

## What's So Jewish About Civic Engagement?

### Classical Jewish Texts & Medieval Rabbinic Commentary

1. “But seek the welfare of the city where I have sent you into exile, and pray to the Lord on its behalf, for in its welfare you will find your welfare.” [Jeremiah 29:7](#)
2. **Rabbi Eliezer:** God said to Moses, “There is a time to shorten and a time to lengthen. My children are distressed, the sea is closing, the enemy is pursuing, and you are standing there going on and on with prayer!?! Say to the children of Israel, ‘Go forth!’”
3. **Rabbi Joshua:** God said to Moses, “There is nothing else for Israel to do except go forward. Go forth: when their legs go forth from the dry land to the sea, you will see the miracles that I will do for them.” [Shemot Rabbah 21:8](#)

### Texts from the Modern World

“Frederick Douglass (1818-1895) - Douglass was an American social reformer, abolitionist, orator, writer, and statesman. After escaping from slavery in Maryland, he became a national leader of the abolitionist movement, gaining note for his speeches and writings on slavery.

“I prayed for twenty years but received no answer until I prayed with my legs.” (p. 134) From “Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass: An American Slave”

**Abraham Joshua Heschel (1907-1972)** - Heschel was one of the most important scholars, rabbis, and activists in 20th century America. He played a critical role in the civil rights movement and was a participant in the third Selma to Montgomery march, accompanying Dr. Martin Luther King and John Lewis.

“When he came home from Selma in 1965, my father (Abraham Joshua Heschel) wrote, ‘For many of us the march from Selma to Montgomery was about protest and prayer. Legs are not lips and walking is not kneeling. And yet our legs uttered songs. Even without words, our march was worship. I felt my legs were praying.’”  
 From [Dr. Susanna Heschel](#).

### Discussion Questions

1. When reading these texts, what language or concepts resonate with you?
  - a. What language makes you uncomfortable?
  - b. What do they say about the relationship between prayer and action?
2. When and in what settings do you feel compelled to act?
3. What does it mean to “pray with your feet?”
  - a. In what ways have you “prayed with your feet” in your life? (Participate in a march, take action on an issue, vote, etc.)
4. How does being Jewish affect your desire or urge to “pray with your feet?”
  - a. How does being a U.S. resident or citizen compel you to “use your legs?”
  - b. How do these answers differ? How are they the same?
5. How do these ideas relate to Rosh Hashanah, the ancient alarm clock of the shofar, reminding us to “Wake Up and Get to Work!”

### Actions

- Each student should conclude this session by utilizing the [Ballotready tool on the MitzVote website](#). This tool will allow them to make sure their voter registration is up to date and provides other voter resources. Additional student voter resources [can be found here](#).
- **Extra credit:** Have each student send the ballotready resource to five friends!

## Yom Kippur & Sukkot: A Time to Restart & Recommit

### Classical Jewish Texts & Medieval Rabbinic Commentary

- Is such the fast I desire, A day for men to starve their bodies? Is it bowing the head like a bulrush And lying in sackcloth and ashes? Do you call that a fast, A day when the LORD is favorable?

No, this is the fast I desire: To unlock fetters of wickedness, And untie the cords of the yoke To let the oppressed go free; To break off every yoke.

It is to share your bread with the hungry, And to take the wretched poor into your home; When you see the naked, to clothe him, And not to ignore your own kin. Then shall your light burst through like the dawn And your healing spring up quickly; Your Vindicator shall march before you, The Presence of the LORD shall be your rear guard. [Isaiah 58:5-8](#)

*In addition to serving as a prophetic text in the bible, this passage is traditionally read on Yom Kippur morning, while most people are in services, fasting, and are engaging in ritual commandments.*
- “He [Rabbi Tarfon] used to say: It is not your duty to finish the work, but neither are you at liberty to neglect it.” [Pirkei Avot 2:16](#)

*Pirkei Avot is collection of 1st-2nd Century rabbinic sayings.*

### Texts from the Modern World

**Anne Frank (1929-1945)** - Frank gained international fame posthumously following the publication of her diary which documents her experiences hiding during the German occupation of the Netherlands in World War II.

“How wonderful it is that nobody need wait a single moment before starting to improve the world.” -Anne Frank

**John Lewis (1940-2020)** - Lewis was an American politician and civil-rights leader who served in the United States House of Representatives for Georgia’s 5th congressional district from 1987 until his death in 2020. Lewis served as the chairman of the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee from 1963 to 1966.

