



CIVIL DISCOURSE: LOVE THY NEIGHBOR

Overview

Civic Spirit educates, inspires, and empowers schools across faith traditions to enhance civic belonging and responsibility in their student, faculty, and parent communities. Through professional support and student programs, Civic Spirit prepares the next generation to be knowledgeable, ethical, and active participants in the civic life of their community and the political life of our democracy.

This resource, adapted from Civic Spirit's Civics-Learning-in-a-Box model, includes texts and tools meant to enhance student understanding and engagement with civic life through the lens of Jewish texts. Below, you will find the 5-Step Framework that will support young tweens in developing civic agency.

The 5-Step Framework includes:

1. Historical and Contemporary Texts
2. Norm Setting Guidelines
3. Text Based Questions
4. Call to Action
5. Reflection Discussion

The icons below are meant to support your use of this resource. When you see the dinner table icon, you will find suggested strategies for a dinner table conversation. The classroom icon indicates useful classroom tools.



Historical and Contemporary Texts

Text A: Babylonian Talmud

Beit Hillel and Beit Shammai were two Jewish schools of thought in the 1st century. They were known to have strong debates about topics such as Jewish celebrations, how to be a good person, and ideas about religion. However, it is said that, "Beit Shammai did not refrain from marrying women from Beit Hillel, nor did Beit Hillel refrain from marrying women from Beit Shammai."

Text B: Ginsburg And Scalia

Former Supreme Court Justices Ruth Bader Ginsburg and Antonin Scalia almost always had opposite opinions on very serious issues such as abortion and same sex marriage. While they almost never agreed, they often read each other's opinions with a scholarly eye and offered suggestions for improvement. They were quite good friends and had a special celebration together with their families every New Year's Eve. Ginsburg said, "I have always enjoyed Antonin ... he can always say things that make me laugh." Scalia said he likes Ginsburg "because she is an intelligent woman and a nice woman and a considerate woman—all the qualities that you like in a person."

Text C: Midrash

Rabbi Shimon ben Gamliel told his servant: "Go buy me something good from the market." He went and bought a tongue. Rabbi Shimon said: "Go buy me something bad from the market." The servant returned with another tongue. Said Rabbi Gamliel: "I told you to buy something good and something bad and you returned with the same thing. How is this possible?" Answered his servant, "From the tongue comes good and bad. When it is good there is nothing better than it, but when it is evil, there is nothing more evil than it."

Text D: Pirkei Avot

Moses' brother, Aaron, was known as a peacemaker. Rabbi Hillel said that when Aaron heard that two people were arguing, he would go to each of them and tell them how much the other regretted his actions, until the two people agreed to face each other as friends.

First Things First: Norm Setting

Norm setting is an essential component of creating safe spaces for productive conversations. The topics you are going to discuss may elicit strong feelings and emotions --that's great, it means you care deeply! The best way to approach this is for the group to co-create a set of agreements that they will follow throughout their time together.



Use Jamboard or Nearpod for a collaborative conversation.



Ask your children to jot down 1-2 rules that will help them feel safe and respected during the conversation. Then, make a list that includes everyone's ideas and have everyone agree to follow them.

Examples:

- We will set aside the need to persuade someone to change their mind.
- We will focus on understanding each other's perspectives.
- We will be curious and ask questions without judgement.
- We will seek first to understand, then to be understood.
- We will "step up" and "step back" to make space for everyone to be heard.
- We will speak only for ourselves.

Text Based Questions

The following exercise was initially designed for chevruta learning (ancient Jewish tradition of paired learning) but can happen in a variety of ways in both the home and classroom. You can try using the included chevruta protocol, or try any of the following suggested procedures.



Suggested procedure:

Think-Pair-Share or Turn-and-Talk

Suggested procedure:

Read the texts independently (now is a good time to take a few bites of food!) and write down your initial thoughts or questions.

Regroup to clarify or ask any questions.

Read the questions for discussion together.

Pause to give everyone ample time to think about their responses and formulate their thoughts.

Discuss the questions as a group --and don't forget to pass the salt and pepper!

Read:

Babylonian Talmud (A)

Ginsburg/Scalia (B)

Rabbi Gamliel Midrash (C)

Pirkei Avot (D)

Discussion Questions:

- What can we learn from Hillel and Shammai's friendship? From Ginsburg and Scalia's?
- In your own words, please explain, "From the tongue comes good and bad. When it is good there is nothing better than it, but when it is evil, there is nothing more evil than it."
- Do you agree with Aaron's approach to arguments? Would you do anything differently?
- What do you think it means to disagree with someone without being disagreeable?
- Have you ever disagreed with a friend? How did you handle it?

