

EACH WILL VOICE HIS VIEW

IS CIVIC ENGAGEMENT A JEWISH OBLIGATION?

OPENING EXERCISE:

The *New York Times*, offers this definition of civic engagement¹: “Civic engagement means working to make a difference in the civic life of our communities and developing the combination of knowledge, skills, values and motivation to make that difference. It means promoting the quality of life in a community, through both political and non-political processes.”

Take a few minutes to consider the following questions on your own:

What is your first memory of “civic engagement”?
Was there anything that felt “Jewish” about it?

You may wish to jot down some notes here:

What is your most recent experience of “civic engagement”?
Was there anything that felt “Jewish” about it?

You may wish to jot down some notes here:

¹ *Quoting* Civic Responsibility & Higher Education (Thomas Ehrlich, ed.; Onyx Press 2002).

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS:

- (a) What commonalities or themes do you notice?
- (b) What, if anything, made your experiences “feel Jewish”?

FROM OUR TRADITION: COMMUNITY AND CITIZENSHIP

For thousands of years, Jews lived in self-governing communities within larger societies. It is therefore not surprising that Jewish tradition has a great deal to say about the rights and responsibilities of citizens. Consider the following texts from the Babylonian Talmud:

Sanhedrin 17b

A Torah scholar is not permitted to reside in any city that does not have these ten things: A court that has the authority to flog and punish transgressors; and a charity fund for which monies are collected by two people and distributed by three, as required by halakha. This leads to a requirement for another three people in the city. And a synagogue; and a bathhouse; and a public bathroom; a doctor; and a bloodletter; and a scribe [velavlar] to write sacred scrolls and necessary documents; and a ritual slaughterer; and a teacher of young children. With these additional requirements there are a minimum of 120 men who must be residents of the city. They said in the name of Rabbi Akiva: The city must also have varieties of fruit, because varieties of fruit illuminate the eyes.

Bava Batra 8a

[One must dwell in a place] thirty days [before being required to contribute] to the soup kitchen, three months for the charity fund, six months for clothing, nine months for burial, twelve months for paying taxes.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS:

- (a) According to the first text, what communal needs must be met in order for a Torah scholar to reside in a particular city? Which of these needs are relevant in today’s society?
- (b) In your view, what are the basic necessities that need to be addressed in order to have a well-functioning community?
- (c) Why does the second text link one’s obligations to the length of residency in a particular place? Why do you think it differentiates between the different types of obligation? What can this text teach us about the meaning of citizenship?

FROM OUR TRADITION: COMMUNITY DECISIONMAKING

Our rabbis and commentators understood that there would not always (or ever) be consensus on key decisions. So how should decisions get made, and what is the role of the individual in that process? Consider these sources:

Shulchan Aruch,² Choshen Mishpat 163:1

For any community matter on which they cannot find common ground, they should convene all taxpayers, and they should agree that each will voice his view for the sake of heaven [i.e. honestly and in the interest of the greater good, not in his own self-interest], and they will follow the majority.

Maimonides on Genesis 23:2:1

(2) If, in your opinion, the majority are about to commit an error in judgment, do not remain silent because they are the majority, but state your view. This applies even if you know beforehand that they will not accept your viewpoint but that of the majority.

Midrash Tanhuma³, Mishpatim 2:1

If a person of learning participates in public affairs and serves as judge or arbiter, that person gives stability to the land... But if a person sits in their home and says to themselves, “What have the affairs of society to do with me?... Why should I trouble myself with the people’s voices of protest? Let my soul dwell in peace!”—if one does this, they overthrow the world.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS:

- (a) In the first text, what is the significance of the fact that “taxpayers” are entitled to vote? How does this relate to the earlier text concerning the obligation of citizens? Whose voices does this approach raise up? Whose does it leave out?
- (b) Why do you think Maimonides instructs us not to remain silent, even if we know the majority will not agree with us? What is the value of voicing the minority opinion?
- (c) The third text rather dramatically equates political apathy with the overthrow of the world. What do you make of that?
- (d) When in your life have you felt called to engage in public issues? When have you been inclined to sit them out?

² The Shulchan Aruch is a compendium of Jewish law by the great Spanish scholar Joseph Karo, first published in 1565.

³ A collection of midrash that was compiled some time between the 5th and 9th centuries BCE. This translation is by the Jewish environmental organization Hazon.

FROM OUR TRADITION: OBLIGATION TO PROTEST

Finally, consider this text from the Talmud:

Shabbat 54b

Everyone who can protest the sin of their household and does not is responsible for the people of their household. For the people of their city is responsible for the people of their city. For the whole world, they are responsible for the whole world....

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS:

- (a) What does this text mean when it says we are responsible? Where does this responsibility come from?
- (b) Whose wrongs do you take personally? Who are you responsible for?
- (c) Is it reasonable to ask individuals to actively protest every wrong in the world? How do you choose which wrongs to protest?

MAKING CIVIC ENGAGEMENT FEEL JEWISH:

Having studied these texts together, think again about the experiences of civic engagement you shared at the beginning. Do these texts affect how you see the “Jewishness” of those actions?

One way we elevate Jewish acts is to bless them. Below you will find a blessing for civic engagement. Feel free to cut it out and carry it in your wallet. Say the blessing the next time you vote, engage in civic debate, or protest a wrong you see in society. See if it makes those acts feel more “Jewish.”

A Blessing for Civic Engagement

ברוך אתה ?? אלהינו מלך העולם אשר קדשנו במצוותי
וצונו לעסוק בצרכי ציבור.

*Baruch atah Adonai, Eloheinu Melech Ha'olam, asher
kidshanu b'mitzvotav, v'tzi-vanu la'asok b'tzorkhay tzibur.*

Blessed are You, Adonai our God, Source of All, who has
made us holy with your mitzvot and instructed us to
engage deeply with our community.