

What's Jewish About Voting?

Topic

Challenge and Response

Mitzvot, Middot, and Sacred Moments

Voting and Democracy: Do We Really Choose our Leaders?

Grade Level(s)

7th and Above

Big Ideas

Shared values help groups to make decisions as a community.

Relevant Vocabulary

תַּנַּ"ךְ (TaNaKH)	The Bible
שְׁמוֹת (Shemot)	The Book of Exodus
אֹהֶל מוֹעֵד (Ohel Moed)	The Tent of Meeting
אָרוֹן (Aron)	Ark (of the Covenant)
מִשְׁכָּן (Mishkan)	Tabernacle

Respectful discussion and listening are important aspect of choosing an appropriate leader.

Learning Targets

Students will:

1. Be exposed to Jewish sources on democracy and the democratic process
2. Explore the differing ways that Jewish leaders of the *TaNaKH* were chosen
3. Wrestle with principles and qualities of Jewish leadership, and decide which of these are of value to them in a leader, secular or religious

Materials / Technology Needed

- [Shemot 18:13 – 26](#)
- Copies of the Leaders and Constituents source sheet (included at the end of this activity)
- Copies of [JTeach's Middot Chart](#)
- Small pieces of paper + writing implements
- [Poll Everywhere](#) (optional)

Background for Teachers

In the time leading up to elections, there will inevitably be a great deal of conversation in the media, in homes, and in the Jewish community, about the candidates, the issues that are important to people, and the merits of ballot initiatives. Without delving into the specifics of these topics themselves, these activities provide a platform for the exploration of Jewish values in elections and leadership. The educator is encouraged to ensure that the class discussion remain focused on elections and leadership, and not spin into controversial conversations about the candidates and the voting choices of

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students/parents. However, the educator can provide “food for thought” questions to be discussed at home with families.

Bezalel

Bezalel ben Uri ben Hur was the chief craftsman of the *Mishkan*, *Ohel Moed*, and the *Aron*. He was selected by God for this role and filled with the divine spirit of wisdom, skill, knowledge, and all workmanship ([Shemot 31:2 – 3](#)). Jewish wisdom records that Bezalel's skills went beyond just his craftsmanship and that he also was particularly adept at transmitting his knowledge and sharing his skills, which demonstrated his righteousness ([Or HaChaim on Shemot 35:34](#)). In addition, Jewish wisdom records that Bezalel was accepted by the community to be the leader of the building of the *Mishkan* as they voted by acclamation to approve his appointment ([Tractate Berakhot 55a](#)).

Description of Activities

Begin with a class vote on something: a mascot, a favorite song, a treat to have at a class celebration, etc. Have students cast ballots for their choices, and then engage in a conversation about how it felt to have the responsibility of choosing something. How did it feel to win? How did it feel if your choice didn't win or if you didn't like any of the options offered to you?

1. Hand out copies of the *Shemot* text and read as a class.

Ask: Who is choosing the leaders in this case? What criteria are used to choose them? What personal qualities are required? Write the qualities on the black/white board to be used later in the lesson.

Ask: How is this system of choosing leadership different than what we find in the American political system? (Most leaders aren't chosen by one person.) How is it the same? (Many judges are appointed. There are checks and balances. Legislators are appointed in accordance with population density.)

2. Introduce the Talmud text about Bezalel.

Break learners into groups of 2 – 3 and give each group a copy of the Talmud texts.

- Instruct each group to read through the text from *Berachot* 55a and summarize it to ensure understanding. Students can also read about Bezalel in the Torah texts referenced in the Background about Bezalel.
- Ask students to name the qualities that make Bezalel a good leader. Add these to the list on the black/white board.

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- Review what is different in the way Moses chose leaders and the way Bezalel is chosen.
- Discuss, in small groups or as a class, how the text relates to elections and democracy. You might provide some, or all, of the following questions:
 - Why was it important for Bezalel to be approved by the people?
 - How might a community's acceptance of a leader be different if the leader is chosen by a single person, a small group, or the whole community?
 - How do you think people who might not have wanted Bezalel to get the job would have felt?
 - How would you feel if you knew the candidate you preferred didn't stand a chance of being chosen?
 - Whose opinions do you rely on to choose your leaders (in school, in clubs/on teams, in government)?

Now that they have studied two textual narratives of how leaders are chosen, students will have an opportunity to apply Jewish values in thinking about how they choose their own leaders.

- Hand out copies of the Middot Chart.
 - Explain that all of the values on the chart are possible Jewish understandings of what it means to be a good person. Have each learner pick and write down 5 values that they think a leader (Jewish or non-Jewish) should have.
 - Once they have chosen their values, each student should partner with another to see how many overlapping values they have. Together, they should come up with a shared 5 values from their two lists.
 - Invite each pair to share the values they have chosen in one of the following ways:
 - Using the Free Response Poll option on Poll Everywhere, students input their chosen values.
 - Students write their chosen values on the board or on a large piece of paper.

