



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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A framing text:

לא תוכל להתעלם.

“You shall not hide yourself.”

– Deuteronomy 22:3

- *Medieval commentator Rashi interprets it thus: “You must not cover your eyes, pretending not to see.”*
- *When the community is in trouble, a person should not say, “I will go into my house and eat and drink and be at peace with myself.” (B. Talmud, Masechet Taanit, 11a)*
- *“The opposite of good is not evil, the opposite of good is indifference. In a free society, some are guilty, but all are responsible.” – Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel*
- *“As engaged citizens, each of us has a responsibility to not only take part in our democracy, but to involve others into the process as well.” – Rabbi Jonah Dov Pesner, Religious Action Center of Reform Judaism*

Additional texts:

The texts (along with commentary) below are statements that are ideal to be used in articles or speeches. For example, they can be quoted in the introduction to a candidate forum at your synagogue.

אמר רבי יצחק אין מעמידין פרנס על הציבור אלא אם כן נמלכים בציבור
Rabbi Yitzhak taught, “A ruler is not to be appointed unless the community is first consulted.”

– Talmud, Brakhot 55a

- Voting is our modern way of consulting the community before appointing a ruler. The rabbis of the Talmud had no idea of a representative democracy; they did not know of rulers who were elected. But, they still highlighted the importance of the community having some input into who would rule them. Today, when we have the right to vote for our elected officials, we also have the responsibility to vote and ensure others in our community vote as well.

ודרשו את שלום העיר אשר הגלית אתכם שמה והתפללו בעדה אל יי. כי בשלומה יהיה לכם שלום.
“Seek out the peace of the city where I cause you to roam and pray for her sake to God, for in her peace you all will have peace.”

– Jeremiah 29:7



- The word translated above as peace “is variously translated as welfare, prosperity, or peace...The Talmud teaches that when a scholar is seeking a place to live, among the things his/her city must have is a legal court, a tzedakah fund that is collected by two people and distributed by three, a synagogue, a scribe, a healer, and a teacher of children. (Babylonian Talmud, Sanhedrin 17b)...Where we live matters. Our city’s system of justice, its structures to support the needy such as affordable housing, its health care, businesses, educational system, and synagogues are all variables that are central to our wellbeing.” One way that we ensure the welfare of our city is by voting for those candidate who reflect our values and vision for our cities and our country.

– Rabbi Judy Schindler, excerpted from “[Democracy is Not a Spectator Sport](#)”

דינא דמלכות דינא

“Dina d’malchuta dina” (The law of the land is the law)

– *Talmud, N’darim 28a, Gittin 10b, Bava Kama 113a-b, Bava Batra 54b-55a*

- Already in the period of the compilation of the Talmud, the rabbinic principle that civil laws must be recognized and honored had been developed. We are privileged to live in a land whose legal code offers its citizens the opportunity to go to the polls and elect the officials who rule the land. This was a nation that in its founding documents prohibited religious tests for office and any laws respecting establishment of religion, while endorsing free expression of religion, which not only secured our freedoms, but ensured that our rights as citizens would not depend upon our religious identity or practices. Here we have known unprecedented freedoms and opportunities. Just as we have a responsibility to follow the laws of our country, we have a responsibility to vote for those who make our laws.

למדו הטיב דרשו משפת אשרו חמוץ. שפטו יתום ריבו אלמנה.

“Learn to do good. Devote yourselves to justice; aid the wronged;
Uphold the rights of the orphan; defend the cause of the widow.”

– *Isaiah 1:17-21*

- In ancient times orphans and widows were especially vulnerable. With no male relative to care for them, they were often destitute, without land or a way to earn a livelihood and dependent on handouts from others. Isaiah reminds us that doing good does not mean doing good for ourselves, but doing good for others, particularly the most vulnerable among us. Today, we do this work by engaging with our elected officials, voting and making our voices heard, especially on those issues which harm those who are most vulnerable in our society today including people who are poor, LGBTQ, or part of religious and/or racial minorities.



ואמר רבי חייא בר אבא אמר רבי יוחנן אל יתפלל אדם אלא בבית שיש שם חלונות
Rabbi Chiya bar Abba teaches in the name of Rabbi Yochanan,
“One may pray only in a house with windows.”

– *Talmud Brachot 34b*

- This passage reminds us that even when we pray, an activity often seen as solitary and between just us and God, we must be conscious of the outside world. How much the more so our daily work reminds us of the need to be involved in our communities. The first and most fundamental part of that involvement is civic engagement