



# THE JEWISH EDUCATION PROJECT

## Voting as a Jewish Value

### Why Vote?

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Within the economics departments at certain universities, there is a famous but probably apocryphal story about two world-class economists who run into each other at the voting booth.

"What are you doing here?" one asks.

"My wife made me come," the other says.

The first economist gives a confirming nod. "The same."

After a mutually sheepish moment, one of them hatches a plan: "If you promise never to tell anyone you saw me here, I'll never tell anyone I saw you." They shake hands, finish their polling business and scurry off.

Why would an economist be embarrassed to be seen at the voting booth?

Because voting exacts a cost -- in time, effort, lost productivity -- with no discernible payoff except perhaps some vague sense of having done your "civic duty." As the economist Patricia Funk wrote in a recent paper, "A rational individual should abstain from voting."

The odds that your vote will actually affect the outcome of a given election are very, very, very slim. This was documented by the economists Casey Mulligan and Charles Hunter, who analyzed more than 56,000 Congressional and state-legislative elections since 1898.

### Jeremiah 29:4-7

(4) Thus said GOD of Hosts, the God of Israel, to the whole community that I exiled from Jerusalem to Babylon: (5) Build houses and live in them, plant gardens and eat their fruit. (6) You should take wives and beget sons and daughters; and you

### ירמיהו כ"ט:ד'-ז'

(ד) כִּהֵן אָמַר יְהוָה צְבָאוֹת אֱלֹהֵי  
יִשְׂרָאֵל לְכֹל־הַגּוֹלָה אֲשֶׁר־הִגַּלְתִּי  
מִירוּשָׁלַם בָּבֶלָה: (ה) בְּנִוּ בָתִּים  
וְנָשְׁבוּ וְנָטְעוּ גִבּוֹת וְאָכְלוּ אֶת־פְּרִיָן:

should take wives for your sons, and give your daughters to husbands, that they may bear sons and daughters. Multiply there, do not decrease. (7) And seek the welfare of the city to which I have exiled you and pray to GOD in its behalf; for in its prosperity you shall prosper.

(ו) קָחוּ נָשִׁים וְהוֹלִידוּ בָנִים וּבָנוֹת וְקָחוּ לְבָנֵיכֶם נָשִׁים וְאֶת־בָּנוֹתֵיכֶם תָּנוּ לְאִנְשֵׁים וְתִלְדְּנָה בָנִים וּבָנוֹת וְרַבּוּ־נָשִׁים וְאַל־תִּמְעָטוּ: (ז) וְדַרְשׁוּ אֶת־שְׁלוֹם הָעִיר אֲשֶׁר הִגַּלְתִּי אֶתְכֶם שָׁמָּה וְהִתְפַּלְלוּ בְעֵדָה אֶל־יְהוָה כִּי בְשְׁלוֹמָהּ יִהְיֶה לָכֶם שְׁלוֹם:

*What is our relationship to our country?  
What kind of citizen is Jeremiah encouraging us to be?*

**Pirkei Avot 3:2**

(2) Rabbi Chanina, the Deputy High Priest, says: Pray for the welfare of the government, for were it not for the fear of it, man would swallow his fellow alive.

**משנה אבות ג'ב'**

(ב) רַבִּי חַנִּינָא סֵגֹן הַכֹּהֲנִים אוֹמֵר, הָיִי מְתַפְּלֵל בְּשְׁלוֹמָהּ שֶׁל מְלָכוֹת, שְׂאֵלְמַלְא מוֹרְאָה, אִישׁ אֶת רֵעֵהוּ חַיִּים בְּלֵעוֹ.

**Rabbeinu Yonah on Pirkei Avot 3:2:2**

**man would swallow his fellow alive:** This matter is wanting to say that a person should pray for the peace of the whole world and be in pain about the pain of others. And this is the way of the righteous ones, as David, peace be upon him, stated (Psalms 35:13), "As for me, when they were ill, my dress was sackcloth, I afflicted myself in fasting." As a person should not make his supplications and his requests for his needs alone, but rather to pray for all people, that they be at peace. As with the welfare of the government, there is peace in the world.