“When you see something that is not right, not fair, not just, you have to speak up. You have to say something; you have to do something.”

### Discussion Questions

- What role does atonement and forgiveness play in your life?
- How do you use this holiday of atonement and forgiveness, repentance and renewal, within your personal growth and development?
- Is Yom Kippur a time for reflection or a time for action?
  - What is the relationship between intention and action? Are they of equal weight and value?
- What behavior changes do you pledge to make following YK?

### Additional Text-based Discussion Option

#### Interfaith Text Study: Atonement & Forgiveness

*This lesson includes Catholic, Ashkenazi, Sephardi, and Muslim prayers of atonement and discussion questions.*

### Actions

- Have each student make a concrete plan to vote—make sure everyone participating in the learning session can answer these questions:
  - Do you still need to register to vote? If so, do you have what you need to do so?
  - How do you plan on voting? In-person? By-mail?
  - If you plan to vote in person, where is your polling site?
  - Do you need to request an absentee ballot?
- Utilize [Campus Vote Project’s State Student Voter Guide](#) for logistical information about voting
- Use the [ballotready tool on the MitzVote website](#) with your students to walk through these questions.

## Bring Your Own Vote (BYOV): Voter Education

### Jewish Text (Talmudic)

ברוך אתה יהוה אלהינו מלך-העולם אשר קדשנו במצותיו וצונו לעסק בדברי-תורה

**Baruch atah, Adonai Eloheinu, Melech haolam, asher kid'shanu b'mitzvotav v'tzivanu laasok b'divrei Torah.**

*Blessed are You, Adonai our God, Sovereign of all, who hallows us with mitzvot, commanding us to engage with words of Torah.*

- What does Judaism and/or religious traditions say about the act of studying, learning, and engaging with information?
- In what way is Judaism an “open source” religion that encourages inquiry and in what way is Judaism closed and resistance to questioning?
- Here are the words of the prayer we say when studying Torah. Blessed are You, Adonai our God, Sovereign of all, who hallows us with mitzvot, commanding us to engage with words of Torah. What language resonates with you? What language concerns you?

### Contemporary Texts

“Education is the passport to the future, for tomorrow belongs to those who prepare for it today”. - **Malcolm X**

“Genius is one percent inspiration, ninety-nine percent perspiration.” - **Thomas Edison** *Spoken statement (c. 1903); published in Harper's Monthly (September 1932).*

The more that you read, the more things you will know, the more that you learn, the more places you'll go.” - **Dr. Seuss**

“Live as if you were to die tomorrow. Learn as if you were to live forever.” - **Mahatma Gandhi**

“Education is not the filling of a pail, but the lighting of a fire.” - **W.B. Yeats**

“Knowledge is power. Information is liberating. Education is the premise of progress, in every society, in every family.”

– **Kofi Annan** *(Kofi Annan was the former secretary-general of the United Nations and a recipient of the Nobel Peace Prize.)*

### Contemporary Texts, continued

“Let us pick up our books and our pens, they are the most powerful weapons.” and “Education is education. We should learn everything and then choose which path to follow.” - **Malala Yousafzai** *(As a young girl, Malala Yousafzai defied the Taliban in Pakistan and demanded that girls be allowed to receive an education. She was shot in the head by a Taliban gunman in 2012 but survived. In 2014, she became the youngest person to receive the Nobel Peace Prize.)*

### Discussion Questions

- When you read these quotes, what ideas come to mind? What questions do you have? What concerns you?
- What are the parts of the voting process that you feel uninformed about?
- What feels most intimidating?
- What prevents you from seeking out this information?
- How long would it take to gather the information you don't know?
- Do you know where to look for reliable information about political candidates? Where would you seek out that information?
- Would a lack of information (“I don't know enough”) prevent you from voting?

### Action

Find your election information using [Campus Vote Project's State Student Voter Guide](#)

## Are Jews Obligated to Vote?

### Jewish Text (Talmudic)

#### Pirkei Avot 2: Do Not Remove Yourself From the Community

- a. What communities am I a part of?
- b. What relationship do I have with each of these communities?
- c. What role do individual or communal relationships play in my personal, academic, social, professional life?
- d. What role do relationships / community play in my Jewish identity?
- e. What are our obligations to each other as Americans, Jews, and humans?
- f. What are our civic duties to one another? Are those the same?
- g. When I cast my vote, what do I expect to get in return?
- h. What will I do if my expectation does not happen?
- i. When I cast my vote, what am I promising to give?