Chevruta Protocol

Partner 1: I understood that _____ because it says _____ in the text.

Partner 2: What do you mean by _____? OR Can you explain why you wonder about _____?

Partner 1: The reason I wonder about _____ is because _____. OR The words in the text that prove my idea is _____.

Partner 2: I agree/ disagree with your idea because _____. OR I wonder if the reason the text says _____ is because _____.

Partner 1: Our discussion made me realize that _____. OR When you suggested _____, it made me think that _____.

Now What: Call to Action

As a Jew and a civic change-maker, it's essential to be able to seek first to understand, then to be understood. With this in mind, practice the Essential Partner's Questions of Persuasion and Understanding Exercise --with a family member or classmate. This exercise helps distinguish between questions that divert and divide from questions that deepen and connect. Use the sentence starters in the chart and the protocol below to help you engage in conversation. The goal is to be able to use Questions of Understanding the next time you find yourself in a Hillel/Shamai or Ginsburg/Scalia conversation!

Questions of Persuasion: Questions that Divide	Questions of Understanding: Questions that Connect
But doesn't that mean that....?	What makes you think that...?
So, you are saying ...?	How did you come to believe...?
Don't you think that ...?	Have you always believed...?

Round 1: Questions of Persuasion

Person 1: Make a statement you believe to be true, by starting with, "I believe..." or "I think that..." (ex. cat videos are the best part of the Internet; There should be universal healthcare.)

Person 2: Ask questions that divide (questions designed to convince Person 1 that she is mistaken and should change her mind). *By the way, if you find that you agree with the statement, play devil's advocate.*

Person 1: Respond to questions honestly.

Switch roles and repeat.

Round 2: Questions of Understanding

Person 1: Repeat your same statement of truth.

Person 2: Ask questions that connect (questions designed to better understand what Person 1 is thinking and feeling).

Switch roles and repeat.

Debrief

- What was that like?
- Did anyone change their mind?
- What do you notice about the quality of questions you asked?
- What changed in your listening?

Reflection

The best way to deepen the learning process is through reflection. Reflection creates an opportunity for information to become meaningful knowledge. It provides a chance to make connections to your life and allows children to develop a personal relationship with the material. It is suggested to answer the questions below by writing a journal or diary entry. This can be a private activity and does not need to be shared.

How does something you discussed today connect to what you already knew?

How did these exercises extend your thinking further?

What questions do you still have?



Classroom Extension

Collaborative problem-solving is another great tool for practicing civil discourse. In a large group, it is likely that peers or friends will all have different opinions. Be sure students understand that there is no moral judgement being passed during this activity.



You can definitely use this activity at home, if you can make at least two small groups of two (grown-ups should participate too!).

Directions:

Split the class into three small groups and explain that each group will consider a moral or ethical dilemma and make a very difficult decision. The goal is for the group to come to a consensus about a final decision. Be sure to ask students to share an overview of any disagreements that came up and how they were settled.

Possible Dilemmas:

1. You are a very skilled doctor with five dying patients, each of whom needs a different organ in order to live. Unfortunately, there are no organs available to perform any of the transplants. It just so happens that you have a sixth dying patient, suffering from a fatal illness, who will die sooner than the other five if not treated. If this sixth patient dies, you will be able to use his organs to save the five other patients. However, you have a medicine you can give to this sixth patient that will cure his illness and he won't die. What do you do?
2. You have witnessed a man rob a bank, but then, he did something completely unusual and unexpected with the money. He donated it to an orphanage that was poor, run-down and lacking in proper food, care, water and amenities. The sum of money would be a great benefit to the orphanage, and the children's lives would turn from poor to prosperous. What do you do?
3. You are on a cruise and the ship encounters an unexpected storm. The storm continues to rage and eventually you and the other passengers are told you must head to the lifeboats and abandon ship. As people begin to line up, you realize some lines have fewer people, some have families, and some seem to have younger, single people. You know you are strong and capable. What do you do?

Resources

Essential Partners partners with communities and organizations around the globe, equipping them to navigate the values, beliefs, and identities that are essential to them.

MitzVote is a non-partisan get-out-the-vote campaign that provides students with the education and resources they need to mobilize and vote in 2020.

Sefaria is a non-profit organization dedicated to building the future of Jewish learning in an open and participatory way.