



What's Jewish About Voting?

Topic: Voting and Democracy: Do We Really Choose our Leaders?

Grade Level(s): 7th and above

Goals for the Lesson/Activity

- Students will be exposed to Jewish sources on democracy and the democratic process.
- Students will explore the differing ways that Jewish leaders of the TaNaKH were chosen.
- Students will 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 needed

- Copies of *Shemot* (Exodus) 18:13-26 Text Sheet (download)
- Copies of the Talmud texts: Leaders and Constituents (download)
- Copies of the *Middot* Chart available at: <http://jteach.org/project/middot-chart/>
- Small pieces of paper + writing implements

Technology needed

- **Poll Everywhere** (optional); free version for all major platforms (polleverywhere.com)

Background for Teachers

In the time leading up to the 2016 presidential election, there will inevitably be a great deal of conversation in the media, in homes, and in the Jewish community, about the election and the presidential candidates. Without delving into the specifics of the candidates 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 students/parents. However, the educator can provide “food for thought” questions to be discussed at home with families.



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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* (Exodus) 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.
- 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 know the candidate you preferred didn't stand a chance of being chosen?



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- 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 available at jteach.org/project/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 the election 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?
- Additional Possible Questions:
 - What do Jewish values mean if candidates aren't Jewish?
 - What are some of your values that you hope our president 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 *Arachin*. On one wall, place a piece of paper with the opinion of Rabbi Judah. On the other, place the opinion of the sages. Instruct students to go to the side of the room matching their views. 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.



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Differentiation Options

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.

For learners who need extension opportunities

- Delve further into the text from *Shemot* (Exodus). 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?