Point out the most common values and have a conversation about the place that Jewish values have in leadership in general, and elections in particular.

- Compare the values they have chosen to the values written on the board from their discussions of the biblical and Talmudic texts. Ask: How have our views about important characteristics of leadership changed?

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- Additional Possible Questions:
 - What do Jewish values mean if candidates aren't Jewish?
 - What are some of your values that you hope our elected leaders will share?
 - How might the qualities you look for in a president be different from those you might look for in a judge, county sheriff or local ward or county leader?

If time allows: Direct students to the Talmud quote from Tractate *Arakhin*. On one wall, place a piece of paper with the opinion of Rabbi Judah. On the opposite wall, place the opinion of the sages. Instruct students to go to the side of the room matching their views. If students think that there is a balance between the two options, they can go to the middle. After a few minutes of discussion, ask a representative from each group to explain why they chose the side they did. If you choose, students can portray this through drama, song or poetry.

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

- Ask students to name one person who is a leader in their life, perhaps a teacher, parent, or coach. Ask learners to tell a story, perhaps to an aide, about something that person did to show leadership. Using the Middot Chart, learners, together with an aide or a partner, should choose the leadership trait displayed in their story. Learners draw a picture of their chosen leader displaying this trait.
- Ask students to choose a quality from the chart that they might use to be good people. Ask them to choose qualities that they would like their parents, teachers, or coaches to show as well. Ask them to act out a scene in which they exhibit the qualities they have chosen.

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For learners who need extension opportunities

- Delve further into the text from Shemot. Learners should reread it and highlight all of the good pieces of advice they can find in it. Have them place a star or check next to all of the universal advice and make no mark on the advice which is specific to Moses' situation. Then, instruct them to make a list of ways that a president (or any leader) needs help from others, and think about ways that they can help leaders in our community.
- Ask students to research a person from Jewish history from a text or time period your class has studied. (From the Torah, you might think of Moses, Miriam, Aaron, or Joshua. From later biblical texts you might use Devorah, King David, King Solomon, Isaiah, or Esther. Rabbi Akiva, Hillel, Shammai, and Maimonides are interesting historical choices. From contemporary history you might suggest David Ben Gurion or Golda Meir.) Ask them to think about the stories of these people and assign them qualities from the Chart. They can also consider what qualities these people didn't have and how their stories might have been different if they had. What made these people good leaders? How could they have been better leaders?

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Leaders and Constituents

Background about Bezalel

Bezalel was the chief craftsman of the Tabernacle and the Ark of the Covenant. He was an accomplished artist, and according to the Exodus narrative (chapters 31, 36-39), was called by God, along with Oholiav, to construct the *Ohel Mo'ed* (Tent of Meeting), the furniture and instruments inside, and the garments for the priests.

Tractate <i>Berachot</i> 55a	ברכות נ"ה.
R. Isaac said:	אמר רבי יצחק
One must not appoint a leader over a community without first consulting the community, as it says: "See, God has called by name Bezalel" (<i>Shemot</i> 35:30)	אין מעמידין פרנס על הצבור אלא אם כן נמלכים בצבור, שנאמר: "ראו קרא ה' בשם בצלאל" (שמות לה: ל),
The Holy Blessed One said to Moses: Do you consider Bezalel suitable?	אמר לו הקדוש ברוך הוא למשה: משה, הגון עליך בצלאל?
Moses replied: Sovereign of the Universe, if You think he's suitable, all the more so [I think he is]!	אמר לו: רבונו של עולם, אם לפניך הגון — לפני לא כל שכן!
[God] said to Moses: All the same, go and speak to them.	אמר לו: אף על פי כן, לך אמור להם.
[Moses] went and said to the Israelites: "Do you consider Bezalel suitable?"	הלך ואמר להם לישראל: הגון עליכם בצלאל?
They replied: If The Holy Blessed One and you consider him suitable, all the more so [we think he is]!	אמרו לו: אם לפני הקדוש ברוך הוא ולפניך הוא הגון, לפנינו לא כל שכן!

Tractate <i>Arakhin</i> 17a	ערכין יז.
This is the generation of those who seek him, who seek your face, Jacob, Selah." (<i>Psalms</i> 24:6)	"זוה דור דרשיו מבקשי פניך יעקב סלה" (תהלים כד: ו)
Rabbi Yehuda HaNasi and the Sages disagree in this matter.	פליגי בה רבי יהודה נשיאה ורבנן,
One said, "The character of the generation is determined by its leader."	חד אמר: דור לפי פרנס,
And one said, "The character of the leader is determined by the generation."	וחד אמר: פרנס לפי דורו.