

# Designing Learning for Civic Engagement and Civil Discourse

## *Discussion Guide*

### Introduction

The last several years have been marked by increasing polarization and diminishing capacity for civil discourse. Some educators may feel intimidated by the prospect of engaging learners in conversations related to civic engagement, fearing confrontational conversations among students, objections from parents, or reprisal from administrators. And yet, the purpose of education is, in part, to equip young people with the skills to be active, responsible participants in the democratic process. Jewish education, specifically, is intended to help learners rely on their heritage as a source of inspiration and understanding as they navigate the everyday challenges of their lives. As Jewish educators, we are obligated to create safe spaces for our learners to explore their understanding of, and responsibility to, our government.

Civics education intersects with several typical components of a Jewish education. When we teach about tikkun olam we are teaching social responsibility, empathy, and agency. When we teach about the debates of Hillel and Shammai, we are teaching civil discourse and a tolerance for uncertainty.

This resource is intended to help Jewish educators address these topics. The videos are excerpts from a webinar hosted by The Jewish Education Project just days after the January 6 insurrection at the Capitol, featuring Dr. Tamara Mann Tweel, Director of Civic Initiatives at the Teagle Foundation, Hepzibah Alon of Facing History and Ourselves, and moderated by Rabbi Dena Klein of The Jewish Education Project. You can view the entire webinar and associated materials [here](#). The video excerpts are accompanied by discussion questions that will enable teachers to consider their own feelings and those of their students, and then create lessons that address current events with greater confidence.

The opening video is an introduction that lays the groundwork for further discussion and should be watched by all. You can then choose from among the three following modules, opting to use just one for greater focus or introducing all three. No excerpt is longer than ten minutes, and the discussion questions in the Guide can be used as you see fit. Ultimately, the goal is to facilitate discussion that helps educators grapple with their own feelings about government so that they can then design learning experiences that help their students explore their relationship with government, democracy, and each other.

This project emerges from our unwavering belief that education is a tool for positive change in our society. The more we engage our learners in experiences that foster empathy, normalize uncertainty, and develop responsibility, the more we contribute to a better future for our democracy. We are inspired by the bravery of teachers as they address these challenging issues, and we are confident that the next generation will be advocates for a more just, inclusive, and democratic society.

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## [Video #1: Civic Engagement is an Essential Part of Jewish Education \(3:55\)](#)

### **Big Ideas:**

- Students' everyday lives are shaped by politics. Politics has moved from living in the background of their lives to being corporeal.
- Talking about civic engagement helps address students' authentic pain points.
- COVID has heightened this shift to corporeal. Now the government decides whether or not they can attend school, camp, synagogue, dictates what they wear, where and how they travel, when they have to quarantine.
- Politics is not partisanship. Teachers feel anxious about opening up political conversations. Politics can be noble and empowering, calling us to be our "best selves."

### **Guide Questions:**

1. In what ways is government part of our learners' everyday life experience?
  - Which ways are helpful?
  - Which may be pain points?
  - How might this impact our learners' attitude toward government and civic involvement?
2. What might be the significance of the observation that Dr. Tweel makes that politics have gone from being something that is outside of ourselves, in the background of our lives, to something corporeal; something that is deep within our bodies and our souls?
3. What does it mean to be "political?" What does it mean to be "partisan?"
  - Why might it be important to distinguish between these two terms?
  - How might we reframe politics from being a "dirty word" to being one that calls to mind positive associations and images?
  - What are some examples of "the nobility of politics?"
4. How might we help our learners celebrate the helpful aspects of their connection to government while also allowing them to deal with these pain points?
  - How can we use the Jewish tradition to help them thrive despite these challenges?
  - What have been some ways you have been successful in addressing the social emotional needs of your learners in dealing with difficult emotions?

5. How can Jewish education pique interest and positive motivation toward civic responsibility and engagement?
  - What are some things that you already do in your classroom to show responsibility to your community of learners?
  - To your school or synagogue community?
  - What are a few additional steps you can try out with your class to increase our awareness and actual contribution to a culture of mutual care and responsibility for each other?

## [Video #2: Empowering Learners to Be Empathetic Change Agents \(6:36\)](#)

### **Big Ideas:**

- We and our students may often feel that we have little control over our lives and what is happening in the world.
- Involvement in politics and civic engagement can give us control and motivate us to engage in changing and improving the world.
- Putting our students in the role of decision maker (e.g. vaccine distribution) can help them understand logistical and moral complexity, which increases empathy for decision makers and raises curiosity about the decision making process.
- Doing good works in the world takes persistence and resilience and a willingness to fail forward; learn from your experience and try again.
- Problem solving is an iterative process. Goals for making change can stretch and evolve over time to stimulate a cycle of continuous improvement. It is exciting to achieve goals and set new ones that can help us move the goal-posts toward making ever-larger impact and changing people's lives for the better in more dramatic ways over time.

