



# Civil Discourse in a Politically Turbulent Time

## **Topic**

Civil Discourse in a Politically Turbulent Time  
2016 Presidential Election

## **Grade Level**

7th-12th Grades

## **Overview**

No matter your political leanings, if you've been following the current presidential election, you have likely heard speech and witnessed behavior that has been disappointing, from both political candidates and their supporters. It is unclear what the days and weeks after the election will bring, but political scientists and historians suggest that the ugliness which has marked this season may intensify in the weeks after the election. With this in mind we have put together a list of twelve Jewish values we think are worth highlighting between the election and inauguration. We hope they will inform or encourage conversations about civil discourse you might have with your students during this politically turbulent time.

It does not go unnoticed that this election cycle has also stirred deep passion and activism among the populace. It is our hope that the study of these values will encourage continued speech and action which aims toward the betterment of society.

## **Goals**

- To provide Jewish values with which to frame conversations in the aftermath of the 2016 American Presidential election.
- To provide both the impetus and the language to promote civil discourse in the wake of the 2016 American Presidential election.

## **Background for Teachers**

It may seem to many that the current U.S. Presidential race is the most contentious election they can recall. Though the rhetoric surrounding the campaigns of the major party candidates has been unlike what has been seen in recent history, this is far from the first combative presidential bout in American history.

Fans of the Broadway musical Hamilton will be aware of the trouble-plagued election of 1800. At this point in U.S. history, electors were given two votes instead of one, which they used to vote for two different candidates. The candidate with the most votes would become president, the runner-up, vice president. Thomas Jefferson and Aaron Burr each got 73 votes, a clear tie, while incumbent president John Adams only received 65 votes. In accord with the laws governing elections, the vote went to the House of Representatives where Alexander Hamilton lobbied the members of his party (the Federalists) to give their support to Jefferson. Jefferson, of course, became the nation's third president, Burr the vice president. Two other results of this election: Burr would



## Civil Discourse in a Politically Turbulent Time

later kill Hamilton in an infamous duel and the constitution would be amended (for a 12th time) to specify that electors vote separately for president and vice president.

In 1860, Republican nominee and eventual president Abraham Lincoln couldn't be found on the ballot in most Southern States. Additionally, southern states left the Democratic party, which had nominated Stephen Douglas and instead formed the Constitutional Union party with then-Vice President John Breckinridge as their top pick. Lincoln won 40% of the popular vote with Douglas following behind; however Lincoln won the majority of the electoral votes in the North along with California and Oregon, with Douglas only capturing Missouri. Breckenridge won Maryland and Delaware along with most of the states in the South. Shortly after the election, South Carolina seceded and by February the Confederate States of America had been formed.

Many teachers will remember the 2000 election between George W. Bush and Al Gore. Gore won the popular vote by a margin of more than 500,000 votes but the results of the electoral college—specifically the electors in Florida—would remain in play for a number of weeks. There were just a few hundred votes separating the candidates, prompting calls for recounts. Political parties brought lawsuits alleging voter intimidation, names left off voter rolls, and ballots which were either difficult to read or punch (Florida's ballots were punch ballots where voters pushed a perforated piece of paper next to the name of their choice to make a hole). The cases went all the way to the Supreme Court, which stopped the recount. Five weeks after the election, George W. Bush was declared the winner.

### **Suggestions for How to Use this Resource**

Study one value each week leading up to the inauguration. Ask students to come up with scenarios, real or imagined, in which the value of the week could be applied.

Gather a number of election-related news stories each week, or ask your students to do so. Post-election these could be about plans of both winning and losing candidates, legal proceedings, constituent activities or statements, etc. Ask students to apply values from the list to each of these news stories.

Review the list of values each week and decide which one contains the best advice given the news cycle or current social climate.

Study one value each week leading up to the inauguration at the beginning of the class session. Ask students to brainstorm ways they might bring the value to life. For the remainder of the class session, ask the students to embody the value in their speech and actions. If students miss an opportunity to live the value of the day, gently point out the missed opportunity or ask other students if they noticed a time when a value might have been used, but wasn't.



