



Making Informed Choices

Topic Voting: Making Informed Choices

Grade Level(s) 8-12

Goals for the Lesson/Activity

Students will:

- Review Jewish Wisdom on the importance of community involvement
- Participate in voting and voting-readiness simulations
- Engage with Jewish texts on about information and action
- Consider the issues which are important to them

Materials needed

Copies of handouts

Tape

Scissors

Prepare in Advance

Print out a copy of the Cake or Pie resource and fold it according to directions below:

- Fold the bottom third up so that the word is completely covered.
- Fold that third over again so that the second word is covered, and you can only see the words “cake” or “pie” respectively.

Print out and make copies of the Jewish Texts on Information and Action handout

Print out and make copies of the Election Issues handout.

Technology needed

None

Background for Teachers

When voters are uninformed about candidate choice – especially for down-ballot candidates such as judges or commissioners of such things as roads or sanitation – they employ any one of a number of strategies:

- They may choose simply not to vote
- They may vote based on name
 - In some cities, names that seemingly represent certain ethnicities garner more votes
 - Some voters choose based on the names they recognize, which is why candidates spend money on advertising, such as lawn signs, that have nothing more than their name



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- They may vote based on order listed. Various studies suggest that the first name on the ballot often receives more votes, between 4 to 10% more depending on the circumstances

Description of Activities

As election seasons draw near, many political and communal organizations stress the importance of voting. The Jewish community is no different. Though these drives – often seen on television or social media – urge voters to go to the polls, they don't often offer wisdom or resources for making informed choices.

In this lesson, students will investigate the possible effects of making uninformed choices as well as engage with Jewish texts which speak to actions both with and without information.

1: Voting is a Jewish Value

Note: If your students have previously discussed voting as a Jewish value, please start at activity 2.

Write the following two quotes on a white/blackboard:

Talmud Berachot 55a

אמר רבי יצחק אין מעמידין פרנס על הצבור אלא אם כן נמלכים בצבור
Rabbi Yitzhak said: One may only appoint a leader over a community if
he consults with the community and they agree to the appointment.

Pirke Avot 2:4

הלל אומר, אל תפריש מן הצבור
Hillel said: Do not separate yourself from the community.

Ask:

- What can we learn from the Talmud text about how communal leaders should be chosen?
- What can we learn from the Pirke Avot text about our responsibility?
- Knowing that you are (likely) too young to vote, how can you follow the wisdom found in these texts?



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2: Know your Choices

Let the students know that since you have been talking about voting, you want them to practice by taking a vote. Though voting for public office is often done by secret ballot – though the method differs depending on locale – let them know you'll be voting by show of hands.

Place the Cake or Pie resources on the wall or black/white board. Make sure that they are folded so that only the word “cake” or “pie” shows.

Ask students to raise their hands to signify their preference. Record this on the board or a large sheet of paper taped to the wall.

Unfold the paper to reveal the words “ice cream” and “pizza” respectively. Take another vote to assess if the students have changed their minds now that they know the pie is a pizza pie and the cake is an ice cream cake. Count the votes and put the tally under the original tally. Repeat the process one more time, opening the pieces of paper to reveal the words “rum raisin” and “onion and olive.” Tally the votes and write the totals under the two other vote counts.

Ask students to raise their hand if they changed their mind at any point during the voting. Ask what they can infer from the data or the experience of voting in this way.

Students might extrapolate from this exercise that a person can't always make the choice that's right for them without all the information. Yet, we often implore people to vote without ensuring that they have the information they need to do so in a responsible way.

3: Jewish Texts on Information and Action

Hand out the Jewish Texts on Information and Action handout.

Split students into small groups and instruct them to read through the Exodus texts and answer the related questions. After they have done so, bring the group back together and debrief asking them to summarize their discussions. Ask:

- How many people think that information is a prerequisite to action? How many think that one can act responsibly without information?
- What, if any, is the benefit to getting information before acting? What, if any, is the benefit of acting without prior information?



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- Is there someone for whom they would act before learning or “do” before “listening?” Similarly, are there circumstances in which they might vote before being fully informed?
- What does always voting for the candidates of one party without knowing particular stances have in common with the idea of *na’aseh v’nishmah*? (You can extrapolate in this case that they are similar because in both cases the people trust the larger entity – God or political party – but don’t know exactly what they’re going to get.

4: Knowing your Issues

Now that they understand the importance of being informed, let students know that they are going to think about the issues that are important to them. They can begin the process of gathering information now so that they are ready when they have an opportunity to vote.

Option: In the resources section of this lesson you will find two grids with issues of concern to voters. The first contains issues which might be of importance in a school election, the second are issues commonly discussed in US politics.

- You might choose to practice with the high school issues before tackling the US political issues.
- You might choose to focus solely on high school or political issues.

Please note that the issues are phrased in generic, or non-partisan, ways. Two people with very different views on US foreign policy might both choose Israel as an issue important to them, for instance, though their specific policy choices might differ.

Hand out a copy of the issue list you have chosen to use. If using both, hand out the School Election Issues first.

Instruct students to read the list they have been given. Offer them the opportunity to fill in the blank spaces with additional issues which are important to them. Invite students to cut the grid apart and place the issues in front of them in order of importance. Alternatively, they can number the issues inside of the grid.

Ask students if they feel they have enough information on the issues about which they are passionate. Ask them how they might consider getting information, or how they might advise others.



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Let students know about one-issue voting, the idea that one issue is so important to a person that they will vote for the person who shares their stance, regardless of that person's views on other issues. Ask students if they would consider voting based only on their top issue.

Ask students to turn back to the Jewish texts and invite someone to read the piece from *Avodah Zarah*. Ask:

- How does this relate to elections?
- What might you do if you felt as though you really had no decision to make?
- How might you educate yourself in this case?

To conclude, solicit one of the students to read the text from Kiddushin. Ask the students to explain how this relates to voting. Whether they are voting in school elections, encouraging others to vote, or preparing for their first opportunity to vote, reinforce the idea that being informed is part of their Jewish responsibility.



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PIZZA

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CAKE

ICE CREAM

RUM RAISIN



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School Election Issues

School Start Time	Length of School Day	Cafeteria Food
Open Campus	Foreign Language Requirement	Sports Programs
Homework Policy	Technology Policy	Class Offerings
School Safety	Discipline Policies	Issues around Gender/Sexuality

Election Issues

Abortion	Gun Rights	Israel
Immigration	Health Care	Education
Women's Rights	LGBT Issues	Poverty
Environment	Economy	Military Spending