### Contemporary Texts

Texts two and three from [Voting Our Values: A Text Study](#)  
 - John Quincy Adams and Emma Goldman

The [Universe of Obligation](#) exercise

### Discussion Questions

1. Do we have a civic/Jewish/human/American obligation to vote? Relate this question to contemporary anarchist/radical philosophy. How do those ideologies coexist with voting?
  - a. Voting is the bare minimum
  - b. Voting is your price of admission to the community
  - c. Voting is bigger than the candidate or current election
  - d. Voting demonstrates different theories of change
    - i. [Community Change: Theories, Practice, and Evidence](#)
2. What is the relationship between your lived experience and political philosophy and/or desire to vote?
  - a. How do our experiences and/or status/privileged positions shape our answers to this question?
  - b. Why would someone refrain from voting?
  - c. How do you respond when someone tells you they are not voting?
  - d. What are ways to respond without alienating or insulting that person?
  - e. What are some methods of involvement in our civic society outside of just voting?

### Action Item: Campus Mapping

- [Here is the diagram](#) for imagining how to form relationships with related organizations on your campus with whom you can partner on Get Out the Vote/Civic Engagement activities.
- [Here is the spreadsheet](#) to begin your campus mapping strategy—please [Save As a Copy](#) so you can track your progress.

## You Just Voted for the First Time. Let's Celebrate!

### Jewish Text (Talmudic)

In Judaism, we have a bold tradition: When we experience something new, we say the Shechyanu and intentionally express our gratitude. By doing so, we acknowledge our own humility and the good fortune we possess in terms of life, health, opportunity, and community.

Furthermore, in Judaism, when someone “comes of age” and begins to understand the weight of adulthood—both pressure and power—we are asked to commit a year to studying the responsibilities of the religion, specifically honoring the messages of the Torah, and then demonstrating publicly our ability to own that important role.

Turning 18 in America as a citizen is a similar process— young adults gain the right to participate and the ability to demonstrate their powerful voice in how the country should operate, along with the pressure-filled responsibility of knowing how the system works and who to choose as its leadership. Yet, unlike with a b'nai mitzvah, sometimes we forget to properly CELEBRATE this inherited right. This year—let's do it!

There are endless ways to honor the moment of voting for the first time including:

- Shehechyanu
- Voting Prayers

#### Shehechyanu שְׁהַחְיָנוּ

בְּרוּךְ אַתָּה, יי אֱלֹהֵינוּ, מֶלֶךְ הָעוֹלָם, שְׁהַחְיָנוּ וְקִיְּמָנוּ וְהִגִּיעַנוּ לְזִמְנוּ הַזֶּה.

*Blessed are You, Lord our God, King of the Universe, who has granted us life, sustained us and enabled us to reach this occasion.*

#### A BLESSING FOR VOTING

(Credit: Rabbi Laura Novak Winer)

**Transliteration:** *Baruch atah Adonai, Eloheinu Melech haolam, shemetzapeh me'itanu l'asok b'avodat ezrachut ha'medina.*

**Traditional translation:** *Blessed are You Lord our God, Ruler of the Universe who expects us to engage as citizens in our country.*

**Humanistic interpretation:** *Blessed are we who engage as citizens, upholding our values of freedom and justice and exercising our power to choose our leaders.*

### Contemporary Texts

[100 Years Later, These Activists Continue Their Ancestors' Work](#)

[Women weren't given the vote. They took it.](#)

[Don't take your right to vote for granted. Immigrants like me wait years to have the chance.](#)

[Watch this video](#) on immigrants gaining citizenship and the right to vote.

### Discussion Questions

1. If you are eligible, at what age did you realize you would be able to vote?
2. When you think about that “civil right,” what do you feel?
3. If you have voted in the past, what did you feel afterwards? How was this feeling affected by your selected choice winning or losing?
4. How do you feel about the Jewish value of celebrating milestones and expressing gratitude at moments of new experiences?
5. Do you think we should celebrate the right to vote?
6. What are ways you would like to celebrate or honor your ability to vote?

### Actions

- Explore concrete actions you and your friends can do on November 8th to celebrate voting.
- READ: [Senator Kennedy's March 1970 speech to the Senate Subcommittee on Lowering the Voting Age from 21 to 18.](#)  
Here is the [press release](#) from that speech!
- Learn about Thomas Mundy Peterson.