**רבינו יונה על פרקי אבות ג'ב':ב'**

**איש את רעהו חיים בלעו.** זה הענין ר"ל שיש לאדם להתפלל על שלום כל העולם ולהצטער על צער של אחרים. וכן דרכן של צדיקים כמו שאמר דוד ע"ה (תהלים ל"ה י"ג) ואני בחלותם לבושי שק עניתי בצום נפשי שאין לאדם לעשות תחנוניו ובקשתו לצרכיו לבד אך להתפלל על כל בני אדם שיעמדו בשלום ובשלומה של מלכות יש שלום לעולם:

*This quote suggests the reality of "Veneer Theory" a Hobbesian view of reality that we are only a thin veneer away from humanity's horrific nature. Rabbeinu Yonah seems to be more in line with Rosseau, who argued that humanity is fundamentally good, and we should have empathy for others. Which approach feels more authentic to you?*

**Exodus 23:2**

(2) You shall neither side with the mighty to do wrong—you shall not give perverse testimony in a dispute so as to pervert it in favor of the mighty—

**שמות כ"ג:ב'**

(ב) לֹא-תִהְיֶה אַתְּ-רִבִּים לְרַעַת  
וְלֹא-תַעֲנֶה עַל-רֵב לְנֹטַת אַתְּרֵי  
רִבִּים לְהַטֹּת:

**Rashbam on Exodus 23:2:1**

(2) לא תהיה אחרי רבים לרעות, if, in your opinion, the majority are about to commit an error in judgment, do not remain silent because they are the majority, but state your view. This applies even if you know beforehand that they will not accept your viewpoint but that of the majority.

**רשב"ם על שמות כ"ג:ב':א'**

(ב) לא תהיה אחרי רבים  
לרעות - אם הם דנים שלא  
כדין לפי דעתך ואף על פי  
שלא יאמינו לך כי אם  
למרובים.

*What does this come to teach us about the importance of voting even if we think our vote might not matter?*

**Rabbi Moshe Feinstein, 1984**

*[March 3, 1895 – March 23, 1986) was an American Orthodox rabbi, scholar, and posek (authority on halakha—Jewish law), regarded by many as the de facto supreme halakhic authority for observant Jews in North America.]*

On reaching the shores of the United States; Jews found a safe haven. The rights guaranteed by the United States Constitution and Bill of Rights have allowed us the freedom to practice our religion without interference and to live in this republic in safety.

A fundamental principle of Judaism is *hakaras hatov* – recognizing benefits afforded us and giving expression to our appreciation. Therefore, it is incumbent upon each Jewish citizen to participate in the democratic system which

safeguards the freedoms we enjoy. The most fundamental responsibility incumbent on each individual is to register and to vote. Therefore, I urge all members of the Jewish community to fulfill their obligations by registering as soon as possible and by voting. By this, we can express our appreciation and contribute to the continued security of our community.

**Rabbi Laura Novak Winer**

From Moment Magazine: [https://www.momentmag.com/ask\\_the\\_rabbis\\_voting/](https://www.momentmag.com/ask_the_rabbis_voting/)

A man once came before the Chazon Ish (a Russian-born Orthodox rabbi, 1878-1953) and explained that he didn't have enough money to pay his taxes and, therefore, would not be allowed to vote in an upcoming election. The Chazon Ish responded: "You should sell your tefillin and pay the taxes... tefillin, you can borrow from another, but the right to vote you cannot get from someone else." As this story illustrates, there have been times when Jews faced barriers to voting, or, though allowed to vote in theory, were unable to do so. (Of course, there were far worse times when legislation affirmatively stripped Jews of their rights, such as the Nuremberg Laws in 1930s Germany.) Thankfully, in the United States, the 24th Amendment protects one's right to vote regardless of taxpayer status.

The Chazon Ish story tells us that voting is so important that one should sell one's tefillin—a symbol of one's commitment to observing the mitzvot, or commandments—in order to do so. I would suggest that for us, today, voting is more than a right or a privilege. It is an obligation incumbent upon us as equal citizens in a democratic society.

*Do you believe voting is a Mitzvah? Or is it an illogical choice that you should avoid? Why or why not? Does where you live impact your choice?*