



Voting Our Values: A Text Study

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Rabbi Yitzhak taught, "A ruler is not to be appointed unless the community is first consulted."

– *Talmud, Brakhot 55a*

Voting is our modern way of consulting the community before appointing a ruler. The rabbis who wrote the *Talmud*¹ had never participated in a representative democracy. However, their writings and other Jewish texts and traditions highlight the timeless importance of community input on who make the decisions and holds power within the community. Today, when we have **the right** to vote for our elected officials, we also have **the responsibility** to vote and ensure others in our community have the opportunity and access to vote as well.

Please use the three texts below to invite conversation about the value and importance of voting. Let's examine our relationship to civic engagement and how we want to take action to create a more just society.

TEXT ONE:

The following story has been passed down as evidence that voting is one of the most vital rights we, as a Jewish community, have. **Rabbi Laura Novak Winer**, a Reform Rabbi in Fresno, CA, includes it in her response to the question, "Are we commanded to vote?" for Moment Magazine's *Ask the Rabbis* series.

"A man once came before the Chazon Ish (a Russian-born Orthodox rabbi, 1878-1953) and explained that he didn't have enough money to pay his taxes and, therefore, would not be allowed to vote in an upcoming election. The Chazon Ish responded: 'You should sell your tefillin² and pay the taxes... tefillin, you can borrow from another, but the right to vote you cannot get from someone else.'

- Rabbi Laura Novak Winer³

Guiding Questions:

- What does the *tefillin* symbolize? What do the taxes symbolize?
- What do you know about what others have risked in order to gain the right to vote? How does this connect to the experiences of American Jews throughout history?

¹ *Talmud*, literally translated as "study," the set of teachings and commentaries on the *Torah* that form the basis for Jewish law.

² *Tefillin*, also called phylacteries, are a set of small black leather boxes containing scrolls of parchment inscribed with verses from the *Torah*. They are worn during morning prayers by Jewish people that choose to utilize them.

³ "[Ask the Rabbis // Voting](#)," *Moment Magazine*, May 6, 2016.



- What would you be willing to lose in order to participate in the election of our leaders?
- What discrepancies do you see in the ways in which Jewish values relate to U.S. policies and lived reality? What are ways in which you see alignment between the two?

TEXT TWO & THREE:

President John Quincy Adams (1767 - 1848) was known to be one of the greatest diplomats and secretaries of state in U.S. history. He was known as a leader driven by morals, and became a leading opponent of the slave trade. Adams expressed the sentiment that a vote is a terrible thing to waste, and expanded on that concept in the quote below.

“Always vote for principle, though you may vote alone, and you may cherish the sweetest reflection that your vote is never lost.”

- President John Quincy Adams

Emma Goldman (1869 - 1940), born to a Jewish family in Lithuania, was an anarchist political activist, writer, and American immigrant. Goldman was openly and frequently criticized for being a freethinking “rebel woman” and spoke unapologetically about prisons, atheism, freedom of speech, militarism, capitalism, homosexuality and marriage.

“If voting changed anything, they’d make it illegal.”

- Commonly attributed to Emma Goldman

Guiding Questions:

- Do one of these texts resonate with you more than the other? Why?
- What do you think is the connection between the two different viewpoints of these texts?
- If Adams is on one end of the spectrum and Goldman the other, where do you sit? How much value do you believe your vote has?
- Do either of these texts inspire your engagement in the democratic process? What are different ways you can meaningfully take action?

Next Steps:

Below are three resources from Hillel International, the RAC, and Repair the World to continue engaging in critical dialogue and take action around civic engagement.

- Hillel International’s [MitzVote Campaign](#)
- The Religious Action Center’s [Civic Engagement Campaign Resources](#)
- Repair the World’s [Guide to Respectful Conversations](#)