## How to Vote Your Values

### Jewish Text

לא בשמים הוא לאמר מי יעלה לנו השמימה ויקחה לנו וישמענו:  
אתה ונעשנה:

Blessed are You, Lord our God, King of the Universe, It is not in the heavens, that you should say, “Who among us can go up to the heavens and get it for us and impart it to us, that we may observe it?” (Deuteronomy 30:12)

[Lo BaShamayim Hi: Civic Responsibility through Jewish Texts](#)

### Reflective Exercises

[Beyond the Line](#)

[ABQ How do You Decide Who to Vote For?](#)

[Vote by Design Student Workbook](#)

[My Political Autobiography](#)

### Discussion Questions

1. What is a difficult decision you have made recently?
2. How did you make your decision? What factors did you consider?
3. How do you confront pressures to act or believe a certain way? What values do you hold fast to that can help you step forward confidently in your decision making?
4. From where do you gather your information? How does that challenge or reaffirm your values?
5. Does voting for a president and/or other elected official feel like a difficult decision or an easy one?
6. What are the most significant 2-3 factors you will consider when voting for president? Mayor? Other elected officials?
7. In what ways do you think these factors will change over time in your life?

### Action

Use the [Ballotready tool on the MitzVote website](#) and create your ballot; consider how you would select your responses for candidates and referendums.

## Plus One: Getting Others to the Polls

What is our obligation to help others? What is our obligation to help others vote?

### Jewish Text (Talmudic)

#### Pirket Avot 1: 14

דאן ינא המ, ימצעל ינאשכו. לי ימ, לי ינא ויא מא, רמוא היא אזה  
 יתמיא, וישכע אל:

He [also] used to say: If I am not for myself, who is for me?  
 But if I am for my own self [only], what am I? And if not  
 now, when? - Rabbi Hillel

### Contemporary Texts

There are many theories of change which guide civic participation. Here are two to consider:

1. [ACLU Theory of Change](#)
2. [Campus Compact Social Change Wheel -](#)  
 sCampus Compact advances the public purposes of colleges and universities by deepening their ability to improve community life and to educate students for civic and social responsibility. (From the Minnesota Campus Compact chapter)

### Discussion Questions

1. When you read the Hillel quote, what do you think he is trying to say?
2. Do you agree with Hillel?
3. How do you think societal change happens or can happen?
4. In what ways have you seen social change in action actually work?
5. In looking at the Campus Compact Social Change Wheel, which of these actions do you believe in most? Which do you participate in?
6. Do you think it is more important that you focus on your own behavior or help others change?
7. What do you think or what have you learned are the best ways to help somebody else engage in social change without being judgmental?

### Actions

- Text three friends who you think may need help navigating the logistics of voting. Maybe they plan to vote by mail but have not requested an absentee ballot.
- Schedule a date to facetime with them so that you can walk them through the process of applying for the absentee ballot in their area and help them make sure it gets done. **The logistical barriers of finding, printing, filling out, and then mailing the form are the biggest challenges for young people in participating in the vote. Don't stop nagging your friends until their vote is in!**

## Should We Participate in a Broken System?

### Jewish Text (Midrash)

#### Vayikra Rabba 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.

#### Exercise:

1. Put yourself in the position of the people on the ship—what are you feeling/thinking watching one person drill a hole in the bottom of the ship? What might you do to stop them?
2. Now, put yourself in the position of the person drilling. What are you gaining by making this hole? What might persuade you to stop?
3. On a ship, does any part of the hull belong to one passenger more than any other? How is your community/town/city/country like a ship? How is it different?

### Contemporary Texts

#### Rabbi Laura Novak Winer, Moment Magazine, June 2016, "Is it a Mitzvah to Vote?"

*A man once came before the Chazon Ish (a Russian-born Orthodox rabbi, 1878-1953) and explained that he didn't have enough money to pay his taxes and, therefore, would not be allowed to vote in an upcoming election. The Chazon Ish responded: "You should sell your tefillin and pay the taxes... tefillin, you can borrow from another, but the right to vote you cannot get from someone else."*

*As this story illustrates, there have been times when Jews faced barriers to voting, or, though allowed to vote in theory, were unable to do so. (Of course, there were far worse times when legislation affirmatively stripped Jews of their rights, such as the Nuremberg Laws in 1930s Germany.) Thankfully, in the United States, the 24th Amendment protects one's right to vote regardless of taxpayer status.*

*The Chazon Ish story tells us that voting is so important that one should sell one's tefillin—a symbol of one's commitment to observing the mitzvot, or commandments—in order to do so. I would suggest that for us, today, voting is more than a right or a privilege. It is an obligation incumbent upon us as equal citizens in a democratic society.*

