

Topic

Challenge and Response
Mitzvot, Middot, and Sacred Moments

Grade Level

7th – 12th Grades

Overview

Hazal—the Sages—believed that *mahloket*—disagreement or dispute—is a healthy way for people to understand each other and live harmoniously, as long as the disagreeing parties are respectful of each other and engage in their disagreement for the greater good ([Pirkei Avot 5:17](#)).

No matter your political leanings, if you've watched the news, opened a newspaper, or used social media over the past few years, you have likely noticed a sharp decline in civil discourse, especially in the political arena. On a national level as well as in local electoral politics, you have likely heard speech and witnessed behavior that has been disappointing, from political leaders, candidates, and their respective supporters. It's unclear what the coming days and weeks will bring, but recent experience suggests that the ugliness shows no signs of abating. With this in mind, we have put together a list of 12 Jewish values we think are worth highlighting. We hope they will inform or encourage conversations about civil discourse you might have with your students during this politically turbulent time.

It does not go unnoticed that both electoral politics and governmental leadership have stirred deep passion and activism among the populace, and this can be a positive development when the population as a whole leverages that passion to move society forward. It is our hope that the study of these values will encourage continued speech and action which aims toward the betterment of society.

Goals

- To provide Jewish values with which to frame political and social conversations that are taking place on both a national and local level
- To provide both the impetus and the language to promote civil discourse when speaking about government, politics, and social issues

Background for Teachers

It may seem to many that we live in the most politically contentious time they can remember. Public discourse, which previously often centered on policy positions, has become far more personal. Public figures are held to account for social affiliations, vacation choices, and family disputes. Social media, which can be used to galvanize people to work together, is often a tool for quick sound bites rather than serious conversations. Though negative rhetoric and vitriol seem at an all-time high, there have been many combative campaigns throughout American history.

Fans of the Broadway musical *Hamilton* will be aware of the trouble-plagued election of 1800. At that point in U.S. history, electors were given two votes instead of one, which they used to vote for two different candidates. The candidate with the most votes would become president; the runner-up, vice president. Thomas Jefferson and Aaron Burr each got 73 votes, a clear tie, while incumbent president John Adams only received 65 votes. In accord with the laws governing elections, the vote went to the House of Representatives, where Alexander Hamilton lobbied the members of his party (the Federalists) to give their support to Jefferson. Jefferson, of course, became the nation's third president, Burr the vice president. Two other results of this election: Burr would later kill Hamilton in an infamous duel, and the Constitution would be amended to specify that electors vote separately for president and vice president.

In 1860, Republican nominee and eventual president Abraham Lincoln couldn't be found on the ballot in most Southern states. Additionally, Southern states left the Democratic party, which had nominated Stephen Douglas, and instead formed the Constitutional Union party with then-Vice President John Breckinridge as their top pick. Lincoln won 40% of the popular vote with Douglas following behind; however, Lincoln won the majority of the electoral votes in the North along with California and Oregon, with Douglas only capturing Missouri. Breckenridge won Maryland and Delaware along with most of the states in the South. Shortly after the election, South Carolina seceded; and by February the Confederate States of America had been formed.

Many people will remember the 2000 election between George W. Bush and Al Gore. Gore won the popular vote by a margin of more than 500,000 votes, but the results of the electoral college—specifically the electors in Florida—would remain in play for a number of weeks. There were just a few hundred votes separating the candidates, prompting calls for recounts. Political parties brought lawsuits alleging voter intimidation, names left off voter rolls, and ballots that were either difficult to read or punch. (Florida's ballots were punch ballots where voters pushed a perforated piece of paper next to the name of their choice to make a hole). The cases went all the way to the Supreme Court, which stopped the recount. Five weeks after the election George W. Bush was declared the winner.

Jewish Values - Civil Discourse

Suggestions for How to Use this Resource

Pick a Value of the Week and study one value each week. Ask students to come up with scenarios, real or imagined, in which the value of the week could be applied.

Ask students to brainstorm ways they might bring the Value of the Week to life. For the remainder of the class session, ask the students to embody the value in their speech and actions. If students miss an opportunity to live the value of the day, gently point out the missed opportunity or ask other students if they noticed a time when a value might have been used but wasn't.

Suggest that students imagine that they will be attending a political rally. Invite them to create posters and banners that advocate for one or more of the values included here.

Invite students to create short public service announcement videos highlighting each of the values.

Use the values to create memes with your students by finding or drawing images and attaching a pertinent statement about each of the values.

Gather several news stories each week or ask your students to do so. These could be about plans of government officials or their opponents, legal proceedings, constituent activities or statements, etc. Ask students to apply values from the list to each of these news stories.

Review the list of values each week and decide which one contains the best advice given the news cycle or current social climate.

Write each of the values on separate sheets of paper. Ask students to rank them in order of importance, according to which values are more necessary to civil discourse.

Values

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. However, Hillel the Elder advises us to remain engaged ([Pirkei Avot 2:4](#)).

