



## Jewish Values • Civil Discourse

### אַל תִּפְרוֹשׁ מִן הַצִּיבּוּר

***Al Tifrosh min HaTzibbur*** — Do not separate yourself from the community. It may seem, during such a discouraging time, that the best thing a person can do is step out of the fray. Hillel the Elder, in *Pirkei Avot* (Ethics of the Fathers) 2:5, advises us to remain engaged.

If you are not old enough to vote, what can you do to engage in the political process at this time of year? Are you able to inform others on issues, or assist others in getting to the polls? What else can you do? If you've been active participants in student government elections, or have friends who have, perhaps you can speak about what losing candidates or parties have done—or what they might have done—to stay involved after the elections were over.

### דִּינָא דְּמַלְכוּתָא דִּינָא

***Dina D'malchuta Dina*** — Literally the "law of the kingdom is the law"; this halachic principle suggests that civil law in the country where one resides is binding and, in some cases, preferable to Jewish law.

We may see contested elections or claims of voter fraud in the coming months. How can the principle of *dina d'malchuta dina* influence our actions? How can we let our feelings be known while respecting the law of the land? Which laws might be particularly important to civil society in the weeks between the election and the time the Congress is seated?

### עֲנוּה

***Anava*** means humility, or the ability to temper one's innate or achieved talents and abilities through modesty in both speech and behavior. In the Bible, leaders who show humility, such as Moses, succeed, while leaders who display arrogance, such as Korach, ultimately fail.

It takes someone with a certain level of ego and self-assuredness to run for public office. What advice would you give both those who achieved their intended office and those who didn't, about how they might act with humility? (For a great example of humility, find the note that George Bush left for Bill Clinton as the former was leaving office on Inauguration Day.)

### מַחֲלֻקֵּת לְשֵׁם שָׁמַיִם

***Machloket L'shaym Shamayim*** is an "argument for the sake of heaven." In *Pirkei Avot* (Ethics of the Fathers) 5:20, we read: "Any dispute which is for the sake of Heaven will ultimately endure, and one which is not for the sake of Heaven will not ultimately endure." An argument which is "for the sake of heaven" is seen as one which advances the cause of humanity. Power struggles or arguments meant to debase another person or group can be seen as arguments not for the sake of heaven.



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In any election there are heated arguments over many issues, often with each side claiming that their position is for the good of society. How do you decide which arguments are for the sake of heaven? Do you think a contested election is an "argument for the sake of heaven?"

### מכריעו לכף זכות

**Machrio L'Chaf Zechut** is colloquially understood to mean judging others favorably. *Machrio* comes from the root chaf-reish-ayin meaning to bend. We might understand this to mean that we are bending to find merit where we might not be inclined to do so. Rabbi Nachman of Bratslav suggests that we should aspire to find the good in every person, even those who seem to have no discernible positive attributes. He continues with the thought that, if we nurture even a small bit of good in someone, it might blossom.

During especially heated elections, a reporter often asks a candidate to express something positive about their opponent. How might you judge others favorably? What might you have to sacrifice or compromise to look for the good in those with whom you disagree? Do you think that it is possible—or even advisable—for former political rivals to look for the good in one another?

### לא תעמד על דם רעך

**Lo Ta'amod al Dam Rei'echa** —This phrase from Leviticus (19:16) is colloquially understood to mean, "do not stand around while your neighbor bleeds." It can be understood to mean: Do not be passive in the face of violence.

It is often easy to condemn violence from a distance; to share a Facebook post or sign a petition. What other actions might you take to prevent violence? Is it possible to do this without exposing yourself to danger?

### רוֹדֵף שָׁלוֹם

**Rodef Shalom** encourages us to pursue peace. The phrase is seen in *Pirkei Avot* (Ethics of the Fathers) 1:12, where we learn we are to be like the disciples of Aaron, both loving peace and pursuing it. This value suggests that instead of merely reacting to a situation peaceably, we proactively set the stage for peace.

The Major League baseball playoff games often occur in the weeks leading up to November elections. Using social media, opponents have been known to wish each other luck before play started and congratulated one another after losses. In the weeks after the election what can you do to encourage peace among would-be rivals?

### דֶּרֶךְ אֶרֶץ

**Derech Eretz**, translated literally is "the way of the land," but it is colloquially understood to connote manners, consideration for others, or common decency. The concept of



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*Derech Eretz* includes the types of things that a person should do without being legislated to do so, such as moving aside to let another person in an elevator or not leaving chewed gum on a chair.

Recent election cycles have been, in many instances, devoid of *derech eretz*. In some cases, candidates refused to extend common courtesy and would not even shake hands as is customary during debates. At other times, the lack of decency was much greater with accusations, slurs, and in the case of attendees at some rallies, even punches, flying.

How do you think one can campaign with *derech eretz*, given that it has become common practice to tear the other candidate down? How should both winning and losing candidates display common decency in the aftermath of the election?

The following two values come from *Parashat Mishpatim*, Exodus 21:1 -24:18, in which Moses relates many foundational Jewish values to the Children of Israel including those on such far-ranging topics as kashrut, the three pilgrimage holidays, property ownership, and fair treatment of orphans and widows.

### מִדְּבַר שֶׁקֶר תִּרְחַק

**Mid'var Sheker Tirchak** literally means to "keep far from a false charge." On the surface, this value has similarities to Jewish warning against *lashon hara* and *rechilut*, evil speech and gossip, respectively. More than asking its reader not to engage in telling—or spreading—untruths, this verse asks that we disassociate from the person engaging in such behavior or making such a charge.

In your opinion, is it better to disassociate from a person making a false charge or to try to convince them, kindly, that their position or assertion is wrong? Would you leave a party or block someone on social media to keep away from a false charge? Do you think that those in power have a responsibility to renounce false charges made by candidates or elected officials from their own party?

### לֹא תִהְיֶה אַחֲרֵי רַבִּים לְרָעָה

**Lo T'hiyeh Acharei Rabim L'ra'ot** can be translated literally to mean, "You shall neither side with the mighty to do wrong," but can also be understood to mean "do not side with the multitude (or majority)." In either case, the verse encourages its reader to follow one's conscience instead of blindly following someone with power or going along with the majority if your heart tells you otherwise.

Is it difficult to voice an opinion that differs from the majority or from those who currently hold power? If so, why? What can you do to encourage that all voices be heard?



### תּוֹכַחָה

**Tochecha** is understood as loving rebuke or gentle redirection. This means that, even when we find someone else to be wrong (not simply when we don't like their opinion), we are obligated to correct them kindly, even lovingly. Often, when people are shown their errors by someone who is angry or impatient, they are unable to hear the correction and may feel as though they need to hold onto their misperceptions even more strongly.

Think of someone who is presenting information you know to be false. How can you gently correct them and present your case so that you might be heard? What words might you use?

### תְּקוּן עוֹלָם

**Tikkun Olam**, or repairing the world, is often used to describe the concept of social action or the act of doing good deeds. However, the phrase can allude to something much deeper. According to Kabbalah, when God began to create the world, God needed to contract in order to make room for the creation. When God made light on the first day of creation, that light was contained in ten vessels. The vessels are said to have broken as God's light was too strong and too pure to be contained. Had they not shattered, the world might be a perfect place. *Tikkun olam* implies that we must not simply do good things, but that by doing so we repair the brokenness in the world and bring it closer to perfection.

Over the past few years, people have pointed to political differences as the cause for severed ties among friends and family. What might you do to help repair that which has been broken?