### Contemporary Texts, continued

#### Noam Chomsky, The Ink, August 11, 2020

*Well, there is a traditional left position, which has been pretty much forgotten, unfortunately, but it's the one I think we should adhere to. That's the position that real politics is constant activism. It's quite different from the establishment position, which says politics means focus, laser-like, on the quadrennial extravaganza, then go home and let your superiors take over.*

*The left position has always been: You're working all the time, and every once in a while there's an event called an election. This should take you away from real politics for 10 or 15 minutes. Then you go back to work.*

*At this moment, the difference between the candidates is a chasm. There has never been a greater difference. It should be obvious to anyone who's not living under a rock. So the traditional left position says, "Take the 15 minutes, push the lever, go back to work."*

*...The left position is you rarely support anyone. You vote against the worst. You keep the pressure and activism going.*

#### Exercise:

1. The Chazon Ish, via Rabbi Winer, tells us that voting is so important we should 'sell our tefillin' in order to be able to do it. Tefillin are the visible symbols of the wearer's commitment to Torah and commandments, the symbol of commitment to the core values and practices of Jewish life. What values or practices (or symbolic representations of them) would you be willing to let go of in order to cast a ballot?
2. Rabbi Winer lifts up voting as sacred obligation. Professor Chomsky frames it as a small but necessary part of the lifelong project of working for a better world. Which concept of voting resonates more for you? If you know people who are choosing not to vote on principal, which way of thinking would be more persuasive for them?

### Action

If you know someone who is registered but not planning on voting, invite them for coffee and a) **listen to their reasons why** and b) **see if they might be open to hearing the words of Rabbi Winer or Professor Chomsky.**



## The Vote is Over. Your Person Won/Lost. Now What?

### Jewish Texts (Talmudic)

1. [אתותי'ם או אתורב'ח או](#)  
 “O havruta O'mituta” (BT Ta'anit 23a)  
 “Give me friendship or give me death.”
2. [Open Disagreement](#) (Rabbi Avi Orlow)

### Contemporary Texts

1. [A Culture of Heavenly Argument: My Jewish Response to Senseless Hatred by Helen Kramer](#)
2. [Read a Story](#) from Respect+Rebellion: Repairing Polarization on College Campuses
3. [America's Divided Mind—Beyond Conflict](#)
4. [Celebrating Political Diversity](#)  
 - Joan Blades, John Gable
5. [The Psychology of Polarization and How We Can Overcome Our Prejudices](#)
6. [Purple: America, We Need to Talk | Resetting the Table Docs](#)

### Action

Plan an event (virtual or in-person) to foster conversations and engage in the process of healing this country using [Living Room Conversations](#) or the [Purple resource from Resetting the Table](#)

## What Does Society Need to Thrive?

### Jewish Text (Talmudic)

#### Sanhedrin 17b: Rules for Where a Torah Scholar Must Live

BEFORE YOU READ THE SANHEDRIN PASSAGE, ANSWER THESE QUESTIONS:

1. What elements and institutions does a city need to be safe and just and to thrive?
2. How do your values impact your answer?
3. What elements and institutions does a city need for a (Jewish) person to live there safely and ethically? Are all of these necessitates related to Judaism?

NOW READ THE SANHEDRIN PASSAGE.

1. How do your answers in Questions 1-4 compare to what is suggested by the Sanhedrin?
2. Is there anything you would add to your ideal city upon reflection after reading the Sanhedrin?
3. How do you think the city where you reside measures up to your ideal city and/or what the Sanhedrin proposes for a city?

### Contemporary Text

“What you do makes a difference, and you have to decide what kind of difference you want to make.” -Jane Goodall (English primatologist, anthropologist, and world’s foremost expert on chimpanzees)

“It is not always the same thing to be a good man and a good citizen.” - Aristotle

1. Do you agree with Aristotle’s statement? Why or why not?
2. What do you think are the responsibilities and roles of a citizen?
3. How does your list compare to the traits of a citizen identified in [Pew Research Center’s national public survey?](#)
4. Is being a good citizen a personal goal of yours? If so, what do you do currently as a good citizen? Are there any new behaviors you would like to try in the coming year to deepen your commitment to good citizenship?

### Actions

- Peruse the list of student clubs on your college’s website.
- Identify a group or club involved in civic engagement on your college campus that you have been interested in learning more about or getting involved with.
- Now send them an email and introduce yourself!