If your students are not old enough to vote, what can they do to engage in the political process? Are they able to inform others on issues, or assist others in getting to the polls? Can they write letters to their representatives? What else might they do? If they have been active participants in student government elections, or have friends who have, perhaps they can speak about what losing candidates have done—or what they might have done—to stay involved after the elections were over.

דִּינָא דְּמַלְכוּתָא דִּינָא (Dina D'malchuta Dina)

The law of the kingdom is the law.

This principle of Jewish law suggests that civil law in the country where one resides is binding and, in some cases, takes priority over Jewish law.

In a society where things might seem unjust, 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 when the rule of law seems to be breaking down?

אֲנָוָה (Anavah)

Humility

Anavah describes 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 (see for example [Numbers 12:3](#)), 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 modern example of humility, [check out the note](#) that George H.W. Bush left for Bill Clinton as the former was leaving office on Inauguration Day.)

מַחְלֻקֵת לְשֵׁם שָׁמַיִם (*Mahloket L'sheim Shamayim*)

Argument for the sake of heaven

Hazal believed that "Any argument which is for the sake of Heaven will ultimately endure, and one which is not for the sake of Heaven will not ultimately endure" ([Pirkei Avot 5:17](#)). 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.

In any society 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? How do you conduct yourself in an argument in a way that is for the sake of heaven?

מַכְרִיעוּ לְכַף זְכוּת (*Machrio L'Chaf Zechut*)

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 Breslov 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 ([Likutei Moharan 282:1](#)).

How might you judge others favorably? What might you have to sacrifice or compromise in order 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? How might expressing something positive about a rival help to change the nature of a relationship?

לֹא תֵעָמֵד עַל-דַּם רֵעֶךָ (*Lo Ta'amod al Dam Rei'echa*)

Do not stand by the blood of your neighbor.

This phrase ([Leviticus 19:16](#)) is colloquially understood to mean, "Do not stand around while your neighbor bleeds." It can also 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? What does it mean to be a neighbor? What is your responsibility to respond to violence when the violence is happening in another location?

רוֹדֵף שְׁלוֹם (*Rodef Shalom*)

Pursue peace

Hillel the Elder taught that one should be like the disciples of Aaron, both loving peace and pursuing it (*Pirkei Avot 1:12*). This value suggests that, instead of merely reacting to a situation peaceably, we should proactively set the stage for peace.

Many sports have a tradition of opponents shaking hands before and/or after a game as a way of demonstrating that the players respect each other and wish each other well. How might this translate to the political sphere? What challenges are there in pursuing peace when the stakes are more than just the result of a game? What can you do to encourage peace among would-be rivals?

דְּרֵךְ אֶרֶץ (*Derech Eretz*)

The way of the land

This value is colloquially understood to connote manners, consideration for others, or common decency. The concept of *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 into an elevator, waiting patiently while someone slower walks ahead of them, or not leaving chewed gum on a chair.

Many spaces that have traditionally been marked by their shows of respect are, in many instances today, lacking in *derech eretz*. In some cases, people on opposite sides of the aisle refuse to extend common courtesy and will not even shake hands as is customary during debates. At other times, the lack of decency is much greater with accusations, slurs, and sometimes even punches flying.

How do you think one can engage in public policy actions with *derech eretz*, given that it has become more common to tear down one's opposition? How should people on both sides of an issue display common decency both while and after the issue is contested?

Jewish Values - Civil Discourse

The following two values come from *Parashat Mishpatim*, Exodus 21:1 – 24:18, in which Moses relates many foundational Jewish values to *B'nei Yisrael*—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.

מְדַבֵּר-שֶׁקֶר תִּרְחַק (*Mid'var Sheker Tirchak*)

Keep far from a false charge.

On the surface, this value has similarities to the Jewish warning against *lashon hara* and *rechilus*, evil speech and gossip respectively. More than asking its reader not to engage in telling—or spreading—untruths, this verse ([Exodus 23:7](#)) asks that we disassociate from the person engaging in such behavior or making such a charge. Jewish wisdom (e.g. [Mishnah Torah 7:3](#)) even posits that *lashon hara* harms three people: the one who speaks it, the one who hears, and the one who is spoken about.

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? In order to keep away from a false charge would you leave a party or block someone on social media? How much do 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*)

Do not side with the mighty to do wrong

This idea can also be understood to mean "do not side with the majority to do wrong." In either case, the verse ([Exodus 23:2](#)) encourages the 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? How can you be strong in your own beliefs in the face of opposition either from a strong individual or from a large group? What can you do to encourage that all voices be heard?

תּוֹכַחָה (Tochakha)

Loving rebuke or gentle redirection

This means that, even when we find that someone else is 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? How much do you think you are responsible to continue to redirect the other person and at which point do you think it is OK to desist from redirecting?

תִּקּוּן עוֹלָם (Tikkun Olam)

Repairing the world

This phrase is often used to describe the concept of social action or the act of doing good deeds. However, it 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.

The current political and social climate has caused lots of severed ties among friends, family members, and even large numbers of members of religious and ethnic groups. What might you do to help repair that which has been broken?