



## And You Shall Teach Your Children... Civic Responsibility, Leadership, and Civil Discourse

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Informal learning takes place daily in our homes. It happens when we talk about current events, watch the news, take our children with us to vote. Our children's exposure to civic responsibility and discourse comes from the examples we set for our children, the conversations they overhear, and the discussions we have with them.

Bringing Jewish texts and values into these conversations can help us guide our children and encourage them to grapple with their personal views on essential questions such as: What are my civic responsibilities? What kind of leadership do I value? How do I respectfully engage in difficult conversations around controversial issues? And how can Judaism inform all of this?

When we carry out our civic responsibilities, thoughtfully choose leaders or take on leadership roles ourselves, and engage in civil discourse we are also increasing our ability to thrive as Jews and in the world today. By acting as responsible citizens we are activating our beliefs around teamwork, hope, judgement, perspective. These [positive character strengths](#), and more, will help us to be our best selves.

Here is an opportunity to combine Jewish learning with civic responsibility. **The Jewish Education Project has [curated resources](#) that are rich with texts, discussions, and activities that you can adapt to use in your home.** There is a brief description of each resource, and the recommended age for its audience.

To get you started on conversations, we have selected a few short Jewish texts (biblical, rabbinic, and modern) to discuss with your child around civic responsibility, leadership, and civil discourse.

### **Civic Responsibility**

#### *Elementary (1st-4<sup>th</sup> grade)*

The second story in the Torah (Genesis 2:4-3:21) tells of God placing Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden. The Torah says that God placed them in the garden of Eden, to till it – to work the land - and tend it – to take care of it.

- What do we do as a family that helps take care of the earth? (*examples: recycle, compost, reuse*)
- What is something else we can do more of to take care of the earth? (*turn off lights, turn off water when brushing teeth*)
- How does our doing this help others and the world?

#### *Middle School (5<sup>th</sup>-8<sup>th</sup> grade)*

“Separate reeds are weak and easily broken; but bound together they are strong and hard to tear apart.” (Tanchuma, Nitzavim 1)

- How is each person acting on their own like a separate reed? Do you agree that when people are bound together, they are stronger and harder to “tear apart”?
- What is an example of how our family works with others in the community?
- What are some things our family can do with the community that will help others and make the world better?



### *High School (9<sup>th</sup>-12<sup>th</sup> grade)*

In the Passover Haggadah, we are commanded to “Go forth and learn!”

- What are some things you have learned about our government and about voting?
- What kinds of questions do you have?
- You are nearing voting age, what are some things you feel you would need to learn more about to be an educated voter? Consider an issue that you hear about in the media. What is something that we, as a family, can learn about or do together that would be interesting and help prepare you for voting?

### **Leadership**

#### *Elementary (1st-4<sup>th</sup> grade)*

Moses’ father-in-law, Jethro, saw that Moses was the only judge for all the Israelites and that people were standing all day long waiting to speak with Moses and hear his decisions. Jethro realized that this wasn’t good for Moses or the Israelites. Jethro suggested that Moses get other honest men to help him judge smaller problems and that Moses judge only the more serious issues. Moses did as Jethro suggested. (Exodus 18)

- What do you learn about Moses from this story?
- Are you surprised by this story? Why or why not?
- What do you learn about a being a great leader from this story?
- What do you think makes someone a great leader?

#### *Middle School (5<sup>th</sup>-8<sup>th</sup> grade)*

“Leadership demands two kinds of courage: the strength to take a risk, and the humility to admit when a risk fails.” (Rabbi Lord Jonathan Sacks, former Chief Rabbi of Great Britain)

- Why do you think Rabbi Sacks feels it takes courage and strength to take a risk? Do you agree? Explain.
- Do you agree that it takes courage and humility (not being proud, not thinking one is better than others) to admit when a risk fails? Explain.
- Are you surprised that Rabbi Saks sees this as an important part of leadership?
- Is this something you would look for in a leader? Why or why not?

#### *High School (9<sup>th</sup>-12<sup>th</sup> grade)*

“Happy is the generation whose great (leaders) listen to the small, for then it follows obviously that in such a generation, the small will listen to the great.” (Babylonian Talmud, Rosh HaShanah 25b).

- According to this text, what does a great leader do? What is the “reward” of doing this? (*consider: People are happy, and people will listen to the leader.*)



- What do the small, the people, need to do? *consider: Speak up so the leader can listen.*)
- Do you agree with this teaching? Explain.
- What are some ways that you can speak up about an issue?
- Before you vote, how can you learn if a person running for office “listens to the small”?

## Civil Discourse

### Elementary (1st-4<sup>th</sup> grade)

If you look at a mezuzah, you’ll see that it is placed on the doorpost at an angle. It seems that one rabbi felt that it should be straight up, and another felt it should be horizontal. A third rabbi came up with this compromise that the [mezuzah be at an angle](#).

- How can looking at a mezuzah remind you that we need to respect and listen to others?
- How does the mezuzah teach us that we should be open to other opinions and ideas?
- What can you do to best listen to others who have an opinion different from your own?
- What can you do so that others will be happy to hear your ideas?

### Middle School (5<sup>th</sup>-8<sup>th</sup> grade)

“Hillel said: Judge not your fellow until you have been in that person’s place.” (Pirkei Avot 2:5)

- Can you think of a time when someone couldn’t understand how you felt because they never experienced what you experienced?
- Do you think you can ever really be in someone else’s place? Why or why not? What does that tell you about judging someone?
- How can you better understand another person’s view?
- How can Hillel’s teaching guide you when speaking with someone with whom you disagree?

### High School (9<sup>th</sup>-12<sup>th</sup> grade)

“A man walking on a road saw a pack of dogs and felt afraid of them, so he sat down in their midst.” (Genesis Rabbah 84:5)

- Do you think this is a good comparison to a person who confronts a group of people with whom they disagree? Why or why not?
- What risk was the man taking? What was his motivation to “sit in their midst”?
- Imagine there is a group of your peers who are very vocal and are promoting an idea that you believe is wrong. Based on this teaching, what might you do?

*We hope that you and your child will engage in meaningful conversations, based in Jewish text and values, that will allow you both to reflect on these important questions and your responsibilities as civic actors. We also hope that these resources and this process will serve as an important building block in helping your children and your family to thrive.*