### **Guide Questions:**

1. How might we help our learners pivot away from cynicism and disengagement to appreciate the positive achievements that are happening in our time?
2. How might we switch from a frame of things being "out of our control" to one of seeing ourselves as capable of action and of making a positive difference?
  - How might we increase student agency?
  - How might we put our kids into positions of "political power?"
  - What are some hypothetical case studies of complex decisions that can build understanding and empathy for decision-makers?
  - How might we help our students make a positive difference in their class, synagogue, family, community?
  - How can the goals of increasing agency and positive impact become stretch goals that can increase impact and agency over time?
3. How might we use Jewish texts to inspire positivity, agency, and impact?
4. How might we inspire our learners to strive for creating a cycle of experimentation instead of feeling that a problem is solved after one solution is offered?

**Now that you have had a chance to explore these ideas, how could you imagine designing a lesson/experience for your students to explore one or more of these big ideas?**

[Video #3: Witnessing our Experience to Motivate Civic Engagement \(1:38\)](#)

**Big Ideas:**

- People are not aware of how much the government provides services that support our daily lives.
- Guided prompts and journaling can open our eyes to ways that the government provides essential and helpful interventions which enable us to live and focus our attention on our daily activities rather than on basic survival.
- Awareness, noticing and witnessing of daily experiences can promote a framework of appreciation, positive associations with government and an interest in involvement in civic engagement.

**Guide Questions:**

1. What does it mean to “witness” our own life experiences?
  - What does this term evoke for you?
2. How might we use Dr. Tweel’s witnessing strategy for building civic awareness, civic-mindedness, and an interest in society and politics?
  - How might students help each other deepen their powers of observation and add additional layers of detail to their witnessing?
3. How might we help our learners see and try on possible roles of civic engagement?
4. How might we help our learners explore what Judaism says about our obligation to stand up for our rights and the rights of others?

**Now that you have had a chance to explore these ideas, how could you imagine designing a learning experience for your students to explore one or more of these big ideas?**

[Video #4: Resilience, Intellectual Flexibility, and Empathy \(5:17\)](#)

**Big Ideas:**

- To be a leader in a democracy means listening to multiple opinions and perspectives. It means making the hard decisions, knowing that there will be those who disagree and criticize.
- We are living in a moment in history where our axioms are not stable. The world does change us and our views. We have permission to be unsure and to be vulnerable and to be uncertain.

- In order to cultivate openness to changing one's ideas and to explore confidently-held beliefs, develop a practice of exploring the story behind the belief or opinion.
- Jewish texts can help us feel empowered and responsible for getting involved and making a difference.

### **Guide Questions:**

1. How might we help students explore their uncertainty in the context of Jewish education?
2. How might we experiment with some of the approaches that Dr. Tweel suggests:
  - Share one of your long-held beliefs.
  - Tell me the story of why you developed this opinion and what it has meant to you. Explain why you might be less sure of this opinion in this moment? What has made you revisit this belief now? How does it feel to make yourself live with uncertainty and with becoming less committed to this belief? What does the loss of this belief feel like? What can help you be okay with being unsure, with the uncertainty of these times?
  - What does it feel like to hold steady to an idea even when you're unsure of it?
  - What does it mean to try out a new belief? What can help you be open to testing out new thinking?
3. How might Jewish tradition/Jewish texts help us feel that it is okay to be vulnerable and open to letting history change us?
  - What are examples of characters in the Torah, Bible, Talmud who changed their thinking and beliefs in response to the changing circumstances and events in which they found themselves living?
  - What are other Jewish texts or tales that support students as they explore change?
4. How might we use Dr. Tweel's protocol for exploring strongly held opinions:
  - What are the stakes for you in holding this opinion so strongly?
  - Why are you holding firm to this opinion?
  - Why is this idea important to you?
  - Walk us through how you came to hold this opinion. What did you read? What are your sources? Teach us about them.
  - What would happen if you let go of this belief?
  - What are your fears; what would be lost?
5. How might you employ a hevruta approach to explore certainty and uncertainty of opinion? (See the Facing History model for hevruta study, found [here](#)).

**Now that you have had a chance to explore these ideas, how could you imagine designing a lesson/experience for your students to explore one or more of these big ideas?**

## Conclusion

[The Jewish Education Project's Educator Portal](#) is full of additional valuable resources that can help you navigate the challenge of creating opportunities for learners to explore civic engagement and civil discourse. We are eager to learn from you as you create educational opportunities for your learners. Please be in touch and let us know what you discover.