those Waters Part” by Doug Mishkin**

Let us retell the story of our struggle for the promised land  
Let us remember how freedom is won so our children will understand  
Once we were slaves in Egypt, our people and our land were apart  
But when Moses stood before that troubled sea, he could  
Make those waters part

Once we were slaves in America, we were given white men’s names  
They scattered our families, they shattered our lives, while they kept us bound in chains  
Then we marched strong in Selma, we looked the racists right in the heart  
And when Martin stood before that troubled sea, he could  
Make those waters part

Somewhere tonight lives a free man  
Somewhere else freedom’s just a song of the heart  
We must find the river flowing between them  
And we must make those waters part

Now we are slaves in our own time  
The many at the hands of the few  
And we who’ve crossed the sea of slavery before  
Must remember what we must do  
In the name of the falsely imprisoned  
In the name of all the homeless at heart  
In the name of all the history that binds us  
We must make those waters part

Somewhere tonight lives a free man  
Somewhere else freedom’s just a song of the heart  
We must find the river flowing between them  
And we must make those waters part

Troubled seas rising around us  
Sometimes the promised land seems hidden from view  
So we retell these stories, that’s how we start  
To make those waters part