## Civil Discourse in a Politically Turbulent Time

Write each of the values on separate sheets of paper. Ask students to rank them in order of importance, according to which values are more necessary to civil discourse."

### Values

**אַל תִּפְרוֹשׁ מִן הַצִּיבּוֹר** (*Al Tifrosh min HaTzibbur*) — Do not separate yourself from the community. It may seem, during such a discouraging time, that the best thing a person can do is step out of the fray. Hillel the Elder, in *Pirkei Avot* (Ethics of the Fathers) 2:5, advises us to remain engaged.

If your students are not old enough to vote, what can they do to engage in the political process at this time of year? Are they able to inform others on issues, or assist others in getting to the polls? What else might they do? If they have been active participants in student government elections, or have friends who have, perhaps they can speak about what losing candidates have done — or what they might have done — to stay involved after the elections were over.

**דִּינָא דְּמַלְכוּתָא דִּינָא** (*Dina D'malchuta Dina*) — Literally the "law of the kingdom is the law"; this halachic principle suggests that civil law in the country where one resides is binding and, in some cases, preferable to Jewish law.

In what may very well be a contested presidential election, how can the principle of *dina d'malchuta dina* influence our actions? How can we let our feelings be known while respecting the law of the land? Which laws might be particularly important to civil society in the weeks between the election and the inauguration?

**עֲנוּוָה** – *Anava* means humility, or the ability to temper one's innate or achieved talents and abilities through modesty in both speech and behavior. In the Bible, leaders who show humility, such as Moses, succeed, while leaders who display arrogance, such as Korach, ultimately fail.

It takes someone with a certain level of ego and self-assuredness to run for public office. What advice would you give both those who achieved their intended office and those who didn't, about how they might act with humility? (For a great example of humility, find the note that George Bush left for Bill Clinton as the former was leaving office on Inauguration Day.)

**מַחְלֻקֶּת לְשֵׁם שָׁמַיִם** – *Machloket L'shaym Shamayim* is an "argument for the sake of heaven." In *Pirkei Avot* (Ethics of the Fathers) 5:20, we read: "Any dispute which is for the sake of Heaven will ultimately endure, and one which is not for the sake of



## Civil Discourse in a Politically Turbulent Time

Heaven will not ultimately endure." An argument which is "for the sake of heaven" is seen as one which advances the cause of humanity. Power struggles or arguments meant to debase another person or group can be seen as arguments not for the sake of heaven.

In any election there are heated arguments over many issues, often with each side claiming that their position is for the good of society. How do you decide which arguments are for the sake of heaven? Do you think a contested election is an "argument for the sake of heaven?"

**מַכְרִיעוּ לְכַף זְכוּת – *Machrio L'Chaf Zechut*** is colloquially understood to mean judging others favorably. *Machrio* comes from the root chaf-reish-ayin meaning to bend. We might understand this to mean that we are bending to find merit where we might not be inclined to do so. Rabbi Nachman of Bratslav suggests that we should aspire to find the good in every person, even those who seem to have no discernible positive attributes. He continues with the thought that, if we nurture even a small bit of good in someone, it might blossom.

At the end of the second debate, the moderators asked the candidates to express something positive about one another. How might you judge others favorably? What might you have to sacrifice or compromise in order to look for the good in those with whom you disagree? Do you think that it is possible—or even advisable—for former political rivals to look for the good in one another?

**לֹא תַעֲמֹד עַל דַּם רֵעֶךָ – *Lo Ta'amod al Dam Rei'echa*** —This phrase from Leviticus (19:16) is colloquially understood to mean, "do not stand around while your neighbor bleeds." It can be understood to mean: Do not be passive in the face of violence.

It is often easy to condemn violence from a distance; to share a Facebook post or sign a petition. What other actions might you take to prevent violence? Is it possible to do this without exposing yourself to danger?

