



Presidential Speeches/Jewish Values

Topic

American Presidents, Jewish Values

Grade Level

5th-10th

Goals for the Lesson/Activity

Students will

- Explore a number of Jewish values related to citizenship, care for others, and the ties that unite all people.
- Examine texts relating to Jewish values and place them in a broader context.
- Connect Jewish values and American political life
- Identify at least 5 American values and Jewish values which have been inextricably intertwined since the birth of the nation
- Appreciate that, with the proper tools and outlook, it's easy to see the world through a Jewish lens.

Prepare in Advance

- Print the following source sheets: "Presidential Speeches," "Jewish Values," and "Jewish Values Texts."
- If you choose to have small groups of students look at individual texts, you may want to print the speeches on individual pages or cut them into sections.
- One Venn diagram for each group

Background for Teachers

Throughout the history of the United States, presidents have used public speeches as a vehicle to inspire the people and put forth their vision for the country. A great speech can become part of the fabric of public thought and cement a president's place in history. Presidents often reference their predecessors' greatest words in their own speeches.

Below, please find a bit of background on each of the presidential speeches from which the excerpts included have been chosen.

The excerpt chosen for George Washington is taken from his Farewell Address in 1796 in which he informs citizens of his decision not to run for another term in office; encourages national unity and discourages too much enthusiasm for political parties and geographical differences; and suggests that the nation steer clear of international entanglements. Note that George Washington did not deliver his words in a public speech but rather wrote a 32-page handwritten document that was published in newspapers across the country in September, 1796.

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The excerpt chosen for Abraham Lincoln is his Second Inaugural Address, spoken in March of 1865, a little more than a month before his assassination. The address, understandably, is focused on the Civil War, which would end approximately two months later. The major theme of the self-admitted short speech was the war and its attendant themes: slavery, loss of life, and a divided nation. Lincoln also invoked God, quoting biblical verses or borrowing biblical ideas, and wondering about what God had in store for the nation.

The excerpt chosen for John F. Kennedy comes from his inaugural address on January 20, 1961, against the backdrop of the Cold War. Eastern Bloc countries, led by the Soviet Union, and Western Bloc countries, led by the United States, were pitted against one another from the end of World War II until the early 1990s. In the period leading up to the speech, the United States showed growing concern about the spread of communism into Vietnam; engaged in the Space Race with the USSR; and, just a few weeks before the inaugural, severed diplomatic ties with Cuba.

The excerpt chosen for Barack Obama comes from his last State of the Union, given on January 12, 2016. Among his themes were the equal opportunity for all people to achieve economic and personal security and maintaining national security without becoming the world's policemen. He praised the US economy and cautioned against bigotry. His speech was set against the backdrop of a rise in gun violence and international terrorism, as well as a divisive national election.

Description of Activities

1. Based on the ability of your students, divide students into groups of two, three, or four.
2. Give each group of students two speeches. If possible, do not give any group the same two.
3. Ask students to restate the main points of the speeches in their own words.
4. Have students identify a number of values in each excerpt as a class. You might want to ask older students to identify 5-7 values in each excerpt in their small groups.
5. Pass out the Jewish Values list and ask students to circle the Jewish values that match 3-5 of the values they identified in the speeches.
6. Pass out the Venn diagram. Instruct students to label each circle of the Venn diagram with the name of the president associated with each of the speeches they have. Ask them to write the values they have chosen in the appropriate circles, placing them in the middle if there is an overlap. Encourage them to include the Hebrew names of the values they are recording.



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7. **For younger students:** Bring the class together and have them share their choices.
8. **For older students:** As students finish naming or writing the Jewish values they found in each of the speeches, hand out the Jewish values texts source-sheet and ask them to choose three texts, one that relates to the material in each of the speeches they studied, and one that applies to both.
 - a. Bring the class together and have them share their choices and explain the reasons they chose the texts they did.
9. If there is time, ask students which of the Jewish values that they heard, if any, best embodies or expresses their understanding of American values. Which Jewish values, if any, conflict with the values put forth in the presidential excerpts?

Differentiation Options

Knowing that students learn in a variety of ways and modalities, the following options are provided to adjust the above lesson to meet the unique needs of your learners.

For learners who need more assistance

- Instead of reading the speeches, have students listen. There are many options online through a simple video search. You can find links to the Kennedy and Obama speeches here:
 - Kennedy: <http://www.jfklibrary.org/Asset-Viewer/BqXIEM9F4024ntFI7SVAjA.aspx>
 - Obama: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=cCXSO-3mt5I>

Of course, there is no video record of Lincoln and Washington reading their speeches; but you can hear other people reading them here:

- Washington: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-c-XPeH_tt4
- Lincoln: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=EUSqDOb6wT0>
- Have students underline key words representing values.
- Instead of pairing Jewish texts with presidential speeches, give students an opportunity to explore and explain one Jewish value in depth.

For learners who need extension opportunities

- Encourage students to search other speeches by the same presidents to see if they can find similar values expressed. They might also look at different presidential speeches and find the Jewish values in them. They can do the same with other historical documents such as the Constitution.



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- Reverse the idea: Bring some prayer books into class and ask students to find what they might consider American values in a prayer. You might guide students toward prayers for the government and the country, where American values might be easier to find. You might also choose to challenge students by suggesting prayers such as the weekday *Amidah* or *Aleinu*, where American values might be more elusive.
- Ask students to research the Declaration of the Establishment of the State of Israel, which was read publicly by David Ben-Gurion. How do the values that are put forth compare to the ones in the presidential speeches? What Jewish values are emphasized?