Judaism and Political Engagement
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What does it mean to be politically engaged as a Jew?

<u>Hevruta Questions: Break into small groups</u>

1. **Pirkei Avot 2:5** "Do not separate yourself from the community."

Guiding Questions:

- What does this imply about our responsibility to be politically involved?
- How would separating oneself from politics affect a community?

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2. **Jeremiah 29:7** "Seek the welfare of the city to which I have exiled you and pray to God on its behalf, for in its prosperity you shall prosper."

Guiding Questions:

- How does this verse shape the way Jews should view their role in society, especially in diaspora?

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3. **Rambam, Hilchot Melachim 3:6** "A king is established to do justice, to fight the wars of the Lord, and to uphold the laws of the Torah."

Guiding Questions:

- What does this suggest about the ideal qualities or goals of a political leader?
- How might we apply this today in a democracy?

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4. **Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel (Selma, 1965)** "When I marched in Selma, my feet were praying."

Guiding Questions:

- What does this tell us about political activism as a form of spiritual or religious practice?

Political Dilemma Circle: Upon hearing the following statements step in if you agree, step out if you disagree.

Statements:

- "Jews have a religious obligation to vote."
- "Jews should support the political party that best protects Jewish interests."
- "Political protest is a Jewish value."
- "Jewish values should always influence public policy decisions."

Rabbi Dan's 10 Commandments of Jewish Political Engagement

These core values have emerged from our tradition — and from my own teachings and writings:

1. **Responsibility and Collective Justice** Judaism is not a private faith; it is a communal call to justice. Jewish ethics require public engagement — silence or neutrality in the face of injustice is not a Jewish option.

> "Judaism demands that we show up—for each other, for the vulnerable, for what is right. Injustice anywhere is our business. Jews are the world's alarm clock, everyone hates their alarm clock but they are necessary for a well functioning life/society"

2. **Bearing Moral Witness** Jews have historically been outsiders and moral critics of society. We must use our voice to hold political systems accountable to ethical standards.

> "We are descendants of prophets, not politicians. Our job is not to win favor but to shine light."

3. **Empathy and the Pursuit of Human Dignity** All people are created *b'tzelem Elohim* — in the image of God — and our politics must reflect that sacred worth.

4. **Torah as a Guide for Public Policy** Jewish texts offer timeless wisdom for public life. Values like *tzedek (justice)*, *rachamim (compassion)*, and *emet (truth)* are meant to influence how we vote, advocate, and lead.

> "If our Torah doesn't shape how we speak in the public square, what good is it?"

5. **Dialogue Over Division** Judaism embraces disagreement, humility, and respectful debate. We are not called to uniformity, but to unity rooted in sacred purpose.

6. **Memory as Motivation** Our collective memory — of oppression, liberation, survival — compels us to act with courage and compassion in the public arena.

> "To remember is to choose moral responsibility."

7. Ask "Why" Before You Judge

> "Before we jump down each other's throats, what if we simply asked: why?" *(Parshat Emor)*

Understanding the backstory — the hurt, trauma, or identity that shaped someone's political beliefs — is essential to moral dialogue.

8. Names Matter: Become Who You Are Needed to Be

> "We are not only who our parents called us to be, and we are not only the people others see us as; we are becoming." *(Sh'mot)*

Political engagement should be grounded in identity — not only who we've been, but who we're called to become.

9. Courage to Cross the River

> "Life is not lived on this side of the river. Life is on the other side." *(Vayishlach)*

Sometimes justice means confronting pain, reconciling the past, and limping forward anyway — like Jacob, who became Israel.

10. Faith Isn't Just for Jews

> "Jethro — a Midianite — is the first to say 'Baruch Hu.' Torah was given in the wilderness because it belongs to all people." *(Yitro)*

Interfaith respect and pluralism are essential to Jewish political life.

11. “You Meant It for Bad, But God Meant It for Good”

> “The Jewish response to suffering is not just lemonade out of lemons. It’s recasting the pain to find deeper meaning.” *(Vayigash)*

Jewish political life should be shaped by hope, perspective, and moral purpose.

12. When We Teach, We Heal

> “Were it not for the raven, were it not for the rabbi, were it not for the good example, we would be stuck.” *(Bereshit)*

Political leadership is ultimately educational — it lifts others up by modeling courage, responsibility, and hope.

Closing Reflection:

Rabbi Jonathan Sacks z"l: *"Judaism is not a religion of the private sphere. It challenges us to build a society in which we are all co-responsible for the common good."*

- *What’s one Jewish idea or value that will shape how you engage with politics or leadership in the future?*