**רוֹדֵף שָׁלוֹם – *Rodef Shalom*** encourages us to pursue peace. The phrase is seen in *Pirkei Avot* (Ethics of the Fathers) 1:12, where we learn we are to be like the disciples of Aaron, both loving peace and pursuing it. This value suggests that instead of merely reacting to a situation peaceably, we proactively set the stage for peace.

The Major League baseball playoff games occurred in the weeks leading up to the election. Using their Twitter accounts, opponents wished each other luck before play started and congratulated one another after losses. In the weeks after the election what can you do to encourage peace among would-be rivals?



## Civil Discourse in a Politically Turbulent Time

**דֶּרֶךְ אֶרֶץ – Derech Eretz**, translated literally is "the way of the land," but it is colloquially understood to connote manners, consideration for others, or common decency. The concept of *Derech Eretz* includes the types of things that a person should do without being legislated to do so, such as moving aside to let another person in an elevator or not leaving chewed gum on a chair.

This election cycle has been, in many instances, devoid of *derech eretz*. In some cases, candidates refused to extend common courtesy and would not even shake hands as is customary during debates. At other times, the lack of decency was much greater with accusations, slurs, and in the case of attendees at some rallies, even punches, flying.

How do you think one can campaign with *derech eretz*, given that it has become common practice to tear the other candidate down? How should both winning and losing candidates display common decency in the aftermath of the election?

The following two values come from *Parashat Mishpatim*, Exodus 21:1 -24:18, in which Moses relates many foundational Jewish values to the Children of Israel including those on such far-ranging topics as kashrut, the three pilgrimage holidays, property ownership, and fair treatment of orphans and widows.

**מִדְּבַר-שָׁקֶר תִּרְחָק – Mid'var Sheker Tirchak** literally means to "keep far from a false charge." On the surface, this value has similarities to Jewish warning against *lashon hara* and *rechilus*, evil speech and gossip, respectively. More than asking its reader not to engage in telling—or spreading—untruths, this verse asks that we disassociate from the person engaging in such behavior or making such a charge.

In your opinion, is it better to disassociate from a person making a false charge or to try to convince them, kindly, that their position or assertion is wrong? In order to keep away from a false charge would you leave a party or block someone on social media? Do you think that those in power have a responsibility to renounce false charges made by candidates or elected officials from their own party?

**לֹא-תִהְיֶה אַחֲרֵי רַבִּים לְרָעָה – Lo T'hiyeh Acharei Rabim L'ra'ot** can be translated literally to mean, "You shall neither side with the mighty to do wrong," but can also be understood to mean "do not side with the multitude (or majority)." In either case, the verse encourages its reader to follow one's conscience instead of blindly following someone with power or going along with the majority if your heart tells you otherwise.

Is it difficult to voice an opinion that differs from the majority or from those who currently hold power? If so, why? What can you do to encourage that all voices be heard?



## Civil Discourse in a Politically Turbulent Time

**תּוֹכַחָה** – *Tochecha* is understood as loving rebuke or gentle redirection. This means that, even when we find someone else to be wrong (not simply when we don't like their opinion), we are obligated to correct them kindly, even lovingly. Often, when people are shown their errors by someone who is angry or impatient, they are unable to hear the correction and may feel as though they need to hold onto their misperceptions even more strongly.

Think of someone who is presenting information you know to be false. How can you gently correct them and present your case so that you might be heard? What words might you use?

**תִּקּוּן עוֹלָם** – *Tikkun Olam*, or repairing the world, is often used to describe the concept of social action or the act of doing good deeds. However, the phrase can allude to something much deeper. According to Kabbalah, when God began to create the world, God needed to contract in order to make room for the creation. When God made light on the first day of creation, that light was contained in ten vessels. The vessels are said to have broken as God's light was too strong and too pure to be contained. Had they not shattered, the world might be a perfect place. *Tikkun olam* implies that we must not simply do good things, but that by doing so we repair the brokenness in the world and bring it closer to perfection.

This election season has brought with it lots of severed ties among friends, family members, and even large numbers of members of religious and ethnic groups. What might you do to help repair that which has been broken?